

2019

Gender and Age in the Professions: Intersectionality, Meta-work, and Social Change

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.7577/pp.3432>

<https://erepo.uef.fi/handle/123456789/7652>

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Abstract: Sociologists have paid little attention to the shifting significance of gender to professional work. Nevertheless, there is evidence that the meanings attached to gender, and the gendering of work, have shifted over time, such that the experiences of newer cohorts of professionals differ from those of professionals in previous generations. In this paper, we show how combining intersectionality theory and life course approaches facilitates the exploration of inequalities by gender, class, and race/ethnicity across generations and age cohorts. We present empirical research findings to demonstrate how this approach illuminates the convergence of gender and age in the professions to confer privilege and produce disadvantage in professional workplaces.

Subsequently, we introduce the concept of *meta-work*—hidden, invisible and laborious work performed by non-traditional and disadvantaged professionals—through which they endeavor to cope with structural inequalities embedded in the professions. As professions and professional workplaces are still designed primarily for middle-class, dominant-ethnicity men, professionals who do not fit these categories need to invest extra time and energy to develop individual strategies and tactics to cope with professional pressures in and around their work. Meta-work is intrinsically linked to the traditional and normative ideals surrounding professional roles and identities, and therefore is intimately connected with professionals' sense of self and their feeling of belonging to professional communities. Meta-work, and the tactics and strategies that result from it, are important coping mechanisms for some professionals, enabling them to deal with rapidly changing work realities and a lack of collegial support. Finally, we highlight several areas for future research on the intersections of gender and age in the professions.

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Keywords: Age, gender, inequality, intersectionality, intersectional life course lens, life course perspective, meta-work, professions

Professional work is changing. Globalization, financialization, new public management, and organizational change are altering professional workplaces (Allan, Faulconbridge & Thomas, 2019; Brock, 2006; Dent, Bourgeault, Denis & Kuhlmann, 2016; Noordegraaf, 2016). Professionals appear to be more closely managed than in the past, and their career trajectories are changing (Noordegraaf & Steijn, 2013). Indeed, the professional labour market is becoming more precarious and polarized (Francis, 2015; Murgia & Poggio, 2019). Technological change is altering what pro-

Received:
06 May 2019

Accepted:
10 June 2019

professionals do and how they do it. For example, professionals are increasingly pressured to be available to work anytime and anyplace through their mobile phones and the internet (e.g. Perlow, 2012). The changes affecting professionals are similar to those impacting other workers, but there is reason to believe the implications for professions are different (Livingstone & Watts, 2018). Professionals appear to be losing autonomy and influence more quickly than other workers (Livingstone & Watts, 2018). At the same time, social change threatens to undermine those characteristics that have made professionals historically distinct: discretion, social authority, homogeneity, knowledge, and skill.

These changes and other social trends combine to exacerbate internal stratification within professions (Noordegraaf, 2016; Waring, 2014). Scholars have identified divisions within professions across work setting, authority level, and across gender, race, and immigration status. Differences across age cohort and generation are also evident, but have seldom been explored (Choroszewicz & Adams, 2019). Despite the belief that these internal divisions are likely to grow, and that they have the potential to alter professions dramatically (Freidson, 1994; Waring, 2014; Noordegraaf, 2016), few scholars have adopted an explicitly intersectional approach to explore within-profession differentiation more closely.

The intersection between gender and age has been particularly neglected, not only among professions scholars, but in intersectionality theory as well (McMullin, 2011; Choroszewicz & Adams, 2019). Professions, and the organizations in which professionals work, are gendered institutions (Adams, 2000; Britton, 2017; Davies, 1996). Historically, male-dominated professions were designed by men for men, and women have been at a disadvantage—experiencing discrimination, and barriers respecting entry, promotion, and practice opportunities (Davies, 1996; Hearn, Biese, Choroszewicz & Husu, 2016; Witz, 1992). Nevertheless, gender advantage and disadvantage are very much intertwined with age, generation, and the life course. For example, research has suggested that differences between men and women become particularly salient during key life course transitions, such as first entry into professional employment (Seron, Silbey, Cech & Rubineau, 2016), or during child-bearing years (Ranson, 2005; Demaiter & Adams, 2009). Moreover, generational differences are evident. In light of substantial change to professional work and workplaces, the experiences of those who entered practice decades ago may be different from the experiences of newer professionals entering practice in recent years. Their expectations of professional careers may differ as well (Ng, Lyons, & Schweitzer, 2017). Although some gender biases have been reduced due to equal opportunity and anti-discrimination legislation implemented across Western countries, professional work is still gendered in a manner that creates challenges for young workers entering professional careers.

In this paper, we show how combining intersectionality theory and life course approaches facilitates the exploration of inequalities by gender, class, and race/ethnicity across generations and age cohorts. We argue that the meanings attached to gender, and the gendering of work, have shifted over time such that the experiences of newer cohorts of professionals differ from those of professionals in previous generations (e.g. Adams, 2019; Choroszewicz, 2019; Cottingham & Dill, 2019). Subsequently, we demonstrate the importance of an intersectional approach by presenting some empirical research findings, identifying how at key life course stages, gender and age converge to confer privilege and produce disadvantage in professional workplaces within Western countries. The examples we discuss include: 1) challenges for young professionals entering and building professional careers; 2) challenges for older professionals facing work intensification and rapid technological advances; and 3) work–life balance challenges within and across generations and age cohorts. These examples highlight a growing need to explore the significance of age and generation to professional work, in intersection with other inequalities. Next, we introduce the concept of *meta-work*—hidden, invisible and laborious work performed by non-traditional and disadvantaged professionals—through which they endeavour to

cope with structural inequalities embedded in the professions. We conclude our essay with a discussion on implications for further research on professions as well as some ideas for future research on the intersections of gender and age in the professions.

Intersectionality and life course perspective

There is a sizeable body of research exploring the significance of gender to professional employment (see, for instance, Davies, 1996; Hearn et al., 2016; Witz, 1992). Research has explored the movement of women into traditionally male-dominated professions (Adams, 2010; Witz, 1992; Choroszewicz & Kay, in press), as well as women and men's different experiences of career entry, career progression, professional practice and identity, and work-family reconciliation (see for example Choroszewicz & Adams, 2019). Despite the feminization trend in Western professions, gender equity social policies, and other social change, there is evidence that gender still shapes experiences of professional employment in important ways (Britton, 2017; Hearn et al., 2016). However, it has also become clear that a gender lens is often insufficient as social inequalities across a range of dimensions, including class, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and citizenship, intertwine to shape experiences (Choroszewicz & Adams, 2019; Holvino, 2010). Intersectional theoretical perspectives provide analytical tools to understand how gender, class, and race, and other structured sets of social relations (and identities) intersect to shape experiences, advantages and disadvantages, and opportunities (Acker, 2006; Choo & Ferree, 2010; Crenshaw, 1989; Holvino, 2010). Yet, intersectional theory too often neglects age, contending that as a dimension of inequality it is fundamentally different from others, and hence cannot be incorporated under an intersectional lens (Acker, 2006). As a result, the significance of age, cohort, and generation to men's and women's experiences of professional practice too often remains unexamined.

In our recent book, *Gender, Age and Inequality in the Professions*, we argue that combining an intersectional approach with a life course perspective helps to illuminate the intersection of gender and age (and other dimensions of inequality) (Choroszewicz & Adams, 2019). Gender and age are important, co-constructed, and structural systems of inequality. They gain meaning in particular organizational, institutional, and socio-historical contexts. Within professions, gender and age intertwine (in combination with race/ethnicity, social class, etc.) to shape opportunities for employment, working conditions, career promotion, and experiences of private life. The life course perspective can inform our understanding of these intersections by drawing our attention to the impact of social-historical context on our experiences of key life transitions, and how these affect our longer-term life trajectories.

Life course scholars focus on the social pathways that individuals traverse as they live their lives from birth to time of death (Shanahan & Macmillan, 2008). These social pathways are structured by social institutions, norms, and social interactions that vary across time and place (Elder et al., 2003; Shanahan & Macmillan, 2008). Along these pathways there may be many key life events (transitions and turning points) that shape subsequent life trajectories (Shanahan & Macmillan, 2008). Key transitions (such as entry into first professional job, or transition to parenthood) are structured, and shaped by social norms, institutions, and interactions. As a result, social-historical context is crucial in shaping experiences and opportunities.

Individuals whose pathways have commonalities, due to shared norms, shared experiences of major world events, and shared social contexts, often develop similar outlooks and attitudes (Parry & Urwin, 2011). Age cohorts, or generations, can be meaningful in this light. In Western countries generations have been divided into four over-arching categories: Traditionalists (born 1925–1945), Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964), Generation X (born 1965–1979) and Generation Y/Millennials (born 1980–2000). Although the experiences of people within these broad categories

may differ, those sharing a generation may have distinct experiences due to the social contexts in which they grew up, were educated, and entered the labour force. These experiences have been said to shape working habits, commitment to work, and outlook.

Adopting a life course perspective illuminates potential differences in work experiences across cohort. In light of the substantial change in professional work over time—changing entrance standards, labour market opportunities, organizational change, shifting policy contexts and so on—one would expect that the careers of Baby Boomer professionals and their Millennial counterparts would differ in meaningful ways. For example, young professionals face a more precarious labour market than their predecessors did; higher education, and advanced training no longer offer protections from unemployment as they did in the past. Moreover, experiences of key transitions, such as challenges at professional entry, may lead to widely varying career trajectories, and even different visions of how professions should be practiced. Age differences within professions may be meaningful sources for division.

These age and generational differences intersect with gender in a variety of ways. Experiences of key life transitions not only vary by age, but by gender: research has documented differences in career entry, for example, across gender as well as other sociodemographic factors (Adams & Kwon, 2019; Francis, 2015; Kay, 2019). Men and women are still paid differently, they are promoted at different rates, and the birth of a child affects men and women's careers quite differently (Colley, 2017; Ranson, 2005). Nevertheless, in light of organizational and national policy changes, having a child does not impact women's careers today in the same way it affected women generations ago. Given the impact of career entry on broader career trajectories (Kay, 2019), these differences might lead to distinct experiences of professional careers. It is important to consider the intersection of gender and age to understand social experiences, and how they differ across individuals and over time. Gender norms also vary across generations. For example, members of younger generations valorize gender equality norms and policies more than their colleagues from other generations whose lives were to a greater extent influenced by norms of gender difference both at home and at work (Niemistö, Hearn, & Jyrkinen, 2016). Looking at just age differences or gender differences in isolation obscures the complex ways in which gender and age intersect to shape the work and personal lives of professional workers.

Combining intersectionality and life course approaches provides a framework for exploring how advantages and disadvantages vary across gender and age, and moreover, how experiences of key life course events and transitions differ in meaningful ways. In the next section, we illustrate the utility of this approach by focusing on three such transitions or life course stages: career entry, late-career challenges, and experiences of work-family conflict.

Empirical examples

1) Challenges for young professionals entering and building professional careers

Entry into professional careers involves a complex mix of advanced education, practical training, and mentorship. Access to education and training opportunities is highly competitive. In light of labour market challenges and increasing precarity, access to employment and mentorship is also more complicated than in the past. Young workers entering professions face many challenges that at least some members of earlier cohorts did not. They also increasingly find themselves in strong competition for scarce prestigious jobs. In some environments younger workers may be favoured – for instance in high tech firms or large law firms (Corbett, 2019; Kay,

2019). However, even when job opportunities are available, young workers may struggle to adjust to the physical, mental, and emotional demands of professional careers (Adams, 2019; Cottingham & Dill, 2019). Young professionals may also be stereotyped as uncommitted, unreliable, low-skilled, disrespectful, or overly demanding in terms of work-life balance, leisure time, as well as interesting work assignments and promotion (e.g. Foster, 2016; Laird, Harvey & Lancaster, 2015).

Research has highlighted significant gender differences among early career professionals, with men having more work opportunities and more positive experiences. Young men are often paid more, indicating that the gender pay gap begins in the early stages of careers and takes place both in the public (Colley, 2017) and private sectors (Dinovitzer, 2015). Young women entering male-dominated professions may face hostile working environments, discrimination, and skill discounting (Adams, 2019). Over time, professional women learn to ignore everyday sexist comments and micro-aggressions from male co-workers. Others decide to exit hostile work environments in search of more positive ones—a strategy that sometimes takes women out of professional workplaces all together. Exit or ‘opting out’ of hostile and inflexible workplaces remains one of the most common coping strategies among women in male-dominated professions. Some research shows that exit can be also an empowering experience for professional women and provide them with individual agency needed for opting in to more sustainable work options (Biese & Choroszewicz, 2019).

Young women in male-dominated professions may face extra challenges acquiring the expected professional demeanour, including specific emotional capital, resistance to stress and so-called soft skills. Women are more likely to feel uncertainty, negative emotions and inadequacy due to being young and inexperienced (Cottingham & Dill, 2019). This may be particularly the case for young women today as notions of identity, professionalism, and skills expand to cover personal attributes, behaviours, and attitudes (Bailly & Léné, 2013; Choroszewicz, in press; Grugulis & Vincent, 2009). Emotional labour—and manifesting the appropriate feeling states on the job—is more pronounced and explicit today (cf. Hochschild, 1983). Professionals need to demonstrate empathetic behaviour towards clients and provide personalized service to them while at the same time they have to fulfil organizational performance requirements, which might contradict in terms of time and end result. The capacity to manage both one’s own emotions but also the emotions of others is becoming increasingly central not only in female-dominated professions (Cottingham & Dill, 2019) but also in male-dominated professions (Choroszewicz, in press). Young professionals are expected to draw on their personal competences and flexibility to show interest and enthusiasm for their job, to collaborate with colleagues and clients located across the globe, as well as to be attentive to clients’ needs for customized service. Generating client rapport and building trust are highly valued, but young professionals are often left alone in developing these skills.

Today’s emphasis on individual responsibility, resilience, and self-management can be especially challenging for young professionals who are launching professional careers (Olakivi & Wrede, 2019). Young professionals—especially those coming from more disadvantaged socio-demographic backgrounds, and those with insufficient mentoring—might be vulnerable to subtle acts of exploitation and marginalization that degrade their well-being. They may feel the need to work harder to prove their competence, or make career choices to minimize discrimination. For example, Adams and Kwon (2019) find that young women, especially from Asian-Canadian ethnic backgrounds, entering medicine face particular challenges to find supportive mentors and to choose specialties that allow for work-life balance. As young professionals do not receive enough support, understanding and mentoring from their older colleagues (Cottingham & Dill, 2019; Choroszewicz, 2019), they may need to rely on cultural and social capital forged in part through social class. Aspiring professionals from working-class backgrounds sometimes struggle to ac-

quire the capital needed to succeed (Waterfield, Beagan & Mohamed, in press). Social class also matters for entry to the elite law schools (Sommerlad, 2016) and to the prestigious first jobs (Kay, 2019). Young professionals who lack the privileged social, cultural and economic background may feel like ‘strangers’ in their professions (see eg. Behtoui & Leivestad, 2019).

2) Challenges for older professionals facing intensifying work pace and rapid technological advances

Older workers are also subject to stereotypes and disadvantages in some jobs. Older professionals can, for example, be stereotyped as possessing outdated skills, and therefore to be less effective at their jobs (Scheuer & Mills, 2017). This appears especially salient in technology and computing jobs where older workers—men and women—have more negative experiences compared to their younger colleagues (Corbett, 2019). Stereotypes vary across profession. For example, academia may value older age as evidence of accumulated work experience and knowledge, while in other fields, older workers may be cast as out of touch, and unable to learn new things (Riach, 2007). There is also evidence that people who enter professional practice later in life face particular difficulties landing first jobs (Kay, 2019). In this manner, organizations employing professionals may disadvantage older workers by offering them fewer opportunities.

Older workers may also experience different opportunities. In some fields they may be promoted into management, which brings a new set of challenges: different work, different skills, and work intensification. Contemporary hyper-competitive professional cultures in which continuous connectivity and availability through mobile phones and the internet is the norm, may be particularly intense for professionals in managerial positions. Like workers in other fields, professionals who lose their positions late in life, may have greater difficulty finding new jobs (McMullin & Berger, 2006).

Perspectives on aging also differ for men and women (Krekula, 2007). That is, research shows that while older men are rewarded with higher respect, authority and salaries; older women are often viewed as less competent, and their skills are downgraded (Adams, 2019; Jyrkinen & McKie, 2012). Older professional women also face more pressure to look attractive and young (Jyrkinen, 2014). Women’s experiences of being the ‘wrong age’ are fairly common. Young women may be deemed unattractive employees due to their capacity for childbirth, and when women reach their 40s, they risk being considered as ‘old’ (Jyrkinen & McKie, 2012).

Still, many older professionals are advantaged in professional labour markets. Their accumulated work experiences may provide them with professional resources—skills, knowledge and networks—enabling them to benefit from current professional structures and cultures. However, they are also affected by emerging precarity. Little research has explored how labour market changes affect professional workers differentially by gender and age.

3) Work–life balance challenges within and across generations

The intersection of gender, age and the life course can be seen quite clearly in research on work-life balance within professions. Having a child is a major life course transition that has a profound impact on life and career trajectories, but the impact on men and women has traditionally been quite different. Men tend to increase their work hours and career commitment after having children, while women traditionally cut back on their work hours (Fox, 2009; Plickert, 2019)—a practice that can negatively impact professional career advancement. Still, there is evidence of variation across generations. For example, younger men appear to be more engaged in child-rearing than their predecessors, making work-family conflict more of a concern for

them (Burnett, Gatrell, Cooper, & Sparrow, 2013; Ylikännö, Pääkkönen, & Hakovirta, 2014). Furthermore, it is not clear whether child-rearing negatively impacts younger women pursuing professional careers, to the same extent it did women in previous generations.

Still, research highlights how work-family conflict continues to affect the careers of men and women professionals, and its impact appears to vary by age and generation. Young women and men professionals who want to adopt more fluid gender roles in family life and careers may find themselves constrained by traditional gendered assumptions about career commitment in their work environments. As professional ideals and structures continue to prioritize career demands over private life, young professionals struggle to reconcile both. Young male professionals, like professional women, are increasingly torn between intensive parenting and the world of professional work, which may negatively affect their opportunities to build new narratives of themselves as involved fathers (Choroszewicz, 2019). Their older male colleagues, whose personal experiences aligned with traditional gender roles in family and work, do not necessarily understand the different attitudes towards work-life balance and social pressures around involved fatherhood. The use of mobile technologies has also elevated work expectations in many demanding careers, particularly in terms of around-the-clock accessibility, benefitting professionals with a spouse at home to uphold family responsibilities. The research shows that the challenges of work-life balance are often individualized leading more disadvantaged professionals to make career choices that are conducive to family life and in which they are less prone to discrimination (Olakivi & Wrede, 2019; Adams & Kwon, 2019). While some young professionals without parenting responsibilities associate long work hours with professional behaviour, fun, and enjoyment (Sturges, 2013), they may also experience work-life challenges even though their right to ‘downtime’ is largely overlooked. A study on young to middle-aged childless and solo-living professionals shows that their dilemmas are linked to the lack of legitimacy of their need for flexible work schedules in workplaces as well as the assumption that their non-work time is solely leisure time and thus less important than the downtime of those with family care responsibilities (Wilkinson, Tomlinson, & Gardiner, 2017).

Currently, organizational policies reward those who can devote long hours to professional work; such policies disadvantage those with care responsibilities. Changing gender roles mean that men and women, across age cohorts, experience such pressures differently.

Meta-work

Many professional workplaces appear designed for an ideal worker—one who is middle-aged (with work experience), middle-class, dominant-ethnicity, and most often male. Those professionals who do not neatly fit these categories need to invest extra time and energy to develop individual strategies and tactics to cope with professional pressures in and around their work. We call this extra work *meta-work*—defined as the hidden, invisible and laborious work performed specifically by young non-traditional and disadvantaged professionals through which they endeavour to cope with structural inequalities embedded in the professions (Choroszewicz & Adams, 2019, p. 267-268). Meta-work is intrinsically linked to the traditional and normative ideals surrounding professional roles and identities, and therefore is intimately connected with professionals’ sense of self and sense of belonging to professional communities.

The meta-work is often invisible to others—especially those in privileged positions. This work is laborious because it places additional strains on those marginalized by gender, age, ethnicity and so on, to work harder to prove their ability to conform to traditional professional assumptions. It can put particular strains on young professionals from less traditional socio-demographic backgrounds who need

to do more meta-work to present themselves as competent. On the one hand, they need to do more work to comply with professional ideals that might be at odds with their worldview, class background, and social and cultural capital. On the other hand, they might have less access to mentoring, at school and at work. Some studies show that professionals with migrant backgrounds may feel like ‘strangers’ in their professions due to a lack of powerful and resourceful networks and lack of cultural fit (Behtoui & Leivestad, 2019).

We consider meta-work, and the tactics and strategies that result from it, important coping mechanisms for some professionals, enabling them to deal with rapidly changing work realities, a lack of collegial support and barriers to professional development and career progress. At the same time we note that meta-work can also put marginalized professionals at a disadvantage, as they must work harder and in different ways, than their more privileged counterparts. Meta-work can help professionals cope with structural inequalities such as sexism, racism, and ageism on an individual level, but it does nothing to alter the structures that marginalize them in the first place. As a result, meta-work can be a burden that accumulates over a career, reducing opportunities for promotion and advancement (Ferree & Purkayastha, 2000).

Nonetheless, the impact of meta-work may differ dramatically across age, gender, and other structured social inequalities. The impact on a young minority woman undertaking meta-work throughout her career, would be different than the meta-work done by an older man who engages in meta-work late in his career, but who has more resources accumulated throughout his career to fall back on.

Future Research

To conclude, we would like to highlight several areas for future research on the intersections of gender and age in the professions. Drawing on intersectional and life course approaches, and recent research on age cohorts and generations, we have argued that the experiences of men and women entering professions nowadays are quite different from those entering decades ago. Professions have also undergone significant changes in recent years, including the expansion of employment in large organizations, increased precarity, de-regulation, and increased competition, to name only a few. There are still numerous questions to which research on professions has to find satisfactory answers with the help of an intersectional life course lens. Below we focus on only a few.

While we find the concept of meta-work specifically fruitful for further research on professional work and social change affecting professions, we still know little about how meta-work changes as professionals age and progress in their careers. Does meta-work lead to cumulative disadvantages or do professionals with experience find they accumulate resources that actually minimize meta-work over time? How do outcomes vary by gender, race/ethnicity, and other dimensions of inequality? It is possible that meta-work could lead to professionals developing alternative solutions for work in which they feel less disadvantaged, and which legitimate their own sense of self as professionals. These solutions may expand professional landscapes beyond traditional professional workplaces and practice modes. While the meta-work concept provides an analytical tool to capture individual strategies for navigating professional workplaces, it is not clear whether these strategies have any ability to reduce structural inequalities within professions. Thus, we recommend that further research focus on meta-work, and its impacts, over time.

We have highlighted that different age cohorts and generations have their own challenges that are linked to their socio-cultural and historical contexts. These contexts differ across countries and change over time. For example, in some countries traditional gender norms in workplaces and family life are confronted by progressive family policies that empower fathers. We recommend more comparative research to

explore the impact of these policies on professional careers and workplaces across and within age cohorts or generations for different genders. This research should also take sexuality and the situation of transgender people into account.

Finally, we know little how the changing professional landscape impacts the career trajectories of different age cohorts and generations outside of Western countries. Do professionals in non-Western countries face similar trends of organizational change, rising insecurity, and proletarianization, and if so, and how they cope? Some recent research on academia in Ghana shows that young women are highly disadvantaged in this strongly patriarchal Sub-Saharan context that privileges seniority (Forson, Calveley, Shelley & George, 2017). Violating norms of a deep reverence towards age maturity can be almost treated as deviant behaviour in Ghanaian academia (Forson et al., 2017). There should be more research on the intersection of gender and age beyond Western countries to include for example South Africa, India, Taiwan, Baltic and Eastern European countries.

To conclude, we appeal to professions researchers to adopt an intersectional life course lens, which will enable them to capture the diversity of professionals' experiences, and to understand the changing nature of professional work. We expect that intersectional inequalities and life course issues within professions will continue to shape professional development profoundly in the come years. In addition, we also appeal to researchers already conducting the intersectional research to incorporate age, generation, and the life course when possible to account for changes in intersecting inequalities over time and across socio-cultural contexts.

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