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Analysing Women's Access to Professional Occupations¹**Introduction**

In this paper, I analyse some of the conceptual questions raised by the recent influx of women into higher level occupations in Western European societies in the late 20th century. Particular attention will be paid to the meaning and sociological use of the concept of “gender” in relation to occupational feminisation. Comparative cross-national analysis of the feminisation of professional occupations is confronted with a double challenge. Firstly, the need to develop a sufficiently dynamic and subtle framework for grasping the considerable complexities and on-going transformations (adaptations) of “gender”, the “gender order” or of specific “gender regimes” (Connell 1987) in the context of advanced capitalist societies. Secondly, adapting the conceptual tools developed in the post-war period for the sociological analysis of the “professions” (or of other high status professional groups) in the face of wide-spread and significant changes to their internal characteristics and to their relative positions within a wider economic, social and political environment (Hassenteufel 1997, Burrage and Torstendahl 1990).

Failure to address these two dimensions simultaneously may lead to a truncated vision of the theoretical and empirical complexities which surround the numerically significant influx of women into sectors of the labour market that have traditionally been constructed as a “male preserve”. It is necessary to recognise that both “gender” and “professions” are socially constructed entities with

¹ This paper is based on two recent publications : Le Feuvre, 1999, « Gender, Occupational Feminisation and Reflexivity : A Cross-National Perspective », In R. Crompton (dir.) *The Restructuring of Gender Relations and Employment*, Oxford, Oxford University Press : 150-178 and Le Feuvre, 2001, « La féminisation de la profession médicale : voie de recomposition ou de transformation du genre ? », In P. Aiach, D. Cebe and G. Cresson (dir.), *Femmes et hommes dans le champ de la santé*, Rennes, Editions de l'ENSP, Coll. « Recherche Santé Social » : 197-228. The speech was first held at a project meeting in Toulouse in June 2000.

their own specific historical dynamics. This position does not exclude *a priori* any causal relationship between the two, but it requires a more sensitive approach to the nature of their interaction than has been demonstrated in recent research on this theme. There has been considerable scientific attention paid to the mechanisms through which women have been (and, to a certain extent, still are) excluded from the most prestigious professional occupations (or at least from the most prestigious strata of such professions), while less attention has been paid to the recent phenomenon of their widespread inclusion. The conceptual frameworks developed to analyse this inclusion are inspired by those used to analyse and explain women's previous exclusion. Thus, much recent research, including my own (Crompton 1995, Davies 1998, Le Feuvre and Walters 1993, Crompton and Le Feuvre 1996, 1997, Witz 1992) has tended to stress the internal (re)stratification by sex that has accompanied the feminisation process of professional occupations and to read this as proof of the famous French adage "*plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*".

In other words, the various perspectives on professional feminisation would seem to suggest that, although women as a social group are no longer excluded *en masse* from the higher levels of the occupational hierarchy, the "gender regime" under which they are admitted to these positions shows little sign of change. Although this perspective is reasonably accurate when it comes to providing a description of the professional situation of women², it is increasingly unstable as an analytical tool, leading to a series of contradictions and inconsistencies which relate directly to the heuristic force of the notion of "gender" as a sociological concept.

About "Gender"

As the quantity of academic research on the situation of women in contemporary Western societies increases, there is evidence of the development of diverse (and often contradictory) uses of the term "gender" in current sociological literature. The most obvious development concerns the increasing tendency to use "gender" as an analogy, a metaphor or a straightforward euphemism for "sex". I would argue that this tendency serves to blur the conceptual cutting edge of "gender" as a concept and to reinforce the "gender as an attribute" perspective which has already received widespread criticism in other circles (Connell 1987). As Acker (1992) has stated,

² As the data presented in Crompton, Le Feuvre and Birkelund (1999) indicate, women doctors, like women in many other elite sectors of the labour market, tend to be concentrated in the lower, least prestigious and least well paid sectors of the medical profession (see also Allen 1994, Borrel 1995, Riska and Wenger 1993, Ruelland 1995).

“ Gender refers to patterned, socially produced, distinctions between female and male, feminine and masculine. Gender is not something that people are, in some inherent sense, although we may consciously think of ourselves in the way. Rather, for the individual and the collective, it is a daily accomplishment [...] that occurs in the course of participation in work organisations as well as many other locations and relations. [...] Gender, as patterned differences, usually involves the subordination of women, either concretely or symbolically... ” (Acker 1992 : 250-1, my emphasis added).

Thus, as many authors have already stressed, “ gender ” does not tell us very much about the characteristics of individuals, but is useful for grasping a system of social relations that produces the sexual duality of the human race as a socially significant division. As a number of contemporary French sociologists have argued (Bourdieu 1990, 1998, Delphy 1991, Mathieu 1992), what is usually referred to as the “ gender system ” should not be seen as something that is based on a pre-existing “ natural ” division between “ male ” and “ female ”, rather each society constructs the norms, behaviour and attitudes of members of each of these groups along fairly arbitrary but nevertheless coherent and consistent lines, which may or may not vary over time.³

As I see it, “ gender ” does not have much to do with “ difference ”, it is wholly tied up in a social process of differentiation. For “ gender ” to become meaningful from a sociological perspective, differentiation has to be seen as a process that not only creates sexual duality as something that has a socially significant outcome (as opposed to the physical traits associated with other forms of “ natural difference ”, like that of having light or dark hair, for example), but also as a process that creates a hierarchical framework for the manifestation and interpretation of the “ differences ” it has produced. It is about the relationship between the two categories and not about one or either of the categories themselves, which have no intrinsic meaning outside of the relationship that defines them⁴.

³ As much of the anthropological research from Margaret Mead (1966) onwards has shown, although there is no evidence of a society that does not construct the sexual duality of the human race as a socially significant division, the emotions, attitudes, behaviour and beliefs expected of ‘men’ and of ‘women’ nevertheless show considerable diversity over time and place. In much the same vein, the *relative* importance of this differentiation according to sex with regard to other organising principles of human societies (age, occupation, colour of skin, etc.) may also vary significantly between societies and/or at different periods of their existence.

⁴ This definition of gender requires certain linguistic precautions. Since the relational character of gender is at the heart of this definition, the use of terms such as “ gender relations ” be-

As many authors have noted, the gender (differentiation) process operates simultaneously on several levels. Thus, for example, the four-dimension framework proposed by Joan Acker (1992) for analysis of “gendered organisations”, could equally be used to describe and analyse the differentiation process that operates at the societal level. Acker (1992) argues that the gender process involves :

- the production of gender divisions (i.e. of an objective hierarchy between the sexes) ;
- the creation of symbols, images and forms of consciousness that explicate, justify and, more rarely, oppose gender divisions ;
- interactions between individuals in the multiplicity of forms that enact dominance and subordination and create alliances and exclusions ;
- internal mental work of individuals as they consciously construct their understandings of the [...] gendered structure of work and opportunity and the demands for gender-appropriate behaviours and attitudes. Such internal work helps to reproduce divisions and images even as it ensures individual survival. (Acker 1992 : 252-4).

It therefore follows that,

“ The term gendered processes means that advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity, are patterned through and in terms of the distinction between male and female, masculine and feminine. [...] The daily construction, and sometimes deconstruction, of gender occurs within material and ideological constraints that set the limits of possibility. For example, the boundaries of sex segregation, themselves continually constructed and reconstructed, limit the actions of particular women and men at particular times ”
(Acker 1992 : 251, my emphasis added).

However, as Delphy (1991) and Mathieu (1992) have argued, for the majority of authors (including many feminist researchers), “sex is presumed to come, chronologically, and so therefore, logically, *before* gender” (Delphy 1991 : 93). Once the idea that gender is *based on* a pre-existing, “natural” binary division between the sexes is introduced, it becomes theoretically impossible to adopt a truly sociological perspective on gender - i.e. to analyse the social reasons for its existence and the logical possibility of its demise.

comes somewhat misleading, since this expression seems to rest on an (often implicit) “attribute” definition of gender.

According to Delphy (1991), the inability of a whole range of theoretical paradigms to extract their conception of gender from the “evidence” of human sexual duality, represents a serious threat to the quality of research and serves to weaken the theoretical grounds for political mobilisation in favour of equality. Her criticisms are valid for research carried out in what could be called a “new essentialist” perspective, where the differentiated biological functions of males and females in the human reproductive process are taken to require at least a minimum level of sexual division of labour in all the other social spheres and, therefore, to produce starkly different “personality traits” in all men and all women. This perspective suggests that the major risk of any successful equal opportunities programme would be to “make women like men” and to deprive societies of the altruistic “feminine qualities” which carry to potential to make the world a better place. Delphy’s analysis also holds for what she calls a “cognitivist” perspective on gender, which attributes the existence of gender to a (pre-social) characteristic of all human societies - the necessity to operate solely on the basis of binary distinctions and oppositions (or *differances* as Derrida suggests). According to contemporary followers of Levi-Strauss (1967) in the French structuralist tradition, this necessarily binary vision of the world exists because the visual and cognitive impact on even the most primitive forms of social organisation of the most fundamental, primary binary division of all - the biological distinction between male and female human beings - has served as a cognitive template for all forms of human thought (Héritier 1996). However, as Delphy rightly points out, this perspective fails to account for the fact that gender is not simply about difference. It is essentially a question of hierarchy.

In accordance with this line of argument, I will develop the idea that gender (the differentiation / hierarchy process) produces the “natural” binary divide we call sex (or rather “the sexes”). Once “gender” is seen in terms of the production of a relationship between the binary sexual categories of humanity, thus turning “natural difference” into a socially significant division, a number of logical conclusions can be drawn. The first and most obvious of these is, from a sociological perspective, the need to recognise that “sex” is as much a socially constructed phenomenon as “gender” - without the structural relationship between the sexes (“gender”), the “natural differences” between males and females (biological sex) would have no inherent meaning for us as social scientists.⁵ This first step implies a radical break with any form of essentialist-inspired analysis of women’s (and men’s) position in society. Secondly, this perspective enables us to think more constructively about the complexities of the relationships that exist between “gender” and other forms of social differentiation which affect

⁵ Indeed, much recent research in the field of human genetics has questioned the biological reality of the neat binary XX vs XY division between the sexes - see Peyre, Wiels and Fonton (1991).

individuals and groups on both a material and symbolic level. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, this vision of “gender” implies (from a purely logical perspective) that the very existence of a binary biological difference between the sexes does not imply, *in itself*, any particular form of social organisation. Were the differentiation process of “gender” as we know it to cease tomorrow (or were the differentiation process to operate along different lines), approximately half of the human population would nevertheless continue to have wombs, along with the capacity to fall pregnant during a certain (fairly limited) period of their adult lives, while the rest of humanity would continue not to have these attributes. One can reasonably expect that these composites of humanity would also continue to do what is biologically necessary to produce human offspring. Without “gender”, humanity would not cease to exist. We must therefore recognise, at least as a hypothetical stance, that, since “gender” is not built on the foundations of “natural difference”, its capacity for transformation is relatively unlimited. To take this a step further, the perspective of “genders’” eventual demise should figure, at least as a conceptually coherent possibility, in any analysis of its mechanisms of production - reproduction - transformation.⁶ This does not mean that all human beings would be produced according to a single (masculine) model. As Delphy explains,

“From a gender perspective, this fear [that women would come to resemble men] is totally incomprehensible ; if women were to gain equality with men, men would no longer be as they are today ; why should women come to resemble what men would have ceased to be ? If men are to be analysed within a gender framework, they are first and foremost the dominant group ; to become like them would mean also becoming dominant, but this is a contradiction in terms. In one of the categories of any collective arrangement characterised by a dominant and a subordinate group is suppressed (be it the dominant or the subordinate group) domination ceases *ipso facto* to exist and the other category automatically disappears too.” (Delphy 1991 : 99).

However, the force and strength of the “masculinity” / “femininity” divide (which can be seen to possess the qualities of what Bourdieu (1984) has called an “*allant de soi*” - something so deeply entrenched in our mental vision of the world that it cannot even begin to be questioned as what it is, i.e. an arbitrary social construction), is such that, even as astute (feminist) sociologists, we are

⁶ Within the institutional context of contemporary academia, it is perfectly understandable that the struggle for recognition of the scientific legitimacy of “gender” as an object of enquiry and research should have led to the invisibility of (or the refusal to explicitly acknowledge) this point. This is all the more surprising given that the theoretical perspective of a demise of capitalism (inherent in Marxism) has never been used to limit or restrict the quantity (or quality) of research on class.

caught in its trap. What are we really talking about when we refer to “masculinity” and “femininity”, and their relation to occupational feminisation? Are these inherent characteristics of biological “males” and “females” or does their binary opposition refer rather to two distinct (though interrelated) positions within the specific form division of labour, which, for 20th Century capitalist countries could be termed the “male breadwinner model”. If “masculinity” is a sophisticated and more of less subtle way of referring to “being a man” (maleness - having male genitals), then the first position would seem to hold. If, on the other hand, the definition of “masculinity” incorporates a position in the division of labour where the individual has access to sufficient resources to maintain his/her own labour power (and possibly that of others), where he/she has the ability to obtain and retain a supply of domestic and emotional services, where his/her relation to the most “significant others” is mediated through the employment rather than the marriage contract, etc., what does this actually tell us about the women who are now entering the most prestigious professions in relatively large numbers?

About “Occupational Feminisation”

The ambiguities surrounding the conceptualisation of “gender” become particularly problematic when it comes to analysing the recent influx of women into the most prestigious positions on the occupational hierarchy. In previous work, I have identified a number of theoretical perspectives on occupational feminisation (Le Feuvre 1998), which can be related to particular theoretical visions of “gender”. Conceptual and theoretical ambiguities arise because the term “feminisation” is used both to describe the empirical increase in the proportion of women within a given occupation, as well as to infer changes in the characteristics of the professional group in question and/or to analyse the potential effects of occupational feminisation on the gender process. Broadly speaking, different perspectives on feminisation can be summarised as follows:

1. **The « feminine values » or « feminitude » perspective.** Here it is argued that encouraging the influx of women into the former male bastions or power and prestige offers the opportunity for the diffusion of « feminine values » (altruism, sensitivity, empathy, etc.) throughout the scientific production process. In sufficient numbers, it is argued, women should be able to transform the inherently « masculine » value systems of academic occupations, notably making them more receptive to the needs and requirements of other women academics / students / citizens, and less sensitive to the traditional criteria of scientific success (income maximisation, peer group recognition, linear career paths, ecologically destructive technologies, etc.) (Menkle-Meadow 1989). In this perspective, the promotion of women in academia is also seen as an effective means of trans-

forming the organisational principles of scientific research, notably as far as work time sovereignty is concerned. However, the conceptualisation of gender used here would seem to suggest the continuation of a binary (masculinity / femininity) divide within academic professions, even after fairly widespread occupational feminisation. Women are seen as having specific « feminine » characteristics and qualities (rarely defaults), based on their extra-professional experiences (particularly maternity), but which largely determine the way they « do science ». Although few authors would today suggest that these « qualities » are biologically determined, there is a clear tendency to « naturalise » gender relations and to defend policy measures that enable women to develop academic careers in a specifically « feminine » way. This usually entails taking the objective constraints that women face in combining a career with « their » domestic and family commitments into account when devising non-discriminatory criteria for entry into scientific occupations and/or for promotion within them. In operational terms, this perspective seems to accept at face value the notion that « women are different » and evidently runs the risk of producing policies that reinforce this « difference » on both a material and symbolic level. In previous research (Le Feuvre, 1999), I have analysed the outcomes of occupational feminisation based on a feminitude perspective as a form of « normative integration » of women into former male bastions. Their presence does little to challenge the vertical and horizontal segregation within these occupations and leaves women with sole responsibility for the traditionally « feminine » domestic and family sphere. In short, the foundations of gender relations are left intact and specific “feminine” career paths are carved out for women, implying their virtual absence from the most senior and powerful positions in the academic professional hierarchy.

2. The surrogate maleness or « virilitude » perspective. The theoretical framework underlying this perspective would be a post-modern inspired analysis of the mechanisms through which professions and organisations are « gendered ». Here, the focus is on the few women who have achieved successful academic careers and it generally serves to show that they often lack the « feminine qualities » so loudly celebrated in the previous perspective. This is taken to indicate the inherent masculinity of academia, which is in turn used to explain the difficulty women experience in gaining access to positions of academic power and prestige (Aubert, 1986, Halford and Savage 1995, Davies 1998). In order to « succeed », women need to act as « surrogate men » (although their behaviour - usually remaining single and childless - is actually far-removed from the dominant family formation patterns of the men they are supposed to be modelling themselves on). Although it is generally recognised that these women have little opportunity to question the underlying « masculine » logic of academia as a profession, some authors argue that, by their mere -

highly visible - presence, these women by be in a position to undermine the symbolic value systems that equate scientific competence with maleness (although it is often recognised that, for all their symbolic « virility », these women still have less successful careers than their male counterparts). The policy initiatives that are most coherent with this perspective would thus entail improving women's chances to « play the scientific research career game with the existing (male) rules ». Rather than devising specific career paths for women, policy measures aim to put women « on an equal footing » with men, notably by providing low cost domestic and child-care services which are explicitly aimed at enabling women to adopt « male career patterns », without, it should be noted, radically transforming men's participation in the family or domestic sphere (since 98% of the providers of these services are also women... see Le Feuvre and Parichon, 2000). In my previous research, I have called this pattern of occupational feminisation « transgressive », since the so-called « surrogate men » are only too aware of the social pressures on them to conform to the binary gender norms and of the price they have to pay for their atypical behaviour in the professional and personal spheres. They see themselves - and are generally seen by others - precisely as « exceptions » within a clearly defined binary rules of society.

3. **The patriarchy perspective.** This perspective is frequently used to explain why and how women have been and still are excluded from the production and transmission of scientific knowledge.⁷ However, in the face of an objective increase in the number of women in academia, it has more recently been adapted with a view to analysing the ways in which the global forces of « patriarchy » continue to operate in the face of rising levels of occupational feminisation in higher education and research. Here it is generally argued that the positive effects of an increase in the number of women gaining access to science-based occupations are erased by the simultaneous redefinition of the prestige and earnings-related characteristics of these occupations along gendered lines. Thus occupational feminisation, as a goal or as a reality, is alternatively seen as the **cause** or as the **consequence** of the « de-qualification » / « de-professionalisation » / « pauperisation » / casualisation of the women academics in question (see Reskin and Roos 1990). Thus, from a position that argued that women's exclusion from the production of scientific knowledge was one of the pillars of patriarchal social relations, the authors who adopt this perspective are often led to conclude that the « equality agenda » for scientific occupations is illusory, since patriarchy has infinite means of maintaining and recreating gender hierarchies (Walby 1990). This perspective could be summarised with the

⁷ For a critical assessment of « patriarchy » as a conceptual tool, see Pollert 1996 and Crompton 1998.

famous French adage : « *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* ». The material and symbolic supremacy of men over women, of the masculine over the feminine, is seen a largely universal and a-historical social force which serves to restrict the potentially positive effects of the so called « equality politics », both in terms of the way men and women « do science » and in terms of the overall pattern of gender relations. At the end of the day, the outcomes of occupational feminisation can be seen as the result of a process of « normative integration » similar to that identified under the feminitude presented above.

4. **The « gender erosion » perspective.** This approach also requires a social constructivist framework whereby gender is no longer seen as an attribute (something we have), nor as a role (something we do), but rather as a historically situated social process. Gender is not used to describe the way societies devise particular social attributes for men (masculinity) and women (femininity), but rather to capture the social processes that create the binary sexual divide as a socially significant division. Rather than insisting on ways of accommodating sexual « difference » into the equality agenda, this perspective insists on the fact that « differentiation » and hierarchy are the two social mechanisms that produce inequality between men and women in the first place. However, unlike the patriarchy perspective which may share a similar definition of gender, this approach attempts to analyse the precise historical conditions under which the gender process evolved and to identify the historical conditions under which it could cease to function as effectively as it has done in the recent past. For example, according to some authors, the increasing complexity of advanced modernity serves to make the relationship between biological sex and individual life-chances increasingly tenuous (Giddens 1992 : 199). Within this perspective, « masculinity » is not what men are, or have, or do, but is rather the social marker of the socially constructed dominant group, just as « femininity » marks out the subordinate group. It is therefore as equally unrealistic to devise equality policies which accommodate women's « differences » or their « femininity » as it is to imagine that the answer lies in helping women to adopt the social characteristics of « masculinity ». To come back to the point raised by Christine Delphy (1991) : were women in a position to resemble men, men would no longer be what they are today (the dominant group), since, in order to dominate women as a group, men need to maintain the illusion of women's « difference », which simultaneously creates and justifies their domination. To avoid confusion, it should be stressed that the fourth perspective presented here does not cover the much rehearsed « androgyny » thesis (see Badinter, 1986, for example), since it refuses to recognise « masculinity » and « femininity » as objective entities that individuals possess and that they could eventually decide to « combine » in a strange sort of pick'n'mix construction of their individual or collective identities. The policy agenda outlined under this approach is obviously more complex

than that defined under the previously analysed perspectives. In fact, this approach draws attention to one of the main paradoxes of the equal opportunities policy agenda in itself. By stressing the need to better understand the largely surreptitious, daily processes through which differentiation and hierarchy are created and re-created, it soon becomes clear that these may well include the process through which, in an effort to combat discrimination and inequality, equal opportunity policies create a special category of beneficiaries (women) on the basis of their biological sex and thus reinforce the social construction of the very same « natural difference » on which the original discrimination and inequalities they sought to combat were founded. Defining a policy agenda within this perspective requires recognition of the fact that, since what several authors have called the « taboo of similarity » is at the heart of the contemporary gender process, any attempt to promote equality whilst recognising difference is doomed to failure, particularly as long as women and women alone are defined by their « difference », their « specificities » or their « special needs ». Since our social and legal systems recognise only two, mutually exclusive, sexual categories (male/female), a closer examination of the multiple ways in which « men are different » would constitute a useful starting point for redefining future gender studies research programmes, but it will not provide in itself a sufficiently operational policy agenda. In order to be truly effective, an equality policy agenda based on this fourth conceptual framework would need to promote a reflexively critical deconstruction of the binary sexual divide. Promoting the « inter-changeability » of men and women in the professional and domestic spheres has emerged from my on-going research on women professionals in the UK and France as one of the objectives that a « reflexive equality agenda » could aim to meet. Somewhat paradoxically, this objective would seem to be incompatible with both the « feminitude » and the « virilitude » research perspectives that have undeniably inspired most of the national and E.U. equal opportunities legislation to exist to date.

In practice, much research on occupational feminisation has tended to use various combinations of these different (and often contradictory) theoretical perspectives and implicit conceptualisations of “gender” (see Le Feuvre 1998). However, when taken separately, each perspective gives rise to varying expectations as to the degree of change to be expected as a consequence of occupational feminisation. The nature of these expectations in relation to both gender and professions are summarised in Figure 1 below.

“Gender” exists in permanent interaction with other forms of social differentiation. As such, it becomes perfectly legitimate to question the contradictions and inconsistencies that may result from the articulation between gender, class, ‘race’, etc. and to postulate that “gender” is theoretically as open to transforma-

tion and change as it is to reproduction. The main conceptual risk that the social constructivist perspective on gender, as articulated in this paper, enables us to avoid, lies in the potential (analytical) confusion that can (and does) exist between the differentiation process (“gender”) and the specific differences (the effects or outcomes of “gender”, as measured by so-called “sex differences”) produced at a particular moment in time in a specific societal context. To give what is not a purely gratuitous example, there is nothing about the way that “gender” functions as a process that makes it necessary for “rationality” to be a permanent composite characteristic of “masculinity” and for “altruism” to be a permanent composite characteristic of “femininity” (Davies 1998). Indeed, at any point in time, there may be any number of potential human qualities that are not explicitly mobilised in and through the gender differentiation process (e.g. having a sense of humour). In much the same vein, it seems legitimate to postulate that those qualities, beliefs or actions which possessed a strongly differentiating character in a particular society at a specific point in time (e.g. frequenting cafés in contemporary Algeria), may lose this ability at some point in the future and may never have been operationally efficient in a different societal context (e.g. wearing a skirt in Scotland or crying in public in Italy).

The development of the “male breadwinner” model, as discussed in Crompton (1999), was accompanied by the erosion of the capacity for women's autonomy on all of the four dimensions of the gender process identified by Acker (1992). This was reflected in their labour force disadvantage, which itself became an element of a particular social construction of “femininity”. Thus:

“The quest for female emancipation from patriarchally determined subordination encompasses more than the striving for equality and rights. It can be defined best as the quest for autonomy. Autonomy means women defining themselves and the values by which they will live, and beginning to think of institutional arrangements that will order their environment in line with their needs” (Lerner 1979 : 162, my emphasis added).

This vision of autonomy is also central to the description of advanced modernity proposed by Giddens (1992), who states,

“Autonomy means the capacity of individuals to be self-reflective and self-determining. [...] Clearly autonomy in this sense could not be developed while political rights and obligations were closely tied to tradition and fixed prerogatives of property. Once these dissolved, however, a movement towards autonomy became both possible and seen to be necessary. An overwhelming concern with how individuals might best deter-

mine and regulate the conditions of their association is characteristic of virtually all interpretations of modern democracy ” (1992 : 185).

It is nevertheless important to note that the ideal-type of the “ male breadwinner ” model was rarely institutionalised in a totally pure form in any national context. Indeed, in reaction to the “ gender blind ” typology of Welfare states presented by Esping-Andersen (1990), several authors have attempted to characterise various Welfare state regimes along a continuum representing various degrees of the “ male breadwinner ” model (see, for example, Hantrais 1990, Lewis 1992, O'Reilly and Fagan 1998). Recent research in this field has been sensitive both to the differences between various societies at particular moments in time, notably the historical transition from agrarian to capitalist production (Pfau-Effinger 1993) and to the emergence of more contemporary pressures for change within a given historically defined “ gender system ” (Hirdmann 1988).

The societal and historical relativity or variability of the institutionalisation of the “ male breadwinner ” model, therefore, should imply caution when it comes to making sweeping statements about the changes currently taking place for women in advanced capitalist societies. However, authors who have attempted to provide grand theories of the transformation of gender have tended to attribute a universal character to the “ feudal ” nature of women's primary assignation to the domestic sphere under early capitalism (Giddens 1992, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). Thus, although their analyses of the effects on gender of the on-going “ individualisation ” of social relations may well hold for societies previously characterised by a “ strong ” version of the “ male breadwinner ” model, they become somewhat more problematic when it comes to analysing the changes taking place in societies where the traditionally ascribed gender differentiation process was not centred on (married) women's exclusion from the labour market (see Pfau-Effinger 1993).

Nevertheless, the experience of the women who are now working in significant numbers within the elite professions in all European societies provides invaluable insights into the ways in which women can and indeed, in some circumstances, are contesting and deconstructing the very material, symbolic, interactive and identity foundations of the mid-20th century gender (differentiation) process in a quest for autonomy. Furthermore, I would argue that the forms of resistance to the gender process that can be observed on the part of a proportion of women professionals have relatively little to do with “ masculinity ” and “ femininity ” as such ; they are more to do with a direct attack on “ gender ” as I have defined it above, i.e. a questioning of the legitimacy of the binary differentiation process itself, rather than with contesting the results or outcomes of this process.

The stress placed in the following sections of this paper on women's agency in resisting the gender process should not be seen as a denial of the fact that, despite the removal of most of the formal barriers to women's investment in the "public sphere" on a par with men, the foundations of gender (differentiation) have, at least at the societal level, shown more signs of adaptation than of demise. The *idéal* (Godelier 1984) notions of "femininity" and "masculinity" that were an integral part of the gender differentiation process under early capitalism in most European societies, along with the "subordination of women" and the "internal mental work" (or identity) dimensions of gender have combined to produce new objective (and thus subjective and ideological) forms of gender differentiation and hierarchy. On a macro-level at least, most women have not yet attained equal access to the same degree of individual autonomy as most men - they are concentrated in the lowest paid jobs, over represented amongst part-time and other "flexible" employment contracts and continue to bear the brunt of the unpaid domestic and caring responsibilities within society (Maruani 1996). However, it would be as equally misleading to suggest that the changes outlined in, for example, Crompton (1999 – Introduction) have made no impact whatsoever on the specific forms of gender (differentiation) that directly affect the experiences and identities of at least certain groups of women, particularly those whose access to a considerable share of economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) enables them to envisage life along somewhat different lines to those defined under the "male breadwinner" model period of the "gender contract".

Gender, "Agency" and "Reflexive Modernity"

In this section I will draw on the work of the French sociologist François Dubet in order to develop a theoretical framework for the analysis of gender and occupational feminisation. This approach attempts to identify the mechanisms through which women (and some men) are changing the dominant 20th Century male breadwinner "gender contract" in contemporary European societies.

In line with a number of contemporary authors, I would argue that the "achievement" rather than "ascription" has become the fundamental characteristic of advanced capitalist societies and that this has direct consequences for the nature of the "gender contract" and of specific "gender regimes". However, the recent sociological emphasis on agency should not be seen as a refusal to acknowledge the very real structural determinants of individual life-chances (Dubet 1994). What is needed is a pluralistic framework that encompasses the objective (material) and subjective (*idéal*) (Godelier 1984) dimensions of social

reality in order to account for both “ permanence and revolution ” (Lipovetsky 1998) in the gender (differentiation) process under advanced capitalism.

The “ sociology of experience ” developed by Dubet (1994) is inspired by the work of Simmel (1986) and Weber (1971). Dubet develops a three-fold analysis, based on the general principle that the loss of social unity constitutes the fundamental characteristic of advanced capitalist societies. Within increasingly diverse, heterogeneous social situations and societies, individuals are led to determine the meaning of their decisions and actions and to construct the overall coherence of their lives. Thus, one observes “ heterogeneity in the social and cultural principles which organise individual actions ” (1994 : 16).

“ Social roles, social positions and cultural background no longer provide a stable basis for actions because individuals are not programmed in advance. Rather, they attempt to build unity from the diverse elements of their social experiences and from the wide range of potential orientations they have open to them. Thus, social identity is not about “ being ”, but about working at who one is ” (Dubet 1994 : 16).

The second aspect of advanced modernity concerns the “ subjective distance that individuals place between themselves and the social system ” (1994 : 17). According to Dubet,

“ Individuals never seem to be totally subsumed in their actions, culture or interests, although this distance obviously has nothing to do with a failed or deficient socialisation process. They seem to remain aloof and to cultivate a critical distance. [...] This distancing derives from the heterogeneous diversity of the founding principles of social actions, which come together in the experience of social life - making each individual feel like the author of his / her own experience - an author with only a relatively free rein, because the composite elements of the biographical construction do not depend on individual will alone. The plurality of social experiences create a feeling of distance and detachment as individuals are unable to adhere totally to a range of social roles and values which are not necessarily internally coherent. [...] Insofar as this critical distancing and individual reflexivity are a part of social experiences, they should be analysed from a sociological perspective as constitutive of a process which defines a degree of individual autonomy and creates the subject ” (Dubet 1994 : 17).

Thus, “ social experiences are subjective combinations of objective elements ” (Dubet 1994 : 136), which require recognition that the diverse and often contra-

dictory elements that make up social experiences pre-exist the individual combinations that may be observed in given circumstances, “ these elements are imposed through culture and social relations, objective constraints or particular forms of domination or subordination ” (ibid. : 135), but the individual experience of particular combinations of structural elements nevertheless carries the potential to transform the objective and subjective impact of structure on individual life chances. The “ sociology of experience ” must therefore be particularly sensitive to the “ tensions ” that characterise the relationship between the range of prescriptive (and potentially contradictory) social roles and constraints and the particular social experience combinations of individuals (ibid. : 178). From a theoretical point of view, Dubet argues that recognition of the composite and contradictory character of advanced modernity requires the definitive abandonment of any “ either / or ” (structure vs. agency, objective vs. subjective) explanatory frameworks and the adoption of theoretical plurality.

“ The heterogeneous nature of actions implies a vision of the ‘society’ as an assembly of elements without a centre, where there is no form of regulation of the whole society, the elements fit together in an open or loose way. In the same way as ‘social experience’ is the combination of actions whose meaning depends on the (reflexive) work carried out by the individual actors, what we have called the ‘social system’ or ‘society’ is a combination of elements whose unity depends on the capacities of its members to create meaning. From an epistemological point of view, the diversity of actions implies accepting a range of explanatory frameworks ”. (1994 : 152).

Dubet identifies (Figure 2) three distinct (but interrelated) levels of social experience and proposes three different types of “ causal explanation ” (underlined), related to the nature of the three major components of the social system (bold) and to each of the specific “ underlying logics of action ” (italics).

As far as the social mechanisms of social integration are concerned, Dubet suggests that a “ causal or structural ” explanatory framework based on the traditional sociological notion of socialisation is the most adequate. He cautions us nevertheless about the risk of adopting a functionalist perspective on socialisation, whereby “ the correlation between a model of social integration and elements of the socialisation process becomes the cause of individual action and this cause is taken as a conscious objective ” (1994 : 140). In his model, agency or individual strategies are conceived within a “ system of interdependence ” (Boudon 1979). Although the use of the term “ strategy ” in sociological literature is notoriously ubiquitous, it is used here on the dual understanding that, firstly, “ strategies are not exclusively the preserve of dominant groups [...].

Dominated groups, too, may devise strategies, perhaps in response to those of dominant groups that impinge on them” (Crow 1989 :4) and, secondly, that “ strategic analysis does not allow institutional analysis to be dispensed with ” (ibid. : 20). Thus, according to Dubet,

“ Optimum choice is often already determined by the objective distribution of resources, the nature of individual aspirations (identification model) and social game rules. [...] Individual strategic actions and the relationship between social actors and the social system should be defined as a game (rules) situation rather than as a perfect market situation ” (Dubet 1994 : 145). This does not necessarily imply that the game rules are so defined as to foreclose any “ inventive ” ways of playing the game. However, it is important to note that the “ capacity to transform the rules of the game is less likely to result from a deliberate strategy of individuals than, in the majority of cases, from a unintended consequence of the game rules themselves ” (ibid. : 146).

Finally, the “ historical (biographical) action system ” refers to the “ auto-determination ” capacity that individuals acquire as a result of the tensions and contradictions that exist between the socialisation (integration) and agency (individualisation) dimensions of complex societies within a specific historical and/or societal context.

“ Individual action conceived as an ability or a desire to “ lead one’s own life ” implies both reference to a number of “ values ” and the identification of barriers or obstacles to their accomplishment. The historical past, various forms of domination and the general social order may act as barriers to the “ self-realisation ” of an individual who possesses the ability to place him/herself above the society and to adopt a critical perspective on it ” (Dubet 1994 : 148).

As Boltanski and Thévenot (1987, 1991) have stressed, this subjective “ interpretation ” of the social world can not be reduced to the expression of individual interests, to the application of a social norm or to the nature of social relations (domination). The interpretation of the world which implies a critical distance is based on the pre-existing socially constructed principles of judgement and criticism in a given societal and historical context. The criterion of “ justice ” that individuals use as their interpretative framework for analysing the world (and their place within it) is not inherent to human beings, it is itself socially produced and should be analysed as such. As Dubet suggests, the development of critical distance requires some form of preceding adhesion to or acceptance of social values and therefore, “ the people most involved in this re-

flexive / critical activity usually occupy positions where adhesion (acceptance) and (critical) distance go hand in hand ” (1994 : 149).

Dubet's work has many parallels with the kinds of commentaries developed by Giddens (1991, 1992) and Beck et al. (1995), which we have already discussed in relation to their account of changes in gender relations. Although Dubet makes no specific reference to gender in his work, his analytical perspective provides a useful framework for the analysis of gender and occupational feminisation insofar as he stresses the plurality of theoretical or explanatory orientations that are required to grasp the complexity of any type of social relation under advanced capitalism. This argument parallels those developed by Marshall (1994) in relation to feminist theory, as discussed in the Introduction to this volume.

“ [Social relations] act simultaneously along the lines of integration, competition and domination which serves to limit the autonomy of individuals and collective groups. Any individual faces identical problems, that of combining the diverse logics of social action within his / her social experience ” (1994 : 254).

However, this does not mean that all members of a given society at a given moment in time possess an identical ability to create unity and meaning from the diversity of their social experiences : “ Individual or collective groups subjected to a form of domination tend to be deprived of their ability to unify their experience and to give it autonomous meaning. The investment they have to make in order to achieve this feat is much greater and arduous than for dominant individuals and groups, who have immediate access to the cultural and social resources that enable them to become actors of their experiences ” (Dubet 1994 : 256). It therefore follows that the sociology of social experience is not just about “ agency ”, it proposes to analyse :

“ [...] representations, emotions, behaviour and the way social actors explain these phenomena. It is a sociology of subjectivity whose objects of study, defined by everyday social categories, are very likely to appear as social problems, experiences where behaviour does not conform to expectations or to ascribed social roles, where subjectivities are out of tune with prescriptive attitude and representation models. [...] The sociology of experience is particularly apt for [studying] behaviour which reveals some degree of discrepancy between “ objective ” social expectations and individual “ subjectivities ”. (Dubet 1994 : 257).

In the final section of this paper, I will illustrate the analytical potential of a theoretical perspective based on what could be called “ the social experience of gender and employment ”. I attempt to show, in relation to the points developed in the previous sections, that, as far as the transformation of gender is concerned, the (social and sociological) consequences of the increase in the number of women entering the elite professions needs to be analysed in relation to the three dimensions of social experience - socialisation (integration), individualisation (agency) and reflexivity (distancing) - outlined by Dubet. This approach suggests that it is impossible to adopt *a priori* any single one of the competing explanatory models of occupational feminisation discussed above. Neither is it possible to unambiguously conclude as to the consequences of occupational feminisation for the gender (differentiation) process. The meaning attributed to the entry of women into the upper echelons of the occupational hierarchy needs to be “ situated ” in the wider “ social experience of gender and employment ” of the women concerned and can not simply be “ read off ” from the statistical measurements of their presence / absence or indeed of their relative positions within the occupational hierarchies.

Gender and Occupational Feminisation

The data presented in this section are drawn from a cross-national comparative project entitled “ Gender Relations and Employment: a Cross-National Analysis ”, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, the British Council (Alliance), the Regional Council of the Midi-Pyrénées (CCRRDT) and the University of Bergen (for more details about the aims and objectives of the project, see the Introduction to Crompton, 1999)⁸. Broadly speaking, the main implications of the results from this project to be developed in this section can be summarised as follows :

- Women's entry into elite professions does not necessarily imply, *in itself*, any major transformation of the principles or foundations of the gender differentiation process. However, the interview data from the British and French respondents tend to suggest that there has been a significant shift in the ways in which the gender differentiation process now operates in both these countries. It would nevertheless seem that the different nationally specific institutional “ gender arrangements ” and norms continue to shape women's attitudes and behaviour in relation to the employment-family interface in Britain and France. This would seem to be the case even under the “ revised gender contract ” characterised in both countries by the new social norm of (middle class) women's increased ac-

⁸ During the course of the project, interviews were carried out with approximately 15 practising doctors and 15 bank managers in each of the five countries involved (150 biographical interviews). This paper focuses on the data on doctors and bankers in France and the UK.

cess to academic credentials and to the upper echelons of the labour market. Nevertheless, within the two occupations studied (banking and medicine) in both countries, we found examples of women whose “social experiences” had produced both a degree of “distancing” vis-à-vis the founding logic or principles of the “gender contact” (even in its “advanced modernity” revised form) and thus resistance to the gender (differentiation) process. However, the mere increase in the presence of women within banking and medicine is not a sufficiently reliable empirical indicator of these phenomena since many of the women interviewed within these professions were deeply entrenched in an “integration” logic in relation to the reproduction of the gender (differentiation) process.

- The causal relationship between occupational or career outcomes and women's overall “experience of gender and employment” is difficult to establish with any degree of precision. It would seem that, in some circumstances, women's “distancing” from the gender process may indeed lead them to the most prestigious strata of the occupational hierarchy and, thus, increased “autonomy”, but it also appears that the “quest for autonomy” may be facilitated by the social and cultural resources that a dominant position within the profession provides. It is thus important to stress that the female professionals we interviewed do not fit neatly into distinct categories which can be distinguished with a limited number of variables. The nature of their objective and subjective relationship to the gender process is forged through a series of “social experiences” in all the spheres of society, in the face of what may be totally contradictory or totally coherent expectations and requirements made of them. The direction that the search for unity within the complexities of their experiences of socialisation, education, training, employment, partnerships, domestic arrangements and sexuality may take is itself related to the resources, constraints and opportunities that their objective and subjective experience of these spheres provide.
- Finally, although the different forms of what could be called women's “resistance or integration to the gender process” can be shown to vary over time and between countries, in all cases these represent guiding principles in their lives which are expressed in a relatively stable and coherent manner on all of the four dimensions of the gender process outlined above, i.e. on a material level (what they do, the objective resources they have access to), on a symbolic level (how they think about what they do in terms of “masculinity” and “femininity”), in terms of their interaction with significant others (their degree of autonomy / dependence or subordination) and on an identity level (how they think and feel about who they are in gender differentiated or non-differentiated terms).

I suggest that the experiences of professional women in Britain and France are largely constructed through what could be called their “social experience of gender and employment”. I use this term to refer to the degree to which women professionals identify with and act in accordance with **or** contest and transgress the logic and legitimacy of the gender (differentiation) process and social order. It follows that the objective, symbolic and identity dimensions of this experience refer simultaneously to the family, personal identity and professional spheres. In turn, I would argue that this experience is constructed through the search for coherence and unity in the face of the increasing complexity of women's lives where the contradictions between, on the one hand, the traditional (male breadwinner) socially ascribed gender norms and expectations and, on the other hand, the growing individualisation of their trajectories, create the potential for dissonance and disorder. Within the moving sands of such experiences, the objective, cognitive and subjective resources of individuals may combine in such a way as to favour an “integration” model of action (gender reproduction) or to produce a radically discordant forms of action and reflexivity, which may potentially threaten the founding principles of the gender process.

The discussion of the biographical interviews which follows illustrates the manner in which the integration - individualisation - historical (biographical) context dimensions of the “experience of gender and employment” combine to produce different consequences of occupational feminisation, both in terms of the potential change to professional practice and in terms of the potential transformation of the gender order.⁹ The recounting of the biographies demonstrates the processes through which gender is constructed, reproduced and potentially contested through the social experiences of women working in elite professional occupations. These processes are summarised in Figure 3, which links social experience, logics of action, and possible outcomes of occupational feminisation. The solid lines in the diagram indicate the causal links between biographies and occupational outcomes, thus normativity / dependency are linked with gender reproduction, and reflexivity / autonomy with (potential) gender and occupational transformation. A “transgressional” strategy, in which a woman behaves “like a man” (virilitude) in professional terms, is unlikely to be associated with professional or occupational transformation, but may serve to modify the symbolic foundations of the gender process, as indicated in Figure 1 above.

The arrows at either end of the solid lines indicate that the patterns of occupational feminisation will also have some bearing on the logics of action devel-

⁹ I am less interested in explaining the occupational and family formation trajectories of professional women in different occupational and societal contexts (see Crompton and Harris, 1998a) than in exploring the consequences of the feminisation of elite occupations as far as the reproduction / transformation of the gender process is concerned.

oped by future generations of women entering the professions, since these will feed into the general historical (biographical) context within which they live out their lives.

I have already established that one of the consequences of the male breadwinner model was the denial of autonomy to women as a socially and materially constructed group. Women's dependency on a bread-winning male (or on public services provided to cover for the unexpected and temporary loss or absence of such a person) is thus a constitutive element incorporated in this model of socialisation within the gender (differentiation) process. Women's gaining of autonomy therefore may be taken as a decisive indicator of changes to the gender order. However, this access may take varying forms. On the one hand, women in exceptional historical or personal circumstances (major world wars, enforced celibacy, a crisis of Welfare state services provision) may be denied the opportunity to construct their lives around the principle of dependency and the priority of domesticity. Alternatively, some women may actively choose to avoid emotional and family ties in order to pursue an upwardly mobile career trajectory. In either case, these women will adopt what has traditionally been termed a "career woman" profile, based on the belief that, for women and women alone, occupational success is incompatible with any form of long-term emotional or family commitment. The financial and possible social autonomy gained under these circumstances is nevertheless experienced within the bounds of the gender (differentiation) process. Women who "act like men" in the professional sphere have to pay the price associated with their transgression of the standard gender norms. Unlike their male counterparts, they can not expect to combine a professional and family life, they are constrained to choose between one or the other and, in choosing a professional career they are simply transgressing the gender norms that associate femaleness with domesticity (an outcome of the gender process), rather than contesting the legitimacy of the binary divide in itself.

However, the ultimate form of autonomy lies in the ability to transcend the constraints of the gender (differentiation) process. Whilst the tensions between the integration and the individualisation dimensions of social experiences may be resolved within the binary logic of the gender (differentiation) process - leading to a logic of action focused on normative dependency or on strategic transgression - the reflexivity or critical distance produced by the resolution of such tensions may lead to the conception and experience of autonomy that transcends (and therefore threatens) the logic and legitimacy of the differentiation process itself. Individual professional women cannot be neatly classified into a particular

logic of action¹⁰. On the contrary, our biographical interview data suggest that elements of or events in the historical (biographical) context of women's experiences can lead them to adopt a series of different logics of action over the course of their adult lives. Thus, the dotted lines in Figure 3 indicate the nature of the processes that combine to produce shifts in the logics of action adopted by professional women over time.

Thus, for example, specific patterns of differentiated gender socialisation mean that some women had started out on their employment biographies with an explicitly normative logic of action that had been overtaken by events in their historical (biographical) context. This was the case for this (2/35) English banker (aged 40), who joined the bank after leaving school at 16: "There was a good social life. More like a continuation of your school days. I didn't see myself as a manager, I just saw myself working there". She married at 19 and left the bank at 21 to have a baby. Her normativity and dependency were shaken when her husband left her and her daughter when she was 22: "We got married too young, he wanted his freedom. It [divorce] wasn't a decision I made, it was forced on me". After a period spent in waitress and bar work, she returned to the bank on a part-time basis: "When I was part-time, I was more determined to work through the ranks and realise my potential, because you were treated like some sort of second class citizen". The bank then decided to cut down the part-time hours: "Suddenly the hours would be cut by half, or there was the possibility to work full-time.... I was a single parent, I needed the money, so I had to go back full-time". She got married again (to a fellow bank employee) when her daughter was 6, but her increasing autonomy as a consequence of her comparatively greater employment success destabilised the relationship: "... he used to say 'your precious job'.... towards the end of it, it became a release for me to be at work really, because of the home life not being happy". Her third and current relationship with a bank manager is increasingly gender reflexive: "He... has arranged for things like ironing services and dishwashers... He's a graduate, he was at University with women he still keeps in touch with and he's more open-minded.... He's encouraged me to do my exams, he's encouraged me in my job.... and been supportive at home".

A further case from France also serves to illustrate the inter-weaving of historical (biographical) context and logics of action. A French banker (5/22 aged 42) escaped from parental pressures in a gender conventional way - gave up her

¹⁰ I must stress at this point that I am in no way suggesting that these observations imply the existence of "qualitatively different types" of women, whose individual "preferences" determine their social experience of gender and employment (cf. Hakim 1996). The inherent weaknesses of the "Rational Choice" approach to women's employment patterns have already been demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt (see Crompton and Harris 1998a).

University course and married at 19. Her academic ability and husband's career problems: "I couldn't give up work, because he wasn't earning enough", meant that she was the first woman to gain entry to the bank through the competitive selection examination, although she soon became bored with routine bank work. Shortly after the birth of her son, the relationship broke down and career opportunities at the bank took a turn for the better. She then realised the advantages of being financially independent: "I believe that I was very lucky to have a decent salary. I've always said that if I had been on a really low wage, I would never have been able to get divorced". After divorce, she was "forced" to throw herself into her job and looking after her son, but she continued to aspire to a more normative life-style. This was difficult for her to obtain because she was emotionally involved with a married man, who, after 15 years, had still not fulfilled his promise to leave his wife. Her relatively successful career was thus more the result of her thwarted normative ambitions than of an explicit transgressive strategy: "I have to admit that if I had had a husband and children at home, I would probably never have been able to set up the new department". At the same time, however, she also felt very bitter about the blatant sexism and discrimination she faced at work and this anger transformed her vision and expectations of life. She gradually gained a degree of autonomy that not only fed into her professional life, but also transformed her attitude towards her personal relationships, and has recently become involved with a much younger man, who has different expectations about the domestic division of labour than her previous partners. She is proud of her professional success and feels that she can contest the normative assumptions about the gender hierarchy (female dependency) that she was tied into during the early stages of her adult life.

Another case, (2/01), an English doctor (aged 39), may also serve to illustrate the role of personal experience in reflexive development. She unexpectedly failed her second M.B.: "One of those real traumas of actually failing, something that stayed with me for a long time" and gave up any idea of taking a specialty: "I was not career minded... did what I thought was the easiest option - General Practice - no more exams!". She went to work abroad, where encouragement from her medical colleagues brought back some of her lost confidence. Married to a local man, she returned to a research post in England with her husband to gain postgraduate qualifications intending to return abroad later: "I thought about children when I was doing research work because it would have been easy - regular hours and nice boss". However, at this point her marriage broke up: "I would not blame my career at all for the break-up of my marriage" and she continued to build a career in the UK., where she has recently obtained a Consultant's post. Although she is a successful woman in a highly competitive specialty, she is not conscious of overt discrimination: "but you could say to me 'you're behaving like a man anyway - you've got total mobility

and no dependants'. I consider it a lot of personal sacrifice to have to keep moving around and not to have a family". "Forced" into a transgressional career strategy by the demands of her specialty and the break-up of her marriage, the degree of autonomy gained from her career means that her hopes for the future are nevertheless imbued with reflexivity: "I hope things change here - we need to improve all the support agencies and benefits for women bringing up children. I don't think it's right that women should have to give up a family.... men are wary of married women - they don't want to have to pick up the slack if she has a sick child. People have to rethink fundamentally".

In other biographies, however, the interviewee had carried through her initial logic of action, which was confirmed and consolidated at various points in her life. A French doctor (5/02, aged 38) was the third child in a traditional catholic family of 5 daughters. She thought about becoming a nun until she was 14, then decided to go into medicine because of what she saw as the caring aspect of the profession. She married (against parental advice) during her second year at medical school and had her first two children while she was still a student and a third after she had qualified. She adopted a normative logic of action by combining her medical training, child-care and working to support her husband's studies and effectively took 10 years to qualify as a GP: "at certain times I really did have to sacrifice my own training". After qualifying, she decided not to specialise: "I didn't want to sacrifice my children in the name of personal ambition". And spent the next five years working on a very irregular basis as a locum, providing holiday cover for GP's in the country, where she could take her children with her. Having set up in private practice three years ago, she continues to adhere to the male-breadwinner principle of female dependency: "Men have a different conception of medicine, because they are men, they have families to support, whereas I'm a doctor because I enjoy the job. I say to myself that if I really get fed-up, I can put the key under the door, because I have my husband who has a good job and so we would survive", which the stability of her marriage and her husband's career have confirmed as a viable option.

In a parallel fashion, others had consistently maintained a transgressional logic of action, as in the case of this English banker (2/27, aged 32). Her working-class parents were both made redundant when she was still in her teens, so she decided to leave school and take a secure job in the bank. She always intended to have a career: "The first day in the bank, I went to see the manager, I told him I wanted to do the exams and I had his support. Other women who joined at the same time as me have said they did not have the support and were not encouraged. Personally, I take the view that if you show willing, you get the support". In 1985, she got married: "that didn't change anything as far as career paths were concerned". The marriage was based on the understanding that they

wouldn't have children : “ This was something we had discussed before we got married, that neither of us was interested in having kids ”. However, the relationship didn't last long : “ I was still one of the rare females passing her exams at this point.... up to 1987, everything was fine, but, basically, he [husband] changed... He decided he wanted a family and he wanted it and he was going to get it and he didn't care that it would affect my career ”. This biography illustrates a so-far-consistent strategy, which is transgressive in so much as the respondent appreciates that she was somewhat unusual in having chosen to take a “ masculine ” route through the organisation, but continues to believe that, as a woman, she must be prepared to sacrifice relationships and family life in order to do this.

Above we have described some careers in medicine and banking in which the vicissitudes of biography and social experience had played their part in generating reflexivity. In other cases, however, self consciously reflexive professional women had found their logic of action difficult or impossible to follow. Their particular vision and early experience of a largely non-differentiated gender process has met with opposition and resistance, which had served to limit the potential for change. A French banker (5/28), aged 38, was actively encouraged by her mother to be independent on the understanding that : “ nowadays you can't be sure to spend your whole life with the same man ” and received further confirmation of this attitude from the Business School she attended, which actively promoted the belief that professional success as was important for women as for men: “ On the very first day, at the oral exam, they said things like ‘So, you've decided to continue your education, we presume that it is not with a view to cooing, changing nappies or feeding babies. You are all here to have successful careers and to build up a good professional position'... Whether you were a man or a woman, you were treated in exactly the same way. [...] So when you get out of there and have to face the world of work, it's completely different and it comes as a huge shock ”. The first knock to her ambitions came when she was turned down for management status after 3 years on clerical grades. The second set-back came when she decided that she wanted to change jobs (to branch management) in order to improve her promotion prospects, only to be told by the managing director (in 1993) : “ Madame, as long as I am in charge of this company, there will never be a woman branch manager... there will never be any women in a position of power ”. At this point, she thought about leaving the bank and looking for another job, but the economic climate was poor and her husband, who wanted children more than she did, persuaded her that this set-back to her career provided the perfect opportunity to have a family. After the birth of two daughters (and further promotion) she again applied for a Branch Manager position that she didn't get. In exasperation she went 80% part-time and now considers herself to be more “ family centred ” than before, but is in-

creasingly angry about the way she has been treated at work and continues to adopt a reflexive attitude to bringing about change in both the professional and domestic spheres.

Not all biographies, however, result in coherence and unity and are more or less permanently torn by conflict. An English banker's (2/26 aged 36) father was a bank manager and her mother didn't have a job : " very much the old school.... always there dependable, a mother figure for us ". She married whilst in her first year at University (with the consent of her parents). Her husband also came from a traditional background and she describes him as " not a new man ". She always expected to have responsibility for home and children, and took a career break to have her two children, returning to work full-time before she had intended to because an excellent opportunity came up. Her parents care for the two children : " My parents were very keen for me to be a high achiever... and pushed and encouraged me and developed a high achievement motive in me... You could say it's now gone full circle in that now I'm a career woman, with a family of my own, my Mum is now not as keen on the fact... She thinks I've got my priorities wrong ". This respondent is acutely conscious, therefore, of the conflict between normativity and pressures towards individualism, which she describes in gendered terms : " It's not easy, but I think a lot of it is pressure we've brought to bear on ourselves, as women wanting to be men.... I can't blame anybody for it. I've come to it myself and it's what I wanted to do, so I've got it ". Despite support and encouragement from the bank, the illness of her youngest child, together with the guilt and pressure she experiences and expresses so eloquently, make it probable that her logic of action will remain predominantly normative and her social experience dependent : " I would never expect him [husband] to make sacrifices for my career.... When you look to your future, it will be his pension that will be the thing that we're looking to preserve. Mine's extra, mine's always been the luxury ".

Others find themselves in conflict over a " failure " to realise a normative logic of action, despite a career profile which might initially appear as " transgressional " or even autonomous. A French banker (5/23) was always considered " the genius " of this practising Catholic family and was academically more successful than any of her 4 brother and sisters and most of her peers. Her early socialisation was gender differentiated, and her parents had little understanding of higher education system. After having contemplated a career in medicine, she was encouraged by one of her teachers to take the entrance exams for the Business School. She was ambitious and joined the bank at branch level with management status and continued to progress rapidly through the bank hierarchy, particularly when she accepted a post at the Head Office. A relationship ended (at her instigation) : " ...effectively from 1988 onwards, I was really de-

terminated to build up my professional success and so I think that I probably considered the personal and sentimental side of things as coming second to that". Nevertheless her logic of action at this point would seem to be largely reflexive in that: "I know that if I ever have children myself one day, and I hope that I do... a successful professional career that goes hand in hand with success in personal relationships, that's really something to be proud of". But this potentially reflexive logic is somewhat contradicted by the difficulties she has experienced in finding a partner and the value she attaches to the normative principles of the male breadwinner model: "The reason why things didn't really work out with the person I was living with before is because he didn't have the same social standing or education as myself... I suppose it depends on how you conceive the man's role in relation to his wife and his family. It's very important for me that the man should be the main breadwinner... it really is up to the man to keep the family together and to earn their success and of course there is a financial element to that... I'm really looking for someone with that kind of situation and that makes it quite difficult".

Taken within a cross-national comparative perspective, these biographical accounts indicate the effects of nationally specific social policy decisions (taken as elements of the historical context) on the nature and consequences of occupational feminisation. The banking sector provides an excellent example. Contrary to Britain, there has been no history of the systematic exclusion of married women from banks in France (Crompton and Le Feuvre 1992), but, equally, there is no equivalent in the French banks studied of the "equal opportunities" programmes widely adopted by British clearing banks throughout the 1990s. In the absence of such policies, the French bank respondents generally experienced a higher degree of "tension" between the normative expectations made of them in the professional and private spheres than their British counterparts. However, because of the explicit and direct discrimination they experienced within their professional environment, those women who had reached management status were more likely to have adopted transgressional strategies or to have experienced some degree of reflexivity than the British bankers who had benefited from an equal opportunities scheme¹¹. This was because the UK bank's equal opportunity schemes were explicitly geared to making it possible for women to combine a career with a fairly traditional or normative (male breadwinner) pattern of the domestic division of labour.

In medicine, on the other hand, time-table flexibility during medical studies and the lack of geographical mobility imposed as a part of specialist training gener-

¹¹ Although it should be stressed that this was not the case for all the British bank respondents, many of whom were acutely aware of the fact that the existence of such schemes represented little more than "lip service" to equality on the part of the bank.

ally combined to make a normative logic of action more tenable for female doctors in France than in Britain. Whereas a number of French medical respondents argued that, as women, with particular “feminine qualities”, they were in a position to transform medical practice from within, this “feminitude” perspective on occupational feminisation was never expressed in the British interviews. In order to explain this difference, it may be interesting to analyse further the influence of the “feminist discourses” available within each national context and to examine the extent to which the so-called “French feminist” stress on difference (see, for example, Irigary 1989, 1997) has shaped the ways in which professional women experience the family - employment interface within the medical profession in each country.

Conclusions

In conclusion, I would argue that a rigorous definition of the “gender process” in terms of differentiation rather than difference provides a more dynamic and operational perspective on professional feminisation than has been the case in much recent research on this theme. A conception of women’s “quest for autonomy” as the vital step in the transformation of the mid-20th century gender process sheds new light on the factors that enable us to provide an insightful sociological analysis as to the meaning and consequences of the recent wave of professional feminisation. This is particularly useful at a time when the researchers working on the major changes effecting professional status and practice are increasingly insisting on the importance of recent changes to the relative autonomy of the professions as a whole within the advanced capitalist labour market (Hassenteufel 1997). A radical break with the conceptual frameworks that create a static and rarefied vision of “masculinity” and “femininity” opens up new avenues for grasping the duality and simultaneity of the massive influx of women into the higher levels of the occupational hierarchy and their equally massive over-representation at the very bottom of this hierarchy.

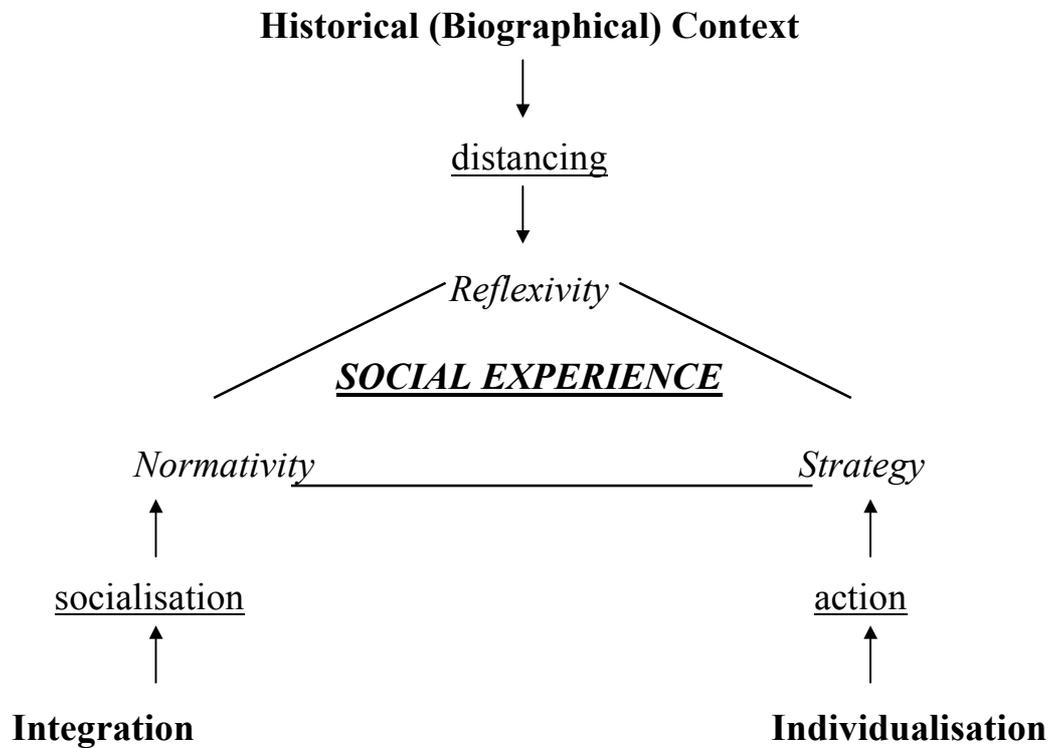
I have no definitive answers as to the long-term effects of occupational feminisation on the gender process, but I am fairly certain that the foundations of the male breadwinner model will be shaken (although perhaps not destroyed) not by the opportunities that access to professional occupations represents for women. It is nevertheless the case that the rapid numerical increase of women professionals remains an unsatisfactory indicator of real or potential changes in the nature of the dominant gender identity and experiences of women “professionals” under advanced capitalism.

Rather than seeing “ women ” as a homogeneous category, future research needs to pay greater attention to the influence of the specific combinations of identity, beliefs and behaviour of female (and male) individuals in the professional and the domestic spheres, as essential factors both in their relationship to the traditional model of the “ male breadwinner ” model and in the degree to which the gender (differentiation) process at the basis of this model is likely to be transformed over time.

Figure 1. The potential consequences of occupational feminisation on occupations and gender

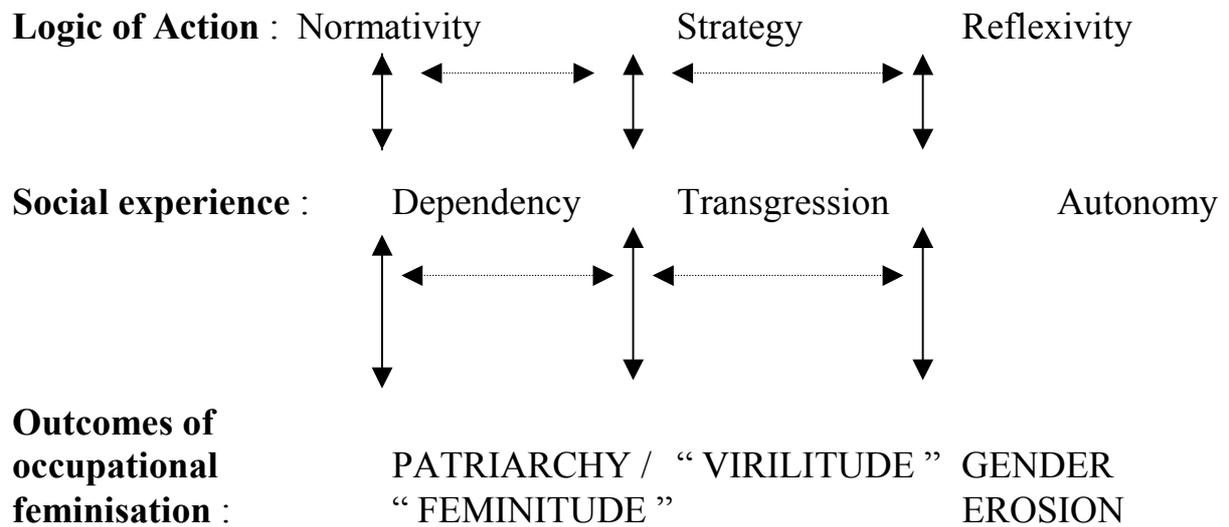
Theoretical perspective / Predicted social change	Patriarchy	“ Virilitude ”	“ Femitude ”	Gender Erosion
Predicted change to the “ Gender Order ”	- -	+	-	++
Predicted change to “ Professional Practice ”	- -	-	+	++

Source : Le Feuvre (1999) : 158.

Figure 2. : Components of Social Experience

Source : Figure based on Dubet (1994) Sociologie de l'expérience, Seuil, Paris : 137

Figure 3. : Social Experience, Logics of Action and Outcomes of Occupational Feminisation



Source : Le Feuvre (1999) : 168.

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