

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

MURIEL MELLOW, *Defining Work: Gender, Professional Work, and the Case of Rural Clergy*. Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007, viii + 196 p., index.

This book offers a thought-provoking discussion about the definition of professional work in an occupation in which paid employment, leisure, and volunteer activities blend together in the eyes of employees (clergy) and employers (the congregation). The author, Muriel Mellow, is a sociologist at the University of Lethbridge. While sociologists have examined the balance between work and personal life for many years, studying an occupation in which work occurs in private homes and during community social events as well as at the office (often a room in the minister's residence) contributes to a better understanding of contemporary professions. Focusing on a rural profession also provides valuable insight into the clash between a diffuse, community-involved approach to work and a more specific and contractual view of professionalism.

Mellow frames her work within several distinct theoretical areas. She draws on both conventional definitions of work, traditionally defined by pay and time, as well as on the literature examining "professionalism" and how the category of the professional redefines the ways in which both the amount of time and the location of work are measured. Relying on a feminist critique of the more traditional definitions of labour, Mellow also examines how unpaid work or housework and volunteer work intersect with paid and professional understandings of work. She argues that for women in particular it is difficult to separate work from leisure activity and that elements of unpaid work (caring for and playing with children, etc.) are enjoyable even though they are necessary. Finally, Mellow outlines the complex intersections between public and private space that clergy encounter.

One of the strengths of this book is Mellow's exploration of the gendered assumptions that exist with respect to professional work when it includes care, empathy, social networking, visibility and nurturing as part of the required job skills. Utilizing information from interviews with forty Protestant clergy, she deconstructs the artificial divide between masculinized, public workspaces and feminized, private home space. She explores the difficulties female clergy face when defining care and concern for congregation members as work as opposed to women's "natural" concern for friends. By comparison, male clergy have less difficulty defining visits and nurturing duties as work, but they have to redefine

traditional assumptions related to masculinity to include nurturing and empathy as well as the more traditional roles of community leader and teacher. Mellow concludes that traditional assumptions about masculinity and femininity affect the expectations of congregations for all clergy but female clergy are expected to include more volunteer time when it falls within the range of labor typically associated with femininity.

The author also explores the gendered assumptions inherent within a professional culture of overwork and always being available (on call). She points out that models of work based on instant and continuous availability assume the employee has no domestic or childcare responsibilities. This masculine model of labour in which a worker is free of family demands and responsibilities and is always available to the community in his/her role as nurturer is expected of rural clergy. Women in the ministry, especially those with children, can be seen as less professional because gender roles within the home dictate that they are not always available. Mellow also examines how “duty” and the need to be “visible” affect choices about the balance between work and personal life in a job which is not restricted to forty hours or five days a week. Her interviewees stated that one of the necessary and sometimes difficult aspects of their job is simply being visible in the community. The need to be present impacts their struggles with defining when they are working and when they are simply living in the communities in which they are employed.

Studying concerns about the balance between work and personal life is also complicated by an understanding that the ministry is a “calling” rather than a job. The sense of obligation or duty that ministers have to their parishioners makes setting boundaries around work and leisure exceptionally difficult. While almost all of Mellow’s participants rejected their “calling” as a justification for overwork, a sense of obligation and responsibility to tasks until they are done runs through her interviews. Mellow acknowledges that this sense of obligation is not unique to the ministry and is inherent in the complicated relationship between overwork and professional identities.

Mellow also provides an excellent example of the strength of grounded theory in qualitative research. Her honesty and thoroughness in developing her methodological approach is a good example of the importance of starting with women’s experiences and developing methods and theories around that experience. The voices of the participants in the study certainly come through in this volume.

The only concern I have in the theoretical application of Mellow’s analysis is her uncritical reliance on what defines traditional gendered divisions of labour. While her view of unpaid work is based on gendered assumptions (women being more responsible for homework), she nonetheless assumes that male clergy are free of all household responsibilities. Perhaps the age of her participants (generally middle-aged and older) and the rural contexts (less likely to be in dual-income homes) support these assumptions. However, the traditional model of constant availability has ramifications

for men as well as women that the author does not explore. I suspect Mellow is relying on a more traditional and rural understanding of gendered divisions of labour because that is what her participants have encountered, but using masculine and feminine categories as fixed rather than fluid excludes the possibility that changes are occurring in gendered work roles. After reading the discussion I was not certain if Mellow drew on her participants' responses in constructing her categories of gendered labour or if the categories were derived from previous literature and experience.

This informative and well-written book will appeal to scholars interested in feminist definitions of work, leisure, unpaid work and volunteer activity in Canadian society. The author's exploration of the work/life balance, the artificial divisions of public and private life, and the interconnections between work, family life, volunteer work and leisure are useful in exploring the changing face of the professions in Canada. The focus on rural communities and professionalism in the rural context contributes to a growing body of literature examining the distinct, community-based identities of non-urban communities. Finally, her close attention to details in broadening the definitions of professionalism from a gendered perspective are useful to anyone examining the changing face of professionalism and work.

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