‘Caring’, ‘Helping’ and ‘Relating’: Gendered Discourses in Speech and Language Therapy

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Background

• Gender typing (where girls choose occupations with creative or caring aspects and boys choose jobs involving scientific, technical and business skills) guides the career choices for 14-16 year olds in the UK (Francis, 1996, 2002).

• Men and women in the UK continue to choose occupations broadly along gender lines (‘occupational sex segregation’, Williams, 1993).

• In speech and language therapy, men make up only between 1-2% (RCSLT, 2007) and 2.5% of the UK workforce (McKinson, 2007; Sheridan, 1999).
### Sex by occupation in the UK [from Labour Force Survey (ONS, 2009)]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Industry sectors</th>
<th>Men (%)</th>
<th>Women (%)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Managers and senior officials</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional occupations</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Associate professional &amp; Technical occupations.</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administrative &amp; Secretarial occupations</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skilled Trade occupations</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Service occupations</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sales and Customer Service occupations</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process, Plant &amp; Machine Operatives</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elementary occupations</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Background (Cont.)

• Occupational sex segregation is a contributory factor in inequality between the sexes in the workplace.

• One measure of inequality is the gender pay gap. It has been suggested that for every 10% increase in men in an occupation, wages are 1.3% higher (HOC, 2005).

• In effect, occupational sex segregation keeps women in low status and low paid jobs (Bradley, 1993).
Theoretical considerations
How do occupations become divided along gender lines?

Two main accounts have been proposed:

• **structural forces**
  (e.g. the impact of industrialisation)

• **sociological accounts**
  (e.g. gender stereotypes; gender discourses)
Theoretical considerations

• Gender stereotypes are ‘commonly accepted beliefs about the activities, roles, physical attributes, and personality traits that distinguish girls and women from boys and men’ (Berndt & Heller, 1986: 889).

• Gendered discourses represent, reconstitute, maintain and contest gendered social practices (Litosseliti, 2006) – for example, reinforcing or contesting the idea of jobs for men/women, of women as ‘natural/better communicators’ or the idea of speech and language therapy as a ‘female profession’ on the basis that so called ‘caring’ skills are perceived to be more important than other (e.g. scientific, analytical) skills.
Gender discourses & Gender identities

What happens when men enter non-traditional occupations?

‘compulsory heterosexuality discourse’ used to maintain a sense of masculinity/identity


Hegemonic masculinity
Gender discourses, Gender identities

What happens when men enter non-traditional occupations?

Some researchers suggest that ‘doing gender’ in those workplaces is easier for women than it is for men (Henson & Krasas-Robers, 2001); that it is less stigmatizing for women to behave in perceived ‘masculine’ ways than it is for men to behave in perceived ‘feminine’ ways (Muldoon & Reilly, 2003; Henson & Krasas-Robers, 2001); and that men entering female dominated professions have to use strategies to counteract the detrimental effects of not being seen as a ‘real man’ (Simpson, 2004).
The current project
The current project

Investigates gender assumptions and discourses around the Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) profession, as these emerge from interviews, questionnaires and focus groups with the following groups of participants in London, UK:

• SLT graduates
• Speech and Language Therapists
• SLT teachers
• Careers advisors
The current project

Addresses the following questions:

1) What is the relevance of gender (if and as raised by the participants themselves) in people’s decision to pursue a career in SLT? What are the consequences of this?

2) In what ways do discourses about the perceived desirability/ gender ‘appropriateness’ of a career in SLT reflect and affect what happens in this ‘female-dominated’ profession?
Methodology

Phase 1 – Questionnaires
• Analysis of questionnaire data with a sample of undergraduate SLT students (32 questionnaires)

Phase 2 – Interviews
• Analysis of interview data with a sample of newly qualified SLT graduates (10 face to face interviews) and practising speech and language therapists (10 face to face interviews).

Phase 3 - Focus Groups
• Analysis of 6 focus groups with
  a) 11 speech and language therapists
  b) 10 university teachers of SLT
  c) 12 careers advisors
Methodology

Three stages of analysis:
1) Data reduction
2) Data organization
3) Data explanation

Analytical framework:
The data were analysed qualitatively using grounded theory principles (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), a combination of content and critical discourse analysis (in the tradition of Fairclough, 1992, Van Dijk, 1997, and others), and a particular focus on gendered discourses (Litosseliti, 2006)
Findings

Phase 1 & 2
• gender differences discourse

“is probably true that [men and women] have different communication styles erm that often kind of fit in with the stereotypes about (women being) better listeners and men might be better at telling you facts”
  (male SLT)

“Any ‘natural’ gap in communication skills between the two sexes is likely to be small enough that qualification and training will go a large way to reducing it further”
  (female undergraduate in SLT)
Findings

Phase 1 & 2
• gender differences discourse

‘men get quicker career progression’

‘men are taken more seriously in meetings’

‘men are perceived as a risk to children’
• “when I had my first placement I do remember being told the school specifically wanted my CRB check over the female”
  (male graduate in SLT)
Findings

Phase 3 (focus groups)

- Different sets of data

- We will focus here on examples that illustrate the relevance of gender in the participants’ talk.
Motivation to become an SLT

• both men and women pursue a career in SLT out of a desire to help others and for the perceived job satisfaction (Whitehouse et al, 2007; Smart, 2006; Boyd & Hewlitt, 2001; Paterson & Woodward, 1996)

but

• there can be gender differences in what is perceived as job satisfaction i.e. for men, salary and career advancement are most important and, for women, opportunities to work with people and help people are most important (Paterson & Woodward, 1996)
Motivation to become an SLT

“A lot of my boys to be honest, they want to be engineers or they want to earn lots of money in the city”

(Male careers advisor)
Motivation to become an SLT

“child friendly and a kind of vocational career that I could do once I’d come back off maternity leave, that was you know quite important”
(Female SLT)

“I think it’s just seen as a nice, threat-free profession that one can have, and one can still have when one has babies”
(Female teacher of SLT)
Discourses around ‘women’s work’ and ‘men’s work’

“I think certain kind of healthcare professions are very… they are female dominated and that message filters down through”

(Female Careers Advisors)

“Boys do sometimes say I want to help people but then they say therefore I want to become a police officer or a fire fighter so the underlying need to care for people is there but there are different outlets”

(Female Careers Advisors)
“In terms of the word therapist. You know, you think of the word therapies, you tend to think of a woman and therefore, men will not perhaps go for a job that says therapy in the same way, just without a lot of conscious thought about it”

(Female teacher of SLT)

“I think the perception’s always there that it's a female profession right from the word ‘go’. I think the word therapist is generally quite female orientated on its own [...] When you turn up at university and you look at the other people in your class you realise that you were right”

(Female SLT)
Discourses around ‘women’s work’ and ‘men’s work’
(Cont.)

• An egalitarian perspective:

“Working in an educational setting we use gender quite positively so we often use a male and a female key-worker together...The skills that we have as women are the skills I hope men would have, maybe not in the same proportion and there’d be skills that men would have that women could have and do equally well, perhaps not in the same proportion”

(Female SLT)
SLT as a ‘caring’ profession

“They talk about caring a lot. That’s what we get in interviews when we talk to them, caring profession, helping people, that’s a biggie”

(Female teacher of SLT)

“They always say they want to help people and that the caring profession attracts them, want to help people. They want to make a difference they say often”

(Female teacher of SLT)
‘Women as carers/nurturers’ discourse

“’cos you’re a girl you’re supposed to like working with children, I think that’s a classic one as so you don’t mind if you have to take them out to the park or take them to the toilet or whatever, it is ‘cos that’s a mum thing to do”

(Female SLT)

“Patience and being very caring and nurturing is more of a female type of role traditionally but I think men can be”

(Female careers advisor)

“I don’t know how caring you have to be to be a speech and language therapist anyway to be honest. You’re a professional doing your job conscientiously. I question the caring approach”

(Female SLT)
‘Women as good communicators’ discourse

“...perception of little boys and girls... when they’re toddlers that girls are better at communicating and interacting with people and boys are better at dealing with their toys and fixing”

(Female careers advisor)

“[women have this ability for] listening and capacity to elicit [...] information from people in a way that will establish that sense of ‘I’m quite happy to chat to you about this’”

(Female teacher of SLT)
‘Women as good communicators’ discourse
(Cont.)

“I think there’s the perception that women are more communicative than men whether it turns out to be more realistic ... communication and talking is always just thought of as a female thing”

(Female SLT)

“from my experience, not just in speech therapy but in my career beforehand in project management, the best project managers that I have ever worked with are the best communicators and they are all women”

(Male SLT)
‘Women as good communicators’ discourse
(Cont.)

“we are all women [...] I think we may be looking at applicants expecting certain more female characteristics in their interaction, in their interpersonal skills and we have discussed that, whether there’s an in-built bias into the way that we interview people. We expect them to engage in group discussions, expect them to be quite reflective and I wonder if some of those qualities are more culturally expected of women”

(Female teacher of SLT)
Different communication styles??

“[He’s] very assertive, he’s no nonsense, he doesn’t care what other people think, he doesn’t care that you know we’re going against the grain and he doesn’t care that he will be actually openly criticizing other people, he doesn’t care and I think it’s brilliant!”

(Female SLT describing a male colleague)
The macro level: gender and career progression

“I think if you look at the evidence, the male trajectory through the layers, through the ranks and if you think how many male students, newly qualified therapists get very quickly into management [...] I think men tend to rise up through the ranks quite quickly.”

(Female SLT)

“I think it’s harder for women to go through the ranks and I don’t think it’s just speech therapy. People making the decisions currently who are right up there are men. I think that might have something to do with it”

(Male SLT)
The macro level: gender and career progression
(Cont.)

“I remember when I was qualifying it seemed to be, all the men seemed to be in the top jobs, seemed to be predominance in the managerial positions [...] There weren’t many men in the profession. Those that were in the profession have got to kind of the top”

(Female teacher of SLT)

“[Men] are less pulled by the emotional aspects which means that management is more attractive or research for that matter”

(Female teacher of SLT)
The macro level: gender and career progression (Cont.)

Some male SLTs describe how they feel pressured to working in certain specialities within the profession, in particular adult neurology. One female SLT explains how her husband (also on SLT training at the time) was given placements in hospitals:

“he had I think 3 or 4 hospital placements and I had none [...] and he always said ‘oh, I think it’s because I’m a man they just assume I’m gonna go and work in hospital’. I think that was a factor for him, an expectation of him”

Similarly, a male SLT describes how his male manager attempts to devalue paediatrics therapy by highlighting the use of toys in therapy:

“my manager at [name] when I was there working with adults, ‘cos I had a split post, he actually said to me ‘oh you don’t want to carry on working with teddies and dollies!’”
A male SLT describes how he experienced differential treatment whilst on placement:

“feeling that sometimes you’re at risk working with perhaps alone with a child as a man. I still feel that people have perceptions about a male therapist. Teachers would often say to me going into schools ‘As you’re a man we’d better leave the door ajar if you’re working with this child’”

• The public perception of men as child abusers is often reflected in other male professionals’ accounts – esp. childcare workers (Sumsion, 1999), primary school teachers (Smith, 2004) and nurses (Fisher, 2009; Duffin, 2009).
In sum…

The Speech and Language Therapy profession presents an extreme example of occupational sex segregation, which is continuously shored up by a range of gendered discourses and their associated social practices.

These discourses are sometimes taken as given and reinforced by participants in our research, yet other times they are contested.

In structural terms, inequalities persist in such workplaces (e.g. in terms of career progression for women, in terms of the positions available for men, etc.) – and these need to be made visible by (among others) critical / feminist discourse analysts.
Research Agenda

Uncharted terrain considerations

- under-representation

- perception of feminisation of the workplace

- devaluation of female roles
Research Agenda…

Gendered discourses and the crucial link with material conditions

‘Structural forces (the capitalist drive for accumulation, the hierarchies that perpetuate male social dominance) […] come together with ideologies and discourses of femininity and masculinity to produce an effect of gendering within the employment sphere.’

(Bradley, 1993: 14)
Research Agenda

Changes in both social conditions and discourses & ideologies of femininity/ masculinity
References

• Available upon request
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