Comments on Annette Henninger and Karin Gottschall "Freelancers in Germany's Old and New Media Industry: Beyond Standard Patterns of Work and Life?"

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Beyond Gender? A response to Gottschall and Henninger

It is striking that much of the writing about the transformation of work in the knowledge-society (or network society or risk society, as it is variously characterized), remains speculative, based on very little empirical research. Against this backdrop, Karin Gottschall and Annette Henninger's paper is welcomed as an important, rigorous empirical study based on the lives of precisely those people said to be at the forefront of transformations in work. This work is theoretically and methodologically innovative, and it is rigorous and original. The design of the research to include both workers in new roles within established professions, and new professions, is sensitive and very useful. Gottschall and Henninger have produced a timely and important piece of work that grapples with significant issues at the heart of concern about new patterns of working life, and their effect on domestic arrangements and subjectivity.

Here I want to focus specifically on their findings in relation to gender. For Gottschall and Henninger there seem to be grounds for optimism, especially in the context of Germany's modernized breadwinner model. Gender arrangements overall, within their sample, were 'diverse', and gender differences were 'minimal', with men and women spread evenly between job-focused and balanced arrangements as well as different types of arrangements within partnerships. Indeed, domestic arrangements based on reverse gender roles were seen as frequently as those with traditional patterns. All these findings would seem to offer hopeful signs to the analyst concerned with more equitable gender relations. It would be churlish not to welcome this picture of enhanced diversity, yet here I want to offer a few notes of caution -- based largely on a reading of Gottschall and Henninger's qualitative interview data.

New inequalities?

First, it is striking to note that of 39 interviewees only 3 had domestic arrangements that were characterized as both structurally equal and balanced. That is, only three people were managing both to combine work and caring responsibilities and leisure in a balanced way, and to share this more or less equitably with their partner. This partly reflected the degree of job-focus among interviewees (two thirds of the sample), in which people reported having little leisure time, and having to postpone other wishes and interests in order to prioritize paid work. It suggests the need for a larger analysis that looks at questions of dis-enclosure together with gender (and parenting).

Two of the female freelancers said that they had refrained from having children either due to low or insecure income or lack of time. This finding alone points to concerns about the field and the way in which financial rewards and time constraints are mediated by gender. There were no parallel 'sacrifices' reported by men. Of course, many women do not want to have children, and may instead commit themselves to doing work they love deeply, and this may explain these findings. Nevertheless, I think this observation suggests the need to look very carefully at the possibility that the nature of this work places particular demands on women that may make having children difficult.

Research on 'old media' workers in Britain -- TV producers mainly working for independent production companies on three or six month contracts -- found a similar pattern (Baehr 1996) as has research on journalists (Christmas 1997). Also, the BBC, which had targets for the percentage of women in senior management positions, found that whereas the men in this position usually had partners and families, for women, getting to such a position often did not allow that (Gill 2006). In other words, the cost of success is in not being able to 'have it all' if you are female. Recent research by Ian Bittman and Judy Wajcman (2000) on the time budgets of households, found that the single biggest inequality and division was not between men and

women, but between women with young children and everyone else. This suggests the urgent need to look at how parenting has a different impact on men than on women -- as this may be a key inequality of the future.

This point came out really beautifully in Gottschall and Henninger's biographical approach. It seemed to show that even when responsibility for housework and children was more equally shared within heterosexual couples, women still performed the emotional labor (Hochschild 1983) and still took overall responsibility within the home.

Discussing structurally specialized arrangements within households, Gottschall and Henninger emphasized that these were temporary and contingent, rather than fixed or taken for granted. In this sense, they pointed again to the potential for an opening up of gender arrangements. However, their interview data suggested that such arrangements had radically different meanings for men and women. For men, they seemed largely to be a matter of choice, while women were far more ambivalent about the flexibility required. It remains to be seen what the differential long-term impact of career breaks to raise children may be for men and women, and points to the need for longitudinal qualitative research.

Work, life and gender-silence

In this paper, Gottschall and Henninger chose to focus on the boundaries between work and life and on gender arrangements within households. This is an illuminating analysis, but it does not tell us about the relationship between gendered work-life arrangements and other features of freelancers' lives. What is the relationship between access to contracts, training, earnings and gender? Did the respondents talk about gender as a meaningful category in narrating their work biographies?

In the study of freelance new media workers that I did with colleagues across Europe, we found that gender was consistently disavowed (Gill and Dodd 2000; Gill 2002). Of our 114

respondents, 80 percent of men and 75 percent of women said that there was no gender disadvantage for women entering new media work. Indeed they were equally sanguine about other axes of inequality such as 'race', ethnicity and disability: what emerged was a powerful individualistic and meritocratic discourse, which stressed that anyone can make it if they work hard enough. Our respondents were generally utterly committed to this discourse which sometimes operated as a mantra. Yet one of the problems with this ideology of individual success and achievement is that it offers no way of understanding difficulties as anything other than personal failure or random events. What we found was that there were moments when respondents acknowledged that they knew they were not operating in a meritocratic system -- that they knew, for example, that contracts were not allocated on performance but often on connections -- yet this contradiction did not displace the overall ideology of individual meritocracy. This is significant both for understandings of ideology and for understanding subjectivity.

In terms of gender the issue was particularly stark. When we looked across a range of criteria such as the number of contracts, the amount of money earned, and so on, we found a clear pattern of gender inequality, with women securing fewer contracts and earning less but, equally, we found a strong pattern of conviction by men and women that gender was not an issue.

This presented us with an interesting dilemma: how were we to take seriously the evident economic and social patterns, yet also simultaneously take seriously and respect our respondents' accounts? Clearly, it is not just a case of 'false consciousness'. But we might need to ask whether the disavowal of the significance of gender is itself part of the picture of inequality. That is, whether silence about gender may itself be part of the contemporary patterning of gender relations in these post feminist times in which all the battles are supposed to have been won.

Doing gender in interviews

Finally, Gottschall and Henninger's research raised an issue about the performance of gender in interviews. What is the status of the interview respondents' claims? Are they to be taken at face value as authentic accounts of their actual feelings and commitments -- or might they be seen as occasioned and motivated productions of discourse? I think this is particularly pertinent in relation to gender -- in that we might see interview responses to questions about the balance of work and family commitments as prime opportunities for 'doing gender', as Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) call it; that is, producing oneself as a particular kind of gendered subject. We might want to ask what kinds of pressures there are to perform gender in particular kinds of ways. To take one example, research on domestic work and childcare shows that in heterosexual couples men and women give radically different answers when asked about men's contribution to house work and childcare. Men, on the whole, reported doing far more of this than women believe they do. This can be humorous or annoying, but what I think it shows is that part of the requirement for contemporary masculinity -- at least in particular class fractions -- is to be an involved father and be egalitarian in attitudes to house work.

When I read about Gottschall and Henninger's interviewees' responses I wondered to what extent they might be thought of as 'doing gender'. What are the pressures that operate to structure the kinds of answers one might receive? How difficult is it for a woman with small children to say that she is primarily work focused? Could a man say he is totally uninvolved with his children's care? I am raising these questions with a broad discourse analytic point of trying to think about the epistemological status of interview data, and, more specifically, just wondering what, if anything, the notion of gender as performance, not just fixed identity, might add to this work?

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