

Christine Williams on “The Glass Escalator”

Williams examined men’s experience in four female-dominated professions (nursing, elementary school teachers, librarians and social workers). She interviewed 76 men and 23 women in these professions in four metropolitan areas.

The theory of tokenism would predict that any small group (e.g., men in women-dominated professions) experiences discrimination. However, sexism against women may outweigh any discrimination against men as tokens in these professions.

Research on women in male-dominated professions has found a “glass-ceiling,” a level above women can’t rise due to discrimination. Williams did not find this effect for men in female-dominated professions. Instead, these men experienced a “glass escalator” that pushed them upwards in the professions.

Hiring: In these professions, there is a general preference for hiring men. Men are steered away from the most female-dominated parts of the professions (e.g., teaching lower grades, librarian in the children collection), but this may result in them being “kicked-upstairs” into better paying and more prestigious positions.

Working environment: Men in female-dominated professions are more likely to be supervised by men than women in male-dominated professions. This can result in rapport with and special treatment from supervisors. (This isn’t necessarily true for gay men.) There was some differential treatment of men (e.g., being asked to lift heavy boxes), but men didn’t always experience this negatively.

Discrimination from outsiders: Men in these professions often experience discrimination from the public, such as stereotypes that they are gay or asexual or that they are unable to get a better job. Men who work with children may be thought to be pedophiles. These types of stigma may be a major barrier to men entering these jobs. However, negative public reaction may also result in men being promoted to jobs with less public contact.