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**'Age, Gender and Work: Small Information Technology
Firms in the New Economy'
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REVIEW

It comes as no surprise to those of us who study the gender relations of IT to discover that small and medium-sized IT firms produce and reproduce gender inequalities, and that exemplary workers in this industry remain young men who are both unencumbered by caring responsibilities and regarded as naturally most able to 'fit in' with the work cultures of these companies. This fact has already been well established in relation to large firms by many studies of IT work in many cultures. It is acknowledged in the introduction to this book, which synthesises the results of a cross-national study of small organisations in the IT industry and their skilled employees.

The project of this book, however, goes beyond the description and analysis of the ways in which gender relations are played out in the small firms segment of the IT sector. The book is concerned with the combined influences of gender and age on the structure of work and employment relations for IT workers in small firms, for the archetypal IT worker remains a young man aged under 45. Through a series of case studies of working life in employing organisations and an online survey of employees, it analyses intersecting gender and age relations as they affect IT employees in four advanced industrialised economies: Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

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The book, and the project on which it draws (the 'Workforce Ageing in the New Economy' (WANE) project), takes the perspective of the life-course originally developed by Elder (1995) as the basis for an understanding of the transitions in the lives of employees and the influences of their non-working lives and significant relationships upon their employment trajectories. In this respect, as we have also noted in a recent Special Issue of this journal (Castaño and Webster 2011), the life-course perspective is an immensely useful lens through which to scrutinise the issues charting the paths that employees take through their careers, for it acknowledges the context shaping their working lives, the timings and specificities of changes in their status, and the processes by which they change. Also important for feminist researchers of IT careers, in my view, is the analysis of women's choices and decisions which this perspective supports, for it acknowledges the ways in which people negotiate the issues in their lives as individuals and in their relationships with others, structured as they are by the cultures and practices of different societies and institutions within them.

Indeed, focusing on individual life-courses does not imply abandoning an emphasis on the structural dimensions of gender or age. On the contrary, throughout the book McMullin and her colleagues combine their use of the life-course approach with an innovative conceptual approach to the study of the gender and age structures and cultures of firms. For them, gender and age are 'bases of social inequality that emerge simultaneously as both structural and individual features of social life' (p. 11). At the structural level, gender and age relations are constructed through power relations which include and exclude social groups from access to resources and opportunities. At the individual level, people "do" both gender and age in their everyday interactions, in the process reconstructing or modifying the gender and age relations conditioned structurally.

In the tradition of Joan Acker (2006) and many others, they underline the regimes of gender and age which underpin working life, and they draw heavily on her concept of 'inequality regimes' in organisations – an extension of Connell's (2002) concept of 'gender regimes', which allows for age as well as gender inequalities (and indeed for other dimensions of inequality) to be woven into organisational analysis.

In Chapter Three of the book, Ranson and Dryburgh take the gender regime concept further by identifying four refinements which not only classify the firms under study but also bring the concept to life in the empirical context of IT employment. The *masculinist gender regime* denotes regimes in firms which employ few women, particularly in senior or technical roles, which organise their cultures around masculine activities, and which organise recruitment to fit these cultures. The *benignly paternalistic gender regime* refers to a regime in organisations which do employ a few women in managerial and technical positions, are supportive environments to work in, but are still numerically strongly male-dominated. *Benignly maternalistic gender regimes* characterise firms employing more women and with a feminine workplace culture, while the *balanced gender regime* denotes firms with numerical gender balance throughout the firm and at the top, together with the valuing of older, more experienced staff. This analysis, then, has the merits of highlighting both the numerical presence of women and older workers and the cultural arrangements in firms which facilitate or inhibit their inclusion. Then, in Chapter Four, Comeau

and Kemp extend the concept of the masculine gender regime to distinguish between *entrepreneurial masculinity* (workers are expected to be entrepreneurial themselves), *brotherhood masculinity* (where the exclusion of those who don't 'fit in' is normal), and *craftsman masculinity* (where value is placed on skill).

Age regimes are expressed through stereotypes of, and assumptions about, the capabilities and expertise of older workers in computing, and these are the focus of the next major section of the book. As the three chapters within this section show, so-called 'older' workers are seen as less flexible, less able to adopt new technological solutions and generally less technologically adept than younger ones – or, as they describe themselves “too old to code” (Marshall 2010). Of course, the term 'older' is relative in the context of IT work; as McMullin and Comeau make clear in Chapter Seven, workers in IT are considered old long before they would be in other sectors, conventionally in their early forties. This is partly because age is defined in relation to the age structure of the occupational or industrial group, and in this case, the majority of IT workers in all countries covered by the study are under forty. Moreover, in general, women are considered to be older workers at younger ages than men are. The result of the ageism endemic in the sector is that older workers are not only rare but they are also vulnerable – to discrimination, to stereotyping, and to redundancy in times of crisis.

This culture of combined sexism and ageism calls into question the label of 'advanced', both in relation to the countries under study and in relation to the sector. In fact, the hiring and employment practices of some of the firms in this study come across as decidedly retarded, and depressingly, getting worse not better. One of the many strengths of the book is the way in which it places the empirical evidence about firm practices in the context of wider economic pressures and developments. Just as individual workers' lives and trajectories are understood in the context of the social relations which structure them, so too the case studies are understood in the context of the cyclical upturns and downturns which have beset the sector: their employment strategies and practices reflect the pressures wrought upon them by the volatility of the competitive environment.

Equally, the conceptual advances offered by the book are significant: the development of the concept of 'gender regimes', the identification of different forms of masculine cultures of technological endeavour, and in particular, their very solid empirical application through the case studies. The book is to be valued and commended for its conceptual and empirical contribution to our understanding of the dimensions of inequality in IT employment. All that remains now, having extensively analysed this state of affairs, is to change it.

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