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Gendered Practices in Veterinary Organizations

David Knights

Professor Organization Studies
Lancaster University Management School
Lancaster LA14YW
d.knights@lancaster.ac.uk

Caroline Clarke

Senior Lecturer
Open University Business School
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes, MK76AA
caroline.clarke@open.ac.uk

Corresponding author: d.knights@lancaster.ac.uk

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Abstract

As a result of scandals concerning sexual harassment in Hollywood and in the media, as well as questions regarding the size of the gender pay gap, considerable attention has recently been paid to questions of gender diversity and discrimination in organizations. Gender issues would appear particularly salient within the veterinary profession, not least because women are beginning to outnumber men as practitioners (RCVS, 2015). While this research on veterinary surgeons was *not* initially focused on gender, as the study progressed gender became an issue of such importance that it could not be ignored. Although ‘feminized in numerical terms’ the veterinary profession and ‘its professional structure and culture remains gendered masculine’ (Irvine & Vermilya, 2010:74). Translated into practice, this means that although 76% of vet school graduates are currently female (Vet Futures, 2014b), disproportionately few have risen, or are rising through the hierarchy (Treanor, 2016). On the surface it is easy to rationalize this away partly by simply stating how many women vets appear to sacrifice career for family, but our aim is to go beyond merely repeating and reinforcing the commonsense view of female

reproduction and parenting as the sole explanation for gender inequality within this and other professions.

Introduction

Although a topic of great importance, we did not set out to study gender in our research with vets, but the accounts given to us by our participants made it impossible to ignore. Despite women now outnumbering male vets (RCVS, 2015), veterinary practices are still comparatively insensitive to how their ‘professional structure and culture’ remains ‘gendered masculine’ (Irvine & Vermilya, 2010, p. 74). We should state that when referring to gender, we are not talking *primarily* about the biological distinction between women and men, but the ‘socially produced pattern of meanings that distinguish the masculine from the feminine’ (Pullen & Rhodes, 2008, p. 7).

Relatedly, the aim of this article is to examine how gender is constructed and reproduced in the organization of veterinary practices, while its effects are often either ignored or taken-for-granted by our participants and the profession more generally. We explore these ideas through the presentation and discussion of our ethnographic research, an immersion into the world of veterinary work, seeking to develop insights not only complementary to the larger scale data produced by the RCVS (2014a; b; 2015) but also helpful for understanding the problems and seeking potential solutions.

Regardless of equality legislation and active feminism, the female gender is often intimately linked with limited intellectual, emotional and physical strength, for women are often treated in stereotypical ways as comparatively passive and subordinate to the male subject who is seen as both active and autonomous (Hekman, 1999: 6). In our interviews, many women (especially, early career) vets reported this kind of gendered experience where clients, and sometimes even their own practices, treated them as having limited competence and credibility. For newly minted veterinary professionals, unequal client-power relationships of this kind pose a threat to their professional identities, and if coupled with a string of ‘unsuccessful’ cases in a context where organizational support is either limited or non-existent (Routly and others, 2002; Clarke and Knights, 2018a) these can have deleterious effects on their mental health and ability to practice.

Despite 76% of veterinary students being female (RCVS, 2014b), women begin to repeat, recite and reproduce gendered discourses of limitation even during their training for they exhibit greater intentions to work part-time, with fewer aspirations to own a veterinary practice when compared to males (Treanor, 2016). This may be partly due to what Treanor calls ‘fit work’, whereby women (consciously or unconsciously) start to adjust their future intentions and plans, so as to align with particular areas of work that are deemed ‘more appropriate’ for them, and therefore accessible. Women students may already have encountered and internalized the signaling of ‘fit work’ whilst in ‘veterinary education and practical work experience placement’ (Treanor, 2016: 407). Translated into veterinary practice, this might mean a transition into small animal work, or first-opinion practices, rather than a consideration of specialist hospital work, or academic research (Treanor & Marlowe, 2016). We extend Treanor’s ideas of ‘fit work’ to include not only *areas of work*, but also *ways of working*, so this might mean being and staying in part-time, lower salaried and non-partnership roles. Certainly, our findings confirm that female vets reproduce these discourses of limitation regarding their own future, which of course has serious consequences, not only for their own career, but also for a profession where 80% of its graduates are currently female.

We therefore contend that our research is important for at least three different reasons. First, there are not only ethical, but also potentially legal, implications of practices that conflict with equal opportunity policies and values. Second, the gendered organization of work and taken-for-granted masculine practices, may render veterinary work an unattractive or unenlightened option for prospective bright and intelligent (female) students. Third, since few women in comparison to men are encouraged to seek promotion, or eventually obtain it (Irvine and Vermilya, 2010), there is a fundamental problem in succession planning that needs to be urgently addressed by the profession.

Methods

Our research methods were ethnographic, so they were of an interpretive and qualitative nature. We understand that quantitative methods that draw either on published statistical or questionnaire data are valuable in generating broad general accounts of a phenomenon, especially where stratified random samples are deployed in their construction. Indeed, we were

alerted to changes around gender in the profession, not only through our emergent findings in this study, but also by consulting a range of survey data provided by RCVS (2014a; b; 2015). This kind of research provides broad and extensive accounts of important issues but it cannot always explore fully the conditions underlying particular problems, for this requires us to examine how subjects interpret or make sense of their situations. If we can encourage our research participants to talk about their work, meaningful experiences that are rarely captured in questionnaires can form the basis for us to interpret and better understand their lives.

We negotiated access for our study partly through an anonymous but collaborative group of vets who work towards providing a quality service that is nationally recognised. We started with a written invitation sent by email to independent member practices throughout the UK, which resulted in a response from 12 practices. We gained access to the remainder of our participants through informal contacts and personal recommendations. Our final sample comprised 76 participants; 39 males and 36 females with an age range from 25 to 63 in what was a fairly typical representation of the profession. We further stratified our sample to ensure representation of the three main types of vets: Small Animal, Large Animals and Equine, and to include vets with varied experience ranging from early career through to partners/directors.

The study consisted of two stages: Stage 1 - a pilot study comprising 12 interviews and observations. Stage 2 followed with a more substantial interview programme of 63 interviews and observations. We conducted our semi-structured interviews so that participants would talk broadly about themselves, and how they felt in regard to the veterinary profession. Questions such as *'can you assemble for me your perfect day at work?'*, *'what attracted you to the profession and has it panned out the way you expected it to'* and *'have you ever considered leaving the profession?'* were designed to encourage an openness to their experience of veterinary practice, and to allow us to explore the conditions whereby roughly 90% of the occupation have reported anxiety and stress (RCVS, 2015). We did not explicitly ask questions around gender. Interviews varied between 41 minutes in length to 93 minutes, and were digitally recorded and fully transcribed, after which they were imported into *NVivo*, a software programme that facilitates data analysis.

As part of our ethnographic study, and to help familiarise ourselves with veterinary work, we also carried out observations of vets during farm, equine and small animal practice visits, and

often when consultations and operations were undertaken. We also ‘lurked’ in staff kitchens, and corridors making field notes, participating in conversations and writing reflections. These informed our analysis by illustrating events that might otherwise be erased, ‘censored, ignored or side-lined in social scientific accounts’ (Wacquant, 2015, p.3). Prior to carrying out any research, The Human Research Ethics Committee at The Open University granted ethical approval for our study.

Data Analysis

We immersed ourselves in the texts of our interviews, reading and rereading them so as to establish themes and trends within them. We coded our texts initially using general concepts that surround social relations at work and in the profession, then refined and sub-divided our data into second order analytical concepts such as self-deprecation, masculinity, physicality, and unpaid labour. Finally, we critically analysed and interrogated our data in order to comprehend the ways in which particular narratives were used, either consciously or not, to maintain or disrupt the prevailing sense of relations at work. For example, senior vets often repeated their view that women wouldn’t seek promotion as ultimately, they only wanted to work part time. Recognising this as a means of justifying existing gendered hierarchies, we must be alert as to how constant repetition can morph into a taken for granted reality, “that’s just the way it is”, which is not only endorsed by those in power, but also by those disadvantaged by it (Irvine and Vermilya, 2010; Treanor, 2016).

Findings

Our approach does not attempt to emulate the model of the strict sciences; rather, its purpose is to provide materials that will encourage discussion and debate on issues of contemporary concern, of which gender in the veterinary profession is certainly one. When reporting on ethnographic research, space prevents presentation of data representing anything more than a brief sample of what has been collected but ~~although we make no claim to representational precision,~~ these gendered experiences from our interviews were by no means atypical. So, for example, one woman reported on her specific experience,

my very first weekend on call here I saw a down cow and I give her the treatments. ... “If she's not up by tomorrow give me a call”. ... they gave me a call but demanded one of the boys came out to see her because I'd clearly not done it right. ... he came out, did the exact same thing as me. That kept them happy. (Female, Large Animal, 5 years)

Such blatant sexism from clients tends not to be challenged by (senior) vets (Williams, 2014), partly because of their being oblivious to the problems, but also presumably for fear of upsetting the client (RCVS, 2014a). This lack of support can have a downwardly spiralling effect where women vets begin to doubt themselves in ways that undermine their confidence, not least because it was reported that some clients (and vets) continue to hold,

Very, very old-fashioned ideas, [about] a woman's place [being] probably in the home and not in the workplace. (Female, Small Animal, 20 years)

Of course, some senior vets appear on the surface to be sensitive to gender but, as the following example shows, are also unaware of their own tendency to express stereotypical assumptions,

I think that there was a lot of chauvinism ... much less so now. I think female vets can actually bring a lot of skills, in terms of, often, their communication style is different and is well received by the farmers. ... they can ...use their charm in situations, which do require some physical strength to actually just get the farmer to help. (Male, Large Animal, 32 years.)

While declaring chauvinism to be a thing of the past, this vet proceeds to reproduce it by describing female vets in stereotypical terms, for example being good communicators, while being able to use their ‘charm’ to compensate for their ultimate physical inferiority to the male sex. Issues of physical weaknesses were frequently reproduced by vets of both sexes, particularly in relation to large animal work,

As a woman, being a female, I knew I wanted a family and I thought physically I just might not be able to cope with [large animals] for very long. (Female, Small Animal, 5 yrs)

Rarely were the apparent physical limitations placed upon women challenged,

Sometimes, if it's a calving, "oh, we need someone with long arms". Well, no you don't, you just need the technique to do the calving. And so quite often it's that sort of thing. Rather than gender, specifically...Most of our job doesn't require any strength. And the bits that do require strength, often require technique, more than strength. (Female, Large Animal, 2.5 years)

This issue seems pervasive beyond the UK, for an Australian online blogger challenges these constant comparisons of male and female physical strength by asking 'what's an extra 15 Kilograms to a 1 tonne bull?' Physicality was only one of many aspects noted, in our research, where the legitimacy of female vets was questioned until they had 'proven' themselves,

There were some farmers that were a bit funny about this. 'Oh, can you send a man?' And you say, "no, you've got me or you've got me". But, generally speaking, once you go out and do the job ... they can see that you're perfectly capable of doing it (Female, Large Animal, 10 years)

They would probably pay more attention if I was male'.
(Female Large Animal, 8 years)

I still do think that male vets are valued higher than females...I've seen it. I've experienced it. I had a case, a lady in hysterics, and as soon as a male vet came on the scene she was completely different (Female, Small Animal, 9 years)

Beyond the surface, the organisation of veterinary medicine is reported to be still entrenched in its historically masculine culture, which tends to favour men, particularly when it comes to advancement and promotion,

When I asked if I could be a partner they said, "there were people that were averse to having a female partner' (Female, Small Animal, 21 years)

Such aspects of the ‘gendered organisation’ of veterinary work reside in, and reproduce presumptions around the gendered division of domestic labour, where women tend to take on most of the responsibilities in caring for dependents. Predictably, both sexes subscribe to a narrative of female vets having to choose between career or family, which was entirely absent from male accounts, as were any issues of future fatherhood. These assumed responsibilities then become conflated (unproblematically) with either the sheer impossibility, or lack of desire, for women to seek senior positions in their practices. Such narratives of limitation are sometimes exacerbated and reinforced by gendered self-deprecation,

I know so few females that actually want to do the business side of things. None of us want to go in that direction; I’m rubbish with numbers, I wouldn’t want to... I think, for most females that’s not what they’re aiming for. (Female, Small Animal, 8 years)

you spend a lot of time at vet school, about five/six years, so for a female, by the time you get out you’re ... probably starting to think about a family. Maybe you don’t have enough time to even move on to the business side of things, or if you do then it obviously means pushing family aside, which I have seen some girls do (Female, Small Animal, 10 years)

Here the vet ‘naturalises’ not only her own position as carer, but also appears to judge negatively those who do pursue a career. Relatedly, the masculine culture of long working hours in veterinary practices militates against those women who subscribe to the stereotypical culture of caring, since domestic constraints may often interfere with, or give the impression of a lower, commitment to the organisation compared to their male compatriots. Put simply, if women assume responsibility for non-work related commitments, it leaves male vets comparatively advantaged in terms of being visibly present and ambitious,

there’s a culture of long hours and that is the case for directors... I think that perhaps a lot of female vets, either through dint of taking career maternity breaks or ... perhaps not the primary breadwinner in the household, means that they don’t always aspire to run veterinary practices. (Male, Large Animal, 33 years)

Invariably, the very intelligent young ladies that come out of vet school... don't really want to own a practice...because they might have a family at some point, three or four or five years down the line...which kind of leaves this older male classic sort of, white male middle class practice owner kind of thing (Male, Small Animal, 28 years)

As it has frequently been argued, 'men as a group dominate women as a group' (Walby, 1990, p.3), but this disadvantage is further exacerbated when female vets are described through gendered narratives of male superiority, where success/partnership may still be reliant on marriage, despite two vets holding the same qualifications,

I've never actually said that to anyone, but it's always been in my mind, how the only way you can get partnership here is to marry a vet, which you don't want to do (Female small animal, 30 years)

Aside from one veterinary practice where there were several part-time female directors, we also found evidence in our study that once female vets had children, and/or went part-time, they were assumed to be on the 'mommy track' (Gatrell, 2008) and were no longer taken seriously by the practice. This manifested itself in several ways, such as no longer being given complex cases and not being considered as candidates for promotion,

'I've obviously not been included in the partnership...I got told I was "too empathetic, I was too good a surgeon and my family were too important". Judy got told "she was too old."' (Female, Small Animal, 8 years)

Here, by dint of being told she is 'too good', the vet fails to be promoted, since most of the elements where she is said to excel are stereotypically feminine. Similar criticisms of 'family being too important' would be hard to imagine as a (relevant) description of a male vet. Promotion aside, there were other detrimental implications for becoming a part-time vet, such as how they sometimes felt that their identities as professionals were undermined,

I think since going part-time I probably feel more of an imposter, I feel like I don't pull my weight. Or I'm not around all the time; I'm not... a real vet because I'm not here all the time putting in the hours and the out-of-hours, seeing all those horrible cases. I feel guilty; I feel guilty! (Female Small Animal, 9 years)

Here, the female vet berates herself for not being present at work in the way that other vets are, despite how part-time work by its very definition means working fewer hours, while simultaneously taking up the burden of less valued and unpaid domestic labour.

Discussion and Concluding Comments

In this discussion, we consider how our study is important in relation to the three different, but related claims we set out in the introduction and conclude by showing the limitations and some recommendations for future research and practice.

First, we suggest the importance of our study in relation to the potentially ethical, and legal implications of practices that conflict with equal opportunity policies and values. While most veterinary practices in our research were hierarchically insensitive to gender issues, their clients tended to be more explicitly discriminatory, sometimes even insisting that their animals be treated by male vets (Williams, 2014). Our data indicated how female vets constantly need to 'prove themselves', thus experiencing a more precarious and pressurised environment than their male counterparts. Despite their increasing numbers, disproportionately few women vets have risen through the hierarchy (Irvine and Vermilya, 2010; Treanor, 2016), reinforcing other research that finds women 'far less likely to be a sole principal, director or partner' (RCVS, 2015: 3-4).

However, our research goes beyond existing knowledge as it seeks to understand *why* this is occurring. A majority of our participants (both male and female) tended to express gender stereotypes and often women vets were subject to outright sex discrimination. This can only exacerbate the situation, whereby it is argued that one in five female vets will 'suffer burnout...in their first five years after graduation'ⁱ (RCVS, 2015: 17). On these terms alone, it is ethically incumbent on senior managers to identify and challenge discrimination, from within the profession itself or among clients to alleviate the pressures that female vets reported.

A second issue our analysis raises is whether the gendered organization of work in veterinary medicine, could ultimately render it unattractive as a workplace for women. At present, despite the evidence relating to the high ratio of senior male compared to female vets, and the low ratio of females within large-animal practices, hospital specialists and academic researchers in veterinary medicine who are female, vets do not readily recognise these issues, and some even refuse to acknowledge their existence (Treanor, 2016). Whether or not vets acknowledge gender as being problematic, they (and the profession) must still live with its effects. One male equine partner made the following observation ‘I’ve got daughters and tell them to go into medicine, because the career structure [in this profession] is so poor for girls. In this practice we have nine directors all male. We have probably 20 odd assistants of which two are male’. Such an indictment is all the more serious coming from an insider. Is the current popularity of veterinary medicine sustainable in this context, or could it become untenable once the gendered nature of the profession, and the limited nature of work deemed ‘fit’ for females (Treanor, 2016) becomes more widely experienced and acknowledged? We suggest that these issues are likely to become more of a concern, and unless remedial action is taken, turnover may accelerate further, and recruitment could become a problem.

Third, our study confirms the view that employee turnover and exit into part-time work is partly a problem of gender mismanagement (Clarke and Knights, 2018b). We have seen how barriers to promotion rely on notions of the passive female vet, who is seen to place family before work, but managers fail to recognize how their practices not only reflect, but also reproduce, this gendered situation where women are frequently led to see career as ‘either/or decisions’ between ‘productive and reproductive work’ (Gatrell, 2008). These reinforce the discourses of ‘limitation’ that are often used to justify why women do not climb the hierarchy.

However, women’s behaviour is in large part *a symptom* of wider entrenched masculine practices, and the harvest of those seeds of doubt sown early on in both veterinary school and work placements concerning what is ‘fit’ work for female vets (Treanor, 2016). In short, this inequality cannot be explained away solely as due to individual ‘choice’ or the attraction of family, for it is linked intimately to various gendered assumptions: about women’s responsibility for caring and domestic labour; part-time veterinary work facilitating this; and the lack of imaginative arrangements and possibilities concerning more flexible forms of

partnership and management. If fewer women in comparison to men are encouraged to seek, or eventually obtain promotion, then given the gender demographics, a succession planning crisis is inevitable.

While often irritated by their effects in daily practice, women vets do not seem to be moved to challenge the gender hierarchies and the entrenched masculine cultures at work (Irvine and Vermilya, 2010; Castro and Armitage-Chan, 2016), so the gendered distribution of hierarchical power, privilege and prestige remain secure (Clarke and Knights 2018a). Consequently, vets tend to reproduce the conditions of gender disadvantage but this is often exacerbated by concerns to avoid upsetting the client (Institute of Employment Studies, 2014). If we were asked to offer potential solutions to these problems, we would suggest gender awareness training both in management and in the veterinary college curriculum. This could raise issues of discrimination around gender and other closely related problems such as age, so that students are equipped to recognize and challenge discourses of limitation and discrimination *before they* become normalized, internalized and entrenched.

A limitation of our project is that the focus was not specifically on how the profession is in a state of deep transformation (Ruston and Others, 2017). Traditionally, and in parallel with dentists, opticians and pharmacists, veterinary surgeons have operated through comparatively small independent, self-employed partnerships. However, more research is clearly needed to interrogate the changes that occur as a result of corporatization, including its impact on gender relations. From our limited observations, the corporates are repeating the same gender-blind practices of the profession and this could well end up being their Achilles heel to limit corporate growth or, worst case scenario, damage the general provision of future veterinary services. In this sense, we think our analysis is of as much relevance to the corporates as to the independents that formed around 90% of our sample, and that further research into this under-researched area would be beneficial for the profession as a whole.

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Notes

ⁱ This compares to one in seven for male vets so we are not claiming that gender is the only problem facing the veterinary profession (see, Clarke and Knights, 2018a).