

SOLITUDES OF THE WORKPLACE: WOMEN IN UNIVERSITIES

Elvi Whittaker, Ed.
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Solitudes of the Workplace: Women in Universities is an edited collection by trans-disciplinary scholars on the subject of solitude for women of various positions within universities in Canada. The book departs from traditional literature of gender and the university by including the experiences of solitude beyond those with the position of professor, such as non-academic administrators, support staff, mature women students, and contract teachers and researchers. The book is prefaced by a "Prologue: A View from the Pinnacle: Conversations with Martha Piper" by Sally E. Thorne, and then divided (unequally) into two parts, beginning with the smaller section. Part one, "Solitudes and Formal Knowledge," feels somewhat out of place in the collection as the three other chapters address the historical context of women's studies in Canada; the area of study of Canadian feminist anthropology; and marginalized identity categories used by the university to study and track equity within the institution. The first section of the book provides an in-depth literature review of the historical struggles of women, and feminist, in particular, struggles within the university and various disciplines. It does, however, fall short of addressing experiences of solitude, and the diversity of such experiences from an intersectional framework. The essays within the first section feel dated within a second-wave feminist conversation and do not adequately

address contemporary issues of solitude and formal knowledge such as pushback against feminist and other radical pedagogies in the contemporary neo-liberal context, or, for instance, the struggle of trans women and trans studies to establish their own fields of research, publication, courses and majors. While the editor of the collection, Elvi Whittaker, claims that "[t]wo themes stand out as linked essentials: identity and categories. This interplay between workplace activities and products, and the creation of self and behavior, underlies each account," this interplay is unclear in the first section of the collection.

Part two, "Identities and the Everyday," is nearly twice as long as the first part of the book and contains 8 essays instead of 3. Whittaker is attentive to the complex relationship between social relations, power, and identity and provides a thorough working background on identity for the reader in her introduction to this section of the book. Patricia Palulis' chapter "Tenure (Un)Secure/d: As Words Go Into Labour," is particularly dactylic and has the affect one might expect from a feminist account of experiences of solitude in the university. Other chapters include discussions of gender and "scientific voice;" diverse experiences, identities, and solidarity practices of contemporary women students, administrative assistants, secretaries and clerical staff; the "cultural barrier" between academic and "non-academic" staff, as well as the unique difficulties of contract teaching and being a professor in Atlantic Canada. The shared strength of all of the chapters in the second section is the wide variety of methods, theories, and disciplinary backgrounds of each of the authors.

Solitudes of the Workplace would be a useful introductory text for courses on the sociology of gender or women's studies as it successfully

lays out the literature in the field and presents a diverse range of experiences and arguments pertaining to and by women of various positions within the university setting. Whittaker notes that while some consideration was taken with regards to the geographical differences within Canada and the different jobs women hold within the university, "Questions of representation, however, were secondary considerations to the task of discovering ongoing research on workplace experiences—the central theme of the collection." Whittaker's introductions to each of the two parts of the collection, as well as the conclusion, are concise and direct the reader to the collaborative point that is trying to be made. This text is accessibly written. But it lacks critical engagement with the diverse positionalities and realities encompassed within the category of "women." It was also disappointing that there was no discussion of sexual harassment and/or violence in the university as a workplace, despite the historical and contemporary gendered nature of both phenomena in the university context.

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