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Book Review: Gender Shrapnel in the Academic Workplace

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***Gender Shrapnel in the Academic Workplace*, Ellen Mayock, 2016. Hardcover. Palgrave Macmillan, New York. 244 pages, index included, \$100.00. Hardcover.**

Reviewed by Lisa M. Litterio¹

Institutions espouse to focus on social justice, globalism, and equity, but Mayock, writing in early 2015, directly confronts this third-wave feminism environment and exposes the way in which university culture perpetuates inequity in the treatment, hiring, and support of women. Using a hybrid methodology of data coupled with primarily first-person narratives, she weaves together a cohesive text that examines these underlying problems in academia. Rather than simply problematizing gender inequity in the workplace, she devotes a significant portion of her work to solutions, references, and guides to navigating instances of gender discrimination.

Mayock begins her work by defining gender shrapnel, which “is a series of small explosions in the workplace that affect women and men and reveal an uneven gender dynamic at all levels of the organization” (6). These workplace explosions occur when “gender norms of our homes and of our public interactions that consistently follow a patriarchal flow are replicated and entrenched in the workplace” (6). To illustrate, Mayock shares an anecdote from a female faculty member of an all-male committee. Since there were home-made cookies on a plate at their meeting, the men assumed the female baked them. Not only is gender shrapnel itself problematic, but also are its lasting effects. She states, “When you’re evaluated on your performance at work and your perceived performance in the home, you’ve been hit by a form of gender shrapnel. The first time you’ve been hit by it, you have no idea what it is, where it came from, and why” (4). Along with its dizzying effects, gender shrapnel is oppositional to Title VII and Title XI law, which Mayock refers to throughout her work. Finally, she emphasizes that gender shrapnel is all an encompassing process because “institutions cannot function well within a culture of fear and defensiveness” (21). For an audience unfamiliar with this term, the closest alignment could be “microaggressions,” coined by Harvard professor and psychiatrist Charles Pierce in the 1970s (Pierce). Although he used microaggressions to refer to instances of discrimination from non-African Americans to African Americans, microaggressions can also encompass any instances of racial, gender, sexual orientation, or class-based discrimination. While Mayock claims microaggressions are linked to gender shrapnel, she argues shrapnel affects parties beyond the ones discriminated against (10). This statement is a place where her work could be expanded, particularly showing the instances and effects of gender shrapnel beyond the first-person narratives. Whether Mayock’s term becomes popularized to the level of microaggressions remains to be seen, and also dependent on the reach of her work.

Her text is organized into five parts. Part I provides a methodological framework and relies heavily on narratives from females who have experienced gender shrapnel. These stories are from friends and colleges, “primarily from the education field, but also business, law, medicine, and politics” (11). These narratives focus on sexual discrimination, harassment, and retaliation while offering concrete solutions to pressing issues. The goal of her work is to move from compassion to activism. In Part II, Mayock shifts from examining current narratives to the historical and more data-centered, as she analyzes Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* to conceptualize a

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“professional mystique.” She argues that Friedan’s work is still applicable today, including how women are depicted in the media, the glass ceiling, and the structure of the workplace environment. Mayock floats research, statistics, and gender shrapnel examples here, and as a result, some of her writing in this section appears tangential rather than supportive. Part III offers potential solutions to these problems while Part IV consists of case studies that demonstrate how gender shrapnel occurs and how it can be prevented. Finally, in Part V, Mayock acknowledges that gender shrapnel is a continual part of our lives and we need to still speak out against workplace injustice by using the resource guide and checklists she provides.

In addition to relying on the narratives of others, Mayock shares her own story with the reader and acknowledges the power of her own narrative in Part I. As a female in an academic administrative position and chairing series of events surrounding co-education while forming the Women’s and Gender Studies Program, she shares her own story to provide credence to her ideas and empathy. It also allows us as readers to see that gender shrapnel is not a distant theoretical concept; it is a visceral one and affects the author as well. In addition to sharing her own story, Mayock’s background in Spanish/Foreign Languages represents one discipline of many that involves gender shrapnel in the workplace. Her prior experience and research in gender shrapnel supports her viewpoints. She wrote for *Inside Higher Education* about “Clearing the Shrapnel” (9/22/16), the New Books Network Podcast, and guest co-hosted with Dr. Michael Aronoff and Dara Wells for Doctor Radio on the effects of gender bias (Mayock). All of these speaking engagements are ways she makes gender shrapnel accessible to those in medicine, law, the academy, and other positions. She has also co-edited a prior book, *Feminist Activism in Academia: Essays on Personal, Political, and Professional Change*. Her previous work emphasizes the power of the first-person narrative, which explains her methodology for this text.

Many readers of her work may wonder, as Mayock encourages us to, how to move from contemplation to action. At the end of each chapter, particularly in Part II and Part III, Mayock provides a chronological list of action items. These include recognizing institutional problems and attempting to combat them. Of particular use is the penultimate section, in which Mayock examines training principles for analyzing workplace situations and integrating new practices. Mayock advocates for assessment of gender inequity, a standing body on gender discrimination, and follow through with leadership and evaluation practices. Further, the Appendix offers comprehensive case studies, and there are a variety and diversity of examples, such as a supervisor touching a female employee inappropriately to colleagues creating a damaging culture of misanthropy. These resources would be useful for those interested, but I question ways to reach an audience who does not recognize a problem or claims overt sensitivity or ignorance. In addition, Mayock’s suggestion of forming a professional committee about workplace environments is useful, but there may not be enough resources or support at some institutions for these committees. It may also attract those interested in workplace equity when the conversation needs to encompass the entire institution. There may also be the need for external reviewers or neutral parties to intervene and assess incidences of gender shrapnel.

Other questions that remain after reading Mayock’s text include: are we getting better? Are institutions of higher education improving, or are the examples and narratives Mayock weaves through the text illustrative of a seriously damaging culture of higher education? This is where more quantitative research could be useful in understanding some of the culture, perceptions, and changes in the treatment of women in higher education. Additional research could also address Mayock’s comments in the final remarks that she received criticism about the over reliance of stories rather than data. Alternatively, as a follow-up text, the reader could benefit from a

longitudinal study using Mayock's checklists and user guides to assess the effectiveness of these guides in changing and combating workplace harassment. In the publication of her book, it is unknown how effective they are, but we do learn Mayock crafted this list in conversation with Professor Sally Burns from New York University Law School.

Reviewing her work after the presidential election, we are reminded that this kind of serious inquiry about how to combat workplace discrimination and incidences of gender shrapnel are pertinent now more than ever. Mayock's work is timely not only for institutions of higher education, but also institutions in general as we grapple with questions of inequity, power, and politics. As Mayock reminds us, the goal is not defensiveness or fear, but compassion and dignity for all members of the workplace. Although the popularity and applicability of the specific term "gender shrapnel" is yet to be seen, Mayock's point about the visibility and advocacy of workplace inequity is well taken. Her text does not only illuminate problems we are facing, but also pragmatic solutions to these pressing issues.

Additional citations:

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