

The Paula principle: How and why women work below their level of competence

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Book review:

Schuller, Tom (2017) *The Paula Principle: How and why Women Work Below Their Level of Competence* London: Scribe RRP £14.99 | 234 x 153mm pbo, 256pp | ISBN: 9781911344018 | e-book ISBN: 9781925548013

Why educational success does not always lead to equality

*Anna¹, 42, from Melbourne, believes a lack of self-confidence stopped her from being promoted in the media and advertising worlds. "I used to watch this guy at work," she says. "He wasn't competent but he was the most extraordinary self-promoter I've ever seen. It made me realise how I needed to put myself forward more."*¹

This familiar story from the *The Sydney Morning Herald* in June 2017 appears in a discussion of why women, successfully educated and competent in every way, so frequently end up in a job that doesn't reflect their ability. It's one of the questions Tom Schuller asks in *The Paula Principle: How and why Women Work Below Their Level of Competence*². The stories Schuller uncovers about women's experience of the workplace is underpinned by a wealth of data from OECD countries in which it is clear that women have overtaken men educationally at every level and yet somehow this isn't matched by success in employment. For example, Schuller reminds us that women have overtaken men,

- at school leaving certificate level
- at top of course in the High School Certificate in Australia
- at university entrance level
- at attendance in full-time further and higher education
- at highest level in university finals
- in medical school exams...

and he calls these '*crossover points*' and teases us as to when they happened - longer ago than you think, is the answer. The data used is rich, accessible and simply set out. It is probably something we all knew, but didn't know quite as

¹ Dent, Jackie (2017) 'What's holding so many well-educated women back when it comes to work?' *The Sydney Morning Herald* Careers and Money, June 11, 2017

² Schuller, Tom (2017) *The Paula Principle: How and why Women Work Below Their Level of Competence* London: Scribe RRP £14.99 | 234 x 153mm pbo, 256pp | ISBN: 9781911344018 | e-book ISBN: 9781925548013

clearly as we do now. The inescapable conclusion is that something very odd is going on. Or, if you're a woman it's probably pretty obvious and endlessly irritating. Despite Schuller's disclaimer in the preface that he is not a gender specialist nor is he a woman, there is a level of irony about a privileged white male, commenting on the rather obvious issue that faces women in the workplace. Although this is oddly uncomfortable, Schuller himself recognises this irony in the early part of the book.

Schuller's concept of 'The Paula Principle' is accessible and useful for adult educators and the principle is set out as, '*most women work below their level of competence*'³. In this book Schuller doesn't explore in any depth Feminist theories on domestic, reproductive labour and the relationship between capitalist production and domestic reproduction⁴ nor does he carry forward alternative visions of gendered patterns. The book is deliberately set out to be written in a way that is accessible to a broad audience and does away with academic language. Schuller has been working on this idea for many years and supports the data with valuable interviews with a range of women, and underpinned with a useful blog. His theory is that there is a common pattern to what is a frustrating problem. He identifies five broad reasons why there's a gap between achievement and workplace position for women in OECD countries which he terms 'factors'. He suggests a useful exercise where people might vote on which factor is most important in explaining the Paula Principle and suggests an order of perceived importance. Might it be structural, about discrimination and the way in which women are undervalued? Might it be the result of caring responsibilities - children, partner or elders? Might it be related to women's self-confidence or identity? Perhaps it's about social capital and lack of access to vertical networks? A fifth suggestion from Schuller is more positive - it's the result of choice - the wish to balance one's life and not to expose oneself to such high stress. All of these are explored; none in themselves are convincing as a cause, but in combination they may go some way to explain an ongoing and as yet unresolved problem. The best answers as to why the Paula Principle is evident lie in the responses from those he interviewed. Their view of the world - across the social class spectrum - leaves us by turns angry and exasperated.

Evidence of the Paula Principle is all around us. In July 2017 the BBC in the UK published the salaries of all staff earning over £150,000. It provided opportunities for the first time to note that male colleagues doing the same job in the same teams (like newsreaders) were paid, hugely different salaries from the women - with the men always earning a great deal more. Only a third of the top salaries went to women in spite of an equal pay policy going back years. The men

³ contrasting with Peter and Hull's (1969) *The Peter Principle: 'every employee tends to rise to his level of incompetence'*.

⁴ Weeks, Kathi (20017) *Life within and Against Work, ethemera articles: theory and politics in organization, Vol 7(1): 233-247.*

themselves came blinking into the light at this exposure, agreeing rather sheepishly with interviewers that yes the gender pay gap was wrong and shouldn't be happening: men and women should get equal pay for an equal job. But hapless executives in the BBC, trying to explain how this could have happened, could not answer very simple questions like, 'If there is an equal pay act in this country and in your corporation, how come you allow this to go on?' Nor could they offer any solution, other than by saying that salaries for those top earners would become level in due time (about three to ten years). "We need to employ the very best. They help make the BBC what it is. That's the business we're in," the Director General Tony Hall said. "And of course, we're in a market that is now even more competitive than ever..."⁵ One interviewer asked, '*Couldn't the men take less money?*' There was no answer from Hall to this suggestion.

Tom Schuller's book is very useful for continuing the debate. It raises questions which may make some people feel uncomfortable, but provides a valuable prompt for research students looking at widening participation. It reminds us (as always) that education might make a huge difference to individuals but in itself education cannot be the one and only key to securing equality in a real sense. This makes it harder to sell lifelong learning to policy makers but at least it's placed the argument in the public domain. It doesn't explain why pay is still unequal, or so few women are in boardrooms or running big national and international companies, but it does explain the many reasons which might contribute to this. The Paula Principle seems to apply across many job levels and types.

Schuller argues deftly that there may be a number of solutions to unlock whatever it is that is holding women back. There is nothing inevitable about the Paula Principle and part of the solution lies in men valuing 'mosaic working'; greater clarity about how we see part-time working and how it is valued; greater access to learning throughout life.

You will find this book of value, in seminars, at the dinner table and in trade union meetings. We recommend giving it to colleagues and students and asking for their experiences and the reasons for the Principle, and what they suggest the solutions might be. We need to carry on the conversation about it - and it has to be bigger than the equality argument - while being essentially about equality in the end.

Two irritating things in an otherwise excellent book: first, the absence of an index so that you can find things easily, and second, the references. To follow up a reference requires scampering to the back of the book, which in turn means you lose the drift or argument. I understand that the publisher wanted an accessible book and not one written in the usual academic jargon. It is useful that the book

⁵ 'BBC expects backlash over stars' salaries but says they're worth it' Tuesday 18 July 2017
<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2017/jul/18/bbc-expects-backlash-stars-salaries-says-theyre-worth-it-tony-hall> accessed 08 August 2017

is accessible but references and index would have been helpful. This is a relatively trivial complaint. *The Paula Principle* is a book worth reading for everyone who wants to see fair play and has a passion for lifelong learning and adult education.

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ⁱ Names have been changed