

Doing, knowing, being: Notes from a naval shipyard on competency and social identity in the skilled trades

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Problem and literature

The status of the skilled trades worker in Canada is contested, both in public opinion and among social scientists. For some, the skilled trades conjure comforting images of old-world craftsmanship, honest toil, brotherly solidarity, practical ingenuity, and the satisfaction of a job well done. Responding to predictions of impending skills shortages, Canadian governments and industry associations have invested heavily in publicity and recruitment campaigns that portray trades occupations and apprenticeship as pathways to “good pay, career opportunities, and respect” (Canadian Apprenticeship Forum, 2006). Such efforts are a direct response to an alternate view: a perception of the skilled trades as dirty, mind-numbing, and often poorly-paid jobs for those with few other choices. This divergence of views has important implications for public education and training policy, but also invites substantially different interpretations in social theory. The research presented in this paper examines conceptions of occupational identity among skilled trades workers within a large industrial workplace, and relates these perceptions of “trade pride” and “trade stigma” to current developments in public training policy and schools of social thought.

As a theoretical framework, the present paper refers to three analytical traditions that are reflected in the literature on occupational identity in the skilled trades: human capital theory, conflict sociology, and Weberian economic sociology. Human capital theory remains the dominant paradigm for labour force policy in Canada, and the basis of mainstream discourse on apprenticeship for skilled trades. From this perspective, questions of occupational identity are rather derivative: the central issue is the efficient operation of the labour market, based in the correct balance between employers’ demand and the training system’s supply of skills of the appropriate type and quality. For many years, governments’ role in this process was confined to ensuring that the public vocational training system met the labour market’s evolving demand for particular industrial skills. Only in recent years, as persistently low rates of apprenticeship participation seemed to threaten a skills-supply crisis, did the question of occupational status arise as an important policy issue. Over the last decade, there has been a growing concern that negative public perceptions of the skilled trades are a serious factor in

suppressing participation (Sharpe, 1999). Observing that skilled trades occupations often provide high wages and satisfying work, advocates of apprenticeship concluded that the low public esteem for the trades reflects an irrational prejudice (Kunin & Gallagher, 2000) apparently reinforced by public school teachers and counsellors who simply lack any awareness of manual occupations and their rewards (Skills Compétences Canada, 2001). On this view, occupational status in the skilled trades becomes a relevant issue in light of its potentially distorting influence on labour market operation.

In the limited literature produced by structural sociologists on the apprenticeable trades in Canada, occupational status again plays a derivative role. Notwithstanding the claims of apprenticeship advocates, there is considerable evidence that vocational training for skilled trades careers is, on average, a less lucrative educational pathway than college or university (Boothby & Drewes, 2006; McIntosh, 2005; Prasil, 2005). It is also clear that participants in vocational training and apprenticeship tend to be less successful in school and to accumulate less formal education over time than students who opt for the academic stream (Looker, 2001). Moreover, both in terms of their working conditions and their demography, skilled manual occupations often appear unpalatable to young people, and particularly to young women. Males account for over 90 percent of Canadian workers in apprenticeable occupations, and women are heavily concentrated in a small number of trades. This gender bias, and ample evidence of overt sexism in industrial workplaces, has been an intractable issue (e.g., Hart & Shrimpton, 2003). On this basis, unflattering public perceptions of trades occupations might be regarded as fair comment, and not as evidence of irrational prejudice. Indeed, an issue for sociologists has been the seeming irrationality of sentiments and arguments that cast trades occupations in a favourable light, when they are otherwise understood to represent a position of class disadvantage. On a conventional Marxist account, apprentices manage to develop a resistant class consciousness while simultaneously learning productive work skills (Mjelde, 1987). In a more post-modern reading, it has been argued that young apprentices who express a commitment to trades careers are in fact indulging in "post-facto rationalizations" of a social destiny that they feel compelled to collude in (Lehmann, 2005). Given the assumed disadvantage of trades careers, efforts by government and industry to inflate the public's esteem for them are interpreted as ideological manipulation (Taylor, 2005). On these accounts, perceptions of occupational status and identity in the skilled trades are again treated as epiphenomena, which in this case obscure the underlying dynamics of social class reproduction.

The third perspective to be considered here is rooted in Weber's economic sociology (Smelser & Swedberg, 2005; Swedberg, 1998). For Weber, crafts occupations and the apprenticeship process exemplified a number of crucial mechanisms in economic-social

behaviour. The most robust and general is the mechanism of social closure: the capacity of groups to enhance their members' welfare by sharing resources internally, and to strategically restrict or open their membership to others. The craft guild was a paradigm case of social closure which, by preserving its members' monopoly on practice, sustained their income and enabled them improve their production techniques. Apprenticeship provided a highly controlled means of renewing the guild's membership, ensuring that trainees acquired the technical skill to perform the craft while also absorbing the disposition to uphold the interests of the association. For Weber, social status is distinct from, but no less important than economic class. Since occupations constitute status groups (Gerth & Mills, 1958), the esteem accorded to particular occupations, and the precise requirements for entering them, are of vital consequence. Three points can be briefly noted in this context. The first, which underlies the burgeoning literature on social capital (Halpern, 2005; Lin, 2001; e.g., Putnam, 2001), has to do with the permeability of group boundaries. Within a social environment populated by overlapping groups, individuals may either seek to build networks which permit them membership in multiple associations, and/or attempt to monopolize their current assets by excluding new entrants. These mirror-image options have been referred to as "light" and "dark" sides of social capital (Schulman & Anderson, 1999). The second point concerns the attribution of social status or "social honour" to particular occupations. For Weber, the distribution of status honour reflected political power more than productive utility, as evidenced by the high status of priestly castes in traditional societies, whose status was based in their supposed connection to occult forces. Similarly, the theory of the "social construction of skill" refers to the possibility that occupational groups may overstate or obscure the nature of their skills in order to preserve their exclusive claim to a domain of practice (Attewell, 1990; More, 1982). The third and related point is that, as Weber recognized, it is not only *high* social status that bestows entitlements on particular groups. Though they might be severely disadvantaged, stigmatized groups may none the less be compelled to preserve the monopoly that even their "pariah" status ensures them in relation to particular social roles. In summary, the Weberian perspective differs substantially from the two described earlier, in that occupational status or identity is not merely an interpretation or rationalization overlaid on workers' marketable skills or their class positions. Rather, perceptions of occupational status are fundamental to establishing and preserving workers' occupational roles.

The study

The research described here, conducted at a naval shipyard (hereafter, “the Dockyard”), in 2007, is the largest plant study of skilled trades workers ever undertaken in Canada. The facility employs approximately one thousand civilians in apprenticeable skilled trades occupations. Most are directly involved in ship repair, in a variety of mechanical, electrical, electronics, pipe, and related occupations. In addition, over one hundred other workers in roles such as carpenter, electrician, painter, and pipe fitter are employed in maintaining the land-based infrastructure of the facility. The research methods included a pen-and-paper survey covering over 150 variables (N=509), as well as ten group interviews with 49 participants drawn from skilled trades workers, managers, and union representatives. A review of administrative records, collective agreements and other documentation provided further insight into the demographics of the workplace population, as well as earnings and working conditions. The larger study, of which the present paper describes only a part, investigated a number of sociological issues including the membership profile of the workforce, occupational and class patterns in trades workers’ families, and elements of workplace culture. The present paper draws on the study in relation to questions of occupational identity. (Because of space limitations, supporting data tables and direct quotations are not presented here. Tables cited in the end notes refer to the dissertation, which is available at <https://circle.ubc.ca/>).

Disadvantage

An initial question was whether the apprenticeable trades constitute lucrative careers or positions of economic and social disadvantage. The short answer is “both”. There are approximately 150 nominally apprenticeable occupations in Canada, ranging from poorly paid, usually non-unionized, and overwhelmingly female-dominated trades such as hairdresser and beautician, through male-dominated occupations such as Millwright which are largely confined to unionized heavy industry and can be quite highly paid, particularly under good economic conditions. The competing and contrary generalizations seem to be the result, on one side, of the advocates’ selective reporting of good news and on the other, of academics’ failure to discriminate among very different types of trade occupation within large data sets.

An analysis of wage and benefit rates showed that workers in the Dockyard earn on average at least 10% more than the median for males employed full-time in the surrounding labour market, and over 40% more than the median for females¹. Moreover, the Dockyard workers’ collective agreement provisions on benefits and

working conditions compare favourably with conditions for other unionized workers in the same trades and region. Additionally, as employees of the federal government, trades workers in the case study site enjoy a rather unique set of benefits, of which the most notable are exceptional job security and full-year employment. The survey and interviews confirmed that respondents recognize the Dockyard as an exceptionally attractive employer in the region, particularly in terms of job security and working conditions. In short, the study population cannot be considered disadvantaged, at least in direct economic terms.

The heritability of occupational status is another issue that leads commentators on the apprenticeable trades to different conclusions. In surveys, trades workers often claim to have based their career choice on the example of a parent or other relative who worked in the trades (Skills Compétences Canada, 2001). Advocates of apprenticeship in Canada interpret this as proof that positive impressions of trades occupations will spread naturally when favourable communications channels are available, but that information about their benefits remains otherwise suppressed within a society that is generally prejudiced against them. Sociologists have interpreted the same finding as evidence of structural determinism, where successive generations of families are drawn into similarly substandard occupations. The Dockyard study presented an opportunity to explore this phenomenon. The workforce survey confirmed that almost one-third of trades workers in the facility had fathers in the skilled trades (compared to one-eighth or less of the general population). In addition, 40% of respondents reported having a sibling in a skilled trade occupation.

However, further analysis ruled out any easy supposition of structural determinism. Given that all members of the study population work in skilled trades occupations, it was necessary to adopt some other basis for examining the intergenerational transfer of occupation within their families. Two alternate indicators were used: the careers of respondents' siblings, and the careers to which the respondents themselves had aspired during their teenage years. Neither indicator was found to vary meaningfully with the occupations of respondents' fathers. Among the siblings of the study population, the offspring of tradesmen were found to be no more likely to enter trades careers than the offspring of fathers in other occupations². Nor did having a father in a skilled trade occupation raise the probability that respondents themselves had aspired to trades careers during their teenage years.³ The study population does not reflect the structural transmission of disadvantage through trades occupations – in the first place because it is not evidently disadvantaged – and in the second because the trades-headed families within it did not produce either tradesmen or trades-aspiring offspring at a higher rate than other families. It is significant that members of the study group share a high rate of

family connections to the trades. However, to conclude from this that trades occupations are a structurally reproduced class position would be to commit the ecological fallacy: i.e., to attribute a characteristic of an observed group to an entire population which the group is assumed to represent. The legitimate question is: What accounts for the high concentration of this trait within the study population?

Identity and group membership

The same question could be asked regarding other characteristics. The administrative and survey data showed that study population displays a number of other features that seem to typify the industrial skilled trades workforce in Canada and distinguish it from the population at large. Ninety-eight percent of the study group are male; 88 percent were born in Canada; 94 percent are Anglophone.⁴ The respective figures for the ambient labour force are 49, 81, and 85 percent. When cross tabulated with the workers' employment tenure these variables are found to be extremely stable over time.

The interviews revealed a powerful set of membership control mechanisms in operation within the workplace. An "extended internal labour market" was found to exist, whereby employment opportunities were systematically channelled through the personal and professional networks of incumbent workers and managers. A large proportion of survey respondents reported that prior social connections, whether involving family, co-workers, or friends, had been a factor in their being hired into trades positions at the Dockyard. The administrative basis for this selectivity seems to be a set of management practices which vest considerable power in local shop supervisors and current workers when it comes to recruiting and vetting new members. Managers are explicitly advised to select on the basis of "best fit" with the existing work group (Department of National Defence, 2006).

But it is also apparent that questions of stigma and socially-constructed occupational identity figure large in the Dockyard's membership dynamics. Considering the first of these, there is an acute awareness of trades occupations as socially undervalued; a sense that trades workers are regularly condescended to by professionals and others who are ignorant of the real nature of technical work. In conversation, trades workers pushed back with anecdotes of educated professionals who "wouldn't know which way to turn a screw". In this way, responses to the perceived stigma were smoothly melded into affirmations of "trade pride", suggesting the social construction, if not of skill, then of a set of distinctive attributes for suitability to the skilled trades. Both the survey and the interviews showed strong support for a view of trades skills as relatively esoteric forms of expertise only attainable through mentorship under incumbents in the workplace. It was ritually agreed that an ineffable kind of "trades smarts" was far more valuable in a trades

workplace than the theoretical knowledge attainable by “book learning”. Through this defensive strategy, legitimate pride in craft expertise is fused with a rejection of other forms of competency, and – more importantly – other forms of assessment, since it is understood that the qualities in question are not accurately testable except by experienced trades workers themselves. Far from merely providing a psychological salve, such identity statements play a direct role in the membership control mechanisms of the group, since their implicit message is a defence of the organization’s selection processes.

This being both a highly stable workplace, and one with a military mission, notions of occupational pride are institutionally embedded and reinforced. It was argued that a combination of patriotic duty and a sense of attachment to the Dockyard “family” inspired an exceptional degree of commitment in Dockyard workers. Managers referred repeatedly to what they saw as an irrepressible pride in workmanship that characterized the Dockyard workforce and helped to distinguish the organization from private-sector workplaces where quality might be sacrificed to economic efficiency. Observing that their ultimate “customers” would be Canadian sailors “heading into harm’s way” managers and trades workers spoke of a “moral duty” to provide impeccable workmanship, and therefore to select only the very best candidates for trades positions. Just below the surface of such comments is an explicit rejection of the “employment equity” policies which would require these managers to consider women or other minority candidates for trades roles.

Discussion

This paper began by presenting three different perspectives on the social status in the context of the perceived stigmatization of apprenticeable skilled trades in Canada. The case study supports the Weberian perspective, where social and occupational groups seek to maintain exclusive access to certain resources through formal membership rules and cultural discourses which accord unique status to their own members.

Despite their supposedly stigmatized position, members of the case study population enjoy certain definite advantages, particularly in terms of the wages, benefits and working conditions. However, considering their capacity to achieve similar employment security in an open, competitive labour market, they are at a considerable competitive risk. Data from the 2003 IALSS survey show that workers in apprenticeable occupations in Canada score comparatively poorly on several measures of foundational skills. Compared with Canadian males in nine broad occupational categories, workers in apprenticeable trades held sixth place on proficiency in numeracy, as well as documentary and prose literacy.⁵ They also scored below the mean for Canadian males on measures of literacy and numeracy confidence and the leisure-time use of reading

materials and information.⁶ A critically important feature of the Canadian educational structure is the nearly complete isolation of apprenticeship training within an otherwise highly-subscribed post-secondary education system. Apprenticeship accounts for about 15% of PSE enrolment, and apprenticeship completers make up less than 10% of post-secondary certificate holders. With very few exceptions, vocational training and industrial workplace experience are not transferable for credit to the university system. Not surprisingly, male workers in apprenticeable trades are less likely than workers in any of the nine ISCO occupational groups to attend university.⁷

In this light, it is noteworthy that the sense of trades identity expressed by members of the study population was found to vary inversely with educational attainment.⁸ The workplace survey contained several opinion questions concerning whether apprenticeship should be the sole means of entry to skilled trades; whether trades occupations are a lifelong career or a stepping stone to other opportunities; and whether trades occupations are worthy of pride. On each item, there was a statistically significant, negative association between respondents' education and their degree of assent to the "trades identity" statement. While not all incumbents would endorse the anti-intellectual image that the separatist discourse portrays, the great majority support preserving the key policy mechanisms that have historically defined the skilled trades in Canada: their established occupational boundaries and the apprenticeship process.

The competitive risks to the stereotypical, Canadian, male trades worker are not hypothetical. Reforms to provincial apprenticeship systems in Canada have generally reduced the exclusivity of the skilled trades, whether by specifically inviting under-represented groups to participate in apprenticeable occupations; by reducing the institutional barriers between trades training and other educational pathways; or by devising alternatives to full apprenticeship as the means of acquiring trades qualifications. These encroachments make it all the more plausible to interpret the Dockyard workers' expressions of occupational identity, not as the cultural residue of a subordinate class position, but as elements of active group interest strategies.

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End Notes

All end note references are to Meredith, 2008, available at <https://circle.ubc.ca/>.

¹Tables 4.2 and 4.3

²Table T125

³ Table T128.

⁴ Table 4.1

⁵ Table 4.6

⁶ Table 4.7

⁷ Table 4.4

⁸ Table 5.3