“I Just Like Working with My Hands”:
Employment Aspirations and the Meaning of Work for Low-Skilled Long-Term Unemployed Men in Britain’s ‘Service Economy’

Economic restructuring since the early 1980’s has had a profound impact on the nature of work and the composition of the workforce by sex in contemporary Britain. Whilst de-industrialisation has led to the large-scale decline of male-dominated manual employment in the manufacturing and extractive industries, service sector growth has been associated with rising female employment. These trends are highly significant. Hence, while female employment has grown dramatically since 1979, male employment has stagnated and the number of men classified as ‘economically inactive’ has doubled since the late 1970’s (Alcock et al 2003).

Low-end, low-skill ‘servicing’ jobs now represent the main source of employment for those with low-level skills and qualifications. Yet, it is clear that the nature of low-skill work in the contemporary ‘service economy’ is fundamentally different to that generated by the ‘industrial economy’. Hence, the technical and physical skills required for low-skill manufacturing employment have been superseded by a growing demand for the emotional, aesthetic, communication and customer-handling skills required to carry out the interactive service jobs that dominate low-skill employment in contemporary Britain. Research has shown that these low-skill ‘servicing’ jobs are ‘feminised’ in that they are dominated by women and demand skills and attributes that have been traditionally and stereotypically associated with women and ‘women’s work’ (Bradley 1989, Adkins 1995, Filby 1992, Liedner 1991, Tyler and Taylor 2001).

In this context, this paper discusses the employment aspirations of a group particularly disadvantaged by economic restructuring and the growth of low-level service employment – low-skilled and poorly educated men. Such men now face an uncertain future in the labour market as traditional routes into typically ‘masculine’ and male-dominated areas of employment have been severely reduced, with the consequence being that low-skilled and poorly educated men from manual occupational backgrounds are heavily over represented amongst the ‘economically inactive’, unemployed and long-term unemployed (Campbell 2001).
Based on 35 semi-structured in-depth interviews with low-skilled unemployed men, this research explores how such men are responding to the changing labour market conditions they find themselves in and whether they seek to ‘compromise their masculinity’ (Bradley 1999:212) by entering gender atypical types of service employment. The paper examines the men’s perceptions of interactive service employment, their employment aspirations and the meaning and importance of work for the men’s identity more generally. In casting doubt on the idea that service sector employment growth can alleviate the growing problem of economic inactivity amongst low-skilled and poorly educated men the paper highlights the difficulties that interactive service work presents for low-skilled men. Aside from a clear mismatch between the skills held by the men and those required for growth areas of service employment, the men expressed a clear dislike of ‘servicing’ work based on the need to engage in ‘emotional labour’ and show deference to customers/clients. In concluding, the paper suggests that such aspirations reflect the continued importance of what Willis (1977) termed “the cross-valorisation of manual labour with the social superiority of masculinity”, which orientates low-skilled men away from growth areas of service employment and towards types of ‘masculine’ manual employment now in decline.

References


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