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MATURE-AGED CONSTRUCTION MALE WORKER IDENTITIES IN TURBULENT TIMES

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Abstract

This paper addresses the attitudes towards training of three mature-aged construction workers elicited through the posing of a series of questions. The narratives that resulted were considered through the lens of vocational identity and specifically through the themes of training as a challenge, a possible means of procuring alternative forms of work, and as an irrelevance. The understanding of occupational identity used in this paper differs from more 'essentialist' approaches to identity formation research that is based on either of structuralism or individual agency. Rather, we show that the study participants work in both active and passive ways to fashion vocational identities for themselves that are constantly re-storied within the evolving structures of individual workplaces and the broader globalised economy in which those workplaces are situated. It is these stories about training, told at a particular time by each of the workers to the interviewees, which are the focus of this paper.

Mature-aged workers in Australia

In contrast to some other issues that are currently challenging the Australian government, the ageing of the population is an indisputable reality. This is evidenced by recent Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2009a) figures that show the percentage of the population aged 45 years or more, conventionally referred to as 'mature-aged' (Dawe, 2009) is now 25% of the population. It is also understood that, if the present life expectancy remains or extends, and there are no substantial increases in the current birth rate or the resident status of migrants or refugees in this country, then these percentages are likely to continue to increase in the future. Indeed, projections for Australia's population are that there will be between 31 and 43 million people living in this country in 2056, the differences in projected numbers depending on the assumptions that are made about future levels of mortality, fertility and net overseas migration (ABS, 2009a).

Concomitant with increases in the ageing of the population have been increases in the age of the workforce, with evidence of significant growth in labour force participation rates for mature-aged workers. For example, in February 2006, there were 2,555,600 persons aged between 45 and 64 years employed in a full-time capacity (35.7% of the total workforce) (ABS, 2006) but by June 2009 this number had risen to 2,836,000, an increase of 2.3% (ABS, 2009b) over this three and a half year period. What is particularly notable when these data are broken down into smaller age-groups is that the increase in numbers of males aged between 45 and 60 years who worked full-time over this time span hovered around the 5% mark but increased substantially to 20.6% for such workers aged between 60 and 65 years, although the share of the total for this group is very small.

Thus, it can be seen that, while the mature-aged full-time workforce grew over this period and very significantly in the case of 60-65 year olds, these workers constituted fewer than 5% of the total full-time working population in June 2009.

With respect to workers in the construction industry, there were almost a million workers employed in May 2009, of whom, 84% were male. The industry is divided into three areas, namely, building construction, heavy and civil engineering construction and construction services. Most (65%) males work in the construction services on a full-time basis (80%) as employees in the private sector (87%) (ABS, 2009b). While the industry has grown during the last decade, it has been affected by the recent financial crisis. However, this slowing in productivity has been seen as a 'pause' rather than a trend and it is expected that the sector will return strong growth in the next decade (Carter, 2010, p. 27).

Consistent with the Australian workforce generally, the construction industry has a substantial number of male mature-age workers (24%) (ABS, 2009a). Some of these would have completed an initial apprenticeship and thus hold the equivalent of a Certificate III level VET qualification. In total, 37.7% of the industry are qualified at this level or higher, compared with 17% of all employees. The skills levels of construction workers are considered by employers to be sufficient for them to be competent, a position that might account for the relatively low level of funds spent on training across the industry (*Industry & Training*, 2007). A similar finding about training was reported by Lundberg and Marshallsay (2007) in a recent South Australian study of 242 mature-age construction workers (and three other occupational groups). When asked if they would require training for work beyond retirement age, only 20% assented with almost three times replying in the negative. Of those who identified the need for training, over a third considered that such training was available to them.

However, it is one thing to recognise that training is available it is another to engage in such training. Wooden, VandenHeuvel, Cully and Curtain (2001), for example, strongly concluded that older workers' attitudes were a 'significant obstacle' to their participation in training (p. 37) A range of researchers have identified a number of barriers that deter older workers from taking up available training. One such barrier is that of health (Thomson, Dawe, Anlezark, & Bowman, 2005; Maurer, 2001). For example, Maurer (2001) observed a link between the erosion of cognitive ability and self-perceptions of capability to learn:

Beliefs that people may become more absent-minded, slow, forgetful, fragile, or even senile with age have been documented in the research literature... . To the extent that people believe that these characteristics decline with age *and* they perceive the characteristics as being key capabilities for learning, these beliefs by older workers may contribute to judgments that they are not capable of learning and improving (p. 132) [emphasis in original].

Reasons other than limited self-efficacy that are evident in the literature include a perception that the cost, in terms of time, effort and money, would not be rewarded

(Noonan, 2007). In other research, though, Taylor and Urwin (2001, cited in Phillipson and Smith, 2005) reported that the proportion of workers aged 50-64 who had self-financed their own training for work purposes was similar to that of workers aged 25-39 and 40-49 respectively. Finally, some workers consider that continuing training is unnecessary (Chappell, Hawke and Solomon, 2003; Noonan, 2007).

Like other aspects of work, attitudes towards training are an integral part of people's vocational identity. In the next section the concept of vocational identity is addressed and this is then used to interpret the responses by three construction workers to questions about their interest in, and experiences of, training. These questions were part of a series used in a small pilot study, conducted by the two authors, with 10 ambulance service officers and 8 construction workers across Queensland in 2008 and 2009. We wanted to understand in more depth how these vocational identities were articulated within an interview situation and how training impacted on such an understanding of these identities.

The lens of vocational identity

Smistrup (2007) claims that to be a competent or even expert employee, a worker must integrate the knowledge and skills pertaining to an occupation and the wider critical features of the industry or professional Discourse (Gee, 2004) of that occupation with his/her own biography. Thus,

Vocational identities are developed as a result of the learning processes that unfold in the borderlands between 'the collective' and 'the subjective' while the trainees participate in, conduct and reflect upon the work practice and their work experiences. This is fundamentally based on conceptualising identity as relational and a learning process which takes place in the interaction between a structured social world that pre-exists the individual and faces her [sic] as a reality and a subjective world that has been structured by the totality of her [sic] biographical experiences and life conditions (Smistrup, 2007, p. 56).

However, this process of integration of occupational knowledge and skills and aspects of their professional Discourse (Gee, 2005) is a continuing process that is replete with tensions. It is not only trainees or new employees who face new challenges. In a world of continuing globalisation, constantly evolving technology and higher retention rates of older people in the workforce, we all confront dissonances between our individual subjectivities and the structured environments in which we participate. Gaining insights into how these differences and changes are being reconciled by a small sample of construction workers is the focus of this paper.

Understanding identity formation through narrative interpretation

The workers' views on which this paper draws were derived from eight males who were employed in different aspects of the construction industry. They were purposively chosen

and then invited to participate in a semi-structured interview that focused on the topics of their intentions, concerns and potential learning needs with respect to their continued employment and the training that would be required to sustain such employment. The interviews were audio-recorded and these records were then transcribed.

The construction workers brought to the interactions considerable knowledge of, and expertise within, the construction industry. While this familiarity with the general background of the interviewees is acknowledged and is evident in the text of the transcript, a process of critical reflection and constant comparison (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was used by the researchers in order to make explicit possible influences from these factors. Further, in analysing the interview data, the transcripts were read several times to identify sub-themes and these were used to understand the patterns and categories that emerged from the interview stories. This approach is reflective of data analysis strategies that are based on a general inductive method of analysis (e.g., Thomas, 2006). Three of these sub-themes are addressed in the analytical section that follows. It is within the language used by the participants in the interviews that we have framed a view of the tension between identities, training and future work.

Training and the vocational identity of construction workers

Training was understood in different ways by individual construction workers whom we interviewed. First, it was often perceived as something difficult. Second, training was understood as a way for workers to transition to new forms of work. Third, it was seen as irrelevant. Samples of the interviewees' narratives relating to these three training aspects are discussed below.

Training as a challenge

One interviewee ('Jim') framed up his response, and that of others with whom he identified, to the question about engagement in formal training in the following way:

as we get older we sort of balk more at, the formal, going back to school or something like that. It's harder. It's a real challenge to go back and do a course when you're older. I'm doing one at the moment. . . . I don't mind it, and it's quite good; it's quite interesting. But I think that we are down to half of the original number.

This worker focused his response by claiming membership (through his use of the pronoun 'we') of a collective identity of older workers who 'balked' at institutionalised forms of learning. Interestingly, it is not registered training organisations within the vocational education sector that are called up initially as a naturalised space for engaging in formal training, although they might be equated with the implied locations in his phrase, 'something like that'. Rather, a generic institution called 'school' has this function. He then continues to elaborate on the difficulty of engaging in such training by making a comparison: 'harder'. It is clear that the referent for this comparative adjective is 'older', an attribute that both precedes and follows this opinion and a comparison is being made between his current age and an earlier part of his life. He then encapsulates the issue as a 'challenge' and sees training not in terms of a lifelong learning concept but

as something that one 'goes back to'. He also recognises that he is currently engaging in formal training and evaluates it in a somewhat positive light: "I don't mind it", 'it's quite good' and 'it's quite interesting'. However, he finally positions himself as a stayer, in contrast to a substantive number of the original course participants who have discontinued attending. Thus, in summary, 'Jim' draws attention to his position that formal training is difficult generally for older workers but particular instances of such training can be enjoyable for some.

Training as a possible means of procuring alternative forms of work

Even though it might be a challenge, formal training, understood as courses, was seen as a means of escaping the physical demands of construction work. As another interviewee ('Bob') stated,

I've just done a workplace health and safety course to get off the heavy table work in construction. So workplace health and safety is a lot easier, a bit more with your brain, more so than with your hands . . .

Here the worker provides a rationale for engaging in training that is organised: it "gets [him] off the heavy table work" of his previous occupation and gives him a credential which he can use to seek an alternative occupation that is, on the one hand, less demanding ('easier') on his body but, on the other, more demanding cognitively. 'Bob's use of the first person singular pronoun 'I' contrasts with the collective 'we' that is used by 'Jim' in the previous quote. This is not to suggest, though, that 'Bob' sees himself as apart from other construction workers who may have followed a similar path in completing a course in order to change occupations; it is just that his group membership is not articulated in this instance.

Group membership is, however, drawn upon by 'Bob' later in the interview in a more collective way than in the case of 'Jim' above when the view that participating in formal training as a mature age worker is stated as not a preferred option but rather as a possible means of changing occupation while remaining within the construction industry. The excerpt from the transcript shows that being an experienced tradesperson has been, and continues to be, a very important component of his identity and one that he is not keen to relinquish.

At this time in your life you don't want to be going back to school. I did a 5-year apprenticeship when I started with a builder in the UK and that's probably about 40 years ago and it's only just in the last 6 months that I went and did another course [workplace health and safety officer] since I did my apprenticeship. That's a big gap between courses, isn't it? . . . I've done that now but I think that I'll go off with that to try and go off the tools. I'll see what happens, I think that it will get busy again but you know. . . . they'll be screaming for work. . . . I just want to stay with what I know.

Again, there is evidence of an interviewee's explicit recognition of being an older worker ('at this time of your life') placed in the theme position (that is, the first position) (Eggins, 2004) of his response. However, instead of selecting a form of the first person singular or plural to connote his membership of a particular community as in the case of

'Jim' above, 'Bob' has used a form of the second person, 'your', in the more general sense of anyone in society. This emphasis on the general, rather than on the particular, is reiterated in his second use of this pronoun 'you' as the subject of the clause following this phrase. Here he takes up 'Jim's earlier metaphor of 'going back to school' to represent his understanding of participating in formal training. It is as though there is only one legitimate form of authoritative learning and that must replicate his experiences of being a young pupil in a school

'Bob' also notes that his experience of formal training was, until recently, restricted to the five formal years he spent as an apprentice learning to become a tradesperson. He highlights the fact that his vocational life has been largely devoid of such training by means of the statement: 'That's a big gap between courses', but then invites the interviewer to concur, with the appended tag, 'isn't it?'

This interviewee sees the completion of a course such as the workplace health and safety officer course as a means 'to go off the tools'. This metaphor for construction work aligns with his earlier embodied notion of tradespersons using their 'hands' but at this point it is not taken as far, with the particular type of bodily engagement in alternative work that is envisaged being left implicit.

Towards the end of this transcript excerpt, relative to earlier statements, 'Bob's commitment to a changed form of work is not completely developed. Where he has previously claimed explicitly that the reason he chose the workplace health and safety course was to transition to a different occupation, at this point he is much more tentative. He 'will see what happens' and may, indeed, not make such a transition. He also hedges his position by using the modals of 'think' (twice) and 'try' to effect this.

This worker, then, has extended his identity by opting to complete a formal training course to open up vocational opportunities. Even with this credential, though, he does not appear to be operating in a totally committed manner, that is, he is moving around in some borderland (Smistrup, 2007) transitional site. In this equivocal position, however, he is different from the third worker whose views are next considered in this paper.

Training as an irrelevance

In contrast to 'Bob' and 'Jim' who may have had a somewhat ambivalent attitude towards engagement in formal training, a third construction interviewee ('Tony') was adamant that he would neither require nor participate in further vocational training. However, he did concede that if he needed to work in a new area that demanded additional skills, these would be acquired but through informal learning on-site with a more experienced colleague.

Well you have to do courses to develop skills that I haven't got. But why should I develop more skills that I haven't got when I've got enough skills in my trade?

...

I wouldn't seek formal training. As you [interviewer] said, this is an over 55 interview so I'm not really keen on starting anything that I don't really have to.

Like, as I said, I'm a chippy. I know what I am doing and if I was presented with a job where I need certain skills I would work with someone who had them if I had to. But, as I said, if I could get out of it I would.

In the first example above, 'Tony' recognises that there are skills other than the ones he has that could be learnt through formal courses. However, this learning is not applicable to him. Like 'Bob', cited immediately above, he does not subscribe to a view of lifelong learning but sees competence as being a finite notion that, once acquired, does not need to be constantly evaluated and extended. This position is framed up as a question, implying that further training is irrelevant to him and rhetorically inviting the interviewer to make a case for why he should embark on such a step.

In Tony's second excerpt above, he succinctly sums up his perspective on formal training – he wouldn't 'seek' it. In providing support for his position, he acknowledges that he is an older person (over 55 years) and, as such (evidenced by his use of 'so'), is not interested in changing any aspects of his lifestyle. In the following sentence, he is more specific, reiterating his occupational identity of 'chippy' (a colloquial term for a carpenter that would be familiar to the interviewer) and his competence to perform this role (I know what I'm doing'). He does acknowledge, though, that if he was required to perform in a job for which he lacked skills, he would meet this challenge appropriately: not through the acquisition of the requisite skills via formal training modes but, rather, through an informal apprenticeship system (Lave & Wenger, 1989). He concludes with the upshot, though, that any form of learning is to be avoided.

Using identity as a lens to examine the issue of mature-age workers and training is appropriate because this concept is able to bring together the subjective biography of an individual and those cultural and social experiences that both afford and constrain the development of that subjectivity.

Dealing with tensions in turbulent times

Our lives in the twenty-first century are characterised by the need for constant change. Sometimes the required changes are small and incremental and we have time to plan how we might respond most efficaciously to them. At other times, though, we face major upheavals that are sudden in our lives and thus our responses are not pre-figured. The prospect of growing older in their role of workers in the construction industry for the three individuals whose perspectives are touched upon in the previous sections is perceived somewhat differently by each of them. In the case of 'Jim', whose view of training is presented first, he shows a level of agency in responding to the need to undertake further training, describing the experience has been 'challenging'. He also affiliates with older workers in this observation but, at the same time, he contrasts himself with others who enrolled at the same time as he did but discontinued their attendance.

In the second transcript excerpt 'Bob' seems to be more committed initially to transitioning to another occupation. However, further in his narrative, he hedges and takes a 'wait and see' attitude before he will commit to change. Hall (1994) suggests that there are two kinds of identity: identity as 'being' and identity as 'becoming'. These two workers appear to be situated in a 'borderland' (Smistrup, 2007, p. 56) between their

identities of 'being', that is in a state that is somewhat stable and familiar with a sense of discursive affiliation with others, and a new identity that is being formed, partly from the old but with new elements, one of which is training.

In contrast to 'Jim' and 'Bob', the third interviewee, 'Tony', is clearly not engaging in any boundary work in relation to formal training as a response to 'New Times' (Farrell, 2000). Rather, he appears to consider that at this time in his life he has sufficient knowledge and skills to cope with the demands that he envisages he will meet. Further, in the event that he was required to engage in a task where his competence was lacking, he would take up one of two possible options: he would seek assistance from an expert or he would avoid the task. There is no tension here that formal training might address. Indeed, formal training is not an option for 'Tony'.

It is not surprising that these three construction workers perceived formal training in different lights at the time of their interviews. The identities they drew upon to consider the issue of this form of training and their work as mature-aged employees at a particular time and in a particular setting were contingent on different personal biographies and cultural influences. Beauchamp and Thomas (2009) cite Olsen (2008) who has defined identity in the following way:

As a label, really, for the collection of influences and effects from the immediate context, prior constructs of self, social positioning, and meaning systems (each itself a fluid influence and all together an ever-changing construct) (p. 139).

This is not to say that interview data are unreliable. Indeed, they are important sources for understanding phenomena such as tensions experienced by mature-aged workers with respect to formal training but it must be recognised that they are situationally-specific and the identities that are made relevant at the time of the interaction are just one of a 'basket of selves which come to the surface' (Cohen, 2004, p. 11) at a particular social moment in response to contingent factors.

Notes

1. Gee (2005) differentiates between lower case 'd' discourse and upper case 'D' discourse. The second is broader and includes ways of behaving, dress, and other membership conventions.

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