

Social construction of skill viewed through the lens of training for the cleaning industry

Erica Smith, University of Ballarat

Abstract

Most people would agree that an objective measurement of skill in work is not possible. Many perceptions of what is skilled work privilege 'male' over 'female' occupations, and pre-1950 industrial and craft jobs over more recently-established and service sector jobs. Theories of social construction of skill centre around claim-making by interest groups, structural conditions that allow or prevent such claims, and the institutionalisation of those claims. As skill cannot be measured objectively, the social construction of skill takes on immense significance in defining what are worthy and non-worthy occupations, and the training that is available and valued within those occupations.

A recent NCVER-funded research project on traineeships involved the author in a case study of training in the cleaning industry. The levels of skill and underpinning knowledge in cleaning jobs were at odds with the low status of the industry. Some responses clearly revealed attitudes coloured by social construction and perceptions of labour aristocracy. One effect of these views was a sort of 'false consciousness' among some cleaning workers. Views about cleaning training varied from 'a bit of a shadowy thing' to 'meaningful training... (which) should lead to a career path .. and a more sustainable and better workforce.'

Introduction

Beliefs about the value of different types of work are closely linked to the training system as those occupations deemed to be skilled have traditionally attracted qualifications and government funding for those undertaking such qualifications. In Australia apprenticeships are the most obvious example of this process although over the last twenty years many other fields of work have joined the ranks of credentialed occupations through the traineeship system. Cleaning is an

occupation that has generally been viewed as low status. This paper reports on data from a case study that was part of a larger project, funded by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research, on quality of traineeships. Cleaning was one of six occupational areas selected for the study. The paper uses theories of social construction of skill and worker false consciousness to analyse data from the case study.

Background and literature review

Social construction of skill

In Australia as in other countries, skill has become a central concept in understanding social and economic progress (Wolf, 2002). Concepts of skill affect the perceived worth of different occupations and of individual workers and the ability of national economies to respond to change. Recent debates on skill shortages have proceeded without a fundamental examination of the nature of skill. As Borghans, Green & Mayhew (2001: 376) point out, in the absence of examination of what 'skill' means, the rhetoric of policy 'could turn out to mean very different things to different people'. A precise understanding of what we mean by skill is particularly important for the 21st century as western economies continue to move away from primary and secondary industries towards the service sector (Triplett & Bosworth, 2004). Because of this, many jobs formerly regarded as among the most skilled have become relatively unimportant, and newer jobs contain new forms of skill that did not exist a hundred years ago.

Positivist/technicist approaches view skill as an unproblematic, measurable 'quantity' (Attewell, 1990, Felstead *et al*, 2005). Within this positivist framework, reliant upon indicators such as complexity and autonomy (Adler, 2007), skills relating to working with people are generally seen as being of less importance than skills relating to working with things. This view emphasises the supremacy of so-called 'traditional trades' such as plumbing or machining over occupations such as aged care and retailing. Positivist attempts to measure skill are mainly recorded within the human resource management and economics literature. In the US, the Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT) has been widely used (Spenner, 1990).

Social construction theory helps to explain some of the anomalies that surface when looking at positivist notions of skill. This broad theory centres on claim-making by interest groups,

structural conditions that allow or prevent such claims, and the institutionalisation of those claims (Schneider, 1985, in Steinberg, 1990: 455). Applied to skill, social construction theory attempts to account for beliefs about skill and the job hierarchies that are then operationalised through pay, job evaluations, industrial relations and qualifications systems. Littler (1982: 10-11) in a seminal discussion of this topic from a labour process standpoint asserts that jobs gain a 'skilled' label because collective organisation by workers has won that label. Feminist approaches (eg Steinberg, 1990, Healy, Hansen & Ledwith, 2006) extend this labour process approach to account for the influence of gender and race as well as unionisation.

The cleaning industry

The cleaning industry in Australia as in all developed countries is large; there was a national turnover of \$2 billion a year at the time of the latest Australian Bureau of Statistics report on the industry, in 1989-99, (ABS, 2000). The industry is also diverse, with a preponderance of small employers – half of companies are sole proprietors - although there are three major companies, Big Clean Services, ISS Facility Services and Menzies International (IBISWorld, 2008). There was a workforce of 95,000 in 1999 (ABS, 2000) but it is likely that the numbers have considerably increased since then. Most cleaning workers are employed in the commercial sector (e.g., cleaning services for hospitals, offices, schools and hotels) but there is also a strong domestic sector and specialisations such as carpet cleaners. Technological development is rapid although the take-up of new technology is uneven across the industry. The industry is characterised by low pay, high labour turnover, a large proportion of part-time, casual and 'self-employed' workers, workers with literacy and language disadvantage, and an international student workforce (ineligible for traineeships) in the metropolitan areas. A recent government report (DEWR, 2006) into the cleaning industry found that there were substantial recruitment difficulties, especially in Western Australia, and that the available pool of workers was often of lower quality than employers would have liked. The major complaints were about work ethic, insufficient technical skills, and communication skills (DEWR, 2006:9) – issues that would be readily addressed through training. Reasons provided by employers for difficulty filling vacancies were low status, the unsociable working hours and the nature of the work (DEWR, 2006: 7). DEWR concluded that the tight labour market provided an opportunity for the cleaning

industry to consider recruitment from traditionally hard-to-place groups such as parents returning to the workforce.

The major employer associations in the industry are the Building Services Contractors' Association of Australia (BSCAA) and the Australian Cleaning Contractors' Association (ACCA). The major trade union is the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers' Union. The industry is part of property services which at a national level is covered by the Construction and Property Services Industry Skills Council (CPSISC).

Traditionally, training in cleaning has been informal and on the job. Trainees are now present in the cleaning industry and they undertake qualifications in Asset Maintenance (Cleaning Operations) which are included in the Asset Maintenance Training Package PRM04, which is the second iteration of the Training Package. The focus of the case study was on the Certificate III in Asset Maintenance (Cleaning Operations). Certificate II appears to be most commonly offered as a pre-employment course, and Certificate IV is generally undertaken by supervisors. There is also a Certificate I in Asset Maintenance (Cleaning Operations) which contains only three units and appears to be offered to particular client groups e.g., potential early school-leavers.

Research method

This cleaning industry case study consisted of document analysis of the Training Package qualification, interviews with industry stakeholders including managers in a public and private RTO, an in-depth study in one organisation, and interviews with senior staff in two other companies (one a Group Training Company) and one additional Registered Training Organisation. Stakeholder interviews were conducted by telephone and were of 45-90 minutes' duration. The interviews were recorded and transcribed with permission. The research took place in late 2007 and early 2008; the fieldwork was in Victoria and the telephone interviews were all in the eastern States. Interviewees are listed in Table 1 (at the end of this paper).

The in-depth study was of 'Bill Saunders Cleaning' (pseudonym) which was a privately-owned cleaning business in a regional city in Victoria. There were 18 employees, all of whom were

employed on a casual basis, although many worked close to full-time hours at least some of the time and had been with the company for some years. The work was divided amongst commercial and domestic work, the majority commercial with included schools as well as office and other premises. The work was fairly gender-segregated with men normally doing windows and handling heavy equipment such as carpet cleaners, while women undertook the lighter work. The men's work tended to be daytime while the women's tended to be early mornings and after-hours. The company had been operating for 18 years. The business presented many management challenges associated with managing a large casual workforce, with substitute staff often needing to be found for staff who were sick or absent for other reasons. The company study involved face to face interviews at the company office (which was also the manager's home), a worker's home and the RTO that provided traineeship training for the company.

For the purposes of examining the social construction of skill, this paper focuses primarily on the responses of training providers: 'State TAFE', 'Regional Public' (also a TAFE provider), 'Institute of Training' (private RTO), STEP (community RTO) and Clean Co (enterprise RTO), and on the responses of the interviewees from 'Bill Saunders Cleaning'. These interviews are marked in Table 1 with an asterisk. However, data from other interviewees is included where appropriate.

Findings and discussion

The nature of skills within cleaning

The Certificate III PRM30104 has five core units and 14 electives, of which three may be from another Training Package. The core units are shown in Table 2 (at the end of this paper).

Electives include units on working with particular surfaces, types of furniture/fitting or cleaning systems, infection control, and responding to client inquiries and complaints. Nominal hours are between 295 and 600 depending on electives selected (OTTE, 2004). In Victoria, cleaning traineeships last for a maximum of 18 months full-time, 36 months part-time (OTTE, 2004: 33). These data contrast with, for example, the various General Construction Certificate III

qualifications, which attract nominal hours of around 900-1000 and apprenticeship terms of three to four years.

The traineeship qualifications (Certificate II and III) were considered to be of high quality and had good industry acceptance among those who were aware of them. However, the industry was not yet routinely demanding qualified people, generally asking for 'experience' but it was expected that a demand for the qualification would follow. Qualifications were sometimes used by companies to help them win government tenders and for Bill Saunders, for example, this was an important level for him to qualify his staff. . Meanwhile, possession of the qualification undoubtedly helped people get jobs because it was proof of experience and skills. As the BSCAA representative said

'They (traineeship graduates) would have started the process to understand and learn the industry. There are obviously physical aspects of training like learning to vacuum, learning to clean toilets... they're all important and if the employer doesn't have to go through that process with a new employee then obviously it's saving a lot of time... a significant part of the traineeship is OH&S. You and I might think that getting the cleaner to check his (sic) cord before he plugs his vacuum cleaner in is a normal part of the process – well it's not easy to get them to do it... they've got to self-regulate. '

Those nearer the delivery area recognised deeper skills involved in the work as well as the risks that training could address. The 'Regional Public' interviewee said

'.. the equipment that is out there now, the responsibilities and security factors – these cleaners are locking up multi-storey buildings and banks with guards and a lot of responsibility ... people are getting very, very ill in this industry. The chemicals we use can kill people..'

While most people found the content of the qualification suitable there was a criticism from the 'State TAFE' respondent, He said

It's pretty, you know, lots and lots of different units, you know, ... ' clean a glass table' or ' a window'

This comment was obviously based on a misinterpretation of the unit ‘clean glass surfaces’. Such a misconception from the ‘State TAFE’ curriculum manager responsible for the area could indicate the lack of interest from this major public training provider in cleaning training and a readiness to believe that the qualification is inferior.

Attitudes towards the cleaning industry and cleaning training

Many stakeholders talked positively about cleaning and cleaning training. They had hoped that traineeships would professionalise the industry and lead to a training culture, and felt that on the whole this was happening. They discussed the levels of skill inherent in the job of cleaning and the way in which the traineeship validated and lifted skill levels. They felt that quality of work in the industry and particularly OH&S and sustainability would be lifted by traineeships. The BSCAA representative said

(it needed to) really tackle the OH&S area because there are a lot of shonky practices, this is an area where obviously OH&S has such a big impact – correct movement, correct bending techniques, and using heavy equipment.

He said that OH&S consumed greater and greater amounts of managers’ time and hence good training of workers in this area was a business necessity:

‘(As a manager) ten years ago I would probably have spent an hour a week on it, and I’m now spending probably a day a week.’

The union representative thought that with more trained staff more full-time jobs might be created and more people attracted into the industry as a career choice. The industry was diverse and the traineeship qualification offered a pathway both for employees and for small business owners. The BSCAA representatives said that the average age of business owners was rising and traineeships offered a chance to provide pathways to senior management for younger workers. It was stated that for the area to take off, people with a ‘passion’ were needed and this was certainly evident among several interviewees.

All stakeholders agreed that there had been some instances of ‘abuse’ of funding systems by employers to gain incentives but those with broader knowledge tended to say that this had not

been severe in the industry and that there were ‘really good solid experiences’ as well, according to the BSV interviewee. Attrition rates of trainees were believed to be around the middle range. Since many workers were part-time and often of low literacy or non-English speaking background (NESB) the qualification had been valuable for equity reasons. A view was expressed that managers taking on trainees should be appropriately qualified and/or that AACs should assess companies for suitability. Poor management was identified by respondents as a major problem in the industry, and so more engagement in Certificate IV programs would help both generally and with supervision of trainees. It was strongly felt that training improved the status of the industry.

The ‘State TAFE’ respondent oversaw delivery of cleaning qualifications in his State as part of construction services, his own background being the building industry. He did not have high regard either for traineeships in general or for this qualification in particular. There were not many students enrolled in this area in ‘State TAFE’, and no full-time teachers employed; it was described as a ‘bit of a shadowy thing’. The respondent felt that the training was low-level, did not move beyond what was already undertaken in the workplace, and felt it was not important for ‘State TAFE’ to worry about its quality, feeling that cleaning traineeships were better left to private RTOs and enterprise RTOs. He said:

We’re not talking about something that’s a critical occupation, an important one, we are not talking about someone who is doing something that’s fundamental to human health and safety for example, so ... I’m not sure there’s any major gain in this type of thing.

He believed that there were no technological advances in the cleaning industry.

This interview contrasted starkly with the co-ordinator of cleaning training at ‘Regional Public’ in another State, who was interviewed as part of the Bill Saunders case study. This co-ordinator managed a great number of cleaning training programs including, but by no means limited to, traineeships that extended throughout his State and into two adjacent States. The range of programs included on-site partnerships with major industry partners. He employed three full-time staff and a large number of part-timers and contractors throughout the different locations. He mounted ‘field days’ for local employers where they could inspect and try out new equipment. Mindful of the comments of the ‘State TAFE’ interviewee, the researcher asked the ‘Regional

Public' interviewee whether his section in the Institute received any derogatory comments from traditional trade areas, such as construction, within his Institute. He responded

No. Definitely not. If anything, I mean, we're probably getting more and more out there now than a lot of other areas. We're sort of lucky here; we're one of the – what would we call it – bigger players probably in the trades as far as student contact hours go, and our numbers go.

Provenance of views about the worth of cleaning and cleaning training

Stakeholders' own backgrounds seemed to be very important in the value they put on the cleaning industry and cleaning training. Those who had worked in traditional trades seemed more likely to consider cleaning work to be unskilled and to be willing to believe that the training was inferior. However this was not always the case. The 'Regional Public' interviewee was also from a trade background but had entered cleaning as a second job when he needed extra money while his family was young. It was clear that many of the people he worked with and the industry contacts he had were passionate about the industry. He said

Look you won't slow us down on it; we're mad on our cleaning, all of us, all over the state and once we start, we get into it.

Those interviewees who worked closely with disadvantaged clients also seemed more aware of the skills involved in the job and the benefits of training. For example the Brotherhood of St Laurence staff were able to point very clearly to the generic skills as well as the technical skills developed during cleaning training; one described it as 'like getting an arts degree ... it gives you the skills to do something else.' The generic skills included the important social and negotiation skills needed in an industry where almost always workers are working on the premises of another employer.

'False consciousness' of workers in cleaning

The Marxist term 'false consciousness' is used most frequently to explain workers' complicity in their oppression by their capitalist masters. In this paper the term is used in a different way – to explain the way in which cleaning workers perceive their job as low skilled and of low status, and perceived lack of power in their own careers.

Training was reported by some stakeholders to reveal to workers the skill inherent in their jobs and their own potential for taking more control over their working lives. The 'Regional Public' interviewee described the excitement that workers felt when they saw the new technology that was available in their industry

And it's fantastic – you know they've got a rotten old stick at work with a few bits of hair on it - that's called a mop, and they say 'Look at what (the equipment) you've got – wow.'

The 'Big Clean' traineeship co-coordinator referred to workers' pride in their traineeship qualifications.

A lot of these traineeships are you know, targeting a blue collar audience... like someone who's been a cleaner, may have been a cleaner for 5, 10 years, but there's been no formal recognition of what they've done, and ... they see themselves as just a cleaner. The recognition that what they're doing actually does have some value somewhere in an educational framework, has made them feel, I think, just a lot more prouder about what they do, in themselves, with their self esteem ... If we have a big group that finishes their traineeships on the same site, or from sites that are closely related, we'll have like a little graduation ceremony for them, and just to see people who may have never enjoyed an educational accolade in their whole life, this is a big deal for them and it's really special and it's really nice to see that and to see that pride, and the fact that, you know, something they've done has got a perceived value now that may not have had before, or they didn't think had before.

However the perceptions of low status - or what one respondent referred to as the 'stigma' of working in cleaning - appeared to be quite persistent. A female cleaner in the 'Bill Saunders' case study, was appreciative of the learning she undertook in her off-the-job training. Yet when talking about the tasks and skills she learned she often used the word 'just'; for example, 'mostly

just going over ways to learn floors', 'mostly just that sort of thing'. It took a great deal of questioning to draw out from her the different areas covered in her work and in the training. Yet when asked if she would undertake further qualifications in the industry said

I wouldn't mind it. I'm not sure what there would be further along. If he (the manager) wanted me to do another one, I would do it.

The other, male, worker interviewed had an almost identical answer:

If (the manager) wanted me to do it, I wouldn't say no. I would go and do it without a worry'

His view of the training was that it was 'too easy' and yet he was able to describe many complex operations that had been covered; he seemed to find it 'easy' because he had already learned most of the skills on the job.

This seeming dissonance between the skills that stakeholders were able to point to in cleaning jobs and the 'false consciousness' of the workers themselves could be explained by a number of reasons. In the 'Bill Saunders' case study the two workers were grateful to their manager for giving them work after returning to work, following child-rearing in one case and a back injury in the other. The Brotherhood of St Laurence programs catered for similarly and more disadvantaged clients. The DEEWR (2006) report referred to earlier in this paper noted that cleaning work was suitable for such 'hard to place' people. Workers with low self-esteem are perhaps not likely to have a very high opinion of the jobs they are able to access. Another reason could be that most workers appeared to be introduced to the concept of traineeships through their employer, either as existing workers or after having been employed as a new worker, rather than actively seeking a traineeship. In this way they seemed to become reliant on their employers to inform them of training opportunities, and independent seeking after higher-level qualifications did not seem to be common. Selecting a qualification involves actively considering that occupation as skilled; entering one almost by accident does not promote a perception of the qualification as valued.

What can improve the image of cleaning training?

When asked what was necessary, or what needed to change, to improve the quality of traineeships in cleaning, respondents hoped for a greater understanding among some stakeholders

of the importance of the industry and therefore of qualified staff. A greater understanding of the match between job roles and the different qualifications was desired. Respondents mentioned the need for better quality in training; the interviewee from 'Institute of Training' said that she sometimes had to resist pressure from companies that did not seek much training, reportedly saying 'Can't you just follow them around?' The implication of this comment was that other RTOs did not provide proper training services and that some employers actually preferred this. Some respondents said that trainees needed to be made aware of practices across different workplaces, so that their learning extended beyond what they needed in their immediate job.

It was reported that the low status of cleaning was, to some extent, justified because there were some 'cowboys' operating in the industry. Respondents suggested that supervisors themselves might not be well-qualified and compensation needed to be made for this when arranging training programs. It was mentioned that sometimes people bought a cleaning business as a pre-retirement activity and they were not particularly interested in or committed to the industry. As the 'Regional Public' interviewee put it

We find a lot of people, maybe getting a (redundancy) package; thinking "I'm a bit young to retire; I'll buy a cleaning business." So where's the knowledge and the background? There isn't any – but next thing you know there've got five trainees. So it's going to be always hard to make it work.

Greater regulation of the industry was suggested by several interviewees.

Conclusion

Cleaning is an area of work that is vital to society and the study showed that it involves risks to its workforce in terms of OH&S and to its clients in terms of security. However it has in the past been considerably undervalued, to the extent that the respondent in charge of curriculum for a State TAFE system stated that there was little skill or knowledge involved in the job. The research showed the level of skills and knowledge required, as well as the difference that training could make not only in job performance but in improving self-efficacy and learner motivation. Better training could create better jobs, through multi-skilling, and could attract better candidates to the industry. There was a clear sense from the research that many key players were consciously

working with the traineeship system to increase the status of the cleaning industry and the sense of vocation among its workers. This was in a context where other segments of the industry were responding to pressure from clients by cost-cutting and inappropriate employment practices. However the research also revealed that there might be major stakeholders who were passively if not actively trying to downgrade the status of cleaning training and through this, by implication, the occupation of cleaner. It may be that staff in some public providers, State Training Authorities and intermediary agencies need education about the industry and in particular the level of skills and knowledge required.

Appendix - Tables

Table 1: Interviewees

Interviewee	Position	Organisation
1.	Senior officer	Business Skills Victoria (BSV) – nominee of CPSISC the national Skills Council
2.	Committee member	Building Service Contractor’s Association of Australia (BSCAA) NSW - employer association. Also the proprietor of a cleaning company with 300 employees.
3. *	Senior officer	Construction Services Programs, <i>State TAFE</i> - public RTO curriculum manager
4. *	Director, Business Development	<i>Institute of Training</i> – private RTO
5.	Senior officer	NSW, Liquor, Hospitality & Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMU) – union
6. *	Traineeship manager	<i>Big Clean Co</i> (enterprise)
7. *	Senior officer	STEP, part of Brotherhood of St Laurence (social welfare organisation) - group training organisation and RTO manager
8.	Manager	Brotherhood of St Laurence’s cleaning enterprise

9. *	Company owner/manager	<i>Bill Saunders Cleaning</i>
10. *	Long-standing employee	<i>Bill Saunders Cleaning</i>
11. *	Employee for six months	<i>Bill Saunders Cleaning</i>
12. *	Cleaning course coordinator and teacher	<i>Regional Public RTO serving Bill Saunders Cleaning</i>

Note: names in italics are pseudonyms

* denotes interviews used for analysis of social construction of skill

Table 2: Units in the Certificate III Asset Maintenance in Cleaning Operations

Unit code	Unit title	Nominal hours
PRMCL33B	Plan for safe and efficient cleaning activities	15
PRMCL35B	Maintain a cleaning storage area	15
PRMCL39A	Support leadership in the workplace	50
PRMCMN201A	Participate in workplace safety arrangements	25
PRMCMN301A	Contribute to workplace safety arrangement	30

(OTTE, 2004: 25)

References

- Adler, P. (2007). The future of critical management studies: A paleo-Marxist critique of labour process theory. *Organization Studies*, 28, 1313-1345.
- Attewell, P. (1990). What is skill? *Work and Occupations*, 17:4, 422-448.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (2000) 8672.0 - *Cleaning Services Industry, Australia, 1998-99*, ABS, Canberra.
- Borghans, L., Green, F. & Mayhew, K. (2001). Skills measurement & economic analysis: An introduction. *Oxford Economic Papers*, 3, 375-384.
- Department of Employment & Workplace Relations (DEWR) (2006). *Recruitment in the cleaning services industry*. DEWR, Canberra.
- Felstead, A., Fuller, A., Unwin, L., Ashton, D., Butler, P., Lee, T. and Walters, S. (2005). *Applying the survey method to learning at work: A recent UK experiment*. Centre for Labour Market Studies, University of Leicester.
- Healy, G., Hansen, L.L., and Ledwith, S. (2006). Still uncovering gender in industrial relations. *Industrial Relations Journal*, 37:4, 290-298.
- IBISWorld Australia (2008). *Cleaning services in Australia – Industry report*. IBISWorld, Sydney.
- Office of Training & Tertiary Education (OTTE) (2004). *Victorian Purchasing Guide PRM04 Asset Maintenance Training Package* (Cleaning Operations Sector). OTTE, Melbourne
- Spencer, K. (1990). Skill: meanings, methods and measures. *Work & Occupations*, 17:4, 399-421.
- Steinberg, R. (1990). Social construction of skill: Gender, power & comparable worth. *Work & Occupations*, 17:4, 449-482.
- Triplet, J. & Bosworth, B. (2004). *Productivity in the U.S. services sector: New sources of economic growth*. Brookings Institution Press, New York.
- Wolf, A. (2002). *Does education matter?* Penguin Group, London.