'I KNOW BRENDAN; HE'S A GOOD LAD': THE EVALUATION OF SKILL IN THE RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION OF CONSTRUCTION WORKERS

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This paper reports a qualitative investigation of how those who engage site workers in the UK evaluate their skills. It is based on interviews with 50 tradespeople and managers, covering a period from the Second World War to the present day, and on archival research into a DLO in 1979-1982. It was found that remarkably consistent criteria are currently used by managers and by operatives themselves to recognize whether recruits are likely to have the desired skills and qualities. The main criteria are: personal acquaintance or recommendation; inspection of tools; and the informal trial period. There are differences, however, from the criteria used thirty years ago, which tended to be more formal, and which also included trade union membership.

Keywords: skills, recruitment, selection, building trades, labour, informality.

INTRODUCTION

The meaning of skill is often taken for granted. Construction employers, policy makers and even academics rarely question the meaning of skill in the building trades. There are exceptions to this however. Clarke (for example Clarke and Wall 1998; Clarke 2005) has addressed trade boundaries, and in a recent critical review, Chan and Dainty (2007) point out that the definition of skills is not uncontested; that there is a disconnect between skills research and policies, and skills needs in practice; and that more research should be undertaken using the 'socio-cultural lens'. The research reported here attempts to address this situation by investigating how skills are understood in construction trades in the UK, and whether this has changed over time. In asking how skills are evaluated when selecting construction craft workers – the criteria used in deciding whether someone is likely to have the required skill, and how they are recognized as having that skill once they start work – the focus is not directly on the recruitment and selection process, but through that on the understanding of skill which is used to assess the worker's suitability.

SKILL

Skill is often treated as having an objective character independent of the observer, and thus being amenable to measurement. Yet 'there is surprisingly little agreement on what "skills" (or knowledge, or competence) actually refer to' (Felstead *et al.* 2002: 20). Conceptualizations of skill change over time (Payne 2004) and differ in different countries (Brockmann *et al* 2007).

Skill in the person

A distinction is often drawn between skill in the person, and skill demanded by the job (which may or may not match). The idea of skills as personal attributes, as 'individual possessions' brought to a job, is common in the construction industry in spite of the importance of the work group. Tradesmen use 'investment and return' rhetoric to justify wage differentials with labourers (Steiger 1993: 554-555). There are, however, a number of criticisms of this approach to understanding skill. It can be seen to perpetuate a mechanistic, instrumental view of the individual worker, a criticism linked to concerns about the one-sided model of *homo œconomicus* at the heart of human capital theory. Skill in the person may be 'measured' by qualifications, but this poses problems in construction where much learning is informal.

Skill in the job is often described in terms of complexity of the task, and autonomy in carrying it out (e.g. Spenner1990; Felstead *et al* 2002). It is argued that highly-skilled jobs require high levels of discretion over job tasks – deciding how hard to work; what tasks to do; how to do the task; and the quality standards to which to work. Control over the detailed execution of work tasks is assumed to require judgement and skill. By this definition, work in the construction trades is highly skilled. However, purporting to measure job complexity raises questions particularly concerning gender bias, and the privileging of cognitive complexity over manual skills (Attewell 1990). There are also concerns about how far discretion is an indicator of skill. In the Felstead *et al* (2007) *Skills at Work* survey, most measures of skill (e.g. qualifications needed to do the job, or length of time to learn to do the job well) have risen over a 20-year period, yet employee task discretion has consistently fallen across all occupational groups and all industrial sectors.

Situated learning – skill as social process

In contrast to the positivist, rationalist approach to defining skill in the worker or in the job, the interpretative view sees skill as situational – the worker is not separate from the work; skills are by definition inseparable from the contexts in which they are developed and used. Lave and Wenger (1991) draws attention to the situated and social nature of knowledge and learning. Skills are embedded in context. Gherardi and Nicolini (2002) draw on these ideas in their study of safety on small construction sites, emphasizing the interdependence of knowledge and practice. Similarly, Seymour and Hill (1995) found that foremen build their own teams of operatives who stay together, thus creating an informal organization in which knowledge and skill are not simply the possession of individuals, but a resource for the whole team.

Skill as socially constructed

According to Ball (1988: 3)

> *'Skill is a social construct denoting status, earning capacity, industrial power and the ability to exclude others, as well as indicating a capacity to undertake certain specified tasks. Construction is riddled with skill and status divisions. They have benefited certain types of workers but have created enormous rifts between trades, as well as between those workers officially designated as having a trade and those classified as unskilled. One group clearly excluded from construction has been women'*

Sociologists have emphasized the socially constructed nature of skill, and tried to understand the processes by which some jobs come to be defined as skilled. Conceptions of skill are socially and politically negotiated over time, and reflect the power and influence of particular interest groups. Occupational groups vie for power

and prestige, seeking monopoly power in the labour market through such strategies as restricting entry, limiting competition, and exercising disciplinary powers. Lengthy apprenticeships or training can help build the perception of exceptional knowledge requirements. Other techniques include secrecy, special language or jargon, and the prevention of other groups carrying out the work. This is the process of social closure, originally defined by Weber (1978), which can be traced back to the craft guilds.

The assessment of skill in recruitment and selection
There is considerable literature within HRM in construction which points to the informality of recruitment practices. For example, as long ago as 1986, Bresnen *et al* found that recruitment and selection practices tended to be informal and to emphasize experience rather than qualifications. (They also suggested that such strategies have a negative impact on training and skills.) Druker and White (1996) found that recruitment in construction is often informal and through personal contacts. Clarke and Hermann (2007) confirm that firms rely on experience – not qualifications – as the main criterion for operative recruitment.

Changes in skills, qualifications and training
Significant changes have occurred in the UK labour market and in training systems over the past 30 to 40 years. Briefly, these include the decline of traditional apprenticeships and the introduction of NVQs; changes in the taxation and national insurance regime for construction workers which encouraged self-employment; the disappearance of DLOs which formerly carried out much training; low demand for skills during the recessions of the early 1980s and early 1990s leading to declining company commitment to new entrant training; and the wider European labour market making it easier for UK contractors to import skills from nations with lower wage costs and avoid the expense of training local workers. There has clearly been a dramatic fall in apprentice training, although the very fragmentation which is one of the causes of the decline, also makes it difficult to measure. The Phelps-Brown report (1968: 43) records that in 1966 there were 130 000 building trade apprentices– almost 10% of the number of operatives. In contrast, the total number completing apprenticeships in 2007 was 'over 5000' (CITB-ConstructionSkills, 2008) so the total number of apprentices at that time (not given) may be surmised to be under 20 000, or around 1.4%. Figures for the proportion of the workforce which is 'skilled', 'trained' or 'qualified' are difficult to arrive at and to compare. The actual level of qualification achieved by those completing training is not recorded, and there is no record of individuals' qualifications for the industry as a whole. However, Dickerson and Vignoles (2007) found that only 20% of (male) UK construction workers have vocational qualifications at level 3. A report for CITB-ConstructionSkills (2005)[1] found that 50% had some qualification relevant to construction. At least half of those working on site can thus be presumed to have learned whatever skills they have informally. As it is not credible that all these people are unskilled, this poses a problem for how skills are recognized in the widespread absence of qualifications.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION

The research perspective was influenced by approaches which stress the importance of context, informality and emergence to studying organizational processes (e.g. Bresnen 2009; Kao *et al* 2009; Green *et al* 2009) and which see learning and skills as socio-

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[1] Based on a questionnaire administered on larger new-build sites - and therefore likely to overestimate qualifications in the construction workforce as a whole.

cultural phenomena based on participation in a system of situated practices (Lave and Wenger 1991; Gherardi and Nicolini 2002).The research reported here explored some of the ways in which skill is constituted in particular contexts, by focusing upon the assessment of recruits' skills. Data was collected from interviews, many carried out on two contemporary sites in Reading, and an historic case study of the City of Manchester Direct Works Department (CMDWD) thirty years ago, based on a combination of archival sources and retrospective interviews (oral histories).

The Manchester case study

Archival data (minutes of meetings of the Direct Works Committee and associated documents, mainly reports to the Committee) were further elucidated by interviewing individuals who worked for the organization. The time period studied, 1979 to 1982, is seen as a pivotal one in which important structural changes in the construction industry were interwoven with wider political and cultural changes. Pettigrew (2003) emphasizes the importance of locating present behaviour in the context of its historical antecedents; reconstructing past processes can help the researcher discover patterns and find underlying mechanisms. Understanding the meanings of skill in the particular geographic, temporal and institutional context in Manchester 30 years ago may thus help to explain how things came to be as they now are. However,

> *'The archeological revisit can be used to connect the present to the past, but it may also be used to compare the present to the past'* (Burawoy 2003: 672).

The choice of Manchester, and of the publicly-owned Direct Works Department, provides as great a contrast as possible with private-sector projects in the south-east at the present time, in order to bring out the differences. Comparative analysis is also central to the grounded theory as described by Glaser and Strauss (1967: 55-58), who recommend maximizing differences among comparison groups (e.g. different organizations, regions or cities) in order to maximize the different relationships, strategies, processes, and structural mechanisms which may be discovered in attempting to explain the differences.

The interviews

50 people were interviewed, 39 men and 11 women, aged from 26 to 86. All were working, or had worked, on construction sites; about half were currently working 'on the tools'; the others had moved into construction management, retired, or left the industry. Informants included craftspeople, clerks of works, foremen and site managers, a trade union convenor, and trade trainers. Interviews lasted from 40 minutes to more than 2 hours. All were recorded except in 4 cases where the interviewees did not consent. Interview guides were prepared in advance for particular categories of informant, but were treated flexibly, with questions allowed to emerge from the immediate context. The focus of the interviews was on construction craft skills and the process of learning a trade. A non-directive opening question regarding the informants' entry to the industry and their occupation encouraged the telling of rich stories ranging over many topics. Some informants had served traditional apprenticeships but many had acquired their skills informally, for example bricklayers who had previously worked as hod carriers.

In trying to unpick the meaning of skill, questions were asked aimed at discovering how skills are evaluated when selecting construction workers, along the lines of '*What would you look for if you were taking somebody on?*' If necessary, this was followed up with further questioning to understand the criteria used in deciding whether someone is likely to have the required skill, and how they are recognized as having

that skill once they start work. Similar questions were asked both of site-based managers responsible for engaging others, and of workers themselves. Partly because of widespread self-employment, the boundary between the two groups was sometimes unclear. Many people who do not have formal responsibility for engaging labour are nevertheless involved in the processes of finding suitable candidates for work and judging their worthiness. On the two Reading sites where interviews took place, all work was subcontracted and the main contractors' only direct employees were 'staff' or 'management'. The predominantly informal means of skills assessment described here were therefore those of the various subcontractors, mainly smaller firms.

CRITERIA FOR ASSESSING SKILL

What emerged from the interviews was a consistent set of criteria for evaluating the skills of potential recruits[1]. Firstly personal acquaintance or being vouched for, *'you know them, or you know someone that knows them'*. Secondly, *'you look at their tools … and you see how they use them'*. In the final analysis, though, *'if you've got problems, you get rid of them'*.

Personal acquaintance or being vouched for
The first response of almost every informant was that they would seek to engage workers who they know and have previously worked with. Fred, a site manager, says *'you go off experience, you go off who you know'*. Peter indicates that this assessment based on experience worked both ways when he was a site manager

> *'inevitably you knew the guys that were available, because in an area, you'd know who was coming free, and they'd know you, and whether they would come and work with you and for you'.*

In evaluating the skills of someone who is not personally known, reputation and word of mouth come into play. Personal recommendation is the key, being vouched for by someone who is known and trusted.

> *'Most of the blokes you take on, they'll be taken on by reputation. Somebody will know them, and say "Oh yes, I know Brendan, he's a good lad"… Brendan comes on board and after a couple of weeks he says to the foreman "Well actually, there's two friends of mine that are good lads…" And that is the way most subcontractors recruit their labour. It is by word of mouth…'*

This means that the selection of suitable new recruits may be largely in the hands of their colleagues.

Tools
For those who work 'on the tools', the tools themselves are crucially important. According to Peter, a site manager, skill is judged by

> *'the state of his tools… Like, say you've got a man coming out as a bricklayer, if he's got all brand new shiny stuff, if every piece is new, then there's something wrong…'*

It was suggested many times that *'there's something wrong'* with a craftsman who has new tools. Well worn but good quality tools signify a good tradesman, whereas cheap

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[1] 'Recruit' perhaps implies direct and continuing employment, but of course many building workers are engaged on a self-employed basis, and relationships vary from casual to longer-term.

but brand new gives warning of a 'chancer'. John tells the tale of a bricklayer from a six month government training scheme.

> *'you could tell him a mile away, like – he'd come out, everything was new, 'cause they used to give you the tools'*

He was taken on by the employer, but could not keep up with the more experienced bricklayers, and

> *'he got persecuted, so the pressure was insurmountable and he virtually just called it a day, you know, packed in…'.*

This shows the role of the work group in judging whether someone is suitably skilled.

In any particular trade, it is possible to describe in great detail what the tools say about the person. However, what matters is not just the tools, but the way they are used.

> *'you look at their tools, and you see how they use them… the man, and the way he looks after them, does he clean them at the end of the working day? 'This care and use of the tools then shades into the assessment of the work output in the informal 'skills test'.*

The unofficial trial period

Recruitment in the construction trades is very often subject to an informal trial period– if the person does not demonstrate the requisite skill during the first half-day, they will be sacked. This is, as Dean says, completely accepted.

> *'it's not a problem to just sack someone…it's completely accepted, so if someone says you're down the road, you go…'*

Both managers and workers regard this as normal. For example, a notionally self-employed electrician said 'if you get someone and they're rubbish, you just get rid of them … and that's where the self-employed thing comes in', whilst a site manager said 'if you find out you've got problems, then you get rid of them, don't you?'

The end product, the quality and quantity of work produced are the key criteria here. There is also an assessment of the way the new recruit goes about their work, in judging their ability to do work other than the specific task they are doing. The painter's preparation, the bricklayer putting a corner up, are carefully observed. This assessment is often carried out by colleagues rather than managers. A bricklayer says

> *'within half an hour they will assess you… if you're no good, you're out of it. I mean, not just by the foreman's observation… your general bricklayer stood next to them, they're not gonna want to work with him because he's reflecting on your work'.*

Some managers also spoke of delegating this assessment either to working supervisors or to workers themselves.

Qualifications

Qualifications were not spontaneously mentioned as a way of identifying those who are skilled in a trade. In several cases follow-up questions were asked ('*What about qualifications?*'), but the responses indicate that qualifications are considered unimportant or irrelevant in assessing candidates' skills and abilities for manual work on site. Several informants who had served formal indentured apprenticeships said *'no-one's ever asked to see my papers'*. In some cases, qualifications were not simply considered unimportant or irrelevant, but actively disparaged.

> *'There's a joke about NVQ translating as not very qualified and I'd tend to agree having seen what turns up with a 'wedding album' of certificates but little or no real on the tools experience.'*

It seems over-emphasis on qualifications arouses suspicion just as brand new tools do.

Trade union membership
In the late 1970s, Manchester Direct Works Department was still a closed shop. Many similar public-sector organizations, some bigger private firms, and large construction sites in major cities were also closed shops. According to John, UCATT convenor

> *'in Manchester, the 70s was predominantly rock-solid trade unionism. You couldn't get on a job in town without a union card, and likewise in Liverpool. You wouldn't be allowed to pick up a bricklayer's trowel, or hammer…'*

It was not possible to be employed as a skilled building worker without being a member of the craft union, UCATT. Labourers (and groundworkers), members of TGWU, were not allowed to 'use tools', a privilege jealously guarded by UCATT. Union membership was seen as a guarantee of skill. By contrast, only one person mentioned trade unions in the contemporary Reading interviews

> *'If someone's a very strong Union person, they're probably good – they will piss you off, but you can't get rid of them because they will be very good…'*

However this was a senior manager no longer responsible for engaging operatives. No-one currently working on site gave union membership as a sign of skilled status.

DISCUSSION

Being 'a good lad' and the 'other side' of embeddedness
Being known to be 'a good lad' is crucially important when site workers are assessed for 'skill' or suitability. This is not (simply) a question of 'what you can do' in the sense of narrow competences. Being 'sound' or 'a good lad' may have little to do with quality or output of work. It entails having a certain work ethic and physical toughness, but also 'having the *craic*' which may include joking and 'taking the piss' at work, and socializing in the pub. It is a complex mix of fitting in, who and what someone is, and being an 'honourable man'. It involves conformity to social and cultural norms, values, and ways of behaving, but also relies upon essential identity such as gender or membership of an ethnic group. Michael, a groundworks supervisor.

> *'They're exclusively Irish, and mostly Donegal. It is a father and son, uncle and nephew job. That is almost a closed shop. If you're not married to one of their nieces or their daughter or something, you're not going to get in there.'*

The assessment of new workers' skills is not only carried out by managers and supervisors who are formally responsible for recruitment and selection. It is often the other workers who propose suitable recruits. It may also be the other craftsmen who decide to 'get rid of' someone not perceived as sufficiently skilful, as with the '6 month bricklayer' who was persecuted by his colleagues. A conception of skill can be seen to emerge through a process of collective sense-making by all those involved. The mere presence of a 'rough', poorly-skilled bricklayer is felt to 'reflect on your work'. This suggests a feeling of collective responsibility for the honour of the craft; hence the necessity to protect its status by excluding those who do not live up to the standard. Weber (1978: 342) described the process by which a status group (e.g. an occupation) secures certain resources and privileges by excluding others. To do this, they single out certain social or physical attributes that they share, and define these as

the criteria of eligibility. In modern industrial societies, access is often controlled by tests and examinations which are (ostensibly at least) open to all. However, the building trades are 'pre-modern' in this respect. In the absence of qualifications and certificates as instruments of social closure, they have returned to traditional criteria of family pedigree as well as networks based on ethnicity and local community. Waldinger (1995) describes the tight control exercised by descendants of Italian, Irish, and Polish immigrants over the New York construction trades. The 'other side' of embeddedness is that the same social relations that enhance the ease and efficiency of economic exchanges among community members, also implicitly restrict outsiders.

Research has indicated that the more informal the forms of recruitment, the more social networks come into play as a powerful form of exclusion (Clarke and Wall 1998; Dainty *et al* 2000; Royal Holloway 2002; Clarke and Herrmann 2007). Clarke and Gribling (2008) found that, even on Heathrow Terminal 5 where recruitment methods were claimed to be non-discriminatory (with selection criteria related to skills, safety and security), in practice recruitment was mainly by word-of-mouth for manual jobs. Such informal methods, combined with the preference for work experience over formal qualifications, tended to entrench the predominance of white males. Formal training and qualifications may be a way in for those with no connections. One informant, Paul, who became a painter and decorator via YTS (the youth training scheme of the 1980s) said that in spite of its problems it was 'a way in for those who didn't have family networks'.

Changes: formal and informal assessment of skills
The historical case study at the CMDWD looks at a very specific moment in history, coming at the end of the post-war 'long boom', and looking at a large public-sector organization. In such organizations, where employment was expected to be a stable, long-term relationship, recruitment and selection tended to be more formal. Interviewees mentioned replying to advertisements, application forms or letters, references and interviews. More emphasis was placed on the possession of qualifications in assessing skills; it was often necessary, or at least preferable, to be 'time-served'. The decline of the public sector, coupled with the growth of subcontracting and self-employment, means that the structured relationships of direct employment have largely been replaced by more casual relations, where recruiting the right person is not seen as too important, because if they fail to meet requirements, 'you just get rid of them'. Self-employment does not preclude longer-term relationships developing over time, but they are always emergent, informal, and contingent. Certainly casual employment and informal recruitment are nothing new. Several informants with over 50 years experience of the industry suggested that informal practices for assessing skills are longstanding characteristics of some parts of the construction industry; perhaps what has changed is that they have now spread to almost the whole industry. Currently, there seem to be virtually no formal recruitment and selection processes in place for workers in the building trades. No job descriptions are needed because 'everybody knows' what skills are expected of a bricklayer. Jobs are most often obtained by personal contacts. Changes in the system of vocational education and training are also relevant. The collapse in the availability of apprenticeships means that many young people study for a construction award at college but have no on-site experience and therefore cannot gain the skilled status which would make them employable (Clarke and Gribling 2008), whilst others, having contacts, manage to acquire skills informally but have little theoretical knowledge. Building workers themselves continue to have considerable influence over

the definition of those who are suitably skilled, but whereas it used to be by means of trade unions and more formal mechanisms, it is now through informal networks.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

There seems to have been a move away from 'modern, bureaucratic' criteria such as qualifications which were used by the DLOs, and, to some extent, the large contractors when they used to directly employ trades. Now that most employment is by small firms, personal characteristics have become more important than ever as they are taken to indicate skill. Informal on-the-job training (and informal recruitment and selection) with minimal involvement by government, employers, or trade unions, enables skilled workers to erect their own barriers to entry, which may include restricting access to men and boys from their own local community or ethnic group. In the absence of social closure through trade unionism, control over apprenticeships, or educational credentialism, building craft workers defend their skilled status at least partly through networks, membership of which becomes important to the perception of the worker as being suitably skilled. This analysis emphasizes the situated nature of understandings of skill, and the importance of wider socio-political changes (as well as local power relations) in shaping the form that it takes.

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