College Students View Clerical Work: Issues in the Social Construction of Skill

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The level of skill that is attributed to a job is of enormous consequence for the political power, the income and the status of the workers who perform it. More skilled jobs attract more public respect and allow the people who perform them to demand better working conditions and higher rewards. Definitions of the skill level of a job, while purporting to be neutral descriptions of its character, in fact serve to justify its status and pay level, and to legitimize, or challenge the structure of inequality that exists in the workplace.

But the processes whereby people come to attribute levels of skill to a job are not well understood. These processes are political ones, and reflect the relative power of different groups in having their skills recognized (Gaskell, 1987). The educational and training requirements for a job display in a public institutional form, the common view of its skill level, its status, and the respect that is owed it. Jobs that require long periods of study in institutions of higher learning are called professions. Their incumbents are seen to possess the skills necessary for performing, judging and developing their own work. Jobs that require little formal training and education fall on the other end of this spectrum. Their incumbents are seen to need supervision by others, as they do not understand and share the goals of the organization; they are easily replaceable so they do not need to be well treated by the organization, and they are paid and respected less. But the level and content of training programs is arrived at through political processes, and is not a mechanical reflection of the tasks a worker must perform.

Much of the literature on skills in the workplace has been a debate about whether the separation between unskilled work and skilled (professional) work is increasing. Some argue that as computers are introduced into the workplace, conception and control are separated from execution; lower level workers need to know less, while technical and professional people need to know more (Braverman, 1974; Levin and Rumberger, 1983; Kuttner, 1984). There is also a literature

which argues that the introduction of technology increases employees' need to know, and gives them increased power and discretion in relation to their work (Mann and Schumann, 1986; OECD, 1984). There are a variety of studies which argue that technology itself has no necessary impact on skills, but that the way it is brought into the workplace is critical (Cohen and White, 1985).

In this paper, we do not intend to resolve the disagreement. We do want to point out that skills are not an easily identifiable, objective characteristic of a job, but are socially constructed, by workers, by management, and of particular interest to us, by educators and students in training programs. Training programs communicate to students and to the outside world the necessary skills, effort, responsibility and working conditions attached to a job. Ambiguities about the nature of the work are discussed and instructors provide an official account that can be challenged or accepted by students. Training programs are a good place to see the formation of beliefs about skill with which workers will enter the workplace.

In this paper we will take one type of work, clerical work, and explore the way it is constructed by students and instructors in a training program. Clerical work is particularly interesting because the nature of the work has been subject to so much historical transformation and contemporary debate. Current economic and political debates about whether clerical employees belong in unions and whether they receive "equal pay for work of equal value" reflect quite differing views of the nature and value of the work. Academic debates revolve around its class position (Lockwood, 1958; Braverman, 1974; Wright et al., 1987) and the consequences of new technology (Glenn and Feldberg, 1977; Crompton and Jones, 1984; Davies, 1982; Lowe, 1980). The links between the political and academic discussions are transparent, a fact which adds importance to the academic work and informs the political debate.

In this paper we look at the way women who are planning to be clerical workers construct the nature of clerical work. Their conflicting versions of the work point to the variety of constructions that are possible. In documenting the many ways clerical work can be constructed, we want to emphasize the importance of this social construction in determining the rewards, the conditions and the power that do accrue to the work.

This paper is based on data from case studies of two clerical training programs in a large West Coast city. Each program offered courses in a variety of areas — clerk typist, administrative clerk, word processing operator, bookkeeping, accounting, medical transcriptionist, legal secretary, and secretarial. Approximately three-quarters of the students paid their own fees, and the remainder were sponsored by governmental agencies and the Ministry of Human Resources. Approximately one-half the students were between the ages of 20 and 24. A quarter of the students were under 20 and the remainder were over 25 years of age.

Most of the data come from interviews with 69 women. The interviews were about an hour in length, were taped and transcribed. They were relatively "unstructured" but covered why women entered the programs, what was involved in the training, and how it was connected to the nature of the work. Analysis was

done by coding the interviews using a set of descriptors designed to identify student views on a variety of issues. Following the coding of student interviews with these categories, the interviews were sorted and read for the purpose of identifying major themes that characterized student views about each of the major categories. After interpretations were developed, an effort was made to find disconfirming and contradictory evidence.

In addition to the interviews, three field workers spent time in business education classrooms over a period of three months. During this time the researchers held many informal conversations with the students and the instructors at the colleges and observed classes. This fieldwork shaped the researchers' approach to clerical training, and is used in this paper to illustrate the way classes were conducted.

Recruitment: Why Clerical Work?

It is striking how often students said that they went into a clerical training program because they wanted a clerical job. This may not seem surprising, but it tells us two things: First, students felt they had control over which segment of the labor market they entered and second, clerical work itself was attractive for a variety of reasons. It was considered, by and large, a good job, requiring skill and hard work, worthy of respect and recognition. That is why students were willing to put time into the training program. As previous work with high school students has indicated, women see many advantages in clerical jobs, among them a relatively good chance of finding work that is comfortable, challenging, secure and relatively well paid (Gaskell, 1985). This positive view of clerical work is contrary to a good deal of literature which portrays clerical jobs as poorly paid, offering little respect and few prospects for advancement. The women themselves described the problems.

> I was working at the one place for five years and I was getting such terrible wages and doing so much of the work in the office, you just get fed up.

> I was doing that job and accounts receivable . . . and it was so boring. You knew exactly what to do, when to do it . . . . I could just see me at 40 years old doing this job, going absolutely nowhere and it just made me sick.

These students do not describe clerical work positively. They know it can be repetitive, underpaid and lacking in respect. So why do they persist in wanting clerical jobs, enrolling in clerical training programs, and describing their prospects in clerical jobs in positive ways? There are a number of factors that help to explain it.

Constructions of clerical work as a "good" job, worth training for, arise in some determinant social conditions. The women who see it as a good job are talking about it on the basis of their experiences of the labor market, of schooling and of family. As they talk, it becomes clear that they see clerical work as a relatively good option in a world that does not offer a lot, rather than seeing it as

a great job. Enthusiasm for the work and the training is based in knowledge of what makes other options worse.

For some students, training for a job as a clerical worker was not their first choice. However, high unemployment among university graduates, or excessively long waiting lists for popular community college courses caused many to reconsider their initial career preferences. Office related training courses are comparatively easy to get into and can be completed in one-half or one-quarter of the time it takes to obtain a university degree. For many, the easy access, short completion period and comparatively good employment prospects were critical.

> A good reason for doing it was I knew there was still a good market for it . . . I didn't want to get into anything where there was a losing market, and yet, I felt I could be myself too.

For other students, the view of office work as enjoyable was based on a comparison of office work with other kinds of work. Several students compared office work to their experiences as waitresses.

> I've always waitressed and you can't fall back on that. You are really expendable and I can't stand it . . . This isn't guaranteeing me anything either but it's just something that's a little more . . . intelligent. You are using your brain and it feels good . . . . So, I thought I would go back to school and have this to fall back on.

Other students who had experience in blue collar jobs spoke of secretarial work as having several positive features compared to their other work experiences. Describing her work in a mill, one student said,

> It's too physical. I think after a while it's boring and repetitious doing the same thing over and over again all the time. The only thing I could think about was this big pay cheque at the end of two weeks.

Students want to work in a place where they feel comfortable. Comfort can mean a nice physical environment, but most stressed the importance of cooperation among co-workers and the need for a fair relationship with one's boss.

> When I go out looking for a job, I'm looking for a career. I'm looking for a second home, a second family to feel comfortable with and I know the job that I have to do . . . .

A second factor that was important in producing characterizations of clerical jobs as "good" jobs was the variety of jobs within what can broadly be labelled as "clerical work". This meant that negative experiences of the work in one particular site did not constitute grounds for rejecting it altogether. A bad experience can be blamed on a "bad job," and one can hope for a "good job." Within clerical work, most see the possibility of good jobs — with variety, interest and prospects for advancement, even if they also see the possibility of poor working conditions. Within any one job, variety exists so that any particular task can be

offset by others. Students relate the variety of work related tasks to being challenged, using their brains, developing skills.

> I'd [like] something that gives me different things to do . . . like not sitting at a typewriter all day, typing letters, memos or whatever or just sitting at a phone answering phones. I don't mind doing things like that, I really enjoy it, but I would like to have all kinds of different things to do during the day.

> I like a change. I like to adapt to change, I don't like doing the same thing for the same person all the time.

"Clerical work" describes not just a variety of kinds of work and a variety of places of work, it describes a variety of levels of work. Many students see possibilities for advancement as office workers. Even if "entry level" clerical jobs are not great, they offer the possibility of promotion to bigger and better things.

Training programs are critical in allowing for promotion for moving up to better positions (Boothby, 1986). Many of the students enrolled in clerical training programs have already had experiences of clerical work, and are back to upgrade their qualifications in order to get a better job. This belief in further education can be described as hegemonic because it is at this point of re-entry from the workforce into office work training programs that the system of training as a means for personal advancement begins to cycle back onto itself. Many students originally entered office work training programs believing it to be a way of obtaining a "good job." Upon entering the workforce, they find themselves unable to attain their goals. Advancement is limited or non-existent. Their work is sometimes boring and routine, and held in low esteem by their employers. How does one better one's chances for advancement? Rather than trying to change any particular job, or give up on clerical work as a bad option, many students believe it is done through more education, and thus enrol for more training.

Curriculum Content: the Value of Clerical Skills

The training program communicates to students that clerical work involves a great many skills, skills that are hard to acquire, and worthy of respect. The curriculum is based on constructing the possibilities of clerical work positively. Instructors want their students to be interested in their work, and they want to believe the skills they are teaching are valuable. Students want to believe that there is a good job at the end of the line, that putting in time on training is worthwhile. The way to construct clerical work positively, in a training environment, is to stress the skills involved, the difficulty of the tasks to be mastered, and their consequent value.

One of the major ways the status of clerical work is communicated to students is through the notion of "professionalism." Students are told they need to develop a "professional" attitude. The appropriation of this term, connoting skill, power and respect, symbolizes much of the pride teachers want to communicate

and students want to experience. In several of the classes observed during the study, the notion of professionalism was communicated to students by urging them to become involved in professional associations relevant to their field of study. Other teachers took their students to the large annual trade shows in which industry representatives and business personnel met to examine and discuss the latest developments in office technologies.

For teachers the notion of professionalism involved awareness. The following illustration comes from a legal secretarial class where the teacher is attempting to discuss sources of law with the students:

> IR: "What is the body that enacts laws?"
> [Gets no response from the students.]
> Do you know about parliament girls?" . . . . You should become professionals, learn what goes on in society. It shows professionalism".

She then goes on to read about a recently appointed supreme court judge. She tells them to read MacLeans or anything that's available.

In a second instance, the teacher of a word processing class is talking with one of the researchers about what she calls a "professional attitude." This involves working hard, in their estimation.

> She talks to me about one academic high school student . . . . 'She is really learning a lot but doesn't have a professional attitude — takes long coffee breaks, arrives late, is absent. It really burns me. But they won't last three months on a job. I don't care how liberal the employer is, they're not paid to socialize.'

Students' notions of professionalism were similar. One component of these notions was a belief that to be professional was to have a thorough understanding of one's area of expertise and to apply that knowledge and skill in a competent manner. Typical comments of this type are as follows:

> Do your work the best you can, not to be sloppy in your work, have a neat document . . . . dress nicely, have a nice appearance, that's what it is.

> That you take pride in your work . . . doing it to your best ability . . . . tact in dealing with people. Professionalism is a lot of things.

Embedded in these quotations is the belief that clerical workers represent the larger organization they work for. Office workers provide the public with their first impression of the company, either through written communication or personal contact in a reception area. As a result, they must be respected by the public, and important to the firm.

> You are there to work for the employer . . . . You are kind of the go-between between the public and your employer . . . act business-like.

The importance of accuracy and the need for an awareness of organizational goals was stressed in the curriculum, giving concrete expression to these notions of professionalism. The following excerpts from classroom observations illustrate:

> (Teacher) Payroll is a very complicated procedure but it is exacting. You have to be accurate, you have to maintain confidentiality . . . . It is very critical to negotiations. You hear of unions and management bargaining. They look to see if everything is accurate . . . .

In a discussion of computerized bookkeeping, a student asks "Doesn't this make everybody data entry clerks?" The teacher's answer to the question was: "No, no . . . you've got to structure those invoices. You're now responsible . . ."

The notion of professionalism combines in classrooms with a sense of the importance of a job well done, an assignment properly accomplished. The pressure and difficulty of the training program also communicate to students that the skills they are learning are hard won and important. When asked about life as a student, many of those interviewed spoke of the pressures and stresses of trying to cope with their workload.

> I'm at school all day from 8:00 to 4:00 . . . . I work on homework from maybe 6:30 to 11:00 . . . .

The difficulty of the tasks involved both the volume and the nature of the work they had to do. The amount of work was justified by the necessity of practice, of increasing manual skills to a level where productivity, thus of value to an employer, is enhanced:

> It prepares you for a field, an automated office, something that we are becoming more and more aware of. You want to get as much done for as little as you can possibly do it for.

Many of the students believed that learning to be a clerical worker involved more than developing a repertoire of specific skills. These students felt that underlying the skills one learns, there must be a broader knowledge that allows one to apply the skills properly. For some students, that knowledge began with a thorough understanding of the basics of English and mathematics:

> If you are poor in English you can't write well. Everybody needs to write . . . . If the boss is a poor writer, you've got to fix his punctuation and grammar and everything . . . .

Some of the courses the students took were intentionally structured to build on prerequisite knowledge:

> You have to go into bookkeeping, that is part of it. I guess that's why they teach you the math and machines first, because they teach you basic math to make sure you know how to add and subtract, fractions, everything like that. And they teach you the machines part of it so that

> when you go into bookkeeping you're not having to learn the calculator. You've already got it and you can just work with the figures and concentrate more on the forms that you are using.

The difficulty of the learning is communicated to students by calling much of what they learn "theory," a term borrowed from professional university training. Most students saw the relationship between theory and practice as one in which skills were akin to practice, and knowledge of how to use the skills was akin to theory. Students saw the skills they were learning as important, but readily acknowledged that the practical application of those skills depended on a broader knowledge.

> You have to learn a bit about the background before you can understand how it works. If you are just going to push the buttons, I don't think you are really learning anything from it. There's a lot of theory in word processing. It doesn't seem it, but there is.

> I think it does help you to know. I like background information. You have to know what's going on. You know, you walk in there blind and you sit at your little desk and do your thing. It's tunneling. You don't have a vision of how things work.

The "theory" dignifies the work, makes the worker more than a moveable part in a production machine, gives her understanding, power, the right to be respected, to have her judgements listened to.

The curriculum, then, in stressing professionalism, theory, and high levels of practical skill, communicates to students that their work is complex and to be respected. It communicates it in different ways — professionalism, theory and speed involve somewhat different aspects of the work, but it communicates it in multi-faceted ways that will make sense to a variety of students. In many ways, training does dignify the work, encourage women to take themselves and their skills seriously.

Resistance and Struggle: the Contradictions

Despite the students' predisposition to construct clerical jobs positively, and the instructors' best efforts to build up the job, students' willingness to believe these messages is often strained. Some responses to the ideas that clerical jobs were "professional" ones illustrate the problem:

> I . . . look at it as a trade because it is not that high of a job. To me a profession is a higher job. I'm not saying secretarial work isn't hard or anything. It is a hard job, but to be a professional is something like a doctor or a scientist, something like that. It takes longer. I won't feel like a professional . . . . If I was a doctor, I would feel like a professional.

These women see through the language of dignity to the reality of something else.

Notions of clerical work as professional work coexist with notions of clerical work as devalued and alienated labor. These women often express having a sense of pride in their work along with the recognition that their work is undervalued.

> I don't think a lot of people realize that a lot of the work done in the offices . . . . is done by the staff and everybody doesn't look at it that way. I feel that it's the staff that runs the whole office more than the boss does.

> Bosses or lawyers couldn't do without legal secretaries . . . . So therefore, you are more important than your pay would indicate.

The necessity of a great deal of theory similarly comes in for a critique. Many think there is an overemphasis on theory, an overemphasis that manages to make what is actually straightforward, confusing.

> I think you need more hands-on learning. That class is all textbook and people coming to talk to you about finances, but you don't really get right down to how they work.

> I know a couple of friends of mine have their own businesses and they figure what I'm doing now is far above what you need to do bookkeeping in their office. Most of it is quite simple and straightforward. You get into . . . things here . . . that you wouldn't ordinarily need.

The students are not anxious to engage in a lot of academic work that does not seem directly relevant to their jobs. They operate with a fairly restricted idea of what they will need to know — type a letter, do rudimentary bookkeeping. They use their experiences and the experiences of their friends to decide whether all the "theory" is necessary and they frequently decide it is not.

The workload, too, justified for its emphasis on the high quality of performance that was expected of a clerical worker, often led to frustration and rejection of its importance. Typing speed as measured during timed tests and rigid due dates for assignments bothered many students. Students saw the pressure as a problem produced by the college, not the workplace.

> There's just too much pressure. If you need the extra time, and some people need it, they're really stingy about it. I mean if you're paying for it, who cares? Let them have . . . an extra week if they need it . . . . Because once you've failed something, you can't go on anymore.

> You're only given a certain amount to time, you know, to get up to a certain speed and so that's what makes it hard. It's not so much that it's hard to do but it's the time pressure that's really hard to handle.

There are, then, those who resist inflated notions of what clerical work involves, and a curriculum based on it. But the resistance is more likely to be directed at specific classroom practices that become too difficult — a test, an unclear explanation of computers, too many essays — than at the general notion of clerical work that underpins the decisions about appropriate curriculum. The resistance, while it clearly exists and is articulated privately, does not change the instructors' versions of what it means to learn to be a clerical worker.

Conclusion

In this paper we have looked at the ways in which clerical work is construed by women enrolled in office work training programs. They believe clerical jobs are

basically good jobs, they believe they need more knowledge and skill to perform them adequately, and they see the work as responsible, "skilled.". At the same time they are aware of the lack of recognition and value placed on the work, and they are trying to escape the many "bad" clerical jobs they know exist. We have also examined how the curricula of the training programs present students with images of clerical work as an occupation that is worthy of considerable respect. Central to this curricular focus are the notions of "professionalism," the importance of theory, and an emphasis on high levels of production.

Many students embrace the highly skilled versions of clerical work that are communicated to them. Going to school, in whatever form, communicates the acquisition of skill. During interviews the students emphasized the role of theory underlying practice, the need to be able to make informed judgements in the workplace, and the importance of developing an awareness of organizational goals. The curriculum reinforces in students a pride in their work, and a measure of prestige for the job for which they are training. It was summed up by one student who said,

> I've got a lot of background . . . . I've taken a lot of courses. I've done all the typing I could take everything . . . . So I was never not proud of being a secretary, I always liked it. So I thought whatever anyone thinks, I like it . . .

Yet many of the expectations communicated by the notion of professionalism are contradicted by the reality of clerical jobs where skills are not recognized and respected, and not paid for. Career advancement, autonomy in one's work, and recognition of the importance of clerical work, does not exist in the workplaces most of them have experienced and heard about. Clerical work is not considered to be a very skilled job, and clerical workers are underpaid for the level of education they have.

The contradiction raises a number of important questions. How do students who have been through training programs such as the ones described in this study resolve the contradictions they find? Many return for more training in an attempt to gain further recognition for themselves in the workplace and better their chances for career development. This individualized response buys into the dominant ideology: study, work hard, get ahead. It assumes that skills will be recognized in the workplace, and will ensure individual, if not collective, advancement.

Women who remain in clerical positions, however, will confront the limitations of this approach. Gender segregated labor markets where women's skills are undervalued and underrecognized give lie to promises of upward mobility and individual merit. Women confront structural barriers that prevent the recognition of their skills at work, however much they are stressed in training. To have skills publically recognized involves political struggles around the organization of the occupation rather than, or at least as well as, individual acquisition of skills.

The training program, while trying to enhance the status of clerical work within a traditional framework that assumes a skill is fairly unproblematically a

skill, and that it will be publicly recognized if it is stressed in training, did little to contribute to a new way of looking at the occupation. It did not instill in these women the idea that they would have to fight to have their skills recognized. The program was based on the quite different assumption that skills were the basis of occupational prestige and power.

But in emphasizing pride and knowledge in work, such training may provide a basis for women to begin to demand that others also recognize what they have achieved. Only when they start with a secure sense of the importance of their work are they able to demand that that sense be more widely shared and more concretely expressed. Although the training programs' emphasis on skill acquisition misleadingly represents the world of work, it does not simply reproduce the deskilled versions of the work that are common among managers, and can therefore be made reality. Here we have a basis for struggle, a way of understanding skills that can come into conflict with attempts to downgrade it.

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