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Pioneering Manual Tradeswomen Talk about their Work and Lives

Louisa Smith
University of Wollongong, louisas@uow.edu.au

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Abstract
This section draws on fifteen life history interviews with women who worked in manual trades in Australia during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Their life stories suggest that, while they did not consciously set out to create social change, they are leaders because they were pioneers in male-dominated occupations. I will explore some of the strategies these women employed to negotiate the pleasures and costs of their pioneer status, as well as the contradictions they experienced in workplaces that had the potential to be both enjoyable and hostile.

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THEME

Pioneering Manual Tradeswomen Talk about their Work and Lives

Non-Traditional Trade Employment

Written by Louisa Smith, The University of Sydney

This section draws on fifteen life history interviews with women who worked in manual trades in Australia during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Their life stories suggest that, while they did not consciously set out to create social change, they are leaders because they were pioneers in male-dominated occupations. I will explore some of the strategies these women employed to negotiate the pleasures and costs of their pioneer status, as well as the contradictions they experienced in workplaces that had the potential to be both enjoyable and hostile.

One of the ways that male-dominated trades have excluded women is through their association with the physical strength, skill and violence usually yoked to the male body. Despite the fact that the physical demands of trades are often used to justify women’s exclusion from them, all of the interviewed tradeswomen recalled that they loved working with their bodies. This pleasure in the physicality of work became central to the participants’ discussions of it. However, while all of the participants enjoyed using their bodies, the nature of this enjoyment differed according to the social conditions that led each of them to become a tradesperson.

For a number of the women, the physicality of their work in trades became crucial to their sense of worth. This was particularly the case for three women who claimed working-class backgrounds. For these women, the most highly valued work in their childhood households had been the physical work of their male relatives as miners, fishermen and tradesmen. This legacy became central to their identities. For Kate, this was manifested in a keen sense that she had to make a physical contribution to the world:
'If I am not doing things, my spirit does die. You know, I need to be, you know, even if I am not feeling fantastic. I am always, like, drawing or, you know, looking up a new way of doing a design or something like that. I don't sit ... I am a doer. I just do things ... No, I can't live without it. Not me, no way.'

For Kate, not being able to engage in the world physically was akin to dying (‘I can’t live without it’) and her trade was central to her sense of being (‘I am a doer’), her spirit, her life and her livelihood. Ironically, the women who saw such occupations as essential to their self identity were also aware that this kind of work was difficult to sustain as they became older or faced health crises. Kate's identity hinged on her relationship with a form of work that was, by its nature, precarious.

Unlike Kate who valued the body's capacity to get things done, other women, particularly those who had been exposed to feminist thinking, found that the importance of physical work came to be about knowing how to use the body to get things done. Feminism had given these women an intellectual and political framework through which to see their bodies in relation to others and to work. For these tradeswomen, it was not only the physicality that was important but the fact that the physicality required skills and knowledge that had in the past been reserved for men. These tradeswomen enjoyed learning how to use their bodies competently. Maxine, a mechanic in the 1970s and 80s, explained that for her there was ‘a kind of exuberance in knowing how to use your body well’. The pleasure was amplified for these women by the recognition that what they were doing was gender anomalous and therefore political. For Maxine, ‘the pleasure is twofold. There is the initial pleasure of learning how to use your body well and then the resultant pleasure of this being a political action and revelation of the arbitrary and false demarcations of gender division’. Through being a mechanic, Maxine's politics became embodied. As her body became physically engaged and skilled in trade work, it also became a political symbol.

When tradeswomen demystified the physical and intellectual challenges of trade work, they often attributed their success to their attitude rather than their strength or skill. When Zadie was asked about the physical demands of carpentry, she replied ‘it's just an attitude’, thus drawing attention away from the physical body and instead emphasising her creative approach to physical problems:

'An attitude of being able to do things. You know, so nothing is too overwhelming and if you're five foot two and you're building a house, that you always know how to work out how to get that beam up or when you have to ask for help and it's never about being unconfident in any way. It's always about being competent and confident in your strengths and your abilities. If not to have the actual strength then to be clever enough to work out a system that would make something happen which would probably be more sensible anyway and easier on everyone's backs and all that kind of stuff.'
So the physical body was not powerful in itself; it was powerful because of the perspective with which the women concerned approached the physical world. Physical strength was not as powerful as strength of will and confidence.

This separation of physical strength from competence in the work of manual trades was one way in which women became leaders within their field. Without being encumbered by the social pressures of being a 'macho bloke', many of the women found that they managed the physical aspects of their work more safely than their male workmates, an approach often referred to as 'working smart'. Women would set up pulleys, find wheelbarrows or think through and plan before moving something. This had significant implications for the bodies of all workers, for the development of more thoughtful and safer approaches to physical problems meant that the execution of the work relied less on physical strength and its accompanying risks. A number of the women I interviewed said that they were known for this approach and tradesmen often respected and enjoyed working with them for this reason. Lisa recalled being particularly proud when one of her TAFE teachers reminded the other carpentry apprentices that, without women entering trades, workplaces would not be as safe. While the teacher's assertion of a correlation between the presence of tradeswomen and safety may not be proven, it does indicate that women had come to symbolise safer work places and practices.

While gender had the potential to be a positive resource in trades, more commonly the entrenched masculine cultures made entering trades difficult for women. When they did manage to gain access, such women encountered difficulties in being acknowledged and recognised for their work, turning those tradeswomen who persevered into highly visible pioneers. While equal opportunity campaigns went some way to helping women get apprenticeships and enter trades, they found little support or mentoring once established in an apprenticeship. For three participants who embarked on apprenticeships during the period from the 1980s to 2010s, the sexism they experienced during their apprenticeships was so 'horrific' and their training so 'appalling' that they did not continue with their trade. Lisa, who was employed as a carpentry apprentice in 1980 at the age of seventeen, had a particularly traumatic experience. She was hired by a local council to fill a quota of women they needed, but, because work was allocated through informal networks, Lisa spent three years making toolboxes. She was also sexually harassed on a number of occasions. These unacceptable conditions were made worse by the fact that Lisa felt she had no recourse for complaint. Ironically, the men with whom Lisa worked were aware of the legalities concerning gendered discrimination and often quipped that Lisa could easily make a complaint. But Lisa knew this process would not have been easy. The union representative was one of the most sexist members of her work team and to approach other levels of management seemed overwhelming for a shy seventeen-year-old from the country. Instead, Lisa tried to be as 'inconspicuous as possible'; she became like 'Teflon'.

Another way that women dealt with these often unwelcoming masculine cultures was to start their own businesses. Sometimes such women became recognised as leaders in an area of their trade and, in their businesses, their gender often became an important resource. The two carpenters and two cabinet makers I interviewed who were self-employed discussed how their focus on
domestic construction resulted in most of their clients being women. Women clients often preferred to have a tradeswoman in their home, and thought that a woman would better understand their needs in a domestic environment. For their part, the tradeswomen who were mothers were able to adapt their business hours to fit around their parenting obligations, for example, by moving from commercial construction to domestic cabinet making. For these women, the self-employed nature of their trades work allowed them the flexibility that parenting demanded.

Despite their accomplishments in their trades and businesses, these women still found that their skills were subjected to doubt and testing. A number of women described men at lumberyards or hardware shops trying to explain something to them that they already knew or attempting sell them something substandard or inappropriate. Having suffered repeatedly from lack of recognition as a builder on the worksite, Zadie had t-shirts made that said, 'I'm the builder, Who are you?' The declaration of identity combined with the interrogative switched the power dynamic, and made the woman builder recognisable and everybody else the mystery.

Women who entered manual trades over the last thirty years constituted a tiny minority in workplaces that mostly remained defined by a particularly rough masculinity. Being a lone woman in a male-dominated workplace sometimes meant that women faced hostility and harassment, and their work often went unrecognised. Depending on their age and their cultural, political and educational resources, tradeswomen dealt with the challenges in different ways. Some tried to become invisible in the workplace, some quit the trade altogether, and others made themselves highly visible. At other times, their pioneer status meant that gender could be a useful resource at work. Being female and outside of the normative work culture meant that women could separate the work of trades from the work of masculinity. This meant, as we have seen, that they often worked differently and sometimes led their workplaces in taking on 'smarter' and safer work practices. It is clear is that none of the women I interviewed experienced being a tradesperson in a way that was unmarked by their gender. While the term 'tradesperson' may have entered the lexicon of political correctness, its use cannot conceal the fact that when the person in the trade is a woman she stands out, is noticed and therefore has no choice but to engage with the work differently.

**Related Themes**

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