

# Conceptions of Skill and the Work of Women: Some Historical and Political Issues<sup>1</sup>

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Assumptions about what constitutes “skilled” and “unskilled” work have been fundamental to the division of labour in the workplace, to ideological divisions within the working class and to academic and policy discussion about the labour force. The terms have been important in the ways workers and employers describe and understand differences among workers. They have been adopted by academics and policy makers seeking to understand labour markets and the nature of work. Their use is based on the common understanding that skilled workers have more to offer their employers, and thus rightfully enjoy higher esteem, and a better bargaining position in relation to management and other workers. Recently the terms have taken on added importance in Canada, as the state has argued that a shortage of “skilled” workers constitutes a major problem for the economy even in a time of general unemployment (Dodge, 1981; Betcherman, 1981). This definition of the problem suggests a reallocation of resources towards attracting and training skilled workers, while the unskilled are left to fend for themselves.

Women are rarely considered to be skilled workers. One can find constant references to women’s lack of skills in the research literature. Studies of the socialization and education of girls are often premised on the assumption that we need to understand the ways in which girls become deskilled—learning the attitudes (passivity, fear of success) and intellectual styles (docility, dependence) which fit them for less skilled areas of work (Horner, 1970; Levy, 1972). Studies in the human capital tradition explore how women’s lower earnings at work are explained by their lack of “human capital” i.e. relevant work skills (Becker, 1964). In this tradition, Polachek (1975, 1976) characterizes female occupations as “requiring lesser amounts of training” and “menial.”

Even theorists who are explicitly feminist and/or Marxist characterize women’s jobs as demanding less skill. Women “are still overwhelmingly slotted into specific industries and occupations characterized by low pay, low skill requirements, low productivity and low prospects for advancement” (Armstrong, 1978: 16).



*TIME LINE #1*, Sarah Gersovitz, coloured pencil on mylar, 18" x 30," 1982

“Women are paid less even for the same job. They usually get less skilled jobs. They are given proportionally less responsibility in the hierarchy, and they are the last hired and first fired.” (Castells, 1980: 191). Wolpe (1978) describes women “clustering at the lowest levels of the occupational hierarchy, in terms of both pay and skills (p. 294).”

A more careful analysis of the jobs women do reveals that these claims are entirely too facile. We usually take schooling as an important index of “skill” but women in the labour force are more educated on the average than men in the labour force. (Picot, 1980; Gaskell, 1982). Boyd (1981), in Canada, and Wolf and Rosenfeld (1978), in the U.S., have shown that on indices of occupational status, women do not appear disadvantaged in relation to men. Englund (1982) shows that jobs in which women predominate require as much formal schooling and as much “cognitive complexity” as the jobs in which men predominate. Indeed, she concludes, based on the official government ratings in the *American Dictionary of Occupations*, that “females actually have an advantageous occupational skill distribution on balance.”

This analysis is immensely valuable in showing that the problem for women is not in their skills, but in the way these skills are rewarded. With the same education and skills as a man, a woman gets paid less. Occupations which employ a large number of women pay less for the same skills than occupations which employ a large number of men (Oppenheimer, 1970).

But the argument about skill can be taken in another direction, to explore how the assumption that women are unskilled has come to be so widely shared. Most discussions proceed as if skill were an easily identified and quantified characteristic of a job, like pay and prospects for advancement. But skill is a socially constructed category and we need to inquire about how it is constructed. What counts as a “skill” and why?

The ability to manage social interaction, the ability to put up with routine tasks, the ability to analyze problems or the possession of a particular kind of credential? Different things may count in different circumstances. Different people will count different things.

In this paper it will be argued that managing skill definitions is a political process, one that organized workers engage in continually. Women have been at a disadvantage in this process of managing skill definitions because they have not been represented by strong collective organizations. As a result, the notion of skilled work is used in a way that devalues the work women do. Understanding how this happens will provide women with more awareness of how to combat continuing attempts to downplay the skills involved in their work.

This paper will begin to look at these processes as they have influenced working class jobs. Others have explored how professional groups have engaged in similar political struggles, acting to monopolize access to, mystify and charge high prices for the skills they have (Collins, 1979). Women professionals have had less political power than their male counterparts, and the consequences for women can be explored. They include, arguably, the classification of women’s professional work as only “semiprofessional” (nursing, teaching, librarianship), the underrepresentation of women in the male professions, and the takeover of some areas of women’s work, notably midwifery, by more “skilled” professionals.

### Rethinking Skills

Some recent work has begun to challenge the taken for granted nature of skill labels. Braverman (1974) especially urged a rethinking of the way we accept official designations of what is skilled or unskilled work. He points out that, according to census categories, work today is considerably more skilled than work a century

ago because more people work with machines. But the reality behind the census classifications is considerably more complex. For instance, although the census classified drivers of motorized vehicles as skilled and drivers of horse-drawn vehicles as unskilled, Braverman comments,

Today, it would be more proper to regard those who are able to drive vehicles as unskilled in that respect at least, while those who can care for, harness and manage a team of horses are certainly the possessors of a marked and uncommon ability. There is certainly little reason to suppose that the ability to drive a motor vehicle is more demanding, requires longer training or habituation time, and thus represents a higher or intrinsically more rewarding skill (p. 430).

But having pointed out that the government classification system does not accurately describe skill levels, Braverman reverts to his own definition of skill as one that is accurate. He sees skills as “traditionally bound up with craft mastery,” and, as he indicated above, tied to training time and the “commonness” of skills. He assumes this definition is shared with his readers and validated by common sense. He does not want to pursue issues in the sociology of knowledge, being uneasy with definitions of skill that depend on “relativistic or contemporary notions,” (p. 430) especially as he sees “skilled” coming to mean “able to perform repetitive tasks with manual dexterity” a usage which is produced by changes in the organization of work and which he deplores. But his own concern with changing and wrongheaded notions of skill suggests the importance of enquiry into the processes involved in producing skill labels.

Some feminist work has also begun to question the connection between skill labels and the actual content of work. Margaret Mead has written, “One aspect of this social evaluation of differ-

ent types of labour is the differentiated prestige of men’s activities and women’s activities. Whatever men do—even if it is dressing dolls for religious ceremonies—is more prestigious than what women do and is treated as a higher achievement.” More recently, Phillips and Taylor (1980) have argued:

The classification of women’s jobs as unskilled and men’s jobs as skilled or semi-skilled frequently bears little relation to the actual amount of training or ability required for them. Skill definitions are saturated with sexual bias. The work of women is often deemed inferior simply because it is women who do it. Women workers carry into the workplace their status as subordinate individuals and this status comes to define the work they do (p. 79).

In this passage Phillips and Taylor see gender-distorting skill classification, much in the way that Braverman sees skill labels being distorted by capitalism. For Phillips and Taylor, the amount of training and “ability” required are legitimate bases for differentiating among skill levels. But what might be called, in social psychology, a “halo” effect acts to increase the status of men’s work, because men do it.

While this process surely occurs, Phillips and Taylor do not go far enough in exploring how the social construction of skill categories works against women. Ability itself is a socially defined concept. Which abilities count? It depends on who is using what criteria, which returns us to the original problem that employers do not value women’s abilities. Training time is also not a clear indicator of the difficulty of learning to do a job. How are we to determine the amount of training “necessary” to an “adequate” performance of a job? Rather, the length and form that training will take is decided through political and economic struggle. So what Phillips and Taylor take as potentially objective valuations of skill levels are themselves socially produced.

Barrett (1980) places her discussion of skill squarely in the context of political struggles between men and women under capitalism. "Women have frequently failed to establish recognition of the skills required by their work, and have consequently been in a weak bargaining position in a divided and internally competitive work force...we need to know precisely how and why some groups of workers succeed in establishing definitions of their work as skilled (p. 166)." By asking about the political processes responsible for skill labelling, she is pointing to the questions I will pursue here. She goes on to suggest that training requirements may be part, not of "real" skill requirements, but of the way skill categories are constructed. "Training and recruitment may be highly controlled and skill rendered inaccessible for the purposes of retaining the differentials and privilege of the labour aristocracy(p. 168)."

### Education and the Creation of Skill

It has been shown above that even those who point to the ideological content of skill ratings (Braverman, Phillips and Taylor) tend to rely on time spent in training as a legitimate way to differentiate between skilled and unskilled work. This is not the only criterion, but it is an important one. Time is a useful measure for administrators or social scientists trying to come up with ratings, as it can be turned into a number and used to compare things that are actually quite unlike. Time becomes a mode of exchange of value, like money, and it creates the same problem of "fetishizing the commodity," in Marx's terms, losing sight of what it actually represents and how it is produced. Thus time in training is turned into skill ratings, reifying skill into a unidimensional "thing."

This is the assumption built into the *Canadian Classification and Dictionary of Occupations (CCDO)*, which is the state's attempt to systematically "classify and define occupational activity in the world of work" (Canadian Govern-

ment, 1977). The skill level of a job in the *CCDO* is expressed partly in terms of general educational development (GED) and specific vocational preparation (SVP). GED measures the levels of numeracy, literacy, comprehension and reading skills necessary for performing a job. While this is not identical with the number of years of schooling required, it is "assumed to result from participation in the educational system." The SVP, which is highly correlated with the GED rating, is based on the "time necessary for acquiring specific skills." This is estimated from time in "vocational training, apprenticeship, in-plant and on-the-job training, as well as from experience in other occupations."

Taking training time as a sign of skill assumes that the length of training depends on the difficulty, complexity and breadth of understanding necessary for performing the work. There is a long tradition in the sociology of education that treats skill in just this way, as something accumulated through years of formal education. This view of skill has been used to explain why more educated workers are preferred by employers, paid more and enjoy lower unemployment rates. It underlies human capital theory, and the analysis of schooling as a "fair" mechanism for allocating jobs in the society (Becker, 1964; Parsons, 1959).

But many recent strands of the sociology of education have raised questions about this common scenario. Educational attainment may act as a "signal" or a "screen," without imparting any necessary skills (Spence, 1973). Some have argued that the skills learned at school have very little importance on the job (Berg, 1970; Hall and Carlton, 1977). The time training takes can vary for the same job, and changes when the actual skills involved in the work do not. The training of teachers is an example. It has been suggested that what is learned in school is not any technical skill, but social orientation that employers prefer because they produce a quies-

cent workforce. (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Collins, 1979). As Collins summarizes his critique,

The great majority of all jobs can be learned through practice by any literate person. The number of esoteric specialties "requiring" unusually extensive training or skills is relatively small. The "system" does not "need" or "demand" a certain kind of performance; it "needs" what it gets, because "it" is nothing more than a slip shod way of talking about the way things happen to be at the time. How hard people work, and with what dexterity and cleverness, depends on how much other people can require them to do, and on how much they can dominate other people (p. 54).

In other words, the correspondence between schooling and work need not be very strong, and certainly does not need to be based on "skill." While there undoubtedly are instances where training does develop necessary skills, this must not be assumed to be the case.

Secondly, the notion that education serves the employer in some straightforward way has been increasingly questioned. It is more useful to see educational institutions and the state in general as a site of class struggle than as a mechanical reflection of what employers want (Cathcart, Esland and Johnson, 1981; Apple, 1982). Employers will have more resources, power, and access to decision-making than most other groups, but education does have some independence, and other groups are able to exert some influence. This has produced innumerable struggles over what will be in the curriculum, when and how it will be taught, and what will be left in the hands of parents or employers or unions. The form that specific skill training and vocational education will take has been one of the major areas of this struggle, within the public school system as well as in the workplace and in state-run training programs.

To summarize, although length of training is taken as a sign of the skill level of a job, there is no necessary relation between the time spent in school and level of difficulty of the work. Many political factors influence the length and kind of training. Research has often shown little relationship between the skills workers use at work and what they learned in school. Schooling and forms of training can, however, have a material impact on the operation of labour markets by influencing the supply of workers and the way that qualified workers are recognized—both legally through licensing and more informally in personnel practices. For this reason there has been considerable contention over what forms training will take, and what kinds of skills are recognized and regulated.

The usefulness of this framework can be illustrated by looking briefly at the way craft unions have struggled over kinds of training to maintain definitions of their work as skilled. This paper will then consider clerical workers to see how they have been unable to win similar battles, and how the organization of training there contributes to the work's "unskilled" character. This is a very preliminary overview, but will suggest a new set of questions about skill, and work, and education, which need to be addressed by further research.

### **The "Skilled" Trades**

In most employment documents and sociological texts, as well as among most workers, a "skilled" labourer is equivalent to an artisan, a craftsman who performs a licensed trade. The sign of a skilled labourer rather than a semi-skilled or unskilled one is the existence of an apprenticeship which leads to licensing. Which trades are apprenticed, and exactly what an apprenticeship involves, varies from country to country (Reubens, 1978), but in North America apprenticeships are reserved for relatively few trades and involve a period of three to six years of on-the-job training while the trainee is employed

at less than a full journeyman's wage (Dymond, 1973).

This form of training is rarely applied to the work women do. There are only a few trades where women are represented—hairdressing and cooking being the main ones. A 1978 study showed 3% of the participants in apprenticeship programs in Canada were female (Zimmerman, 1981). Mitchell (1979) found that 7.5% of all participants in apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programs in B.C. were women. Briggs (1974) has pointed out that “of the multitude of potentially apprenticeable jobs and occupations...those that have been recognized and approved for formal apprenticeships had with only one or two outstanding exceptions happened to fall in the traditionally male occupational category.”

How does this “happen?” The previous section of this paper argues that we can look for the reasons in the history of political struggles over apprenticeship, rather than simply in characteristics of the work performed. Briggs herself argues that job descriptions show few skill differences between apprenticed and much non-apprenticed and female work, even when official skill ratings systematically underrate the skills involved in women's work.

Apprenticeships have their origin in the practices of the medieval guilds or “mysteries” as they were sometimes called. The name “mystery” emphasizes the special and complex nature of craft knowledge, and the long process of apprenticeship that was necessary to learn it adequately. Apprenticeships have always been subject to political struggle between labour and capital. Apprenticeships were made a universal and compulsory form of job training in Britain in 1563 through an act of parliament.

It shall not be lawful to any person...to exercise any craft now used within the realm of England or Wales, except he shall

have been brought up therein seven years at the least as an apprentice (Rule, 1981).

In fact, these regulations seem to have been mostly applied to men and male work although a few women's trades (e.g. millinery) were well organized. Women's work in the home meant that most women learned the arts of textile manufacture, sewing, food processing, cleaning, and, to a certain extent, trading (Hartman, 1979). This made it difficult to monopolize the skills, to create “mysteries.” Women also worked in trades that were carried on as family industries with the male as head and journeyman, so that they picked up the necessary skills without being formally apprenticed (Foner, 1980).

It is unlikely that even in male trades, the apprenticeship law was applied very strictly, except where the power of the crafts was great enough to ensure it. However, the law acted as a symbol of the legitimate claims of the craft unions to control entry and training into work. The repeal of the act in 1814 followed a prolonged struggle between organized skilled labour and manufacturing employers seeking a free labour force (Rule, 1981).

The discussion at the time sounds remarkably similar to contemporary discussions of training requirements (More, 1980: ch. 3; Rule, 1981: ch. 4; Thompson, 1963: 278-280). At a time when new technologies were altering jobs in the workplace and employers feared that the working classes represented a growing and serious threat, apprenticeship regulations came under attack. Much evidence was produced to show that far from teaching complex skills apprenticeships were a way of exploiting young labourers at low wages and creating artificial shortages of workers. Adam Smith maintained that any trade, even a skilled one like watch-making, could be learned in a matter of weeks. The craft unions fought the repeal of the law and attempted in many job specific job actions to enforce its provisions. Learning took place on the shop

floor through the precept and example of older workers, and the artisans considered the knowledge involved their property, not to be taken from them by the state or the employer. Apprenticeships served to limit the supply of labour, to stop wages being undercut by non-union members, and to enhance the status and skill of the journeyman.

During the nineteenth century some trades were still able to consolidate their position enough to limit, regulate and enforce apprenticeships. There is a continuing record of work stoppages and other forms of job action over apprenticeship provisions into the twentieth century (Thompson, 1963; Palmer, 1979; Keigley, 1980; More, 1980). They represent a continuing attempt by workers whose skills were still officially recognized to retain their power in the labour market in the face of continued reorganization of production that threatened to displace them.

Only where working people were able to establish powerful trade societies, as in the case of male mule-spinners and the engineers, could a lengthy apprenticeship be enforced (Lewenhak, 1977).

Men were better organized than women to resist attacks on apprenticeships. In their struggles to maintain their skilled status, their power, and their wages, the craft unions excluded women workers from training and from union membership. This was done not simply because of prejudice, but because women could be paid lower wages and used to undermine the union's position (Foner, 1980).

Women were then used by employers as strikebreakers. The fact that untrained women were used by employers to replace male workers suggests that the skill necessary for work could still be picked up more casually than through a formal apprenticeship. The apprenticeship served to control the supply of labour and to

mystify the skills involved as much as it served to teach skills. The enforcement of apprenticeship regulations and the exclusion of women became tactics to preserve the skilled status of jobs under attack. The consequence was that women were pushed into areas of employment that did not demand an apprenticeship.

There has been much debate in the literature on apprenticeship as to whether it imparts necessary skills to workers or whether it is simply, as Lee (1981) puts it, "a period of ritual servitude designed to reinforce exclusive unionism." From James Howell (1877) and the Webbs (1920) to more recent critics (Williams, 1957; Liepman, 1960; Gleason and Mardle, 1981), commentators have argued that apprenticeships do not in fact teach much that is necessary for doing the job. Others (More, 1980; Less, 1981; Ryrie and Wier, 1978) argue that this is at least overgeneralized, and that important skills are picked up through apprenticeships and are used on the job.

Whatever its training functions, it is clear that where apprenticeships exist they are an important institution in the labour market, regulating entry into some jobs. The important point is that the training has remained in a form that controls entry by demanding that trainees be hired by an employer who is willing to sponsor and subsidize their training on the assumption that the worker will be an ongoing part of the organization of production. That this form of training has been preserved, and has not been turned into either specific skill training modules on the job, or generalized technical training in the high school or community college, is due to continuing union pressure, an ability to import trained workers from abroad, and employers' willingness to undertake training for some men who, they assume, will stay on the job. However, it is clear that the number of apprenticeships is still declining (Ricketts, 1980; Dymond, 1973).

Clement's (1981) study of hard rock mining in Canada describes a contemporary Canadian example of the continuing struggle over apprenticeship. As technology has changed in mining, management has reorganized work in a way that de-skills it. Management has also replaced traditional training with a company controlled modular training program that teaches the particular processes necessary to operate particular machines, but provides no overall understanding of the mining process or the variety of technological processes involved. The union has responded by trying to introduce the "miner-as-a-trade" program, which would certify mining apprentices and require a three year period of apprenticeship with eight weeks a year in school in addition to the time spent working in specific areas. This is an attempt by the union to counteract the de-skilling strategy of management. The union has had limited success persuading the government and management to recognize the program, although in Manitoba, the NDP government did so and the mining company was forced to participate.

At present, the Canadian government is officially concerned about a shortage of "skills," especially the availability of people in licensed trades (Betcherman, 1980; Dodge, 1981). This is signalling new attention to processes of training in the trades, a new training act, and a new assault on apprenticeships. Ways of increasing the supply of labour and circumventing training requirements increase when there is a labour shortage. We can expect new initiatives in the area of training for craft work. Some of the signs of this can already be seen. New research on generic skills in the trades has been funded by the Canadian Department of Employment and Immigration in an attempt to examine the transferability of skills among occupations (Smith, 1981). This is undertaken with the explicit purpose of reorganizing training, and developing a comprehensive curriculum based in the high schools and the community colleges. Pre-apprenticeships are being introduced in the high schools

in specific trades. A common core program for pre-apprenticeships in all trades is being introduced into B.C. community colleges. Employers complain about having to pay for training, and demand more government subsidies, while they criticize the traditional apprenticeship system as inefficient and failing to produce enough skilled workers (Ricketts, 1980).

The result is that the use of the apprenticeship as a way of controlling the supply of labour is continuing to slip away from the unions. A more open system based in the public schools and community colleges is developing. The unions' control of the content of training is also undermined. While unions have direct input into what courses will be offered in apprenticeship training, their control is weakened in the public school system.

It is not clear what the result of these changes will be for women. The traditional structure of apprenticeship did not result in much access to the trades for women. The demise of the apprenticeship system and the emphasis on general skills taught in educational institutions may open recruitment more widely and permit more women to at least compete for training places and employment. Women are more likely to be able to move into new areas of employment when these areas are expanding. On the other hand, some have argued that special initiatives for women, affirmative action programs, and the holding of a certain quota of training "seats" for women,—all of which have been tried recently in the trades—will disappear as training is reorganized. If women do gain more access to the trades as training becomes more widely available, shorter and therefore less valued, it will continue the tradition of women moving into new areas of work as they get designated as "unskilled." This is a process we can see by looking at clerical work.

## Clerical Work

The training for clerical work contrasts clearly with the training for licensed trades. Clerical work is quintessentially “women’s work.” In any bureaucracy, clerical workers are at the bottom. Their work is considered unskilled and routine and is paid accordingly. Career ladders for clerical workers are short, and end within clerical or secretarial work, not allowing a move into managerial or technical areas, which are considered skilled, and paid considerably more.

Clerical work in the nineteenth century, and earlier, was a male field, a skilled and small one. Clerical jobs were primarily managerial, allowing promotion into partnerships (Braverman, 1974; Lockwood, 1958). The training was similar to an apprenticeship. “Master craftsmen, such as bookkeepers or chief clerks, maintained control over the process in its totality, and apprentices or journeyman craftsmen—ordinary clerks, copying clerks, and office boys—learned their crafts in office apprenticeships, and in the ordinary course of events advanced through the levels by promotion” (Braverman, p. 299).

Around the turn of the century the typewriter was introduced and what Braverman calls the “factory office” began to appear. Clerical work expanded rapidly, and women entered the new jobs, which became increasingly cut off from promotion opportunities and seen as “unskilled.” In Canada, clerical work more than doubled from 2% of the workforce in 1891 to 5% in 1901, and in 1911 almost doubled again to 9%. The percentage of women doing clerical work rose from 14% in 1891, to 22% in 1901 and 33% in 1911 (Lowe, 1980).

Mechanization afforded considerable socio-economic status and craft-like work to a select group of female clerks. Early stenographers closely approximated the ideal of craft work, as evident in the range of their

skills and their greater mastery and control over the work process (Lowe, p. 377).

To begin with, stenographers were able to translate this into high wages. However, employers were able to reorganize work so that skills were fragmented and typing pools were created. Private business schools opened. Clerical training became part of the high school curriculum. The skills of the stenographer flooded the market, and the work lost its “skilled” status rapidly. Wages and promotion opportunities declined.

The striking thing about the training for office work today is that it is widely available in many settings, most importantly in the public high schools. Commercial courses in the high school have a unique status in relationship to the labour market. They are seen as job training much more directly than any other part of the high school curriculum. They specifically include typing, shorthand and office machines: technical skills with little traditional academic content. They include social skills in courses like office practice and work experience, as well as academic skills in English and communications courses. Course descriptions make no bones about their vocational goals—“as many types of written language projects as are relevant to office work will be included,” “should be capable of handling books in a small business firm,” “qualifies a student for a high-standard secretarial position” (Gaskell, 1981), and teachers are explicit in their concern for job-related social skills—being feminine, dressing well and handling an interview (Valli, 1982).

Taking these courses is important in securing a secretarial job. Typing and shorthand particularly are skills which cannot be picked up in a matter of weeks on the job, which can be learned at school, and which are likely to be tested during a job interview. As clerical work employed 47% of females with a high school education in 1971, these courses take on an enormous importance for girls who are not planning to continue

post-secondary education, and they are seen as an occupational safety net even for girls who do plan to go to college. The courses have relatively low status in the school; good students are encouraged to stay in the more academic courses. Hall and Carlton (1977) have suggested that clerical work is the only type of job obtained by a significant number of high school graduates that demands significant technical skills. They arrive at this conclusion by asking employers whether their employees have the skills necessary for their work. Only the employers of clerical workers want their employees to know more.

Why then is training for clerical work incorporated into the high school curriculum when training for other types of work is added on after high school, on the job or in post-secondary education? The forms of training which we now take for granted were historically constructed. The incorporation of vocational education courses into the public high school was subject to negotiation between employers, labour, and educators (Harp, 1980; Schechter, 1977; Dunn, 1979, 1980; Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Progressive educational reformers argued that the academic curriculum was elitist, and needed to be adapted to the needs of working class children. They argued that vocational courses would provide skills to make pupils more productive and well paid workers, and would mesh schooling with the economy to make it a more socially efficient institution.

Employers saw vocational education as a means of breaking workers' control over skills training. Bowles and Gintis quote the National Association of Manufacturers, "It is plain to see that trade schools properly protected from the domination and withering blight of organized labor are the one and only remedy for the present intolerable conditions" (p. 193). Rogers and Tyack (1982) describe business' response as a "noisy, ambitious campaign to insert training for jobs into schools (p. 282)."

Labour was split on the wisdom of more vocational schooling in the public domain, wanting to use it to increase the skills of workers and their access to advancement, but fearing management motives. While the Trades and Labour Congress declared itself in complete sympathy with the recommendations of the Canadian Royal Commission on Technical Education in 1913, working class testimony in 1891 opposed more technical education in schools on the grounds that it would lead to a congested labour market and teach skills imperfectly (Schechter, 1977).

While the introduction of industrial education, home economics and business education into the public schools did occur in the early twentieth century, this "victory" obscures the fact that there were differences in the forms of training that were introduced, and in their relation to getting a job. As we have seen, some apprenticeships continued outside the school, and school-based industrial training was not producing students qualified for skilled industrial jobs. Only in business education did the training for craft-like skills come to be lodged in public schooling.

Studies of the specifics of business education are much less numerous than studies that inquire more broadly into what is called vocational education, so conjecture about the differences exists in something of a vacuum. Weiss (1978) suggests that business education courses were brought into the school in an attempt to increase enrollments, especially of boys who were attending the flourishing private business schools. This explanation seems to correctly reflect the public discussion in schools at the time, and it has been offered for other forms of vocational courses, but it leaves various factors, especially related to the developing organization of work, unanswered. As Poss (1981) and Rogers and Tyack (1982) point out, schools in the late nineteenth century were already serving to train students for jobs in business.

Youths who gambled on clerkships as the entry point could gain a good deal of specific vocational training from the schools, at least as far as penmanship and ciphering. By the end of the century and in still greater numbers, young, urban, native born women could capitalize on the same instruction to work their way through schools into the expanding secretarial and commercial positions opened to women (Rogers and Tyack, p. 274).

The existence and organization of the private business schools was itself noteworthy, when we compare it with, for example, the organization of training for mechanics. The training was provided off the job, was not subsidized by employers and was open to anyone willing to pay the fee. Why did the training develop in this form outside the public school, a form which allowed it to be incorporated into the school relatively easily?

The organization of clerical workers appears to be a critical variable. They were not unionized and were not able to collectively organize to control access to the job at a time when the need for labour was rapidly expanding. Moreover, as clerical work became increasingly feminized, employers were reluctant to invest in on-the-job training, seeing women as temporary workers, with short working lives, in whom investment would be wasted. Thus the resistance of workers was less and the push for subsidized training by employers was greater. As a result, clerical training was available for public school educators to take over, while real training for the male crafts eluded their grasp.

Clerical training is still not confined to the high school, important as its existence there is, but is widely available to anyone who wants to take a night course, a short day program at a private secretarial college, or a variety of courses at the community college level. The training is short and intensive. Entrance involves no nego-

tiations with a union or an employer, and few prerequisites, although a high school diploma may be required.

What results then is a large pool of labour, so identified with women that the assumption that all women can type becomes prevalent. Clerical skills become part of every women's skills, along with the ability to manage her personal appearance, support the men around her and handle interpersonal relations. The training does not appear scarce, long and arduous but easy, taken for granted (as long as you are female) and thus no skill at all.

The process shows signs of continuing with the introduction of computer technology into the office. It is reducing the number of clerical jobs and further truncating the career ladders available to clerical workers. Although new jobs involving work with computers are opening up, these are not being filled by women who were clerical workers, but by men with "more" and certainly different skills (Feldberg & Glen, 1980; Menzies, 1980).

The reasons for this are complex. Employers prefer to hire workers who already have the skills they need, instead of mounting the training at their own expense. This is particularly true if the workers are women. Employers then hire directly from the public schools, and streaming within the schools becomes critical for understanding why women do not have access to new technical and managerial jobs in offices. The curriculum guides for British Columbia's high schools illustrate how processes of streaming in the public schools are taking place. "Data processing" is being introduced into the commercial curriculum. In it, students learn to operate electronic equipment. The objectives of the courses are set out explicitly. For example, students will learn to "process data with a) edge notched cards, b) embossed plates, c) carbon paper." They will "prepare source documents for input" using a variety of techniques and they will learn to "use

a variety of input media and devices" (B.C. Dept. of Education, 1981). They are learning to feed the machine, which must involve some understanding of how the machine works, but their knowledge is officially minimal.

In the math department, however, "computer science" is offered. The name as well as the course description tell the difference. In this course, students learn to write programs using various computer languages, and discuss how the computer will affect society. They get defined as potential technical experts. The commercial teachers I have talked to see no reason for their students to take this course, as it does not provide skills an office worker will use.

Processes of gender differentiation are displayed in the placement of these courses. We know that girls drop out of mathematics much more quickly than boys, and grade eleven is the beginning of this process of differentiation. More boys than girls then will take the computer math courses. We also know that girls tend to take the office courses preparing clerical workers. More girls will take the "data processing" course. Instead of mounting courses that introduce all students equally to computers, courses are being implemented in a way that ensures differential access to knowledge for boys and girls.

The clerical worker is not being given training that allows her to understand the machines she works with, that would allow her to be a "skilled" worker or enter further training. Her training is defined in such a way that it is distinct from management training or computer training. It is not just the lower end of a continuum. It is a different "program." One cannot graduate from one to the other. Entering the commercial program rather than the academic program acts as a barrier to taking the courses necessary to be recognized as a manager or a computer technician. Students who take business courses do not have the prerequisites they need to get into university training in business administration or

computer science. Furthermore, the necessary training for advancement is not offered on the job, as employers prefer employees who have higher educational credentials, even when much of the training occurs on the job. The training process operates to give men without office experience the recognized attributes for advancement, while women's skills are downplayed.

### Conclusions and Implications

The time and form that training for a job takes are created through a process of political struggle between workers and capital. This paper has argued that some male workers have been able to retain relatively lengthy apprenticeships with restricted access while women in clerical work are trained in programs that are short and widely available. While one might argue that neither job is actually very difficult to learn, or that both are quite difficult, there is little basis for arguing that one is significantly more difficult to acquire than the other. The differences arise in the power of organized male workers, their ability to monopolize access to their skills and the unwillingness of employers to invest in training women.

These two examples have shown how training programs can help to create "skilled" workers through limiting access to jobs and institutionalizing and mystifying the "skills" involved. Women's unskilled status is produced at least in part by training that is widely accessible and formally short. Differences in what one needs to know to do the job are less important than differences in the ways this knowledge is transmitted and made available in the labour market. The way it is transmitted to new workers can vary and this process is a process of managing the image of skill as much as it is learning to do a job. To manage it successfully, you need power, and male craft unions have had more power than secretaries. Neither seems to be doing very well at the moment however. It is professional groups that have been most successful in this enterprise, and the traditional male professions have been

the most successful of all in both uniting access and mystifying their skills.

This analysis suggests that "skill" should not be seen as an independent variable, a fixed attribute of a job or a worker which will explain higher wages or unemployment, as it is in human capital theory or neoclassical economics. The "skilled" label instead stands for a political process in which some workers have more economic power than others. It is this power that allows them both to make the "skilled" label stick, and to demand higher wages, limit entry into the job and increase the stability of their employment. Skill will only be exchanged for wages if it represents resources that the workers have to get their way—i.e. if they are not easily replaceable, and if they are able to organize job action when it is necessary to preserve their position.

Women should not assume that when the state moves to increase the length of training, it will necessarily benefit women by increasing the employer's perception of their skill and the difficulty of access. Changes may occur because the existence of a surplus of workers makes it possible for employers to demand more for the same wages. For example, clerical workers with university degrees may be preferred by some employers, but job descriptions and wage rates remain the same. Even when it constitutes an attempt by an occupational group to upgrade the image of the work and limit access, the effect may be small. Daycare workers for example, are increasingly required to fulfill training and licensing requirements and this is supported by daycare workers who want to have their skills recognized, but their power to demand better wages is limited by the structure of financing for daycare.

This analysis suggests that we should not accept the notion that the only way to become a skilled worker is to do the jobs men do, the way men do them. Organizing to demand recognition

of the skills involved in women's labour is critical, using strategies like equal pay for work of equal value. Even with more programs designed to move women into what have been male areas of work, we can assume the workplace will remain largely segregated for a long time. One of the ways to increase the wages and improve working conditions for women is to demand recognition for the skills and jobs we have.

#### NOTES

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