

Skills

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The idea that skills are an objective measure typically associated with attributes that are rewarded by market mechanisms is a central argument in conventional economic analyses of the labour market. Skills are regarded as a measure or reflection of competence to perform a particular task or range of tasks, often acquired through education and training, but also by experience during one's working life. The notion of a skill may also encompass less clearly identifiable characteristics, such as the exercise of judgement or discretion, as well as what have been termed 'tacit' skills, such as emotional intelligence.

Skills may be generic or job-specific, and are associated with distinctions in the labour market. Thus, in the UK, it is common to distinguish between skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers. Indeed, this distinction is the basis for the definition of class positions in industrial economies, and is associated with moral worth. The unskilled – those without recognised credentials – tend to be the lowest paid, and often the least secure, in the labour market. Among their ranks are essential blue collar workers and public employees, from refuse collectors to street cleaners, without whom cities would not function efficiently, as well as what used to be termed 'factory hands'.

Skills such as judgement and organisational ability, even authority – the tacit skills that are important in the 'knowledge economy' – are more typically mapped onto high status forms of work, and so those who exhibit such traits are defined as highly skilled workers. As manual employment in manufacturing industries began to decline in advanced industrial economies from the early 1970s, a claim that older 'craft workers' were being deskilled by new technology (as computer-based technology replaced hot metal typesetting in the printing industry, for example) was advanced by Harry Braverman. A nostalgic sense of loss lay behind this claim and behind a related argument about the decline of regionally specific 'traditions of skill' that geographers had identified in post-war Britain – skilled metal workers in South Yorkshire, for example, or gifted women textile workers in Lancashire.

The most significant challenge to the notion that skill is an objective measure is found in feminist analyses of the labour process. In studies of the patterns of gender segregation in the labour market in both advanced industrial economies in the north and developing economies in the south, the connections between skill classifications, gender, and low pay have been made plain. Women in economies across the world find themselves undertaking

tasks that are classified as low-skilled, whether the 'caring' labour of childcare and care of the elderly, of nursing and primary school teaching, or working in shops, cafes and bars, providing 'service with a smile' in the USA, UK and other states, or the low-waged work in export processing zones, where women's 'nimble fingers' made them ideal workers for assembling transistors or the components of iPhones. In all these jobs, the 'natural' attributes of femininity – empathy, service, emotional literacy, dealing with bodily fluids and emissions, sewing, knitting and weaving – albeit on an industrial scale, make them ideal employees, and as these skills are seen as natural, rather than acquired by training or long experience in the labour market, then they were not well-remunerated. Decades ago, Jane Jenson (1989) captured this differentiation in her argument about 'the talents of women' compared to 'the skills of men', but recognition of women's skills in terms of higher pay still remains elusive. As labour market segmentation between men and women is so significant, policies such as equal pay for equal work have had little effect, as women often find it hard to find a male comparator when making a claim for equality. This has been recognised in the UK, for example, in a shift to legislation based on equal pay for equal value work, when it has been argued, for example, that the skills of a female cook match those of a male painter.

The argument that there is an association between skill, value, pay and gender that disadvantages women workers has become increasingly important in the growing dominance of service sector employment, where both the provider and purchaser of a service must be present in the exchange. What is known as interactive employment – undertaken by shop assistants, waiters, airline crew and personal trainers – has been termed 'emotional labour' or 'body work', to capture the significance of a labour market performance in which the service providers must be attentive to the feelings and demands of consumers. The embodied attributes of an employee, such as facial expression, accent, weight, age and skin colour, as well as deference, must be pleasing to customers so that they will return and repurchase services. By and large, a woman is the typical employee in these jobs.

The recognition that the definition of skill is not independent of the workers who perform different types of labour has been extended into a more general analysis that links gender, nationality, skin colour and migrant status to distinctions between workers on the basis of their 'skills'. Analyses of, for example, migrant Filipina women working as nurses in Canada have shown that stereotypical

assumptions about their docility and deference means that they are often excluded from the training programmes that lead to promotion. Women of colour are often tracked into inferior positions in the care sector on the assumption that they lack skills, and the training they receive often mirrors assumptions about their 'natural' capacity to care.

As a carer in a nursing home in Chicago once told an investigator, "I am not sure if they are training me to be a nursing assistant or a black woman."

References

Jenson, J. (1989) 'The Talents of Women, the Skills of Men', in S. Wood (ed.) *The Transformation of Work*, London: Unwin and Hyman.

