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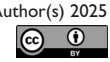

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Continuity and Change: The Employment Orientation of Contemporary Marginalised Working-Class Young Men

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Abstract

Youth unemployment is increasing and disproportionately affects marginalised working-class young men, a subgroup commonly associated with manual employment aspirations and protest masculinity. Despite the detrimental impact of youth unemployment on this demographic and recent research exploring their masculine identity, there remains a limited understanding of their current employment aspirations. Drawing on a qualitative study conducted in the South Wales Valleys, UK, this article seeks to fill the knowledge gap by examining the employment orientation of marginalised working-class young men. The findings reveal both continuity and change in the understanding of this subgroup's employment aspirations. Continuity includes a protest masculine-related rejection of certain service sector work and an attraction to manual employment influenced by familial socialisation. Change is observed through an interest in non-manual work, which for some participants appears to stem from what is described as a rupturing process, or significant social influences that destabilise working-class masculine modes of being.

Keywords

employment orientation, protest masculinity, service sector, working class

Introduction

The unemployment rate among young people is increasing (Francis-Devine et al., 2024), with marginalised young men being disproportionately affected (AVECO, 2012). Despite these challenging labour market conditions and recent insight into the evolving masculine identity of marginalised working-class young men (Gater, 2024), existing evidence

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concerning the employment orientation of this demographic is over a decade old (Ward, 2013). This evidence may be considered outdated, given that social class distinctions and working-class identities are subject to change (Ainsley, 2018; Evans, 2023). Consequently, the understanding of the employment orientation of contemporary marginalised working-class young men remains limited. It is crucial to update the evidence regarding the employment aspirations of this demographic to enhance their chances of securing stable and secure work (Department for Work & Pensions, HM Treasury, Department for Education, 2024; Welsh Government, 2021).

Addressing the knowledge gap, this article explores the employment orientation of a group of marginalised working-class young men aged 12–20 years from the South Wales Valleys, UK. The findings originate from an ethnographic study conducted in partnership with a youth centre organisation. The study investigated the post-school transition and masculine identity of a group of marginalised working-class young men. Their marginalised status is attributed to elevated levels of social and economic deprivation in their community, as well as disengagement from education. These factors diminish their life chances and increase the risk of long-term social exclusion (Blackman and Rogers, 2017).

Marginalised working-class young men have traditionally been associated with an attraction to manual jobs, influenced by social relations (Ashton and Field, 1976; Carter, 1966; Tolson, 1977) and the inheritance of a masculine identity (Willis, 1977), often termed working-class and/or protest masculinity (Connell, 1995). Protest masculinity is historically understood as a response to class deprivation and is defined as a 'marginalised masculinity, which picks up themes of hegemonic masculinity in the society at large but reworks them in a context of poverty' (Connell, 2005: 114). Characteristics often associated with protest masculinity include opposition to capitalist authority and control, sexism, homophobia, a disaffected relationship with education, manual labour and values such as toughness, along with an allure to dirt and danger (Connell, 1995; McDowell, 2003; McDowell et al., 2014; Sassatelli et al., 2009; Simpson, 2004).

However, rapid deindustrialisation since the 1970s has led to a decline in manual employment and an increase in service sector work. Despite this economic shift, post-industrial era research has continued identifying manual employment career aspirations among working-class youth in former industrial locales (see, for example, McDowell, 2003; Nayak, 2006; Nixon, 2009; Ward, 2015). This employment orientation often derives from the inheritance of working-class masculine characteristics (Walkerdine and Jiménez, 2012; Ward, 2015) and resistance to the emotional labour demands of service sector jobs (Hochschild, 1983). Such jobs typically require deference and docility, which have historically been perceived as incompatible with working-class masculinity (Connell, 1995; McDowell, 2003).

Nevertheless, studies have highlighted the involvement of working-class men in service-oriented roles and the strategies they employ to maintain their masculine identity (Bishop et al., 2009; Simpson, 2004). Additional research on service sector employment has demonstrated working-class men's ability to exhibit both hyper-masculine traits and traditionally feminine-associated characteristics such as civility, friendliness and servility (Søgaard and Krause-Jensen, 2020). Recent research has also documented the evolving nature of masculinity, including the notion of inclusive masculinity (Anderson,

2009). Somewhat alternatively to the characteristics associated with protest masculinity (see, for example, Gater, 2024), inclusive masculinity includes a rejection of homophobia, emotional openness and embracing activities once coded as feminine (Anderson and McCormack, 2018).

In the context of inclusive masculinity, Roberts (2018) presents an alternative viewpoint concerning the employment experiences of working-class young men. He argues that his study participants, referred to as the 'missing middle' or working-class young men who have not disengaged from school, in contrast to marginalised working-class young men with a disaffected relationship with education (Willis, 1977), no longer strictly conform to traditional standards of working-class masculinity. Instead, they demonstrate a more inclusive form of masculinity conducive to the emotional labour demands of service sector employment (Hochschild, 1983). Roberts's (2018) research underscores the evolving attitudes towards employment among working-class young men. However, it is important to emphasise that his study mainly centred on 'missing middle' individuals. Consequently, Roberts's findings prompt additional questions concerning the long-standing evidence regarding marginalised young men (Ward, 2013) and the extent to which shifting attitudes towards employment are evident within this demographic.

This article aims to contribute to the knowledge gap and respond to the research question: *What is the employment orientation of contemporary, marginalised working-class young men, and how is this view constructed?* The first of three findings sections in this article identifies the participants' partial or complete attraction to traditionally associated working-class forms of skilled manual employment (Ness, 2012; Thiel, 2007) and establishes a link to protest masculinity (Connell, 1995), while highlighting some deviation and an employment orientation other than manual work. The second section explores the factors that influence the young men's choice of employment, identifying familial socialisation or the intergenerational transmission of masculine modes of being (Walkerdine and Jiménez, 2012), often through prominent male figures (Tolson, 1977; Willis, 1977). However, among some participants, there appears to have been a potential rupture in the intergenerational transmission process, resulting in a destabilisation of working-class masculine modes of being and a shift towards employment preferences beyond manual labour. The final section evidences the young men's working-class masculine rejection of certain service sector work and their inability to engage in emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) and sedentary employment. These findings enhance the understanding of contemporary marginalised working-class young men's employment orientation, illustrating both continuity and change in employment attitudes while providing evidence to support efforts to address youth unemployment.

Literature review

Historical employment-related research on marginalised working-class young men has frequently identified a manual work orientation. For example, post-Second World War studies, including Willis's (1977) qualitative ethnographic research, identified a group of young men, referred to as 'the lads', who expressed a desire for manual work and a rejection of mental labour and 'pen-pushing' (Willis, 1977: 149), viewing such activities as effeminate and 'cissy' (Willis, 1977: 153). The lads' orientation towards manual labour

was attributed mainly to social influences, particularly male figures, including fathers, and the inheritance of a form of masculine identity that has become known as working-class and/or protest masculinity (Connell, 1995; Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2003).

The significance of family and community in socialisation is also identifiable in Carter's (1966) and Ashton and Field's (1976) studies. Carter (1966) identified three working-class family types: home-centred, aspiring and rough. Home-centred families are categorised as having middle-class aspirations, with husbands in skilled employment; children are encouraged to study, while factory and shop work is viewed unfavourably due to its associated low status. Aspiring working-class families are defined by fathers in semi- and unskilled manual employment, with children aspiring to the same jobs as their fathers. Defined by deprivation, the 'rough' category includes males in semi- and unskilled work and children who are prepared for 'dead-end' manual jobs as a result of their backgrounds influencing their attitudes towards work. Ashton and Field (1976) further identified impoverished, marginalised working-class young men living with parents in low-income jobs who reject meritocracy and pursue employment similar to that of their parents.

Overall, post-Second World War studies identify marginalised working-class young men who develop a manual employment orientation shaped by cultural and structural influences and masculine ways of being. This research pertains to a period of relatively high rates of industrial work, which enabled marginalised working-class young men to find manual jobs with reasonable ease (Roberts, 2020). However, these labour market conditions have undergone significant changes.

The 'Thatcherite Revolution' of the late 1970s (Nayak, 2003a: 149) and Conservative government policy informed by free market ideology led to a decline in manual jobs and a shift towards service sector employment. This employment shift lessened the need for male manual workers, who once dominated employment in heavy industries, while simultaneously stimulating growth in female labour participation. Service sector employment includes various forms of work, from well-paid, high-tech and professional occupations to low-status, insecure jobs (Ward, 2015). Therefore, unlike the Post-Second World War era, marginalised working-class young men face limited employment prospects in manufacturing and are, thus, more likely to find opportunities in service work (Roberts, 2020). Many interactive service sector job types require emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) and attributes including deference and docility (McDowell, 2003). As such, rather than being incidental, workers' identities are integral to the job (Leidner, 1991). Although recent studies have highlighted the growing participation of working-class men in service-oriented roles (Bishop et al., 2009; Simpson, 2004; Søgaard and Krause-Jensen, 2020), the traits of deference and docility are historically viewed as antithetical to normative protest masculinity (Connell, 1995) and the notion of 'stick[ing] up for yourself' (McDowell, 2003: 176). This section illustrates significant structural changes in the UK labour market and economy. Nonetheless, studies from the post-industrial period reveal some continuities and consistencies with post-Second World War school-to-work transitions research, while also identifying a notable disparity.

Some post-industrial era studies demonstrate a degree of continuity with Post-Second World War research. For instance, Williamson and Williamson's (1981) ethnographic study, conducted in 'Milltown' – a deprived suburb of a Welsh city – documents five

working-class young men aged 13 to 18 who are characterised by strong machismo, aggressive sexism, homophobia and aspirations for masculine jobs that involve 'hard graft', such as outdoor manual work. Similarly, a group of working-class young men with a 'prominent masculine legacy of manual labour [that] ran through their familial biographies' (Nayak, 2003b: 12) was identified in Nayak's (2003a, 2003b, 2006) research in Northeast England. These young men expressed an appreciation for skilled physical labour and a commitment to the traditional working-class masculine ideal of 'hard graft'.

McDowell's (2003) research on working-class young men identifies a legacy of manual labour and an attraction to typically masculine manual work. Despite significant changes in the labour market and some of the young men engaging in service sector work, McDowell (2003: 134) 'found little evidence . . . that the young men [were] . . . looking for work in the retail sector, in leisure or tourism or the hospitality industry'. Correspondingly, Nixon's (2006, 2009) research demonstrates low-skilled, poorly educated working-class men's rejection of anything other than male-dominated manual occupations, with socialisation and educational background serving as significant influencing factors (Andersson and Beckman, 2018).

Working-class young men resembling Willis's lads, who shared comparable attitudes towards employment, are identified in Ward's (2013, 2015) research in South Wales, UK. Ward argues that working-class masculinity served as the 'default reference point' for these young men (Ward, 2015: 96). However, some of the young men undertook service sector work, which may be viewed as contradictory, given their association with working-class masculinity (Connell, 1995). Yet, Ward surprisingly overlooks this disparity and fails to explore the experiences of the young men in service sector work.

Despite the shift from manual to service sector work, similar to the studies conducted in the post-Second World War era, research in the post-industrial period continues to identify a link between marginalised working-class young men and a preference for manual employment. This orientation largely stems from socialisation and the intergenerational transmission of perceptions about appropriate forms of masculine work (Roberts, 2018), as well as structural factors. However, these studies from the post-industrial period are over a decade old (Ward, 2013), and recent research by Roberts (2018) challenges established notions and presents an alternative perspective.

Roberts's (2018) research was conducted in Kent, UK, an area that formerly housed shipbuilding, mining and milling, which has since experienced significant societal development and a changing labour market structure. This includes a substantial increase in retail, leading to the area being ranked among the least deprived third of the UK (Roberts, 2011). The research explored the educational and employment experiences and formulation of masculinity of a group of working-class young men who were 'not the most marginalised . . . members of the working class' (Roberts, 2018: 4). Instead, it focused on the 'missing middle': 'those working-class men who, by virtue of being neither disengaged from school/work nor on a route to a "typically successful" adulthood characterised by a degree and a professional occupation'.

Dissimilar to prior research on working-class young men, which emphasises the significance of familial socialisation and a subsequent masculine attraction to manual employment (Nixon, 2009; Willis, 1977), Roberts (2018: 126) states that his missing middle study sample 'had not merely inherited older generations of men's dispositions

towards and understanding of appropriately masculine work'. Unlike Nixon's (2006, 2009) participants, Roberts argues that the working-class young men in his research were not tied to traditional predispositions; instead, they had developed an inclusive form of masculinity (Anderson, 2009) more in tune with the emotional demands of retail work. Roberts attributes the difference in his findings to the contemporary context of his study and 'young working-class men [who] are not hostage to the traditional predispositions held by their counterparts from previous generations' (Roberts, 2018: 121). While Roberts's results diverge from the established links between working-class young men and a preference for manual employment, the context of his research is significant. The sample included the missing middle and young men who were academically engaged, which is claimed to facilitate softer displays of masculinity (Nixon, 2018). This contrasts with marginalised working-class young men, who have been continually associated with disaffected relationships with education, attraction to manual employment and protest masculinity (Connell, 1995).

Roberts's explanation for his findings, which is partly based on the recency of his study, raises important questions about the existing understanding of the employment orientation of marginalised working-class young men, which has not been updated for over a decade (Ward, 2013). Given the increasing youth unemployment rate, which disproportionately impacts young males from disadvantaged backgrounds (AVECO, 2012; Francis-Devine et al., 2024), alongside a notable youth unemployment rate of 14.6% in the South Wales Valleys – approximately one-third higher than in areas like Cheshire, where the rate is 10.2% (Social Mobility Commission, 2024) – it is important to address this knowledge gap. The long-term adverse scarring effects of youth unemployment on health, well-being and life chances (Ralston et al., 2022) further emphasise the urgency. Updating the current understanding is crucial to improving the employment prospects of this subgroup and ensuring they have access to work that offers security and a fair income (Department for Work & Pensions, HM Treasury, Department for Education, 2024; Welsh Government, 2021). This article addresses the knowledge gap and highlights both commonality and dissimilarity in the existing understanding of this subgroup of working-class young men and their employment orientation. It highlights a certain attachment to manual labour, while also demonstrating a shift away from this type of work, which seems to arise from a rupturing process or the destabilisation of working-class masculine modes of being.

Contextual information and methodology

The findings presented below originate from a study conducted collaboratively with a youth centre. Research permission for this organisation was obtained by contacting the centre manager, who freely provided access, while the centre staff provided valuable assistance and advice on the research design. The study explored the post-school transition and masculine identity of a group of marginalised working-class young men. The youth centre associated with the research was located in a former coalfield community in the South Wales Valleys, UK, which had previously supported two coal mines that provided a significant source of employment. Owing to the area's geographic and economic isolation, it has failed to replace this earlier source of work. As such, it now ranks among

the most deprived regions in Wales, suffering from high levels of long-term sickness, low educational attainment and elevated rates of youth unemployment (Social Mobility Commission, 2024).

Cardiff University ethics committee approved the study based on participant anonymity. Verbal information about the study was provided to the participants, and they were given consent forms that included details about the research, such as how the data would be used, the questions that would be asked and their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Before data collection commenced, verbal and written consent for participation in the research was obtained from all participants, with those under 16 also providing consent from their parents or guardians.

The study included ethnography, which involved 120 hours of attendance at the youth centre, engaging in activities and conversations with the young people. This involvement allowed for participant observations within the youth centre and its immediate surroundings, assessing the participants' patterns of behaviour and actions (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The ethnographic method and engagement allowed me to establish a good rapport and a trusting relationship with several young men. Building on the established trust, I used purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) to select participants who would provide the most significant data, considering the research subject (Yin, 2015). Consequently, and due to limitations caused by COVID-19, the research primarily became a case study (Yin, 2012) involving a group of nine young men, whom I came to refer to as 'the Ladz': Stan (age 13), Tommy (age 14), Dan (age 16), Craig (age 12), Lewis (age 18), Billy (age 15), Ian (age 17), Cole (age 20) and Wesley (age 17). Although the rapport I established with the Ladz may have affected the information they shared (Berger, 2015), this was offset by researcher reflexivity (Attia and Edge, 2017) and my awareness of 'the role of the self in the creation of knowledge' (Berger, 2015: 220).

The group of young men studied was relatively representative of those who frequented the youth centre at the time of the research, exhibiting various levels of association with protest masculinity. Their associations included openly acknowledging a disaffected relationship with education, which led to classroom disruptions and physical or verbal confrontations with teachers. These issues were further exacerbated by learning difficulties and mental health problems, resulting in some of the young men being excluded from school. Such factors increased the likelihood of becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) (Ralston et al., 2022) and hindered their pursuit of further education and vocational training, which many preferred. Additionally, several of the young men were involved in criminal behaviour and exhibited violent tendencies.

The ethnographic methodological approach also involved semi-structured interviews. One interview was conducted with each participant, lasting approximately one hour, and all interviews were audio-recorded. Interviews with the Ladz took place while I played pool with them at the youth centre, as my ethnographic observations indicated that the pool room was a space where the young people seemed relaxed and open. While playing pool with the young men, I adopted a conversational interview approach and asked questions, including: What do you want to do for work? Why do you want to pursue that job? I probed the young men's responses and explored any unanticipated topics that emerged (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Generally, interviews were conducted individually; however, at the young men's request, a few interviews included two participants being interviewed

together. Visual methods were also incorporated into the interviews as a possible means of stimulating conversation and exploring various forms of employment. The young men were shown images of different job types and asked to identify the work depicted and share their thoughts on those roles. Some data from the visual methods provided limited complementary insights to the study and were subsequently excluded from the final research write-up.

The data underwent thematic analysis and was coded using complete coding, which involved identifying and labelling any relevant information in the entire dataset to address the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Sections of interest in the dataset were highlighted, and comments were added beside each section, explaining their relevance to the study and research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The principle of inclusivity was also adhered to, whereby any ambiguous data that could potentially address the research questions was coded as relevant (Braun and Clarke, 2013). After completing the coding of the data, the codes were compiled and key themes were identified that encapsulated significant aspects of the data related to the research questions while also reflecting consistent patterns and meanings within the dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The following findings section presents themes that capture something important about the data (Charmaz, 2010). The theme names are derived from data quotations.

Findings

Employment preference: 'Anything to do with building'

The initial exploration of the Ladz's employment orientation began with assessing their job preferences. The collated data revealed a partial or complete attraction to traditionally associated working-class manual employment, particularly construction work (Ness, 2012; Thiel, 2007). For instance, while playing pool with Craig, I inquired about the type of job he would like to pursue:

> The most job I would like in the world is a roofer or like a plumber. That is all I would like to do. No, actually, I wouldn't mind doing carpentry too. My uncle does it and earns loads of money. I want to do a job that I enjoy. I wouldn't want to do journalism or something like that because you've got to do loads of writing. [Fieldnotes]

At the time of the study, Ian was employed as a plumber's assistant. In response to the question 'Did you ever think about what kind of jobs you wanted to do when you were at school?', Ian replied:

> I wanted to be something productive, like doing something outside or anything to do with building or something. Carpentry, bricklaying or plumbing. I like to do stuff with my hands. That's why I like the work. I wouldn't want to be stuck in an office typing away, doing the same stuff over and over.

Ian's response highlights the importance of outdoor work. It also suggests that the job duties of skilled manual employment are considered creative, providing intrinsic rewards,

and points to the idea that 'practice is more important than theory' (Willis, 1977: 56). The significance of outdoor work and being active was also a feature of Cole's data:

> I love being outside. I would rather be outside than stuck in an office. It would drive me insane looking at the same four walls every day. I can't sit down. I'm out in all weathers – I don't mind getting dirty. I don't mind getting wet.

Ian and Cole's responses illustrate a traditional working-class commitment to manual, hands-on (Nixon, 2006) 'practical' forms of employment, along with an association with the masculine notion of dirty work (Slutskaya et al., 2016; Walkerdine and Jiménez, 2012). Furthermore, the young men naturally differentiate between manual labour and office work. This differentiation is characterised by skilled tasks that offer a sense of autonomy and intrinsic interest, in contrast to a restricted and closely supervised office setting (Ness, 2012). Additionally, skilled manual labour tends to pay a wage premium, possibly providing an additional incentive.

Tommy's preferred work choices included mechanics, plumbing, and scrap collecting. My ethnographic discussions with Tommy revealed that he had rigid ideas about his employment ambitions. As the choices demonstrate, Tommy's work preferences exclusively include traditionally associated working-class manual jobs (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2007) and exclude middle-class professions. This exclusion and the rigidity of Tommy's employment goals prompted me to explore the topic further during a conversation with him. The following excerpt is taken from my fieldnotes:

RG:	Tommy, ever thought about being a lawyer or something like that?
Tommy:	Fuck that, too much paperwork. They gave me a huge paper test in school, and I said, fuck that. I chucked it in the shredder and walked out. I want to be a mechanic because I like taking things apart. I've done it with my dad before, and I fucking loved it.

Tommy's response emphasises his association with working-class masculinity (Connell, 1995) by demonstrating his rejection of schooling, paperwork and examination requirements (Willis, 1977).

Billy's data also revealed a distinction between practical and theoretical aspects, yet not in the conventional understanding of manual labour versus mental labour (Willis, 1977). Unlike the previous Ladz, Billy dismissed working-class-associated manual employment and instead expressed a preference for a career in cooking. When making sense of this orientation, Billy stated that:

> It'll [cooking] be more practical than theory, won't it. I couldn't sit in an office all day. I wouldn't have the patience for it, but with cooking, so many things are on your mind. Oh, I done the dough. Have I taken it out of the fridge, all that stuff. More practical needs than theory and writing down in cooking, I reckon.

In this excerpt, we again see the traditional working-class distinction between 'practical' work and office work or mental labour, along with an associated masculine necessity for

active forms of employment (Willis, 1977). More notable, however, is Billy's ability to retraditionalise (Adkins, 1999) or redefine cooking – an activity traditionally associated with femininity (Kenway and Kraack, 2004) – within the historical working-class, masculine employment meaning-making of practical versus theory (Willis, 1977). Despite Billy's efforts to retraditionalise cooking, his attraction to this traditionally feminised activity may reflect a growing care-oriented approach among men (Szabo, 2014) and the emergence of inclusive, softer displays of masculinity among marginalised working-class young men (Gater, 2024).

Lewis's data also revealed retraditionalisation (Adkins, 1999) and a redefined understanding of hands-on work. His job preferences highlighted a contrasting mismatch between skilled working-class manual occupations traditionally associated with masculinity, including bricklaying and plumbing (Ness, 2012; Thiel, 2007), as well as frontline healthcare work in the form of a paramedic, which requires emotional labour and associated feminine qualities (Hayes et al., 2020). Based on this mismatch, Lewis was asked to explain his preference for plumbing:

Lewis: I dunno. It's just all in the category of getting your hands dirty.
RG: What is it about getting your hands dirty?
Lewis: I dunno. It's hands-on shit like.
RG: What does hands-on mean? Explain that to me.
Lewis: I like to use my hands a lot. My hands gotta be doing something. Cos that like how I have been brought up, like to show respect, work and be caring. Because my mother and father broke up when I was young, so I've just been brought up by my mum, who brought me up the right way.

This response by Lewis potentially highlights the blurred nature of his masculine meaning-making. The working-class inclination towards practical manual and 'hands-on' (Nixon, 2006) work has traditionally been theorised through protest masculinity (Connell, 1995). Although protest masculinity 'is compatible with . . . a sense of display which, in conventional role terms, is decidedly feminine' (Connell, 2005: 11), it is frequently associated with values and traits, including toughness and stoicism (Connell, 1995; McDowell, 2003). In contrast, Lewis associates his preference for hands-on work with respect and care for others, characteristics linked to softer, caring masculinities and traditionally aligned with women (Elliott, 2020).

Being 20 years old, Cole had already entered the workforce and was employed by the local council as a memorial mason. However, this job was not his preferred job choice. Since the age of eight, Cole had been drawn to funeral directing while also favouring mechanical engineering within the army.

Unlike the rest of the Ladz, Wesley had a somewhat ambiguous sense of employment preference and no fixed career ambition:

> I haven't thought about what type of job that much. I like television stuff. TV – stuff like that, but I might change my mind and find something else that I am good at. I'll just give things a try. I like trying stuff like experimenting with different jobs.

The following section explores the social, cultural and individual factors that influence the Ladz's choice of employment.

Employment influences: 'It all goes back to family'

When discussing their employment orientation, the influence of family was apparent in most of the Ladz's replies. These social connections significantly shaped the young men's perceptions of employment and job preferences. For example, when I asked Dan why he favoured plumbing, he replied:

Dan: It's like fixing a bike with my brother when I was younger. Ever since he was 10 [brother], he's been fixing motorbikes, so I've been brought up with it. I've always thought proper work was building walls, bricklaying, plastering, carpentry and plumbing.
RG: Why do you think they are proper jobs, Dan?
Dan: Cos I've always seen people working outside and looking like they're working, all dirty instead of sitting in an office all clean and smartly dressed.

In this discussion – without explicitly using the term – Dan almost effectively explains socialisation: 'the acquisition of values, attitudes, and behaviours through exposure to cultural beliefs and values during childhood' (Chesters, 2021: 574). It appears that Dan was raised in an environment where traditional working-class masculine forms of manual employment are the norm, while other types of employment remain less visible. This background seems to have shaped his understanding of employment and what constitutes 'appropriately masculine work' (Roberts, 2018: 126), or what Dan refers to as 'proper work'.

Dan's employment motivation-related data reveals a departure from the traditional concept of social reproduction related to fathers, as outlined in prominent post-Second World War studies (Tolson, 1977; Willis, 1977), while still reaffirming the influence of male relatives. This shift is reflected in a response given by Ian: 'My uncle is a carpenter, and I just like what he does and what he works as. He said he likes his job, so I gave it a try, and I love it.' Ian's uncle's influence on his career choice may be linked to Ian's father's extended period of unemployment due to illness and his mother's health issues that prevented her from working.

Despite the employment influence data provided by Dan and Ian indicating a departure from the conventional notion of the 'traditional' father social reproduction model prevalent in the post-Second World War studies, the importance of male family members, or what may be perceived as intergenerational transmission (Jimenez and Walkerdine, 2011), remains apparent.

Male relatives were mentioned in Billy's corresponding findings. However, female kin were identified as the influential factor in his employment preference and attraction to cooking. When asked why he favoured this type of work, the following discussion ensued:

Billy: Cos, my nan and family helped me cook over the years. It makes them proud to see me do something with what they have taught me.
RG: So, it's the influence from your nan?
Billy: It's like my uncle. He loves Liverpool, and when I was younger, he used to buy me all the Liverpool kits. Then, I supported Liverpool. It all goes back to family, like where you start. They teach you things. It's like school, really.

Akin to Dan, in this excerpt, Billy also demonstrates an interpretive understanding of socialisation (Chesters, 2021) and highlights the career-determining nature of family members. However, unlike the previous Ladz, this impact predominantly relates to a female member, rather than male kin, guiding a career direction that deviates from traditional working-class, masculine-associated occupations. Billy's mother was a single parent, potentially explaining the significant female influence.

Despite the evidence suggesting a departure from the traditional concept of intergenerational transmission related to fathers (Jimenez and Walkerdine, 2011; Tolson, 1977; Willis, 1977), which is reflected in some of the Ladz's employment preference data, a response given by Lewis re-establishes the significance of this notion. When I asked him why he wanted to do construction, Lewis responded: 'Because I go with my dad and he's always building shit. I dunno. He's always buying shit to build. So, we are always doing tha'.' However, his job preferences are also influenced by his stepfather.

When asked why he wanted to be a paramedic, Lewis replied: 'I like helping people and keeping people safe from the world. I've always wanted to be a paramedic since I was six.' I responded with: 'Why do you think that is?'. Lewis replied: 'My stepfather. He's a paramedic.' As noted previously, there are distinct differences in skill requirements and associations between these two jobs: construction is often linked to masculinity (Ness, 2012; Thiel, 2007), whereas paramedic work typically involves emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) and associated feminine qualities (Hayes et al., 2020). Lewis seems to have inherited both sets of job-associated skills from influential male figures.

Unlike the other Ladz, the source of Wesley's media and television career orientation was never wholly revealed beyond intrinsic reward. However, as illustrated in the following fieldnote excerpt, Wesley differentiates media studies from GCSEs, preferring practical, varied learning over formal theoretical education:

> I picked media for GCSE and I am doing it in college now. I just like it because it's really different from GCSE. In the course, we do loads of different stuff, like we're doing photography when we go back after the break, and we do like filming and stuff like that.

Wesley was heavily involved in various media projects at the youth centre. This leads to speculation about whether his involvement influenced the concept of 'other-directed', wherein external factors shape a young person's career orientation (Veness, 1962: 73), or, at the very least, whether it may have fuelled Wesley's intrinsic interest in media and television.

Employment rejected: 'I don't take shit off nobody'

Like many coalfield areas, the South Wales Valleys have a significant level of call centre employment (Beatty et al., 2019). As such, the Ladz were shown a picture of a call centre. They were then asked to identify the type of work depicted in the image and to express their thoughts about the job and the environment. The following excerpts are the Ladz's responses:

Craig: Nah! (laughs). Sometimes people rage on the phone, and you have to keep calm and try to hold your anger back, and then you can't, and you say okay, bye! I'd go round their house and bang them out!

Stan: Fuck that! That's the fucking worst job ever! That's another version of school, boy.

Billy: Office work. That's boring! It doesn't interest me. I'm not good with stuff like phones. I can't talk to people like tha'. And like, people, when they got problems, they get angry, and I'd end up getting angry at them, and then I'll lose my job. People need to be calm, don't they? If they were lipping me, I'd go nuts.

Tommy: I would never do that because it would be too many people talking at once, and I'd get frustrated and fucking slap them.

Ian: Call centre. Depressing! I would hate to do that. You get spoken to like garbage. Horrible! A lot of people must have a lot of abuse doing that. I would say something back, and I know you're not allowed to.

Wesley: I would if I had to do it and needed the money. My aunty used to be one, and she said it's alright, but if you're in a bad mood that day, you could get angry, and someone might report you, and you'd be out.

Lewis: It's a boring man's job. You gotta sit there fucking hours, just speaking shit to people. I don't like talking to people I don't know, and that's what that is ini'. I wouldn't do tha' job. I know for a fact I'd fuck up in two minutes. I'd probably tell them to fuck off and end the phone call (laughs). I don't take shit off nobody!

Roberts (2018) argues that existing studies on working-class men and service sector work are dated and focus on older or unemployed men. Consequently, the distinctiveness of his findings may be attributed to the contemporary context of his study and 'young working-class men [who] are not hostage to the traditional predisposition held by their counterparts from previous generations' (Roberts, 2018: 121). While this assertion may hold true for the 'missing middle' sample in Roberts's study, the excerpts above illustrate the Ladz's reluctance to pursue employment in call centres.

Although it may be disingenuous to generalise from this data and claim it represents a complete rejection of all service sector jobs, importantly, there is evidence indicating a struggle to engage in emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), manage feelings and suppress emotions. Instead, the Ladz tend to favour speaking their minds, sticking up for themselves, and, in some instances, responding physically when confronted. This

evidence may reaffirm the young men's alignment with working-class and/or protest masculinity (Connell, 1995; McDowell et al., 2014), as the notion of defending one's honour and dignity is crucial to expressions of this particular form of masculinity (Connell, 1995; McDowell et al., 2014).

Notably, one of the Ladz, Lewis, expresses an inability to engage in call centre work due to difficulties in managing and suppressing his feelings. Yet, he aspires to be a paramedic – a profession that, as previously stated, also demands emotional labour and is associated with certain feminine qualities (Hayes et al., 2020). However, the paramedic role is action-oriented, which contrasts with the sedentary nature of call centre work that Lewis explicitly dislikes, stating, 'You gotta sit there fucking hours'. This aversion to stationary and monotonous employment is further reflected in Dan's adverse reaction to the call centre imagery, as well as in some of the Ladz's responses regarding office work, as illustrated in the following fieldnote excerpt:

Dan: It's not my thing like. I would find it boring. You are just sitting on a computer. It's just boring like. I like doing more things practical. An office is like smart suits, writing and computers. Offices you have to be smart and all that don't you to get a tidy office job.

Ian: My worst job would be working in an office. I hate office working. The same stuff over and over! In the job where I am now, we do the same stuff, but we do it at different times and places.

Cole: I couldn't be stuck in an office. It would drive me insane looking at the same four walls every day. I couldn't sit there all day with that sense of feeling enclosed.

These excerpts emphasise Dan's masculine working-class identity and his inclination towards practical, physical and active forms of employment (Willis, 1977). They also underscore the Ladz's aversion to confinement and sedentary work, indicating a preference for independence and varied working environments, as opposed to the constricted, closely supervised settings of offices, or call centres (Ness, 2012).

Discussion

Relatively recent evidence suggests that some working-class young men are 'not merely inherit[ing] older generations of men's dispositions towards and understanding of appropriately masculine work' (Roberts, 2018: 126). However, little is known about whether this shift in employment orientation corresponds to marginalised working-class young men synonymous with working-class and/or protest masculinity (Connell, 1995) and manual employment aspirations (McDowell, 2003; Ward, 2015; Willis, 1977). Contributing to this knowledge gap, this qualitative exploration of a group of marginalised working-class young men in the South Wales Valleys, UK, demonstrates that, despite social and economic change, a partial or complete orientation towards manual employment persists among the majority of the Ladz. Furthermore, call centre imagery predominantly revealed that the young men were unwilling to engage in some service sector roles, stemming from an inability to perform emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) and an aversion to confinement and sedentary work.

The Ladz's manual employment orientation and the dismissal of service sector-related work align with the historical understanding of this subgroup of working-class young men. This includes Nayak's (2003b: 13) 'Real Geordies', who had an appreciation of skilled physical labour, as well as notions of working-class masculinity (Connell, 1995) and an inability to put on a smiley face (Nixon, 2009). The source of the Ladz's manual employment orientation revealed a 'prominent masculine legacy of manual labour [which] ran through their familial biographies' (Nayak, 2003b: 12).

However, among certain members of the Ladz, there appear to be shifting employment aspirations and orientations that extend beyond manual labour. For instance, Billy stated that he was not interested in construction work and instead favoured cooking and aspired to be a chef. Lewis's job preferences included becoming a paramedic, while Wesley aspired to work in media and television. The career ambitions of Billy and Lewis may reflect the emergence of inclusive, softer displays of masculinity among marginalised working-class young men (Gater, 2024). The role of a paramedic requires dispositions such as respect and compassion, which align with characteristics of softer, caring masculinities (Elliott, 2020). Similarly, cooking has historically been associated with femininity, and historical notions of masculinity require a 'rejection of all aspects that are deemed feminine' (Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, 2003: 97). Furthermore, these employment aspirations indicate a departure from manual work and mainly diverge from the father-to-son transfer of knowledge and employment social reproduction (Walker and Roberts, 2018) frequently observed in studies of marginalised working-class young men. Lewis's ambition to become a paramedic, partly shaped by his stepfather, highlights how evolving and diverse family structures can significantly influence young people's employment goals.

Instead, influences on employment appear to stem from females and factors other than biological fathers, leading to a possible rupture or destabilisation of working-class masculine ideals and producing career aspirations not typically associated with working-class masculinity (Connell, 1995). The shifting employment aspirations among these young men suggest that exposure to broader work experiences and opportunities might redirect their employment orientation beyond manual work. However, the Ladz's disengagement from education and the resulting likelihood of achieving low qualification outcomes may still restrict their employment options. Furthermore, some of the Ladz attempt to retraditionalise (Adkins, 1999) or redefine their job preferences within the historical context of working-class, masculine employment meaning-making of practical versus theory (Willis, 1977), referring to the job requirements as 'hands-on' (Nixon, 2006), which potentially helps 'align the image of the job with a more conventional notion of masculinity' (Simpson, 2004: 361).

Conclusion

In closing, this article highlights both continuity and change in the employment orientations of marginalised working-class young men. The Ladz's preference for manual labour, influenced by familial socialisation and rejection of certain service sector jobs, aligns with the historical understanding of this subgroup of working-class young men (McDowell, 2003; Nixon, 2009; Tolson, 1977; Willis, 1977). However, some data from

the Ladz suggests emerging shifts in employment orientations that extend beyond manual work, possibly originating from rupturing processes or the destabilisation of working-class masculine modes of being. Although the study has limitations, including a small sample size and a specific geographic focus, that may limit the generalisability of its findings, the identified rupturing processes offer interesting insights. These insights and the broadening of young men's career aspirations partially align with the aims of the UK and Welsh governments to remove barriers preventing disadvantaged youth from securing stable employment (Department for Work & Pensions, HM Treasury, Department for Education, 2024; Welsh Government, 2021). Addressing youth unemployment is important, especially in light of COVID-19's impact and the significant rise in youth unemployment (Barford et al., 2021), which remains persistent (Francis-Devine et al., 2024) and disproportionately affects males from disadvantaged backgrounds (AVECO, 2012). Future research should further explore evolving employment aspirations among marginalised young men and the factors shaping these aspirations. By doing so, it can help inform the development of interventions that promote a broader range of career opportunities and enhance employment outcomes for this demographic, which is particularly vulnerable to unemployment.

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