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Re-thinking skill through a new lens using evidence from three Australian service industries

Introduction

As Grugulis and Vincent (2009, p. 597) put it, 'skill has always been an elusive concept'.

Conceptions of the nature of skill have been long-contested in the scholarly literature. There are divergent approaches to debates on the nature of skill (Esposito, 2008). An overarching conceptual framework for skill has not yet been developed and, it might be argued, perhaps cannot be developed, because the skills literature is typically highly 'siloed' among a range of disciplines including economics, occupational psychology, management, industrial relations and human resource development as well as education (Sawchuk, 2006).

Vallas (1990: 380) maintains that there is a basic divergence between those, such as psychologists and human capital theorists, who think about skills as being 'the properties of the workers rather than the job', and sociologists, who are concerned with the requirements of jobs. Broadly, this paper takes a sociological approach - i.e. it is about jobs rather than workers - although it will be seen in the Discussion below that we found 'the properties of the workers' can shape both the job itself and the perceptions of skill in the job.

The research and the conceptual model reported in this paper relate to jobs for which training is typically provided by the vocational education and training (VET) sector, rather than higher education. In Australia and other Anglophone countries, jobs of this nature which have a high degree of technical content, which involve working with tools have a strong blue-collar trade union history, have a long history of qualifications, and do not contain much 'soft skill' content, tend to be regarded as skilled. These jobs are more often

undertaken by males. In contrast, jobs with high 'soft skills' content, which involve working with people and relationships rather than tools, in which the workforce is usually female and is weakly organised into trade unions, and which have only recently attracted qualifications, tend to be regarded as low skilled. However, the latter group of jobs are growing much more quickly in advanced economies than the former. In view of structural changes in the economy and the proliferation of service sector jobs, it seems that a more nuanced conceptualisation of skill is required. The alternative is to argue that the workforce in advanced economies is becoming progressively less skilled, a concept which held sway in the 1970s (eg Braverman, 1974), and more recently in the debates on low skills equilibria and skills polarisation (eg Lauder, 1999). However, the more recent arguments in this area tend to be circular in nature; that is, that the workforce is becoming less skilled because there are more people in certain types of jobs, without necessarily involving a critical examination of the jobs depicted as low-skilled. This paper aims to help fill that evidence gap.

The study consisted of empirical research in three service industries, each including interviews with industry-level stakeholders and company case studies developed from interviews with workers, managers and human resources staff. A focus on service industries where soft skills are dominant, rather than on the manufacturing sector, where much earlier research about skill was undertaken, helped to foster a fresh look at skill. While service industries have not been altogether neglected (eg Grugulis and Bozkurt, 2011; Hampson and Junor, 2010; Mason & Osborne, 2008), and the literature in this area is growing, particularly relating to jobs such as call-centre work (eg Lloyd and Payne, 2009), we examined commercial and manual service-sector jobs which have been relatively under-researched.

The need for such research is prompted by the fact that western economies have moved from primary and secondary towards service industries (Triplett and Bosworth, 2004; OECD, 2000). Because of this, the change in the occupational make-up of the workforce in Australia continues to develop quite rapidly, in common with other advanced capitalist nations. From 1960 to 2012, the proportion of jobs in the service industries increased from 50% to 75% of the Australian workforce (Lowe, 2012). The retail industry, for example, employed 10.9% of the workforce in 2011, second only to health care and social assistance; in contrast, in 2001, manufacturing was the major employer (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

Despite this shift, the policies of government in Australia still seem to be based on outmoded and unquestioned assumptions on the part of key actors about the nature of skill and of skilled work and workers. It could be argued that many major stakeholders in skill formation policy, such as trade union leaders and those managing employer associations, have working lives rooted in the old skills culture and find it difficult (Colley, James & Tedder, 2002) to accept new notions of skill that are outside this personal 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977).

Views about skill are important in a wider sense because of the consequences which flow from these beliefs. Vallas (1990, p. 379-80) notes the potential public policy implications of views about skill; as he puts it, 'More than academic nuances are at stake'. He notes that the implications include industrial relations, equity and education consequences. Among equity issues, current perceptions about skill have been shown adversely to affect certain groups such as women and service sector workers (Smith, 2004). For individuals, location within 'unskilled' occupations can lead to low self-esteem, limited career prospects, limited access to qualification pathways and low wages (Somerville, 2006). A current example from

Australian policy illustrates the potentially damaging effects of unquestioned assumptions about skill. A review of Australian apprenticeships and traineeships by a government-appointed 'Expert Panel' (McDowell, 2011) proposed the reduction or removal of financial supports for training in certain occupational areas. The 'rules' proposed to measure decide which occupations should continue to be funded for training were derived from proxy measures of skill such as training times (using those associated with traditional trades as a benchmark) and socially constructed concepts such as 'valued career'. These proposals have been largely enacted during the period 2011-13 via successive funding mechanisms managed by Federal and State layers of government

Literature Review

The sociological literature on skill (i.e. skill as a property of a job) can be broadly classified into four major approaches. These approaches do not measure the same thing as each other, but represent different approaches to the concept of skill as represented in literature over the past three decades.

1. *Positivist/technicist approaches* view skill as an unproblematic, measurable 'quantity' (Attewell, 1990; Felstead *et al.*, 2005) based on indicators such as complexity and autonomy (Adler, 2007). Skills relating to working with people are generally seen as less important than skills relating to working with things. The US Departments of Labor's Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT) and associated O*NET models (eg Mumford and Peterson, 1999) are intended to describe and 'measure' jobs and their associated skill.
2. *Proxy measures of skill*, such as length of training, wage rates (Spenner, 1990) or, in Australia, the Australian Bureau of Statistics ASCO (occupational) classifications, are often used to measure skill (Esposto, 2008). Gallie (1991), for example, in a seminal

paper, reports position in occupational classification systems and the need for qualifications to undertake a job (proxy measures) as indicators of skill. However it is argued that such proxy measures may be problematic (Young, 2004; Grugulis and Lloyd, 2010) and are used primarily because of a lack of other data that would enable skill to be measured directly (Gatta *et al.*, 2007).

3. *Social construction* theory centres around claim-making by interest groups who wish to preserve or enhance the status of certain occupations. It explains how beliefs about skill and the job hierarchies are operationalised through institutions such as industrial relations arrangements and requirements for qualifications (Steinberg, 1990: 455). Labour process theorists (Littler 1982: 10-11; but challenged by Adler, 2007), assert that so-called 'skilled' jobs gain the 'skilled' label because of collective organisation by workers. Feminist literature (eg Healy, Hansen & Ledwith, 2006) extends this labour process approach, arguing that 'male' jobs have gained the reputation of being skilled at the expense of 'female' jobs. In social construction theory, the proxy measures described above are themselves regarded as products of social construction; as are the measures used in positivist/technicist approaches (Steinberg, 1990); Steinberg describes the United States DOT as gendered and racialised.
4. *Soft or generic skills* have received an increasing emphasis internationally over the last thirty years (Gatta, Boushey & Appelbaum, 2007). Soft skills have been operationalised in Australian training policy as 'key competencies' or 'employability skills' (Business Council of Australia & Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 2002), and more recently as 'foundation skills' (Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills & Employment, 2012) and in other countries through different lists of 'generic skills'. The

issue of 'soft skills' has become a further problematic in the debate around skill (Grugulis and Lloyd, 2010). Some scholars claim that soft skills are no more than personal attributes (Grugulis, Warhurst & Keep, 2004); that they are no different than are those used in everyday life, and that it degrades the notion of skill to consider soft skills as skills (Payne, 2009). In recent research on call centres, Lloyd and Payne (2009) argue forcefully against the use of workers' own accounts to examine skill, concluding that arguments for skill in such research are ill-founded. Against this, it has been argued that soft skills are as real as 'technical skills', and that the debates reflect underlying gender issues since 'female' jobs are more likely than 'male' jobs to incorporate soft skills (Gatta *et al.*, 2007).

More recently, the debate about the nature of skill and its supposed presence in some jobs and not other jobs, has become linked to the debate about 'good jobs' and 'bad jobs'. Like the debates about skill, a range of indicators are brought into play in order to pinpoint job quality (eg de Bustillo, Fernandez-Macias, Anton & Esteve, 2011). The same conceptual drawbacks, including the ready dismissal of some jobs as 'low quality' (see Gallie, 1991), persist in this newer field of debate. Few alternative voices are heard, although Gould's (2010) discussion of 'McJobs' challenges the prevailing orthodoxy. In the Australian policy context, the notion of 'good jobs' has become operationalised in the use of the term 'valued career' (McDowell, 2011) to determine funding for training.

Research method

The research reported in this paper was carried out during 2010 in three industry areas: retail, hospitality and hairdressing. These industry areas were purposefully selected in conjunction with the funding body, Service Skills Australia, to cover a range of service

industry jobs and also to include jobs which were apprenticed (and therefore traditionally regarded as skilled) and jobs which were not. Service Skills Australia is one of eleven industry skills councils funded by the Australian government to support skills development. The selected occupations were: kitchen-hand, chef, retail assistant and hairdresser.

The research began with four ‘frames’ or ways of looking at skill, derived from the four major approaches in the sociological literature on skill discussed above. Previous attempts to incorporate a broad range of skill indicators into a coherent framework, such as the O*NET model have not been successful (Mumford and Peterson, 1999; Gibson, Harvey & Harris, 2007). This is not surprising considering the divergent approaches to skill discussed above. Therefore we decided that, rather than trying to achieve a single ‘measure’ of skill, it was better to recognise the different frames through which we can look at skill.

The multiple frame approach is adapted from one previously used in organisational theory (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Bolman & Deal, 1991). This approach proposes a number of ways of examining a phenomenon and assumes that each perspective contributes to a fuller understanding. Our approach proposes that jobs can be examined through each frame, giving a more rounded view of skill than a single-frame approach. These four frames informed questions asked of interviewees in our research.

From each frame, a number of possible constructs were derived (Table 1).

Table 1: Frames and associated constructs (initial proposition)

Frame	Possible constructs
Positivist/technicist, using measurable indicators	Autonomy; complexity; sophistication of tools used; body of knowledge

Social construction	Gender composition; level of unionism; historical tradition.
Proxy measures	Level of education required; length of period of funded training; licensing; pay rates.
Soft skills	Employability skills content; degree of interaction with clients.

The research questions for the project were:

1. What are the perceptions of skill that are held by different stakeholder groups in the training and employment relations systems in service sector industries, and by workers and managers in companies?
2. What are the policy and practical consequences of these perceptions of skill?
3. How can skill in those occupations be better described?

The research approach selected was qualitative. This approach was selected partly because the phenomenon being studied is not well defined and is not susceptible to measurement and quantification; and also because discussions about skill involve a heavy emphasis on perceptions of skill, and perspectives are best explored qualitatively (J. Maxwell, 2002). It has been argued more particularly that research on skill lends itself particularly to qualitative approaches (Attewell, 1990), primarily because of the difficulty in 'measuring' it. The study involved interviews with key stakeholders in the three service sector industry areas, case studies in six companies, and validation with senior industry personnel. The company case studies enabled the issues to be seen in context (Yin, 2003); as skills are almost always practised within company settings, it was particularly important to use a case study approach. It is frequently argued that case studies are useful for building theory (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007).

In Phase 1, five key stakeholders were interviewed for each of the three industry areas. In each industry, these were:

1. An employer association's chief executive officer or delegate;
2. A trade union officer;
3. An industry Skills Council staff member with coverage of the relevant industry area;
4. A senior educationalist from the public training provider, Technical and Further Education (TAFE); and
5. A senior educationalist from a private training provider.

In total 14 interviews were conducted in Phase 1, as a trade union representative responded for both retail and hairdressing. Interviews were undertaken by telephone and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes; they were taped and transcribed with permission.

The interview questions focused on three main areas:

1. Respondent's own job and education history, and personal conceptions of skill;
2. Within-industry and external perceptions of skill in jobs in the industry area, and effects of such perceptions (eg on training available, wage rates, recruitment to the industry)
3. Suggestions about way of improving skill content of jobs and public perceptions of skill in the jobs

The constructs shown in Table 1 were used to frame many of the detailed questions.

Phase 2 of the project consisted of company case studies (see Table 2), covering the occupations of hairdresser, chef, kitchen-hand and retail assistant. For two of these occupations, training is undertaken by apprenticeship (hairdresser and chef), with well-established training traditions. On the other hand, qualifications in the occupations of

kitchen-hand and retail assistant had only become available in Australia from the 1980s in a period of training reform which saw formal training programs and qualifications created in many, typically newer, occupations (Smith & Keating, 2003).

Table 2. Case study sites in Australian service industries

Industry	'Trade' occupation	Non-trade occupation	Company pseudonym	Number of interviewees
Retail (retail assistant)		X	Fine Foods	3
		X	Sportsco	5
Hospitality (kitchen-hand and chef)	X	X	Catering Co	6
	X	X	Leisure Co	3
Hairdressing (hairdresser)	X		Coiffeur Hair Design	4
	X		Pamper Palace	2
TOTAL				18

Case study sites were chosen as a result of nomination by Service Skills Australia and direct contacts made by the researchers. The nature of these cases is relevant to the discussion of skill. In retail, Fine Foods was a small speciality shop in a fashionable suburb, selling foods, coffee and kitchen equipment; Sportsco was part of a large national chain with a wide range of sporting clothes and equipment. In hospitality, Catering Co was a company preparing food for service at a range of functions and sporting events, with up to fifteen chefs working at the central site on busy days; Leisure Co was a large gaming complex containing

numerous restaurants and an in-house training facility. In hairdressing, Coiffeur Hair Design was a suburban hairdressing salon; while Pamper Palace was also in a suburban location, in a different town, and had an upmarket positioning.

At the case study sites, interviews were undertaken with: a senior line manager; a senior human resource or training manager; a supervisor; and two or more workers in each of the occupations being studied. None of the companies had a workplace union presence. The Pamper Palace and Leisure Co case studies were selected to complement the other hospitality and hairdressing cases rather than replicate the same process, hence had fewer numbers.

In total, 23 interviews were conducted in this phase, and all were carried out on-site except that for Sportsco, two corporate staff were interviewed by telephone. Each interview ran for about one hour, and they were taped with permission, and transcribed. In all interviews the focus was on the particular occupation being studied in that industry area. A detailed and structured common interview framework was devised, with variations for people in different job roles. Interviewees were asked to provide a brief account of their employment history before being asked about the tasks involved in the job, technical, knowledge and customer service content, levels of complexity and autonomy, generic skills content, risks if the job was not done properly, and levels of performance. Interviewees were also asked to 'rate' the job's skill level compared with other jobs in the company and in the economy at large. Managers were also asked for more general information about the company and its operations.

The interview protocols were based on the constructs of skill in Table 1 above, but also included additional concepts of skill that had emerged from the Phase 1 stakeholder interviews. Relevant scales were utilised where available; for example one was based on the Australian 'employability skills framework'. The framework lists eight skills as follows: communication, teamwork, problem solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organising, self-management, managing own learning, and technology. The use of the scales provided helpful prompts for discussion.

Themes were drawn out from the interview transcripts and the data were coded and analysed using data reduction and display techniques (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The conceptual framework was developed progressively through the three stages of data collection, and was presented to six senior service industry stakeholders in the validation phase (Phase 3), in a workshop arranged by Service Skills Australia. The insights gained in the validation enabled some refinements to the model already developed.

Findings

In this section, the findings of the first two phases of the project are reported separately. The integration of the findings and their relationship with the literature, together with the additional insights gained from the validation phase, are reported in the Discussion section.

Phase 1: Stakeholder interviews

Conceptions of skill: There was a general view among stakeholder interviewees that a skilled job had to be learned – “something that you have to learn and be trained how to do it” (Retail training provider co-ordinator). In addition skill was seen to involve performance at a particular standard – “the ability to perform a task or a role to a specified standard to meet task requirements and outcomes” (Retail employer association). A skilled job had to involve a “degree of difficulty” (Hairdressing TAFE co-ordinator); and it had to have elements of complexity (Hospitality employer association) and autonomy (Hospitality trade union). It was also suggested that a skilled job needed to involve prioritising tasks (Hospitality trade union) and a degree of responsibility (Hospitality training provider co-ordinator). It could also involve issues of health and safety (Hairdressing training provider co-ordinator).

Provenance of conceptions of skill: The interviewees reported deriving their views from a variety of sources. Some referred to their working and educational experiences (nationally and internationally), and others to their observations of people performing jobs, or to their experiences in their roles in the vocational education and training sector:

Obviously working in the training sector we are constantly thinking of skills and knowledge and how we structure programs around them.

Those skills initially to me are something that is observable, because ...

how we often assess skills is through observation of them (Retail training provider co-ordinator).

Skill in the relevant occupation and perceptions of skill: With few exceptions, respondents reported that all of the occupations were skilled to a degree: “Every single job has got skill” (Hairdressing trade union), but they were not considered equal. Some jobs were said to have “small skills” (Retail training provider co-coordinator) or “varying degrees of skill” (TAFE co-coordinator). The difficulty of measuring the degree of skill emerged from the interviews, for example:

I am a bit uncomfortable about creating a kind of sliding scale of skilled occupation. I think I retain that view that all these jobs are skilled to a lesser or greater extent. Some of them are accompanied by formal qualifications, some aren't and some of the skills are described or recognised better than others (Hospitality trade union).

A different view was that if a job appears unskilled “it just means the person in the job is unskilled” (Retail training provider co-coordinator). It was observed that because some jobs can be performed at different levels of proficiency, there is a tendency for people to assume the work is performed at the ‘entry level’ and is in effect unskilled. Some of the work in the jobs that were studied could be performed without formal training – albeit not well – and this was seen to add to a perception of low skill. Respondents were asked what differentiated a skilled from an unskilled person in a job; a commonly held view was that it was the ability to plan for contingencies or as one respondent put it, they did not “wait for the next thing” (Hospitality TAFE co-coordinator).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, most respondents felt that jobs in their industries were undervalued. For example, a retail training provider co-ordinator said: “If you are talking from an outsider’s point of view, then I think they are largely undervalued”. Respondents suggested

various reasons for community perceptions of low skill including: an undervaluing of customer service, the stigma associated with low levels of pay (Hospitality employer association), and lack of respect accorded to jobs that could be done without qualifications - i.e. on-the-job learning was undervalued compared with college-based learning (Retail employer association). Also, it was suggested that managers devalued their own skills, and by extension the skills of their subordinates, because they themselves entered the job when no qualifications were expected (Training provider co-coordinator). It was pointed out that perceptions of skill could be culturally specific; two respondents stated that in Europe front-of-house hospitality jobs were well respected.

It was also observed that the degree of difficulty of jobs was sometimes overlooked. One respondent said, "I think it is just generally undervalued and sometimes surprisingly people who think, well, it doesn't take any skill getting into retail and actually absolutely struggle" (Retail training provider coordinator). The reasons underpinning this view included the routine and familiar nature of the work being performed :

I think part of it is that everyone goes into a shop and everyone thinks, "Oh yes, I could do that". At one level that's probably true, but to do the job properly and do it well, I think requires skill. I'm not sure people who don't really know the nature of the work in the industries understand that (Trade union representative).

Technical language, or the lack of it, emerged as a factor that may contribute to the undervaluing of skills. Visible jobs in the service industries that we researched tended to lack a specific technical language, leading to perceptions that such jobs were less skilled, for

example compared, to a car mechanic's job where much of the language was hidden from the public.

Finally, and importantly, another factor contributing to undervaluation of skills may be the predominance of young workers in an occupation, particularly where the job is often undertaken on a part-time basis in conjunction with full-time study. Two quotes illustrate this point.

They are dismissed fairly quickly as the job on the way to going somewhere else. The job you get when you can't get anything else, a fill in, that sort of thing (Training provider coordinator).

I see it all the time where retail gets bandied around as the job you have until you're waiting to get a 'real job' - the job you have while you're at university just to earn money and that sort of thing. It's regarded as not a real job or not a skilled job. (Industry Skills Council representative)

Thus the association of low skill with 'women's work' seems to have been extended to 'young people's work'.

The very visibility of service industry jobs meant that poor performance was noted by the public; and if jobs were done badly, the public might receive the impression that the work, rather than the person, was unskilled. One respondent said

I think the general public generally don't think about skill levels in retail until they actually have a bad experience and then they talk about poor skill level... Unless you're in my business, where you're training people in that sector, (the) general public don't analyse it. So I think they think that it's a relatively unskilled job. (Training provider coordinator)

Effects of public perceptions of skill: Participants commented on some potential consequences of perceptions that service sector work was low-skilled. Several respondents stated that perceptions contributed to a situation where people did not enter these occupations as a first choice, with a consequential lowering of potential skill levels in the industry (Hairdressing union). Qualifications in the industries were not valued, and so governments did not fund training to the same extent as other occupations. It was stated that the workforce itself felt undervalued as a result of public perceptions, and employees could feel that they were “caught in the industry, but disillusioned because they feel they’re not recognised and they’re not appreciated” (Hairdressing union).

Phase 2: Findings from the case studies

In the second phase of the project we canvassed a similar range of issues with workers and managers in companies. Our focus here was on the individual’s experience of the particular job in the specific organisational context.

Views about skill in the relevant occupation: In the stakeholder interviews, the views expressed were fairly consistent across the industries and jobs. The case studies, however, showed some differences within and across industry areas. Not unexpectedly, in the ‘trade’ occupations – hairdressing and chef - the organisational interviewees at all levels considered that these jobs were more skilled than non-trade occupations. These respondents conceptualised a hierarchy of jobs with the particular occupation near the top. This was confirmed by their scaled ratings of the employability skills requirements of the particular occupation. Among those interviewed about the hairdressing occupation, all but one person

rated the requirements for all employability skills as high; and for chef, all participants rated each of the eight items as medium or high. For retail assistant and kitchen hand, in contrast, the ratings of employability skill requirements were distributed almost equally among 'low', 'medium' and 'high'. Interestingly, in these latter occupations, managers' view of skill requirements were almost uniformly higher than the views of the occupants of those jobs. Several of the workers suggested that the low evaluation of the skill level of their own job may have resulted from entering jobs that are commonly regarded as 'low skill'. In one example (Sportsco) a sales assistant said that he would almost be embarrassed to say that he worked in retail, and yet he enjoyed his job and would not consider returning to a previous higher status occupation.

It became clear from the case studies that, because of their personal attributes individuals could perform at high levels in any particular job, thus conferring greater skill 'requirements' on the job. For example a manager could provide one worker with more discretion and autonomy and another might be given much less, as occurred at Catering Co where a worker expanded his responsibilities beyond the job requirements, due to a combination of the duration of his job experience, innate abilities and perception of what was required to achieve the required standard of service. More generally, it appeared that management or work organisation structures could encourage or discourage autonomy, as might be expected, but this issue was not explored in detail in this research project.

Justification for views of skill in the occupation: Participants had different bases for their perceptions of skill in the occupations. These included the amount of training required to do the job (four years for chefs and three years for hairdressers, with no specified period for the other occupations); the 'good' that workers provided to people (for example,

hairdressers talked about boosting customers' self-confidence, and the retail workers talked about helping customers find the right product); the physical demands of the job, such as the pressure of work in catering and the time spent on one's feet in retail; the time they spent interacting with people; and the potential risks if the job was performed badly, for example, the consequence of using incorrect chemicals in hairdressing, or selling incorrect footwear in the sports shop. Product knowledge emerged as being extremely important: a skilled sales assistant, for example, was regarded as one who could match the product to the customer's needs.

Public perception of skill in the occupation: It was interesting to note that even respondents in apprenticed occupations whose self-perceptions of skill were high considered that public perceptions of their skill were low. A number of suggestions were advanced to explain why the public undervalued the skill in the occupations in the study. These included people's experiences of being served by less-skilled and/or younger workers, and a lack of understanding of the detail involved in the job. It was also suggested that in jobs involving customer contact, customer service skills intersected with workers' personalities, so that skill was tacit in the sense of being difficult to observe and measure, leading to it being undervalued. It was suggested that there was a circular effect in which public perceptions that the work was low-skilled led to low occupational self-esteem among workers, in turn causing them to belittle the skills that they used.

Differences among sites: Some differences emerged among the retail and hospitality sites, with more uniformity in hairdressing. At Sportsco, the senior managers thought that the job was more skilled than the workers did, perhaps because the senior managers were more aware of the importance of sales staff to the business outcomes. Alternatively, job

incumbents might have been commenting on the job as they performed it, while the senior managers might be imagining the 'ideal' sales assistant. The relative size of the sites also affected skills that could be deployed. As a simple example, at Fine Foods sales assistants operated and cleaned the point of sale terminals, but at the much larger Sportsco, sales assistants did neither of these things. In hospitality, the size of Leisure Co made it possible for skill development to be segmented unless job rotation was practised. Leisure Co staff placed a greater importance on food technology skills than did Catering Co staff. The Leisure Co case study had a strong emphasis on skill associated with speed, a factor that had not emerged strongly at Catering Co perhaps because at the latter site, most of their food was prepared well ahead of service.

Discussion

The stakeholder comments from Phase 1 were generally consistent with the three main approaches to skill identified in the literature review, but with some important additions. Most comments fell within the 'positivist' and 'proxy' frames described in Table 1. For example, there was discussion of complexity, of qualifications and of pay. Table 3 provides indicative industry stakeholder comments for the frames and constructs described in Table 1.

Table 3: Examples of stakeholder comments about skill in the relevant occupation, by frames and associated constructs

Frame	Construct	Comments
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Positivist/technicist, using measurable indicators	Autonomy	'A level of autonomy that requires some form of decision-making.'
	Complexity	'A number of different tasks having to be done simultaneously.'
	Sophistication of tools used	'Cutting, colouring, foiling, hair extensions, chemical curling, chemical straightening, blow waving, setting, styling hair.'
	Body of knowledge	'A knowledge of the menu as far as what sauce goes with what ... and the ability to recommend a bottle of wine.'
Social construction	Gender composition	No specific comments
	Level of unionism	No specific comments
	Historical tradition	'They [jobs like sales assistant] don't fit under traditional models of education.'
Proxy measures	Level of education required	'I sometimes wonder whether the term 'unskilled' is just to put people in another bag that aren't in the qualification bag, so to speak.'
	Length of funded training	'Something that you have to learn and be trained how to do.'
	Licensing	'When we're talking about the men's trades ...safety issues form some

	Pay	regularity.' 'Careers teachers... will always make judgments based on relative wages of different jobs.'
Soft skills	Employability skills content Degree of interaction with clients.	'Things like teamwork, interpersonal skills conflict management....' 'Retail is about connecting with people and the face to face interactions all the time.'

It can be seen that the 'social construction' area as currently delineated did not feature greatly in the responses: neither gender composition of the occupation nor the level of unionism were mentioned by the stakeholder respondents. However, potentially new aspects of social construction emerged from this phase of the research: 'everydayness', high proportion of young people in the occupation, the presence or absence of technical language, and the possibility of a job being done at many different levels.

There were some important additions in the case study phase of the research; these included the addition of the physical demands of the job as an indicator of skill. This is consistent with N. Maxwell (2006, p. 8). There was also a major focus on the issue of risk if the job was performed badly. In addition, the contribution of the job to the business outcomes of the enterprise was identified as a component of skill. These features pertained to the content job itself rather than perceptions of skill in the job and do not appear to feature in current debates about skill.

The context for the exercise of skill also emerged as important. Two factors were relevant here: firstly the nature of the enterprise (for example, the nature of the clientele in the two retail sites); and secondly, the importance of work organisation structures. If work organisation was overly Taylorist, in the sense of being divided into number of narrowly defined tasks, as at Leisure Co, then the work could not be performed in such a skilled manner. Hence the job could differ markedly across organisations or even within an organisation. Levels of performance emerged as being important elements of skill, and this seemed to be linked to two factors: first the importance of individual attributes and abilities, and second, motivation or desire to do the job well. In terms of public perceptions of skill, an important insight from the case study interviews was the emphasis on the public not understanding the complexity of the work.

The final industry validation helped particularly with the interrogation of the findings about soft skills. Participants, who included experts across all three industry areas, emphasised the importance of gender in perceptions of skill, an issue which had not emerged during the first two phases of the research. An extension of this point, put forward by participants, was that this led to full-time jobs being perceived as being more skilled than part-time jobs, since the latter were more likely to be undertaken by women. They also challenged conventional views about soft skills, pointing out that among high-level executives soft skills were highly valued, whereas in front-line service work they were not seen as being an indicator of skill. This point has been previously made by Grugulis and Vincent (2009), albeit in relation to technical rather than managerial work. These two points from the social construction frame had not emerged in either the Phase 1 stakeholder interviews or the Phase 2 case studies. The failure of Phase 1 and 2 participants to mention these points was discussed during the

validation, and it was suggested that the interviewees were immersed in their workplaces and industries and accepted their gendered nature of their occupations.

A new conceptual model of skill

The findings from the project enabled us to propose a new conceptual model of skill (Figure 1). The model integrates features relating to the 'job content' with elements of social construction. This model, for the occupations studied, integrates findings from stakeholders and participants at all levels in the industries studied.

In the model, the circles surrounding the centre reflect the content of a job, and the factors in the surrounding 'cloud' represent factors which do not relate to job content but which affect perceptions of skill in that occupation. The factors in the 'cloud' relate to the 'social construction' and 'proxy' approaches to skill. The size of the font used for these factors represents the strength of the data in the study. Some of these factors are well recognised in existing literature but others are not. Our model places 'proxy' measures of skill firmly within the social construction domain as has been suggested in the literature (eg Steinberg, 1990). The separation of job content from perceptions of skill in the model is not intended to deny that 'job content' and 'socially-constructed features' are inter-related.

'Job content' features may carry a different attribution among occupations and occupational levels. Importantly we found that interpersonal skill content is not highly valued in lower level jobs, while in managerial jobs it is interpersonal skills that are often the most highly regarded. The relative regard attributed to interpersonal skills at different levels

of seniority may relate to the extent to which they are visible and part of the specified job role. For example in a retail assistant role, the interpersonal skills are evident and 'everyday'; in other roles they are 'hidden' from the public. It may also reflect traditional conceptions of job hierarchies in which lower level jobs were often based on physical attributes such as manual dexterity.

Some of the 'job content' components in Figure 1 are little recognised in existing literature on skill. Physical demands, as opposed to technical demands, are not frequently mentioned in discussion of skill (although the Dictionary of Occupational Titles [see Mumford and Peterson, 1999]) lists physical demands of a job as one of the eight classification components), but several research participants referred to the demand for physical stamina and fortitude as a skill. It is interesting to reflect that in other spheres such as athletics, these are regarded as essential components of skill. Levels of risk associated with potential errors are also rarely mentioned in the literature, yet the consequences of work being done incorrectly may be extreme and must surely be factored into the skill content of a job. The skill resides in the ability to understand the potential consequences of error, either to the health and safety of co-workers or customers, or to business performance, and to cope with the consequent pressure, while performing the relevant task competently. Similarly the role of pressure itself is rarely acknowledged; a job performed relatively easily with few time constraints becomes highly skilled with time pressure and the involvement of demanding customers.

We suggest that our model actually operates within a framework of the exercise of skill. The exercise of skill is what is required and desired by both the individual and the employer. The

dependent variables proposed for workers are ability and motivation. This derives from our finding that the same job could be undertaken differently by different workers and that this may partly result from innate ability or interest in, and commitment to, the work. The notion of levels of performance has recently been explored by Hampson and Junor (2010). They identified five levels of expertise in service sector work (defined broadly), with an emphasis both on soft skills and on the integration of disparate skills. They did not, however, explore the matter of motivation, i.e. the desire to do the job well. For the employer, the dependent variables affecting the exercise of skill that are proposed are the organisational size and the way in which work is organised. The case studies showed the importance of context in determining the level of skill in a job and the level at which it is performed. However this was not a main focus of the research and it would be inappropriate to place too much weight on this finding; for this reason the model does not cover the framework for the exercise of skill.

Conclusion

The model of skill developed through this research extends existing notions of skill.

Three factors are added to the 'job content' dimension of skill: Physical demands, dependent risks, and pressure. Four factors are added to those normally grouped under social construction and proxy measures of skill, and these factors are particularly important in recognising the shift in the make-up of the workforce in advanced societies. The four factors which add to the perception of a job as either unskilled or low-skilled are: the proportion of young people and women in the relevant occupational group, the proportion of casual and part-time jobs in the workforce, the presence of a wide range of levels at which a job may be performed, and the appearance of everydayness. In regards to service

sector work, it is perhaps the latter, which may be described as 'quotidieneity', which is the most powerful. A member of the public comes into contact on almost a daily basis with a retail assistant, for example. It is comparatively easy to assume that this job is straightforward and easy to learn; the language used in the transaction is familiar to all; it could be imagined (perhaps erroneously), as one respondent pointed out, that a member of the public could readily move from one side of the counter to the other.

The research adds comparatively little to the 'individual worker' dimension of skill, which tends to rest upon a positivist conception of skill. However, the importance of motivation emerged as a tentative finding, as did the importance of an appropriate context in which skills could be deployed. In themselves, these factors can be affected by perceptions of skill; for example, effort in a job could be linked to perceptions of its worth. This feature is overlooked in studies such as Lloyd and Payne's (2009) study of call-centre workers, in which they do not consider the fact that some workers' perceptions of the job as unskilled and the lack of motivation to perform well could be related to the perceived low status of the job.

The research makes a further contribution to the literature by challenging traditional concepts of skill. The model developed from the research is deliberately descriptive rather than normative and it is suggested that this is in itself important. The evidence suggests that skill and perceptions of skill are complex, ever-changing, and contextually bound, and that social construction underpins all judgments. In this context, the model presented in this paper enables aspects of skill to be *examined* but not necessarily *evaluated*.

What are the policy and practice implications of this study? To return to the point raised by Vallas (1990), there are far-reaching implications of hasty and possibly inaccurate judgments about some jobs being skilled and others being categorised as unskilled. In the vocational education and training system in the State of Victoria, for example, funding has recently been reduced for training for many occupations in the service sector (Guthrie, Smith, Burt & Every, 2014) , using proxy measures such as training times and socially constructed measures such as jobs with ‘public value’ (Department of Education and Early Childhood, 2012). For the jobs that we researched and similar jobs, the findings could be helpful for managers and human resource managers when considering matters such as using work organisation and job design to encourage the exercise of skill, or re-considering the qualifications that are required for entry to a particular occupation. In vocational education policy, the findings could improve the content of qualifications and could provide better grounding for funding decisions relating to those qualifications. The findings also provide some evidence for arguments of comparable worth in employee relations settings, but this aspect was not explored in our project.

Some limitations need to be acknowledged. The research project was exploratory in nature and covered only three industry areas , so the results cannot be generalised widely; however we believe that they do however provide fertile grounds for further research. However, the interviewees in many of these sites had broader industry experience which contributed to their responses; and the stakeholder interviews also provided rich and deep industry-wide and cross-industry insights. Thus the implications of the findings extend beyond the immediate research undertaken. The three different methods of collecting data, moving from industry level to company level and back to industry and cross-industry level,

added successively to the insights gained during the research and could usefully be replicated in future research into this topic.

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