

# The concept of skill and its social construction

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SUMMARY

**The article argues that identifying and developing vocational skills is a social as well as a technical process, influenced by existing power and social structures. After giving several examples of the social construction of skill, it suggests that current national and European policies on skill definition do not really address inequities arising from the social construction process and ends by giving examples of initiatives which can have a positive impact.**

## Introduction

From the mid 1970s, unacceptably high levels of continuing unemployment and the transformation of production processes by ICT have pushed the concept of skill and its acquisition to the centre of debates on appropriate employment policies for modernising economies. Too often, in these debates, the concept of skill is taken for granted and its complexity is ignored. The main argument of this paper is that the search for greater clarity on the concept of skill needs to begin with an appreciation of its social construction. As Wood (1981) points out, 'for a sociologist all skills are socially constructed in that none are the result of some technology which has fallen from the sky'. The first part of the paper provides several examples of how skill is socially constructed, the second part considers the implications of the social construction of skill for current policy developments, and the final section points to some initiatives which may help to avoid some of the negative consequences of social construction.

## The social construction of skill

Discussions of the concept of skill have tended to focus on its technical/professional dimensions, manipulation skills and the knowledge associated with the techniques of the work process, developed via training and experience. However, evaluating, identifying and developing skills, it is argued, should not be seen as primarily objective processes but very much the result of social construction. In this section several examples are given of ways in which social processes impact upon the definition of skill.

### **Employer-employee relations**

The actors most intimately involved in this process of social construction are workers and employers. Workers selling their labour are likely to define their skills differently from employers buying them. For workers, their skills are a combination of the knowledge, skills and experience they have acquired both before entering employment and during their careers. Their definition of their skills is likely to include elements they use in their present jobs, in previous jobs and even elements they have never used but could if required. This concept can be called effective skill. Employers, on the other hand, tend to define skill more narrowly, from the point of view of the requirements of the job after due analysis. This narrower definition can be termed nominal skill, which is normally the only skill employers are prepared to recognise (and reward).

Inevitably, employers have to take into account the skills available in the labour market; they may be unable to impose their narrow definition of skill completely during recruitment. Nevertheless, there is often a difference between the skills an employer considers necessary to do a job and the views held by the worker. These differences can contribute to situations of underqualification but, more commonly, to the type of overqualification found in Spain, where one third of workers between 25 and 29 years of age are overqualified for their job, most of them graduates (Iribar, 2004). Disputes and negotiation are likely to occur around them because of their impact on the pay of the worker.

The difference between effective and nominal skills can be influenced by a variety of factors in a given situation, among which the pertaining power relations are prominent. Trade unions and professional bodies will seek to impose a definition of skill nearer to the effective model. At a time of labour scarcity the difference will be less because of the greater power of the worker to impose their 'effective' definition of skill. Jobs in which there is an emphasis on tacit skills tend to find the worker in a weaker position. Employers will tend only to recognise tacit skills if the worker can persuade the employer to assign some formal criteria to them, e.g. assigning value to years of service in a particular role. In general, it is suggested that the more democracy that exists within the enterprise, the smaller the difference between effective and nominal skills.

### **Women's employment**

The impact of the social construction of skill can be seen clearly in relation to women's employment.

Predominantly men's jobs are systematically characterised as more skilled and better paid than women's jobs because the latter are undervalued, often as a result of social definition of skill. Employers, to divide the workforce, or groups of predominantly male workers, to protect a privileged position, operate in internal labour markets to use their economic power to maintain their skills at a higher level than those of women workers. Gomez Bueno (2000) examined the collective agreement for the Spanish textile industry (a sector with a largely female labour force). The criteria used in the textile sector for grading jobs were degree of autonomy, supervisory authority, responsibility, initiative required, complexity and training. Gomez Bueno suggested these criteria were so general and ambiguous that they permit a high degree of discretion so that a job such as sewing (largely occupied by women) could be classified as unskilled while cutting out (largely occupied by men) is classified as skilled.

Women's jobs are undervalued because their employment features a significant proportion of jobs with an emphasis on tacit skills, e.g. social skills of caring, or on skills developed during family socialisation, e.g. sewing, which are less subject to measurement.

An example is domestic work, mainly carried out by women employed under poor terms and conditions. To what extent is this a result of their low level of technical skill? Anderson (2000) argues that domestic work is more than the enumeration of different tasks. It is skilled both in terms of the variety of tasks performed and the management of these tasks, often inextricably linked and operating at the same time. Anderson suggests that 'when men do household work they, like children, help by task: it is women who manage the process'. However, women's skill in managing and performing domestic work finds no reflection in their status or employment conditions in the sector: because their work is socially devalued, their technical skills are not recognised.

### **Service sector employment**

Occupations in the service sector similarly tend to be undervalued. Jobs such as messenger, delivering pizzas, waiters, and security guards certainly do not appear to require many special skills. However their skills, when objectively defined, are not as limited as is normally assumed: rather the low degree of social recognition of these skills contributes to their low status. Lower status service sector jobs tend to emphasise interpersonal skills. Such skills tend to be tacit, derived from experience and not objectified in qualifications and they tend to be very different from the benchmark skills traditionally associated with manufacturing industry. As Thompson, Warhurst and Callaghan (2000) point out, the traditional model of the skilled or knowledge worker is someone who has access to,

learns and is qualified to practice an explicit body of knowledge; interactive service work depends upon skills located within each worker, e.g. quality of verbal communication. Such work, emphasising 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1989), is often exploited as an 'invisible' skill. The employer's nominal definition predominates, contributes to a low labour market status and is used by employers to justify poor terms of employment (Korczynski, 2002). The devaluation of service sector work is also made more likely by the high proportion of women and young workers in the sector's labour force. Both of these groups have less power in employment relations and are likely to be disadvantaged in the process of the social construction of skill. Thus the question must be posed: 'Is the young motor cyclist delivering pizzas to people's homes really less skilled than the dockworker?'

### **Employees in small firms**

Another group of workers whose skills tend to be undervalued are those employed in small firms. The skills developed by workers in small firms tend to be acquired tacitly, on the job. Given the limited presence of trade unions and the importance of individual relations, the power balance in the small firm tends to favour the employer. Such formal training as does take place tends to be directed largely at management reflecting the pertaining power structure (AJEMAD, 2001). Nominal skills, the skills an employer considers necessary to do a job, carry more weight than any concept of effective skill held by the worker. As a result, regular examples of overqualification may be found, as in the case of graduates employed for work that does not require a university degree. The tacit skills acquired in the small firm tend to be defined by the short-term specific needs of the organisation and, being often particular to that company, may be difficult to transfer to other employment settings.

The above discussion has sought to show that skill can be socially constructed and that the problem of skill cannot be reduced to purely technical questions. As a social construction, skill has been shown to be a result not only of the system of employment relations in a narrow sense but, most clearly in the case of the position of women in employment, of the pertaining pattern of economic and political relations in society.

## Policy implications

The social construction of skill has implications for public policy on skill definition and development. We begin by considering the concept of competences and then take a look at current national and European approaches.

Since the 1980s, the concept of competence has increasingly displaced that of skill, particularly in literature on human resource management. What implications has this emphasis on competence for the emphasis on the social construction of skill? Competences place an emphasis on outcomes specified clearly and transparently and their assessment is separate from particular academic institutions or learning programmes (Wolf, 1994). As such they are to be distinguished from the concept of skill under Fordism with its emphasis on formal qualifications which could be applied to different groups of workers and which specified the knowledge necessary to discharge a particular role.

It is understandable that employers operating in the globalised environment of the last two decades should have difficulties with the traditional concept of skill. The development of increased flexibility and multi-skilling has made less relevant many traditional skills 'compartments.' In addition, in areas of the growing service sector, traditional skills models were never really implanted. However, the development of the concept of competence does more than reflect the changed business environment in which employers are operating. It also reflects a change in the social relations between employers and workers. The decline of collectivism in employment relations and the increasing emphasis on individual relations in the workplace have facilitated the development of a concept which favours much more the employer's nominal definition of skill than the employee's effective definition and takes for granted the association of the worker with the employer's 'project'.

The tendency of the concept to emphasise the acquisition of tacit skills on the job at the expense of explicit skills devalues the qualifications the worker brings to the organisation, creating a closed system which underwrites the established skill hierarchy. The area for negotiation between employer and worker is thus reduced. Employers developing multi-skilling are able to avoid paying for the new skills acquired by the workers by designating them as competences. Employer-driven conservatism and the limited knowledge underpinning associated with the concept tend to result in a set of competences being not much more than a description of the 'normal way of doing the job' with the consequence that they do little to prepare the worker for future development, promotion, and the challenge of change. The acquisition of competences tacitly, in informal learning contexts, makes it more difficult for them to be recorded and certificated and therefore portable, reducing their added value to the worker.

Competences are, therefore, just as subject to social construction as more traditional models of skill. Their significance is that they reflect a modification in power relationships between employers and employees. Employers, facing a more deregulated, competitive environment and less differentiated labour supply, with the expansion of higher education, have taken advantage of the weakness of employee organisation to seek to introduce a definition of skill which approximates more to their nominal definition than that existing under Fordism. In this context it is no coincidence that the development of competences has progressed furthest in those western countries where deregulation and the decline of collective worker power has advanced most.

Proponents of national public policy initiatives to ameliorate the problems created by the current process of social construction face several difficulties. Such initiatives will need to be interventionist to affect embedded structures and therefore will be seen as running counter to the prevailing emphasis on flexibility, decentralisation and deregulation which dominates much contemporary discourse. Political institutions cannot be presented as playing a purely technical role, dictating the framework and the guidelines for new methodologies and systems, but will need actively to facilitate a bottom up, participative process of skills definition. As Bjørnåvold (1997, p. 70) points out, 'the state has to try to balance the competing interests of employers, employees, educators, professional associations, citizens, etc. Legitimate and widely accepted mechanisms ... can only be established on the basis of this kind of broad based participation'.

Current dominant institutional models for skills definition, nationally located and selective in terms of the interest groups involved, tend not to be adequate for creating this kind of participation. A clear example of this has been the development of national vocational qualifications (NVQs) in the United Kingdom. Employer involvement in developing NVQs was largely relegated to sectorally based groups at national level. Not surprisingly, employers have been resistant to implementing the results of national deliberations because they are unlikely to fit their perception of their requirements. As Wolf (1994) points out, it is problematic to assume that an agreed notion of competence can be achieved at national level, because of the lack of consensus. A key feature of the role of competences as an expression of employers' nominal definition of skill in a fragmented and rapidly changing business environment is that they often only make sense in a very specific employment context, with the result that employers are reluctant to go along with any collective definition. Inevitably, therefore, national systems of definition like NVQs run the risk of mass employer abstention, particularly on the part of smaller enterprises. Thus, in a UK context, as Matlay (2002) found, NVQs appeal predominantly to larger firms, being used by only 10 % of firms with 50-250 employees, 3 % of firms with 11-49 and less than 1 % of firms with 1-10. NVQs tend to be ignored in favour of demonstrable employee

abilities to meet present or anticipated organisational needs (Skinner, Pownall and Cross, 2003). The development of NVQs also lacked consensus because of the limited involvement of employee representatives; trade union nominees had very much a minority role on decision-making committees.

It would be wrong however to attribute the problems of the development of NVQs to the weakness of social dialogue in the UK and therefore see them as peculiar to the system of employment relations in that country. Even those countries with a stronger recent tradition of social partnership will have difficulty in effectively reflecting a wide enough range of interests in respect of skill definition. Trade unions find it difficult to reflect the interests of constituencies discussed earlier (interactive service workers, workers in small firms, and women) because these collectives, which will increasingly represent a majority of workers in the European Union, tend to be employed in sectors where union organisation is weak or non-existent and social dialogue quiescent. Employers' organisations face similar problems of representation in the same sectors.

What are the likely implications for these constituencies of the Copenhagen Declaration on Enhanced European Cooperation in Vocational Education and Training? At one level, implementing elements of the declaration in areas such as greater transparency, information and guidance, and developing common reference levels, common reference systems, and common measures, would seem to offer opportunities to review skill systems which have resulted in the inequities discussed earlier. However, the methodology adopted for implementing the declaration is likely to limit its effectiveness in this respect. Basing the development of a single qualifications framework on the experiences of those countries that already have national frameworks, and involving existing stakeholders, is likely to lead to a conservative result because the consequences of the social construction of skill are embedded in those experiences and reflect the interests of those stakeholders. Quality assurance would seem to offer positive opportunities. It is possible to envisage measures and targets for VET performance, which could have a positive effect upon the recognition of skills such as the obligation to establish qualification reviews of particular collectives. However, too much emphasis on bottom-up cooperation in this area is likely again to serve existing interests.

This part of the paper has emphasised the difficulties in reducing the inequities resulting from the social construction of skill by public initiatives which reflect largely employer interests, as is the case with competences, or which largely build upon existing structures of qualification and interest, as appears to be the case with current European initiatives.

## Relevant initiatives

Effective initiatives to foster a more balanced involvement in the social construction of skills need, therefore, to overcome the shortcomings. While recognising that systems of skills definition need a national framework to facilitate transferability and accreditation, they also need to include mechanisms which encourage local involvement on the part of employers and employees and which are sensitive to the full gamut of employment contexts. Given the current balance of power in skills definition, a priority of these mechanisms would seem to give more opportunity for the worker's effective definition of skill being articulated. Several examples of initiatives exist which indicate the form such mechanisms could take, reflecting a mixture of collective and individual approaches.

The framework of action for the lifelong development of competences and qualifications, adopted by the social partners in 2002, is likely to be more effective in focusing on the skills deficiencies of a horizontal constituency such as workers in small firms where there is general social partner commitment. European projects led by UEAPME, such as Protein, to identify new competences produced in informal training in SMEs and craft enterprises and to produce new criteria and practice for identifying and validating them, are examples of such a focus. In the UK the social partners have lobbied successfully for resources to help more small businesses achieve the Investors in People standard. However, in the case of vertical constituencies, such as workers in the interpersonal service sector, where sectoral social partners are weak, there is a need for a focus to be adopted by the central organisations.

A recent collective approach is represented by the establishment by statute in the United Kingdom in 2003 of the figure of the union learning representative. This is a union member at enterprise level, representing employee skills interests, advising them on and organising training opportunities. The limitations of the role are clear. Their rights are significantly less than health and safety representatives in terms of rights to consultation and information. In practice the emphasis in the legislation is much more on their role advising union members than on consulting and negotiating with employers. In addition the legislation confines their role to unionised workplaces (unlike health and safety representatives). However, if these problems were resolved, learning representatives could play a useful role in representing employee views on skills. It is recognised that in the smallest firms the emergence of such representatives, even with comprehensive legal backing, is unlikely. Hence, the initiative needs to go further in establishing the figure of territorial learning representatives with rights in relation to small firms in a region: a relevant precedent is the figure of the territorial safety representative (Walters, 2001).



Another collective approach is provision for group training plans aimed at workers in small and medium sized companies contained in the tripartite agreements for continuous training in Spain, which began in 1993. A group training plan would typically be aimed at the workers in small firms in a particular sector in one province and would involve several different courses. Plans had to be sponsored and managed either by a relevant trade union or employers' association. Thus, for example, in 1999-2000, 26 % of the group plans in engineering (with an average of 1 344 trainees per plan) and 47 % of the plans in the hospitality sector (with an average of 532 trainees per plan) were promoted by unions (Rigby, 2002). Most of the union-sponsored training took place outside working hours and therefore was not controlled by employers. It typically provided training which was less specific than the largely on-the-job training made available by employers. As such it gave a wide range of workers the opportunity to develop their skills profile independently of employer control, helping to change the balance of power by equipping them with more explicit skills and increasing their mobility. The contents of plans were determined by surveys of employees and employers in the sector.

The emphasis on informal learning through work experience which has been associated with the development of the competence approach to skill inevitably poses the question of how to provide more recognition for informal learning. The worker who has developed implicit skills, which his/her employer has little incentive to recognise explicitly, needs rights and an infrastructure of support to translate those skills into a recognised and transferable form. The recent agreement by the French social partners (EIRO, 2003) provides an example of the form such individual rights could begin to take. The agreement signed in September of 2003 consolidates a number of rights, many of which were already in place but whose use is now facilitated. As well as individual rights to training, the agreement provides for a training passport, drawn up at the request of the employee, who takes responsibility for it and which lists the knowledge skills and occupational aptitudes acquired either in initial and continuing training or through professional experience. It also establishes that employees with 20 years' work experience will be eligible for a skills audit and will be given prioritised access to the recognition of their work-derived experience. For rights of this type to operate effectively there needs to be in place local centres where employees can obtain guidance on how to carry out their audit. There is logic in locating those centres in vocational educational institutions given the expertise which already resides there.

A second area of individual rights which has a role in supporting employees in skill definition is equality legislation. A considerable body of European legislation has been put in place over the last 30 years, initially to tackle sex discrimination related to pay, working conditions and social security, more recently extended to tackle discrimination on several additional grounds. Access to training is already covered by this legislation. The issue of skill is covered by equality legislation in equal

work for equal value. Thus when an applicant claims equal pay on grounds of equal value, comparisons are made between the applicant's work and that of the named comparator 'under such headings as effort, skill, and decision'. However, the degree to which effective mechanisms for implementing this equality legislation exist varies considerably in the European Union. The development of more effective equality legislation on skill recognition would have particular implications for women workers but would also be of benefit to other groups whose labour market power tends to be weaker, e.g. older and younger workers. It could take the form of obligations upon employers when assessing competences. Strebler, Thompson and Heron (1997) suggest several options in this respect which, although specifically developed in relation to gender, could be adapted for wider use. These include obligations on employers to check that competence headings apply equally to all groups, review whether self-assessment and peer assessment could be added to line managers' assessment of competences, and train line managers to interpret competence headings and be aware of potential biases in interpretation.

## Conclusion

This article has sought to show that skills are defined as a result of a social process, a process which has produced inequities reflecting existing structures of power. The development of a comprehensive approach to VET, reflected in the Copenhagen Declaration, represents an opportunity to address these problems. Taking this opportunity will involve developing mechanisms to give a voice in the process of skills definition, development and delivery to collectives which, until now, have been largely silent – workers in small firms, the service sector and women workers. Traditional sectoral and national institutions have been unable to do this. There is a need for a multi-level approach which embraces the enterprise and individual employees but which, at the same time, recognises the need for national intervention to reach out to those sectors and collectives where the social process of skill definition is continuing to produce inequities.

Current developments in implementing the Copenhagen Declaration have tended to emphasise the status quo with an emphasis on building on existing national structures. It has been stressed that such an approach is unlikely to result in significant progress. This is not an argument against the importance of a national framework of skill and qualifications; it suggests that such a national framework should take into account the issues raised by the social construction of skill and embrace the kind of initiatives on a more generalised basis. ■

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