Harnessing social and cultural capital for life skills - women who can ‘talk the tools’ and ‘walk the work’
The big picture…

- The manual trades are highly gender segregated.
- Women represent 1-3% of manual trades workers (ABS, 218).
- There has been little shift in this status in 20 years.
The big picture cont…

Rates of VET completions have also remained stagnant during this time.

http://vocstats.ncver.edu.au/webapi/jsf/dataCatalogueExplorer.xhtml
Our broader research project investigates how women achieve sustainable careers (indeed how women thrive and succeed) in the manual trades – trades considered non-traditional work for women.

These are:
• Automotive,
• Electro-technology,
• Construction trades -
  • bricklaying,
  • carpentry,
  • painting/decorating,
  • metal fabrication,
• Plumbing.
During 2018, the project team organised:

- Three half day industry consultation workshops in regional NSW
- Interviews with:
  - One focus group with four apprentices
  - Ten Tradeswomen
  - One apprentice
  - Ten industry stakeholders
  - Two School careers advisors
- Conducted a systematic literature review of 27 articles from 1998 to 2019
Talking the tools and walking the work! Social and cultural capital – life skills

Social capital – relationships and networks,
• “It’s not what you know but who you know”
• Knowing the right people will provide:
  opportunities,
  Family/friends, role models, mentors
  experiences that attain position and reward (Bourdieu 1986).

Cultural capital – language, behaviour, norms & values
• In workplaces, this translates into:
  looking right
  sounding right,
  knowing how ‘to fit in’ (Bourdieu 1986).

Q. How do we endow students who don’t have capital with it so they too can get and keep jobs?
Our research indicates the presence of capital – social and cultural – facilitates success and longevity for women entering manual trades

- 13 of 15 tradeswomen/apprentices interviewed identified having some form of capital prior to their apprenticeship:
  - trades family / friends
  - regional / farm background
  - Identified as ‘tomboy’

- Four out of five apprentices took some kind of trade class in high school.

- Women who have capital find:
  - Their VET journey less daunting
  - They are more quickly accepted
  - Feel they ‘belong’
  - Have some protection
Findings supported by the literature…

Taylor, Hamm & Raykov’s Canadian study:

➢ “young apprentices with a family background in trades and/or knowledge of the workplace culture of the trades are more likely to … enter with a feel for the game” (2015, p. 94).

Berik and Bilginsoy’s US study:

➢ a family tradition with parents and other family/friends in the trades benefited women because the disposition and identity required for the trade existed regardless of gender (2000).

Ibáñez’s Spanish study:

➢ women in businesses owned by family members “…were at no time made to feel uneasy or rejected by their workmates or subjected to any type of harassment or micro-aggression” (2016, p. 47).
Holly (44yrs tradie for 5yrs)

I said dad, I know it’s a bit late in the day and I know I’m forty, you know, but can I be your last apprentice? I just thought oh, there’s so much to learn from dad, you know? And just because I’m a girl, I miss out.

I did my apprenticeship with my dad and loved it, loved it.

In a small town… people go ‘oh, yeah, that’s Phil’s daughter’. ‘Oh yeah, that’s Holly, she’s always you know, done what she’s wanted to do’… once all the tradies, plumber, sparkie and everyone else, once they’ve worked with me once and they see that somebody else has already accepted you, they do the same, you know? …

It’s just opportunity … that’s my experience, and so I’ve gone well, I’m going to make the most of that.
Examples from our study…

**Abigail (22yrs third year apprentice)**

My friend Caitlyn’s dad is actually the boss of (Commercial building company) and I know her family pretty well… I ran into Caitlyn and her mum in Woolworths and I said I want to get a trade… she said ‘well, let me talk to my husband…’, and he rang me up and said ‘do you want a job?’

I just went for a three month trial … I really liked it and he gave me the job’.

I grew up with brothers, so that probably helped me be a bit more tougher and take it a bit.

**Caitlyn (19yrs first year apprentice)**

My whole family are actually builders, my dad’s brothers and my cousins and all of that, so I’ve kind of grown up with it. And then, I did a bit of work experience with Abigail and yeah, she just sort of helped. Stories and that sort of thing, so I thought I’d give it a crack.

I just always ask dad questions and all of that sort of thing, and he’s taken me out on sites.
Examples from our study…

Olivia (15yrs first year apprentice)
I grew up around it, like I’ve been doing tractors since I was born, pretty much, so instead of having to teach the apprentice something, I kind of already knew it. My dad was a mechanic … we’ve been rebuilding cars and selling them since I was a kid.

I did three days and they offered me an apprenticeship straight away.

Lauren (19yrs third year apprentice)
Dad would always work on the family farm, and I kind of always wanted to weld because I thought it was cool.

For Year Ten work experience I went to my uncle, my uncle is a boilermaker… and then for metal and engineering in Year Eleven.

One of the boys [I did work placement with] suggested (company name), and I went and saw them and said look, would you mind if I came down here for a week and they were like yeah, no worries. After the week I said I’m interested in an apprenticeship, have you got one going? And I got the apprenticeship.
The gendered experience of capital…

Gender capital – women and work

- rewards members of a gendered group
- gender capital earns social and cultural capital within an organisation (Huppartz, 2010).

Social and cultural capital operates overtly in the masculine culture of trades. For example, a boy with capital will be ahead of a girl with capital, simply based on gender.

Our findings indicate that a lack of capital obstructs women entering manual trades and their VET journey.

Six tradeswomen identified a lack of capital or a barrier to advancing their capital. This manifests as:

- No family/friends trades capital
- Difficulty obtaining an apprenticeship due to sex-role stereotypes
- Sexual harassment
- Unnecessary surveillance & work checks
Examples from our study…

Jemma (45yrs – tradesperson for 6yrs)
I wanted to be a mechanic when I was sixteen too, but I didn’t know how to do it or how to get into it.

I did find … there was an expectation of a base knowledge which I didn’t have, because I’d never been around anyone who worked on cars. I felt that they were having an expectation of a certain amount of knowledge that they shouldn’t have when you’re doing an apprenticeship.

Emily (37yrs – tradesperson for 6 yrs)
I moved back to (region) and then put the feelers out. There were a lot of knockbacks initially, sort of a few hits to the confidence, and then the doubt came in… can I get a job?

In the end I had a couple of people … looking out for me. There was one builder that was looking for an apprentice, and someone else who knew my grandfather and he went behind the scenes and said ‘give her a go, I’ve seen her work’.

So yeah, he gave me a go and then there was just the usual sexual harassment… by supervisors and colleagues … stealing my clothes.. and then I was told things, repulsive things that people were doing with my clothes.
Examples from our study…

Jade (24yrs – tradesperson for 4yrs)
…My immediate crew is awesome and they just see me as one of them …

There is some other Departments, they need your trade and then I go down there and … they’ll call for someone else to come down anyway…

The first few times … I felt pretty upset about it… I’m like I can do this job, I am here for a reason, and they wouldn’t have put me here if I wasn’t capable… but like when I told the guys about it, they were pretty angry that it had happened…

The boys on my crew, they get pretty protective of me, like when these people don’t listen to me, they come down and get pretty angry about it… they sort of come down and … back me up: ‘No, she’s right.’

…Now I just laugh about it. I am like it’s their loss, if they look like an idiot because they called two people.
**Examples from our study…**

**Madison (25 yrs – tradesperson 6 years)**

I decided on a whim, really. I don’t have any trades in my family, so when I left school… I decided to give it a go because I enjoyed physics.

It was really hard to find [a job]… I even did work experience and had that under my belt and I was still struggling.

Peter called me and said ‘do you want an apprenticeship, none of the other blokes are cutting up to it’.

I did a trial with him and it just went from there. The second year had already begun… so Peter said ‘look, there is not really much point in enrolling now. Why don’t you just do a year on the tools’. Because I wasn’t trade … I wasn’t a tomboy or anything, I wasn’t good with tools.
Where to from here…discussion

- Capital – social & cultural – plays a role in women *talking the tools and walking the work!*

- The masculine culture of the trades enables negative gender capital = low numbers of women in those occupations.

- Current ways redress lack of capital are random and rely on good nature of stakeholders

- Our research indicates that women benefit from ‘formal structures’:
  - organisational supports (including assigned mentors),
  - “the obligation to explicit rules”
  - affirmative action and
  - anti-discrimination regulations (Berik & Bilginsoy, 2006, 322).

- This method creates a pathway that replicates the advantages of capital.

- Co-ordinated structural intervention (from high school through VET and on the tools experiences) can facilitate someone’s journey to success.

*Thank you!*
References


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