Literature Review: Employment

The way that employment is organised, encountered and experienced by members of society can have profound impacts on the construction of people's everyday lifestyles. This literature review will focus on contemporary aspects of employment; considering the issues of the workplace, gender, race, class and the negotiation of work-life balance. In order for any conclusions to be substantiated, these themes shall be closely analysed within a framework that encompasses Marxist, Weberian and Foucauldian notions of power.

A key aspect to employment is that of the workplace, as it is a space where work itself takes place. Current literature indicates that this is a gendered and racialised space which, depending on the biological, cultural and ideological characteristics of the various employers and employees, is experienced unevenly. Valentine (2001) highlights these issues by drawing on research of the printing industry as gendered, where men considered themselves to be physically better suited to the potentially 'dangerous' work involved, and the textile industry in Bradford, where the dexterity of Pakistani immigrants made them suitable workers (2001: 151). Such essentialism suggests premeditated stances exist amongst those who fundamentally hold power in the workplace, complying with Marxist interpretations about the capitalist mode of production exclusively serving those in elite positions. Smith (2002) adds a gendered and racial perspective to this, revealing that the under-representation of women and ethnic minorities in managerial, authoritative jobs is a "significant cause of inequality" (2002: 535). However, Smith fails to fully define why this is, and acknowledges the explanatory limitations to this largely quantitative research. Moreover, Valentine's (1993) paper about lesbian experiences of the workplace clarifies these notions; identifying the workplace as a heterosexually dominated space that can lead to secrecy through fear of alienation and being perceived as an inferior 'other'. Weberian concepts of status and Foucauldian ideas of normalisation within institutes are evident in such cases, as employees themselves make concerted efforts to 'fit in' the workplace environment. It can therefore be seen that the workplace is not as an inclusive space as one may first expect, instead, ingrained cultural practices and beliefs of what worker's bodies and ideologies should constitute invariably creates inequalities.

In addition to this, it is important to consider the notion of class, as this can have implications for specific types of employment. Smith *et al*. (2008) investigated how the UK

Government's 'New Deal' was attempting to assist unemployed lone parents in London back to work. However, the interviews and focus groups revealed that this programme could "exacerbate the socially excluded position of lone mothers by forcing them off benefits and into low paid, low status childcare jobs" (2008: 242). Moreover, the nature of the New Deal attributes the relatively low skills of working class lone parents to "feminised occupational areas such as childcare" (2008: 243) further reproducing both class and gendered inequalities within the labour force. It must be noted that this study is inherently limited, as only women were surveyed within West London; an affluent area where such trends are invariably going to be found. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that class structures and pre-conceived ideas about who can and should do what arguably exist within the UK political system. McDowell (1997) supports this by investigating the recruitment strategies of three merchant banks. This was achieved through qualitative interviews with various employers and employees. McDowell identifies that "the gender of applicants and perhaps their ethnic backgrounds may be changing, but their class composition remains solidly bourgeois." (1997: 132). The recruitment from elitist backgrounds such as specific universities was also inferred, highlighting how power within employment can have significant influence over selective recruitment. The conceptions of power discussed are essentially Marxist, in that power is derived from a hierarchical class structure, with the influence being held by the decision makers. There are clearly limitations regarding the scope of the research examined, but there is still evidence to suggest that class inequalities are prevalent within certain types of employment.

The issue of work-life balance must also be examined as an element of contemporary employment, as the rise of dual-earning families in modern western society has produced challenges surrounding familial obligations such as childcare. There is, however, a tendency for such duties outside of the workplace to reproduce gender inequalities. This has been attributed to the "pressures on men to be present in the workforce", whereby they are "bound to the norms of masculinity" (Sheridan 2004: 222) such as being the 'breadwinner'. Jarvis (2002) partly supports these assertions regarding institutional and employer expectations, but also identifies other reasons why men in particular work long hours and are thus unable to tend to other duties. Jarvis identifies eight drivers for working long hours: tight deadlines; demand-led services; portfolio worker survival; enthusiasm for work; presenteeism; moral obligation; financial incentive and 'macho' goal oriented. Only tight deadlines and demand-led drivers can be regarded as distinct in that they are ultimately enforced by the employer. The remaining six drivers are more

complicated; highlighting how pressure to work long hours can be self-inflicted, not just hierarchically imposed.

In terms of inequality, the reasons for women working reduced hours is not entirely a passive result of traditional masculine values and norms, but a product of choices that bare their own restrictions. McDowell *et al.* (2005) through interviewing mothers about work-life balance, identified that regardless of employment status, all mothers expressed the desire to be involved in paid employment whilst child rearing. However, the uncontested desire to be a mother, income constraints, suitable childcare facilities and employment demands, coupled with ideologies of 'good mothering' (2005: 457) invariably mean that mothers may not have the freedom to work full-time hours. This significantly contributes to the reproduction of the contemporary nature of childcare patterns. The gendered sense of obligation is therefore arguably (re)produced through historically entrenched public discourse; encompassing the Foucauldian notion of self-regulation as a means to balance the expected roles outside the realm of employment. However, through directly drawing on Foucault's work on feminism, ethics and the self, McNay (1992) points out that 'mothering' is a role highly dependent on class, ethnicity and cultural variants (1992: 96). This strongly underpins the importance that spatial and temporal contexts play in producing this gendered aspect of work-life balance.

In conclusion, it is clear that there is a strong inter-connection between all of the issues explored. No one aspect of employment exists as an exclusive entity; rather they are spatially, socially and ideologically linked. A common theme of inequality, however, is continuous. The workplace can be a site of gender and racial inequality, while class can also determine the possible realisation of an individual's employment aspirations. The unequal nature of childcare, (re)produced through both workplace and public discourse, is an example of how employment can influence the negotiation of everyday life. The idea of power within all of these themes is also clear as Marxism, and to an extent Weberian concepts of power, are relevant in explaining structural notions of class and workplace hegemony. Moreover, Foucauldian concepts stress the importance of relational and discursive practices in facilitating the inequalities associated with employment. It must also be noted that the scope of this review is highly limited. Therefore, future studies should incorporate a wider approach to the various inequalities of employment that are both present and absent in this examination.

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