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# **‘We’re not like that’: Crusader and Maverick Occupational Identity**

## **Resistance**

**Rachel Lara Cohen**

### **Abstract**

This article explores the occupational identities of hairdressers and vehicle mechanics working in small and micro-firms. Using qualitative interview data from two UK cities, it examines the ways that workers expounded, reflected on and discursively reframed public perceptions of their occupation. A novel distinction between two types of identity reframing is proposed. ‘Crusaders’ are workers who reject characterisations as inappropriate for the occupation at large, whereas ‘mavericks’ accept that popular characterisations apply to other workers but differentiate themselves. The analysis identifies differences in occupational identity resistance strategies (crusader or maverick) when workers interact with two different publics: customers and trainees.

### **Keywords**

Customers; Hairstylists; Identity Resistance; Mechanics; Occupational Identity; Small Firms; Trainees

## Introduction

The importance of occupation in defining personhood is revealed in the ubiquity of occupational surnames, such as Carpenter or Smith. Today, despite repeated claims that workplace identities are of diminishing relevance (Bauman, 2004; Casey, 1995) and increasing attention to other types of identity-formation, workers continue to be socialised into occupations (Coffey and Atkinson, 1994) and occupational groups develop shared socio-cultural tastes and even practice intergenerational occupational transmission (Grusky and Sørensen, 1998). In everyday settings, the ongoing relevance of occupation to how we see ourselves and others is revealed by our reading of the existential enquiries ‘What are you?’, ‘What do you do?’ as proxies for: ‘What is your occupation?’ Every time we respond by assigning ourselves an occupation: Doctor, Waitress, Bus Driver, we recognise and reinforce the ongoing social meaningfulness of occupation to identity.

This article outlines how workers in two occupations – hairdressing and vehicle mechanics – reflect on their work and discursively evaluate and challenge aspects of their occupational identities. The article identifies workplace-based triggers for workers’ reflexive ‘identity work’ and presents a novel argument that conceptually differentiates workers performing collective versus individual occupational identity resistance.

## Identity at work

Identity is the way we understand and represent our ‘self’. Identity is social, involving ‘cultural, discursive or institutional notions of who or what any individual might be’ (Watson, 2008: 131). Identity is also context-specific. Thus ‘identity is a self-referential description that provides *contextually appropriate* answers to the question ‘Who am I?’ or

“Who are we?” (Ashforth et al., 2008: 327, emphasis added). As such, identity situates and embeds us within concrete social landscapes, including work-scapes.

As the literature on identity has grown, so work-related identities have received increasing academic attention (Brown, 2015; Miscenko and Day, 2015). Much of this has attended to ‘social category social-identities’ (Watson, 2008: 131), including disability, ethnicity, gender, nationality, sexuality. These identities are typically forged beyond the workplace but may be reproduced, exploited or transformed, within the workplace (c.f. Cohen and Wolkowitz, 2018).

Other collective identities, however, originate within working-life. These include class, organisational and occupational identity. Class-identity, in its Marxist and Weberian incarnations, is rooted in work and the relations of production and can be likened to collective class consciousness (SurrIDGE, 2007). Today, however, class identity has increasingly cultural associations and is arguably, in part at least, (re)produced beyond the workplace (Skeggs, 2005; Tyler, 2008).

Organizational identity is entirely formed within the workplace and involves vertical, as well as horizontal, associations: workers identify with others across their employing organisation (Brown, 2015; Miscenko and Day, 2015). Companies attempt to strengthen organisational identification and exert normative control by using ‘culture management’ programmes. This control is not limitless, however, and possibilities remain for workers’ identity resistance or emancipation (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

Finally, and most salient for this study, is occupational identity. This involves workers’ ‘imagined identification’ (Parker, 1997) with others performing the same work across

different institutions (Ashforth et al., 2008: 351). Like class therefore, occupational identity involves collective work-related horizontal association. Occupational identity is rooted in more concrete categories than class, however. Thus occupational identity might be understood as a type of Durkheimian class (or professional group) consciousness (Grusky and Sørensen, 1998). Occupational identity is reinforced by professional associations or trade unions, but unlike organisational identity, may involve no institutional identification. Occupational identity varies in intensity, and is strengthened where work is physically risky or highly skilled (MacKenzie et al., 2015), where there are commonalities amongst workers, demographic clustering, low turnover or physical proximity (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999) or with an extended training period (Loseke and Cahill, 1986). While occupational, and especially professional, identity was an early subject of sociological interest (c.f. Goode, 1957; Hughes, 1970; Salaman, 1971) there has been little recent academic interest.<sup>1</sup> This article suggests, however, that occupation remains a salient identity for workers.

Organisational and occupational identities are potentially competing identity resources and may, therefore, conflict with or substitute for one another (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Miscenko and Day, 2015; Parker, 1997; Walsh and Gordon, 2008: 53). Because organisational identity is strengthened where companies have the resources to manage culture, workers in small resource-poor firms may possess weaker organisational identities and may, therefore, be particularly invested in occupational identity. This has not been fully investigated, but is suggested by analysis that shows that accountancy trainees in small firms are more directly influenced by occupational/professional bodies than trainees in Big 4 firms (Hamilton, 2013: 45).

## **(Re)production of occupational identity**

Identities involve negotiation between the identity attributed to us by others and the self-identity we seek (Brown, 2015: 4; Watson, 2008). Identity is therefore constructed, but not infinitely mutable - the stories or social understandings available within our social world set the boundaries within which we construct identity (Clarke et al., 2009: 327). Some social understandings are located within discrete organisations or professional groups, providing the basis for occupational socialisation (Coffey and Atkinson, 1994; Hamilton, 2013; Loseke and Cahill, 1986). However, other understandings about occupation circulate in wider society and mean that 'when we think about occupations, we employ a dominant label with associated cultural baggage ("politician," "lawyer," "custodian"), an occupational essence' (Fine, 1996: 91).

If social understandings are the starting point, workers nonetheless are able to (re)construct their occupational identities. Fine (1996) argues that in doing so they make choices – selecting from varied occupational and rhetorical stances. Thus, the chefs he studied vary their rhetorical presentation with structural location, career position, and restaurant type. Such rhetorical 'identity work' may also occur 'when one is confronted with threatening and stressful events' (Gendron and Spira, 2010: 276) or following transformations in work practices, routines or technology (Aldridge and Evetts, 2003: 556). This highlights that workers' occupational identity choices are neither essential nor forged beyond the workplace but are instead underpinned by specific workplace experiences.

## **Interaction and identity resistance**

Occupational identities must be performed to others, and consequently are negotiated in real and imagined interaction. As discussed below, this includes interaction with other

workers (Beech, 2008; Coffey and Atkinson, 1994) and with customers (Ghidina, 1992; Walsh and Gordon, 2008). For instance, midwives re-negotiate what it is to be a midwife in interaction with others in the clinical setting: other midwives, but also doctors and nurses (Davies, 1994). Here, occupational identity is reinforced through 'defensive othering' (Ezzell, 2009), whereby 'identity positions are predicated upon the rejection of the values and behaviours associated with a specific other' (McInnes and Corlett, 2012: 29). Othering may be part of a professionalization project, whereby groups frame a collective professional identity in contradistinction to other occupations. However, othering extends beyond strictly 'professional' settings. For instance, relatively low-paid hotel workers position themselves vis-à-vis other workers in order to 'establish competent, privileged and authoritative selves' (Sherman, 2005: 134).

Customers are the third point in the workplace 'service triangle' (Lopez, 2010) and for many workers, the outsiders (or public) with whom they most frequently interact and to whom their identity is most often performed and validated, or not. Customers therefore play an important role in endorsing occupational identity (Walsh and Gordon, 2008) and it is through imagining themselves as customers and describing their work through the eyes of customers that workers attempt to assert the social value of their work and achieve recognition (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999: 421–2). Achieving customer endorsement or recognition is not always straightforward, however. For instance, Gimlin (1996) finds that middle-class clients refuse to endorse working-class hairstylists' self-characterisation as experts. Where workers seek to construct an acceptable and socially viable identity one strategy they may deploy is to 'train wayward clients to behave in a manner more conducive to their work definitions and thus their definitions of self' (Ghidina, 1992: 80). Irrespective of

whether it is ultimately successful, such 'training' comprises a form of identity work, or workplace identity resistance (Brown, 2015; Lee and Lin, 2011; McInnes and Corlett, 2012; Watson, 2008).

Workers engaging in 'dirty work', involving physical, social or moral 'taint' (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999: 415) that produces a 'spoiled' identity (Goffman, 2009), may be at greater risk of mismatch between their self-understandings and the identifications of those with whom they interact. This mismatch produces a strong motivation to transform public understandings (c.f. Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Ghidina, 1992; Meara, 1974). Thus studies have found varied identity resistance strategies among workers performing dirty work, including 'reframing' or 'transforming the meaning attached to a stigmatised identity' through association with non-stigmatised occupations (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999: 421). Yet, little attention has been paid to whether identity resistance for workers (performing dirty work or not), is individual (action that differentiates the individual from the occupation) or collective (action for the occupation).

The above review has provided an overview of occupational identity, pointed to workers' agency in the (re)production of occupational identity and identified work-based interactions as key moments for identity resistance. It also highlights four gaps in the literature. First, relatively little research examines occupational identity as compared to other collective identities: class, organizational and social-category. Second, studies of identity work and resistance, have rarely looked across different occupations to identify commonalities in the types of interaction that produce identity resistance. Third, analyses of dirty work identify techniques used by workers to discursively resist and reframe occupational identity, but there have not been equivalent analyses of workers in less stigmatised occupations. Fourth,



analyses have not explored whether identity resistance reinforces or undermines collective occupational identity. This article attempts to fill these gaps by examining the ways that workers based in small firms across two occupations reflect on and attempt to challenge what they understand as the dominant cultural understandings of their work. Moreover, it introduces a novel conceptual typology, contrasting, maverick from crusader identity resistance, in order to differentiate occupational identity resistance that is individual from resistance that is collective.

## Research methods

Research was conducted between 2002 and 2010 in two mid-sized UK cities for two linked studies. The first study involved hairstylists and the second, five years later, car mechanics.<sup>2</sup> In each all relevant businesses in the city were collated using online directory, Yell.com supplemented by additional directories. Businesses were sorted geographically by post-code and interviews requested at every *k*th business. Given variation across inner and outer city areas and between areas of varying affluence, and given that hairdressers and mechanics have local clienteles, this produced a representatively diverse range of businesses (and clienteles).

The author visited all selected establishments to secure an interview with at least one worker. Where it was impossible, the next business on the list was approached.

Respondents in both occupations were overwhelmingly based in small firms (fewer than fifty employees) or micro firms (fewer than ten employees). This is typical for the occupations; working within small/micro firms is the norm for a majority of UK hairdressers and mechanics.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as noted above, small and micro firms are an under-researched and potentially fruitful site for analysis of occupational identity.

Occupational identity was not part of the original study design, which focused on employment relations and workers' everyday experiences of work-life boundaries. Rather, the themes presented here developed inductively. Respondent denials of identity positions were first noticed in listening to and analysing interviews with hairdressers (the first study), but this theme was not explored further. After similar reflexive denials were encountered during interviews with mechanics (the second study) a research question was posed: What similarities were there in the interactional moments that produced identity resistance and reflexivity among workers employed in these different occupations? This analysis represents an attempt to answer that question.

Talk-based analysis can only ever capture what Watson (2008) terms 'outward/external engagement' with social identity, as opposed to 'inward/internal' self-reflection. Given, however, that the interviewer did not explicitly ask about identity, where identity came up it was relatively 'natural' to the interaction; important to respondents or seen by them as relevant to other issues being discussed rather than directly produced by interviewer prompts. A disadvantage to the study is that discussion of occupational identity was relatively unsystematic. Given this, the following analysis cannot provide a comprehensive overview of identity within these occupations, but rather can highlight ways in which occupational identity claims emerge from discussion about working life.

In analysis, talk about occupational identity was understood as all those statements that, address what it means to be in the occupation. This aligns with Parker's (1997: 121) conceptualisation of occupational/professional divisions as based on 'them who do that, us who do this'. This includes statements about the people who do, or should do, the work as well as those who should not or are unsuited to do it. In order to ensure that respondents

are heard they are, at times, quoted at length. Such self-definition is important, given workers' frustrations about how their work is (negatively) defined by others, discussed below.

The research involved 70 interviews with hairstylists and 25 interviews with car mechanics. Interviews were conducted by the author, recorded, transcribed and all identifying details anonymised. Most interviews took place at the workplace, and customers and other workers were sometimes present for short periods. The different numbers of respondents mean that the different occupations were not equally covered. Claims made here are not, however, intended to perfectly capture these occupations, but rather to identify patterns. The occupations have relevant similarities. Neither is well paid.<sup>4</sup> Both involve protracted workplace training or apprenticeships, which might be expected to accentuate occupational identity (Coffey and Atkinson, 1994). In both occupations workers interact directly with clients in potentially-ongoing relationships, rather than one-off encounters (Korczyński, 2009). Conversely the occupations reflect differences relating to gender (hairstyling is female-dominated; vehicle mechanics male-dominated). There is also, arguably, differences in the stigma or 'dirtiness' of the occupations (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999): Dant and Bowles (2003) identify mechanics as materially 'dirty work' and, as discussed below, vehicle mechanics are subjected to 'moral taint' that hairstylists are not.

### **What people imagine us to be**

Hairdressers and mechanics feature widely in popular culture and have strong 'occupational essences' (Fine, 1996). Consequently, those with whom hairdressers and mechanics interact are likely to possess prior understandings of the work involved. Such public perceptions were consequential for workers, with workers' most acute comments about their

occupational role coming during moments of reflexive denial, when they suggested that they personally, or the work they performed, differed from others' perceptions (elaborated further below). Discussion about, and reflections on, occupational identity typically emerged as workers reflected on interaction with two work-based publics<sup>5</sup>: customers and trainees.

Following sections delineate two different types of identity resistance that occurred in these moments, as workers reflected on their interactions: 'crusader' and 'maverick'. The designations of crusader and maverick are created to emphasise different modes of disassociation from dominant social understandings: collective and individual respectively. Crusaders perform identity work on behalf of the occupation. This may involve an attempt to reframe social understandings of the work and/or workers who perform this kind of work. In contrast mavericks attempt to reframe their individual occupational identity by differentiating themselves from others in the occupation. This identity work leaves existing social understandings, and stereotypes, relatively undisturbed or may even reinforce these.

### **Customers and crusader identity work**

Workers made claims about the social significance of the work-product, or outcome of their work in their customers' lives. This provided a way for workers to highlight the 'social value' of their labour (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999), underpinning positively-tinged identity claims.

Barry, a barber/stylist in mid-size salon is typical:

And the responsibility that you take. Because if you balls someone's hair up you like balls all of their dress-wear. Everything. Because if their hair's not right their dress-wear's not right. So, you've got a big responsibility.

Here Barry focuses on personal image, and its fragility, to highlight hairstylists' responsibility for client well-being and, by extension, the value of their work-product. Different work-products of, arguably, equal social importance, were identified by mechanics, including customer safety and wealth.

Vikram (below) begins, like Barry, by emphasizing the responsibility entailed when working on a product of value, and of personal importance to the customer (a car). As he develops this claim he extends it, however, to envelop occupational recognition and social trust:

Cars, okay cars, for people it's a very personal thing, for some people [it's the] the second biggest asset in their life: house, car... if they can trust you with their car they'll trust you with a lot of things... I've seen people talking about their life. I used to keep, er, Kleenex, box of Kleenex in the office because I've seen people sitting there telling me their life story and start crying, and they do ...You see basically it's, you know, basically they trust me and want to talk.

Thus, Vikram suggests, because cars have high social value, being entrusted with a car qualifies him for other roles of trust, including confidant. This is a two-fold discursive move – first, claiming the social value of the product and second, associating social value and client trust/intimacy. This allows him to deploy evidence of clients' emotions ('crying') to reassert the initial claim about the value of his work. This move, the link between value, trust and intimacy, was similarly made by hairdressers.

As other studies have found, workers also engaged in analogising (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Fine, 1996); associating their occupation with other occupations to discursively emphasise the value of their own work. Hairstylists often likened themselves to therapists,

for instance Mary claimed, 'you've got to be a therapist, as a hairdresser'. This association enabled hairdresser customer-worker interactions to be represented as aesthetically, and additionally emotionally, beneficial. Analogising also enabled workers to make claims that countered the (low) financial value accorded their work. For instance, Nick, a waged car mechanic, frustrated at mechanics' pay argued that 'this country is backwards'. To elaborate he did not, however, focus on vehicle mechanics, but rather transitioned to low pay for 'childcare', a job that involves looking after 'the most precious thing that you've got in your life'. The implication is that in a 'backwards' country characterised by wider structures of unfairness, remuneration is low for work of high value, counter-intuitively, poor remuneration for work on cars may indicate its value.

Emphasising the social value of the work and analogising are both defined here as forms of 'crusading' identity resistance. In both cases workers identified value either directly by emphasising the value of their work-product or through comparison with other (valuable) occupations. In doing this they act as identity crusaders, attempting to transform (and improve) occupational identity. As outlined in the next section this contrasts with types of maverick occupational resistance, which was a type of resistance that more frequently emerged in reflecting on interactions with clients and which involved differentiating themselves from others within their own occupation.

### **Customers and maverick identity work**

Respondents regularly presented themselves as *unlike* an, often un-defined, other. This rhetorical othering is seen in how Jenny, a hairstylist in a mid-sized salon situated in a working-class area of town, describes her communication with customers:

Wherever I work I want to be myself. I don't want to ask somebody if they're going on holiday, because you're not really... We're not like that. We talk about things that are deep as well.

Jenny's repeated use of disclaimers ('not like that' 'not really') in representing talk in her salon as 'deep' was typical of stylist interviewees. These denial-claims are a form of maverick identity resistance because they presuppose that 'other' stylists are 'like that' while simultaneously differentiating the speaker as an occupational maverick.

If denial-claims were typical the 'other', from whom stylists differentiated themselves varied. Jane (below) demonstrates an alternative version:

Some people always think, it's a big company, big name, it's really well known, it's going to be pretentious... And I think they do feel sometimes a bit intimidated ...But if they actually come in they can see that it's not like that. The atmosphere's very friendly. [Jane, stylist, national chain]

Here Jane reflects on how customers read the salon brand aesthetics and dissociates herself and her workmates from one reading she believes likely: pretension. Jane does not, however, deny that hairstylists are pretentious. Rather, as James a stylist in another upscale salon echoes, 'Some salons, they're quite pretentious'. Thus, Jane and James suggest, pretention is not a wholly inaccurate identification, but applies to *other* salons and stylists, not themselves.

Variation in maverick stylist identities was not random. Rather, stylists in the most aesthetically-oriented salons denied pretension, whereas those in working class neighbourhood salons denied a gendered-classed triviality. Thus, the denial-claim made by

stylists varied with workers' reflexive understanding of their workplace and their customers' socio-economic position. This variation demonstrates the nuanced and situated nature of workers' reflexive considerations of customer occupational identity expectations. In both cases stylists present themselves as mavericks, unusually well positioned to engage in emotional-labour (Cohen, 2010) and produce the interactional trust essential for salon work (Eayrs, 1993), but do so by differentiating themselves from specific, gendered and classed, real or imagined, others.

In contrast to stylists, there was considerable consistency in the maverick identity work performed by vehicle mechanics. Mechanics negotiate especially tricky territory in relations with customers, contending with material and metaphorical dirt (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Dant and Bowles, 2003). During interviews, they regularly acknowledged the occupation's spoiled reputation (Goffman, 2009), including characterisations of mechanics as untrustworthy and unintelligent.

It's just a nightmare really, it's mainly, I'd say with the customers, cause it, no-one likes going to a garage, everyone knows that no-one likes going to a garage, 'Oh mechanics will rip you off, they'll do this, they'll do that.' ...it's probably the way that everyone thinks about the trade, no-one likes it and, it gets pushed onto yourself sort of thing ... when you get customers talking to you they just talk to like you're an idiot and stuff like that and like they think that they're gonna get ripped off.

This quote from John, a mechanic in a medium sized garage, highlights the distrust with which mechanics contend, showing how it is experienced and how it undermines interactional work. Evocatively, he suggests the occupational identity is forcefully 'pushed



onto' him, implying an inability to resist. As we see below, however, many mechanics did find ways to resist.

Mechanic-customer interactions lack a 'menu' (Korczyński and Ott, 2006); typically when a customer enters a garage neither she nor the mechanic know what work is needed, undermining 'customer sovereignty'. Moreover, when the repaired car is successfully re-fitted with parts the work is literally invisible (Dant, 2010). Thus, mechanics' work requires justification, explanation, time/cost estimation and, frequently – should their first best guess of the problem prove incorrect or partial – re-estimation. Within these imprecise processes an occupational reputation for dishonesty has emerged. Mechanics did not usually challenge this wholesale, but rather, by imagining themselves as customers (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999), claimed this reputation was justified with respect to others in their occupation.

[in other garages] you pull in, and they've got somebody in a nice blue overall standing there, waiting, to do a job for you, and they're targeted, by their company directors, to make a certain amount of money out of every car that comes in the door so if you've got a little job that's gonna cost twenty pounds, they'll find a load more stuff, and then if you happen to be female, they'll frighten the living daylight out of you, by telling you that your hand-brake cables are gonna break and, your tyres have got no tread on them and your shock absorbers are leaking, and the car's not safe and you shouldn't drive it out of the place without, getting this done...

[Howard, owner/mechanic, longstanding neighbourhood garage]

The claim that customers, and women especially, have good reason to distrust some mechanics was echoed widely. Which type of 'other' garages were identified as

untrustworthy varied, however. Here Howard highlights the role of ‘company directors’, implying that problems are especially acute in incorporated firms, namely Main Dealerships. As several mechanics pointed out, dealerships operate payment schemes involving targets and commission, which provide structural incentives to identify additional work. Howard’s depiction of the worker in ‘a nice blue overall’ meanwhile symbolically differentiates these ‘other’ establishments from small local businesses like his – the material cleanliness of Main Dealerships belying the morally dirty practices he suggests occur. Conversely, by implication we deduce, smaller, physically dirtier, unincorporated workshops are morally cleaner and more trustworthy.

If widespread acknowledgement that *some* mechanics are untrustworthy enabled mechanics to identify with customers, it also meant that mechanics seeking to resist this occupational identity, never challenged it wholesale. Consequently, they constructed themselves as mavericks. Moreover, just as, and undoubtedly because, female customers were widely described as especially vulnerable to predatory tactics, female customers were regularly implicated within maverick identities – relations with female customers rhetorically deployed as evidence of honesty. Respondents’ enthusiasm for providing this evidence was doubtless exacerbated by being interviewed by a woman, but there were no questions in the interview schedule on client gender. Moreover, respondents only raised gender in relation to (dis)honesty. The following two (excerpted) examples are typical.

I think [my brother-in-law] must have asked her, ‘Why do you take the car to Dick? As a woman, why do you go to Dick?’ And she said, ‘Because he doesn’t treat me like a fool.’ ...I think that’s why probably [I have] so many female customers. ...Women, no disrespect, are open in a garage to be taken to the cleaners, because they don’t

know the ins and outs of a motorcar... it's not their forte, some are interested, to a point, some aren't, so you can tell them, if you want to, they come in with a problem, you can tell them whatever and they won't know what it is... or how much it's likely to cost. But if you're honest and up front they come back... and they go: 'Ooh go and see him.' I mean I've got four girls sharing a house. The one came from a recommendation from the girl who used to be in the house that they moved into, and I ended up, the four of them come here... [Dick, sole-owner-operator long-standing garage].

There was another article [in the local paper] and they were saying that females were very comfortable coming to [this] Garage cause a lot of ladies were coming to the Garage and they'd feel like they're not being trusted properly [elsewhere] or they were being talked down to and they were not being explained. The mechanic [was] just saying, 'Here's your keys. Your car's done. Bye, bye.' And not being explained to. I really take pride in telling people how the car's been... I like to show them the parts if they want to have a look at them. I want them to come out of here being reassured that they haven't been done, everything's been done correctly and er, I've got four sisters and they're all driving ...like I said, I like to treat people how I like, how I like myself and, basically I just explain everything about it... [Steve, co-owner garage].

In both quotes mechanics describe women's repeated custom at length, carefully 'verifying' it with impartial sources (brother-in-law; newspaper), to counter the association with untrustworthiness and gendered exploitation and thereby construct a maverick identity.

This discursive deployment of female customers is tellingly contradictory, since both Steve

and Dick suggested that women were especially ill-equipped to make sound judgements about car repair ('not their forte'). The contradiction highlights, therefore, that client gender is deployed symbolically – feminine associations of weakness and vulnerability used to highlight respondents' exceptional care and concern. The implication is that only the exceptional mechanic does not use his power to exploit clients. As such this maverick identity resistance actually reinforces existing negative stereotypes about the occupation.

In the above quote Steve also describes the material efforts he makes to validate his otherwise invisible work, including displaying extracted parts to customers. Other mechanics used other material techniques to increase the transparency of interactions and demonstrate trustworthiness. Specifically, computer diagnostics, externalised and thereby legitimised, work:

...because, if you don't go by what the computer says you've got nothing to prove to the Customer.' [Mark, mechanic, specialist garage]

Reliance on ostensibly 'impartial' technology was, however, also not straightforward. Rather, computers were widely critiqued as leading to over-diagnosis, something Howard (above) associated with disreputable 'other' garages. This highlights the paradoxical effects of, and limits to, mechanics' rhetorical and material attempts to produce a maverick occupational identity of conscientious trustworthiness. In an occupation reliant on unstandardized and unpredictable materials (vehicles needing repair), there is, at least sometimes, little relationship between effort and outcome and no fool-proof mechanism for evidencing honest work.

This section has suggested that workers in both occupations attempted to construct maverick identities in managing client relations. Maverick identities emerged from workers' endeavours to imagine how the occupation at large was perceived by customers and, in response, to create distance between their individual and a collective occupational identity. In the case of mechanics, who regularly contended with suspicious and hostile customers, the construction of a maverick identity facilitated client interaction and was critical to obtaining and retaining work, but was rarely entirely successful. Hairdressers did not contend with as obviously stigmatising identities, nor as unpredictable work. Yet, maverick identity resistance was a way to overcome the constraints on workplace interaction that occurred in the context of customers' gendered-classed understanding of hairstylists.

### **Trainees and a crusader identity**

Apprentices, or trainees, are widespread within salons and garages. Most arrive straight from school. Therefore, after customers, trainees are one of the outsiders or public workers most often encounter at work. It has been shown that trainees develop occupational identity as they move from occupational outsider to insider (Hamilton, 2013). The present study additionally revealed that interactions with trainees – especially ill-fitting trainees – prompted qualified practitioners to reflect on their own work, including the requirements for occupational mastery. In elaborating on this workers perform crusader resistance, attempting to reset public understandings of their occupation.

Hairdresser stories of trainee misfit most often pinpointed under-estimation of the training required<sup>6</sup>.

A lot of trainees come and they think they're expecting to do hair, just like that.

[Naomi, stylist]

This expectation, to 'do hair, just like that', suggests impatience, but more importantly, a disrespect for the skills and training required. This was sometimes framed as the outcome of gendered and classed-privilege, and an implied devaluation of women's work, as in Mary's critical appraisal of male trainees:

They're [male hairdressers] not good. ...We've had one trainee who brought his scissors on the first day and err, you know... [incredulous laugh]. And he wanted to learn all he could in a year, because his mum and dad were going to open a salon for him. I said, 'Oh, alright, door's there!' [Mary, Stylist/Owner]

For stylists, trainees were especially important because they collectively embodied the outside world's beliefs about who could make it in the occupation.

There's another side of it where well: if you can't get a proper job you can always be a hairdresser. Which is an awful... it's so unprofessional. You know, I mean my wife's a teacher, and I couldn't believe how she said, 'Well, you know, you don't want to be a hairdresser, you want to go to university' and all this [Preston, stylist/Owner].

Stylists responded to the notion that hairdressing was not a 'proper job' by emphasising the training required to perform the work. For instance, Carl (below), develops an analogy with medicine. Notably, however, as Carl moves from his initial assertion that hairdressing 'is a profession' to the mandative clause that it 'should be a profession' he displays awareness of (and rejects) the same public assumptions that Mary and Naomi (above) criticise: that hairdressing is something that you can 'just walk into'.

It is a profession. To become a doctor, it's three years at university and then SHO [junior doctor] for one or two years. To work for us it's three years as a junior and

then you've got a six-week barbering course where you have to polish off. And then you come onto the salon floor. But then again, the salon floor, when you come up the first year, you're a fully qualified stylist, you know everything, but you're then building yourself up and getting experience, like a doctor really. Even though a doctor's qualified in three years, they're still an SHO where they do loads of hours and get loads of experience. ...You know, you can't just walk into it and do it. *You* couldn't do it. I mean, waitress over there couldn't do it. It's not as easy as just picking up a pair of scissors and cutting somebody's hair. And I feel it should be a profession. [Carl, stylist, chain]

Thus, hairstylists in reflecting on trainees, and training, discursively react against assumptions revealed by trainee behaviour – that hairdressing is easily mastered. In reacting they act as crusaders, defending and repositioning the occupation.

Vehicle mechanics were also frustrated by trainee behaviour and the lack of occupational respect it revealed. Gary (below) is typical.

'Cause the way it used to be, [the College] used to take on a load of lads or girls, and then just [send them] straight to the workplace. And most of them were useless.

They didn't wanna know really. It's, it was just something to do. [Gary, mechanic]

To the extent that vehicle mechanics training had become 'just something to do', mechanics did not blame young people, but rather the careers advisors and colleges who reinforced this identification by systematically pushing under-achieving young people to do 'something', rather than nothing. Mechanics training had in this way become a last resort for young people who might otherwise be classified as 'NEET' (not in education,

employment or training). Mechanics like Gary resisted this identification, emphasising mechanic work as physically arduous, and therefore unsuitable for people who 'didn't wanna know' or who lacked the commitment for early mornings and cold winters in exposed workshops.

If tough masculine talk that emphasised manual hardiness was one way that mechanics responded to trainees it was not the only type of crusader occupational identity displayed. For instance, Dave (below) suggests that the current crop of 'unruly' trainees will 'no longer' 'be enticed' into mechanics as it increasingly requires a more academic skill-set. It is noteworthy that Dave was in his twenties when interviewed and so little older than the 'younger lads' he criticises.

These younger lads that are coming in now, that are ...unruly and all that ...they're not, no longer gonna be enticed into this game because it's got to be qualifications and it's gonna be learning how to use a computer, maths, everything comes into it now. [Dave, mechanic]

In these different ways – by variously emphasising traditional working-class attributes of toughness and discipline or middle-class qualifications – mechanics reacted against the idea that 'anyone', nor less unruly or unmotivated trainees, can do their work.

The examples in this section have shown that as workers reflect on their trainees, they also reflect on the outer-world's idea of what it takes to be a hairdresser or mechanic, sometimes identifying 'teachers', 'colleges', 'careers advisors' or 'parents' as implicated in constructing or reproducing mis-identifications. For workers the gap between their and the public's understanding of their occupation is experienced as a gap between (respectively)



workplace demands and the expectations and capacities of trainees. One trainee's weaknesses may indicate individual-level problems, but systematic gaps between trainee perceptions and workplace requirements are evidence of widespread occupational (mis)identification. Thus, when they criticise the suitability of trainees these workers act as occupational identity crusaders, attempting to alter the way their occupation is identified - hard labour or knowledge-work; professional or easy. Yet, in doing this they reproduce the cultural dismissal of 'unsuitable' working class recruits (Tyler, 2008).

## Discussion

The occupations examined here – hairdressing and mechanics – are socially meaningful. Thus, public perceptions of what the work involves shape workers' interactional landscape. This creates difficulties in getting work done and constrains workers' ability to define their identities. Consequently, stylists and mechanics actively reflected on and sought to reframe what they understood others' perceptions to be. This article introduces a key distinction in how they attempted this: Crusaders claimed that popular characterisations were inappropriate for the whole occupation, whereas mavericks accepted popular characterisations as appropriate to other workers but rejected them for themselves.

This article contributes to those studies that have shown that occupational identity work is shaped by tensions *at the workplace* (Aldridge and Evetts, 2003; Fine, 1996; Gendron and Spira, 2010). The workers studied here (re)constructed occupational identity in response to mundane workplace tensions, produced by interaction with different work-based publics: customers and trainees. The use of maverick (dis)identification in customer-interactions facilitated market differentiation and signalled trustworthiness within relatively brief customer-worker interactions in occupations in which customer sovereignty is complicated

by non-standard 'menus' (Korczynski and Ott, 2006) and distrust common. Although effective for individual workers maverick reframing often reinforced socially undesirable occupational identifications – and customer distrust – more generally. Where crusading identity work occurred with customers it rarely involved confrontation with, or rejection of, existing identities, rather it relied upon redirection, highlighting positive parts of the work via analogising and/or by identifying its socially valuable ends. In contrast, identity work relating to trainee interactions involved workers acting as crusaders in ways that more explicitly confronted public (mis)conceptions. It is likely that the duration and scope of trainee interactions, which are typically more expansive than relationships with customers, reduces the feasibility of maverick identity resistance. This suggests that maverick and crusader resistance strategies are not chosen randomly but are rooted in different interactional settings.

## Conclusion

This article has explored workers' reflexive identity resistance. It has shown that this can be either collective, reinforcing occupation-wide identification while resisting dominant understandings, or can be individual, reducing collective identification and failing to challenge, or even reinforcing, dominant understandings. A topic for future studies is whether workers' deployment of one or other of these types of occupational identity resistance has wider implications, including implications for workers' collective organisation.

The identification of strategies of resistance is not meant to suggest that workers are necessarily successful in (re)constructing their self-identities, nor that they are freed of the constraints imposed by other, overlapping, social identities. It is, however a reminder that occupation is not simply 'the tag' that 'locates an individual's place in the social hierarchy'

(Bottero, 2005: 62), but rather occupation may convey more fine-grained meanings. Thus, classed distaste (Tyler, 2008) clearly exacerbates and may underpin the distrust experienced by mechanics, but mechanics' occupational identity and resistance, cannot simply be read from their class (working) and gender (male). Similarly, hairdressers are 'emblematically' represented as female, find their skill trivialised and adjust their conversation, and emotional labour, to meet the perceived demands of clients in ways that are highly gendered and (working)classed (Cohen, 2010; Cohen and Wolkowitz, 2018). Yet, the identity 'hairdresser' retains meaning that goes beyond 'working-class female worker'. In other words, these are classed and gendered occupational identities, but they cannot be reduced to class and gender. Rather, they remain *occupational* identities. That occupation matters is, moreover, evident in the multiple ways that workers perform crusader and maverick *occupational* identity resistance.

Hairdressers and mechanics are visible within popular culture, the media, and daily encounters and have strong 'occupational essences' (Fine, 1996). In contrast, much administrative, managerial and coordination work is performed by workers with less culturally recognised jobs. Moreover, previous studies have shown that workers in new occupations cannot draw upon culturally recognised labels (Lee and Lin, 2011). Where occupational essences are weaker, therefore, we may find that there exists considerable scope for identity (re)construction, whereas in occupations like hairdresser or mechanic, with widespread cultural resonance, workers seeking to reconstruct occupational identity must confront dominant labels directly – as either crusader or maverick.

Previous studies have shown that workers performing 'dirty work' (c.f. Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999) distance themselves from or reframe popular understandings. This article

suggests that stigma makes it more difficult to produce and maintain a desired occupational identity, but forms of identity management are found within *and beyond* dirty work.

Occupational identity work is rooted in the mundane ways that work is performed and experienced and the different spaces for resistance afforded.

The workers studied here are based in small/micro firms, an under-studied, but distinctive, research site. Working alone or with few others, they have considerable discursive space to shape occupational identity. Workers within larger companies have fewer interactions with customers or trainees. Therefore, whether they have equivalent scope, or need, to engage in identity reframing is an open question requiring further investigation. Additionally, given the specificities of work and identity in the UK, it would be interesting to see how far these findings are replicated elsewhere. Finally, noting criticisms of interviews as a mode to understand identity work (McInnes and Corlett, 2012), future research employing observational methods might usefully situate these strategies of resistance within a richer understanding of the work-setting.

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<sup>1</sup> Only six percent of the work-identity articles in Miscenko and Day’s (2015) review focus on occupational identity, and many of these examine ‘dirty-work’ (discussed below).

<sup>2</sup> The second study also examined accountants, not discussed here for space reasons.

<sup>3</sup> Nationally 98 percent of UK hairstylists are in workplaces with fewer than 50 employees, more than three quarters in micro establishments (under ten employees); over 70 percent of car mechanics are in small workplaces, and more than half of these in micro workplaces. (Office for National Statistics 2013, analysis available by request).

<sup>4</sup> In 2016 median full-time pay in vehicle trades was £26,628 and hairdressing, £14,397 (Office for National Statistics, 2016), placing both in the bottom half of the income distribution, and hairdressers near the foot.

<sup>5</sup> Public is used here to include all who, in the first instance, are situated outside of the occupation and therefore have ‘outsider’ perspectives.

<sup>6</sup> UK hairdressers do not require state license.