

**Constructing gendered workplace ‘types’: the weaver-millworker distinction
in Dundee’s jute industry, c. 1880-1910**

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Abstract:

Victorian and Edwardian Dundee was labelled a ‘woman’s town’ due to the high proportion of women who worked in the city’s staple jute industry. In this article, drawing on a range of contemporary sources, I use the work of feminist historians and Foucauldian notions of discourse to interrogate this label and explore why and how working women came to be marked as a particular problematic group. Further, in questioning this group, I demonstrate how two specific workplace ‘types’ – the weaver and millworker – were identified and constructed in contrast to one another. This article probes the processes through which these two ‘types’ were created, contested and performed in relation to the segregations and working conditions of their respective workplaces, and argues for a markedly spatial interrogation of gender identities and the category ‘working woman’.

Key words: working women, Dundee, discourse, gendered ‘types’, jute industry

Introduction

The Scottish city of Dundee has a long history of textile production and, when raw jute first arrived in the 1830s, was gradually transformed into “juteopolis” (Walker, 1979; Whatley, 1992). Renowned for being a “one-industry city” (Checkland and Checkland, 1997: 35), jute production dominated Dundee’s economic landscape, employing around 80 per cent of the workforce in the period 1841-1911 (Rodger, 1985), reaching its peak between 1891 and 1911 with almost 40,000 operatives (Walker, 1979).

At its simplest, jute production was divided into the processes of spinning and weaving and between the mill and factory. The mill was where the jute fibre was prepared for weaving and was split between two buildings and stages; the Low Mill, where jute was softened, carded and drawn out, and the High Mill, where yarn was spun, twisted, reeled and wound. Jute yarn was then taken to the factory where weavers wove it into cloth (Watson, 1990).

The gendered dynamics of this process were unique, with women dominating both mill and factory work and primarily confined, through a rigid vertical segregation, to the respective tasks of spinning and weaving (Wainwright, 2005). This was in contrast to other textile centres across Britain with women largely restricted to the latter, the former remaining the preserve of men (Joyce, 1980; Morgan, 1997; Winstanley, 1996). As women dominated the jute production process, the industry was by far the most significant employer of female labour in Dundee. The 1901 census, for example, showed that 31 per cent of the total female population was employed in the mills and factories, with 27,635 out of the

39,752 textile industry operatives being women. Moreover, in 1901, “the proportion of married women who had remunerative occupations was exceptionally high” – at least 24.1 per cent compared with 6.1 per cent in Glasgow and 5.6 per cent in Edinburgh (Walker, 1979: 86-87).

The advent of jute created high demand for workers and in-migrations of labour created a gender imbalance in the city with, in 1901, 17,421 more women than men over the age of 20 (Lennox, 1905). Expressing patriarchal concern, a philanthropic organisation in the city, the *Dundee Social Union (DSU)*, noted, “[b]etween the ages of 20 and 45, Dundee has three women for every two men, and around this significant fact hang some of the most serious problems” (1905: xii).

The idea of working women as problematic resonated with, and was (re)constructed by, philanthropists, social commentators, journalists, company directors and trade unionists who, for various reasons, converged upon the city’s women workers through investigation, surveillance and/or concern. Indeed, taking a Foucauldian tack and recognising the temporalities of understanding ‘women’ in history (Riley, 1988), a range of discourses arose around Dundee’s working women, making them the object of alarm and subject to thorough scrutiny (Wainwright, 2002).

Placed within feminist historical geography’s current trajectory of questioning the production of gendered identities (Morin and Berg, 1999), this article suggests the continuing need for the category ‘woman worker’ to be challenged (Scott,

1988). It is informed implicitly by the ‘new cultural history’ (Hunt, 1989) approach taken by a number of feminist historians, who have questioned the epistemological category of ‘women’ in history (Riley, 1988 and Scott, 1988).

Writing almost twenty years ago, Scott (1988: 42) surmised:

The story is no longer about the things that have happened to women and men and how they have reacted to them; instead it is about how the subjective and collective meanings of women and men as categories of identity have been constructed.

In extending this, the article is informed by the work of Rose (1992) and Canning (1996) who have explored the discursive construction of gendered identities in nineteenth-century textile-manufacturing towns and the discursive approach taken by scholars to identify other socially constructed female figures, notably ‘the prostitute’ (Nead, 1988; Walkowitz, 1992), and the moral geographies they invoked. Importantly, as a point of departure, this article explores not only how working women were constructed as a group of concern and intrigue, set apart from their ‘respectable’ counterparts and men, but how they performed and were problematised and hierarchised into two particular identities: the weaver and the millworker.

Canning (1996: 219) notes that work identities are “elusive historical subjects that cannot be reconstructed in any definitive way; instead they are “read” and interpreted by comparing a variety of different sources”. The aim of this article is not to recover true or essential work identities but, rather, taking a discursive approach, to look for recurring themes in the way working women, and specific groups of working women, were defined, essentialised and contrasted with one another. In doing this, a number of sources are used to identify discursive practices, including the performative, through which working women were

(re)positioned. Through detailed examination of the peculiarities of Dundee, this article adds a markedly spatial interrogation to the work on gendered identities. It does this by focussing closely on how ‘types’ were embedded in specific workplace geographies and material conditions, and how understandings of these were central in ‘type’ differentiation.

The article draws on a range of primary sources, including newspaper articles, philanthropists’ investigations and trade union reports, taken mainly from the period 1880-1910, complemented by reflective accounts and oral histories relating to the early twentieth century. As the term discourse is now common currency and has become something of a nebulous term, I first explain how I understand and use it, and why it is useful in probing the construction of gendered identities.

A discursive approach

According to Green (1990:3), discourse is “a coherent pattern of statements across a range of archives and sites” whereby meanings depend not only on one particular text or image, but also on meanings carried by a range of often seemingly unconnected texts (Rose, 2001). The task of discursive archival research is therefore to find, what Foucault (1972: 29) describes as:

[R]elations between statements (even if the author is unaware of them; even if the statements do not have the same author; even if the authors were unaware of each other’s existence); relations between groups of statements thus established (even if these groups do not concern the same, or even adjacent fields; even if they do not possess the same formal level; even if they are not the locus of assignable exchanges); relations between statements and groups of statements and events of a quite different kind (technical, economic, political, social).

Many readings of discourse focus on the production of knowledge and truth, the location(s) from which knowledge and truth are derived and legitimated, and the ways they are circulated, consumed and reproduced. This article, as in historical research more generally, relies almost exclusively on the words, images and texts produced by the socially privileged and institutionally powerful (Canning, 1996). However, discourse is about more than formal and official documents, and is never a free-floating construction (Gregory, 2001).

As cultural geographers and historians have taken up discourse analysis, a criticism that continues to be levelled at this approach is that it deals only with meanings and representations. However, for Foucault, discourse is a material and historical entity, rather than abstract and textual (Young, 2001). Emphasis on the materiality and physicality of discursive practices has been pressed more forcefully in recent years. The reading of discourse I use here is concerned with material, historical and geographical practices of knowledge production, with how discourse was materialised and replicated in and through particular spaces, and with the creation of specific subject positions and performances. Concerned with the *dematerialising* of discourse, Philo (2000) suggests the need to dissolve the materiality-discourse, reality-representational binary opposition, re-vision the relations between them, and explore how representations and materialities create and build upon one another. Through close reflection on workplace geographies, the materiality of discourse is an important theme in this article.

I am not only interested in what the category of 'working women' and, notably, the sub-categories of 'weaver' and 'millworker' meant, but also how they were

practised – how they were used, performed and reconstituted, both textually and materially. This article starts with an exploration of Dundee as a ‘woman’s town’, and then goes on to explore the construction of the two seemingly distinct groups of weavers and millworkers, and details the processes and geographies through which these identities were forged.

A ‘woman’s town’

In 1905, in his thesis on working-class life, Lennox commented that “Dundee is a woman’s town and most of its productive labour is in her hands”. This label, regularly repeated in histories of the city and industrial Scotland, reverberates through Dundee’s own sense of heritage. It was derived from real and imagined geographies as women were seen (both physically and through journalistic appraisals) at, and going to and from, work and, more generally, moving ‘freely’ through urban space, very much against Victorian middle-class notions of respectability and femininity, and understandings of public and private space (Wilson, 1991). For example, in 1893, the *Dundee Year Book’s*ⁱ (*DYB*) commentary on the Royal Commission on Labour’s report into the jute industry noted:

The subject of women’s work and wages has been and will be interesting...Fifty years ago a woman’s sphere was bound generally by the narrow limits of her own fireside, but now all is changed, and her sphere has “widened with the process of the sun.” In an industrial community such as ours, by far the largest portion of working women is to be found in the mills and factories. (*DYB*, 1893: 175)

Such articles, making visible working women and their geographies, reflected the ‘New Journalism’ of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century city (Malone, 1999) which had, as a central theme, the subject of women’s work.

Although the role of women in paid employment was chief in the designation of Dundee as a ‘woman’s town’, journalistic investigations of workers extended beyond factory and mill to “Their Social Conditions” (*DYB*, 1901). Judgement was passed on issues including housing conditions, recreational pursuits and social habits, all aimed at providing readers with a holistic view of those who sustained the city’s staple industry. For example, the *DYB* (1884: 61) noted:

There are in this busy centre of the industry many thousands of women engaged in the preparation and weaving of jute alone, who pass their lives in the perpetual whirl and roar of mill and factory, so that we cannot afford to be independent of the subject, even if we would. For the daily work and surroundings of these women must, perforce, be of interest to us when we remember the influence they have for good or evil on the homelife and whole social position of the worker.

Further, when outside of work, for example, during strikes, women were reported “parading in the streets”, “shouting and singing” and indulging in “threatening demonstrations” (*Lamb Collection*ⁱⁱ, 196c27). Women were also seen “promenading” and “gossiping” and, more surreptitiously, participating in what one visitor to the town described as “indecent” behaviour with members of the opposite sex (*Dundee Advertiser*, 10 September, 1912). One image perpetually used to depict women and public space was that of the female drunk and in 1901 the *DYB* reported that there was a “colony of females more negligent of their offspring than the lower animals” and that this would have serious repercussions for succeeding generations. In part, women’s independent earnings were blamed for this, as one commentator noted, “[t]he full hand leads to a loose style of management” (*People’s Journal*, 18 June 1881).

However, interest in women’s workplace participation was not restricted to journalistic commentary but was echoed by the city’s industrial, religious,

political and social elite. For example, in 1893, giving evidence to the Royal Commission on Labour, the Reverend Henry Williamson, a Unitarian minister and president of the Dundee and District Mill and Factory Operatives Union (DDMFOU), voiced concern over working women's inability to organise themselves before the Union's establishment:

It is not easy to know what to do with women. They are governed by impulse...all at once, without notice 50 or 100 of them are in a state of rebellion, and it requires someone to come in just to advise them.

Comparing women to a "flock of sheep without a shepherd", he suggested the usual outcome of strikes was a return to work without redress to their grievances.

Philanthropic organisations, tasked with resolving the city's many problems, honed in on and targeted working women and, in so doing, recreated them as a particular problematic group. One such organisation was the *DSU*, which recognised the importance of women's labour for economic prosperity:

Without women's labour the city would sink to the level of a small burgh: as a manufacturing centre it would possibly cease to exist. No other community...has a more vital interest in everything pertaining to the welfare of women. (*DSU*, 1905)

Similarly, in comparing the high infant-mortality rates in Dundee with other cities, the Medical Officer of Health (MOH) cautioned, "the peculiar condition of life here must be borne in mind":

Our high death-rate is not due so much to the sanitary condition of the city...But from our industrial conditions which give employment to a large proportion of married women. (MOH, 1900)

The label 'woman's town' reflected then women's role in the workplace and social and moral voices of concern that stemmed from this. It was not coined in response to women's political grievances, though these did exist, most notably

through a discernible suffrage movement in the early twentieth century (Leneman, 2000), which would have compounded the notion of a ‘woman’s town’. Instead, it was women’s role in the workplace that caused consternation among Dundee’s middle-classes.

Despite the numerical and oratorical preponderance of working women in Dundee, it would be wrong to think they constituted, and were considered, a homogenous group. The demarcation of both mill and factory work as ‘women’s work’ led to the distinguishing of different ‘types’ of working women, the most notable and persistent division being between weavers and millworkers, the latter comprising both spinners and preparers:

We are met at the outset by a decided and recognised division, consisting of weavers on the one hand, and spinners and preparing hands on the other. Speaking generally, the weavers are well remunerated, and live in good dwellings. They are a fine healthy looking and self-respecting body of women, and do credit to our city. The spinners...are, by some strange trade custom, less favourably recompensed than their colleagues the weavers. The spinning therefore attracts a different class of workers, a class who live often in the most miserable houses, and appear little superior to the poorest paid operatives – namely, the preparing-room hands. (*DYB*, 1901: 202)

It is the preoccupation with these two figures – the weaver and millworker – that marks Dundee out from other textile towns and cities. Certainly elsewhere specific groups of working women caused a similar degree of concern among middle-class social and political elites, for example the female factory workers in Rhineland and Westphalia (Canning, 1996), the millgirls of Lowell (Spain, 1992) and the weavers of Lancashire (Rose, 1992). However, what is significant about Dundee is that, with women employed extensively in both mill and factory work, a process of ‘typing’ was used to differentiate workers.

The opposing figures of millworker and weaver have been captured and reproduced in histories of the jute industry. For example, Walker observes that the weavers “are [a] hard-working, thrifty, and self-respecting class of workers. They impress visitors by the neatness of their dress and the decorum of their manners.” In this way, “[t]here is nothing of the typical millgirl about them, though she does exist in some parts of Dundee” (1979: 69-76). With female labour constructed as *the* social problem in Dundee, the categorising of these two seemingly distinct figures was central to the stereotyping that surrounded women, the jute industry, and their place in Dundee’s economy and history. The rest of this article unpacks these two figures and explores the processes and, importantly, the geographies, of their construction.

Constructing ‘Types’

The weaver-millworker distinction

In a series of reflective articles in the *People’s Journal*, the Reverend Henry Williamson recalled his efforts to start evening classes for millworkers. In resisting his ideas, however, Dundee’s School Board insisted that it would be “undesirable to make any distinction between the classes” of millworker and weaver. However, as Williamson avowed, “the distinction was there in actual fact”:

It may not be generally known that a wide gap separates the millgirls from the factory girls – indeed, so substantial is this subtle distinction that it used to be said of the Scouringburn that the millgirls took one side of the street and the factory girls the other.

Highlighting further ‘type’ distinctions, he continued by describing an antagonistic instance of “this caste system”:

Along came the girls of the factory class, neat and smartly dressed to the tips of their gloves and their be-ribboned hats. Standing by were a dozen or more millgirls with shawls over their shoulders, all bare-headed and some even bare-footed. They watched the others pass within, and then one of them cried, "I'm no gaen in wi' thae mashers" and left. (*People's Journal*, 14 October 1922)

These passages usefully highlight some of the processes involved in the discursive construction of the weaver-millworker distinction. Drawing on differences in dress and insinuating differences in moral character, Williamson refers to a 'caste system' between the two groups; a distinction described as "there in actual fact." Furthermore, this 'caste system' was embedded in specific geographies; not only those of the workplace (of mill and factory) but beyond, as the two groups took opposing sides of the street on leaving work. Further, these types were naturalised and performed by workers themselves, with millworkers responding with derogatory comments to the idea that they attend classes with weavers. As president of the DDMFOU, Williamson's views were respected and given authority; after all, it was Williamson who had worked with, and 'on behalf of' millworkers, and it was thus he who purportedly 'knew' them well.

In addition to the working woman, one 'type' that resonates in contemporary accounts of the Victorian and Edwardian city is the 'prostitute'. Drawing on a range of visual images and written accounts, Nead (1988) pinpoints the importance of key visual terms – dress, bodily condition, location, and looks – through which prostitutes, and hence *the* prostitute, were identified (Walkowitz, 1992). Although these themes could be given different meanings in different images and texts, the basic elements used to represent the prostitute were repeated in a wide variety of contexts. These ideas and techniques can be usefully employed to consider the weaver and millworker in Dundee, and this section

takes Nead's lead to explore how differences between working women were made known through a set of recurring elements, subsumed under two identities and opposing binary distinctions.

Body, dress, behaviour and movement

An article taken from the *DYB* further demonstrates the sharp dichotomy through which the weaver and millworker were understood, emphasising the two opposing characters in terms of dress and behaviour:

In at the same gates...go the respectable, well-dressed, industrious girl, and the frowsy-haired, bare armed, short petticoated, shawlied lassie, of hard voice and rough manners. (1903: 154)

Weavers were the 'aristocrats' of the workplace and, as one manager remembered were, "not only well conducted, but well dressed". He continued, "[t]heir occupation is healthy and favourable to good physical development. Thus there was one we were in the habit of calling "the Little Duchess", she was so stately in her movements, and had such an aristocratic carriage of her handsome little figure" (*People's Journal*, 11 June 1881). Further, weavers were "[n]eat and smartly dressed to the tips of their gloves and their be-ribboned hats" (*People's Journal*, 14 October 1922), and "respectable, well-dressed, industrious girl[s]" (*DYB*, 1903: 154).

In contrast, "[b]elow the surf of industrious, respectable and respected factory workers ebb and surge the flotsam and jetsam of the stream – the millworkers" (*DYB*, 1903:154), with their "shawls over their shoulders, all bare-headed and some even bare-footed" (*People's Journal*, 14 Oct 1922). The millworker was thus seen as a problem, as Williamson unequivocally reflected:

Opinions may vary...as to which is the most serious of Dundee's social problems, as far as I am concerned, that which has demanded my closest attention during the past 50 years is *the* Dundee millgirl...Fifty years ago *she* was a problem, and *she* is a problem still. (*People's Journal*, 14 Oct 1922, italics added)

Further, these images were considered familiar to Dundonians:

One has little difficulty in marking them out as they pass to and fro to their work. The mass of frowsy hair reaching to their eyebrows, the loud talk, the bare arms, the "shawlie", and the striped wincey petticoat are all familiar to us. It seems to be a recognised fact that "Once a millworker aye a millworker." (*DYB*, 1893: 176)

Features of dress, look, and body recur in these opposing definitions. Grosz (1993: 199) argues that bodies "*speak*, without necessarily talking, because they become coded with and as signs. They speak social codes. They become *intextuated*, narratized; simultaneously, social codes, laws, norms, and ideals become *incarnated*". These practices of inscription are particularly prevalent in descriptions of workplace characters. Through clothing, the weaver, in contrast to the millworker, dressed 'properly' with hats and gloves defining her femininity. However, clothing was just one way that the body was read. Movements were interpreted as 'aristocratic' for weavers, indicating a respectability of behaviour and a superiority of character. In this way, although weavers were working women and were publicly 'consumed' in this process of identification, their dress and deportment spoke of the private, the inconspicuous, and the discipline implicit in wider discourses of Victorian femininity.

In contrast, the millworker was deemed 'other', not only to understandings of what it was to be a 'proper' woman but, more locally, to the demure and modest figure of the weaver. Young (1990: 126) describes this situation:

When the dominant culture defines some group as different, as the Other, the members of these groups are imprisoned in their bodies. Dominant

discourse defines them in terms of bodily characteristics and constructs those bodies as ugly, dirty, defiled, impure, contaminated or sick.

As millworkers transgressed boundaries of 'respectability', their bodies were constructed as abject. Walker (1979: 18), for example, wrote, "[t]he revulsion which the millgirl could engender in critics was strongly linked with a mill patois incomprehensible except in swear words, her infuriating hilarity, and her pretence in matters of dress". With unruly bodies, dress and behaviour, the millworker defied the unwritten rules of what it was to be a woman, for which she was scorned by social commentators. Although weavers and millworkers could be visibly deciphered, the rigid, dichotomous understandings of these identities and the meanings attached to them were a means by which commentators could make sense of all working women.

Performing to type

Beyond the representative, these codes of dress, behaviour, movement and conduct were internalised by workers themselves. Canning (1996) suggests that the display of the body through the manner and style of dress was an important manifestation of collective identities among workers, with shop floor 'fashions' signifying awareness of their place in the production process and the 'moral regime' of the mills. Working women created, internalised and regulated identities within the workplace. Drawing on Butler's ideas of performativity, I want to consider how, in Dundee, the workers themselves performed these workplace types. Extending Foucault's work on discourse, Butler explores how we 'do' gender. She explains this process as "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance of a natural sort of being" (1990: 33).

Performativity is that aspect of discourse that has the capacity to produce what it names through repetition and recitation, contesting the notion of the subject. Although Butler refers to the performativity of gender, here it is used to interrogate how working women in Dundee were implicated in the (re)production of ‘types’.

Here, I draw specifically on oral histories relating to the period just after 1910ⁱⁱⁱ. Recognising and wary of the interpretative process of transcription (Schrager, 1998) and the construction of historical memory (Tonkin, 1992), these oral histories, transcribed in the dialect common in Dundee, provide a valuable addition to the words and texts of the privileged. However, rather than ‘gap-filling’ (Sangster, 1998), working within a discursive framework, I use these transcripts to provide insight into the performativity of identities.

Both weavers and millworkers remembered the importance of dress. As one weaver recalled, “[y]ou wouldn’t have dreamed of going to the factory without a hat, you would have been a scruff” (Odyssey, 1980). This was reiterated by a millworker who claimed that, “the weavers were the toffs” as they “used tae go tae their work as if they were going tae a party” (Dundee Oral History Project 040). Another millworker recollected:

[T]hey were different from us altogether, they never looked at us, see we were low mill hands and we used to just run, we’ just our jackets on, nae hats nor gloves. And they thought they were something special because they did the finishing off the jute. An’ they used tae walk pass you as if you were something low. An’ they were it. An’ if you said tae them, ‘an’ what is your occupation?’ – ‘oh, I’m a weaver’. You see that distinction was there. (Odyssey, 1980)

Weavers and millworkers 'did' work differently, purposely accentuating their differences through dress. Such performativities asserted identities by creating divisions and antagonisms between the two groups.

Differences were also reproduced through the local history of spinning and weaving. Although spinning had traditionally been the preserve of women, weaving had been a 'man's job' and only with the advent of the powerloom earlier in the nineteenth century and new working conditions had women replaced men (Gordon, 1991). Weavers therefore sought not only to feminise the job, making it their own, but also to differentiate themselves from men and other women workers through wearing of hats and gloves. Weavers sought to construct themselves as a 'class superior'; by asserting femininity upon a traditionally male job they made women's work 'respectable', a respectability constructed, in part, in contrast to millworkers.

These dual identities provided working women with agency and, importantly, a position from which to resist the patriarchal-capitalist relations of the industry. Identities and performativities translated into important positions with regard to workplace relations. Letters to the local press give a good sense of this:

I saw a letter in your paper a few weeks ago by one "Fairplay" who appeared to be offended because there has been some notice taken of us spinners lately, and who thought that spinners were well enough paid...I would advise "Fairplay" in the future to confine herself to something she understands, and not attempt to write about anything in which her ignorance is so plainly palpable. (*People's Journal*, 29 Sept 1888)

The letter continued, "[i]t is time that the spinners of Dundee should rouse themselves and try to improve their condition...What is there to hinder them from

forming a Union of their own, having no members in it but spinners?” In a second letter, a weaver remarked:

The weaver must turn out the very best cloth, and she has spinners’ bad work, winders’ knots on the yarn, bad cops, and big bobbins. Everything must be put right on the loom, and no extra wage given. (3 Mar 1906)

‘Types’ were reinforced through antagonistic workplace relations and were used as positions from which to bargain and negotiate. Whether in maintaining dress codes or through strategies of resistance, women’s identification with the processes of stereotyping helped to unite them, working “in such a way that they became, what then turns out, in some sense to have been their ‘nature’” (Culler, 1997: 113). Through the performative, identities were reconfirmed by the women themselves and, through their recollection, they are compounded through the (re)telling of history.

Spacing types

Importantly, this performativity contained an implicit spatiality. Reworking Butler’s ideas, Gregson and Rose (2000) consider how identities are produced by and through action in space. In the case of weavers and millworkers, differences between the two groups were not free-floating but grounded in workplace segregations and conditions. Pratt and Hanson (1995: 11) suggest that these geographies are vital:

In many workplaces, not only are women and men, and women with different class and racial characteristics employed in different occupations; they spend their work days in spatial isolation from each other, thereby further circumscribing their lived experience.

With weavers and millworkers occupying different workspaces – the factory and mill respectively – physical separation “clearly demarcated the territories of the two workforces” (Gordon, 1991: 156), so much so that as one weaver

remembered, “I was never in a mill in my life. I’d never even seen the inside of the mill. And when you went into your work, the factory was on one side, the mill was on another” (Odyssey, 1980). Mills and factories were viewed as separate places, producing a particular geographical imagining of workplace roles and identities:

Those different departments so dependent on each other for being and sustenance...have comparatively little social affinity, and the different class of workers persist in a sort of clannish separation, however much they may know of their mutual dependencies. (*People’s Journal*, 11 June 1881)

As suggested earlier, this segregation spilled beyond factory and mill, with weavers and millworkers taking opposing sides of the street. However, there seems to have been a curious co-existence between weavers and millworkers. While antagonisms were apparent, on a personal level “[m]any friendships do exist between individuals” (*People’s Journal*, 11 June 1881), suggesting that these dichotomous figures and the writing of their differences were, to some extent, a creation of social commentators. However, as oral histories and reports intimate, it is possible that, at group level, women workers bought into these labels, defining themselves accordingly, with the separate groupings having “little or no sympathy with one another” (*People’s Journal*, 11 June 1881).

With transfers between mill and factory practically unknown, clear horizontal segregation developed (Walker, 1979) due, largely, to differing apprenticeships. Although weaving was not officially recognised as skilled work, an informal apprenticeship involved young women, on leaving school, entering the weaving sheds to serve time as an ‘ingiver’. During this period, which ranged from a minimum of six weeks to one year, they would work alongside a weaver, learning

the necessary skills (Gordon, 1990). By contrast, spinners began work in the mill aged ten, attending the half-time school and starting as either shifters or piecers, and eventually working their way up to become a spinner. In the mill, there was no automatic route of progression between jobs, and the half-time system gave jobs less stability and the appearance of being less skilled. These circumstances also explain the term ‘millgirl,’ used interchangeably with millworker and spinner. Although this has led to the suggestion that millworkers were drawn from poorer sections of the working classes as poor families were more eager for their children to earn as soon as possible (Walker, 1979), weavers and millworkers could come from the same family and neighbourhood (Gordon, 1991). This suggests too that the construction and performance of weaver and millworker identities had the workplace and fellow workers as their frame of reference, with identities perhaps more blurred and complicated within other spatial contexts.

In addition to these ‘spatial isolations’ and ‘apprenticeship’ processes, weavers and millworkers were paid differently (piece- and set-rates respectively), and worked in different environments (factory work was clean, whereas mill work was dirty). Such differences were crucial in the formation of hierarchies. When explaining why weavers had the reputation of being a class superior to other workers, one mill manager wrote:

This may be attributable not alone to their having comparatively light and clean work, but more probably on account of the individuality of the machine they attend. It is more under their control.... (*People’s Journal*, 11 June, 1881)

As piece-workers, weavers’ earnings were dependent upon their own exertions and, although this made their wages more variable, it connoted a degree of

control. As one millworker interpreted this difference, “the weavers aye said they were better than the spinners... ‘cause they made their own pay” (DOHP 003). In this way, weavers and millworkers became associated with and constructed around a set of dualities that had the factory and mill as prime points of reference.

The above quote also distinguishes between the cleaner work of the weavers and the dirt of the mill, and this clean-dirty division denoted a hierarchy. One weaver, explaining why she felt a cut above the millworkers, pointed out, “I mean we were never what you would say really dirty, the way they got dirty, because they were covered in mill dust” (Odyssey, 1980). Dirt was used as a signifier of imperfection and inferiority. Although it had practical associations, these conditions were coupled with moral associations, making it a potent marker of social difference (Sibley, 1995). Through the influential environmentalism of the Victorian city, the *DYB* (1901: 208) remarked:

The nature of people’s occupation often has a powerful influence in either encouraging dirty or cleanly habits...operatives who do the disagreeable and dirty work in our local industries appear to lose all respect for their appearance, and do not take the trouble to brush their garments or their hair before emerging from the mills. The same negligent habit pervades their homes, and reveals itself in dirty floors, stairs, and beds, and children with filthy garments and unwashed bodies.

It was assumed that a moral geography of the city could be mapped from an examination of workplace roles. A dirty workplace environment engendered dirty habits and, according to social commentators, extended to care of home and body (Driver, 1988).^{iv}

Beyond dualistic readings of the workplace and its extended geographies, differences within groups of workers were occasionally recognised and discussed.

The mill itself was split between the 'High' and the 'Low' mill:

The term "low mill" has a bad odour about it, and the general public imagines that it is so called because of the class of workers employed, but this is entirely a mistaken idea. (*DYB*, 1903: 154)

This article explained that due to the design of the buildings and the weight of the machines needed to crush raw jute, "[t]he "Low mill"...had a geographical and not necessarily a social or moral significance." However, "[w]hile this is the primary meaning of the term, unfortunately there is some justification for the popular notion. In the spinning and reeling departments skilled labour predominates, but in the low mill unskilled labour is the rule". The article continued that, in contrast to the need to start spinning and reeling when young, there was no such need in the preparing department "and as a consequence the low mill, with very few exceptions, is staffed by women over 18 years of age". It was partly for these differences that there was a "very definite snobbish difference even in the jute-mill" with a hierarchy stretching from the breakers to the spinners (*DOHP*, 021). In this way, the weaver-millworker distinction was occasionally broken down, with different gradients of millworker investigated.

Rather than view space merely as a stage on which identities are performed, or as a container within which identities are bound, this paper points to the mutual constitution and performativity of spaces and identities. As Gregson and Rose (2000) suggest, spaces "do not preexist their performances, waiting in some sense to be mapped out by performances; rather, specific performances bring these spaces into being". This can be seen in the Dundee case; the understandings of

and meanings given to mills and factories were created through the performative identities of weaver and millworker and their relationship to one another.

Conclusion

[R]emember the need for philosophical critique of the formation of the categories whose history we study qua historians. (Valverde, 1993: 122)

In Dundee, there is now a sense of pride that the city was a ‘woman’s town’, and scholars of the city and its jute industry have rightly placed working women at or near the centre of their studies. In my view, however, the category ‘working women’ and the figure of the ‘working woman’ are usually reckoned to be self-evident and to require little explanation. Rather than talking and writing about working women as a given category, this paper follows the lead of various feminist historians to probe the processes through which ‘working women’ were identified and constructed as problematic. However, this paper argues that this categorisation needs more thorough interrogation to fully explore the diversity of characters that were constructed and subsumed under its remit. This article has attempted to do this through a close examination of how the ‘types’ of weaver and millworker were constructed, contested and performed. Moreover, it has detailed the means by which they were constructed in relation to one another and through their attachment to and location within a specific workplace geography and understandings of mill and factory.

But what were the effects of this ‘typing’ on the lives of Dundee’s working women? The diagnoses of workplace types legitimated the creation of a landscape of reform as, simultaneously, these organisations legitimated and perpetuated these ‘types’. Rose (1995) has suggested that it is outside the world

of work that rationalized projects of civility proliferated. Through an array of local charitable organisations and local authority departments and figures, a new knowledge economy on the working woman began to take shape; a landscape of reform marked out working women as a particular problematic population to be scrutinized (Wainwright 2003).

And beyond the period in question, these processes of ‘typing’ have been important in understandings of working women in Dundee today, and it is this I want to reflect on to conclude. Dundee’s working women have been used to set the city apart from others:

In Juteopolis, a breed of strong, independent-minded women was forged and more than any other place in Scotland certainly, possibly Europe, Dundee is very much a matriarchal society. (Kay 1995: 10)

McDonald (1995: 155) has also reflected upon the distinction of the city’s working women as “[v]ociferous, sure and dominant. Qualities that were more than a match for the petty sneerings of society”.

Dundee as a ‘woman’s town’ resonates loudly in histories of the city and classifications of women’s various characteristics that were once deplored are now being re-appropriated and re-presented as traits to be celebrated – as unique to the city. McDonald (1995: 159) explains how “[t]he common epithets of irresponsible, militant and uncontrollable were heaped upon the female workers in the jute trade” but, turning these derogatory images on their head, suggests:

For Dundee women had come of age long before the world was ready to accept that women had the right to equality, and from outside Dundee and from within, society acted against the uncomfortable reality of women threatening the male power base.

Through the writing and celebration of local history, problematic identities once constructed as and through technologies of control and classification, are being re-appropriated as positive, showing how women bucked prevailing ideological expectations.

However, this article dislodges these certainties of Dundee's working women. By exploring the construction of working women and, more specifically, the figures of the weaver and millworker, I suggest that existing understandings of women in Dundee's jute industry have been too prescriptive, narrow and rigid. Instead, in recognising the practices of 'type' construction, the discursive approach advocated here allows for the possibility of a greater diversity among Dundee's working women and the category 'woman worker' in history.

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ⁱ The *DYB* was published annually from 1878 to provide a summary of information provided by the city's Liberal Party-supporting newspaper, the *Dundee Advertiser*.

ⁱⁱ The Lamb Collection consists of a range of materials including newspaper cuttings from the late nineteenth century.

ⁱⁱⁱ I use a number of oral histories from the Dundee Oral History Project (1984), Gordon (1991) and Kay (Odyssey interviews, 1980).

^{iv} The closest to this moral mapping was the DSU's survey into the city's housing and industrial conditions (1905). Through investigation of four blocks of dwellings, homes were described and occupations noted. Although not explicitly commented on, millworkers were, in the main, located in the poorer class of housing, although a number of instances existed where weavers and millworkers resided next to one another. Further, only as exceptions were dirty conditions commented on in relation to millworkers' homes and clean conditions in relation to those of weavers. This therefore suggests a blurring of the distinction in the residential spaces and conditions between weavers and millworkers.