

Part One of A 21st-Century American Working-Class Dialectic

A Social Constructivist Grounded Theory: Creating a Shared-Value Framework That Leverages the Skilled Trades to Empower Working-Class Women in the United States

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Introduction

Social reform and social justice issues have historically been considered push-pull or zero-sum. Societal expectations, hegemony, and stigmas underpin and exacerbate these issues. There is another way to resolve social issues such as the significant underrepresentation of women in the skilled trades (Polit, 1979; Bridges et al., 2020; Ness, 2012; Wulff et al., 2021), the toxicity of the hypermasculine American working-class culture that causes it and the resulting socioeconomic consequences. The only reason we believe the dynamic between society and business is zero-sum is because that is what we have been taught (Porter & Kramer, 2011; Kramer & Pfitzer, 2016; Weaver, 2019). By further integrating the concepts of shared value with the emerging concepts of progressive capitalism, this research forges a modern pathway based on historical success in addressing the supply

shortage of skilled trade workers while empowering working-class women and families.

The result of this research will be a progressive grounded theory abstracted from a literature review and PESTLE analysis viewed through a social constructivist lens. This is the first article of a series called *A 21st Century American Working-Class Dialectic*. Once all the articles are completed, they will be included in a scholarly monograph series bearing this title.

In the interim, each article will also be submitted for publication in a peer-reviewed academic journal.

A person's occupation closely correlates with their achieved level of education (Draut, 2018). During this research project, the *working class* is defined as those who do not have a bachelor's degree. This group comprises sixty percent of the labor force (Draut, 2018). While there certainly are less-educated workers who

make higher wages and well-educated workers who make menial wages, in the aggregate, this definition is an accurate way to distinguish between the working and middle classes (Draut, 2018).

There is a continuous need for skilled laborers in the United States, while working-class women need access to career paths that create financial independence, personal agency, and empowerment (Ericksen & Schultheiss, 2009). These paths are limited due to socioeconomic gender-based stereotypes inhibiting intra-class mobility and preventing self-reliance (Ericksen & Schultheiss, 2009; Denissen, 2010; Ness, 2012; Wulff et al., 2021). Many skilled laborers make as much money each year or more as white-collar workers employed in general office roles (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Culturally, the skilled trades remain the domain of men, reinforcing the notion that a person's job is strongly connected to gender stereotypes and societal

expectations. Women encounter additional barriers once employed in the skilled trades. These barriers form an occupational culture that tolerates bullying and harassment of women (Wulff et al., 2021; Denissen, 2010, as cited in Wulff, E. et al., 2021).

Consequently, women make up only three percent of the skilled trades workforce in America (Ness, 2012; Draut, 2018; Bridges et al., 2020). Compounding this disparity, resolving the limited participation of women in the skilled trades is mainly unexamined, as is how to mediate the fact that men make sixteen percent more than women in the same skilled trade roles (Ericksen & Schultheiss, 2009).

The skilled trades and adjacent industries affect the overall balance of the economy. We rely on skilled trade workers to create society's foundation and move us forward. Using the same

lens, we see how employment in the skilled trades can be integral to creating an individual foundation and a path toward financial self-reliance and independence for working-class women.

Unemployment, underemployment, and financial stress cause serious consequences (Nagassar et al., 2010). Higher levels of domestic violence and abuse exist within the working class; drugs and alcohol are the most cited causes (Nagassar et al., 2010). Of course, many working-class households do not experience domestic violence or other abuses. However, unemployment and underemployment remain pernicious. Financial distress and lack of professional employment cause esteem and confidence issues that propagate throughout day-to-day activities, clouding perspective and reducing the scope of possibilities. In financial distress, we are amendable to environments and solutions that produce additional self-

destructive attitudes and behaviors. This insidious “vicious cycle” is challenging to break out of, especially when it is not immediately recognized as abusive.

A dual income of skilled laborers could exceed \$100,000 annually (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Assuming employment in socially acceptable gender-normative roles, this new annual income level significantly alters a working-class family's financial trajectory and decreases financial stress. Employment in the skilled trades creates opportunities that foundationally empower women (Ericksen & Schultheiss, 2009; Ness, 2012), while the lack of a sustainable and livable income often forces women and children to remain in unhealthy relationships.

Purpose Statement

These two primary problems intersect. While encouraging and empowering working-class women to pursue a career in the skilled trades, we must also address the inhibitive sociocultural norms and stigmas that restrict progress. This research addresses the constitutive problems, advances the body of literature, and creates a shared-value theoretical framework.

Literature Review

Integrative literature reviews are helpful if the goal is theory development (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Torraco, 2005, as cited in Snyder, 2019). They are essential to constructing new conceptual models and integrating perspectives while continuously being open to new information. This scalability is an advantage of underpinning research with an integrative or non-systematic literature review. Ad hoc adjustments are typical, expected, and

encouraged. An expanding body of literature offers a unique power to address research questions and create new concepts (Snyder, 2019). The following literature has been categorized into three central knowledge areas. Each knowledge area is first summarized, then all three are followed by a complete synthesis.

Historical Literature

The historical literature on women in the skilled trades is minimal due to almost absolute exclusion from these roles (Ness, 2012). However, literature does exist on women's history in the larger scope of unskilled blue-collar jobs, illustrating hegemony and oppression throughout (Crowston, 2008). History also provides evidence of progress and potential frameworks to leverage the skilled trades to empower working-class women toward financial independence (Crowston, 2008; Metcalf, 2018; Neipert & Bemis, 1974).

Contemporary Literature

Contemporary literature describes additional obstacles women face in pursuing a career in the skilled trades. Skilled trade programs are being dissolved in high schools nationwide due to budget constraints resulting from the societal mandate to push students toward college (Ayala-Quirino, 2020). Over the last several decades, a working-class model has emerged, shifting new roles to the "service-and-care" sector (Draut, 2018). This sector is mainly considered the domain of women and pays the least of all economic sectors (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Fortunately, we have a framework for a progressive solution based on historical data and successful contemporary practices (Neipert & Bemis, 1974; Weaver, 2019).

Social Framework

This knowledge area describes operationalizing a shared-value approach while disproving the notion that the relationship between society and business must be zero-sum (Porter & Kramer, 2011; Kramer & Pfitzer, 2016; Stiglitz, 2019). Laloux (2015) offers instructive business metaphors that parallel personal development. The “power-over” creation (Dynamics of power, inclusion, and exclusion, n.d.) and deployment of gender constructs that deter women from pursuing a career in the skilled trades and how to use gender capital as resistance is also examined (Denissen, 2010). Without social progress, working-class women will continue to experience the most significant combined prevalence of physical, financial, and verbal abuse (Nagassar et al., 2010).

Synthesis

In the United States, women comprise just three percent of the skilled labor workforce (Ness, 2012; Draut, 2018; Bridges et al., 2020). Most literature on women working in the skilled trades focuses on barriers to entry (Bridges et al., 2020). Minimal literature exists exploring and resolving the hypermasculine culture and social norms that impose these barriers (Bridges et al., 2020). This creates a reflexive loop in the literature with no clear path to progress. The minimal available literature further reinforces the loop by implying that little is written on the subject because it is inconsequential, thus casting women in the skilled trades as unimportant and inferior “others” (Denissen, 2010).

Individuals, families, communities, cultures, and society all benefit from women's increased employment and participation in the skilled trades. We must also find a way that simultaneously

allows men and businesses to benefit because when they benefit, things start to move. We leverage this historical fact to start the path to progress.

Capitalism dictates that the fastest way to gain social acceptance is to create a supply that meets a hegemonic demand. This was the case during World War II when there was “renewed interest in using women in the military” (Polit et al., 1979). Emphasis is drawn to the word “using,” pointing out that as people, we are needed when we are considered beneficial. Illustrating this claim, the concept of Rosie the Riveter and the corresponding tagline, “We Can Do It,” were created as promotional pieces to increase women’s desire to participate in workforce mobilization during World War II (Metcalf, 2018). Women responded with force and kept the country moving. However, Walshok (1981) labels contemporary women as blue-

collar pioneers on a male frontier. The label “pioneers” seems to be a misnomer forty years after women established their aptitude, strength, and credibility in industrial and skilled labor roles.

Adding to Walshok’s assertion, Ness (2012) points out that little progress has been made over the last forty years regarding equal opportunity in skilled labor roles.

Offering an alternative perspective, Shlakman (1984) asserts that women have worked in manual labor and industry for centuries, and Alice Clark’s seminal study in 1919 (Crowston, 2008) claimed a “Golden Age in the medieval period” (p. 20) allowing women equitable access to employment in the skilled trades¹.

What accounts for the discrepant perspectives?

¹ Literature on the history of medieval European social conventions provides immediate context to America’s colonial and post-colonial social evolution.

Shlakman's (1984) criticism neglects to consider the historical context, while leading historians have found fundamental flaws in Clark's claim (Crowston, 2008). Many centuries referenced by Shlakman (1984) and Clark's 1919 study (Crowston, 2008) were before the first Industrial Revolution. The opportunities provided were not pure. Women and children worked in industrial occupations out of necessity. This created the most advantageous scenario to ensure the survival of the family unit (Crowston, 2008). Further, during this period, many women were responsible for household production roles, which are analogous to the administrative roles that most women working in the contemporary construction trades occupy (Crowston, 2008; Bridges et al., 2020). In debunking Clark's notion of a medieval Golden Age, historians found that even though women worked in industrial roles, they did not have access to equitable

opportunities, and the introduction of the guild system wholly eroded this chance during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Crowston, 2008).

Thus far, the literature demonstrates the ability and aptitude of women in the skilled trades, yet also shows it is routinely undercut and restricted from growth by institutionalized hypermasculine culture. The key to progress is to create a sustainable need. This need is created by addressing the social norms of the masculine culture that create discriminatory gender constructs while establishing the shared benefits that the inclusion of women provides.

Previous studies indicate that women in the skilled trades often leave their jobs due to poor experience and treatment (Bridges et al., 2020). The skilled trade industries are not socially progressive and suffer a “cultural lag” (Bennet et al., 1999, p. 278,

as cited in Bridges et al., 2020), a term that describes the lack of improved workforce diversification. "Women often find themselves in a double bind where they are held accountable to contradictory expectations for a feminine presentation of self and a masculine performance of work" (Denissen, 2010, p. 1051). This double bind is underpinned by the struggles of working-class males, resulting in their desire to assert dominance over women (Cornell 1995, cited in Ness 2012, p. 661; as cited in Bridges et al., 2020).

We have successfully established the historical need for women in the skilled trades, albeit on an "as needed" basis, and identified the sociocultural barriers that inhibit making this need socially sustainable, socially desirable, and socially acceptable. We have also established women's benefits and abilities in the skilled trade industries. Now what? How do we create progress? We

construct our grounded theory and shared-value framework based on historical success and progressive contemporary best practices while keeping our focus on the future.

In 1970, almost 500,000 women worked in the skilled trades, up from 277,000 in 1960 (Neipert & Bemis, 1974). When this data was measured in 1974, significant corporate and government actions of the early 70s were generally considered the catalysts (Neipert & Bemis, 1974). Further research showed that this improvement was organic and created by the women's liberation and other social justice movements during the 60s. Following this path of inquiry offers insight into creating an environment for organic growth, which offers permanence. A foundational principle of shared value and progressive capitalism, both of which underpin this research, is mutual benefit. Collaboratively creating shared value and mutual benefit from the inside is our

chance at sustainability (Porter & Kramer, 2011; Kramer & Pfitzer, 2016; Weaver, 2019).

Capitalism offers a robust and viable framework to meet human and business needs (Porter & Kramer, 2011). Jobs can be created for all, wealth can be built for all, and we can all move forward together. Leveraging business and capitalism's scalability and profit-seeking practices is crucial to our success. The power of the market can be used to serve society as described in a newly developing framework by Joseph Stiglitz, a Nobel laureate in economics and Congressman Ro Khanna called progressive capitalism (Stiglitz, 2019).

Collective impact defines social problems as complex in their creation and solution (Kramer & Pfitzer, 2016). The most effective changes arise when all players, contributors, and stakeholders view both problem and solution through a shared responsibility

lens, creating an eco-system of shared value (Kramer & Pfitzer, 2016).

What mental models inhibit and restrict progress? What holds an undesired outcome up from below (Weaver, 2019)? People United for Sustainable Housing (PUSH) asked these questions when exploring what to do with the inventory of vacant homes in Buffalo, New York. As a result, a block-by-block framework was developed to ensure efficient and effective resource use while collaborating with banks and business owners in the area to share the improved social and commercial value (Weaver, 2019). This model directly applies to the research problem and will be further integrated with concepts of progressive capitalism and shared value to create a theoretical framework.

Conclusion

Literature specific to women working blue-collar jobs focuses almost exclusively on barriers to entry and the resulting harassment and discrimination once employed (Bridges et al., 2020). Little is written about resolving these issues besides the usual prescriptions of anti-discrimination laws and social justice movements. Both have yielded significant positive results but leave much progress unrealized. Continued and sustainable progress must be made from the inside using a shared-value approach.

It is not enough to understand how and why gender expectations are constructed. We must deconstruct them using the same methods that created them. Literature shows us that historically, women were not considered for skilled trades roles. The patriarchal power structure dissuades it. They do not see

value in including women. It is not “women *can be* skilled laborers.” It is “women *are* skilled laborers” (Ness, 2012).

Increasing the number of women in the skilled trades is a shared-value proposition. We can do better in a way that benefits society and business.

Project Context

In the United States, women represent only 3% of the skilled trade workforce (Draut, 2018). From a pragmatic, social-constructivist perspective, working-class women in America do not pursue a career in the skilled trades for two reasons. First, we are socialized to believe that women cannot adequately physically or mentally perform what the labor of a skilled trade requires. Next, working-class women are socially expected to be caregivers, servers, or cashiers (Draut, 2018). These jobs not only pay less than those traditionally held by working-class men, but women

are pushed into these lower-paying roles by social stigmas and societal expectations that question their femininity, their sexual orientation, and their identity as women if they are interested in a skilled trade career.

This is a crucial feature of invisible power (Dynamics of power, inclusion, and exclusion, n.d.) and is engendered by Gramsci's concept of a cultural hegemony that is designed to gain implicit acceptance by the lower socioeconomic classes of the mental and moral dominance of the upper classes (Lears, 1985). This dominance then directly informs in-class gender interactions and expectations. Acquiescence is granted due to the societal and commercial positioning of the dominant group (Lears, 1985).

"Invisible power shapes the psychological and ideological boundaries of participation" (Dynamics of power, inclusion, and exclusion, n.d., Invisible Power: Shaping Meaning section). These

processes of exclusion are most effectively remedied through education that seeks to reconfigure how the working class perceives itself and then adjusts its corresponding scope of possibilities; this includes addressing the restrictive nature of hypermasculine working-class culture. Lastly, the combination of a working-class culture that is often anti-intellectual with the countrywide reduction in access to skilled trades education constructs additional barriers for women considering education and employment in a skilled trade discipline.

In the aggregate, a higher level of education provides more financial opportunities. Many workers with bachelor's degrees find themselves in a better year-over-year financial position as they gain experience and enhance their professional network (Draut, 2018). The same cannot be said for the new working class. Doubly so for women in the working class. The working class shifted from

"making stuff" to "serving and caring for people." (Draut, 2018). In the working class, serving and caring means working in restaurants, as caretakers in group homes, as certified nursing assistants, or in retail with the distant goal of becoming a supervisor someday. Most of these service and caring roles remain the domain of women and are egregiously underpaid due to the manual labor and customer service nature of the jobs.

However, skilled laborers such as electricians and plumbers are in demand. The installation and construction trades need an estimated 1.3 million openings filled yearly. These positions offer substantially more wages than the income provided by the "serving and caring" jobs (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022.). Unfortunately, skilled trades are often considered a job instead of a career, so these roles are not given proper attention and focus throughout our socialization and cultural development (Ayala-

Quirino, 2020). Further, our education system is designed to push students toward college (Ayala-Quirino, 2020). The resulting stigma and social barriers discourage women from seeking employment in these fields.

Participants and Positionality

I grew up in working-class Reagan-era Arizona and had personal experience with the toxicity of the hypermasculine conservative working-class culture and the social forces that created and reinforced the system of beliefs and behaviors within it. The sample population is the American working class but only as indirectly represented through the literature. While the socially constructed human experience pragmatically frames the context, a social constructivist lens will create new possibilities (Charmaz, 2017).

Project Rationale

A social constructivist grounded theory must be created to advance the literature and subsequently be operationalizable toward creating a system of shared-value working-class social and cognitive reforms. Individual cognitive reforms will then create sustainable collective social reform initiatives. While existing literature on women working in the skilled trades does exist, it focuses mainly on what causes the barriers to entry instead of resolution. Further, existing literature on change usually involves force from the outside, such as through social justice movements and protests (Hunjan & Pettit, 2011). This research creates a framework that will encourage and allow the working class to take an active role in developing their cognitive abilities (Hunajn & Pettit, 2011) through the mediation of culturally hegemonic forces while remaining encompassed by pragmatic historical data for

guidance. This will create organic and sustainable change in working-class cognition.

Research Questions

This research is part one of a series called *A 21st-century American working-class dialectic*. The series intends to further working-class studies and explore the concept of community-based cognitive social reforms, with individual cognition as the starting point. To this end, the encompassing research question is what reforms need to take place for the conditions and experiences of the American working class to improve, followed by exploring how to accomplish these reforms using a constructivist lens and shared-value approach.

For each research problem in the series, the main questions are – what does the literature tell us about the current situation?

What can be created to advance the literature and give rise to

social reforms, and how can we do it to maximize the benefit of working-class individuals?

Analytical Methods To Be Used

Methodologies

A non-systematic literature review, including a PESTLE analysis, will comprise the main body of research. Gray literature will provide context and act as a bridge between the academic journals and PESTLE analysis. "An effective and well-conducted review as a research method creates a firm foundation for advancing knowledge and facilitating theory development" (Webster & Watson, 2002; as cited in Snyder, 2019, p. 333).

Torraco (2005; as cited in Snyder 2019) identifies human resources as the guiding discipline and metaphor for developing and using an integrative approach to conducting a literature review. This establishes an integrative approach as the ideal methodology vis-

à-vis the research problem. Newly emerging topics, such as those this research seeks to address, require a creative and abstract approach to gathering data since the intent is to explore new conceptualizations (Snyder, 2019). This further substantiates the efficacy and validity of underpinning theoretical resolutions using an integrative approach. Lastly, supporting the creation of a grounded theory, integrative literature reviews are generative and not descriptive (Snyder, 2019).

Google Scholar returns 182,000 results when “women skilled trades” is searched. This search term yields literature that provides a conceptual framework. Narrowing the search to “women’s training skilled trades” yields 71,300 results. While this is an enormous number of articles, these search terms yielded the most relevant results to this research within the first two pages. While a traditional grounded theory includes a systematic literature

review, a purposive or non-systematic approach is widely recognized as effective when addressing far-reaching questions and creating new concepts and theories outside a traditional scope (Cook, 2019). Reviewing subsequent articles reinforced this approach since their content reiterated the previous articles and often reasserted the need for progressive literature on this research topic.

The PESTLE analysis will consist of data examining the working class's operating environment (What is Pestle Analysis? Business Analysis Tool, n.d.). While this analysis is typically the domain of organizations and macroeconomics, the PESTLE methodology is ideal for social problems existing on the macro-level, such as excluding women from the skilled trades. Hegemonic discriminatory practices engender this exclusion, thus substantiating the need for a PESTLE analysis.

It is reasonable to argue that an integrative literature review may encompass a PESTLE analysis. This further establishes that a PESTLE analysis is appropriate to ensure a comprehensive integrative literature review is performed. The questions below are examples of this research's inquiry path and were derived from an existing set of questions (What is Pestle Analysis? Business Analysis Tool, n.d.):

1. Who and what are the political hegemony that create and reinforce discriminatory practices in the skilled trades?
2. What are the prevalent economic factors? How can these conditions be reflexively used to create a shared-value approach?
3. What social norms and underpinnings prevent women from being included in the skilled trades? What progress has been recently made? What progress was historically

- made? Is this progress reproducible, or does it provide an actionable framework?
4. How can we use technology to address and resolve these conditions effectively? Or maybe technology is making the conditions worse?
 5. What legislation is meant to address any discrimination in the workplace? Is it being effectively enforced? Are there loopholes or other tacit means to get around the legislation?
 6. How do the inclusion and exclusion of women from skilled trade industries affect the natural, political, and social environments?

Data Management

The data for both methodologies will be collected via the internet or through resources available at the Arizona State

University library. Digital information will be stored locally on a Solid-State Drive (SSD) and backed up on Adobe's Creative Cloud to ensure redundancy. Data management will be a dynamic process allowing for previous notions to be overwritten and improved or existing notions to be substantiated and codified.

Analysis

The continuous analysis will be supported by a thematic coding process starting with the previously established three central knowledge areas. All collected data will be parsed into historical, contemporary, or social framework categories first and then further analyzed for deeper thematic elements. Possible sub-level thematic elements are expected to be - negative social impact, positive social impact, divisive social policies, discriminatory practices, evidence of bullying women in the skilled trade environment, social progress, and social

frameworks that exist only conceptually versus those already operationalized. Microsoft Excel will be used to enumerate the data and list the recurring themes. Optionally, software that parses and categorizes potential qualitative data themes may be deployed.

Assumptions and Limitations

The primary assumption is that the American working class is resistant to change, doubly so for reforms that question the hypermasculine working-class skilled trade archetype. A secondary assumption is a reflexive dismissal of the possibility of using a shared value approach vis-à-vis business and society. An additional assumption is that the concept of progressive capitalism will be immediately considered a misnomer and summarily dismissed due to its shared-value foundation and ironic name.

Some may consider a non-systematic approach to the literature review as a limitation because a balanced perspective will not be offered. However, when generating new conceptual models, a systematic literature review suffers the primary deficiency of ignoring literature that falls outside the narrowly defined research scope (Cook, 2019). Purposive or nonsystematic literature reviews avoid this pitfall (Cook, 2019).

Primary Audience and Deliverable Specifics

The intended audience is scholars and academic researchers engaged in sociological, organizational leadership, economic, political, and community-based cognitive and social reform. The deliverable will be the first part of a scholarly monograph series titled *A 21st Century American Working-Class Dialectic*. It will also be submitted for standalone publication in a peer-reviewed

academic journal, as will the continuing parts of the series until they are all completed.

Ethical Considerations

Data security and privacy protection are not primary considerations since all the research is publicly available. Human subjects are only represented in this research through secondary resources, which introduces another type of ethical consideration. That is, the methodologies are used collaboratively and creatively to create an operationalizable progressive framework instead of simply regurgitating historical descriptions of known quantities rendered null and void upon delivery. Humankind requires ethical and moral progress, which reintroduces the concept of progressive capitalism furthered through a social constructivist lens.

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