

# **Work Restructuring and Changing Craft Identity: The Tale of the Disaffected Weavers (or what happens when the rug is pulled from under your feet)**

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## **Abstract**

*This article explores the changes in worker identity that can occur during manufacturing restructuring - specifically those linked to the declining status of craft work – through an in-depth case-study of Weaveco, a UK carpet manufacturer. An analysis of changes in the labour process is followed by employee reactions centred on the demise of the traditional craft identity of male carpet weavers. The voices of the weavers dramatise the tensions involved in reconstructing their masculine identity, and we consider the implications this has for understanding gendered work relations.*

## **Introduction: Craft Work and Identity**

The last two decades have witnessed a period of great turmoil and reassessment for many craft workers, as technological and organisational changes have demolished their long-standing claims to superior status and identity in the work hierarchy. In the past, craft control of production often generated hostility from both employers and other less skilled workers (Cook 1996, Roberts 1993, Strangleman and Roberts 1999). This article explores how one specific craft grouping, male carpet weavers, responded to organisational and technological changes within one workplace and have attempted to rebuild their work identity without craft skill. As such, it is a rich case study of occupational identity as seen from the shop floor.

The demise of craft skill, which forces male workers to reconstruct their identity, has wider lessons for our understanding of gendered work divisions. Craft skill was socially constructed as an expression of masculinity, which in turn facilitated the development of craft work into an all-male activity (Cook 1996). The craft worker's close identification with his skill confirmed his personal identity and higher status in both the workplace and the wider community. Blauner (1964:47) argues that the notion of an 'occupational community', organised around craft work, created a world within itself. Men and women who lived within its boundaries, regarded male skill as their key reference point, to the extent that the craft status system and its standards of behaviour became a general guide

to people's conduct. Today, this moral standing of craft workers has been broken, even within the workplace, as the material conditions of craft employment have deteriorated. In former manufacturing occupational communities, the standing of craft work has shrunk with the labour market (Gallie et al 1998). Arguably this has made men reassess their local self-image as craft workers with specific qualities, interests and abilities.

Craft trade unions and societies have traditionally used occupational ideology to justify, expand and maintain economic advantage by social closure, excluding unskilled or 'unqualified' workers (Parkin 1974). Consequently, demarcations between craft workers and other workers were policed through strict adherence to the union's rules and regulation. Progression on the shop floor became tightly controlled through the institution of seniority, with a crucial feature of the craft system being the apprenticeship, which conferred status once completed and limited entry into skilled work. Apprenticeships have also served as a means of industrial habituation, whereby workers became socialised into a tradition of craft culture, linking skill to experience. Here craft workers learnt their employment rights and their social obligations, becoming over time a community of practice which reproduced the values of skilled work (Lave and Wenger 1991, Paechter 2003). For example, the print compositors used their trade union body, the Typographical Association, to sustain their superior position within print work and reinforce their superior claims to be 'aristocratic workers' with higher levels of responsibility and respectability (Duffy 2000:77, Roberts 1993).

In sociological terms, social closure relating to demarcations need not involve gender or racial exclusion, but in historical terms it often has. Connell (2000: 12) argues that in hierarchical work relations, certain masculinities are dominant, including those promoted by craft ideology. Masculinities are socially situated so they can be collectively remade as people 'act', particularly at times of disruption such as restructuring. Manliness was a part of the craft workers' moral code which demanded that he behave with dignity when challenging managerial imperatives. For Cook (1996:21), the lack of this dignified manliness was considered to be a major failing of women and unskilled workers and helped to justify their exclusion from craft work. The technical, moral and gender dimensions of craft were closely interwoven - real work was men's work. Cook claims (1996:15) that in order to understand craft workers' relationships to others, you have to recognise how their organizations created a way of seeing the world and its relationship to them. Part of this involved how craft occupational ideology gave skilled workers the authority to become spokesmen for their local community, reinforcing the social distinction between them and other production workers.

According to Bain (2005), work identity can be central to individual self-confidence, status and self-fulfilment, as well as being materially important. Thus major changes to the role and status of a group of workers, after the reorganization of a labour process can lead to experiences of isolation, domination and detachment, whereby they can become disaffected workers (Blauner 1964:1). Increased feelings of powerlessness can also be experienced as shop floor workers witness the decline of the trade union, which has supported their skilled identity (Bradley 1999). This situation for Salaman (1974), is predictable, given that self-image is linked to a person's social roles and the interaction with significant others such as family, work and the community. Therefore, when a work group's work status and union effectiveness slumps, this also raise doubts about

individual work and social identity in the troubled transition from being a male skilled worker to merely another semi-skilled worker.

By exploring how male craft workers respond to this loss of status, we also gain understanding of how male subcultures and identities are reproduced through both workplace practices and social practices. Technological and labour process transformations also call into question a masculine ideology predicated on men's greater physicality and rationality (Edley and Wetherell 1995). In this light, we can expect that the re-working of shop floor skill divisions will have quite different implications for previously excluded 'unskilled' workers, including women (Alvesson and Due Billing 1997, Collinson and Hearn 1996, Connell 1995, 2000).

### **The Weaveco case-study**

Weaveco has been a family owned company since 1783 and was one of the largest and most successful companies in Carpet Town, a town in the West Midlands, whose growth was inextricably entwined with the development of the carpet manufacturing industry. Weaveco traditionally employed its work force through family introductions and practised a paternalist style of management (Ackers, 1998). About eighty percent of the people interviewed for this research had family connections to the company and carpet work (see Tables 1 and 2). Weaveco built its reputation on weaving high quality carpet for a global market. It has consistently invested millions in pioneering carpet loom design, producing individually designed, high quality carpet for the contract market of clubs, pubs, airports and cruise liners as well as the domestic market. Weaveco's success has not protected the company completely from the decline of the British carpet industry and intensified global competition, however numbers of UK employees have stabilised in recent years at around 1,700, two-thirds of whom are male workers.

This research used a variety of qualitative methods designed to build up an interpretation and understanding of the experiences of workers through exploring the narratives of shop floor workers, managers and trade union representatives. It built on several earlier phases of similar research in the company over the past 20 years (Ackers, 1988; Ackers et al 1992) and thus was able to pick up on changes over time. According to Cockburn (1991), such a qualitative approach is more suited to seeing the relations, processes and contradictions that exist within highly gendered workplaces, such as Weaveco. It is also useful for interpreting men and women's subjective experiences of work and power relations (Flick 1998). The case study approach makes people's perceptions of work changes accessible by setting them in the frame of their own experiences and the institutional context of the company, industry and community (Bryman 2001). In all, thirty eight in depth semi-structured interviews were conducted during 2001/02. All were Weaveco employees, including lay trade union officials except for the National Officer of the Carpet Section of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (now Community). Table 1 and 2 outline the cross-section of employees involved in this research.

**Table 1 Weaveco Employees**

<b>Nos.</b>	<b>M/F</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Service</b>	<b>Family connections.</b>	<b>Work Section</b>	<b>Job Title</b>
1	M	51+	37	Y Family Owner	Management	Senior Production Director
2	M	41+	34	N	Management	Production Director
3	M	61+	47	Y	Management	H R Manager
4	M	41+	25 years	Y	Management	Personnel Manager
5	F	21+	12	Y	Management	Marketing Executive
6	F	31+	15	Y	Admin	Employment facilitator
7	F	51+	28	Y	Admin	Order Administrator
8	M	51+	45	Y	Weaving	No 5 Site Manager
9	M	51+	46	Y	Weaving	Training Co-ordinator
10	M	21+	11	Y	Weaving	Pattern Loom Weaver
11	M	41+	35	Y	Weaving	Wilton Weaver
13	M	51+	44	Y	Weaving	Weaver
14	M	41+	31	Y	Weaving	Weaver
15	M	51+	32	N	Weaving	Loom Technician
16	F	31+	4	N	Weaving	Alterer
17	M	51+	35	Y	Spinning	Yarn Factory Manager
18	M	31+	14	N	Spinning	Yarn Training Manager
19	F	51+	32	Y	Spinning	Yarn Operative
20	F	41+	14	Y	Spinning	Yarn Operative
21	F	31+	14	Y	Preparatory	Team Leader
22	F	51+	29	Y	Preparatory	Team leader Winder
23	F	31+	12	Y	Preparatory	Creeler/winder
23	M	31+	27	Y	Weaving	Mark 14 Weaver
24	M	51+	35	Y	Finishing	Finishing Manager
25	M	21+	6	Y	Finishing	Management Trainee
26	M	51+	32	Y	Finishing	Team Leader
27	M	31+	7	N	Finishing	Quality Inspector
28	M	61+	30	Y	Finishing	Quality Technician
29	F	41+	28	Y	Finishing	Mender/Picker
30	F	61+	6	Y	Finishing	Secretary
31	M	41+	15	N	Engineering	Design Engineer
32	M	41+	14	Y	Maintenance	Pipe-fitter
33	M	41+	11	Y	Maintenance	Maintenance Fitter

**Table 2 ISTC Representatives and Weaveco Employees**

ISTC Reps	M/F	Age	Service	Work Section	Job Title	Union title
34	M	51+	25 years	Finishing	Carpet shearer	ISTC President (carpet section )
35	M	41+	26	Finishing	Carpet shearer	S/S and Exec. Member
36	M	51+	30	Weaving	Wilton weaver	Shop Steward
37	F	31+	17	Preparatory	Winder	Executive Member
38	M	-	-		-	National Officer (ISTC)

### **Traditional Work Organisation at Weaveco**

Male craft status at Weaveco rested historically on a number of pillars: a relatively stable labour process, the strength of the trade union, wider respect for skilled men in the local community and the (relative) tolerance of a paternalist employer. All four pillars have crumbled in recent years, but here we will focus on decisive changes in the labour process. Major restructuring occurred in the early 1990s after a severe worldwide recession caused a crisis in what remained of the UK's quality carpet industry. Without substantial organizational changes, Weaveco would have collapsed like most other local competitors.

To illustrate the extent of change, it is useful to outline the traditional patterns of work organisation. When our group first researched the company in the late 1980s (see Ackers 1988), the pattern of production established in the mid-nineteenth century, including the transition from hand to power-loom weaving, was still largely in place. The workforce was sharply segregated between Spinning, Preparatory, Weaving and Finishing sections in order of the production cycle from raw materials to finished carpet (although there were many job roles within these sections – see Tables 1 and 2). Spinning, Preparatory and Finishing workers were regarded as largely semi-skilled and many were women, and indeed the textile industry has a long tradition of female employment. Weaving, by contrast, was an exclusively male sphere of employment, centred on the individual skilled weaver and his power loom. The weaver was responsible for weaving on the front of the loom and he was assisted by several alterers who worked on the back of the loom tying on the carpet threads.

The weaver had 'served his time', via a de facto apprenticeship in the support roles of alterer for four years to qualify for 'weaving papers'; a process supervised by his craft trade union (the PLCW-Power Loom and Carpet Weavers Union). A craft worker's skill was gained tacitly from working alongside other craftsmen and, in time, gaining a detailed and specialized knowledge of that work, as outlined by Lave and Wenger (1991). For weavers this process meant gaining a detailed knowledge of their own loom, the yarn and the carpet weaving process over a long period of time. It also meant making a major commitment to quality work and being punctual and dependable. While all Weaveco employees belonged to the PLCW under a closed shop agreement, the union was dominated by weavers. Thus, as Cook (1996: 22) suggests, this ad hoc form of apprenticeship was used to teach the worker technical competence as well as the

importance of being a loyal trade unionist and adopting a ‘manly bearing’ towards management. Even then, to assume this elite craft role, the weaver still had to climb the seniority ladder and wait for a loom vacancy. Once in position, the weaver claimed ‘ownership’ of his loom and refused to be transferred to any other loom or work. On the shop floor identity was (and was still at the time of research) made manifest in the carrying of the tools of their trade, a pair of scissors and what was termed a bodging needle. The weaver and his team were paid by piecework rates which were negotiated at departmental and national levels.

### **Restructuring Work Organisation and its Impact**

Within the constraints of the power loom technology, in the late 1980s, management had just begun to negotiate mobility agreements, which would allow some very limited movement between looms. However it was the year 1992 which really marked a major turning point for the weaving labour process and broader industrial relations, as restructuring involved totally re-organising shop-floor production to improve flexibility. This meant reducing job demarcations, removing supervisory tiers, ending piecework, and introducing team leaders and self-managed teams in order to improve the quality of the finished product. All of these changes threatened existing craft control of the labour process, however management argued that this was the continuation of a pre-existing trend. Indeed, computer automated looms, which stop automatically when there is a fault in production, rather than the traditional power looms, were designed and introduced by the company in the 1980s. All UK carpets are now woven on automatic looms and managers argued that as a consequence, all weaving work had become semi-skilled. Thus a weaver and his team came to manage up to twelve looms, distancing them further from their original craft roots of ‘one man one loom.’ The Junior Production Director also claimed that huge investment in this new technology and the research and development associated with it, demanded managerial control of the labour process. Part of this managerial control involved pay, and the ending of weaving piecework gave management the opportunity to review weavers’ pay rates. The deskilling of their job tasks thus resulted in a narrowing of wage differentials between weavers and the rest of their weaving team to around £30 a week, (although it should be noted that weavers and alterers still remained at the top of the shop floor wage hierarchy).

In the short term, work reorganization did not greatly change the gender segregated nature of carpet work. Largely this was due to the fact that there were few new vacancies for women to enter. However, in the Preparatory section, where workers prepare the yarn for the looms (including those ‘creelers’ and ‘air cell’ workers), women now work alongside men in teams. Even so, at the time of research there were still no female leaders of mixed or male teams and most importantly, as yet, no woman had become a weaver in the UK factory. Demarcations between the skilled workers, the weavers and alterers, and the other carpet employees thus remained a significant feature of Weaveco’s labour process, even post-restructuring.

Thus, despite the changes associated with the restructuring, the heritage of craft control still influenced the wider workforce and this may help to explain the continuing distinction between shop floor workers. As one weaver stated:

*Weaving is experience, an experienced worker can stand there and look at a loom and say that doesn't sound right he can hear it. I've got a lot of respect for the older people who are working because you can only learn from most of them. When I first joined the pattern section there was bloke called Derek, he's retired now, He would say to me, I've been weaving for nearly fifty years in the company and I'm still learning. I think that is a true reflection of life as well as a carpet factory (Male Pattern loom weaver).*

Restructuring brought the company into direct confrontation with weavers' control of the labour process. Management considered that the weavers' domination of production restricted their long-term competitiveness, particularly as organisational changes around flexibility had been fully introduced in other areas of carpet production. As alluded to earlier, attitudes of management to demands based around notions of craft skill had hardened with the introduction of automatic looms. In addition, the restructuring also saw a redundancy exercise that cleared out many of those considered to be 'die-hard' weavers.

Most significantly, some production was exported to countries with lower labour costs, specifically to a greenfield site in Portugal. The Directors argued that this was necessary in an industry where labour was a major cost and had to compete with competitors in Thailand and Pakistan. However, they also considered that whilst they had exported some jobs, this had helped to secure jobs in Carpet Town, due to cost savings, while continued regular investment in new technology for the main Weaveco factory demonstrated their commitment to UK production. Over and above this, the export of production to a new greenfield site in Portugal did have major implications for the weavers as Portuguese women were recruited to weave on Weaveco's redundant looms. The Senior Production Director considered that cultural factors were behind the recruitment of women in Portugal because only women did weaving work there:

*We would like to have women weavers here and we have some women involved in creeling and altering. It was the union actually which would not have women. The union opposed it; they've not been exactly enthusiastic about it. We would like to develop that but there are some practical problems because by and large opportunities for recruitment are limited. When we first started in Portugal people thought we were mad. They said it took seven years for someone to become a weaver. We had women weaving within six weeks the whole thing was just crazy (Male Senior Production Director).*

However, while the aim of the investment in Portugal was to increase production without substantially increasing labour costs, a secondary benefit was to help challenge the claims of male craft workers, as after only a few weeks training, the Portuguese women successfully increased productivity.

Despite the example of Portugal, within the UK factory it took longer to transform long-standing attitudes of other workers towards the role of weavers and the way in which they were perceived as superior. Equally, changing attitudes was not easy either for the weavers, who not long ago had sat at the top of the skill hierarchy and had held a privileged position in both the company and importantly, the wider town. This fall in

status and respect contributed to the weaver's feeling of disaffection, particularly as they reflected on the civic contribution weavers gave in previous eras:

*I remember talking to my granddad who was a weaver and I know this is extreme, but if a weaver got on a bus somebody would get up and give them their place. I know this is not the way but to me it makes me sad that the weaver's status has been so degraded. I sometimes look at the town and think this was all built on the skill of the weavers now gone. It makes me angry, this whole town was built on weavers otherwise it would just be another backwater. Weaving used to be highly respected, highly paid job but now a man putting rubbish in dustbins earns more than I'm on now. I resent that. I was proud when I became a weaver. I had made it. When I started mother was over the moon that I was working at Weaveco with the possibility of being a weaver, a respected job then, and Weaveco were first even then (Male Narrow Loom Weaver and ISTC shop steward).*

However, the status of weavers was also given managerial authority. Three managers were former weavers, and the HR Director opined that his knowledge of the nature of carpet work, and his own skilled status gave him greater legitimacy as a manager in the eyes of the carpet workers, even in the post-restructuring period. In this way, some of the values of male craft survived the death of the institution itself. Interestingly, Weaveco has always promoted men from the weaving shop floor to more senior supervisory and managerial positions, contradicting Cook's (1996:24) claim that craft workers are traditionally excluded from the managerial hierarchy. This has continued post-restructuring, with the introduction of a management training scheme for shop floor workers, although at the time of research, no female candidate had yet put herself forward for consideration in this scheme. In this way, the weavers' claims to superiority (and the male dominance of the structures) continued to have some standing.

### **Industrial Relations and the Views of the Trade Union**

Before the 1992 restructuring, industrial relations had centred on the PLCW (now the carpet section of the ISTC), and the union had traditionally been powerful enough to retain control over the carpet labour process. As an example of this, Marsh (1995) relates how in the late 1970s, against a background of rising unemployment in Carpet Town, the company wanted to alter the weaving working practice and move temporarily from the 'one man, one loom' tradition to avoid having to place the entire workforce on short-time. The weavers refused to adjust their rigid working practices and went on strike closing the factory. More than half of the workforce who had been laid off did not support this action and marched to the union offices to demand 'the right to work'. The dispute was finally settled but as was clear from views in our earlier studies (Ackers 1988), the working relationship between the union, management and other carpet workers had been soured. In the long run therefore, this had left the weavers isolated in their confrontation with management.

Throughout the 1980s, management chipped away at the weaver's power through employee involvement and other initiatives (Ackers, 1988) but 1992 also marked a major turning point in industrial relations. Highly symbolic of the challenge to the union control of the labour process was when the union-sponsored weaving papers were abolished and



management was given the authority to pick and choose the weavers who would work on their new computer automated looms. Clearly the ability of management to have this authority was related to the declining power of the union. As the number of UK carpet manufacturing employees has declined, union membership in the Carpet union dropped from its peak of around 6,500 in 1976 to 3229 in 1986 to 1270 in 2000 ( when it eventually amalgamated with the ISTC). Thus the union's decline was both a cause and effect of the loss of status of weavers. Clearly, this has implications for other carpet workers in their union. For example historically, weavers had enjoyed two votes for everyone else's one, and an ISTC Executive member and male carpet worker outlined how in the 1980s that while the alterers had a strong union section, it was the weavers who really 'ruled the roost'. However, as this worker went on to describe, this situation was not accepted by all other workers and there were views that the inequalities on the shop floor that favoured the weavers needed to change:

*The (union) were pretty awful to their own members. The weavers used to run the weaving union and if anyone joined the carpet industry more than eighteen years of age he could not get his weaving papers. That disqualified a whole load of people. I got the impression there was blatant unfairness in what the weavers were doing, and although they were a powerful and tight-knit community they didn't have the support either of their peers or the town. I think they probably ended up destroying themselves (Male Production Director).*

Thus these divisions harmed the collective power of the union, and the tensions between the weavers and other carpet workers meant that management could present restructuring as being about restoring equity between carpet workers, as well improving as flexibility and productivity.

### **Rethinking Identities**

Senior management considered two innovations as particularly influential in implementing new working practices on the shop floor. First, team working gave greater responsibility to the shop floor workers and offered some challenge to the superiority of the weavers. Second, the removal of supervisors (many of whom were weavers from the shop floor) was also deemed necessary because many of them were reluctant to implement any change that challenged their authority and knowledge. As one might expect, these new working practices were resisted by the individual weavers and this presented problems for those who worked alongside them, as the following quotes demonstrate:

*We are fully committed to team working in our department. Some people aren't fully committed; they pay lip service to it. There is nowhere else for me to go now at fifty-nine.... I told them it's very cold outside lads, it's self-preservation, if we weren't paying our way then the company would soon consign us to the scrap-heap (Male Narrow Loom Weaver and ISTC Shop Steward).*

*We're in teams and sometimes I don't think my team value me as much as they should...I've got one weaver who has gone back upstairs to be an alterer and taken a drop of thirty pounds in money. His attitude is you chose the weaving so I'm not weaving any more. When you've got one bloke out of five with that attitude, the other four start following. Why should they assist when he's not. He's*

*done nearly forty years and he won't really accept the change (Male Axminster Weaver).*

However, while weavers' disaffection was widespread across the different weaving departments, reactions varied according to the individual hierarchical position held, level of militancy, as well as by age. Younger weavers brought different attitudes about employability. Furthermore, the response to restructuring differed between the Axminster and Wilton weaving departments. The men in the Wilton department, where they weave plain carpet, were both the most militant and the most traditional. Their youngest member was in his mid-forties, while in comparison, there were Axminster workers in their early thirties. The Wilton weavers were opposed to the new forms of team working and were frantically trying to cling onto the institution of seniority within their small department. As two Wilton weavers put it, this was the only security they had and they noted how in the Axminster department there were people with only eighteen months of experience weaving while those with forty years were losing their jobs. For younger weaving workers, the decline of the old skill hierarchy was less of an issue. They saw learning new skills such as 'tuning' the machinery and gaining NVQ qualifications as more of an opportunity to expand their transferable skills and thus their employability. A female ISTC shop steward also confirmed that not all men appreciated the traditional macho approach in union affairs, relating how she had recently had a young lad come to see her rather than a male colleague because he wanted a less aggressive response.

However, most senior tuners and weavers disagreed with the blurring of what they saw as distinct skills. One older male carpet worker for example had originally trained to maintain the loom machinery and now worked in a weaving team alongside a weaver. He argued that although he could weave and did, it did not automatically make him a weaver and that was why he carried a spanner on his belt and not a pair of scissors and a bodging needle. While the weavers acknowledged the inequalities of the past system, with even one older weaver commenting that it was like 'slavery', many were still not reconciled to newer less hierarchical forms of multi-skilled working. Above all, they would have liked more respect for their role, as one reminisced:

*When I started the attitude was different, back then weavers were gods they looked down on people, they thought they could do whatever they liked, talk to whom they liked how they liked and that was the way it worked. If I was to speak to somebody like the weavers used to do about thirty or forty years ago I would get a smack in the mouth. You would not do it today but you did it then because people respected it because they ran the show but now it's changed, I'm only twenty-seven, it would not happen now. Management, don't have to put up with it now they are picking and choosing their weavers, which has upset a lot of people. Roy is a bloke who works with us he was taken off the weaving it has upset him quite a lot because he feels he's been told that he ain't a good weaver (Male Pattern Loom Weaver).*

With a very low turnover of labour and few recruitment opportunities in the industry, any long-term change would take time to filter through. As one older weaver pointed out, there are few places for carpet workers to go. However the difficulties of younger working alongside older workers offers some explanation for why after restructuring,

managers sometimes transferred older weavers to the less prestigious Wilton section or what one weaver called ‘*Devil’s Island*’<sup>1</sup>.

Even so, despite obvious internal divisions, there were areas of their work and status under the new regime with which both Wilton and Axminster weavers expressed disaffection, and even the younger weavers were unhappy with the current situation. It was generally recognised that it was the weavers who had lost the most, as Portuguese women and others did their jobs after only short periods of training, undermining their claims to skill and experience. The issue of the Portuguese women weavers also seemed to be a point of confusion for the UK weavers. While some weavers were slowly recognizing that other people, including women, could weave, they were then questioning why they would want to, in a situation where productivity pressures were increased and income and status had fallen, as one related:

*There is a girl working in the altering section I think she can do the job just as good as any man. I don’t know whether a woman couldn’t do weaving but whether they would want to do it. I couldn’t see why they would want to do it. They would have to be daft. It was absolutely the top job in the town you know but it has lost its value, I begrudge it a bit. I mean I like to think that we were a bit higher though but those days have gone. At one time you used to wait for people to retire and then think it’s going to be my job next, dead men’s shoes. There’s still a few who have done over forty years but most of the older weavers have gone now, doing thirty years I’m not the highest, but I’m at the top section for the amount of years done (Male Axminster Weaver) .*

This was not to say that there was no recognition of the need for change in the industry. For example, the need for greater equity in the treatment of carpet workers was widely acknowledged by many workers. In addition, however difficult the restructuring process was, many also acknowledged the company’s commitment to UK carpet manufacturing. Some workers, including shop stewards, considered that if other companies had matched Weaveco’s investment, its manufacturing could stand as a ‘model’ for others. The continuing investment in UK production and the introduction of the latest loom technology, seemed to also reinforce managerial assertions that as a family-owned company, Weaveco remained committed to production within Carpet Town.

Overall, the company continued to provide employment for its familial occupational community, however there still remained nostalgia for the past from the workforce and anger at what was seen as the managerial betrayal of the weaver’s notions of craft. As discussed earlier, the status separation of the weavers from the other carpet workers could not have occurred without management concessions to their superior work claims. The paternalist heritage of family-controlled management originally supported the masculine ideology of craft-work. Company acceptance had helped to legitimise the weavers’ craft notions and consolidate their special skilled status in the company and industry. Thus management’s more recent challenge to their work status was perceived as something of a betrayal and this has added to their sense of disaffection. However, any potential overt

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<sup>1</sup> Strategically, Wilton’s declining domestic retail market is considered to be more peripheral economically than Axminster, which produces vast quantities of patterned carpet for its key export contract markets.

resistance to new working practices, is circumscribed not only by economic realities, but also by Weaveco's long-standing relationship with the weaving workforce, its commitment to investment in Carpetown and the tacit support of managers who were themselves formerly weavers.

### **Changes to gender segregation**

Despite management support for the recruitment of women into the weaving sheds, the recruitment of female weavers in Portugal, and challenges to rigid skill demarcations, at the time of research, there were still no women weavers in the UK factory and only one woman working as an alterer. However, as two managers pointed out, with the increasing automation of work on the shop floor and the very low level of turnover, there were not really many opportunities for recruitment into these areas on the shop floor. Shop floor production control was still therefore associated with men. The level of entrenchment of the male control of the workforce is well illustrated by the experience of Weaveco's lone female alterer and male responses to her.

The female alterer clearly acknowledged the impact of weaving tradition, which portrayed carpet weaving as a 'man's world':

*I get on with the lads all right. There were four women started on altering and I'm the only one left. A couple just left, one went up to Number Five and I was taken on permanent. Before that I was a two year temporary I think you do have to prove yourself a bit. Creeling at another carpet company was more physical. You've got to try and mix in with them as much as you can because it's, God knows how many years, been males doing that job. You've got to be not too forceful with them, you've got to go along with them until you get to.... now I don't bother so much. It took a while to be accepted by some, perhaps more the older guys than the younger ones. I think the older ones were stuck in their routine and if something changes its...It does not bother me being the only women on the shop floor at all. All the lads didn't swear then but now it's nothing like that I suppose they treat me as one of the lads in a way, which I don't mind really. I'd rather it be like that than them not talking to me (Female Alterer).*

Furthermore, the quotes below from her male colleagues illustrate the difficulties that they perceive women face doing carpet work, and how difficult it was to break down long-standing gender boundaries:

*There is one girl working on the one set of looms, she does altering and creeling. She seems to enjoy it there's no hassle with the people she works with. They seem to get on quite well with all of them. I don't think they're bothered now she's one of the lads actually. Although, I imagine she has great difficulty with what's out in front. Yes she's stretching over to do things. I don't know, I ain't a woman. Let's put it this way, it will push you further away from the job unless you do a lot of squashing I imagine, although she doesn't seem to complain. (Male Tuner/Weaver)*

*They did attempt to have ladies in the altering department but it didn't really work because of social commitments and families. There is only one woman remaining now and she's, let us say, a strong-minded person without a boyfriend.*

*Physically, they couldn't work a four-shift system and run a home.* (Male Pattern Loom Weaver).

*I don't know why Weaveco don't have female weavers we have them in Portugal I believe on our old Mark Seven looms. How they cope I don't really know. The actual weaving is not a physical job it's the attachment of like the bits that becomes the physical part. You (the interviewer) couldn't do it.* (Male Wilton Weaver)

Explanations reliant on stereotypes are blatant here and reflect similar experiences we found in other traditional craft industries (Greene et al, 2002). Crompton and Sanderson (1990:33) consider that cultural inertia helps to explain why despite the removal of barriers to men and women working in the same teams, sex-typing continues to persist within long established jobs. The pervasiveness of stereotypical gender identities in such groups contributed to the very slow progression of women into these areas, despite the forced restructuring at Weaveco, and in this example, resulted in the men desexualising the lone successful female worker to a 'honorary lad'. Production relations thus still operated around an implicit sexual division of labour. No women who worked in Weaveco had control over a team of men, only authority over other women. Therefore, while the old male craft identity appeared broken and beyond repair; no clear new gender relationship emerged. The importance of this becomes apparent when we examine the men's transition to a new male work identity.

### **After Craft: Reconstructing Masculine Work Identity?**

The fracturing of the weavers' craft identity raises an important question. How can the male weavers construct and stabilize work identities within a new hierarchical framework and shifting work relationships? Seidler (1989) and Willis (1977) consider that masculinity is externally defined by the society and community that men and women live in; something that has to be externally asserted and proved. In traditional terms, male identity is secured through his job and his income, whereas a woman's work identity is mediated by family relations. The weavers' status arguably encouraged men to split their identity between their private and work lives, a split which in an occupational community was heightened as work status became privileged within the local community. Siedler (1989:151) argues that men functioning within this set of social relations become working machines, fearful of intimacy vulnerability, regulation, control and discipline (though importantly it should be noted that our research did not explore weavers' intimate family lives). However, the craft fraternity also provides a central source of meaning, friendship and male bonding and so validates their adherence to occupational masculinity and craft union membership (Cockburn 1983, Roberts 1993). Since weavers gained status on the shop floor any challenge to their work role arguably became a challenge to their masculinity. Therefore, they needed to maintain their precarious masculine authority constructed around skill, by for example alluding to the physicality (and maleness) of work in the weaving sheds. For instance, one weaver admitted he disliked handling the more emotional female members, for example, when the pickers would come to him in '*floods of tears*'.

Gender identities are in part chosen, but are also partly imposed by the society and the community in which we live. Woodward (2004) claims that identities are fluid and this

fluidity creates uncertainty and diversity and the expression of uncertainty can take different forms. The weavers' sense of disaffection with their reduced role and status reflects the tension between how control in identity construction has shifted as the work reorganization altered the historical balance between their 'self and the constraints exercised over them' (Woodward 2004:8). According to Siedler (1989:152) as times change, men can choose not to acknowledge the uncertainty that this brings to their inherited and constructed sense of masculine identity. They can refuse to experience parts of their self that are made vulnerable because of change and consequently continue to resist. We see examples of this in the way that the older, more militant Wilton weavers engaged in a doomed struggle to retain craft elements, such as seniority and their notions of skill and experience, within their work domain.

Work identity is subjective and internal, as well as external, and this can be expressed as a tension between structure and agency (Schwarzkopf 2004). For these weavers the tension existed because they considered themselves as skilled workers, while management (and the wider society) regarded them as essentially semi-skilled. The weavers' ability to challenge this situation had declined as their trade union lost influence and one way of showing their dissatisfaction was through withdrawing their knowledge and co-operation. Edley and Wetherell (1995) consider this reaction to be connected to the male workers' self-esteem, their sense of creativity, camaraderie and physical strength and this relates to how they present themselves as men; in this case how this is shaped into a collective identity as weavers.

Nevertheless as discussed earlier, some weavers did recognise that some things had to change, particularly the treatment of 'inferior' carpet workers. This would suggest that not all the weavers fully embraced the deep structure that associated masculinity with craft status and visa versa (see Alvesson and Due Billing 1997). While this was a view held by many, not all weavers agreed with the physicality, the language and blatant abuse of authority, or 'slavery', attached to the old craft system. In the transition away from craft work it is possible that the weavers could remake their work identity utilising a new version of masculinity and skill that still retained some of the old emphasis on physicality and rationality. The adoption of this particular masculinity in Weaveco maybe linked to the continuing division of labour. While the company has experimented with female recruitment into male positions as alterers, this has not changed the male dominated nature of control on the weaving shop floor. Despite the evidence of Portugal, there were still no female weavers in the UK and the gendered treatment of the only remaining alterer partly explains why despite the fact that craft demarcations had almost disappeared (at least formally), gender demarcations had not. Thus, whilst the male weavers were unhappy with losing craft status they had been able to reassert some elements of their masculine identity (Cockburn 1983, Connell 2000).

To conclude, the restructuring of traditional manufacturing workplaces through initiatives such as team working can open up a skill and gender 'can of worms', confusing established male and female identities (see Greene et al 2002 for the latter). In this case, management's destruction of craft control of production has produced an identity crisis for male weavers. This crisis may have been an unintentional by-product of the restructuring rationale, although it seemed clear that management were well aware of the symbolic industrial relations impact of employing women in Portugal on the old looms of

the craftsmen. At Weaveco, the restructuring beginning in 1992 seemed to herald a transformation in shop floor gender relations. Yet a decade later, control of the labour process still rested with men, there were no female team leaders who have authority over male teams, all Weaveco's management trainees in production were men and several of the male managers had themselves formerly been weavers who were then promoted from the shop floor. In this, the level of continuity with the past is demonstrated. The workers' voices in this story of transition on the factory floor, provide not only a rich and interesting case, but clearly suggest the problematic nature of remaking a long-standing work identity even once past certainties are swept away.

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