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Older Workers and Occupational Identity in the Telecommunications Industry: Navigating Employment Transitions through the Life Course

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Abstract

The article examines the relationship between restructuring and work-based identity among older workers, exploring occupational identity, occupational community and their roles in navigating transitions in the life course. Based on working-life biographical interviews with late career and retired telecoms engineers, the article explores the role of occupational identity in dealing with change prior to and following the end of careers at BT, the UK's national telecommunications provider. Restructuring and perpetual organizational change undermined key aspects of the engineering occupational identity, inspiring many to seek alternative employment outside BT. For older workers, some seeking bridge employment in the transition to retirement, the occupational community not only served as a mechanism for finding work but also provided a sustained collective identity resource. Distinctively, the research points to a dialectical relationship between occupational identity and the navigation of change as opposed to the former simply facilitating the latter.

Keywords

bridge employment, identity, life course, occupation, occupational community, occupational identity, older workers, organizational identity, retirement

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Introduction

In the 10 years following the deregulation of the UK telecommunications sector and the privatization of BT in 1984, the national supplier reduced its workforce by over 100,000 through a series of voluntary 'release schemes'. For many of those displaced this was the first time they had sought employment on the external labour market since starting their apprenticeships. The long-term employment relationship had fostered the development of a strong occupational identity among telecoms engineers (MacKenzie et al., 2017), which would play an important role in meeting the challenges created by restructuring. For some of these older workers finding new employment was part of a transition to retirement (Gardiner et al., 2007). Employment beyond the familiar environment of BT's internal labour market, however, meant a new responsibility for life course design (Gould and Saurama, 2004).

Based on working-life biographical interviews with late career and retired telecoms engineers, the article examines the relationship between restructuring and work-based identity, exploring occupational identity, occupational community and their roles in navigating transitions in the life course (Gardiner et al., 2009; MacKenzie et al., 2006; Sargent et al., 2013). It is argued that the occupational community provided a sustained collective identity resource, which both afforded a means of dealing with organizational change and facilitated the performance of work. Crucially, this pattern continued following the major life course change of departure from BT. The occupational community, underpinned by occupational identity, provided material support and a collective identity resource based on a re-articulation of the historical attachment to BT. In addition to occupational identity facilitating life course change (Atchley, 1989; MacKenzie et al., 2006; Marks and Scholarios, 2007; Sargent et al., 2013), the findings suggest life course change by turn facilitated the maintenance of the collective occupational identity. Therefore, the research points to a dialectical relationship between occupational identity and the navigation of change, as opposed to the former simply facilitating the latter. This is not to suggest that one influence was ultimately dominant but rather that the outcome reflected a synthesis of opposing causal tendencies. Moreover, in a more individualized employment context, occupational identity provided a collective reference point for workers who were otherwise fragmented by the nature of their contract terms and labour process. The enduring role of the collective identity resource challenges the prevalent focus within much of the identity literature on individualized reflexive journeys (Collinson, 2006; Howard, 2000).

The next section draws together debates on occupational communities, workplace identity, retirement and bridge employment. The methodology and background to the study are then explained, followed by the presentation of the findings and a discursive conclusion.

Review of debates

Interest in occupational communities is long-standing within the sociology of work literature (Horobin, 1957; Salaman, 1971). Often associated with professions, or traditional industries (MacKenzie et al., 2006; Salaman, 1971; Strangleman, 2012), the

concept of occupational community has also been applied to more dispersed occupations such as face-to-face service work (Sandiford and Seymour, 2007). Occupational communities are defined by insider–outsider status often associated with *inter alia*, idiosyncratic skill, hard or dangerous work, geographic isolation and specificities of the labour process (Jenkins, 2014; Salaman, 1971; Strangleman, 2012; Turnbull, 1992). The importance of occupation to an individual's identity is reflected in a strong emotional attachment to work, which may be heightened by physically demanding or dangerous work (Metzgar, 2001; Turnbull, 1992). Occupational community members share a set of values born of common experience and histories, which underpin a sense of distinctiveness from non-members (Salaman, 1971). Occupational communities are embedded in work practices (Bechky, 2006), both formal and informal, which rely on old hands to communicate and mentor (Orr, 2006). Socialization into such communities may require a given technical competence (Orr, 2006) but also adherence to unofficial although no less codified sets of rules and values (MacKenzie et al., 2006). Such characteristics provide the basis for a sense of separateness, even superiority over non-members (Jenkins, 2014; MacKenzie et al., 2017), although, in turn, perceptions of lower status may also foster in-group solidarities (Sandiford and Seymour, 2007).

The perception of distinct attributes and values shared by members of an occupational community provides a basis for occupational identity, which in turn is supported and reproduced by the occupational community (Bechky, 2006; Salaman, 1971; Strangleman, 2012). Occupational community has been a way of delineating a discussion of occupational identity within the wider sociology of identity literature, one distinct from debates concerned with identity work. A substantial body of literature on identity work has emerged from a post-structuralist perspective, which tends to problematize identity construction as a highly individualized endeavour (Alvesson, 2000; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Identity work is a project of the self rather than a collective process that can potentially be reproduced through social structures (Alvesson, 2000). Alternatively, the study of occupational communities provides for a focus on collectively oriented identities rather than individualized identity projects, and inclines towards an identity shaped by social structure rather than individual identity construction through reflexivity (Collinson, 2006; Howard, 2000). Collective identity is central to occupational communities, which may translate into broader forms of collectivism in terms of class identity and collective organization (McBride and Martínez Lucio, 2011; MacKenzie et al., 2006; Marks and Baldry, 2009; Metzgar, 2001). The collective may also provide mechanisms of material and emotional support during times of individual or shared crisis, such as redundancy, thereby aiding navigation of life course change (Gardiner et al., 2009; MacKenzie et al., 2006).

Although occupational communities may accentuate occupational identity, individuals are of course subject to multiple identity reference points, which may compete, converge or combine (Ashforth et al., 2008). Contributions to the sociology of professions literature suggest broader group affiliation associated with a particular profession, such as journalism or the legal profession, may coexist with organizational identity associated with attachment to a particular employer (Loi et al., 2004; Marks and Scholarios, 2007; Russo, 1998). Moreover, institutional roles, for example managerial responsibilities, may lead to hybridization of identity foci (McGivern et al., 2015). Given the potential for multiple loci

of identities within large organizations, the distinction between organizational and occupational identity may become blurred or inconsequential (Ashforth et al., 2008).

However, the relationship between organizational and occupational identity is complex. Some observers suggest that as organizations often provide the means for expression of occupational identity, the latter reinforces the former, leading to stronger organizational commitment (Loi et al., 2004; Marks and Scholarios, 2007; Russo, 1998). Others point to the potential for tension between these identity foci, notably the mobilization of a broader occupational identity in resistance of managerial fiat (Flynn, 1999; MacKenzie et al., 2017). The collective norms and values of occupational identity can provide the basis for critiques of organizational change (Humphreys and Brown, 2002) or legitimize alternative organizational narratives that compete with management attempts to create established narratives (McDonald et al., 2006). Therefore, the collective norms and values of occupational identity may provide the basis for critical understanding of the changes experienced in contemporary working lives (Strangleman, 2012).

Dealing with change may be facilitated by an alternative focus on career identity, thereby allowing occupational identity to transcend changes in organizational allegiance 'as environmental turbulence continues to erode long-term relationships with organizations' (Ashforth et al., 2008: 352). For Ashforth et al. (2008), such navigation of change requires individualized projects reorienting identity around embracing flexibility, learning and personal growth; demonstrating a willingness to explore and adapt inherent in the 'protean self' (Lifton, 1999: cited in Ashforth et al., 2008). This emphasis on individual projects of change resonates with debates around transitions in the life course associated with major disjunctures such as redundancy and retirement. The life course has traditionally been theorized as comprising long-term trajectories ending in shorter periods of transition (Elder, 1985) as people shift between courses of activity (Macmillan, 2005): from school to work (Brückner and Mayer, 2005); from single life to marriage (Elder, 1985); from work to retirement (Gardiner et al., 2007; Gould and Saurama, 2004).

Increased attention has focused on whether the late 20th century witnessed a paradigmatic shift from a standardized life course, of relatively stable and predictable trajectories and transitions, towards a life course that is de-standardized, de-institutionalized and increasingly individualized (Brückner and Mayer, 2005; Macmillan, 2005).

For observers such as Beck (1992) or Giddens (1991) responsibility for the navigation of transitions in the life course is very much an individualized endeavour. However, the emphasis given to individual responsibility for navigating life course transitions tends to ignore the collective nature of resources people may draw upon (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Gardiner et al., 2009; MacKenzie et al., 2006). Focusing on single critical events may exaggerate the atomized nature of the specific events and individualized nature of agency, at the expense of continuities (Gardiner et al., 2009) embedded in collective structures and habitual agency. The movement away from habitual forms of agency towards the emphasis on individual reflexive transformation of course reflects the wider obsession of theorists such as Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991) with individualization. Yet, critical life events should not be viewed in isolation but located within a continuum of the life course (Gardiner et al., 2009), with consideration of the resources and support systems to which individuals have access (MacKenzie et al., 2006).

Sargent et al. (2013) argue that the de-standardization and individualization of the life course mean that predictable patterns of retirement no longer dominate (see also

Macmillan, 2005). Many older workers choose a transition that allows them to retain a sense of contribution, remaining highly engaged in terms of the use of skills and knowledge through reduced hours working (Sargent et al., 2013). The concept of 'bridge employment' has been used to describe older workers taking up new employment as a means of traversing the transition from a career to retirement (Kim and Feldman, 2000). Bridge employment provides a means of sustaining a steady income, while also facilitating gradual adjustment between full-time work and retirement (Loretto and Vickerstaff, 2015). Within the bridge employment debate, Atchley's (1989) continuity theory has been widely utilized to explain the motivation for undertaking such work: in order to avoid the psychological stress of the absence of work, people seek to 'preserve and maintain existing structures [...] by using continuity i.e. applying familiar strategies in familiar arenas of life' (1989: 183). This links to occupational identity in that Atchley (1989) suggests individuals who have high career identification are likely to seek 'continuity' through work involvement.

The role of occupational identity in dealing with change at various stages of the life course is central to the study presented in this article. While previous work has noted change in the life course may be facilitated by maintaining occupational identity (MacKenzie et al., 2006; Marks and Scholarios, 2007; Sargent et al., 2013), the findings of this study suggest a dialectical relationship between the two. When identities are so clearly embedded within occupational communities, it could equally be argued that maintaining occupational identity may be shaped by transition: ultimately, neither one nor the other influence is dominant but rather the outcome reflects a synthesis of the two. These issues are explored below, following a discussion of the methodology and background to the study.

Methodology and background

The research design was influenced by the biographical methods employed in life story and life course approaches across sociology and adjacent disciplines (Bertaux and Kohli, 1984; Bertaux and Thompson, 2006; Dex, 1989). Working-life biographical interviews were conducted with 26 older telecommunications engineers. Drawing on Bertaux and Kohli's (1984: 217) maxim that: 'The life story approach should be based on narratives of one's life, or parts thereof', the working-life biographies focused on the period of the participant's life spent in employment, and the periods leading up to and following their careers as BT engineers. These spontaneous narratives were supplemented with specific questions.

Bertaux and Kohli (1984: 215) express the aims of biographical narratives as being to garner accurate descriptions of participants' life trajectories, for insight into patterns of social relations and social processes that shaped them. Use of the word 'accurate' raises obvious issues over recounting events that occurred decades earlier. In addition to partial or selective recall, recollection may be shaped by the collective memory of groups of peers or influenced by organizational memory bent on the development of legends or received versions of history (Rowlinson et al., 2010). This is not to deny the importance of accuracy but, following Bertaux and Thompson's (2006: 13) defence of life story methods, in asking participants to describe and explain as factually as possible, the aim is to gather both factual and interpretive information. The working-life biography

approach was not intended as an objective account of indisputable facts but rather an interpretation and reflection by participants on how events shaped changes in attitude over time. Interviews explored the long-term trajectories of the life course, and transitions between phases. This retrospective approach was essential for providing a long-run perspective on occupational identity.

Individual interviews were supplemented by two multiple-participant interviews, with two and three participants. These interviews proved extremely useful in terms of the insight generated through the interaction between participants. Multiple-participant interviews allow insight into how values shared within a group are deployed (Bryman, 2015) and therefore represent an ideal tool for researching the construction and maintenance of collective identities (Munday, 2006).

Access was gained via a retired members branch of the Communications Workers Union, with interviews conducted over several months spanning 2013–2014. Interviews varied in length from around an hour up to four hours. Interviews were fully transcribed and NVivo software was used in coding the data. Coding was undertaken by two members of the research team, in order to provide contrast and triangulate perspectives on developing codes. Interview participants were all male, which reflected the historic occupational gender division within the organization, and ages ranged from late-50s to early-to-mid-70s. The majority had started their careers as apprentices at the GPO (General Post Office, the precursor to BT) in the 1960s; the majority had left BT during mass redundancy schemes introduced in the early 1990s. Occupational community and occupational identity were central to the research aims, however, the relatively open nature of the interviews allowed the participants to present the narratives of their working lives in whatever way they chose. Although a chronological structure was perhaps encouraged by the initial ‘grand tour’ question, the subsequent narrative was structured by the recollection of the individual interviewee.

Findings

Occupational identity and workplace change

The occupational identity shared by the research participants loomed large in their individual narratives. There were a number of subsidiary aspects to this collective identity. Attachment to the organization was important, but interesting here were the ways in which this attachment reflected the disjunctures in the history of the organization. It was notable that organizational attachment was mostly expressed with reference to the GPO, the precursor to BT in the 1960s. People who had started their engineering apprenticeships at this time talked of a degree of kudos, and material benefits, being attached to securing such a position, as this exchange from one of the group interviews shows:

Jack: ‘Gosport Poor Orphans’ they used to call it but you had an identity....
You could get a loan because you worked with GPO.

Norman: Or get mortgages, as soon as you mentioned that, because your wage was guaranteed. If you were *there* you were *in*.

Notwithstanding this organizational association, participants expressed their collective identity in terms that suggested their primary attachment was to their role within

the engineering and technical grades; the occupation of telecommunications engineer held precedence over being just a BT/GPO employee. As Alan reflected: 'Well yeah, you were a telecoms engineer – that's what you were. We didn't think of it as a Post Office engineer or later a BT engineer. You were a telephone engineer.' The primacy given to the occupational identity, over the organizational identity, reflected its use as a resource for dealing with major organizational change. This identity resource remained constant as the GPO transformed to Post Office Telephones, then split from the Post Office to form British Telecom (ultimately BT) and, crucially, underwent privatization.

The makeup of the occupational identity of the telecoms engineer was complex, testimony to which recurred throughout the interviews. Pride in the attainment and application of technical skill was repeatedly expressed by the participants. The idea of work as being 'hands-on' was similarly recurrent, and central to the construction of the occupational identity. Alongside the importance of this tangible, physical application of skill ran the key themes of discretion over the performance of work, being free of management dictat and a high degree of autonomy in the organization of their work. As Paul recalled:

[W]e were left to our own devices. 'There's the [Telephone] Exchange, look after it.' And we did... [W]e were responsible for the whole system working and we took that responsibility seriously. We wanted to keep it working; we didn't need somebody on our backs saying, 'so and so is wrong, get it sorted' and this, that and the other. We knew, so we did, and that was it.

This identity fuelled a sense of being separate and even superior to other occupations within the organization, and insulated the engineers from concerns with market competition or internal organizational politics. As custodians of the national telecommunications infrastructure, dedication to task transcended compliance with managerial decree or company policy. Here can be seen another example of mobilizing the occupational identity to cope with workplace change. Many participants made reference to changes in management practice and workplace relations from the mid-1980s, which they attributed to the effects of privatization (see Batstone et al., 1984). Management were keen to push the message that the new market environment in which the organization now operated should be reflected in more competitive approaches within the workplace, such as performance measurement, internal cost centres and regarding other operational units by turn as either internal customers or competitors. The occupational identity provided the basis of a counter narrative. The technical work lent a certain purity of task that elevated itself above organizational concerns, which the engineers evoked as a way of distancing themselves from the daily institutional routine of their employers. Below, Mick's words capture the attitude towards new management practices:

Quite a long time back they started bringing in graduates, which is not a problem, not got a problem with that but then graduates who are then telling you how to do your job technically and they haven't a blind clue what you are talking about and I used to say to them 'I don't care about your paperwork, not interested about your politics, I know how to fix this and I'll go and fix it.'

The material benefits of the occupational identity

The alternative collective underpinned by the occupational identity had a material impact on the performance of work. The engineers' occupational identity provided the basis for an informal network that paralleled the formal organizational structures. Participants made repeated reference to informal networks of workmates developed over the course of their careers, often established in the early stages, even apprenticeship years. These networks were sustained over temporal and spatial distance, as people moved between roles and locations over the course of their career. Such informal networks helped to lubricate the production process in various ways. Old friends in key locations in the organization could facilitate the quicker performance of a line test, or release of requisitioned material to smooth the completion of a given task. It was also common to seek the opinion or advice of a longstanding colleague. Moreover, a challenging task could be made easier with physical help from colleagues located in close proximity; which in turn reflected the discretion these colleagues had over their own work in order to be able to contribute to the work of others.

The benefits of informal practices reflected elements of the collective identity of the telecoms engineer, and so also extended beyond the networks of personal contacts to others who shared that identity. Interestingly, there were examples of this broader link between those who shared an occupational identity that even transcended the boundary of the organization. In the period of duopoly in the years following privatization, Mercury was the first direct competitor to BT. The regulation governing liberalization decreed that the new entrant company had to be given access to the existing telecoms network infrastructure. Despite a strict company line on fraternizing with the competition, the sense that the role of the engineer was above such organizational politics meant this edict could be applied selectively. As Mick explained:

We had interfaces into Mercury. If we had a fault, we weren't allowed to ring Mercury and speak to them. This old them and us attitude. We had to ring what they called the interface, which was in London, a BT interface. So we would ring our guys in London and say we have a problem with Mercury network. They ... would then ring Mercury, because they were allowed to talk to Mercury, and you would get this backwards and forwards... But after a while you realized how stupid this was and long winded... So after a while, we managed to screw out of Mercury some direct phone numbers and we used to ring them direct. If we had a problem: 'okay mate, blah, blah, blah'... We got a bollocking for talking to Mercury direct. Not by Mercury, by BT.

The functional advantages afforded by the occupational identity was a recurrent theme, notably re-emerging within the life course change associated with leaving BT.

Identity and life course transition

The sense that the identity of the telecoms engineer was only partially defined, and certainly not circumscribed, by organizational boundaries came into sharpest relief in the reported experiences of departure from BT. Here again, the use of the occupational identity as a collective resource for dealing with change was a central feature.

Restructuring associated with the privatization of BT led to a huge labour shedding programme in the late 1980s and early 1990s. More than 100,000 people took voluntary redundancy in this period, including many of the research participants. For people who had spent decades with the same organization, the process of leaving and then navigating their life course outside of BT represented a series of major challenges. As it had served for coping with previous workplace change, the occupational identity was mobilized as a resource for coping with this transition. The first challenge was the process of separation from the organization; but the organization itself had for many become unrecognizable from the one they had joined as apprentices. As Peter recalled:

It was an excellent job. It was also very much like a family business in those days... everybody knew and cared for everybody else. Y'know you fought your own corner but you also stood up and helped other people as well. It really was a nice place to work, there's no question about that... I'd rather not say too much about the organization at the back end 'cos quite frankly it just lost everything and stopped being what we call a 'family business' and turned into a numbers game... You weren't a name you were a number... which was sad really but it was all part of competition... British Telecom... had to compete with others and y'know, I'm not saying competition was a bad thing but it just changed, the organization just changed.

Transition from the Post Office to BT and, more importantly, privatization were cited by most as having changed the dynamics of the organization but crucially this had also impacted on aspects of work that were central to their occupational identity. Although many participants made reference to changes in ownership and restructuring, it was the loss of hands-on application of skills that went with the changes in technology and the erosion of decision-making autonomy that came with these changes that mattered most. Despite a residual loyalty to BT, departure could be reconciled by the fact that the organization no longer afforded the opportunity to be a telecoms engineer in the sense that was reflected in the construction of the occupational identity.

Research participants voiced a number of sources of discontent. Internal reorganizations had variously divided people from their longstanding workmates, moved people to unfamiliar geographical locations, broken ties with local line managers and introduced a more competitive atmosphere within the workplace. The continuum in this sea of change had been the occupational identity, an identity that – to an extent – embraced and facilitated change. Now faced with the prospect of departure from the organization, the occupational identity again did not stand as an obstacle to change but rather, once again, as a means of enabling change. The occupational identity was not something that was left behind at the point of severance from BT, but rather was widely mobilized by the participants to help navigate the transitions in their life courses post-BT. Yet conversely, maintaining the role of telecoms engineer, as it was reflected in the makeup of the occupational identity, meant leaving BT.

Occupational community post-BT

Many of the engineers who left BT during this period stayed within the telecoms sector, finding work in the numerous small new-entrant companies who worked as subcontractors to the main telecoms providers: a subsector created by liberalization and facilitated by the

creation of an external occupational labour market through the downsizing programmes at BT (MacKenzie, 2000). The continuation of informal networks and the broader collective experience of ex-BT engineers served as labour market mechanisms for finding new work, and in lubricating the production process in a similar way it had at BT. These functional advantages were part of the wider process by which the occupational identity facilitated, and was actively mobilized in, the post-BT life course transition of these older workers.

The majority of research participants had elected to continue working in telecommunications. The informal networks of colleagues built up over the course of their BT careers, which were in turn a reflection of and sustained by the shared occupational identity, for many played an important role in the transition process of moving into the external labour market.

Post-BT, the occupational community served an important function as a means of communicating employment opportunities for those seeking work with telecoms subcontractors, either employed on a direct basis or as independent contractors. Many of the participants had ended up working for the same subcontractor, NewCom, a firm established by an ex-BT engineer who had utilized the occupational community to secure a suitably skilled workforce. Some were employed on a permanent basis, others provided a contingent reserve who could be called upon to meet peaks in demand. The availability of work on this basis was well known among the research participants, whether they availed themselves of the opportunity or not.

Interestingly, these new work arrangements reproduced, and relied upon the reproduction of, the traditional practices of knowledge sharing and even hands-on support that had been a celebrated aspect of the occupational community within BT. The ability to call upon the expertise of an ex-BT colleague in a technically difficult situation, or to bring in an extra pair of hands via the informal network of old colleagues, was cited as important to how people functioned as independent contractors.

Intriguingly, new working arrangements brought a re-articulation of the past organizational identity, one that reflected the legacy of traditions that had been eroded within BT itself. Ex-BT colleagues were trusted, both in terms of their skills and in terms of their dedication to task. Such attitudes reproduced the sense of 'separate and superior' that had characterized the engineering identity within BT. As the sector began to employ newly trained engineers, or people with backgrounds in technology companies such as Marconi or even the military, ex-BT colleagues were regarded as preferable workmates. This bond extended beyond direct members of the informal networks of ex-colleagues to embrace anyone who shared the common heritage of being a BT engineer. For workers now experiencing more fragmented and individualized employment conditions, this shared heritage recalled the camaraderie previously enjoyed within the aegis of BT's internal labour market, providing a collectivity that ran contrary to their employment status, often as independent contractors:

[Y]ou probably got on with them [ex-BT] better because you know that somewhere in the past they would have had the same training as you and they would have gone to the same training schools as you. So, you know, you had been brought up the same way. I mean, when we were over at St Marys, that guy from Kingston, he was ex-GPO and within five minutes we had a real rapport going on, we really did. (Jack)

Another aspect of the reassertion of elements of the occupational identity that had been eroded in the latter days of BT was the reclaiming of discretion and autonomy. This is not to equate contingent employment with mutually beneficial flexibility but rather reflected the particular material circumstances of this cohort of workers and the choices this afforded them. The large severance packages and, for some the possibility of early access to their BT pensions, played a significant role in the decision-making process regarding post-BT employment. The availability of an alternative steady income was an important factor in career choices even for those facing a significant number of years in employment; the money provided a compensatory balance that reduced the imperative to match previous earning levels or the compulsion to pursue job opportunities due to financial need.

For many participants, the ability to be more selective about job opportunities was an important part of the transition process. For those who were closer to retirement the imperative to earn a living was more dilute. Participants reported turning down work that involved what they regarded as too much travel or unsocial working hours. Such demands had become associated with the latter stages of BT careers, without fond recall. Being able to apply discretion over weekly hours and geographic mobility echoed some of the autonomy at the heart of the telecom engineer identity that had been enjoyed earlier in their careers. Most importantly, discretion lent a mutuality to the contingent nature of the terms of employment many worked under: work was pursued for the enjoyment of the content more than the imperative of remuneration, and could be dispensed with at any time.

This rebalancing of the terms of employment through the lack of the imperative to earn a living also echoed the previous notions of purity of task. Work was undertaken for the performance of the task, not just for financial remuneration; engineers were once again insulated from the market, from the politics of the organization and from the vagaries of management fiat. As Les observed:

I still enjoy it. The day I don't enjoy it I suppose I can pack up but I don't have to work if you see what I mean so it gives you more incentive to do it I suppose, doesn't it?

The concept of bridge employment was clearly applicable to those who celebrated the opportunity to work reduced hours and have more choice over the terms of their employment as a means of facilitating the transition to retirement. As Eddie explained:

Eddie: [I]t was quite a nice little number really because it wasn't an everyday job, it were just as work was available for us retirees... [NewCom] had permanent staff so we tended to help out when work was high. If work was sparse we wouldn't be working then. So it worked out quite well. I might work for a fortnight then have a fortnight off. I mean when you retire that's pretty good. There may be a few days in and then a few days off. If I didn't want to do it, I didn't do it.

Researcher: The inconsistency of the workflow wasn't an issue for you?

Eddie: No, no, no. It was part of slowing down actually. It was quite good.

Although reflecting familiar patterns of bridge employment, here we see a reciprocal relationship between occupational identity and the opportunities afforded by bridge employment. The collective mechanisms reflected in the occupational community, underpinned by the occupational identity, facilitated the transition to bridge employment within telecom subcontractors. However, rather than reference to an occupational identity based on past employment serving as a compensatory identity resource to offset perceived deterioration in status associated with bridge employment (Atchley, 1989; Sargent et al., 2013), the bridge employment allowed for the continuation of an occupational identity that had been increasingly eroded at BT. Crucially, this pattern also applied to those for whom post-BT employment was not a bridge to retirement, but a longer-term prospect.

The continued importance of collective identity resources was apparent in responses to the question of how people introduced themselves to others in terms of their work. Although responses tended to be embedded in the telecoms engineer identity, for some this was bound up in the re-articulation of the past organizational identity. As Norman reflected:

Even now I will say I'm ex-BT, even now and I've been finished 13 years with BT. I still say I'm ex-BT. Even when we worked for NewCom, we used to go and they'd say 'who are you?' 'Oh we are ex-BT.' Never said we were NewCom, we would do afterwards but first always ex-BT.

For others, the organizational attachment became secondary to the broader occupational identity. As Don concludes:

I still say I'm a telephone engineer, definitely. That is me, that's the main core – I'm a telephone engineer and always will be. In fact I have got an old 1050 switchboard stood at the far end [of the room], an old chord board and it's probably 60-odd years old and I keep threatening to put it in the box with me when I go. That shows you what it's like ...

Discussion and conclusion

There are three key themes to draw from this study: first, the enduring role of occupational identity in navigating change, both in terms of organizational change and major transitions in the life course; second, the relationship between identity and change being more dialectical than unidirectional; third, rather than undergoing individual reflexive journeys, the telecommunications engineers benefitted from collective mechanisms for material support and drew on collective identity resources. The relationship between the occupational and organizational identity is complex, in turn contradictory and mutually supportive. Occupational identity was repeatedly mobilized by the engineers to deal with change across the course of their BT careers. In the latter days of their BT careers, key aspects of the occupational identity were undermined, plus changes in the ethos of the organization meant that the engineers no longer embodied the emerging values of the organization. The inversion of this logic perhaps suggests that in order to pursue the agenda of significant organizational change, including a new more managerial ethos, it was necessary to challenge the occupational identity of the cohort of workers who,

through mobilization of this identity, could present an alternative organizational memory and organizational narrative.

What is interesting here is the way this organizational memory and alternative organizational narrative was rearticulated outside of the organization. A parallel organizational identity re-emerged beyond the boundaries of the organization, albeit this in turn served the purpose of underpinning the continuation of the occupational identity. Post-departure, this adaptation of the organizational identity was reasserted as the basis for a common bond between ex-BT workers, thus contributing in part to the occupational community. This rearticulated version, however, drew on the past, outmoded, identity that had been undermined by technological change, reorganization and growing managerialism. The past organizational identity was selectively invoked, calling on elements that supported the occupational identity and rejecting aspects that did not.

Some aspects of the narratives presented a familiar path to bridge employment, in which the social identity of the previous careers compensated for the lower status of new forms of employment (MacKenzie et al., 2006; Sargent et al., 2013). There were, however, more novel aspects to the role played by the occupational identity, post-BT. Elements of the shared occupational identity that had been undermined in the latter years at BT found continuation only by leaving the organization. The sense of camaraderie associated with the collective identity that had been eroded within BT through successive reorganizations and the assertion of a new managerial ethos, found expression once again in the networks of ex-BT engineers now working on the external labour market. The collective occupational identity was also the basis for informal networks that provided the material benefits of employment opportunities within newly formed telecommunications subcontract firms, such as NewCom.

Moreover, this collective bond facilitated the performance of work through informal mechanisms of support and knowledge sharing, echoing the informal practices that had historically characterized engineering work at BT. Other crucial aspects of the occupational identity also found expression in the telecommunications work undertaken post-BT. The sense of autonomy once associated with work at BT returned to those able to make decisions over their working lives, unfettered by the compulsion to maintain a living wage due to alternative sources of income. Finally, subcontract work provided the opportunity for the hands-on application of skill, and discretion over decision making, which had been so central to the engineering occupational identity but which had been increasingly diminished by technological changes and the reorganization of work in the latter years of their BT careers.

What is interesting in this case is the inversion of the line of causality. Rather than being a unidirectional process, in which the occupational identity facilitates life course change towards new forms of work, in this case life course change facilitated the maintenance and even reassertion of the occupational identity that had been increasingly undermined in its traditional organizational home. This experience adds a new dimension to the traditional relationship between occupational identity and life course change associated with industrial restructuring (Gardiner et al., 2009; MacKenzie et al., 2006). This suggests a dialectical relationship between the role of *identity* in *change* and the role of *change* in *identity*: one opposing line of causality is not dominant over the other, rather the outcome reflects a synthesis of the two influences.

The case of telecommunications engineers also provides further evidence of the collective resources people may call upon for the navigation of life course change, which challenges the assertion that the process is inherently an individualized endeavour, regardless of the responsibilities and expectations that observers such as Beck (1992) or Giddens (1991) postulate.

Occupational identity may have enabled individuals to 'seek refuge in pre-established beliefs and in familiar modes of activity' (Giddens, 1991: 142) at the 'fateful moment' of leaving their long-term employer. However, this approach relies upon a crude dichotomy that seeks to attribute passivity to such actors, while presenting more positive connotations for individuals who question past routine in favour of reassessing their reflexive biographical narratives as a way of empowering and realizing their agency.

Shifts in the foci of identity from organizational towards occupation and career have been cited as ways of dealing with the increasingly unstable environment that has eroded long-term relationships with employers (Ashforth et al., 2008). Such processes have been associated with individualized projects, demonstrating a willingness to change and develop in keeping with the 'protean self' (Lifton, 1999). These explanations put the emphasis once again on the individual: what is interesting in this case is the emphasis on the collective. For these engineers, life course transitions were not individualized projects of change but rather were embedded in the collective of the occupational community and occupational identity. While moving beyond the aegis of BT's internal labour market to more contingent and ostensibly individualized employment, the occupational community provided a continuation of the collective identity and an important source of material support.

Therefore, notions of individual agency must be located within collective identities and the influence of the broader social structures they reflect. The life course change made by leaving BT and seeking work on the external labour market was ultimately an expression of individual agency, but one shaped by social structure. The network of telecoms engineers within this occupational community served as a labour market mechanism directing individuals towards employment opportunities, rather than leaving atomized individuals engaged in market competition – an orthodox economic conceit analogous to the assumptions of individualism within the identity literature.

Moreover the skills sets on which these individuals relied to facilitate this transition were not manifestations of individual human capital but rather reflections of broader social structures that created them, including, *inter alia*: the existence of advanced training programmes and organizational apprenticeship schemes; the historic monopoly telecoms provider; which in turn reflected historic governmental choices over the need to facilitate broader processes of capital accumulation through the development of national infrastructure. The legacy of social structure ultimately both facilitated and circumscribed the expressions of agency in terms of the options available to, and decisions made by, skilled telecoms engineers.

Individuals facing major changes, such as redundancy or retirement, may find themselves more responsible for navigating their subsequent life course (Gould and Saurama, 2004) but this is not necessarily conducted in the context of an idealized, individualized and atomized modernity: social structures and collective mechanisms continue to play a part, and individuals draw on collective resources (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998; Gardiner et al., 2009; MacKenzie et al., 2006), including occupational identity.

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