Work in a Time of Plenty: Narratives of Men’s Work in Post-War Australia

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The recollections of elderly men of work in a time of full employment are the focus of this paper. It is based on in-depth qualitative interviews with men who were young parents in the mid-1950s. Drawing on literature about masculinity, post-war Fordism and the constitution of self-identity through narrative, it explores their themes of how central security was to their identity as providers, and examines what satisfactions they got from working. The narrative bookends of their experience are strong memories of their parents in the Depression, and acute awareness of the contemporary insecurity of their children and grandchildren.

Introduction

This paper explores what the conditions of post-war full employment meant for men’s working lives in Australia, through interviews with men aged in their 70s and 80s, who were asked to tell about their work and family experiences in the mid-1950s. One dimension that immediately emerges is about the availability of work, as a fundamentally new experience that produced both security and relatively high wages, especially as a consequence of demand for skilled working-class labour and for the skills of a burgeoning middle class.

In the post-war boom, men’s experience of work took on some distinctive characteristics; although these were not new, they have particular inflections that reflect the high tide of a breadwinner model of work, family and masculinity. In the literature on masculinity, providing is often argued to be the key link between men’s experience of work and the production of masculinity. If we start with Bob Connell’s argument that gender is relational, that it is not fixed and natural but is produced through the performance of gendered practices, then narratives that connect men’s work and masculinity are particularly revealing. Haywood and Mac an Ghaill, for example, in a review of the literature on masculinity and work, link the meanings of work and manhood: ‘historically, many processes involved in becoming a worker simultaneously interconnect with becoming a man’, particularly, but not only, through becoming a breadwinner.

Certainly, Australian social policy and wages policy during the twentieth century were built on the ideal of the male wage-earner – responsible for providing for a family through the ‘family wage’, and drawing from this position both dignity amongst his peers, and authority within the household. Throughout the twentieth century, it was the conception of manhood asserted by the union movement, and was built into the very fabric of the arbitration system. Full employment and robust wage increases made this male provider model all the more feasible in the post-war years. Many of our interviewees clearly saw their position in ideological or authoritarian terms, insisting on the prerogatives and dignity of the breadwinner. As a retired marine engineer said, his wife had stopped working when they had children, and:
I considered it was alright because my father had been the sole wage earner, and it was my job as a wage earner to provide the money... I was the breadwinner, I was the authority figure... not that my children were misbehaved, but if I spoke, they obeyed me.\(^4\)

The significance and the shadings of narratives about being a breadwinner have been discussed elsewhere, but they provide a crucial backdrop to considering what work meant to men in the post-war years.\(^5\) This paper instead focuses on several other aspects of men's narratives about work, particularly describing the security they came to anticipate in their employment, the pleasures and satisfactions that could be experienced in work, and the importance of men's sociability at work as a source of meaning.

The paper is based on qualitative interviews conducted in the late 1990s.\(^6\) Following focus group discussions to refine our semi-structured schedule of questions, we conducted individual in-depth interviews with a purposive, non-probability sample of 38 men. They were aged in their 70s or 80s at the time of interview, and were asked to reflect back to the mid-1950s, when most were aged in the mid-20s to their late 30s. The purposive criteria used for selecting interviewees were that they were young parents by the mid-1950s, and that the sample represented a range of social class.\(^7\) While conscious of the problems and ambiguities involved, we classified interviewees into class positions.

Twenty-one of our interviewees were middle class, which we divided into four groups: 'managerial middle class' (six men with employment such as manufacturing factory managers, insurance brokers and a small businessman); 'professional middle class' (five men who were civil and mechanical engineers and a senior public servant); 'cognitive middle class' (another five men who were academics, research scientists and school teachers) and -- one of the most vexed boundary issues in class debate -- 'white collar middle class' (five men who were relatively skilled clerical workers in the public and private sectors). Not surprisingly, educational attainment substantially matched these positions; 15 of these 21 men had university degrees or diplomas in engineering, accounting or business studies from the former CAE sector. The other 17 of our interviewees we considered to be working class -- divided into 'skilled working class and trades' (11 men employed as builders, carpenters, printers, factory foremen, a draftsman and a cost clerk in a metal foundry) and 'unskilled working class' (six men who were factory process workers, and a railway worker). In addition, we interviewed six skilled working-class men in a focus group, who worked in manufacturing and textile factories. Again, education provided some guidance, just as it had locked these men out of better paid jobs; 14 of these 17 men had left school by the age of 15 or earlier, many of them with the Intermediate or Junior Technical Certificate from the technical school system that funnelled many of the working class into vocational training.\(^8\)

The interviews were semi-structured to invite narrative description, and they confirmed Catherine Riessman's comment that the impulse to tell our lives in narrative form seems universal, and we have only to ask open questions for narrative to spill out.\(^9\) As David Maines put it, we are 'self-narrating organisms'.\(^10\) The transcripts were analysed for the narratives giving meaning to these men's experiences, drawing on the work of Margaret Somers, who argues that:
social life is itself storied and ... narrative is an ontological condition of social life. ... stories guide action; [and] people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories.13

Somers’ distinction here is between ‘ontological narratives’, as the autobiographical stories we tell about our lives and that form a coherent sense of identity, connected with our own past, and ‘public narratives’, as the available repertoire of story-lines that circulate in various ‘publics’, and which encode cultural, often normative ideas such as ‘the breadwinner’, ‘social mobility’ or ‘union solidarity’. The connection is that we draw on, and select from available (sometimes contradictory) public narratives to make sense of what happens and has happened to us. This is an argument — based on writers such as Charles Taylor and Paul Ricoeur — that links experience and public discourse, the passage of time and self-identity.15

One major narrative in these interviews with elderly men was that of the breadwinner, described by some as ‘just one of those things which were taken for granted’, or as ‘the order of things’. It was both publicly pervasive and ontologically meaningful, and provides the backdrop to the additional themes discussed in this paper. These include the pleasures and trials of work, and operate as receding levels of meaning. The most distant level consists of recollections of their childhood in the Depression, which gave meaning to the security they sought in work; a more recent level is about their recollection today of what working life was like then, and this is overlaid by two further layers, nostalgia for their lost youth and an acute awareness of the contemporary insecurity faced by their children and grandchildren. Each of these overlapping layers of narrative reveals meanings about what it was to do men’s work in a time of plenty.

The Context

Before examining the interviews in detail, it is important to consider the larger context of full employment that shaped these working lives. The polarisation occasioned by the Cold War, the intense conflicts between left and right within the labour movement, and the skill with which Menzies played on these conflicts have all tended to draw our attention away from the elements of convergence in the post-war years. Within a larger frame, we can note that Keynesian economic management was a bipartisan policy by the end of the war, even though differences emerged in how Keynes was interpreted.13 Marian Simms has shown how important the Institute of Public Affairs had been in the early 1940s in urging the Liberals to adopt policies that would present a more acceptable face of liberal capitalism.14 As Menzies declared in his 1949 election speech: ‘We shall confidently devote ourselves to full employment and the avoidance of depression’.15

To some extent, the bipartisan agreement on Keynesian technique paralleled the consensus that Bob Jessop claims formed the political dimension of Fordism in the post-war years. In particular, he points to the role of the state in ‘managing the conflicts between capital and labour over both the individual and the social wage so that the virtuous circle of Fordist growth can be maintained’. This includes policies of full employment and welfare spending, and ‘state support for responsible trade unionism, collective bargaining, the consolidation of big business and social
partnership'. Finally, Jessop also argues that the expansion of the welfare state and the regulatory action of the state altered the balance of class forces in favour of organized labour. Although they vary in emphasis, Fordist arguments combine insights about the organisation and management of work processes with observations about the political tenor of relations between labour, capital and the state, characterised in one account as 'the Fordist growth compromise between capital and labour'.

These arguments provide a number of interlocking themes relevant to the experience of work in the post-war years. State support for arbitration obviously pre-dates the 'heyday' of Fordism, though its subsequent demolition closely matches a post-Fordist drive for 'flexibility'. Menzies was arguably more amenable to arbitration than Bruce and Lyons before him, or Fraser and subsequent Liberals. He was concerned to enhance the authority of arbitration to enforce secret ballots and discipline striking unions, but also genuinely believed it was the industrial relations umpire, useful for containing wage claims in the face of real or anticipated inflation. In the 1955 election campaign, with the fiercest parts of the Cold War over and with Labor splitting, Menzies asserted: 'we will resist any attack on the principle of conciliation and arbitration. The Court has made a powerful contribution to the living standards of unionists and to peace in industry'. But his next point well captured the balance of authority and discipline: 'We have stood solidly for the principle of arbitration and obedience to its decisions'.

In early 1960, William McMahon, as chair of the Policy Research Group of the party, sent Menzies a draft Industrial Charter. It sketched the conditions of employment the Liberals claimed 'should be the right of every Australian citizen', and asserted:

there is no longer any need for people to fear insecurity and want. The Australian economy is capable of steady expansion and full employment for the Australian workforce under progressively improved conditions.

McMahon wrote that they supported 'harmonious industrial relationships', 'a vigorous trade union movement' and encouraged 'employer and employee to recognise their mutual responsibilities' in ensuring prosperity. This was consistent with the preference that Judith Brett has demonstrated on the non-Labor side of politics, who always liked to believe that class conflict was unnecessary. The draft Charter reflected commitments to ensuring the new conditions of full employment but, although Menzies noted his approval, did not signal any new initiatives for industrial compromise.

Part of the context for an accommodating approach to industrial relations was the strong position of the union movement, which included significant popular support for the role of unions. In mid-1951, a Gallup Poll asked: 'Looking back over the history of Trade Unions in Australia, do you think the Unions have been a good thing for Australia, or not?' Nearly nine out of ten Labor voters answered yes, as did 78 per cent of Liberal-Country Party voters. Equally consistent were the rising rates of union coverage, particularly as public sector middle-class employment grew and was unionised. Estimates vary, but they agree that the peak of union coverage in twentieth century Australia was 1954, when (according to Martin) 59 per cent of all employees were unionised, and (according to Isaac and Ford) 61 per cent of wage and salary earners were in a union (66 per cent of men and 45 per cent of women).
Strong unions and a buoyant labour market tipped the balance of power towards labour, something that was recognised by the working-class men we interviewed. Wages rose ahead of inflation during the 1950s, making the position of the breadwinner more secure. Between 1949/50 and 1960/61, inflation was cumulatively 75 per cent, while Male Average Weekly Earnings rose by 101 per cent, in part due to significant (paid) overtime. Over the same period, the weighted averages of minimum weekly wages (under awards and excluding overtime) rose by 86 per cent for men and by 98 per cent for women. The relative strength of industrial labour meant that disputes were not as protracted as they had been up till 1951. Glen Withers noted that strike days per worker declined in the post-war years, while a detailed analysis by Oxnam of the incidence of strikes identified a ‘marked decline since 1951’. Compared to what had come before, strikes were no less frequent in the boom, and they involved a larger proportion of workers, but they were often over rapidly, and this was another indication of union strength. Despite the ructions of the Cold War in the union movement, it is a period of union strength and high wage outcomes. As a consequence, the post-war years also saw significant working-class prosperity (and expansion of home ownership) built on a platform of rising family incomes.

But it is difficult to detect much awareness in our interviews of the role of politics or policy in creating the conditions of full employment. For example, when a group of six working-class men were asked whether they had thought at the time that governments were responsible for ensuring full employment and preventing unemployment, one simply replied: ‘we didn’t expect anything of the government because everything was flowing nicely’. Another said: ‘we never thought about the economy’, followed by another: ‘But then again, you’re asking working class people here … probably business people would be able to answer that’. Despite this modesty, the middle-class men interviewed had no clearer an idea of the relationships between policy, economic management and full employment. Post-war policy and the sort of political consensus postulated by the Fordist framework are not elements of the public narratives on which they drew to make sense of their working lives. The good times were more like the weather, simply there.

**Security**

Security of work is a strong narrative when elderly men recollect their working lives, and their recollection of security and prosperity is today merged into a nostalgic recollection of the post-war years as more uniformly prosperous than they were. Perhaps the reason is that the good times stand out starkly against memories of childhood marked by suffering. The Depression was recollected as a traumatic childhood by many of our interviewees, particularly by working-class men, who described unemployed fathers who felt they had failed as providers, and in some cases took to drink. For many of those who grew up in middle-class families, the Depression was not as difficult, as David Potts also found. But amongst working-class families, the contrast with the Depression now frames how the 1950s are remembered: to the point where few recalled the instability of the immediate post-war years—the shortages, the strikes up till 1951, the high inflation in the early 1950s and the anxieties about both the Cold War and the possible return of a depression. There was plentiful employment, and the anxieties of policy-makers and opinion
leaders about inflation and a possible return of hard times had no purchase on their lives. This in itself is an interesting artefact of memory, in which the entire post-war period has been evened out into one long boom, erasing the instability and nervousness of the first ten years after the war, and the long lag before the working class could really trust the good times.28

There is a strong connection between narratives of the Depression, and narratives of the security of full employment. Many characterised work in terms of gradually being able to make one’s way through organisations that were intelligible and stable, and this stability had extra poignancy when juxtaposed with memories of the Depression. For example, a teacher whose father was an unemployed wharf labourer from 1929 till 1940 recalled how it marked his childhood:

My father ... had a tough time and he used to get a bit depressed sometimes and on the gog ... We used to have to go down to Trades Hall where someone would come from the farm with a load of cabbages and they’ll throw you a cabbage ... But people had pride ... You didn’t let anybody know you’re on the ‘Sussa’, and my mum wouldn’t take the old age pension when she was old enough because that was charity.29

An accounts clerk, whose father worked on the trams, linked memories of the Depression with the search for security for those who had:

come through the Depression. I went to school with kids that didn’t wear any shoes and had long hair because they couldn’t afford to get a cut. You got a job wherever you could get a job and then you got some qualification to fit you to do the job better, or progress through that organisation, and security was the name of the game.30

He had left school at 14, and after 40 years in the same company, was eligible for its private pension scheme. Expectations of staying in the same job and being able to ‘progress through that organisation’ were part of a moral economy centred on the stability of both work and marriage. They connected the expectations men had of themselves as providers, with expectations they had about security. This was not caused by the recollection of the Depression, but was given extra impetus, for some, by the recollection of fathers who had been unable to be providers.

These themes emerged strongly in a lively group discussion with skilled working-class men, who we met in Footscray. They spoke with pride, enthusiasm and nostalgia about their work lives, jostling to get their story heard, joking with, and questioning each other. They described Footscray, where most of them had lived their whole lives, as ‘a marvellous area. We were proud of it, weren’t we?’ It was ‘a separate area’, with only two main roads linking it to the city, teeming with countless bicycles as men rode to work in the early morning. They had all worked in skilled employment in factories, generally after an apprenticeship, in jobs such as textile pattern cutters, technicians and electrical mechanics.

They remembered the Depression as a ‘trauma’. One man told of how his father went bush to find work and how the experience had shaped his expectations about work: ‘we remembered ... the trauma that [our parents] had gone through during the Depression, and we felt that we weren’t going to have the same problem, and our kids weren’t’. Another reflected the same theme:
Depression memories. It must have been stuck in all our minds, you know, because I can remember houses being empty, and you'd have two or three families in one house, and then it got to the point where the empty houses were being vandalised for firewood.

For them, secure jobs were an integral part of working life:

we [were] sort of guaranteed with security when we were young ... there was plenty of work, and you sort of didn't have to think about it really. I was so secure in my job.

They needed the extra income from overtime to 'get anywhere', and overtime was plentiful: 'if you didn't get the overtime, you went to the next place 'cos you can get a job any place'. They told of men sleeping in their cars at their workplaces, when they were working double shifts. Most had been in a union, and the wives of most of them had worked part-time, though they were adamant they were still the provider: 'anything that the wife brought in was still a bit of a bonus'. This point - that women's wages were merely a supplement to their own - is a frequent defence of the breadwinner model in lived experience. And the meanings for their manhood of being a provider were captured in an image they all got enthusiastic about - when they came home late their dinner was on the stove, kept warm on a saucepan. It seemed to signify the relationship between work and home, between their task as the breadwinner, and their wife's as the homemaker.

Despite having said they could move and take a job anywhere, these men had almost all stayed with the one firm for very long periods - from 20 to 50 years. They knew that the balance of class forces had tipped their way under conditions of full employment. As one said, their employers were 'fair':

because they couldn't get labour ... I mean people are in business to make money. They're not in business to nurture their workers, and in those days you couldn't get labour; and consequently they had to make it as attractive as possible.

They thought this was a major reason why their bosses treated them relatively well, with some speaking the paternalist language of the firm as a family, with Christmas parties and social clubs, and with improvements in work conditions, such as better washrooms and canteens in the factories. These experiences of relatively consensual work relations and of security of employment in part reflect a Fordist 'growth compromise between capital and labour', just as the ready availability of overtime reflected that growth. In Somers' terms, security stands out as an ontological narrative; it signifies the continuity and purpose of their working lives, and draws, however faintly, on a 'public' narrative about the post-war boom.

Security of employment was equally integral to being a stable provider. A research officer who sought a job at CSIRO explained that security was 'vital': 'Totally important so I could raise a family. High degree of security and reasonable degree of comfort. Yes, you need security'. Similarly, when a carpenter was asked in what ways security was important to him, he replied:
I've got a wife and family to bring up. I've never had much in life myself. I went from a grandmother to an auntie to another auntie and then... finally my father's brother took us in, and he never had a thing... I didn't appreciate [it] so much until my Navy days and [I] realised just what he had gone through for us.49

The opportunity to be a stable provider was clearly essential to these men, and it is a feature of masculine identity regardless of class.

For example, Eric, who took up a new position in the public service in the early 1950s, was to live a comfortable life in Melbourne's middle-class eastern suburbs, but his childhood had been shaped by the Depression. His father, suffering 'a mental problem' from World War I, lost his small business, and went onto a pension. Eric hints at a childhood shaped by his father's 'sporadic violence'. His grandfather stepped in, paying for his schooling and impressing on the boy the importance of education. In later life, Eric said, he was 'always conscious of the privilege that I had compared to the childhood that I had'. At school, he learnt the virtues of duty and loyalty; parents 'were making huge sacrifices and they [the school] felt they had a mandate to convince their pupils that they have got to repay that debt'.

When he started work in 1953 at the age of 27, he had a university degree, and was embarking on a career in which he would rise gradually through the one organisation until retirement.

I very clearly recall that the first day... all new appointees had to go and front [the secretary to the Trustees]... He had the biggest office in the building and you walked across and stood at attention... 'You've got a great privilege and a great position, you've been given this very senior position' and I said: 'Sir, I'm very grateful, Sir'... I called him 'Sir' because one did, and that was the expectation. I was privileged to have become a member of the public service... I was grateful, I was anxious to work.45

This was framed within a discussion about how he thought his generation had rarely questioned things, simply taking their place within the work and cultural systems with which they were presented. Acceptance of the order of things was part of a narrative that links the legibility of organisations, the security they offered, and the mutual loyalties that were expected. One found a niche and could expect to stay in the organisation, working up through the 'ranks' of promotion.

Just like the factories in which working-class men might work for 40 or 50 years, these work organisations were remarkably stable, hierarchical and legible, and contributed to an experience of stable identity. Richard Sennett has explored the ways that working life within a stable hierarchical organisation can contribute to a sense of personal identity. The self, or 'character', can be experienced as developing gradually through a life trajectory which is comprehensible, because its 'plot' can be read. He argues that, for the post-war generation, work organisations that were legible and intelligible had their paralell in the coherence of the self, as a working identity. He describes an interview with a migrant who was a conscientious worker in a car factory, who had worked for his children's future, and whose life had been based on steady accumulation. 'He carved out a clear story for himself in which his experience accumulated materially and psychically; his life thus made sense to him as a linear narrative.46
Accounts by men we spoke to develop the same theme about the predictability of work and finding a niche in an organisation. An accounts clerk spoke of the security of his employment ‘you just dug in, you see, and I had 15 years there’. A foreman in a plastics factory said: ‘there was no sense of insecurity because work was relatively plentiful, and it never entered people’s minds that they would lose their jobs’. These stories of the predictability of work also suggest a moral economy framed by expectations of dogged responsibility and reciprocal loyalty. Loyalty should, they thought, be repaid by security, opportunities for promotion and – for the middle class – private superannuation schemes and a gold watch at retirement. And if Sennett is right, this same legibility and predictability of work also contributed to the stability of men’s identities as workers and providers.

When Eric was asked if his experience of work was similar to that of his friends, he said:

the same sense of security was there for the majority of us … My next door neighbour was a young bank officer when we moved in and he moved ahead progressively in the bank, and I think other people in the street that were young married couples, the same as we were, we all grew up together … all of us felt we’d eventually finish up with a pension. We’d probably have paid the mortgage off at the end, we hoped our kids would grow up and have it a bit easier than we had. They were the expectations.

These are not simply descriptions of working life; they are also glimpses of a moral order made possible by full employment. Eric’s interview encapsulates the narrative of security of work in a time of plenty. He spoke of the expectations of security, of working one’s way up through a legible hierarchy, of the sense of a linear trajectory that gave meaning to one’s working life, and of the connections between these certainties and those of being a provider. ‘Moving ahead progressively’ through a work organisation was matched by his view that ‘marriage just led to a whole range of things … you became a provider’. When they looked backward, many saw the Depression and the ways it had scarred some families, but when they then looked forward to the present, they contrasted their own experience with a loss of security in contemporary economic conditions. They saw in their children or grandchildren an absence of the certainty they had come to take for granted. An accounts clerk, for example, reflected on the predictability of his work, now regretted it as a lost experience: ‘It’s gone forever, starting off, say, in a shipping company and staying there for 40 years and retiring with a gold watch, that’s gone’.

The Pleasures of Work

There is a substantial literature about what people get from work in addition to wages. One useful contribution is a debate between Jahoda and Fryer, who proposed different interpretations of the part work plays in constructing identity. Interestingly, their work is not about gender, though the research they drew on was largely conducted with men. Jahoda articulated different dimensions of work, arguing that – in addition to providing income – it is a social activity that produces advantages of social interaction with others, structuring of time, social identity or status, and a sense of being connected to wider public purposes. She claimed that these ‘categories of experience’ are both humanly necessary and yet ‘unintended-by-products’ of the
organisation of work. In the subsequent debate, Fryer argued that what was most important was the sense of agency people had when they encountered the conditions of work, and non-monetary benefits did not appear automatically.40

Both Jahoda and Fryer agreed that these 'categories of experience' can be positive or negative, pleasant or alienating. But it is striking that the great majority of our interviewees – asked about what they liked or disliked about their work – recollected working life with enthusiasm. They recounted the satisfactions and pleasures they derived from work; very few mentioned negative aspects of work, and only four spoke of it as 'just a job'. Two of these were process workers, and widespread enthusiasm of retrospect may reflect the low numbers in our sample of process and assembly line workers. By the 1960s and 1970s, more researchers were describing the dehumanising and alienating conditions of factory work, to the point that Peter Berger described work as largely devoid of 'self-identification and personal meaning'; it was now only in the private sphere, he thought, that 'real life and authenticity' could be found.41 To what extent the enthusiasm of our interviewees is also an artefact of memory is difficult to discern; it may be a recollection a time when their lives were purposeful, useful and – importantly – still ahead of them. Certainly, some accounts have a rosy tinge of nostalgia, in which recalling the pleasures of work is part of narrating a coherent self.

Five interrelated themes emerged in our interviews when elderly men reflected back on work. First, middle-class men often described their work as 'interesting', 'fulfilling' or 'challenging' – one (a civil engineer) even described work as 'exhilarating'. They enjoyed responsibility and autonomy, they met people, and their skills were recognised as much as they were rewarded financially. For example, an accounts clerk described the interest he found in shipping goods to Brazil, or receiving consignments of glassware from Hamburg. A scientist spoke of his laboratory work as 'challenging', and enjoying being involved in the creation of knowledge. An insurance broker in the airline industry identified the autonomy of his work:

I welcomed to go in to work. It was a joy ... I suppose it was because I was completely responsible for my own activities, decided what to do and went ahead and did it. Knowing that I was producing results and my colleagues were pleased with me and enjoying meeting the people I was meeting – which involved aeroplanes which has been my life ever since 1942 when I joined the Airforce. It was a grand time.42

These are middle-class examples, and are reminders of the satisfactions possible in middle-class work. The growth of professional and middle-class occupations in the post-war years was accompanied by the experience of personal investment in, and satisfaction from the exercise of skills under conditions of substantial autonomy. Some of the literature on the sociology of work describes professional work in particular as having this dimension of personal investment, as a commitment not so much to an organisation as to an occupation.43

A second theme is closely related. Among working-class men, the nearest equivalent to work that was intrinsically 'challenging' was their characterisation of pride in craft skills or in doing a job well. A bricklayer born in Holland, for example, took pride in being 'a very good bricklayer ... I had always satisfaction
from my work. I love my job'. When asked how much control he had, his response was about autonomy expressed in terms of competitiveness: 'I was proud of laying more bricks than somebody else'.44 A builder spoke of his pride in being regarded as the 'number one builder' in his area. Similarly, when asked what he liked most about work, a factory foreman replied: 'I guess satisfaction when the machines were running smoothly and producing goods to a good quality. I'd say when we've done a good job and everything's right'. It was more important, he thought, than just the wage.45 These examples are partly about competitiveness, but also convey pride in work well done and recognised as such by others.

Pride and identity could be particularly derived from the exercise of skills in work such as printing; often considered the epitome of craft-based work in the postwar years. One printer placed the intrinsic rewards of his craft in the context of his relationship with his employer.

I enjoyed my work, and my employer was a person who rewarded those who worked well ... You always try to do a little more, not so much for the sake of the employer but rather for your own personal satisfaction of knowing I have done a good day's work today. I suppose taking a pride in what you do.46

Research in the early 1960s that tried to measure alienation at work found printers to be the least alienated from their work, especially compared with assembly line workers. Printers had a high degree of autonomy, could see the results of their work, took pride in it, and had a strong union. Similarly, in the 1980s, Cynthia Cockburn examined how important these craft skills were to the identity and politics of British printers, including how their skills were a crucial part of dealing with technological change, and of defending their craft as an exclusively male preserve.47 These descriptions can be contrasted with an interview with a contemporary printer who told of how his craft skills had recently been superseded by computerisation:

I've spent 20 years building up skills, and quite considerable skills – although they're redundant now – but I did it to prove a craft ethic, to maintain my own self esteem, and essentially for the pleasure of it ... It's essentially changed from being a truly enjoyable process and something I looked forward to, to a means to an end now.48

Rewards and satisfactions have some distinct class dimensions. Working-class men more often spoke of taking pride in the exercise of craft skills or in a good day's effort, sometimes with a competitive edge – such as laying more bricks than anyone else. They rarely used the terms found in middle-class interviews, where men could speak of work being stimulating, challenging their intellectual skills and exercised with a substantial degree of discretion and autonomy.

Working-class men recollected a third theme, the physical effort of labour. It is hardly surprising that only working-class men singled out hardship, with some speaking of work as dirty, hard, unrelenting and exploitative. One, who laid concrete for factory floors and railway lines described it as hard and exhausting work, with long hours and foremen driving them on.49 But stories of hard labour could also be about the enjoyment of physical effort, as an embodied sense of self. As Haywood and Mac an Ghaill put it: 'masculinities ... are produced through the work in which
bodies are involved ... Harsh work becomes a symbol of masculinity. One carpenter described his work like this:

Loved it. It was hard work, very hard work, but I liked it .... To be out in the open air, hard work, kept ourselves fit ... before I was married, I used to drink quite a bit, a lot of it. I'd given it away and never had a drink for about 18 years, and I was very fit ... very hard work but I enjoyed it.53

This is a dimension of physical labour, the completion of which could be satisfying in itself, and the mastery of which could be a demonstration of robust manhood. There are connections here between physical effort and working-class masculinity, where labour consists of effort, exhaustion, risk and injury. Bob Connell draws on Mike Donaldson's study of steel workers to point out that masculinities are always embodied, including when the exhaustion of the body 'can be a method of attaining, demonstrating and perpetuating the socially masculine'.54

For some men, to cope with hard labour was a feature of robust manhood, especially when recollected in old age. But it is interesting to contrast the carpenter's tone of revelling in hard work, with what his son (the deskilled printer quoted earlier) remembered.

My memory of the 50s is of bleakness, struggle, and greyness ... I can remember my father coming home after work on hot days and he would just lie for an hour, just inside the front door, and my mother would rub his shoulders ... he'd be absolutely exhausted when he came home and he worked for a pittance. Just struggle, struggle to finish the house, to pay the mortgage, to feed and put us through school.55

The father remembered work not as a struggle, but as something he loved; the son remembered only his father's exhaustion. The two memories are not incompatible, but are different cadences that reveal other significances: for the father, perhaps some nostalgia for his lost vigour, and for the son, a wonder that his father had to work so hard.

A fourth element of satisfaction in work was largely available only to the middle class; this is a dimension of work satisfaction in terms of altruistic rewards. Interestingly, most of these were public sector employees, and they spoke the language of an ethos of service that made their work meaningful, and connected them to a larger social purpose. An SEC technician said he 'liked the job because it was essential for the development of Victoria'.56 A Board of Works engineer felt he was 'involved in solving problems which were pretty important to people, that you're listening to their needs and able to do something for solving those needs'.57 Eric, the public servant introduced earlier, found rewards in preserving and presenting the heritage of the people in exhibitions.58 And a carpenter enjoyed working on a hydro-electric scheme:

Up in the mountains, I got quite a kick out of the fact that they were building a huge complex of dams and underground hydro-electric schemes ... I was part and parcel of that development.59

In each of these examples, work was rewarding and worthwhile because it connected with a wider public purpose. These rewards could also be about the value placed on
one's work by others. A teacher in a small country town enjoyed the esteem reflected back to him by the local community: 'we teachers, we were the king of the castle. We were somebody, and nurses were somebody in those days'. The pleasure here is about being 'somebody' because one's work was respected, or about being part of a larger, more public narrative about development or public service.

A fifth and final dimension of narratives about work is sociability, the enjoyment of the friendship of others – usually groups of men – at work. This, too, is often remembered fondly, and was volunteered by equal numbers of middle-class and working-class men. It is a relatively strong theme, encapsulated by a maintenance worker in a power station: 'It was a pleasure going to work because we'd have a joke with one another, we worked hard together, we had that sort of friend[ship] amongst one another'. The carpenter who revelled in hard work was supervising others and described the relations on building sites:

We all worked together ... I worked as hard as they did and I think they appreciated that, I didn't stand back and let them do all the work and get all the extra money that they weren't getting. Oh, no, it's good, we got on well together with my boss, the builder ... No, we had a good relationship all around.

A costing clerk described relations in the metal foundry:

I always enjoyed my work ... I don't think you work for the money primarily. I enjoyed going to work, enjoyed working with the other chaps and most of them enjoyed [it] with you ... In the main, most of the chaps were pretty decent to work with.

This sociability of working men was sometimes also organised by the firm, in social clubs or Christmas parties, but the more important, everyday theme was enjoying the company of others.

Sociability at work had differences between working-class and middle-class jobs. The social relations at work were equally important for a research scientist in private industry:

the number of staff grew to about 100, and this was a hundred people my age ... the relationship with people was quite good. Everyone knew everyone else and during the year we organised social groups. It was good fun. It was a happy community.

Similarly, an industrial chemist spoke of the opportunity to identify younger people with potential and ... plot a career course for them and help them to achieve it. That's another area of great satisfaction. Whether the site was middle-class employment such as insurance offices, research laboratories or the public service, or working-class work such as building sites, plastics factories or metal foundries, the everyday work together with other men was clearly significant.

This emphasis on sociability may again be the fondness of nostalgia, remembering a time when they were young and more socially connected; but it is a prominent theme in the interviews, and consistent with research on the importance of sociability at work. Research on social relations at work has seen sociability as crucial to
producing particular forms of masculinity, as bonds between men, particularly in workplaces that are predominantly male. This suggests the rather obvious point that where people spend more time together though they do not necessarily all like each other, they come to have a shared history together. Given the longevity of many of the jobs amongst our interviewees, combined with the comparatively stable nature of their organisations, it is hardly surprising that sociability and community are amongst the pleasures looked back upon in retirement.

Conclusion

These narratives of working convey some of the lived texture of men’s working lives. The post-war years were unprecedented in terms of the relative stability of working life due to full employment. This stability in turn buttressed conventional ideas of masculinity constructed around the responsibilities and prerogatives of providing. But the recollections of these men also suggest some of the cross-currents, in differences of outlook and experience that lie hidden under larger, more uniform narratives of post-war prosperity. There were men who saw being a breadwinner as the font of power and authority within the family, and there were others who simply saw breadwinning as what was expected of them. Class matters very little in this distinction. There were men for whom work offered intellectual challenges, and others for whom it was a source of pride in their craft, or in their physical capacity for solid labour; for a few others, work was remembered as hard and unrelenting. Class matters greatly in terms of the types of non-monetary rewards men found in their work, except that all spoke of how significant sociability and friendship was for them. Whether they worked in a metal foundry or a research laboratory, camaraderie and social relations were equally important.

For these men – at least in retrospect – security was a crucial expectation. It was expressed in the metaphor of a job for life, of working up through the ranks and, for the middle class, rewards at retirement of ‘a gold watch’ (itself often a metaphor) or private superannuation. This was also part of a moral order structured around expectations of loyalty, “doing the right thing” by your employer and expecting the same in return. This has some resonance with descriptions of the post-war growth compromise between capital and labour, as an implicit bargain in which security and improved pay and conditions were traded for loyalty, compliance and stability. Similarly, working-class men’s awareness that full employment had shifted the balance of power somewhat in their favour can reflect a consensual experience of industrial relations. But from their point of view, it was a matter of common sense – to get labour, employers had to make concessions – rather than being an abstract politics of Fordist compromise.

The importance of security had much to do with family memories of the Depression and with expectations about being a breadwinner. When older men spoke about job security, they were often thinking of themselves as fathers who put bread on the table, and were thinking about their own fathers’ experience. This points to a significant layering in these narratives, with layers receding back in time, one behind the other, and illustrating the presence of the past. Many of these interviewees were acutely aware of the contemporary insecurity of their children and grandchildren in a “flexible” labour market. As one said in the Footscray focus group: “they don’t know when they’re gonna get put off from one day to another.” Behind this layer
of contemporary narrative lies another; their own recollection of the stability they sought and largely found in their working lives. When they thought back to their young adult years, they recalled why security had been so important, how it had contributed to what they could make of their lives, and to what they had hoped to hand on to their children. Another layer can be seen when they reflected on the pleasures and efforts of work, overlaid with a tinge of nostalgia as they recollected when they were younger. And behind all these, furthest back, lies a further narrative of the trauma of the Depression. Each of these layered narratives contributed to making sense of their life-stories, reflecting what had been gained in the exceptional and short-lived experience of full employment, and encapsulating what they thought had now been lost.

Endnotes

1. I would like to acknowledge the contribution of two anonymous referees for Labour History, who provided particularly valuable comments on an earlier draft, as did my colleague, Bob Pease.


5. M5/29 (841), skilled working class, and trades, boiler maintenance, Anglican, 3 children, wife home duties. (See Endnote 6 for explanation of codes used to catalogue interviewees.)


7. The research was conducted through an ARC Large Grant, with my colleagues Belinda Probert and John Wiseman. These interviews with retired men were complemented by interviews with 46 women of the same age, as well as equivalent numbers of younger men and women who had young children in the late 1990s. During 1997, seven focus groups were conducted with a total of 42 men and women; these focus group transcripts are coded G1, G2 etc in the footnotes. Then individual interviews were conducted between 1997 and 2000; in the footnotes, these are identified as M5/33 (male 1990); and number of interview (followed by some general descriptors of class, occupation, religion and family (as of the mid-1950s). Most interviews were conducted in Melbourne, with a small number in regional Victoria. The task of conducting interviews was equally divided (on gender lines) between the author, John Wiseman, Belinda Probert and project manager, Anita Siebert. Tapes and transcripts are in the possession of the authors; participants were assured of confidentiality. For other papers from this research, see John Murphy, 'Breadwinning'; Belinda Probert, 'Grateful Slaves or Self-Made Women: A Matter of Choice or Policy?' Australian Feminist Studies, vol. 17, no. 37, March 2002, pp. 7-17; John Murphy and Belinda Probert, ""One floorboard at a time": Recollections of Post-War Suburban Dreaming", Australian Historical Studies, no. 124, October 2004, pp. 275-292; and John Murphy and Belinda Probert, 'Never Done: the Working Mothers of the 1950s', In Pat Grimshaw, John Murphy and Belinda Probert (eds), Working Mothers and Social Change, Circa Press, Melbourne, (forthcoming, 2005).

8. Note that the references for quotations provide details of criteria such as class, occupation, religion, number of children and whether or not spouse was in paid work in 1957. We made judgments on issues such as the borderline between the white collar middle class, and skilled working-class occupations such as a cost clerk in a factory. These judgments took into account education, skill level and the degree of autonomy in the labour process. In addition, our sample is under-representative of post-war unskilled migrants. We interviewed seven migrants, four born in the United Kingdom, one in Holland and two in Italy. This means that the discussion is somewhat less representative for manufacturing workers and for those post-war migrants who worked in manufacturing. See Erik Olin Wright et al., The Debts of Classes, Verso, New York, 1989.


12. Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self, Cambridge, CUP, 1989, for an insightful discussion of Ricoeur, see Ezzy, 'Theorizing Narrative Identity'.
25. 68 focus group, skilled working-class men, 20/11/96.
27. See John Murphy, Imagining the Fifties: Private Sentiment and Political Culture in Menzies Australia, University of New South Wales Press and Pluto Press, Sydney, 2000.
29. MS/23 (489), cognitive middle class, school teacher, Catholic, 4 children, wife home duties.
30. MS/24 (470), white collar middle class, accounts clerk, Methodist, 2 children, wife (MS/33) home duties.
31. 68 focus group, skilled working-class men, 20/11/96.
32. MS/27 (476), cognitive middle class, research colleague, Presbyterian, 3 children, wife (FS/33) home duties.
33. MS/32 (484), skilled working class and trades, carpenter, Methodist, 1 child, wife worked.
34. MS/14 (447), professional middle class, public servant, Catholic, 1 child, wife (FS/21) home duties. The name is a pseudonym.
36. MS/23 (466), white collar middle class, accounts clerk, Presbyterian, 2 children, wife home duties.
37. MS/21 (564), skilled working class and trades, factory foreman, Anglican, 2 children, wife home duties.
38. For more development of this theme, including discussion of how women reflected on breadwinning, see Murphy, 'Breadwinning'.
39. MS/23 (466), white collar middle class, accounts clerk, Presbyterian, 2 children, wife (FS/27) home duties.
41. Peter Berger, 'The Human Shape of Work', in Peter Berger (ed.), The Human Shape of Work: Studies in the Sociology of Occupations, Gateway, South Bend, 1964, at p. 217; see also Richard Hall, Dimensions
of Work, Sage, Beverley Hills, 1986 for a discussion of this more radical literature.

42. MS/15 (#48), managerial middle class, insurance broker, Anglican, 2 children, wife (FS/18) home duties then part-time work.


44. MS/4 (#7), skilled working class and trades, bricklayer/contractor, Presbyterian, 5 children, wife home duties.

45. MS/21 (#44), skilled working class and trades, factory foreman, Anglican, 2 children, wife home duties.

46. MS/25 (#79), skilled working class and trades, printer and foreman, Salvation Army, 1 child, wife home duties.


48. MS/2 (#19), skilled working class and trades, printer, year 11 plus apprenticeship.

49. MS/35 (#71), unskilled working class, platter/corner - Methodist, 2 children.


51. MS/6 (#20), skilled working class and trades, carpenter, Catholic, 3 children, wife home duties.


53. MS/2 (#19), skilled working class and trades, printer, year 11 plus apprenticeship.

54. MS/2 (#5), professional middle class, mechanical engineer, no religion, 1 child.

55. MS/18 (#24), professional middle class, engineer, Methodist, 3 children, wife (FS/11) home duties.

56. MS/14 (#47), professional middle class, public servant, Catholic, 1 child, wife (FS/21) home duties.

57. MS/22 (#65), skilled working class and trades, carpenter and trades teacher, no religion, 3 children, wife (FS/28) part-time stenographer.

58. MS/33 (#49), cognitive middle class, school teacher, Catholic, 4 children, wife home duties then returned to teaching.

59. MS/37 (#123), skilled working class and trades, carpenter, no religion, 3 children, wife home duties.

60. MS/6 (#20), skilled working class and trades, carpenter, Catholic, 3 children, wife home duties.

61. MS/20 (#50), skilled working class and trades, costing clerk in factory, Baptist, 4 children, wife home duties.

62. MS/9 (#28), cognitive middle class, research chemist, Anglican, children after 1957, wife dentist (FS/12).

63. MS/12 (#41), managerial middle class, manufacturing manager, Anglican, 2 children, wife home duties.


65. G8 focus group, skilled working class men, 20/11/96.