"WE DON'T HAVE AN EDUCATION; THAT'S WHY WE'RE HERE":
EDUCATION AND STATUS IN TRADES CULTURE

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
(Department of Educational Studies, Adult Education Program)

We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

October, 1996

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the symbolic meaning of education in trades culture. It explores how trades culture in this context is infused with status, and how education is an element of how tradespeople experience status in everyday working life. Education is connected with status in two ways. First, education is associated with prominent status markers, specifically wealth, mental work, and textual authority. Second, in light of these associations, tradespeople see education as having nothing to do with their own lives and work. Trades education does not count as education the same way university does. In its status associations, and perceived irrelevance to trades life, education is a symbol of an elite, prestigious, "insiders" world, of which the trades play little part.

This study is located within the interpretive tradition of social inquiry most influentially first articulated by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. The perspective on status which frames the interpretation owes much to Michael Walzer's philosophical explorations of equality and distributive justice. The empirical basis of the interpretation is drawn from an ethnographic study of a single trades setting in the non-union sector of the building industry. The main participants in the study were a crew of carpenters and other tradespeople building an expensive custom-designed family home. Fieldwork took place between October 1992 and October 1993. Site visits took place several times per week for three to four hours per visit, and involved watching, talking, listening, taking notes and photographs, and helping with routine work tasks. Field observations were augmented by interviews with crew members and other tradespeople. During
the interpretive stage of the research process, "backstage tales" and "textual authority" came to be seen as key cultural vehicles for the expression of status in everyday practice.

The findings of this study suggest that the exclusive status associations of education in the trades are important to recognize for at least two reasons. First, they are counter to the prevailing discourse about education which emphasizes a direct, positive link between education, economic growth, and employment. Second, the status associations of education connect it not necessarily with knowledge and learning, but with a blockage in the flow of ideas. Because their status is lesser, tradespeople's work is not esteemed, and their conceptual input is seldom recognized, sought or credited. From the vantage point of trades culture, education does not look like the tool for economic success it is often portrayed as being. This perspective is important to take into account, if educational objectives are to be egalitarian, realistic, and able to achieve their desired ends.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are many people who have contributed, in many different ways, to the creation and completion of this dissertation. I would like to take this opportunity to offer my thanks, and publicly acknowledge their contribution and support. The crew of carpenters and other tradespeople who participated in my research fieldwork provided an atmosphere of good will and good company that made the whole project not only possible but enjoyable and rewarding. The members of my advisory committee, Allison Tom, Jane Gaskell, and Hans Schuetze consistently provided positive encouragement throughout the five years it took to see the project through from beginning to end. In particular, my research supervisor, Allison Tom, was an invaluable guide and mentor in negotiating the procedural and conceptual complexities of ethnographic research regarding the meaning of work. My fellow students and colleagues at UBC provided a supportive and inspiring work environment, even after I moved out of town and could only keep in touch by e-mail. I would like to particularly thank Andrea, Shauna, and Marina for their friendship, conversations, and response to drafts which always provided a necessary boost for my continued progress.

The writing of this dissertation would have been an impossible task without the further support, motivation, and perspective provided by my friends, neighbours, and family. Thank you all! In particular, I would like to offer a special heartfelt thanks to my parents, who were always there and cheering for me.

Finally, I would like to extend my special thanks, love, and gratitude to my partner Doug, who helped set the ball rolling, and had the grace, forbearance, and fortitude to endure the inevitable trials when it became an avalanche. If there were such a thing as an honourary doctorate bestowed upon partners of dissertation-writers, such an honour would be unquestionably his, many times over. Without his constant support and encouragement this dissertation would never have been written.
"It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw our strength to live and our reasons for living”

- Simone de Beauvoir

"...I just minded being made to feel less human because I was the guy with the shovel and not the cellular phone.”

- Nicholas Petrie
Ph.D. in Construction

Lorne is a good carpenter, catches the foreman's mistakes, knows what's coming next.
One day he finds out that I have a university degree.

We stop work for a moment while he pulls out the blue bandana he stores like a good luck token in his left back pocket. As he rubs the back of his neck Lorne eyes the wall we are building and approves.

I am a professional, he announces. I've built office towers, pulp mills, dams. Spent four years studying, apprentice to a carpenter, same as your Bachelor of Science and twenty-six more perfecting my hand. You could say I have a Ph.D. in construction.

I am only an apprentice. For the rest of the job I call him Dr. Lorne.

- Kate Braid, in Covering Rough Ground
PART I -- ORIENTATION

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Ted’s comment

On the first warm day of spring, a few crew members stayed in the site office for lunch, while another group sat outside on a pile of lumber. It was one of those times where nobody had much to say. Somebody skimmed the morning newspaper, Pierre took off his shirt and closed his eyes, and the rest of us just chewed our sandwiches. After awhile Ted, the plumber, turned to me and asked me to tell him again what I was doing there, and what my research was about. I said something vague about being interested in the relationship between education and trades culture. He laughed a bit, and said, “Oh, right. Well, we don’t have an education; that’s why we’re here,” then took another bite of sandwich.

Nobody contradicted him, and I let the comment go. It was so innocuous, just a passing snippet of ordinary, idle lunchtime conversation. But for a number of reasons it stayed with me throughout the day and for a long time afterwards. It resonated, first of all, with the way I was coming to think about culture, as being written in precisely these small throw-away lines. But what was the story written there, and how was I to read it? I knew there was something, but still wasn’t sure what. Ted’s comment resonated, secondly, with mixed messages. Was Ted speaking out of conviction, self-deprecation, or mockery of a widely held bias? Or perhaps all three at

Pseudonyms are used for all names appearing in the text.
once? I was intrigued by how such a simple sentence could be loaded with many possible meanings, and how this ambiguity, too, was a normal part of cultural processes. Ted’s comment resonated, finally, with the initial puzzlement which had led me to the jobsite in the first place—puzzlement about all sorts of things, both obvious and tenuous, about the relationship between education and trades culture: Why, for instance, did I keep meeting smart tradespeople who were suspicious of education and authority? Why was I surprised that they were smart? Why did their opinions sometimes strike me as keenly perceptive—a breath of fresh air? Why, with their skills and their smarts, did they seem to think of themselves as underlings and outsiders? Why did they often seem to express contradictory views—as if to say both, “we’re outsiders so there must be something wrong with us” and “we’re outsiders because we don’t like what the insiders are up to”; as if they felt both less human and more human because they wore work shirts and hardhats, not suits and ties. How did their outsider status connect with their suspicions about education and authority? And, indeed, why did education and authority seem to hang so consistently together—why did education seem more a barrier for many people in the trades than an effective means to learn and grow? These were the kinds of questions which had propelled me to be sitting there on the lumberpile with Ted in the first place. I did not yet have answers (although I had gained many insights), but I knew that Ted’s comment was an important expression of what I was there to explore.

I suspect that if Ted, or any other tradesperson, had made such a comment to me a few years earlier, I wouldn’t have thought about it at all. If anything, I would have unthinkingly agreed,
assuming it was a perfectly correct statement about education and the trades: Of course tradespeople don’t have an education. They don’t need an education, because the kind of “here” Ted’s comment alluded to does not require one. The work is mostly boring and dirty physical labour. It is the kind of work you do if you can’t cut it academically or in the professional world.

But having spent some time getting to know more about tradespeople, trades work, and trades settings, I now saw things differently. Although Ted’s comment was directly in line with commonplace perceptions about trades work, perceptions I myself once (and sometimes still) held, in many important respects it was not the reality I had come to know. For one thing, most of the people I had met at that particular jobsite, and in the trades generally, did indeed have an education of one sort or other. All had completed high school. Some had, or were in the process of getting, a formal trades education. Ted himself had completed a four-year apprenticeship which included schooling at a local vocational institute. Others hadn’t been formally educated in the trades but had received a thorough, if informal, education on the job. And some others—not a lot, but enough that you’d notice—had spent a couple of years at university or had completed university degrees. In other words, taking a wide, comprehensive view of what education encompasses, far from not having an education, the combined educational experience of the trades workers at the site was actually quite extensive. But somehow this wide view was blotted out in face of the narrower, more exclusive way of thinking about education implied in Ted’s comment.

For another thing, although work at the jobsite had its boring, dirty side, it was also conceptually
complex and challenging, and far from being merely physical labour. To borrow a phrase from
one of the carpenters, in many aspects of trades work “you have to have your brain engaged.”
Not that the crew members were all secret geniuses. As in all work settings, some had different
aptitudes and attitudes than others. But the work required intelligence and care, and the workers
consistently and matter-of-factly supplied it in the regular course of getting the job done. Many of
them were also much more perceptive, articulate, and interesting than my earlier presuppositions
had led me to expect.

So the thoughts that stayed with me about Ted’s comment were partly about their factual
incorrectness. Trades workers at the site did have an education. And “here” was not
automatically a place for uneducated people who went into the trades because they could not do
anything else. But equally important, I also wondered, if Ted’s comment was incorrect, what did
he mean in making it? What did it mean that he could make it, and have it received so
unquestioningly—indeed, have it fit so easily with my own prior (and still partial) assumptions
about what life and work at building sites were like? If it did not mean trades workers hadn’t had
any post-secondary education (because many had), and if it did not mean there wasn’t much for
them to learn or know (because there was), what level of meaning was left to make sense of why
Ted might say such a thing in the first place?

Of course, one possible answer might be that Ted was simply mistaken. But I do not think so.
The thoughts that stayed with me were not just about what Ted said or intended, but about how
Ted’s words rang true with me, or at least with a perception I had once had, despite their incongruity with the facts. A second possible answer is that although Ted’s comment was factually incorrect, there was another level of meaning of education—a symbolic meaning, carried within the nuances and mixed messages—upon which Ted’s comment was exactly right. It was an accurate reflection of one dimension of the many layers of mythic narrative of our culture in which the trades is a place for low-status, uneducated—and hence not very smart, and not very important—guys with beer bellies and pickup trucks. The aim of this study is to explore the way this mythic narrative is accepted and resisted in the trades, and to explore what the import of Ted’s comment might mean—not about Ted, but about trades culture and the place of the trades in the wider culture. What I present, in the chapters that follow, is my reading—a personally located and highly particular reading—of the story of education written in the undertones and contradictions of Ted’s comment, and in trades culture more generally.

The basis of this story is drawn from an ethnographic study of a single non-unionized building site. The main focus of the study was a crew of carpenters and other trades workers building an expensive, custom-designed family home. The fieldwork I carried out at this site began in October 1992 during the first stages of the building project and continued up until October of the following year, when the house was nearly complete and the clients were about to move in. By the end, the house looked very sleek and grand, although for a long time it was hard to imagine, past the mud, sawdust and heavy equipment, what kind of structure might emerge. The long months of building spanned all four seasons and included days of bleak cold, enervating heat, and
perfect cloudless skies. During this period I went to the site two to three times per week for approximately three to four hours per visit. I spent my time there watching, talking, listening, taking notes and photographs, eating lunch, and helping out with the work when I could. I also did informal interviews, but found that my attention was more compelled by the meanings buried within everyday interactions than by what people told me in interviews. As someone quite unaccustomed to spending time around jobsites, I was able to notice many things which others at the site took for granted; similarly I am sure there were equally as many nuances that, in my unfamiliarity, I completely missed. In any event, I became familiar with the rhythm and temper of the place, and was an accepted, if unusual, part of the scenery. Crew members always greeted me by name, sometimes gave me a hard time for being absent on rainy days, and on occasion assured me, in their usual dry way, that everything they had told me was “all lies.” Although the site was not “typical” (if typicalness exists), it included a sufficiently broad and mobile cross-section of trades workers that I believe my interpretations of the symbolic meaning of education at this site will have a familiar ring at other sites in the building trades, and perhaps in other work settings as well.

I should also say that in the period before, during and after fieldwork proper, I never thought of the totality of my field experience as being restricted to this place or these individuals alone. As Lederman (1990) points out, fieldwork is not necessarily—or not only—a matter of going to study the “natives” in their habitual settings but can often be “simply a shifting of attention and of sociable connection within one’s own habitual milieux” (p. 88). Thus, although my fieldwork was
based on the fieldwork I carried out at a single site, it did not stop there. Many of the insights in this study came as much from paying attention to the place of the trades in the everyday world and from puzzling through my own vagueness about what I was doing, as from studying what people did and said at the site itself.

As is often the case with ethnography (Wolcott, 1990), my project began with a broad area of inquiry, but no explicit articulation of a research question. I knew I was interested in trades culture and understandings of education within the trades, but could not isolate what lay at the heart of my interest. The ethnographic research process suited the inward and open-ended character of what I wanted to explore and how I wanted to explore it. It involved keeping an open gaze and allowing my interests to develop and crystallize in response to what I found at the site, and to what struck me most about the culture as I came to be more familiar with it. Reading the story of education at the jobsite was thus a subjective process and did not proceed directly from a question to an answer. Telling it that way would not do it justice. The story as I tell it here is arranged the other way around. It does not, because it could not, follow a standard (although perhaps mythical) dissertation format of beginning with a statement of the research question and proceeding in a linear fashion to a report of the findings. Rather, I begin where I have arrived—if not with an answer, at least with an interpretation, a way of seeing things that makes some sense of those many puzzlements I started with so long ago. It is not, admittedly, a full arrival or a perfect interpretation, since cultural interpretation never is. In the words of Van Maanen (1988):
...a culture is not something that can be known once and for all. Fieldworkers may stalk culture and meaning, but these elusive, will-o’-the-wisp targets slip in and out of view, appear in many apparitions, look different from different angles (and to different stalkers), and sometimes move with surprising speed. Knowing a culture, even our own, is a never-ending story (p. 119).

I had no idea, when I set out, how hard this would be. It seems sometimes that I have more questions now than when I started; it seems sometimes that even now, some five years into the mission, I am only just getting started. However, I am able, at this stage, to make a detailed report from the field. In effect, this whole document is a report of early findings—of what sense I have made so far. The findings do not just come at the end, they also come at the beginning; they do not just comprise the contents of the story, they also comprise its shape and structure. And, most important, they are not absolute or finished, but a step along the way.

The idea that my study is an exploration of “trades culture” may sound dubious to some—a trivialization of the culture concept, or even an oxymoron. Let me be clear at the outset about two fundamental points about what, when I say “trades culture,” I am referring to. First, by culture I am talking about process, not product. Culture, as I mean it here, following the Geertzian notion of culture as “webs of significance” (1973, p. 5), is what takes place in the shared human project of making meaning. It is constituted by the meanings which members of a group or community tacitly agree to take for granted, although these meanings are not fixed—they are being constituted all the time. They are inscribed into taken-for-granted actions, utterances, codes, rituals and understandings—in other words, into comments like Ted’s, and his listeners’
responses to them—but they are not cast in stone. Part of the cultural significance of Ted’s comment, after all, is that it did not mean just one thing but could be interpreted in several ways.

The second fundamental point about what I mean by trades culture is that it is not restricted to the trades alone. Trades culture is not isolated, bounded territory; the taken-for-granted meanings in distinctly trades settings are intertwined with taken-for-granted meanings in the wider society. Although it is Ted and his fellow workers who are the main participants in this story, I am seldom just talking about them. I am also talking about me, about us, and the taken-for-granted meanings about education and trades work (and other kinds of work, by contrast) that are written within me, as they are written within society at large. That is part of what I meant, when I said that my field experience did not stop and end at the jobsite where most of my research was based. When I went looking for trades culture I did not find it at the jobsite alone. I also found it in such things as: the way I talked to the plasterer working in my living room, and the way he talked to me; the way I felt when I went to class in the clothes I had worn to the jobsite; the way acquaintances—tradespeople and non-tradespeople alike—responded to my project when I said I was studying education at a jobsite; the way newspaper articles and television shows portrayed tradespeople and trades work. I did not begin this study with much familiarity with the trades from the inside, but with—as I came to realize—a great deal of cultural familiarity with the trades from the outside. I had much to learn about building sites that was new to me, but I did not have to learn from scratch what a carpenter is, what a plumber is, or what a building site looks like. I had unexamined notions and stereotypes about them, the same as most. Likewise, the people at the
jobsite, and other people I encountered along the way, had unexamined notions and stereotypes about what education is, and what it does or does not have to do with the trades. Many of these came into play in other people’s responses to my project of studying education and the trades as well as my own struggles in trying to sort out what my project was about. I came to see all of those notions, stereotypes, and struggles as a part of the data. This story, as I have stated, is read from undertones, nuances, and exploration of the “given.” Nuances and givens belong to the perceiver as much as to what is being perceived. My interpretation of trades culture is thus a dialectic—a working back and forth—between what I saw and heard as a fieldworker in the new-to-me world of the trades, and what I already knew or assumed about the building trades as a part of my own everyday world and worldview. In some ways it can be characterized as a naive study of the obvious—with the realization that the obvious is often located behind our own eyes and is the hardest and among the most significant of things to see.

I want to make two final clarifications. The first concerns what I mean by “education” and the second what I mean by “story.” With regard to education, it should be clear that I am talking about education as a symbol not as a practice. The distinction is important because there is another story about education, quite different from the one I tell here, that was also a part of jobsite culture. The story I tell is about education as a feature of cultural meaning. At the jobsite, tacit understandings of what the word education meant usually involved understandings of formal education, as typified by such taken-for-granted features of the cultural landscape as schools, teachers, university degrees, classes, textbooks, and exams. The story I do not tell is about
education as a process of informal teaching and learning. Although I do not talk about it, education of this sort was going on at the jobsite all the time. Learning and teaching patterns and practices were inscribed into jobsite life as much as understandings of education were, and were equally intricate, contradictory, and intriguing in their own way. They do not enter this story beyond—and because of—the basic point that these two understandings of education were such separate dimensions of cultural reality. At the site, education, named as such, was one thing; but work-related teaching and learning were quite another thing—and were seldom if ever considered education. That dichotomy in itself is a part of my interest, and a feature of my findings, but the dynamics of how teaching and learning actually took place at the site are beyond the scope of this account, and would take a dissertation of their own to properly explore.

With regard to my meaning of the word “story,” there is a tendency, in qualitative research, to connect it with the idea of the “life story,” or the personal history of research participants (Eisenhart, 1995). This is an important and valuable research focus but it is not, I must stress, the kind of research I have undertaken in this study. The story of education at the jobsite, as told in this study, does not delve very far into personal backgrounds or accounts. It is not Ted’s own story, although he is a minor player in it; neither is it my own story, although I am a minor player too, and am, moreover, the shaper and the teller of the tale. The focus of my research is not on the private realm of personal experience or belief, but on the public realm of cultural interplay and symbolism. Of course experience, personal identity, and culture are hard to separate in any absolute way. Culture is closely linked with identity and experience; they are very much
entangled (Geertz, 1973). What I mean to say is that in reading the nuances of Ted’s comment—and all the other nuances and events which come up for interpretation in this study—I cannot and do not speak for Ted or any of the other research participants. The life histories and inner convictions of the research participants are not my intended focus. The story told in this study belongs to everyone at the jobsite, and to no one; it is not about the personal lives or private thoughts of the people at the site, so much as about the public ways they worked, talked, and joked together. The words and actions are theirs; the interpretation is mine. As Van Maanen (1988) states, while a “culture is expressed (or constituted)...by the actions and words of its members...it is not itself visible but is made visible only through its representation” (p. 3). Ethnographers traditionally represent culture in the form of a narrative, i.e., the fieldworker’s “self-consciously selected words” (p. 4). My hope is that the resulting narrative related here is as interesting to others as my time at the jobsite was to me, and that it opens the way to looking at culture, education, and the trades—and the relationship among them—in a different and provocative light.

The story of education in trades culture

So, what is the story of education written in the undertones and contradictions of Ted’s comment (and beyond), as I have read it so far? Of course, it will take the whole document to tell the story in full but, to boil it down to its essence, there is one main theme with two smaller, intermingled “plot” elements. The main theme, and main focus of the study, is how education served as an inconspicuous yet important feature of how status was built into the fabric of jobsite culture.
Ted's comment was, fundamentally, a comment about status—about how, in sitting on a lumber pile eating a sandwich he did not have status, and not having an "education" was an indicator of why. But, status—what on earth is that? It is a word we use easily, although it is hard to put a finger on exactly what it is or what it means. In its everyday usage, the notion of status is derived from the Latin for "standing," and relates simply to one's position in society. According to Webster's dictionary, it is defined as "position or rank in relation to others" which is straightforward enough but hardly comprehensive. In its sociological usage, the notion of status is more complex and ambiguous. Bryan Turner (1988) points out "that the very concept of status is vague" (p. 1), and that different scholars treat the concept very differently, owing to fundamental differences of theoretical approach. One important distinction is between subjective and objective status, or between status as an attribute of social psychology or of social structure (Grusky, 1994; Turner, 1988). The former perspective focuses on experience and the latter perspective focuses on societal conditions. The interpretive stance adopted in this study is based on the notion of status as experience; this shapes the analysis of status that unfolds in the following pages.

Following the example of George Marcus (Marcus with Hall, 1992), I have not worked from a rigorous definition of status in this study, because status is not where I started, but rather where I ended up. It emerged from my field experience and data analysis, through a long process of looking for clues, attending to hunches, and sorting through minutiae. What I mean by it develops contingently and emerges throughout the text as it unfolds. As my interpretation came
clear, I came to see that status *mattered* at the jobsite—it was an essential part of the culture, and was essentially connected to the symbolic role that education played there. Within trades culture, education was yet another status symbol among many which told tradespeople that their work was less important than other people's work, and that the knowledge and skill their work required was not very highly valued in the scheme of things.

Status may have mattered at the jobsite, but it did so in taken-for-granted, unspectacular ways. It was a built-in feature of the social interplay at the site, especially between tradespeople as one group involved in the building process and clients/architects as another. Tradespeople and clients/architects belonged to differently ranked occupational groups, where clients and architects set the agenda, and tradespeople followed it, with little formal input. Among the ways rank was expressed was in what I term “backstage tales” and “textual authority.” These features of trades culture revealed that status was marked by wealth (for clients) and mental work (for architects), and was reinforced by the way the textual work of perceived elites carried more authority than the manual work of tradespeople.²

Education played a low-key but important role in the status dynamics of trades culture. On the face of it, education all by itself, was not—at least, not overtly—a hot or even particularly

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²Some architects would say that they are anything but elites, especially when it comes to income. Unionized tradespeople may well earn substantially more money than junior architects. Yet there remains a certain cachet associated with the field of architecture, regardless of remuneration. Introducing oneself as an architect has a different ring than introducing oneself as a welder, or a carpenter.
significant theme at the site. It was a construction site, after all, not a classroom, a school, a campus, or any place where education was an obvious first priority. For anybody showing up at the jobsite and strolling among the workers, tools, equipment, building materials, and sawdust, “education” would likely not be the first thought that came to mind. However, although education was neither prominent nor independent as a feature of status in the trades, it was interwoven with the other manifestations of status that had a more overt presence and importance within the normal cultural dynamics of the site. Specifically, it was closely allied with wealth, mental work, and textual authority—in other words, with clients, architects and other dominant elites. In Ted’s comment, trades education did not even count as education because it had no prestige associated with it. Only university education was connected with the kinds of success, prestige, and perceived intellectual ability not commonly associated with the “here” of the jobsite. Even for the university-educated people at the jobsite this held true, because their university studies were superfluous to their presence in the trades. To be university-educated in the trades was to be out of place, or at least counter to the stereotypical trades worker image. Reflecting such stereotypes, in Ted’s comment education meant “success” and, correspondingly, did not mean working in the trades. Education was for other people—such as clients and architects—but not tradespeople; it was associated with people for whom textual work was an integral part of working life, but not with tradespeople for whom textual work was either incidental or unacknowledged. It conferred status on those other people and took away status from tradespeople and trades work. With regard to trades culture, as highlighted by Ted’s comment, education symbolized prestige and privilege more than it symbolized knowledge and learning--
especially knowledge and learning related to trades work.

Education was a deeply embedded feature of status in the trades in the same way it is a deeply embedded feature of status in the ambient culture. The status-bearing meaning of education was--and is--an important part of the cultural landscape, so much so that it is barely visible. This examination of the status associations of education in trades culture--a cultural setting which is not traditionally viewed as “educational”--is an attempt to explore the implicit understandings of education in the wider culture which are usually taken-for-granted and barely considered worthy of note, bringing them into the foreground, and into the light.

In addition to the main theme as outlined above, an important sub-plot woven into the story--and into the status tapestry--is the abiding persistence of contradiction. Prevailing status relations in the trades, and the status-marking function of education within them, were not accepted one hundred percent wholeheartedly by the tradespeople in my study. In particular, the backstage tales which tradespeople told about clients and architects were full of editorial comments and value judgements which evaluated the normal features of status, and often found them wanting. Tradespeople talked about elites in a way that focused on the symbols of eliteness--wealth, mental work, and textual authority--in a way that both reinforced their importance and called their importance into question. Tradespeople criticized the status connotations of education in a similar way to how they criticized other status manifestations: Education was a status marker but it was a sham, more often associated with undeserved social privilege than with real learning or
knowledge. In these kinds of tales, tradespeople partially accepted and partially challenged the prevailing status system. One strand of normal jobsite dynamics reflected an unquestioning acquiescence to prevailing status differences, and to education’s role in marking them. However, another strand, equally persistent, reflected a refusal to believe that these status differences were right, or that wealth, mental work, or education were such a big deal after all. In trades culture, prevailing status relations were being negotiated, in constant movement between adherence and dismissal, all the time. That, after all, is part of the cultural process, and what makes it a simultaneously fascinating and contrary focus of study. This streak of contradiction is in itself a part of what status looked like in trades culture, and I deal with it in the study as an essential component of the cultural phenomena under the microscope.

Another sub-plot which is also connected to the main theme of the story is how education’s function as a status marker within jobsite culture sometimes seemed to act as an impediment to the free flow of ideas across the status divide. Because their status was lesser, the tradespeople’s work was not esteemed. Moreover, along with their work not being esteemed or validated by prestige-granting educational credentials, their conceptual input was seldom recognized, appreciated, sought, or credited. The flow of skills and knowledge required for the work to be done in the most efficient way was sometimes impeded, and the work did not go as well as it might have. For instance, architects did not know some of the practical things tradespeople knew, and sometimes designs reflected that. Work had to be redone, or figured out for the first time, by tradespeople whose work was assumed to be straightforward labour, a simple matter of “just
build it.” This sub-plot has important connotations regarding widespread prevailing assumptions about work, knowledge and education.

**Why this story matters**

The question remains about why any of this matters. Why does it matter how education is woven into the patterns of reckoning status inscribed within a single construction jobsite? Why does it matter to look into the taken-for-granted contours of everyday life at all? There are a few basic reasons why such examination is valuable in general, and why the results of this particular examination have something significant to offer. First, regarding why this kind of approach is important in the first place, I start from a philosophical position that understanding must be grounded in everyday experience if it is to impart anything meaningful about the human condition. We examine, grapple with, and come to terms with the human condition by seeing it in the lives, stories, and circumstances of others. Cultural analysis of what is often taken as “given” in everyday life--cultural analysis of the sort offered here--gains its potency and its insights from examining abstract themes but remaining as close as it can to the ground. Abstract themes--such as culture, status, work, education--if they are allowed to remain abstract, risk becoming large mysterious, remote, and beyond the sense that they have anything to do with us. They risk remaining “out there” for the experts to deal with, not “in here,” part of our everyday lives and ordinary conversations (Walzer, 1988). Cultural analysis gives testimony, and testimony helps us to connect in a grounded, open-eyed, critical way with the forces that shape our lives.
Second, regarding what this particular examination has to offer, I want to address my answer specifically to the current tenor of public debate about the relationship between education and work. Educators, political pundits, social theorists, and practitioners in many other fields are currently much consumed with questions about how the “learning system” (British Columbia Labour Force Development Board, 1995, p. 1) in all its dimensions is—and ought—to respond to a gamut of pressing social and economic challenges regarding the changing world of work (British Columbia Labour Force Development Board, 1995; Crompton, Gallie and Purcell, 1996; Hart, 1992; Muller, 1990). In these days of concern about dwindling fiscal resources and changing patterns of technology and employment, the relationship between education and work, and what this relationship implies conceptually and practically, warrants a good deal of attention.

Unfortunately, the kind of attention being paid to these issues often perpetuates unreflected preconceptions about the assumed relationship between education and work rather than providing an informed, comprehensive deepening of understanding of how these features of the social world are linked. That is to say, the prevailing conversation about the relationship between education and work is at the same time too big and too small—too abstract, and too narrow. The abstraction lies in the way that theoretical analysis and public policy often remain remote from people’s lived experience. One contribution of this study is that it locates the words, actions, and cultural dynamics of a group of working people as the central focus of attention, and undertakes to grapple with how the relationship between education and work is perceived and enacted in this everyday context. The narrowness lies in the way that public policy in particular portrays the relationship between education and work on a one-dimensional, instrumental plane. In current
policy discourse, such as the British Columbia-based *Training for what?* (British Columbia Labour Force Development Board, 1995) “work” means having a job that earns a pay cheque, and “education” means the acquisition of skills to meet the needs of industry. The idea that both work and education carry important cultural messages beyond, and sometimes counter to, the “jobs and skills” level of meaning has been trampled underfoot in the current skills/training stampede. Another contribution of this study is to broaden the picture, beyond the functional level and examine the underlying symbolic links—both positive and negative—between education and work, and of the way these links are enmeshed in other features of daily life and riddled with contradictions. My aim in this document is twofold: first, to introduce a cultural perspective into a discussion that is largely dominated by a narrowly economic paradigm, and second, to bring the view from trades culture into the conversation, for it too offers valuable critiques of prevailing assumptions, and has been left out for too long.

**Organization of the dissertation**

This study is organized into three parts—Orientation, Interpretation, and Summation. The Orientation includes, in addition to this introductory chapter, a second chapter which provides a more comprehensive discussion of the background and context of my research, and a third chapter which addresses ethnographic methodology. In chapter two, I first discuss how my own personal background and interests have drawn me to this research, and have inevitably influenced my approach and findings. Second, I discuss how my research topic relates to current preoccupations about the relationship between work and education which dominate the
contemporary political and social agenda. Third, I examine previous and related research, to put my work into the context of the community of scholars who are taking the same approach or working on the same broad issue as mine, and shows what I have learned from them that has been useful in my work. Fourth, I describe the research setting where my research was based, and introduce the principal research participants. In chapter three, on ethnographic methodology, I provide a discussion of the conceptual and procedural elements encountered and negotiated in the process of carrying out research fieldwork and analysis.

The second part of the dissertation, Interpretation, consists of chapters four and five which set forth the main body of the story. Chapter four is about status. It shows the different ways in which it was evident that tradespeople and clients/architects belonged to different status groups, and presents some of the themes of backstage tales about clients, architects, and other elites, which showed how status was present, and how it was resisted at the same time. It also shows how textual authority functioned at the jobsite to reinforce the status differences that were present in other aspects of everyday practice in the trades. Chapter five is about education. It shows how education was tied to the portrait of status presented in chapter four. Education was just another status marker among many. It was linked with wealth, mental work, and textual authority. Education was associated with the world beyond--and above--the trades, and was not associated with the trades themselves. Thus another part of my discussion in chapter five is not just about education's presence as a marker of (other people's) status, but about its absence as a significant feature of how trades culture defined itself.
The Summation section, being the third and final part of the dissertation, consists of a single chapter which summarizes the main theme and findings of the study, and discusses the implications and contribution of this research project, as they pertain to the four broad areas explored in this study: a) culture, b) status, c) the meaning of work, especially (but not only) pertaining to the trades; and d) the meaning of education. With regard to education in particular, I relate my comments to the current public debate about the role of education, and make specific recommendations for ways to approach educational planning and practice differently. I argue that the symbolic meaning of education in trades culture is a very important consideration in digging beneath the commonplace assumptions about education which we take for granted all the time, and exploring ways to think about—and do—education more reflectively, more insightfully, and ultimately more effectively.

As a supplement to the three main parts of the dissertation I also include an appendix which lists the (pseudonymous) names and occupations of the principal research participants.
CHAPTER TWO: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The aim of this chapter is to set forth the background and context of my research. First, I discuss the personal relevance of the research topic, and relate how the trades in general and carpentry in particular came to be a focus of intellectual interest for me, and how this incipient interest came to be the focus of the present work. My aim in this section is to account for why this topic matters to me, and how my personal background has influenced my approach and findings. Second, I discuss how my research is situated in relation to current public debates about work, the economy, and education. The functional relationship between education and work is very much a topic of the times, and my research emerged partially out of a desire to add a perspective to the public debates which I felt was lacking. Third, I discuss how my interpretation is situated in relation to other scholarship and research. The approach I have taken in this study draws on insights from several areas of research and inquiry, and in my discussion of the literature I trace key influences from a number of different sources. Fourth and finally, I provide a background description of the research setting, discussing some of the characteristics of custom home carpentry as a trades occupation and industry, describing the principal building site where the research was carried out and the stages of work at the site, and introducing the principal research participants.
Personal context

I provide this discussion of my personal background because it helps to situate the study and set the context of my interest in the trades. It shows how I first became aware that trades culture was different from the social world I knew, and what led me to this analysis of the everyday world of the trades, and the symbolic role of education within that everyday world. My personal situation is important because it says where I am “coming from” in this study, and locates the themes I have explored in this research in a broad social context.

I do not have a background in the trades. My family background is white-collar and middle-class, and growing up I never gave much thought to building or fixing things as either a career or hobby. My education has been academic not vocational, leaning to the humanities and social sciences, rather than to the building trades. Also, as a university-educated woman coming of age in the mid-70s, my sensitivities to prevailing status relations focused more on the place of women than of manual workers. However, I became interested in trades culture because of two things. One was the opportunity to work on a research project which involved looking at sawmills and talking with sawmill workers about the circumstances of their working lives. Another was meeting and moving in with a carpenter, and getting to know a number of other people who also worked in the building trades. Talking to these manual workers, and learning about their work and working lives opened my eyes to aspects of the social world I had not thought much about before.

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What did I see? For one thing, I came to appreciate that manual work held complexities and rigours that I had not considered before. Because it was noisy and dirty, I had thought it was also brutish and simple, requiring more muscle than brain. But I came to recognize that manual work also often required mental engagement, and that even apparently unskilled tasks were seldom as straightforward as they seemed. For another thing, I came to see the ways manual workers felt themselves to be socially disadvantaged. In conversations with my partner and his colleagues, they talked about how tradespeople were treated as “lowly,” with little prestige or credibility. One carpenter introduced himself at parties as being “just a carpenter.” Another spoke of the trades as a “step down” from other, more respectable occupations. Also, many manual workers voiced sharp criticisms of formal education as well as other social institutions. It did not strike me as just anti-intellectualism; their critiques of education were a strand of broader critiques of “the system” which were often cogent and perceptive. Many of the workers in the building trades worked for wealthy clients, and had a backdoor entrée into social circles that were otherwise closed to them. This gave them a unique vantage point from which to view and appraise the social scene; comments about education were a part of this general appraisal of widespread divisions between dominant elites and manual workers. However, although they had thoughtful things to say, they apparently had little voice in either the regular decisions that were made in their workplaces or in broader social decision-making. All of these things led me to want to examine trades culture in an in-depth way, to see if these views were common in the trades, and if so, to attempt to make some sense of what underlay these seemingly disparate points of interest. This study represents my best effort at going to see for myself, and interpreting the
underlying meanings behind these early observations.

There is one final comment to add with regard to the connection between my research topic and my personal situation. There has been a persistent sense of discomfort and a periodic feeling of "double vision" in studying so close to home. Observations from my research site would inevitably spill over and intermingle with conversations at parties or at the dinner table at the end of the day. Entries in the field journal I kept to accompany my more descriptive fieldnotes (see methodology chapter) are full of instances where everyday events and interactions resonate with and contribute to my research observations and emerging analysis. Indeed, at one point late in fieldwork, my partner Ed even came to be an employee of the company I was studying, and took on the role of being a direct (albeit minor) research participant, as well as continuing to be an interested bystander and member-at-large of the culture of study, as he had been from the beginning. This raises questions, of course, regarding the extent to which this proximity and overlap have influenced the character of my study and shaped the nature of my findings and conclusions. There is no question that there has been an influence. The further question of whether the influence has tainted my research or enriched it is more difficult to assess at this juncture. Marcus (1992) has argued that no written work is finished, even when the last word has been written by the author, because it still remains for the reader to add his or her own gloss, and provide the distance and the alternate perspectives that the author cannot see close-up. From my vantage point, I have been careful to be accurate, and to negotiate the interplay between detachment and engagement as carefully, self-consciously, and respectfully as possible. Although
my friends and my partner have informed my interpretations, responded to them, and debated
them, the interpretations are, to the extent interpretations ever can be, my own. Although there is
an uncomfortable burden of ownership in such a claim—uncomfortable because it so patently
excludes the fieldwork participants without whom there would be no interpretation in the first
place—I hold, with Margery Wolf (1992) that in the end it is the ethnographer who assumes an
executive, editorial position, and takes responsibility for the narrative results. Even cultural
studies that start out far from home often end up close to home in the end. As Van Maanen puts
it, culture—our own and other people’s—is “something each person must gropingly reach for and
recognize on his [or her] own” (p. 124).

Current public debates

Over the period I have been working on this project, almost every time I have turned on the radio
or looked at a newspaper, journal, or magazine, in amongst the wars, earthquakes, celebrity trials,
sports scores and other events, there usually has been some item or feature citing how the
economy is in trouble, unemployment is rampant, technology is becoming increasingly
sophisticated, and the nature of work is changing dramatically. A consistent sub-theme associated
with these developments is that education—although more and more frequently referred to as
training—is an important part of the mix. Education is variously linked with the economy,
un/employment, technological change, and the changing nature of work. It is not always linked in
the same way. Sometimes the education system is castigated for being a critical source of current
problems. Public universities, for instance, are a drain on scarce fiscal resources, do a lousy job,
and should be revamped and privatized says Andrew Coyne (1996) in the *Globe and Mail* newspaper. Similarly, Dixon and Persky (1996) assert in the *Vancouver Sun* that academic “post-secondary education is, in many ways, performing badly and that it has to be reformed” (p. A15). At the same time, the education system is sometimes also touted as the prime social mechanism for effecting societal solutions. In Great Britain, David Smith (1996) writes in the *London Sunday Times* that there is “motherhood, there is apple pie, and there is new Labour’s bright shining commitment to training” (no page reference). He cites Britain’s Labour Party leader Tony Blair as saying that “education is the best economic policy there is” (Smith, 1996). Closer to home, building on the Premier’s Summit on Skills Development and Training in June 1993, the government of British Columbia has undertaken a broad-based initiative known as “Skills Now” which purports to reflect a new partnership between business, labour, educators and community groups and provide “a $200 million comprehensive plan to prepare British Columbia’s workforce for the 21st century” (Province of British Columbia Ministry of Skills, Training and Labour, 1994, no page reference). In short, the association between education and current widespread economic and social problems—however that association is viewed—is the focus of considerable attention on the part of many social actors, analysts, and observers. People from a number of sectors, such as education, industry, equity groups, and government are grappling with major, unwieldy questions about the relationship between the world of education and the world of work. It would appear that the relationship between education and work is a “hot topic” in the current mood of the times.
A particularly salient expression of how both moods—one critical of formal education as it is currently provided, and the other boosting education and training as the hope of the future—are prevalent, and sometimes interwoven, in a recent document put out by the British Columbia Labour Force Development Board, titled *Training for what?* Following in the footsteps of the Skills Now initiative mentioned above, this government-sponsored report puts forward a blend of assertions about how the province’s overall “investment in learning” (p. 45) is essential to its future growth and success, and yet needs to be significantly modified to be more industry-led and relevant to the anticipated needs of the workplace. It has been taken, in some quarters (Dixon and Persky, 1996; Selman, 1996) as a challenge to the academic sector of the education system, in favour of applied post-secondary programs that deliver more directly relevant so-called “employability skills.” It has also been taken as a call for “more advanced training” broadly based, regardless of where that training is located, because that is what the economy needs (Gallagher, 1996). Either way, the focus of the debate is around the link between education, employment, and the economy, however problematic that relationship is perceived.

It is beyond the scope of this study to carry out a detailed analysis of the themes, undercurrents, and inevitable contradictions within the popular debate as I have just characterized it. My principal focus in this study is on culture as expressed within the offstage commentary of people going about their ordinary business, not the onstage pronouncements of the government, media or fashionable pundits. My main reason for introducing the popular debate and the prominence of
the link between education and work as a hot topic is because it was such an important part of the background from which this study emerged. Not only was I talking with sawmill workers and tradespeople and having my eyes opened to an unfamiliar corner of the social world, I was also listening to the news, reading the paper, and living as a somewhat alert but just-as-anxious-as-anyone creature of the late 20th century. In addition to worrying about global warming, Bosnia, Quebec, and so forth, I puzzled over the apparently tight but troublesome nexus between the economy, education, and—in the words of so many contemporary politicians—"jobs, jobs, jobs." This affected me on a personal level. (Would I ever have a pension? Would I ever get a job? Would I end up as one of those legendary cabdrivers with a PhD?) But on a more contemplative level, it affected my way of thinking about tradespeople and my incipient interest in doing some kind of exploration of understandings about education and the trades. There was a troubling disjuncture between what I was picking up from the popular public discourse and from my encounters with tradespeople. I did not know what the nature of this disjuncture was; rather, it was the disjuncture itself that captured my attention. This study partially arose out of my concern to at least get a feeling for the source of this discontentment. Although it was never my intention to examine the public discourse itself in any depth, it was my hope that getting a better sense of the place of education in trades culture would be a grounded, "real world" place to start, to inform my reading of—and trouble with—the public discourse.

With the greater clarity of hindsight, I am now able to begin to trace what it was that bothered me. I would like to present a brief discussion of it here, thereby sketching an important contour in
the background of this study. To make this task manageable, although I have described the popular debate as broadly based and carried by a range of organs of the public voice, I draw on only a few examples of government policy to represent the whole debate. I do not mean to collapse or trivialize the various voices and positions within the debate, but rather to roughly capture what I find to be key features of a prevailing sensibility. As Kliebard (1990) points out, policy is a good place to start, with such a purpose in mind. Policy, he says, “is primarily a way of shaping public consciousness and gives meaning and direction to an entire sphere of social relations and social institutions” (p. 10). Educational policy, in particular, contributes “to shaping our consciousness about the relationship between education and the workplace” (p. 10).

So what is our public consciousness telling us about education and its relationship with the workplace? It would appear, from the policy perspective, that education is a “good thing” that can solve no end of social and economic troubles. Policies convey an optimistic belief about what education is and can do. Education, and other popular cognate terms such as training, upgrading, and skills development, is associated with key words such as prosperity, potential, success, health, competitiveness, and other positive-sounding attributes that connote social, economic, and personal well-being. One provincial ministry Annual Report from a few years ago contends that the “opportunity for British Columbians to participate in...education, training and skills development is the key to recognizing the province’s full potential. Both social well-being and economic prosperity depend heavily on a motivated, well-trained, and highly-skilled workforce” (British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education, Training and Technology, 1993, p. 3, italics
added). Education can solve the problem; education has good effects. Education will improve your life personally; it will improve the whole economy generally. Education, in the policy context, appears predominantly as a tool, a technique, a system, an activity for delivering the right skills and knowledge (whatever they are) to the right people (whoever they might be). In the introductory paragraph of a recently released policy advisory report, education—indeed, what is dubbed the entire learning system—is described as a primary vehicle for delivering vital human capital:

In the long run, British Columbia's human capital—the knowledge, skills and experience of its people—is undoubtedly the most critical element in its economic success as a province and will play a dominant role in determining how BC fares in an increasingly competitive and fast-changing world. It is essential, therefore, that British Columbians have access to a flexible learning system that will give them the relevant knowledge, skills and experience to cope with—and master—the fast pace of change that is sweeping the workplace. One of the most important current policy debates is about how education and training resources can be best utilized to ensure there is an optimum fit between the needs of the workplace and the knowledge, skills and experience of current and future employees (British Columbia Labour Force Development Board, 1995, p. 1).

What are we to make of this? It certainly sounds impressive. But as Kliebard (1990) says further, about policy as an expression of public consciousness, policy is not necessarily an expression of reality but of mythic beliefs and aspirations. Policy is a "dramatization of ritualistic myths" (p. 12). It organizes dominant allegiances, confers status on some, and ratifies certain norms and biases. It is part of the mythic narrative of received values and opinions which characterize the times, and shape the details of our day-to-day lives. This mythic narrative is something to which people may respond in highly personal ways, believing or doubting as they are wont, but which
often blocks awareness of its own mythological character (Marcus, 1992).

But what has this got to do with tradespeople, and my sense of the disjuncture between the trades perspective and the public discourse? There were, as I see it now, a couple of things that were fundamental. First, in my encounters with tradespeople, I started to pay attention to how education figured as a part of their lives and everyday lived experience in a way that was either not acknowledged in the mythic narrative of public policy and other public debate at all, or in a way that did nothing to disturb the primary assumption that education was first and foremost a straightforward, unproblematic tool of the economy. For tradespeople, education was not just a means to an end, an indifferent tool for acquiring this set of skills or that occupational objective, it was—as it is for everyone—a primary carrier of personal and cultural meaning. Education was not just something to do, it was loaded with significative freight. Maybe I was particularly aware of this as a doctoral student, negotiating social relationships with people for whom graduate studies was foreign territory. I was very aware of my sense of how educationally and vocationally defined social labels—such “labourer” and “university student”—coloured our interactions. I was distressed by the way this experiential aspect of the relationship between education and work was so built into the mythic narrative about jobs and the economy that it was barely acknowledged at all. Out of general interest in exploring the cultural depths—whether the focus of my observations was on tradespeople, stockbrokers, or hairdressers—I wanted to turn away from the prevailing jobs/economy discourse about education and explore the underlying, taken-for-granted aspect of the cultural meanings associated with the relationship between education and work running
through our everyday conversations and interactions.

More particularly to tradespeople, though, the second fundamental aspect of the disjuncture I am talking about lay in the contradictory discontinuities and continuities between the attitudes towards education and training expressed in public policy, and the attitudes I often encountered among tradespeople. The narrow instrumentality of how education figured in the policy discourse, versus the complex social symbolism it carried in jobsite culture, was a patent discontinuity. Yet with regard to the seeming continuities, there was an apparent degree of overlap between a growing pragmatic tone within reports such as *Training for what?*, and critical views of academic education expressed among tradespeople. A central thrust of *Training for what?* is that academic programs provide an over-supply of university graduates (who need to then retrain in applied programs in order to gain appropriate work-related skills) with an under-supply of the necessary skills required in the current work environment. Among tradespeople, the relevance and utility of academic programs was also open to question, and subject to frequent critique. It seemed, on this level, that the policy discourse was speaking on behalf of tradespeople, challenging the privilege of academic over applied courses of study, and expressing and ratifying the perspective of working people in the trades. Despite this seeming convergence, however, I retained the sense that the policy discourse existed on an abstract level, remote from everyday life among tradespeople, rather than speaking on their behalf as it appeared. In order to gain perspective on this possible convergence/divergence between the everyday world of the trades and the perspectives presented in public policy, my objective in this research was to
become more acquainted with everyday life and conversations among tradespeople, and from that vantage point look back on the policy discourse from an expanded angle of vision. Therefore, I will leave further discussion of policy and its relationship with, and relevance to, trades culture for the final chapter, once I have “returned” from the jobsite and am able to revisit and extend the discussion of this theme, informed by the lessons I have brought back from the field. If, to go back to Kliebard (1990), a function of the policy narrative is to organize allegiances, confer status, and ratify certain norms, then the allegiances, status, and norms meaningful to tradespeople appeared to be an ambiguous part of the story. My aim in this study has been to turn away from the prevailing jobs/economy discourse, to explore the relationship between education and work from a more contextual angle, and to find out what tradespeople had to say that might help me examine the character of assumptions embedded within the mythic narrative of the day.

Previous and related research

I now turn to a discussion of the academic literature, to situate my work in the context of the community of scholars who are working on related themes. But what community, exactly? The themes I have explored in this study have spanned a range of disciplines. I have had no easy time determining where I stand and what I have to say relative to the considerable body of work of others. Also, I have had the permission—although it has sometimes felt like a sentence—to allow the research question to develop as I went along. From the beginning, it has been an idiosyncratic journey. I have explored an array of literature related to my developing research interests, but have been lodged in no definite disciplinary tradition or theoretical perspective. My relationship
with the literature has been akin to the advice W.H. Auden once gave to a young poet:

Remember that [another’s] work is not a pair of spectacles, but a key with which to unlock one’s nature and find its unsuspected treasures. Ask yourself constantly and remorselessly, “What am I really interested in?” “What do I know for myself?” “What, in fact are my experiences?” And however boring or silly those experiences may seem at first sight, those and only those can be the subject matter.... (Jenkins, 1996, p. 91).

As is the case with much ethnographic research, sometimes the central theme is not apparent until quite late in the process (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983; Marshall and Rossman, 1989; Wolcott, 1988). Although my research topic has always been the same underneath, it has gone through a variety of guises in getting closer to the language that best expresses it. The topic looked quite different when I began, and continues, even now, to develop and evolve. As Geertz (1973) puts it, “[f]inding our feet, an unnerving business which never more than distantly succeeds, is what ethnographic research consists of as a personal experience” (p. 13). Like life, it has been (and continues to be) a process of “learn as you go.” Finding the question has been as much a part of the research as finding an approach to—and a language for—the answer. That, as Geertz and other interpretive ethnographers would suggest, is all to the good (Geertz, 1973; Marcus, 1992; Marcus, 1994; Rose, 1990; Van Maanen, 1988; Wolf, 1992). But as a result, I have not been able, as is sometimes possible in dissertations, to do the literature review at the beginning, write it up, and have it over and done with, conducting my inquiry along the lines I have read (Rose, 1990). Reviewing the literature has been an ongoing part of the research process. It began before I formally started this project and will continue long after. This discussion of the literature is thus a bare record of a convoluted journey in and out of a number of
sections of the library. In it, I touch on some of the areas in the literature which have had a particularly formative influence on the development of my research topic and approach. My discussion of the literature is divided into six broad categories: a) interpretative anthropology (with a postmodern slant); b) studies of education and work; c) class and status; d) adult education; e) housing and culture; and f) immediate influences.

a) Interpretive anthropology (with a postmodern slant)

The general paradigm of inquiry within which this study is located owes a great deal to the interpretive tradition of anthropology, most influentially first articulated by Clifford Geertz. According to Geertz, the study of culture is properly “an interpretive science in search of meaning, not an experimental science in search of laws” (1973, p. 5). Culture, for Geertz and other interpretivists, is not an objective social fact that can be explained once and for all, but an ongoing process which everybody is part of, and which can be read, like a text, from many different angles and in many different ways. Meaning-making is at the heart of the cultural process, and the interpretation of meaning—from a slight distance, from one’s own perspective, and never to the exclusion of other interpretations—is at the heart of the ethnographic enterprise. As Geertz puts it,

The trick is not to get yourself into some inner correspondence of spirit with your informants. Preferring, like the rest of us, to call their souls their own, they are not going to be altogether keen about such an effort anyhow. The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they’re up to (1983, p. 58).
Although the fundamental commitments of the interpretive approach are linked in one direction to a certain way of thinking about research methodology, they are linked in another direction to a broader formulation of social and political thought. Geertz's placement of meaning at the heart of the cultural process floated on a sea change in the social sciences and the humanities wherein notions of truth and objectivity, once taken for granted as absolute, universal and timeless, came more and more under fire for being hegemonic expressions of a dominant social discourse (Rosaldo, 1993; Walzer, 1988). The interpretive approach to anthropology involves not only a commitment to the study of meaning, but a commitment to a particular view of the social actor, to an appreciation of the role of language in expressing social thought, and to the political project of challenging prevailing ideological worldviews. Let me briefly address each of these additional aspects of the interpretive approach as they are discussed in the literature by turn, and then turn to a discussion of how they have influenced the shape and form of this study.

The view of the social actor: In other expressions of social science, a detached objectivity has been held to be the scientific ideal. However, in conjunction with the central place of meaning-making in cultural interpretation, a recognition of the importance of subjectivity has been an important thrust of contemporary social thought across a wide range of disciplines (Lather, 1991; Marcus, 1994; Rosaldo, 1993). As a consequence of this reflexive turn in social analysis, there has been increased attention to what has been referred to variously as the "positionality" of the human subject (Rosaldo, 1993), and the "situated" character of human knowledge (Haraway, 1988).
The recognition of the subjective element of culture—and cultural analysis—acknowledges an equal subjectivity on both sides of the interpretive exchange. For one thing, the lived experience of research subjects has become, for many social analysts, the central focus of research (Hammersley, 1990; Harding, 1987; Lather, 1991). Moreover the researcher, too, occupies a particular location, and observes from a particular and partial point of view. “Consider, for example, how age, gender, being an outsider, and association with a neo-colonial regime influence what the ethnographer learns. The notion of position also refers to how life experiences both enable and inhibit particular kinds of insight” (Rosaldo, 1993, p. 19).

The role of language: With such attention to subjective positionality and partiality, there has also been increased attention to narrative representations of social reality. With the increasingly blurred boundaries between scientific pursuits and literary ones associated with the interpretive tradition, the analogy of the “text” has been increasingly prominent, and there has likewise been more attention to the rhetorical aspects of doing social science (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Marcus and Cushman, 1982; Schwandt, 1994). Van Maanen (1988) has examined different narrative genres or forms of “tale” in writing up fieldwork, and analyzed the way that different rhetorical styles and conventions provide very different pictures of truth and reality. Realist tales, which he identifies as “[b]y far the most prominent, familiar, prevalent, popular form of ethnographic writing” (p. 45), although they have been extensively challenged in recent years (Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Stocking, 1983), strive for a tone of detachment, objectivity, and interpretive omniscience. “The narrator’s authority, based on unarticulated experience, invisibly
glides through the text” (p. 66). The research process is portrayed as being scientific, unproblematic, and value-free; “self-reflection and doubt are hardly central matters” (p. 51). Confessional tales, on the other hand, take a complete about-face, and set out to place the research process, and the experience of the narrator at the centre of the story. Fundamental to the confessional tale is the perspective that the epistemological problems characteristic of social science regarding the nature of truth and the relationship between the knower and the known are deeply entrenched in the fieldwork enterprise and must be portrayed to make the fieldwork process legitimate: “The omnipotent tone of realism gives way to the modest, unassuming style of one struggling to piece together something reasonably coherent out of displays of initial disorder, doubt, and difficulty” (p. 75). Lastly, impressionist tales seek to weave these two stylistic approaches together in an imaginative rendering of fieldwork and field results. “Impressionist writing tries to keep both subject and object in constant view. The epistemological aim is then to braid the knower and the known” (p. 102). In examining all three modes of ethnographic account, Van Maanen does not argue for “one right way” of writing about cultural interpretations, but reveals the underlying narrative structure of cultural representation, and underscores the view that there are many tacit epistemological assumptions underlying seemingly innocuous textual choices.

**The political project:** With regard to the political dimension of social analysis that also attends upon the interpretive and reflexive turn, this is also an area of considerable variety and vigour. The shift in social thought that brought meaning, subjectivity, and textual signification to the
foreground has been accompanied by urgent and challenging questions about conflict, change, and social inequality. Questions about culture, meaning, and truth are mixed with equally pressing questions about privilege and power. As Rosaldo notes, "the reorientation of anthropology was itself part of a series of much broader social movements and social reformulations" (1993, p. 36), drawing on many intellectual currents, including phenomenology, Marxism, and--later--postmodernism, and critical theory. A fundamental commitment of the interpretive approach is to interrogate the political underpinnings of reified forms of knowledge and to attempt to valorize forms of knowledge that have previously been subordinated or not recognized at all (Foucault, 1980; Smith, 1987).

The political dimension of the interpretive approach to social analysis is nowhere more strongly articulated than within feminist theory broadly defined (Wolf, 1992). Although there are many different feminisms, and many internal debates within the many branches of feminist thought, a broadly accepted tenet of all feminist inquiry is that a central objective of social analysis is to challenge relations of dominance, and to work towards the empowerment of hitherto marginalized and subjugated groups (Harding, 1987; Lather, 1991; Smith, 1987). Patti Lather (1991) is a leading proponent of feminist research of this character. She spells out clearly the founding commitments upon which her scholarly work is based. These commitments depart somewhat from the interpretive approach in their more explicitly radical political orientation, although they are grounded in interpretivist insights, and collectively comprise what is now more likely to be described not as interpretivism but postmodernism (Marcus, 1994; Rose, 1990). They include
recognizing the intrinsic value-ladenness of enquiry, and the displacement of grand totalizing narratives by many voices, speaking from particular and partial cultural locations. Fundamentally, the aim of social enquiry for which she speaks, and which many others who call themselves postmodernists (and sometimes feminists) share (Marcus and Fisher, 1986; Wolf, 1992) involves "analyzing ideas about the causes of powerlessness, recognizing systemic oppressive forces, and acting both individually and collectively to change the conditions of our lives" (Lather, 1991, p. 4). One dimension of this approach involves challenging the privileged status of "colonized academic thought" (Rose, 1990, p. 15) and according equal legitimacy and merit to forms of knowing that do not conform to the established standards of text-dependent academic culture (Gitlin and Myers, 1993; Rose, 1990). Another dimension, which goes beyond the stylistic considerations in portraying ethnographic inquiry examined by Van Maanen (1988), involves efforts to democratize the research process by more directly including research participants in fieldwork and writing, and working towards explicitly emancipatory outcomes. Wolf (1992), in an analysis of feminism, postmodernism, and ethnographic responsibility, lauds these practices and goals, while acknowledging the ethical and procedural difficulties in carrying them out:

[F]eminists are accustomed to working toward utopias, and many are willing (at least in theory) to give "the native" freedom to add her own caveats to the text. Some young feminist ethnographers do return copies of their written work to their informants for their approval and encourage them (sometimes to the informant's terror) to put their names on the cover as joint authors. To this feminist, the seriousness of the ethical problems associated with such a plan are surpassed only by the complexity of the practical problems that would arise in attempting to implement it.... Nonetheless, I recognize and respect the political position of those whose commitment to shared authorship causes them to rework
and revisit their co-authors until all parties see the manuscript as both safe and fair (p. 121).

I now turn to a discussion of how these perspectives on the nature of interpretive inquiry have influenced the shape and form of this study. Taking the view of the social actor, the role of language, and the political dimension of social inquiry into account, the mood of social inquiry associated with interpretivist and postmodern approaches endorses a research stance which is reflexive, cognizant of textual implications, and challenging to prevailing orthodoxies (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Marcus, 1994; Rosaldo, 1993). This stance has provided a broad philosophical framework for the study documented in these pages, and has guided my work in a number of ways, which I present below.

With regard to reflexivity, there is considered attention in this study to the matter of personal perspective—my own, and those of the research participants. I call attention to the fact that my background and life experiences have shaped my choice of research topic, and the interpretive lens with which I have viewed events in the field. The way in which my position as "the one who sees" has influenced "what is seen" is less easy to acknowledge with precise insight, although the very acknowledgement that there is a particular cast to the resulting interpretation because it is me interpreting goes a good way towards setting a necessarily cautionary epistemological tone. I have attended to the personal perspectives of the research participants in a somewhat different fashion, primarily because I have had less access to their private thoughts, feelings, and experiences. For reasons I address below, this is not a collaborative study where the research
participants have been directly involved in the shaping or production of my interpretation of their
culture. However, I acknowledge the influence and importance of their personal perspectives in
two ways. First, in speaking about them, I do not presume to be speaking for them. The
interpretation presented here is not “the” interpretation; it is, to borrow a line from Geertz (1973),
“not privileged, just particular: another country heard from” (p. 23). Following Van Maanen’s
(1988) critique of the “godlike pose” (p. 51) of the ethnographer telling a four-square realist tale,
I endeavour, as loudly and often as possible, to be one of those ethnographers “who question
aloud (or in print) whether they got it right, or whether there might be another, equally useful way
to study, characterize, display, read, or otherwise understand the accumulated field materials”
(Van Maanen, 1988, p. 51), or whether the participants themselves might be able to tell it better
than I ever could. Second, in my analysis of the words and actions of the research participants
gathered in those accumulated field materials, I do not propose, at any time, to be analysing “what
the natives ‘really’ think” (Geertz, 1973, p. 11)—their innermost beliefs and firmly-held, self-
reflected opinions. My analysis of workplace culture focuses, as Geertz (1973) claims any
analysis of culture must, on such cultural expressions as winks, jokes, and tales, which speak
volumes about culturally located values and standards but reveal relatively little about what is
going on inside the winker, the joker, or the teller of the tale. Indeed, a good deal of my analysis
is based on my own actions as a marginal participant of the culture, winking, joking, and telling
tales in tune with everybody else. I was always well aware, on my own behalf, that these actions
were less a reflection of what I “really believed” than a way to participate in the norms of the
culture. I cannot overstate, on behalf of the research participants, my conviction that this was
equally true of them as well. My interpretive focus, in this study, is on the cultural meanings

carried by the *joke*, rather than the unknown, ineffable personal meanings intended by the *joker*.

With regard to cognizance of textual implications, the language used and the way this document is
structured to some extent demonstrate in their own right some of the philosophical and

epistemological considerations which underscore this study. To return to Van Maanen's (1988)
classification of ethnographic genres—realist, confessional, and impressionist tales—he points out
himself that these three narrative approaches do not often exist in a pure form but often co-exist
within the same story, reflecting not inconsistency but the degree of complexity characteristic of
the representation of knowledge. This document is exactly such a hybrid, with realist,
confessional, and impressionistic literary conventions bound together in a single work. It is a
realist tale in the way that it carefully culls and stages the "facts" to support a particular
interpretation; it is a confessional tale in the way that it acknowledges doubt, particularity and
incompleteness, holding, with Geertz (1973), that in the business of cultural interpretation
sometimes "its most telling assertions are its most tremulously based" (p. 29); it is an
impressionist tale in its intentional use of metaphor, colloquialisms, and lighthearted, casual
language, and in the way that the standards which shape it are to some extent "not disciplinary but
literary" (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 106), in pursuit of the elusive impressionist goal of entwining the
doer with the done. It may appear, at times, to be a document deeply at odds with itself: a
dissertation that wants to be a novel, that claims interpretive authority but wants to disclaim
interpretive privilege. Although such dissonances are not driven by a strict, controlling
intentionality (the writing process being an intractable business that resists such control), they are nonetheless representative of the epistemological complexities and ambiguities that accompany the process of interpretive inquiry.

With regard to the challenges to prevailing orthodoxies associated with the research stance that frames this study, there are two final issues I would like to address. The first pertains to the relationship between this study and the academic literature; the second pertains to the ethics and politics of the inclusion—or lack of inclusion—of the research participants in this study in the process of analysis and textual production. Taking the relationship with the academic literature first, I stated above that one political component of the interpretivist stance framing this study involves a challenge to the legitimacy and privilege granted to knowledge codified within the academic “canon” (and even new challenges to the old canon, which may take on canonical proportions of their own) (Marcus, 1994; Rose, 1990; Wolf, 1992). Rose (1992), in particular, is critical of the tendency to frame ethnographic analysis according to “academic texts, methods, and corporate academic culture” (p. 12) and proposes an alternate methodological, moral, and aesthetic treatise of his own: “Do radical ethnography, one that gets you closer to those you study at the risk of going native and never returning” (Rose, 1990, p. 12). Although, in this study, I have not taken Rose’s advice to the extremes he suggests (it’s easy for him to say), I have struggled with the philosophical, epistemological, and political ramifications of doing just that.

One convention of realist tales identified by Van Maanen (1990) is the way that “a cultural description is tied to a theoretical problem of interest in the fieldworker’s disciplinary
community....Field data, in such cases, are put forth as facts marshalled in accordance with the light they shed on the generic topic of interest” (p. 51). It is precisely this convention, and the attendant privileging of established writings over other expressions and locations of knowledge, which Rose and others (hooks, 1994; Lutz, 1988; Marcus and Cushman, 1982) wish to name and challenge, and which has been at the base of my own struggle with the literature. While I acknowledge and value the work of others within the scholarly community, and recognize the importance of framing academic inquiry within a context of prior and related academic work, I also acknowledge—and seek to challenge—the social and political relations of power and privilege that accompany the construction and referencing of established works, bodies, and disciplines.

This challenge is expressed in the text in two ways: first, in being “undisciplined” or undisciplinary, i.e., in drawing on a range of disciplinary sources, and including works of fiction, journalism, and poetry as occasional supplementary references; second, in maintaining an inexact correspondence between the literature that sets the scholarly context of the analysis and the analysis itself. This study does not seek to present itself as a scholarly orphan; there are, as this chapter endeavours to reveal, a good many ancestors and relatives which have a bearing on the content and context of the analysis. Yet neither does it stand closely to the rest of the family, or define itself solely by naming allegiances and kin. The literature discussed in this chapter frames the interpretation, sure enough, but the interpretive chapters that follow do not allude very often to the literature, having been framed not just in the library, but in a kind of triangulated hermeneutic circuit between the library, the jobsite, and writing desk. As Lisa Simpson, of the popular television show The Simpsons would say, “our journey begins at the library,” but--as the
cultural analysts who have influenced this study would hasten to add—it does not end there.

The second challenge to prevailing orthodoxies associated with the interpretive stance traced above comes from a quite different direction, although it follows the same general drift. If the first involves “going native” by getting out of the library, then the second involves bringing the “natives” in, and including them in the business of producing scholarly work, in the fashion of what Van Maanen (1988) calls (as a variant of the three main kinds of tale discussed above) jointly told tales. These modes refer to the increased practice of “the production of jointly authored texts (fieldworker and native) in a way that opens up for readers the discursive and shared character of all cultural descriptions” (p. 136), and addresses the imbalanced power relations between the researcher and the researched. In my discussion of these goals and practices above, I cited Margery Wolf’s (1992) stance of respecting the commitment underlying such research approaches, but struggling with the practical and ethical problems of conducting this kind of research. In this study, I have taken a similar position to Wolf’s. I endorse the principles of shifting the power balance and granting research participants their own voice, but I have not included the participants in the production of this text, for two reasons. The first reason is practical and respectful. The research participants involved in this study had busy lives. They worked long days, and had families and other commitments which took much of their free time. There was little imposition involved in allowing me to spend time with them, watching, helping, and talking, during the working day; however, the additional time and energy it would have required of them to take part in the time-consuming, vaguely defined process of ethnographic
analysis and writing would have been considerable. The second reason is ethical and epistemological—ethical because I was never sure that my motive for wanting to be collaborative and inclusive did not stem in part from a desire to position myself as a moral “good guy” (rather than yet another exploiter of the silenced); epistemological because, if it was the joke I wanted to examine, as I claimed above, it did not follow that I needed to work together with the joker to figure out why the joke was funny. In my role of cultural interpreter, the responsibility of that job fell to me—even if I got it completely wrong. Consequently, the research participants in this study have not been involved in the process of analysing and writing up the research. I have not asked them about whether my interpretation seems right to them, or gone back to them with drafts to check whether they agree with what I have written, although I have striven to be accurate in my interpretation of their culture, and I am terrifically curious to know what they will think. It may be true, then, that in proceeding as I have, I risk the charge of appropriation, even though I fully share the concern expressed by Mascia-Lees et al. about the need “to be suspicious of all attempts by members of a dominant group to speak for the oppressed, no matter how eloquently or experimentally” (as cited in Wolf, 1992, p. 122). But as Wolf sums up, regarding such deep issues, rife with ethical and epistemological ambiguities as they are, “[t]o be suspicious is good. To allow it to silence one is something else. Sorting the oppressor from the oppressed has never been easy once we began to recognize the complexities of power that result from differences in race, class, and gender” (p. 122-123). These difficulties are not to be steered clear of, regardless of the level of inclusion of research subjects. In the end, whether one opts to closely involve the research participants in the analytic process or not, one must proceed, as I
have, guided by a commitment to act in good faith, a sense of respect for the people and the issues involved, and the self-awareness to know that power is always a part of the research interplay, and to be sensitive to its presence and influence.

b) Studies of education and work

Although interpretive anthropology (with a postmodern slant) provided a general conceptual orientation for this study, it provided less to go on regarding my specific focus, namely the cultural intersection between education and work. With regard to education, on the one hand, there is a considerable range and breadth of cultural studies in education which follow the same general orientation I introduced above. Indeed, Lather's (1991) feminist, postmodern perspective previously mentioned is specifically oriented to questions of pedagogical thought and practice. Others (Giroux and McLaren, 1989; McLaughlin and Tierney, 1993) also take a broadly interpretive approach to examining issues pertaining to culture, identity, power and social change within an educational context. With regard to anthropological perspectives on work, on the other hand, the intellectual tradition is less lively. Tom (1986) has pointed out the limited contribution of the field of anthropology to studies of work and the workplace as a site of cultural identity and struggle. As a case in point, Applebaum's (1981) ethnographic analysis of the technological and social organization of the construction industry—in itself a rare focus in anthropology—provides a descriptive perspective on aspects of cultural life in construction, but is inattentive to concerns regarding social status and power relations. Feminist research to some extent has taken up the slack, with a range of studies examining issues of identity, meaning, and ideological dominance in
women's work (Kahn-Hut, Daniels and Colvard, 1982; Kondo, 1990; Tom, 1991). However, the emphasis in my project on the cultural exploration of educational meanings in an occupational context is a hybrid, which falls between these two schools. One area of inquiry which to some extent bridges the divide between education and work is the cultural study of work education (Simon, Dippo and Schenke, 1990). However, the emphasis in this approach is on educational practice within the context of work, rather than, as in my particular research focus, educational meanings.

Expanding beyond culturally oriented interpretivist approaches to the study of education and work, there is also an extensive literature addressing the themes of education and work within the discipline of sociology. In sociology, unlike anthropology, the topic of work, at least at the broad level of the labour market, labour power, and patterns of social stratification, has traditionally been a thematic focus of the field (Erikson and Vallas, 1990). Such longstanding sociological concepts as alienation, exploitation, and the class structure are linked to the workplace context and are derived from certain aspects of Marxist theory which place a particular emphasis on the significance of work for human kind, and on the—wrongful and rightful—place of the worker in society (Grint, 1991). In recent decades, a large sub-discipline of sociology has developed, oriented specifically to the sociology of work and occupations. A key concern, within this strand of sociological inquiry, is the subject of skill, and the changing skill requirements of a workforce faced with different economic conditions and the runaway expansion and complexity of new technologies. In a review of this literature, I noted the polarity in views between “deskilling” on
the one hand (Braverman, 1974) and "upskilling" on the other (Zuboff, 1988). I also remarked on
the tendency in this literature to focus on the measurement and quantification of skill, with
insufficient attention paid to the experience of skill, and the cultural meanings associated with--
and attributed to--different kinds of skill in different kinds of work settings (Spennor, 1990;

An additional branch of sociological research on the general theme of work and occupations
includes a number of finely detailed workplace ethnographies and case studies. These studies
explore a number of issues pertaining to the organization of social life in the workplace, and to the
organization and recognition of working knowledge (Harper, 1987; Kusterer, 1978; Meissner,
1988). They cover a wide array of paid and unpaid, legal and illegal occupational pursuits, from
medical residency to garbage collection to longshoring to bank robbery (Bosk, 1979; Letkeman,
1973; Perry, 1978; Wellman, 1986). Although interesting to read as a general background to
studies of the workplace, and a good source of workplace-based insights into work organization
and working conditions, on the whole they lack the interpretive cultural orientation I was aiming
for in my own study. Also, as in anthropological studies of work, the construction industry as an
occupational setting was only rarely a focus of attention in this line of research. Two studies
examining the theme of work organization and worker autonomy in the skilled building trades
(Reimer, 1982; Silver, 1982) provide a structural analysis of work in the construction industry,
but lack the personal, experiential focus available from a more interpretive perspective.
Reckman's (1979) analysis of the historical evolution of carpentry in the United States offers a
critical commentary on the negative social and structural effects for carpenters of increasing specialization in the building trades—and provides a glimpse, too, of some of the complexities and satisfactions involved in the building process. However this study, too, would be well complemented by the analysis of what these effects "look like" in cultural terms, at the level of everyday practice.

In addition to the sociological analysis of work, there are also extensive studies within the sociological literature on the theme of education. Within this literature, with particular regard to the relationship between education and work, there are a number of studies which address the macro-level association between the education system, the economy, and the division of labour into a stratified hierarchy of managing elites serviced by a labouring and subordinate working class. An oft-cited contribution to this perspective is Bowles and Gintis' (1976) analysis of the way schools prepare workers for a stratified workforce, and reproduce the occupational class structure through ideological legitimation and reproduction. An equally seminal study, and a much more culturally grounded piece of research, is Willis' (1977) ethnography of "how working class kids get working class jobs." By taking a cultural perspective, Willis gains keen insight into the contradictions of cultural reproduction. He shows the irony of how the "lads" of his study, in resistance to school authority, established a counter-school culture which inverted prevailing values about manual and mental work, and how it was by this very mechanism that they ended up in dead-end jobs, serving the larger forces of social domination they were--unconsciously--trying to challenge. Although, by adopting an uncritical acceptance of biased assumptions about what
constitutes a "dead end job," Willis himself inadvertently reinforces the same elitist assumptions pertaining to school and work he contests, his study is a key contribution to our understanding of cultural contradiction, and its central significance in the relationship between education and work.

Another area of sociological inquiry pertaining to the relationship between education and work concerns the notion of skill, and the way education functions as a societal yardstick for the way skill levels are determined and legitimized. It is a yardstick which carries an implicit gender, class, and racial bias, and sometimes does not reflect actual skill so much as the power of certain groups in society to have their work and occupational status recognized (Gaskell, 1982; Steinberg, 1990; Vallas, 1990; Wajcman, 1991). This approach to the question of skill is a departure from the kind of studies mentioned above which had as their chief aim the goal of measuring the growth or decline of skill levels. It takes the view that skill is socially constructed, and is a measure of, if anything, power and influence rather than of knowledge and work performance. As Gaskell (1982) points out, in a study comparing the "skilled trades" with clerical work, "we usually take schooling as an important index of ‘skill’ but women in the labour force are more educated on the average than men in the labour force....[T]he problem for women is not in their skills but in the way these skills are rewarded" (p. 13). She identifies the management of skill definitions as a political process. This perspective is also articulated by Livingstone (1987) in an analysis of educational claims pertaining to skill upgrading. For both, attention to ideological claims about the link between school and skill, and to whose interests are being represented in those claims, is essential to understanding the link between education and work, and to avoiding encapsulation
within a dominant and biased ideology.

It is interesting to note, with respect to Gaskell's (1982) comparison of the social position of the skilled trades versus clerical work, that the trades come off looking much more socially powerful and privileged in her study than they do in the study of trades culture presented in this study. For instance, Gaskell refers to trades apprenticeship as a certification tool which serves, among other things, to “enhance the status and skill of the journeyman” (p. 18), relative to clerical workers for whom there is no apprenticeship equivalent. In my interpretation, I put forward the view that apprenticeship carries little legitimacy at all among the tradespeople I studied, relative to the greater legitimacy associated with a university degree. I talk about how even certified skilled journeymen appear to feel they lack status, get little recognition for their skill, and enjoy no particular social prestige. There are two points I would like to make to clarify this seeming contradiction. First, Gaskell’s comments are focused particularly on the union context. Indeed, as Gaskell points out, historically trades workers--predominantly men--have won significant increases in power and monetary reward through unionization which clerical workers--predominantly women--have not had the same opportunities to bring about. My study, by contrast, examines a non-union setting which exhibited no particular identification with the better organized and more politically influential union side of trades work. Second, both Gaskell’s work and my own focus on marginalized groups who do not traditionally walk the corridors of power. Unionized trades workers may be better off than non-unionized clerical workers, but both have their own struggles with disadvantage in a society where neither women nor working class men
A study which provides an insightful and sensitive analysis of the way such struggles are personally experienced among manual workers--and, further, the way they are tied to prevailing public perceptions about work, education and the relationship between them--is Sennett and Cobb's (1972) classic study of what they refer to as the "hidden injuries of class." In a series of interviews with a group of working class families in a Boston neighbourhood, Sennett and Cobb identify a deep-seated streak of ambivalence about the value of education, work, and blue-collar versus white-collar status. The workers valued education as a route towards success. They saw the educated as having rights, powers and privileges which they themselves, because of some unaccountable personal failure, lacked. But education was also a route away from fundamental values about the meaning of work. According to Sennett and Cobb's interpretation, manual labour was seen by the workers to lack status but to hold a greater degree of dignity than was possible with "educated" white-collar work. Referring to the (college-student) son of one worker they interviewed, they say that "James disrespects school in the same way Frank disrespected pushing papers around at the bank; the status of 'educated man' is greater than that of the craftsman, but the intrinsic satisfaction seems less" (Sennett and Cobb, 1972, p. 27). The contradictory views about the value of education and manual versus mental work reflected in Sennett and Cobb's analysis were an important conceptual resource for me in carrying out this study, and there is a strong echo of the same thematic ambivalence central to Sennett and Cobb's findings, in my interpretation. Moreover, Sennett and Cobb offer a kind of analysis which is very
close to the interpretive approach I adopt. In addition to the nature of their findings, the orientation they took in their analysis of the lives of working people was a role model of sorts for this study. For one thing, although the book is all about class, nowhere does it offer up an explicit definition of what class is or what it means. Sennett and Cobb operate instead from the position that class is a social category best approached from the inside out, rather than from the outside in; their focus is on capturing the variety of experiences of selfhood associated with occupational and educational standing, rather than on defining the structural determinants that shape those experiences. Hence, the book serves as a stylistic model of portrayal as opposed to explication, which I have adopted to some extent. For another thing--and this is a similar point, although approached from the perspective of conceptual focus rather than literary form--Sennett and Cobb’s interest in class as a dimension of personal experience, rather than social structure, has also been highly influential. Their analysis, at bottom, is about how people “feel class and self are joined” (Sennett and Cobb, 1972, p. 36). Although, for reasons I address below, I have exchanged the word class for status, my interpretation is built upon a similar foundation.

c) Class and status

Class is a small, innocuous word, that carries a large burden of sociological meaning. Status is a related word, with equally as many interpretations and applications in the social science literature (Grint, 1991; Grusky, 1994; Turner, 1988). Both essentially can be applied to the role of occupation as a marker of relative social standing. Turner (1988) has identified a central controversy regarding the usage of both terms, involving a fundamental split between Marxian
and Weberian approaches to social analysis. For Marxist sociology, the inequalities, divisions, hierarchies and distinctions within societies can be traced primarily to economic relations which create and perpetuate a class-based division of labour. By contrast, from a Weberian perspective, economic relations are just one dimension of social difference, and the term status more comprehensively includes other dimensions such as power and culture as significant elements of social structure. "In short, the tensions between Weberian and Marxist sociology are focused on the problem of whether economic classes or status groups are the most significant features of social stratification, and thus around the character of political conflict in modern societies" (Turner, 1988, p. 2). From both perspectives, the nature of social stratification and the role of occupation as a key element of stratification are the fundamental phenomena at issue, but how they are shaped and how they function have been, and continue to be, debated from many angles. Of course, more recent social and political thought have added the consideration of gender, sexual orientation, race, and other social attributes into the picture (Grusky, 1994; Smith, 1987), as well as more textured and multi-layered understandings of social relations (Bauman, 1991; Foucault, 1980; Giddens 1984), but class and status remain core issues.

As Turner (1988) points out in his analysis of the status concept, there are a number of ways that status has been defined. Key among these is the differentiation between status as an attribute of social psychology and of social structure, in other words "between self-perception of status and externally-defined status positions" (p. 4). A similar observation could be made about the concept of class: how can social class be measured and quantified (Blau and Duncan, 1967) versus what
does social class feel like (Hoggart, 1957; Sennett and Cobb, 1972; Steedman, 1986)? In both cases, however, the prevalent focus of sociological attention—even much of that which purports to attend to matters of self-perception (Lipset, 1968; Shils, 1981)—inclines towards locating subjective experience in a structural framework, rather than lingering on the personal, experiential level for its own sake. Sennett and Cobb’s (1972) study of working class identity discussed above is a rare standout in this regard, for staking its conceptual territory on the level of subjective experience and maintaining a subjective focus throughout the book. It is, for this reason, more in accord with the interpretive stance that frames this study—which is another way of saying why it has served as a model in this analysis, and why the extensive sociological literature on both class and status has served more as a distant backdrop than a source of immediate points of reference in the foreground.

The sociological literature on class and status is oriented, as I have said above, around the themes of social stratification and inequality pertaining (although not exclusively) to occupational role. Interestingly, a source that has contributed strongly to my conceptual approach to class and status comes not from the discipline of sociology but from the moral philosopher Michael Walzer (1983), in a work, titled Spheres of Justice, that explores the theme not of inequality as a social condition, but of equality as a social aspiration. The connection between the class/status dimension of social relations and moral philosophy is not as tenuous as it may first seem. In an essay that traces the roots of inequality in society, touching on some of the questions raised above about whether economic classes or status groups are at the bottom of it, the sociologist Ralf
Dahrendorf (1969) comes to the conclusion that “inequalities among men [and women] follow from the very concept of societies as moral communities” (p. 40). While Dahrendorf, once he arrives at this insight, takes it back to the sociological debates about social stratification from whence he came, this is precisely the territory where Walzer makes his home. His self-stated purpose in the book is to “describe a society where no social good serves or can serve as a means of domination” (Walzer, 1983, p. xiv). Although the resulting description of that society makes a thought-provoking study in its own right, it is the way Walzer deals with the topic of domination which has served as an inspiration for this study. In another, later work Walzer (1988) has stated his position thus:

Over a number of years, I have been arguing (most clearly in Spheres of Justice [Basic Books, 1983]) against the claim that moral principles are necessarily external to the world of everyday experience, waiting out there to be discovered by detached and dispassionate philosophers. In fact, it seems to me, the everyday world is a moral world, and we would do better to study its internal rules, maxims, conventions, and ideals, rather than to detach ourselves from it in search of a universal standpoint (p. 1).

As with moral principles, so too with domination. Walzer’s approach to the topic is not to examine what is going on out there in the social structure but to attend to the internal rules, maxims, conventions, ideals—and feelings—of how such social characteristics as domination play on our hearts and minds. His interest is not to describe what configures or determines the

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4 It was with some surprise, yet with an “aha” of recognition nonetheless, that I discovered that Clifford Geertz and Michael Walzer—whose work to me exhibited astonishing thematic parallels, although their disciplinary location was quite different—were in fact colleagues in the same institute at the same university.
patterns of rich and poor, aristocrats and commoners, office holders and ordinary citizens that shape the social landscape, but to acknowledge the personal effects of "what aristocrats do to commoners, what office holders do to ordinary citizens, what people with power do to those without it" (Walzer, 1983, p. xiii). The impact of Walzer's work on my own approach to cultural interpretation has less to do with where he arrives, in the vision of equality he portrays, than where he starts, with the placement of identity and personal experience at the centre of the way he looks at issues of domination, subordination, and the vision of equality. Although nowhere in Spheres of Justice does Walzer explicitly articulate that class and status are central matters of concern, the change of words is essentially just a different way of identifying the same neighbourhood. At the heart of the matter is the question of how we so often see ourselves and others in relational terms—not just who is who, but who is up or down on a range of implicit social scales.

The terminology is flexible—many words dance around the same underlying, ineffable theme and can never name it, quite—but it is not arbitrary. Although my approach to the interpretation of what I end up calling status in trades culture is framed by a moral philosopher who deploys the word status loosely among a host of cognate terms, I must return to the sociological debates about class and status to establish why status, exactly, came to be the most appropriate term. Although I do not claim to be conducting my analysis from a Weberian perspective, it is the Weberian emphasis, as elaborated by Seymour Lipset (1968), on how status necessarily "involves the felt perceptions of people" (p. 302) which ultimately tipped the scales in its favour. Although
both class and status have mostly been pursued in sociology from a structural perspective, the stronger association between status and the dimension of “felt perceptions” indicated its greater capacity to express the central role of subjectivity and lived experience, which is a critical feature of the orientation of my analysis.

d) Adult education

The perspective on education taken in this study is a very broad one. Although the cultural meaning of education as I pursue it here carries tacit associations with such formal domains of the educational system as university and public school, these associations are relevant to people of all ages, in all aspects of cultural life. Hence, the division between adult education and other sectors of the educational enterprise is in many respects not a pertinent one in the context of this research. However, the theme of the relationship between education and work has particular application to areas of longstanding and increasing concern within the adult education literature, and this literature has been an integral component of the conceptual background of this study.

Adult education has been in the forefront of the reconceptualization of education beyond schooling for children, to encompass education and learning activities across the whole lifespan. Such phrases as “lifelong education,” “continuing education,” “recurrent education” and “lifelong learning” which are now a regular part of common usage have been the subject of debate and inquiry in the field of adult education for some decades (British Columbia Task Force on Employment and Training, 1991; Jarvis, 1986). Ettore Gelpi (1979) a notable contributor to this
discussion, at least in the European context, has drawn particular attention to the need to rethink the relationship between education and working life in a way that looks beyond simple assumptions about the education/employment/economy nexus, to consider the role of the class structure and social stratification. With reference to vocational education and the education of people for work, Gelpi has put forward the argument that the prevailing “dualistic system of education, where there are two educational channels, one for the masses and one for the elite” (p. 7) provides a flawed basis upon which to pursue the goals which lifelong education purports to represent. For Gelpi, even the integration of existing vocational and academic educational streams is an insufficient response. What is needed is broad-based reform of the entire education system. Although Gelpi’s comments refer specifically to the situation in Europe, where academic and vocational traditions have a different structure and history than in North America (Jarvis, 1986; Knapper and Cropley, 1991), the general character of his observations that the academic/vocational division arises from and perpetuates class differences has some relevancy to the North American context as well (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Cantor and Tyack, 1979).

Gelpi (1979) further argues that a starting point for any rethinking of educational structures and strategies should be with in-depth and culturally sensitive analysis of the conditions and experiences of the realities of working life, i.e., workplace culture. Westwood (1984), following in Gelpi’s footsteps, conducted an ethnographic study of shopfloor culture among women workers in a hosiery factory in the UK. Her findings revealed that the role of education in the lives of these workers was crucially mediated by their cultural context. She concluded her study
with the assertion that even such a fundamental notion as adulthood, and such a fundamental concern as adult participation (or non-participation) in educational activities, can be better understood with a clearer grasp of how adults' identities are shaped by their attitudes and understandings about both work and school.

However, despite Gelpi's clarion call for significantly greater recognition of the cultural context of the relationship between education and work, and Westwood's contribution to grounding the study of educational issues in the reality of the workers' situation, there has not been an overwhelming movement in this direction. The tendency remains, in the adult education literature, to orient discussions of the relationship between education and work towards worker education on the one hand (Zacharakis-Jutz and Schied, 1993) and the provision of workplace-based education and training on the other (Marsick, 1988; Sticht, 1991; Welton, 1991). Moreover, there is a perception that even these discussions are marginal and fragmented. Regarding the former, Schied, et al (1992) point out that, particularly in the United States and to a lesser degree in Canada, although workers' education historically has played a central role in the development of adult education, it has lapsed into the background of current adult education debates. Regarding the latter, Day et al (1992) identify a "two solitudes" mentality in the tendency of adult education scholars to dismiss training as menial, and unworthy of serious attention or analysis--while recognizing, at the same time, its growing prominence on the public agenda (Hart, 1992).
The most comprehensive treatise on the relationship between education and work from an adult education perspective, and the most resolute call for a thorough-going examination of deep-seated prevailing assumptions about what education and work mean to people in their everyday lives, is provided in Hart’s (1992) analysis of adult education, the global economy, and the work of women. Hart is highly critical of adult education’s supporting role in the increasingly “one dimensional identification of education with the needs of business and the economy” (p. 2). In the prevailing discourse about the education/employment/economy nexus, she identifies an alarming trend towards the devaluation of experienced-based knowledge, the growing cult of computer-worship, and the unquestioning and biased belief that “‘knowledge work’—an ideal of work freed of drudgery and dirt” (p. 127)—is the work of the future. She calls for a radical departure from the “widening gyre” of society’s unthinking movement in these directions, and for a reassertion of a vision of work that takes into account a holistic vision of human life and learning, where, for instance, people’s actual experience of skill is not walled off from the prevailing, economy-driven skills discourse. Although Hart’s manifesto leans toward the utopian, my research project took shape partly out of the notion to take her advice—backed by Gelpi and Westwood’s urgings to attend to the everyday realities of workplace culture—and go out and see for myself what was going on in the world of work, beyond the skills discourse wall.

e) Housing and culture

As I mentioned earlier, this study spans a range of disciplines and falls clearly within none of them. In addition to the literature I drew upon from the disciplinary areas mentioned above, I
have also gained insights and perspectives from other sources. Education was, of course, only one dimension of my analysis, and the meaning of work was another. But there were also many aspects of meaning to be explored with regard to the particular kind of workplace I had chosen to examine. In particular, since aside from Reckman's (1979) analysis, sociological studies of the building process had little of significance to offer, I was interested in looking more widely at other treatments of the subject of the built environment and home construction. To gain a better sense of the social, cultural, and political context of home building I examined a selection of works addressing the theme of domestic architecture as a reflection of cultural standards and mores.

In the analysis of house form and culture, anthropologists and other cultural analysts have long recognized the fundamental links between domestic architecture and cultural meaning (Colloredo-Mansfield, 1994; Wright, 1980; Wright, 1981). On one level, people activate architectural meanings, and deploy shared understandings about structure, space, and design, to affirm their personal and cultural identity and communicate messages about themselves. Or, as the architectural critic Witold Rybczynski (1992) puts it, house design and decoration “are a graphic (and sometimes symbolic) representation of public and private cultural attitudes towards domesticity and family life” (p. 8). More than that, though, the home and its presentation are expressions of wealth, status, and social differentiation. There are economic messages embedded within architecture and interior design, and these economic messages carry deeper messages about power, authority and privilege, about who has status and who does not (Douglas, 1992). Domestic architecture, in short, is a highly conspicuous form of conspicuous consumption.
through which, according to Veblen's (1919) original treatise, an elite class defines itself and reinforces its elite position. Additionally, it is not just the home and its embellishments which themselves communicate values and meanings. People's explicit discussions and criticisms of local architecture also contribute to the expression and negotiation of basic cultural values (Blair, 1989). The cultural messages about identity and status are not just communicated by house size and style, but by passers-by who stop to look in envy, admiration, or resentment, and make aesthetic judgements.

On a second level, such messages are also an important part of the backdrop of the building process influencing the people who do the work. The cultural messages conveyed by architectural conspicuous consumption--i.e., big, expensive homes--fan out, and are also expressed in the social relationships between architectural consumers and producers. Tracy Kidder's (1985) journalistic portrayal of a single homebuilding project, and the three-way relationship among the clients, builders, and architects involved in that project, is one reflection of the way cultural values and beliefs about homes and home building are activated in everyday work interactions. One dimension of Kidder's observations, as he watched a crew of carpenters building an architecturally designed home for wealthy clients, revealed the tensions that existed at the interface between all three parties. Kidder describes architects and clients as historically inhabiting a different social world than builders, one, as he says, "better endowed with money and formal education" (p. 258). In a brief review of the rise of architecture in the United States, he talks about the long history of class-based liaison between clients and architects, at the expense of
builders:

At one point or another, most of those [pattern and style books published by architects between 1830 and the Civil War] argue that an architect offers the client protection from the builder. The case is often founded on social class, the architect being the client's ally by virtue of education and breeding. The argument plays upon the suspiciousness of clients about builders, a wariness that seems to have been around for so long that it probably deserves to be called natural (p. 181).

Gwendolyn Wright (1980) has also commented on these same pattern books, and the animosity they sometimes expressed towards builders, in the effort to establish the legitimate role of architects as elite guardians of good taste and style. Thus the symbolic role of housing has carried historically, and continues to carry, important political messages which position some groups involved in the building process—clients and architects—as arbiters of taste and standards while displacing other groups—builders and trades workers—to the margins. A pertinent example of this tendency came to my attention when I read how Kidder's book *House* had been reviewed in the news magazines *Time* and *Newsweek*, shortly after the book had been released in the mid-1980s. Although Kidder's focus had primarily been on the carpenters involved in the construction process and what it had been like for them to work for wealthy clients, both reviews treated the book as though it had been written about the clients, and what it had been like for them to have a crew of carpenters building their house. In these expressions of public perception, the carpenters became marginal characters in their own story.

The role of housing in culture not only tells us about meanings, values, and identity, but about who has a legitimate and visible identity, and who does not. Thus, my exploration of the literature
about housing and culture, although only a small part of the general conceptual background of my research, provided an important reinforcement for my interpretation of the centrality of status in everyday life in the building trades and as a central underlying factor in the relationship among the key players in the home building process (at least an elite corner of it), namely builders, clients, and architects.

f) Immediate influences

The literature I have mentioned above provides a broad background of the context of scholarship in which this study is located. Some of these sources have had a more immediate and lasting influence than others, although all of them have contributed in various ways to the intellectual atmosphere in which my interpretation took shape. In addition, there are three specific sources I would like to acknowledge which I have found particularly helpful, not only in shaping my thinking in a general way, but in providing a concrete focus for my analysis of the symbolic elements of everyday practice. The interpretation of everyday culture at the conceptual level is one thing. But being in the field surrounded by everyday culture—inundated and awash in the relentless flow and detail of it, and having it look so, well, so everyday—is quite another. What is meaningful and what is not? Or, since everything is meaningful, which meanings, which aspects of which everyday activities, matter most? And how does one know how and where to begin to focus one's gaze?

I was greatly helped, in my struggle to sort through such questions, first by the contributions of
Geoffrey Baruch (1981) and James Scott (1990) which, although coming from different directions, both encouraged me to pay attention to ordinary conversational “tales” as a locus of significant cultural communication and, sometimes, political expression. Baruch draws attention to the social function of the “moral tale” as a way for people to establish moral adequacy and hence personal legitimacy in their dealings with those in authority, in his case medical professionals. Scott takes this notion further, and isolates similar kinds of expressions, which he sometimes calls “backstage discourse” and sometimes “hidden transcripts,” as an assertion of class identity, and the voicing of a discrete but very significant challenge to the authority of dominant elites. Drawing on the insights of both Baruch and Scott, the notion of “backstage tales” came to be a key focus of my interpretation.

I was further encouraged by the work of Dorothy Smith (1987; 1990) to look at the social and political connotations not just of talk and tales, as suggested by Scott and Baruch, but of textual practices as well. For Smith, textual practices are a central mechanism of the apparatus of ruling which governs the prevailing culture. According to Smith, textual practices “coordinate, order, provide continuity, monitor and organize relations” (1990, p. 217). Texts are instruments of power, with the capacity to name reality and to exclude the perspective of others who occupy a social position in the margins. Those who control textual practices are in a position to dominate social relations. Consequently, drawing on Smith’s insights, as my analysis developed I paid particular attention to the role of textual practices in trades culture, and to the educational connotations that were inevitably associated with textuality. In addition to backstage tales, the
theme of “textual authority” is a second important focus of my analysis, and a significant element in my interpretation of the meaning of education in trades culture.

In the end, though, although many sources contributed to the progress of this study, there were two truths I ultimately had to face with regard to the relationship between the literature and the resulting interpretation presented in these pages. The first was that it was not possible to exhaustively “read up” on the kind of topic I had elected to explore. Themes like culture, status, the meaning of education, and the meaning of work have been explored at least a thousand times, from at least a thousand angles. I have heard it said, about fiction, that there are perhaps only a handful of themes in literature, but there is an infinite variety of ways to tell the same story, echoing, without always acknowledging, the multiple earlier and other tellings. So too with cultural analysis. There are many voices in the background of my interpretation, speaking—although sometimes in different dialects, sometimes from the jobsite, and sometimes from different disciplinary locations—about similar and related themes. In this review, I acknowledge a small selection of the more noteworthy influences from the literature.

The second truth I ultimately had to face was that as my interpretation progressed, it was necessary for the literature to fade into the background, and for the books to go back to the library shelf in order to get down to the real business of interpretation. There was still Auden’s question: “What do I know for myself?” Although in these postmodern times, where issues of partiality, polyvocality, and intersubjectivity hover over any assertion to know anything for
oneself, this may sound like a naive, old-fashioned point to ponder, there remains the hard and essentially (although never entirely) solitary business of hardening the analysis into those "self-consciously selected words" (Van Maanen, 1988, p. 4) of Van Maanen's that I mentioned earlier. Thus, I conclude this discussion of the literature where I started, with Auden's reminder to his colleague about using other people's work not as a pair of spectacles but as a key to help unlock one's own vision—even one's own vision of the words and actions of others. To the best of my ability—and with all the concerns Auden warned of, about being boring and silly, lurking ever close at hand—I have taken this advice to heart.

Research setting

Turning now from the conceptual setting of the study to the physical, this study is based on an ethnographic study of a single building site. The main focus of this study was a crew of carpenters and other tradespeople building a custom home. The fieldwork I carried out at the site spanned a full year (although the full extent of my field experience was much longer). It formally began in October 1992 when the building project started, and continued until the following October, when the house was nearly finished. Details about the practical steps involved in selecting the site, gaining access, and doing ethnographic fieldwork are provided in the chapter on ethnographic methodology.

The discussion of the research setting that follows touches on key features of the home building industry, site, personnel, and work involved in the research project. I begin with a comment
about some of the characteristics of custom home building, with a specific focus on carpentry as the trade I observed the most, and then introduce the specific site where research was carried out, the principal research participants at the site, and the stages of work involved in the building project.

a) Custom home building

Custom home building is a small segment of the much more extensive home building industry, which in turn is a part of the vast world of construction. It typically involves a three-way arrangement between builders, architects, and clients to create a home specially to suit the clients' desires, tastes, and interests. It can involve either designing and building a house from the ground up, or making renovations to an existing house. What typically defines it as "custom" work is the involvement of clients in specifying the design they want, and architects in helping them achieve it. Although some custom home building can be done on a modest budget, it can also, depending on the financial resources of the client, involve homes that are very large, extravagant, and expensive—the kind of houses associated with affluent and privileged elites.

Although the building trades have a long history of union involvement in industrial and commercial settings (Logan, 1948; Swankey, 1979), custom home building—like most residential construction in North America whether it is custom or not—is almost entirely nonunionized.  

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5It is important to specify that these comments, and indeed the whole character of my interpretation of trades culture, apply to the context of the building trades in North America, and refer most specifically to the Greater Vancouver area. In other countries, for instance Germany
Union carpenters, for instance, might work at custom home building jobsites, but the jobsites themselves are not, as a rule, run by unionized firms. There are no well-established occupational associations to which custom home building firms or employees belong, and no reliable Canadian statistics available about the volume of employment or expenditures associated with this segment of the building market. Custom home building requires no dues, no memberships, and no specific formal requirements, licenses, or educational credentials to be active in the labour market. There is often little job security in this kind of work. Layoffs, lulls between jobs, and episodic alternations between periods of employment and unemployment are characteristic. Hirings and firings follow no fixed protocol. Jobs come more through connections or word of mouth than through a formal interview process; jobs go in an equally informal and sometimes even abrupt fashion. There is no standard period for layoff notice, and work can be terminated with no grace time or forewarning. There is also no fixed, standard wage rate or benefits plan, since rates of pay fluctuate depending on the contracting firm and the fluctuations of the building market. Benefits, beyond those required by law, are at the discretion of the employer.

In carpentry, which is the central trade in home building, there is no single or definite educational trajectory that leads to employment (although other trades, such as electrical work, are much more strictly regulated). Vocational school is the most formal educational option. Getting a trades qualification from a vocational school involves a four-year apprenticeship, which combines and Japan, the educational and occupational profile of trades work is more formally established, and the attendant status roles and disparities are less pronounced. Carpentry in those countries, for instance, is considered a secure, respectable occupation (Muszynski and Wolfe, 1989).
short (six week) intervals of classroom study with paid on-the-job experience for a sponsoring company or journeyperson. Formal trades qualification is mandatory for carpenters working in unionized construction settings, but is not mandatory in the non-union sector. In the non-union sector it is possible to gain skill and experience in the building trades much more informally, acquiring skills on the job without any involvement with a trades school or formal vocational education.

b) The research site

The building site was located in an affluent Vancouver neighbourhood. Although always a comfortable neighbourhood, with the considerable increase in house prices in recent years it had become more exclusive and expensive, beyond the reach of many home buyers. Between October 1992 and 1993 when I carried out my fieldwork, there was quite a "boom" in home building and renovation in the local area. In addition to the study site, there were many other homes in the vicinity at different stages of construction. I also often noticed other trades and service people—tree pruners, landscapers, delivery van drivers, roofers, plumbers, electricians—at work in the area. It sometimes seemed that the neighbourhood emptied of residents during the day, and was repopulated by workers in their absence.

The house: The house built at the site was designed for the clients, a mature married couple with a grown family and profitable careers in business, by an established Vancouver architectural firm. Their "dream home," it was sited on a bluff with a wide view of the city and ocean. Plans for the
house showed a large, open design, with high ceilings, skylights, and big windows. The 5000 square foot interior consisted of three levels. There was a wine room, exercise room, spare room, and utility/storage area on the ground floor, which was below grade at the front of the house, and looked over the bluff at the back. On the main floor there was a large entry hall, a large living room, kitchen, and dining area, a small study and bathroom and an attached garage. The upstairs consisted of a large bedroom with an adjoining study and an en suite bathroom. During most of the time I spent at the site, however, little of this was obvious (to me, at least), since I was there to watch the construction process, and saw very little of the finished structure.

The company: The building contractor hired to build the house was George Campbell Construction (GCC). GCC was a stable and well-established contracting firm that over a period of 16 years had grown from a one-man operation to a mid-sized company with several employees on the payroll. People come and go in the trades; the total number of employees during the period of study ranged from 12 to 16. GCC specialized in custom work in west side Vancouver neighbourhoods, and had worked on several projects designed by prestigious architectural and interior design firms. It primarily did renovations, so the project I studied, a new house, was a departure from the norm. In the year that I spent doing fieldwork, GCC had one other large building project—a major renovation—on the go, and undertook a number of smaller building projects periodically. All in all, it was a moderately busy period for the company, although when the project I studied was nearing completion there were no big projects yet scheduled for the future.
Many people spoke of GCC as “not typical.” It followed practices that were unusual in the industry. For instance, there was a benefits plan, a profit sharing system for regular employees, an unofficial ban on blaring radios at jobsites, and a concerted interest in keeping people working rather than laying them off. The crew worked on a system of “flex days,” which allowed them every second Friday off. Women carpenters were welcome, and the crew was ethnically mixed. One woman carpenter who had worked for GCC in the past described it as “extraordinary”:

“Where are the white guys?!” she reported having exclaimed, on the first day on the job (920901/2). Although there was only one woman carpenter temporarily at the site while I was in the field, the male carpenters came from Chinese, East Indian, Chilean, French, Scottish, and Vietnamese backgrounds.

The crew and tradespeople: George Campbell was the founder and owner of GCC. As general contractor, his role was to oversee all aspects of the building projects undertaken by the company. He worked out of an office in his home, although he frequently dropped in at the site to talk with crew members and see how the work was progressing, sometimes bringing a lunchbox and sitting with the crew during their break. George had a degree in psychology from a university in California, and had taken up carpentry after graduation out of “this sort of sappy 60s notion of working with my hands” (930411i/14). He began as a carpenter’s helper before he went to work

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6 A note about fieldnote citations: The numeric array following fieldnote quotes refers to the date and page number of the fieldnotes from which the quote was drawn. All longer quotes and quotes attributed to a specific person are referenced in this fashion; however, quotes of one or two words not directly attributable to specific individuals are not referenced, to avoid textual clutter. Lower case letters (e.g., “I”) refer to interviews and other additions to fieldnotes.
on his own, and eventually was able to hire carpenters to work for him. He attributed his success to being well-organized, careful, and able to work well with clients and architects.

At the site, the person in charge was Charlie, the site foreman. Charlie had been working with George Campbell for 16 years, and said that he had been with him so long because he was "easy to work for." Charlie was of British ancestry, grew up in Burnaby and was interested in sports, movies, photography, and his young family. He had studied education at university, planning to be a physical education teacher. But during a year off, when he travelled in Europe, his interests changed, and when he came back to Canada, he quit university and took up art photography. He began working in home construction in order to support himself, and came to work with George Campbell through a mutual acquaintance. At that time, George Campbell was still actively involved in the toolbelt-wearing, hammer-swinging side of carpentry, and for awhile, the company consisted of only the two of them.

The remaining crew members are introduced in the order in which they appeared at the site once the project began. The first carpenter I met after Charlie was Pierre, a French-Canadian from a large family in rural Alberta. He was unmarried, in his late-30s. Most days he was accompanied to the site by his dog, Sol. When the job started, Pierre had only been with GCC for a few months. Previously he had worked primarily in a union environment doing concrete formwork in the construction of high-rise apartments. Pierre had completed two years of a carpentry apprenticeship program, but had no definite plans to resume his trades qualification studies.
Compared with Charlie, who liked to talk, Pierre was quiet and kept to himself.

Manuel was a carpenter’s helper who arrived at the site at the same as Pierre. He was a new employee of GCC. He had taken a course in basic carpentry skills for new immigrants at a local community college, but this was his first work experience at a home building site. He was in his early-30s, unmarried, and had moved to Canada from his native Chile three years earlier. He said that he liked working in construction because George was nice, and because the conditions were better than in the factory where he had worked before. But by the end of the job, when there were no new projects looming, he was worried about being laid off, and did not know whether construction really suited him, although he did not know what else he would rather be doing.

Ranjit was the next member of the crew to arrive. He was older than the rest of the crew, and set himself apart from them by frequently absenting himself during coffee and lunch breaks, rather than joining them where they sat together. Some of the other crew members spoke of him as being bossy. He was born in India, and had been in Canada for several years. He was a long-term but irregular employee of GCC, since he also had a farm in the Kootenays, where he often went for months at a time. His father had been a wheelwright in India; woodworking was in his family background. His only formal training in carpentry was a course in site management he had taken in England, prior to his arrival in Canada although he had never worked on the management side of things. He wore a turban, which provided a handy place to tuck his carpenter’s pencil.
The next to arrive were Duncan and Paul, who both began to work at the site on November 1, 1992. Duncan was born in Canada, about 30, and had been working for GCC for over eight years. He began with the company as an apprentice, went through formal apprenticeship training as a GCC employee, and became one of the senior carpenters. He usually worked as a site foreman running jobs on his own, but because of the complexity of this particular job, was there to lend his expertise and serve as a sort of sub-foreman, overseeing the actual building while Charlie was occupied with administrative tasks in the site office. Duncan also took over Charlie's responsibilities on the few occasions when Charlie was sick, on holidays, or otherwise away from the site. Duncan had the reputation with the crew as being the best carpenter and the most meticulous, and he was the one others turned to when they had a problem they needed help to figure out. Duncan and Charlie were adept at puns, and when they talked together in the site office, there was a lot of humour and quick word play.

Paul, like Manuel, was a carpenter's helper and a new employee of GCC. At 21, he was the youngest member of the crew, but--despite his youth and junior position--was far from the least experienced. His father was a carpenter, of Croatian background, and Paul had worked with his father since his early teens on several house building projects. He still lived at home, and in lieu of paying rent, continued to work with his father on flex days and the occasional weekend. Paul had completed one year of a carpentry apprenticeship program and was signed on with GCC as an indentured apprentice; it was through another GCC employee also involved in the apprenticeship program that Paul had obtained the job with GCC. He was due to attend a 6-week session of
trade school classes at the local vocational college in the fall of 1993 when the building project came to an end.

Puran, Ranjit's nephew, arrived at the site in November, shortly after the arrival of Paul and Duncan. He was in his mid-30s, married, and had two children. Like Pierre, he was used to working in a union environment, and was more familiar with a production-oriented way of working than at custom building sites, where speed was less of a factor than quality. He liked doing framing best, where things went quickly. He told me he became frustrated with what he considered the finicky detailed work of finishing carpentry. Like Ranjit, he was a long term but irregular GCC employee, and had been away in India the year before. In addition to working in carpentry, he was a partner in another business venture on the side.

Although these seven men--Charlie, Pierre, Manuel, Ranjit, Duncan, Paul, and Puran--were at the site most often during the building project, they were not all there from beginning to end. At George's request, they were sometimes sent to work at other GCC sites. And there were numerous other GCC employees who came to work at the site on and off from time to time. In addition, a number of labourers were sometimes hired on a temporary basis to carry out such hardy tasks as digging trenches, doing clean-up, and (during one particularly cold snap over the winter) breaking up and removing frozen, ice-encrusted snow. The labourers came and went so irregularly that I hardly had a chance to talk with them much, although I learned that a number of them played in a local band, and did labouring whenever they had to, for the money.
Although the GCC carpenters and helpers did most of the carpentry work at the site, the building process involves the interaction between carpenters and many other tradespeople, or "subtrades." In addition to the GCC crew, there were several other tradespeople who came and went from the site during the various stages of the construction. They included: excavators, pile drivers, truck drivers, concrete pourers, junk removers, insulators, electricians, drywallers, tile setters, painters, cabinetmakers, plumbers, the sprinkler system installer, the alarm system installer, carpet layers, stone masons, landscapers, glaziers, and roofers. There were also regular visits to the site by clients, architects, engineers, building inspectors, and many others whose role was never clear to me. Some of the subtrades were at the site so often that they seemed to be as much a part of the crew as the GCC employees. In particular, I became familiar with Ted the plumber, Chuck the painter, Dave the electrician, and Jim the drywaller. But there were many others who were there only briefly, whom I never met or only spoke with briefly.

**The work**: Physical work at the site, when it began in September 1992, first involved the demolition and removal of a house that already existed on the building lot. This process lasted into the early weeks of October 1992, and little of it was done by GCC crew. The first job that GCC carpenters were involved in was surveying the site and establishing "batter boards" and "string lines" by which the grid lines of the site were marked out. Charlie and Pierre were primarily involved in this stage of the work.

The second stage of the work involved site excavation in preparation for building the house
foundations. Due to the soil quality and configuration of the site, this turned out to be a significantly more elaborate and time-consuming part of the process than had been anticipated. The excavation walls were very steep; this required the installation of steel piles and wooden lagging with supporting braces to prevent the excavation walls from slumping or collapsing into the excavation. This process took up much of the month of November, and the work was primarily carried out by Pierre, Ranjit, Manuel and Charlie.

Once the excavation walls were secure the crew began working on building formwork for the concrete foundations. This involved three stages: first, footings, then foundation walls, then a structural slab which capped off the foundation walls and provided a concrete deck for the main floor. Each stage involved the same basic steps: the construction of wooden forms into which (or onto which, in the case of the foundation and main floor) concrete would be poured, the installation of reinforcing steel, and pouring the concrete. Then, after the concrete had been given a period of time to set and partially cure, the wooden forms were removed, exposing the concrete. This work was carried out during the winter months. In addition to the regular crew members--Charlie, Pierre, Ranjit, Puran, Paul, and Duncan--extra crew members were temporarily hired to get the work done as close to schedule as possible.

By February 1993, the crew had completed all of the work on the foundations and deck, and began to work on framing the house. Work appeared to go quickly, because by then it was "out of the hole" and the wooden structures were permanent rather than temporary. The house began
to acquire form and solidity, as the structure and configuration of beams and studs took shape. The final stage of framing involved building the rafters and roofing. The roof structure of the house was very complicated, with a lot of intersecting roof planes, which challenged the crew in figuring out the correct geometry and techniques for fitting things all together.

The final stages of carpentry work included finishing the exterior and interior wall surfaces, as well as doing more formwork for the exterior decks, patios, and walls that were also included in the house plans. This work was the most painstaking and meticulous, involving a lot of attention to fine details and finishing touches. At this time the involvement of numerous subtrades in the work at the site was most intense. There were also many more visits to the site by the architects and clients in order to make minor revisions to the design or to finalize design decisions which had not yet been made.

All in all, the project took over one year to complete, and owing largely to the unexpected complications involved in the excavation process, went considerably over the originally estimated budget. But in the end the clients were pleased with the results and with GCC's work in building it. During the course of construction, the site was seldom the same from one of my visits to the other. It was, at various times, a demolition site, a big hole, a construction site, and a house. Until the slab was poured, four chilly months into the project, the only "interior" spaces on the site were the site office, which was an uninsulated converted garden shed on the corner of the lot, and the "Porta-let" toilet (where nobody, even during the worst weather, was tempted to spend much
time). As the elements of the house gradually came together, there was an increased tendency on the part of all members of the crew to stand back from their work on occasion, and admire or review various aspects of the structure that was coming into being as a result of their efforts.

It would be foolhardy to pretend that this brief précis of the stages of work involved in the construction of a single house gives any kind of substantive picture of what the work of house building is like, or the level and variety of skills entailed. To do so would take a whole different analysis, with a wholly different research focus. To speak about it briefly and impressionistically though, the thing about the work that impressed me the most was the intricate complexity and need for coordination, foresight, and the ability to think on one's feet, often in a noisy and otherwise disruptive environment, and come up with effective, practical solutions to a regular parade of puzzles and problems. The crew and other tradespeople were collectively and individually faced, on an ongoing basis, with new problems and the pressing need to deal with them right away in order to get on to the next part of the process--and on to the new challenges that the next stage of work might bring. In studying the work of the tradespeople at the site I learned a thing or two about home building--not enough to build a house, but more than enough to convince me not to try to do it myself, but to hire competent professionals to do it for me.
CHAPTER THREE: ETHNOGRAPHY METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the elements of the ethnographic research process involved in carrying out this study. It is not an abstract description of what ethnography is supposed to be, but rather a grounded description of what it was like for me—struggles, anxieties and all—as I translated ethnographic principles into actual practice.

Doing ethnography involves two significant kinds of activity: fieldwork and analysis. In my experience, in some ways these were quite different kinds of work. Fieldwork was outgoing. It involved action and interaction, finding a site, making contact, going into the field, talking to people, establishing rapport, observing, listening, and being an engaged participant in cultural life. Analysis, on the other hand, was much more inward. It involved reflection, reading, writing and contemplation, to figure out, in my own mind, what was going on in the culture I was studying and what I wanted to say about it. But in some ways, too, despite their different orientations, these two activities were not that discrete or easy to separate. In fact, they were often quite blurred together—in keeping with the general blurriness which seems to characterize the ethnographic process (Lareau, 1990; Tom et al. 1994). Thus, although I discuss these two activities separately in this appendix, that is not the whole story. Fieldwork and analysis were not discrete “chunks” of the research process, but happened separately and together, with each activity informing the other.
I have organized this discussion into three chronological stages: getting ready, in the field, and analysis. The “getting ready” stage involved figuring out what I wanted to study, and doing a good deal of initial planning and thinking to set up the research project. The “in the field” stage began on the first day I showed up at the selected study site with notebook in hand, and continued until I went to the site with my notebook for the last time. The “analysis” stage involved listening for the story that spoke from my field experience, and finding a way to tell it. Again, the movement from one stage to the next was not as definite as it sounds. These divisions are much more apparent retrospectively than they were at the time.

Getting ready

The ethnographic research process allows considerable room for designing a research project that is open-ended and accommodates curiosity, surprise, and learning from the field. However, the aim is not to start with an empty slate. A good deal of getting ready is called for first. The main intent of the getting ready stage of the research process was to define a general research focus, but to leave room for the focus to be tightened as the project progressed.

I knew from the outset that I was interested in studying what education “looked like” in a workplace setting where education did not overtly matter very much. I also knew I was interested in “the meaning of work” and how education shaped the way different kinds of work were valued. But how, and in what setting? I had to sharpen the focus, and one way to start was to pick a “field” to focus on. Although I considered many occupational settings—factories, farms,
offices, hairdressing salons—I settled on custom home building because it was one of the places where my interest had started in the first place. Then it was a matter of starting to pay attention to the building trades in a heightened and more conscious way. Although I was not yet “in the field” in a formal way, I began looking at jobsites, talking to tradespeople, and observing and thinking about constructions sites as a particular cultural space in the world. I scanned books and periodicals about building techniques, house design, and (although there were few of these) life in the trades. This stage of the work was a lot of fun; it opened up a whole world of activities, ideas, and concerns that I had not paid much attention to previously.

Getting ready also involved more structured procedures than just altering my habitual gaze. The two main projects undertaken during this stage of the research were a mini-ethnography of a building jobsite—a kind of pilot study—and the preparation of my research proposal. The mini-ethnography was prepared in the context of a graduate course in ethnographic methods. It provided a good introduction to the kind of research setting I wanted to study, and to the ethnographic process. The research proposal was prepared in the context of a graduate seminar in doctoral studies. Writing the proposal provided the opportunity to begin defining my research focus, but it also left room to tighten the focus once I was in the field.

Once the mini-ethnography and proposal were completed, the next major task in getting ready was to locate and gain access to a suitable research site. In my proposal I specified that I was looking for a “high end” home building site, much like the one where I had done the mini-
ethnography. I contacted a number of general contractors I knew or had been referred to, in
order to broach the subject with them. I talked to four or five people, and went to three or four
jobsites to check things out, but for a variety of reasons these possibilities did not pan out.
Finally, on a referral from two other contractors, I contacted George Campbell of G. Campbell
Construction (GCC), who had a suitable building project coming up, and had "no difficulty" with
my research plans. He suggested (rightly) that approval be obtained from the clients before
proceeding further. One month later, in October, 1992, the clients provided their consent. I went
to the jobsite to begin doing fieldwork the very same day.

The process of finding a site was not complicated, but I found it quite stressful. I was afraid of
approaching people to propose that I "study" them. I often felt like a travelling salesperson
dealing in unproven goods, approaching strangers to ask them to do something that served me,
more evidently than it served them. It may have been just shyness, or concern about being a
woman venturing into male space. However, with hindsight, I now suspect that there were also
other things going on. Because my topic was not easy to define, and because it was so foreign to
trades culture—not only foreign but suspect because of its elite, academic orientation—I had a hard
time explaining it clearly, or remaining convinced of its legitimacy and importance. I was aware,
without being entirely conscious of it, that my project didn't seem relevant in the context of trades
culture. I did not have easy words to explain and justify why I thought what I was doing was
important. Although nobody I spoke with in the trades openly challenged my project, I often felt
insecure and defensive talking about it. These feelings were not only present in the early stages of
the project when I was first establishing contact with the field, but continued throughout the whole process. Ultimately these feelings became a source of data, which I discuss in particular in chapter five, but at the time they were just worries, and the cause of many anxious moments.

In the field
My first day officially “in the field” was the first day I showed up at the jobsite with my notebook in hand, with formal permission to be there. I had actually dropped by the site a few times already, to meet Charlie, the site foreman, and get his approval for the project in the event that the clients gave theirs. So the first official day was a bit of an anti-climax. Not much was going on that day, and I did not stay long. I wrote in my fieldnote journal that “now that it’s okay for me to be here, I don’t quite know what to do with myself. Here I am in the field, and I’m already wondering what the hell I’m doing here” (921006j/5).

My time in the field involved carrying out a number of research activities. The central activity was observation, which is a formal way of saying that I went to the site and spent time there, watching, listening, and sometimes working when there was something easy for me to do. Alongside my observations I kept a documentary record of my field experience in written fieldnotes and photographs. I also conducted a number of interviews away from the site, and kept a record of documents used in the construction process, as a way to get an added perspective on the cultural life of the site. I will now give a more detailed portrait of what was involved in each of these activities.
a) Observation

Between October 1992 when fieldwork officially started and October 1993 when it came to an official close, I went to the jobsite a total of 120 times, for periods that ranged from 15 minutes to five hours. I diversified my visits to cover morning, mid-day, and afternoon periods. I was usually at the jobsite for one or two of the regular break times, either morning or afternoon coffee, or lunchtime, because these were the easiest times to engage in talk without interrupting the work. One of the conditions of consent arranged with George Campbell at the outset was that I would occasionally help with labouring tasks to "offset any of the negative impact of my presence." However, the manner of my helping had no clear parameters, and took place on an *ad hoc* basis. Occasionally I was asked to pass a tool, or hold the so-called "dumb" end of a tape measure or the end of a board. I helped with various cleaning tasks whenever I was asked or when I sometimes offered, but was never knowledgeable enough to be able to confidently "read" what would be the most helpful kind of help to offer. Indeed, I was struck, in this process, by the level of knowledge and experience required to perform the most basic of "unskilled" tasks.

My main role at the site was as a "kibitzer"--I established a regular routine of wandering around and visiting crew members during the course of the day, observing, talking, or helping each person as circumstances allowed. Although the main focus of my attention was on the carpenters in the GCC crew, with the many comings and goings from the site, I talked with or observed the work of other tradespeople and visitors to the site--of whom there were many--as the opportunity arose. I established a regular routine, too, of moving back and forth between the house and the
site office, which was a converted garden shed at the edge of the property. My visits to the office allowed me a chance to sit down (and, depending on the weather, get dry or warm) and jot some notes in my field notebook. It also gave me the opportunity to find out what Charlie's work involved, and to talk with him about the progress of the work, since he was in the position to know the most, and was the most forthcoming in discussing the work with me.

I sat with the crew when they had their breaks, and took along my own thermos and lunch bag. I generally kept quiet when the crew was quiet, or took part in whatever conversations came up. I had the intention, early on, of using this time as an opportunity for "group interviews," to engage the crew in discussions of topics relevant to my research. But in actuality, I found that such interviews would have been so out of character with natural jobsite discourse that it made better sense to listen than try to lead the conversation, and to slip in a few questions if they fit with the topic at hand. In the effort to diversify my observation routine, I also had intended to "shadow" each crew member, paying attention to the work of one individual on a given day, rather than moving from person to person, as described above. Again, this turned out to be at odds with the general flow of site interaction, and was discontinued after a few experimental attempts.

During the course of fieldwork, I kept anticipating a time when I would hit my stride and feel effective and at ease with my fieldworker role. I was always looking forward to the next stage of building (when the framing was in place, when the walls were up, when the finishing work was being done) as the time when things would fall into place. Right up to the last day, they never
did. I learned, with Lareau (1990), that doing ethnographic fieldwork "means learning to live with uncertainty, ambiguity, and confusion" (p. 188), and that rather than signifying incompetence and disaster these are part of the process, part of what it means to be an insider and outsider at the same time.

b) Keeping records: fieldnotes and photos

I kept regular written fieldnotes throughout my time in the field, chronicling the events, conversations (and often, anxieties) of each site visit. My system was to write rough notes, or "scratch notes," (Sanjek, 1990b) in a notebook, then type these up on the computer at home afterwards, filling in additional remembered detail. On occasion I carried my notebook with me out into the site itself, and sketched notes while sitting on a pile of lumber, the house floor (when there was a floor), or the picnic table (when the table was brought out, in the summer months). But these occasions were experiments, or exercises in varying my routine, rather than regular practices. I always felt uncomfortable when I had my notebook out in the site, because my activities of writing things down seemed so out-of-place. As I comment in the sections on textual authority in chapters four and five, textual practices were often associated with domination and authority. I felt that my notebook made me seem more of a spy than a collegial kibitzer. To the carpenters at the jobsite my notebook did not represent scholarship, it represented surveillance, and I think it reinforced the uneasiness they sometimes felt that I wasn't just interested in what they were doing, I was interested in what they were doing wrong.
In addition to site-based fieldnotes, throughout the course of fieldwork I also kept other written records: a log recording the time, duration and significant events of each site visit; a research journal where I wrote more interpretively and personally about field events than I did in the actual fieldnotes; and reading notes from my forays into the literature. All of these written records were included in the total corpus of "fieldnotes" used in the data analysis.

I also took a small camera with me on most site visits, and compiled a photographic record of the progress of work from the beginning to the end of the job. My intention—rather naively, as I see now—had been to attempt a form of "photo elicitation" (Harper, 1987; Harper, 1994), using the photos as an aid in interviewing, "giving the interview a concrete point of reference" (Harper, 1987, p. 12). But I was not sufficiently serious, skilled, or aggressive as a photographer for this method to be more than a sideline activity. However, I felt that the taking of photos was more easily accepted and "legitimate" as a documentary technique than my notetaking. Some crew members posed and clowned for the camera, or told me to put it away on days when they hadn't shaved. As the photos were developed, I occasionally took them to show at break time. These became important occasions for building rapport and talking about the progress of the job.⁸

c) Interviews

In addition to field observations I also carried out a number of interviews. Because the jobsite

⁸These photographs also had an unexpected benefit in the building process. They were to provide crucial information, of key assistance to GCC, in the building permit process.
was always busy, noisy, and public, I preferred to do the interviews in places away from the site, in homes, restaurants, or bars. Sometimes, these places were not much quieter, but at least they were less public and did not cause an interruption to the flow of work. The character of the interviews was open-ended and conversational, but they were more formal than the ordinary spontaneous conversations that usually developed during my site observations. From the start, they were social events marked as "interviews," accompanied by consent forms and a small tape recorder. The results were often somewhat stilted, even though the intention was just to have a casual conversation away from the distractions of the site. This was another time when I felt very conscious of not really knowing what questions to ask or what to talk about. In order to make my questions relevant, I wanted to put them in jobsite terms, where even a concept like "culture" was alien, mystifying, and potentially off-putting. It was hard to know how to approach the nebulous aspects of culture that I wanted to explore--that I could barely name myself--in concrete terms. I was aware that academic jargon would be met with raised eyebrows, that some of the tradespeople were not big talkers anyway, and that they worked long days, with long commutes, other commitments, and sometimes other jobs to go to. Also, although I did not really know it at the time, I was more interested in what people unreflectedly did and said at work, than in what they said in an interview with me. In short, the interviews were a struggle. Although I'm glad I did them, as opportunities to meet and talk with people in different settings, they ended up being a minor part of the research data which I have drawn on much less than the data I gathered during field observations.
Most of the interviews I did were with the GCC carpenters and helpers who worked at the research site. However, I conducted a number of additional interviews with other carpenters and tradespeople not immediately connected with the site. Some of those I interviewed were two past employees of GCC, carpenters from other custom home building sites and other sectors of the building industry, a Carpenters' Union official, a Provincial Apprenticeship Board representative, a retired carpentry instructor, and a representative of the British Columbia Home Builders' Association. The reason for these interviews was to flesh out my perspective by widening my horizons beyond a single site.

Also, as I pointed out in the main body of the text, I have also included conversations from my field experience more widely conceived—not just from my time "in the field" at the jobsite—as a part of the data. These were with both tradespeople and non-tradespeople. They were not interviews per se; rather they were conversations and encounters which sometimes made it into my fieldnotes and journals and sometimes did not, but nonetheless were significant in shaping my interpretations.

d) Documents

The collection of documents is an important but sometimes neglected part of ethnographic data collection (Silverman, 1993). When I began this project, I was not very clear about what kinds of "documents" might be involved in a building project. I thought of documents as things you might find in filing cabinets and libraries, but not at construction jobsites. But to be thorough, I included
documents as a data category, with the idea that I would see what I could see, and collect what
documents I could collect. As it turned out, the jobsite was riddled with documents, of both a
conventional and unconventional nature, from plans, designs, and “to do” lists, to sketches drawn
in the dirt with the tip of a stick. None of them were easily collectible, but the process of looking
for documents had a significant impact on the shape of my analysis and interpretation. For one
thing, looking for documents, and seeing all the things that could be included under that category,
caused me to question some of my assumptions about what constituted a document, and to think
more deeply about the role of documents in modern culture. For another thing, looking for
documents brought me to the perspective on “textual authority” as a key marker of prevailing
status relations, which I discuss in the interpretive chapters.

One reason I chose to spend a full year doing fieldwork was to have time to concurrently work on
analysis—to go to the site Monday and Tuesday, for instance, then work on analysis on
Wednesday and Thursday. However, I found that fieldwork and analysis required such different
kinds of attention that I could not switch hats as easily as I had expected. Fieldwork required
engagement—a kind of immersion in culture, language, and everyday events. I was busy getting
to know people’s names and personalities, and trying to figure out what on earth they were doing.
The details involved in a construction project are immense, and every day at the site entailed lots
to watch, lots to learn, and lots to write about when I got home. It entailed lots of inner
confusion, too. I worried about getting in the way, and I worried—since there is no blueprint for
ethnographic fieldwork—about whether I was doing it right. My fieldnotes are full of descriptions
of the everyday progress of the job, of casual conversations, and of my ongoing struggle with the ups and downs of being an ethnographic fieldworker. With all this going on, there was quite simply no mental or emotional room left to engage in analysis in a big way. Wednesdays and Thursdays were given over to writing fieldnotes rather than reading them. There was, of course, a degree of analysis in this. I made extra notes about possible emerging themes, hunches, and points of interest that seemed significant even though I was not sure why. But I was too immersed in the “everydayness” of fieldwork to be able to shift my mode of attention to the level of disengagement that analysis seemed to require. To be able to do this I needed to step back from the field and regard it from a distance; to do that, I needed to wait until fieldwork was over.

The end of fieldwork did not come abruptly. During the last stages of building, the work dwindled to minor—but seemingly endless—details. There was still plenty for Charlie to do, but crew members went to other sites, and at one point, the clients moved in. I went to the site less and less, and one day in October, 1993, when Charlie, Duncan, and a mason I had not met before were the only ones at the site, I decided that it was time to close my notebook, and move on. Although I still went to the site a few times after that, and these final visits were part of my field experience broadly defined, they were not “fieldwork” in the same intense manner that my previous year’s worth of visits had been.

**Analysis**

In the same way that fieldwork did not end with a bang, analysis did not start with one. The first
thing it required was a brief hiatus—a time away from the jobsite and away from my fieldnotes, so that I could start analysis refreshed, and with new eyes. This time away from the project allowed something important to happen (although it, too, did not happen all at once): It allowed me to realize that the basis of my analysis was not really the field, but my corpus of fieldnotes. It allowed me to make the transition from sociable engagement in the field to an analytic distance from it—to shift allegiances, as it were, from the jobsite back to the university.

This transition was both a relief and a trial. The relief was that the social side of the work was over, and I could engage more fully in quiet reflection and writing; I could leave the strains of self-presentation behind, gather my books and notes, and close the office door. It was a kind of coming home. The trial was that this transition, this return, although welcome, was much harder than I had expected. Home turned out to have its discomforts too. They say that the most profound culture shock for travellers is the one experienced not in entering the new culture, but re-entering the old. Perhaps it was a bit like that. Or perhaps it was a bit like “going native,” even though the cultural distance I had travelled was not around the world, but barely around the block. In any event, I had gotten close to those I studied; closer than I had thought. The distancing required for analysis felt like a betrayal. I struggled with it throughout the analytic process, and I still do.

Those were struggles of feeling. There were also struggles of process and technique. In the field, I had been like a photographer at a big event--participant and observer at the same time. Now the
event was over, and everybody had gone their separate ways. Only the images remained. My job was to cull them, picking out the best shots. They would not show everything, but would show what I thought was most important about what I had seen. But what was important? To continue the analogy, those photographs could be culled in a hundred different ways, depending on whether I was looking for the best shots of scenery, of faces, or of some indefinable subjective theme. The most important part of analysis, then, was determining, out of all of the possible stories in my fieldnotes, which one I wanted to tell most, and how to tell it best. There were two distinct (but—of course—interwoven) stages in doing analysis. The first was coding (the “culling” part), and the second was writing (arranging the “shots” in an effective display).

a) Coding

The first step in coding was to read the entire corpus of fieldnotes, journals, interview transcripts, reading notes and other jottings I had compiled up to that point. This was a daunting task, first because there were hundreds of pages, and second because it brought me face to face with strong feelings, both positive and negative, about my worth as a researcher, and an awareness of my own shortcomings. As Jackson (1990) has pointed out, in an analysis of the relationship between fieldnotes and the ethnographer’s professional identity, the topic of fieldnotes often has a strong emotional resonance, bringing up feelings of deep attachment, as towards a “first child” (p. 27), along with feelings of guilt, failure, and inadequacy: “They were crappy” (p. 27). My fieldnotes were full, to be sure, of interesting and insightful anecdotes, some very good descriptions, and a rich, detailed record of the research journey. It was enlightening to revisit some of the early days
in the field I had forgotten, and to examine the changes that had occurred in my perceptions of the site and participants over time. But on occasion, my fieldnotes were also long-winded and self-absorbed. I could see places—glaring out from the page, although I had been oblivious at the time—where I had missed opportunities, gone on tangents, or glossed over things I now wished I had asked or written about in much more descriptive detail. I had got the idea from somewhere that fieldnotes ought to be profound, but mine were ordinary, flawed, and in many places not very interesting. Although they were special, unique, and full of valuable data, they also “lack[ed] magic” (Jackson, 1990, p. 27). However, there was nothing for it but to read them and read them again, and to accept the cringing and wincing as an inevitable part of the process, and an important part of the story of my fieldwork.

The point of all this reading and rereading was to probe and interrogate my fieldnotes for meaningful data—in other words, to identify significant patterns and themes and organize them into coding categories. Although the process was straightforward enough, this was hard conceptual work. My coding categories did not emerge very easily. I was working from my fieldnotes inductively, without any clear pre-identified criteria for what counted as significant, or how significance ought to be flagged. I could recognize data that I thought was important, but I did not know what to name it. For instance, I knew from the beginning that I was interested in the kinds of tales tradespeople told about architects. But I could not easily name what was most interesting about them. Because they were tales? Because they were critical tales? Because their criticism often contained a theme of knowing better? Because knowing better was based on
a certain set of values? All of these things mattered, but it was not possible at the time to say what mattered most, or to turn this vague sense—"mattering"—into a discrete, named category.

Although there are a number of different software programs designed to make ethnographic coding faster and easier, in my experience they required a level of certainty about coding categories which I did not yet have. My approach was to continue to work as inductively as I could with a random selection of about half of my fieldnotes. I first identified—without naming—segments of my fieldnotes which "felt" like significant data. These segments were cut and pasted onto 3x5 cards (another long, tedious process) which in turn were sorted into piles that "felt similar" but still remained nameless. I did not just sort the 3x5 cards once but over and over again, with slightly different groupings resulting from each sorting instance. Gradually a set of data categories began to emerge, as I began to make decisions about what piles to keep, what piles to throw away, and what piles were consistently baffling ("where do these ones go?").

Within the "piles to keep" there were five major themes in particular that commanded my attention. At the time, I named them "identity," "money," "practical work," "writing" and "education." Each of these five themes were further broken down into a number of subcategories. Once these categories were established and named (however temporarily) I could then go back to the rest of my fieldnotes and code them quickly using a computer software program (TextBase Alpha™). With my corpus of fieldnotes thoroughly coded for these four themes, I felt I had enough data to start to write my first draft, and even to think that, with just the writing left to go, I was almost finished.
b) Writing

Needless to say, this was not the case. Writing in fact turned out to be difficult and prolonged. Wolcott (1990) suggests that “if you have engaged in substantial fieldwork, be prepared to spend from several months to a year completing your writing...allow as much time for writing as time spent in the field” (1990, p. 37). I was not as prepared as I could have been; indeed, Wolcott’s estimate proved to be only a modest assessment of the time and energy involved. It was not until I began writing drafts that I really began to grapple with what I wanted to say and what my interpretation was really all about. It was not until I showed my drafts to others and received their critical feedback, that I realized that my thoughts were still scattered, vague, and drifting in many directions. My coding categories were categories right enough, but what was meaningful about them, and the story they told about education still evaded capture. It took another several drafts, and several renamings, resortings, and realignments of my coding categories to work my way ever closer to a more succinct and focused story to tell. “Status” did not appear until very late in the process, as the most appropriate concept to describe the underlying theme that drew my categories together. Probably with more time, more drafts, and more distance this might change again, and become even more focused still. Analysis, as I have come to realize, is never finished, and no draft is ever the “last word.” Wolcott (1990) points out that the lapsed time between concluding his first version of a research project and finding “an adequate way to

9 Especially when, as in this study, the research participants have not been closely involved in the analysis and writing process. The last word written in this document is inevitably mine. However, that is far from the last word on the subject; indeed, I think of it more as the starting point of ongoing conversations with others, including those more acquainted with the trades than I am, who may want to argue with everything I have had to say.
conceptualize and in that sense conclude the study” (p. 56) spanned a quarter of a century. Or, as Van Maanen (1988) states regarding impressionist tales, of which this study is a variant, “the magic of telling impressionist tales is that they are always unfinished. With each retelling we discover more of what we know” (p. 120). Indeed, as Geertz would have it (1973), this fumbling process of negotiating endings (and the inevitable new beginnings) is not just a feature of a certain variant of ethnographic tales, or of one ethnographer’s decades-long struggle for conceptual clarity, but is at the bottom of the whole interpretive paradigm:

Studies do build on other studies, not in the sense that they take up where the others leave off, but in the sense that, better informed and better conceptualized, they plunge more deeply into the same things. Every serious cultural analysis starts from a sheer beginning and ends where it manages to get before exhausting its intellectual impulse (Geertz, 1973, p. 25).

Summary

This research project has had its share of mistakes and successes. If I were to do it again, I would do some things the same and some things differently. With regard to what I would do the same, I am glad I did not strain to impose my research agenda or preconceived notions about what I was looking for, and took the time and had the patience to pay attention as best I could to things in the field as they were (accepting the inevitable distortions of my own presence) rather than trying to force them into a more formal, structured mold. With regard to what I would do differently, I would be more assertive with the camera, and pay more attention to the kind of documentary process—visual, literary or otherwise—most in tune with the culture of the site.
I have gained an appreciation for the difficulties inherent in ethnographic research. This kind of research might *look* soft, but it is very hard. It has been time-consuming (I note with wry bemusement that the writing of this text took more than twice as long as the construction of the house), tedious, and did not permit the guise of certainty and hard objective edges that other kinds of research might. Part of the reward—and part of the struggle—of this research has been to undertake the challenge of looking at the world—and myself—with open eyes. It was a journey into the everyday—especially into the unknown within the everyday. It was a journey that did not always follow a clear path, but it moved, in its best moments, towards greater self-knowledge, the critique of received assumptions, and a deeper knowledge of the complexities of the social world pertaining to education and work, and hence was well worth taking.
PART II — INTERPRETATION

I have characterized my interpretation of status and education in the trades as a "story." As a reminder of what I have already laid out in chapter one, the main theme of the story is that trades culture is infused with status, and that education is an element of how status is experienced in everyday working life. Status matters in the trades, and matters to how education is understood there. Even the way education is perceived to be lacking in trades culture says something about education and status, both in the trades and beyond. But how did the tradespeople in my field study live these statused understandings about the trades? How did education fit in? My aim in this part of the study is to explore how status was inscribed within the ordinary events of everyday working life in the trades. In the following chapters, I will show what I learned about status and the relationship between status and education in trades culture, and relate the evidence and experience upon which my learning was based.

As I have stated previously, ethnographic analysis is an open-ended process, and finding the question is often as much a part of the analytic process as finding the answer. When I began this project, I was not looking for status. It took a long time to see that status was indeed at the heart of what I heard, saw, and was interested in. While I was in the field, I paid attention to as much as I could, without a clear, preconceived idea of what I was looking for. In my fieldnotes and journals, I described what I could remember about what I had noticed during the day. I wrote about the work people did from day to day, how the building project progressed, how different
people worked together, what they talked about at coffee, what the weather was like, my feelings and anxieties about my own project, and so forth. As described in the methodology chapter, following fieldwork, during the analysis stage of the research process, I re-read (many times) everything I had written, examining the details from a more disengaged perspective. It was only very late in this process that I came to "status" as the name for what, in all these details, the data were telling me. Status, and the relationship between status and education, emerged from reading, as it were, between the lines. It emerged from paying attention to little things—from seeing patterns not just in what people said or did, but what they did not say or do, from reflecting not just on my experience at the site, but also on my experience in talking to non-tradespeople about my research project, and on my own anxieties in trying to focus the research question and figure out what I was up to. As a result, the story I tell in these chapters is highly interpretive, involving a good deal of narrative control. It is—as cultural analysis is inclined to be—a story of the obvious, but as such, it does not tell itself, and requires a narrative hand to examine the obvious, and see what it tells us.

This part of the dissertation contains two chapters—four and five. Chapter four explores the theme of status in trades culture. Chapter five turns to the theme of education, and examines where education fits within the portrait of status presented in chapter four. There have been several earlier versions of these chapters, as I have tightened and defined the focus of my
Consequently, different sections of these chapters, have been written at different times, and reflect different conceptions of the field and focus of study. For instance, there are differences between chapter four and chapter five in how broadly I conceived of “the field” at the time of writing. My observations in chapter four are focused primarily on events and experiences based at the study site. In chapter five, my observations are more inclined to draw on the totality of my field experience, broadly defined.

How I moved from version to version is a whole other story, and one that I would like to tell in more detail than the constraints of this study allow. Sanjek (1990a) claims that one canon of validity in ethnographic research is to “document the process.” I concur that it is an important way to make the research process less mysterious and hence more trustworthy. However, my main task in this part of the study is to show where I arrived, without being distracted by the winding route I followed to get there. A version of the analytic journey is included in chapter three, but it too is necessarily abbreviated and concise.
CHAPTER FOUR: STATUS

Introduction

This chapter is about what status “looked like” in trades culture. In trades culture, status—a term I use, framed by the philosophical stance of Michael Walzer (1983, 1988), to subsume other related notions such as power, class, authority, domination and subordination—was something which tradespeople did not have, relative to other occupational and social “elites,” as particularly exemplified by clients and architects, who did. Tradespeople and clients/architects belonged to differently ranked occupational groups, where clients and architects set the agenda, and tradespeople followed it, with little formal input. Status differences were expressed in several ways, first in the tradespeople’s public deference towards clients and architects, second in the “backstage tales” which tradespeople told privately, and third, in the way that “textual authority,” in other words, the symbolic meanings associated with everyday textual practices, reinforced the superior social position of clients and architects, and the subordinate social position of tradespeople. These features of trades culture revealed, among other things, that status was marked by wealth (for clients) and mental work (for architects), and that the textual work of elites carried more authority than the manual work of tradespeople; that tradespeople were both accepting and critical of prevailing status relations; and third, that tradespeople’s criticisms often pricked the balloon of unreflected assumptions within one aspect of the prevailing mythic narrative of the wider culture.
Beginning with a statement of what I mean by status, in this chapter I explore each of the above aspects of status in the trades in some detail. These detailed features of everyday life are not just worthy of note in themselves, but also say a lot about understandings about education in the trades, which I address in the next chapter.

What is status?

At the beginning of this document I included a frontispiece with two quotes. The second, taken from the trades journal *Fine Homebuilding*, went like this: “I just minded being made to feel less human because I was the guy with the shovel and not the cellular phone” (Petrie, 1996, p. 84). That quote is at the bottom of what I mean by status in these pages. By status, I mean the “multitude of differences of rank so subtle and yet so penetrating” (Dahrendorf, 1969, p. 16) one can barely see them, and barely see past them. It is the subjectivity and the subtleness of these differences which are of most interpretive significance—the way they show up in feelings of being “less human” or “more human” in different circumstances, and the way such feelings are communicated by the furnishings of everyday cultural life, i.e, the shovel and the cellular phone.

Status is a part of culture, and cultural meanings are embedded and infused within ordinary norms and values, the routine things we do and assume, and the way we feel about ourselves and others.

Although just about any aspect of human life--gender, sexual orientation, age, property, race, physique--can carry status messages about who is more or less human, the one that is the focus of this interpretation is, of course, work. Different levels of status are attached to different ways of
making a living. Trades work takes its place on a deeply entrenched occupational hierarchy—a place which, as the fellow above with the shovel indicates, invokes feelings of inadequacy and lesser social worth. But how does this happen? Or, I mean, how do we live these statused understandings of what the trades are, and what they count for? How is status experienced by those who happen to make their living working in the trades? The aim of this chapter is to explore these questions.

Status in trades culture

My evidence for the importance of status in trades culture was not located in any one of the details from my field experience that I discuss below, all by itself. Rather, status was manifested in all of these things combined; none of them stand alone. The points I raise are cumulative, each adding upon the next.

a) Different groups: Tradespeople and clients/architects

The building site where I carried out my study was not a quiet place. The work of building a single house involved the coordinated efforts of many different people engaged in many different kinds of activities. Trucks and cars, faxes and phone calls were constantly coming and going, to and from the site. Although it was often difficult to tell, just by looking, exactly what each person was doing there, after awhile I started to notice some recurring tendencies. For instance, some people brought things and some people took things. Some people carried tools, and some people carried briefcases. Some people sat in the site office at coffee, and some people did not. These
tendencies formed a general pattern where, in amongst all the routine arrivals, departures, and interactions, people fell into two broadly different groups. There was a large assortment of tradespeople belonging to one group, and a smaller assortment of clients, architects and other non-trades professionals belonging to another. Not that you could draw bold, impermeable lines around these two groups; the differences were minor and sometimes obscure. Tradespeople and clients/architects were not strangers to each other, but they moved in separate circles, with distinct routines and preoccupations.

The commonalities within the tradespeople group was a matter of general likeness rather than collective solidarity, and in fact involved a good deal of heterogeneity. Many kinds of tradespeople came and went from the site. The GCC carpentry crew--Charlie, Pierre, Puran, Ranjit, Duncan, Manuel, and Paul--were the faces I mostly saw, and although they all worked for the same employer, they were not a "group" in a tight, united sort of way. They were sociable together at work, but did not talk much about their personal lives, or spend time together after working hours. Neither was there a strong social connection between the GCC crew and the many other tradespeople--electricians, plumbers, drywallers, masons, roofers, landscapers, painters, and so on--who were subcontracted to work on specialized parts of the job. Some of them, like Ted (the plumber), and Dave (the electrician), who were well known to the longtime GCC crew members, would join the crew at break times. Other subcontractors, like the landscapers, roofers, and painters, took their breaks separately. In good weather they sat outside, and in bad weather they sat in their trucks.
There were also many distinctions between different kinds of tradespeople, which spanned a great variety of occupational pursuits. For one thing, obviously enough, each trade had its own area of expertise, and each tradesperson came from a company that specialized in that particular activity: the electrical contractor did the electrical work, the plumbing contractor did the plumbing, the painting contractor did the painting, the glazier fabricated and installed the glass, etcetera. For another thing, even within a given trade, there were a number of divisions. In carpentry, for instance, although the GCC crew did most of the general carpentry work, such as form work, framing, and trim and hardware installation, other carpenters, working for specialized firms, made and installed the cabinetry and the windows. It was also a point of distinction for some GCC crew members that they did custom not “spec” carpentry—in other words, that they built unique houses for individual clients rather than multiple homes in a subdivision. “...We don’t do spec houses,” said a carpenter who came by the site one day, representing another company looking for work in the neighbourhood. “Neither do we,” replied Duncan immediately” (930415/3). It was a further point of distinction that, in building custom homes, GCC did not do union work. As Charlie said, on his own behalf, “I’m sure there are projects within the union scope that are very interesting, but I’m mostly interested in residential type applications as far as building is concerned” (930810i/21).

Thus, in describing the tradespeople as a distinct group I am not claiming they were a homogeneous mass. As well as there being many kinds of workers, there were also many disparate ethnic groups, backgrounds, and personalities. In all sorts of ways, in addition to those
I have mentioned, the tradespeople were far from being cut from the same cloth. However, above and beyond all this variance, there was one essential way they were alike. That is that they shared a common sphere of work experience; they were all recognizably *tradespeople*. Their work was by and large focused on *doing*—on creating, assembling, fixing, or handling physical objects. The manual, practical, and concrete character of the work was a point of common ground among all the various trades activities. Nobody spoke about this outright, but little things said a lot. For instance, it was easy to tell the tradespeople at the site by a number of obvious physical clues: They all dressed in work clothes, got dirty, worked in tough physical conditions, faced similar dangers, and seldom went far without their lunch box and thermos. (I found the lunch boxes intriguing. Some of them seemed big as suitcases; others looked like dented relics from wartime. Duncan—the rebel—eschewed a lunch box and carried his sandwiches in a plastic shopping bag.) Also, using my own experience as a gauge, clothes and safety gear carried important messages about identity and belonging. One day when I, along with everybody else, had to wear a hardhat, Duncan said to me (albeit facetiously) “you really belong now” (930330/8). At other times, when I went straight from the jobsite to the university in dirty jeans and gumboots, I felt very aware of how I was dressed. It was like wearing a badge: I had traded in my usual “university student” one for one that said “trades worker.”

So the likenesses that identified tradespeople as a group were, as I say, not overwhelming. But like is often more strongly defined in contrast with unlike, and trades culture was no exception. The commonality of “us” amongst the tradespeople was most marked in relation to those who
were "not us"—they were "them." At the study site, the principal representatives of "them" were clients, architects, and other non-trades professionals—such as designers and engineers—with whom the tradespeople had routine work involvements, but did not work alongside. Because clients and architects were the most crucial and visible members of this group, my comments are mostly focused on them.

There was as much heterogeneity in this group as in the tradespeople group, and indeed clients and architects may not have even been a group in their own eyes. Even so, there was something different about them relative to the tradespeople, and a common thread that united them, despite their intra-group variance. They were different because, although they were also involved in the building process, it was in a different way, and on a different level. They impelled the work at the site and influenced it, but did not do it. As opposed to the trades, which usually involved some kind of physical work, clients and architects came to look and talk but not to participate in the actual building.

In the same way that tradespeople visibly belonged to one group because they wore work clothes, clients and architects visibly belonged to another group because they did not. When clients and architects visited the site they were dressed for leisure or for the office, not for physical labour. Their hands were clean, they stepped carefully through the mud and sawdust, they never brought a lunch box (or shopping bag) and instead of thermoses they sometimes carried Starbucks' cups, although they never had coffee with the crew. They did not interact widely with the GCC crew or
other tradespeople while they were at the site, and chiefly dealt with George, Charlie, and sometimes Duncan. Their dress and interactions alone said that the main centre of their work was elsewhere—in an office, in a meeting, on the phone, at a computer or a drafting table—and did not involve physical work or getting dirty.

Again, my own experience as a person with an attachment to the trades, however temporary and quasi-participatory, was an important source of clues about how tradespeople and clients/architects belonged to different groups. I was particularly sensitive (without being conscious of it at the time) to the theme of clothes and group identity. In one section of my fieldnotes, I noted the client’s “overcoat and bow tie” and his seeming awkwardness with the crew:

Eric didn't seem to me to be too comfortable to be in the company of the crew. It was as though he were on foreign ground (930203/13).

In another section of my fieldnotes I described the architects similarly, remarking on how their clothing looked out of place (“one dressed for the office and the other for the campus”) and how they seemed out of step with jobsite customs, with their busy pace and special vocabulary:

Frank moved quickly, in a hurry, and rather stressed, as though the office were too small for him. The other one followed him. They gave me vague distracted grins. Frank talked about ‘the starting point of all the geometries.’ Charlie looked over at me, where I was sitting on Pierre’s chair, and rolled his eyes (930302/20).

b) Different rank: “Normal people” and “elites”

In and of itself, the fact that tradespeople and clients/architects belonged to different groups did
not saying anything about status. I have said that even among these two broad groups there was a good deal of variety, so difference in itself did not suggest that status was significant. But the difference between tradespeople and clients/architects had a further dimension to it, which made the difference between them particularly marked. They were not just different, they were differently ranked. The difference between them was not just a matter of relative affinity--like/unlike--as I have been discussing; it was also a matter of relative position and evaluation--higher/lower, superior/inferior--which is exactly where status entered the picture. Clients and architects were not just involved with the work in a different way from tradespeople, their level of involvement, and the social position behind their involvement, carried more power and prestige. Although the clients in this particular project were well-liked, they were liked in the manner of bosses rather than colleagues. Although the architects were nominally partners in the building process, they were never "one of us." Clients and architects were the ones at the top, the ones who were perceived as those who gave orders and took none. Relative to tradespeople, who were "the normal people," they were the "big important people," the "bigwigs," "the elites."

There were many things which contributed to the status difference between tradespeople and clients/architects in the routine patterns of everyday practice at the site. Relative social rank was part of the way of things; so much so that it was hardly worthy of notice. It was, for one thing, part of the way of the broader culture. Going back to my observations about clothes, it was taken as given that a suit and tie carried a certain kind of status that dirty jeans, work-worn hands, and a lunch box did not. Such distinctions were written into the social landscape. My earlier comment
about how it felt to go to the university in workclothes drew on these distinctions. Exchanging my "student" badge for a "worker" one was not an equal trade. My workclothes were not just dirty; the dirt was a stigma.

Also, in the routine traffic to and from the site, the architects and clients did not come and go, like tradespeople did, to deliver things or remove things or work on a part of the house. They came to approve, assess, inform, and check on things. Their involvement was dominant and directive. Their contribution to the building process was centred on making design decisions which the tradespeople would then act upon. This was significant in terms of status because, from the vantage point of the jobsite, it was often as if these decisions descended from "on high." Site visits by clients and architects were just one way in which word about how to proceed and what to do next was passed on. At other times, the results of design decisions were relayed, usually to Charlie, by telephone, fax, or courier. In many cases, the tradespeople required the architects' and clients' "say so" before they could go ahead with a particular aspect of their work.

Sometimes, if the necessary decisions were late or delayed, the tradespeople faced major logistical problems about how to get on with the job. Occasionally, too, the architects or clients would change their minds about something, and the tradespeople had to undo work they had completed, and do it over again, which was never popular. One day, when Dave, the electrician, had to come back to the site to move the position of some electrical boxes, he said to me, in an exasperated voice,

"Changes! I hate changes!"
"Life is change, Dave," I said. He made a face. "I guess" (930521/4).
On another occasion, Paul spoke with resignation about the trials of having to redo work that he had taken pains to complete well the first time:

'I don’t know, Jane.' He sighed. 'It’s kind of hard to have to do it again, when you do it right the first time. But hey, what can you do? That’s just how it goes.' (930413/3).

In the regular course of decision-making, tradespeople did not have much of a say. The important decisions were not made by tradespeople, and they were often not even made within the sight of tradespeople; they happened somewhere else, offstage. Tradespeople had to wait for instructions or for permission, and obey requests for revisions. They could not tell the architects or clients to hurry up or to make their decisions in a more timely fashion. Architects and clients told tradespeople what to do, but tradespeople never told architects and clients what to do.

Likewise, architects and clients did not, in the regular course of things, ask tradespeople their opinions, or consult with them about how to do something, although one excerpt from my fieldnotes, reporting on a three-way conversation between Charlie and the two architects, suggested otherwise:

Was Charlie treated as a colleague or a hired hand? Was he consulted or was he just told what to do? Who would be responsible for the decisions being made?....With these questions in mind, it appeared to me that Charlie carried pretty much equal weight in the discussion. He had views and expressed them, and the architects considered them (930323/6).

But such conversations were restricted to the more senior members of the GCC crew—Charlie, George, or Duncan. Other crew members were never, to my knowledge, included. Moreover,
even in the above conversation where it appeared that Charlie was an equal among colleagues, my fieldnotes go on to recount a peculiar development. The discussion centred around a point of complexity about the roof. Charlie said he needed more details from the architects in order to proceed, and in the process of asking for them, supplied some suggestions of his own. At that point, roles seemed to have become reversed. Charlie was coming up with design ideas and explaining them to the architects, who rejected his ideas one by one, but kept looking to him for more:

Somehow, Charlie had come to be in charge of the design work, and the architects were telling him what was wrong with it. It was as if he were doing their job, but that he was still the junior person having his work evaluated (930323/7).

Thus, although Charlie sometimes was involved in making design decisions--and sometimes even took charge—he was still cast in a subordinate position.

Not only did most of the tradespeople not routinely have a say in decision-making, they also routinely kept their thoughts and opinions to themselves. They never in my hearing told the clients or architects what they thought, straight out. Charlie and George especially, being the ones who principally dealt with the clients and architects, spoke about the need for diplomacy and tactical strategies in the way they handled client/architect relations. Charlie described George as having a “knack” for dealing with clients in a way that made them feel comfortable, and eased them through the stresses of building. George described his own role as being a “master of jiggery pokery” where he worked between the clients and architects in a way that was honest and open--and yet very careful about keeping on their right side.
Among the rest of the tradespeople, it was also prudent to keep a low profile when clients and architects were around. The tradespeople habitually treated clients and architects with deference. For instance, the following exchange occurred during a client visit to the site:

At a few minutes past five Eric asked if he were holding anybody up. Paul didn’t say anything [although Eric’s car] was blocking Paul’s way. He [Eric] looked around...and said, “goodbye chaps” and went out.

Two things were noteworthy about this brief exchange. First, five o’clock was quitting time at the site, which was usually observed with extreme punctuality. On this occasion, although it was already past quitting time and the crew was all packed up, ready to go, and had nothing to do, they made no move to leave until after Eric’s departure. Second, it was clear that Eric’s car was in the way, but that Paul, whose car was being blocked, was not inclined to speak up or ask Eric to move.

In another example, this time involving the architects, at one stage of the building process it became apparent that there were complications with a small part of the roof design which needed to be addressed. Charlie and the roofing contractor had a detailed discussion about the problems involved and the range of solutions available, imaginatively characterizing the range of options, on a scale of bad to good, as “the nightmare, ‘the bad dream’ and ‘the good dream’.” Later, after the roofing contractor had left and the architects had arrived, Charlie also spoke with them about the problems with the roof. In this discussion, Charlie’s directness and metaphorical language disappeared. I noted this change in my fieldnotes, and wrote that

Charlie sounded much less definite in representing his views to the architect[s] than when
he had been talking to...the roofer (930302/25).

I also commented in my fieldnotes about Duncan's difference in manner when interacting with architects than when interacting with the rest of the crew. On a day when Duncan took over running the site in Charlie's absence, I made the following observation:

This was a different Duncan than the one I knew. He was being quite genial and friendly. Often he seems more taciturn. It didn't seem exactly contrived but it seemed that the job of talking with the architect involved more "doing friendliness" than is typical of Duncan's character as I've seen so far (930420/4).

Patterns of decision-making and politeness do not make a full case for status differences, even though they have brought us a few steps closer. Status did not rest in the fact that clients and architects were the chief decision-makers, but rather in the way that, in being the decision-makers, they were special, they were elites. Neither did it rest in the tradespeople's public reserve, but in the way that their reserve was not a nicety but a necessity—a matter of acknowledging and acting in accord with the dominance of the bosses whose superior social position and power was a given.

c) Backstage tales

So far, what I have said about the status differences between tradespeople and clients/architects has focused on public behaviour, and the way that, in the presence of clients and architects, tradespeople were fairly subdued. However privately, when architects and clients were not around—or at least when they were out of earshot—it was a different story. Although the tradespeople's opinions were not conspicuously sought by clients and architects, and when expressed were toned down, that does not mean that the tradespeople did not have opinions.
They had them, and, amongst themselves, expressed them actively and openly. Although their opinions and topics of conversation were wide-ranging—sports, movies, the debt and deficit, the price of paint, Noam Chomsky, holidays, food, how to slaughter a pig—a frequent theme of discourse was architects and clients themselves. This topic was such a recurring theme, and so full of messages about status that I have styled this feature of trades culture "backstage tales"—which can be further subdivided into client tales and architect tales—and I want to discuss it at some length.

Even though backstage tales were a private counterpoint to public discretion, they were not, I hasten to say, discourteous and disrespectful. But they were much less guarded, much more direct and opinionated than the careful interactional style that happened otherwise. They were consistently editorial and provided an ongoing evaluation of what clients and architects were like, and what they were up to, something like the "armchair quarterbacking" that flourishes on the sidelines of a big event. I have said that status in trades culture lay in minute ongoing evaluations of relative social position—that plumbers and engineers or carpenters and architects, for instance, did not just do different kinds of work but had a different degree of say in the decision-making and were on different rungs of a hierarchical ladder. But that was only part of it. These status evaluations, although inscribed into the social landscape, were not cast in stone, and did not only

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11I use the term "tale" here loosely to describe a range of communicative acts which had an editorial point, moral, or subtext. Some of them were actual stories, with the full narrative scope that the term implies. But some tales were told in a single word or phrase. Some were told in a movement, a gesture, or inscription.
go one way. Backstage tales provided an element of counter-evaluation which had a vital, yet contradictory effect. On the one hand, they provided a kind of challenge to prevailing status differences. They were a way to debunk the bosses, and to stake out a position of inverted authority—to assert among themselves that clients/architects and other elites may have been in charge, but tradespeople knew better, and could see all the clients/architects’ conceits and mistakes. On the other hand, though, they reflected an acceptance of—and a good deal of information about—the existing status relations within which tradespeople lived and worked. Backstage tales, and what they were about, said a lot about the assumed status differences between “normal people” and “elites,” even in the point of refuting and inverting these differences.

There were a number of ways in which client and architect tales carried important messages about status. Again these messages were cumulative; status did not rest in each one alone but in the compound effect of all of them. First, they carried status messages in the very fact of being told. Clients and architects compelled the tradespeople’s attention. Indeed, elites compelled their attention—not just clients and architects, but other people they saw as privileged bigwigs, such as politicians, teachers, university professors, lawyers, and others who lived in the elite neighbourhoods where the tradespeople habitually worked. The tradespeople talked about clients and architects the most because they were the closest elites to hand, and were dealt with up close. But clients and architects, in the tales told about them, often stood as representatives for the whole section of privileged society from which the tradespeople, as tradespeople, felt themselves
to be excluded. Other things compelled their attention too, of course. But there was something about the tales about elites that was like a "bee in their bonnet"—a kind of fixation to which they repeatedly returned.\textsuperscript{12}

Second, there were messages about status in these tales, not just because they were told but because they were supposed to be told privately, backstage, and out of the earshot of the elites themselves. There were conditions, within trades culture, regarding what could be said to whom, and what kind of discourse was meant for public consumption. The importance of discretion around clients and architects was stated clearly. For instance, during a site visit by the architects, Paul mentioned the need for silence outright:

Paul was saying something about the house (I didn’t hear what) but then he cast his eyes upwards to where the architects were still discussing things and said, “I’d better not say that too loud. The bigwigs are here” (930302/25).

At another time, Paul was the subject, not the proponent, of the need to be circumspect:

Charlie said some more about Paul....“He comes out of this ‘Old World’ background. I know where he’s coming from.” This caused Charlie to mention Paul’s attitudes and his deficiencies in social graces. Apparently Paul [had been] saying something sort of redneck about homosexuals and he (Charlie) had to take him aside and tell him to keep quiet with such opinions when the architects and clients are on the site (930223/7).

\textsuperscript{12}I have to be careful here. Was it their fixation or was it mine? At this point, it is no longer possible to tell. It was tales such as these, and my own participation in them, which sparked my interest in trades culture in the first place. However, although the distinction is lost, about whether these tales really did proliferate at the jobsite or whether I was just highly attuned to them, I do believe there was a quality of fixation in the tales which first came to my attention long before this project ever started. It was this very quality that captured my attention, and which has been an element of all such tales that I have encountered—heard and told—since then.
George demonstrated the most concern regarding what kind of tales were or were not meant for public audiences. In particular, he worried out loud about whether my role as researcher might publicize things that he would rather not have discussed or made known. Once, when he had something critical to say about an architectural firm GCC once worked with, he said to me,

"I trust you won't quote me in your report on that" (930323wg/6).

And later, with regard to my research interests and fieldnote-taking preoccupations, he asked,

"You're not interested in all the gossip are you?....Because they [clients] don't want people to know how much it costs" (930511/5)\(^\text{13}\)

Third, there were messages about status in these tales because of the nature of their content. The content spoke volumes about two very important things. First, the content of backstage tales said a great deal about where status resided within trades culture--and, by association, within the surrounding culture. Although clients and architects were both elites relative to tradespeople, the basis of their eliteness was invested in different aspects of cultural life. Clients had status and were elites because of their wealth. Architects had status and were elites because, according to the prevailing dichotomy between mental and manual labour, architects, as "mental workers" garnered more social control and esteem than "manual workers," i.e., tradespeople. Accordingly, client tales focused on topics related to wealth, whereas architect tales focused on topics related

\(^{13}\)Of course, this raises the question of how much, in these pages, I should or should not say. I actually was interested in the gossip, and indicated as much to George, although in retrospect, not as directly as I would have liked, primarily because at that point I did not know exactly what I was interested in the most, or what I was going to do with my interests. However, I have taken George's concern for discretion seriously and have attempted, throughout this text, to present no information which compromises anybody in any respect.
to working knowledge. Second, the content of backstage tales said a great deal about how the tradespeople did not entirely accept their status position and, in their refutation of it, sometimes expressed cogent and perceptive critiques of the prevailing culture. Backstage tales were one-sided, self-righteous and laced with petty grievances. But they often had a grain of truth to them, and expressed independence and pride in the face of a social order which did not privilege tradespeople in the same way it appeared to privilege others.

I want to illustrate the way in which the content of backstage tales carried status messages by recounting some of them. As I said before, because of the different markers of status associated with clients and architects they fell into two groups: client tales and architect tales. Within each group, the tales further broke down into smaller themes which all, in some way or other, spoke about how wealth and mental work carried status in trades culture, and how tradespeople partially accepted the status associations of these features of cultural life, and were also highly critical of them.

**Client tales:** Wealth was a visible backdrop at the jobsite. The neighbourhood, the view, the big houses, the expensive cars, all carried messages about affluence and high status. The tradespeople, of course, noticed all this wealth, and in noticing they talked about it. The setting spoke of money, and client tales spoke of money too, and of the people who had it, and how they spent it. These tales were full of signs of noticing—noticeing in exact detail. But they were not full of signs of admiration and envy. Client tales were more often critical than admiring. There
were five variants of client tales, which all focussed on wealth in some way and all, or almost all, cast it in a dubious or derogatory light. They were: naming the price, comparing purchases, aesthetic critique, bad attitudes (towards the wealthy), and bad behaviour (by the wealthy).

**Naming the price:** “Naming the price” was a feature of the jobsite’s specialized language. It had two components. First, it involved putting emphasis on expensive things, especially things that were expensive almost beyond imagining. For instance, the tradespeople at the site frequently identified jobs or parts of jobs by cost. There was the “$80,000 kitchen,” the “$80,000 wall,” “the $100,000 addition that was the most expensive room we ever built,” and the job where it cost “a quarter million dollars just for the millwork.” They itemized stages of work the same way: the excavation work cost “tens of thousands,” the foundations cost “$50,000” and so did the doors and windows, the cost overruns “brought it over a million” and so on. Second, with each naming, it involved an accompanying expression of exaggerated disbelief—a rolling of eyeballs, a heightening of eyebrows, a shake of the head, a “hmph,” a sigh, a muttered exclamation of “that’s gross” or “that’s disgusting.” It was as if, in citing the cost and making a face, some perspective might be brought to bear on such extremes. These expressions registered incredulity, and enlisted the listener’s return astonishment. They provided a way of being both impressed and appalled at

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14Writing fieldnotes sensitized me to this aspect of trades discourse. It involved the precise specification of sizes, distances, measurements and amounts, combined with an exact vocabulary of exotic (to me) tools, materials, and processes—not just “a nail,” “a metal rod” or “leaning” but “a 3 ½ inch duplex nail,” “a 6 foot length of 5/8 inch rebar,” and “three-quarters of an inch out, over 12 feet.” (Metrification didn’t seem to play much of a role in residential construction.)
the same time, of noticing but indicating censure and disapproval.

*Comparing purchases:* There were two ways of comparing purchases. The first was to compare what *they* spend versus what *we* earn, in a way that emphasized the acute imbalance of spending power. The following conversation between Duncan and myself was a typical example:

And we talked about the cost of the house. It started out by mentioning the view and the cost of the land. (“It must have been over a million dollars just for the land,” said Duncan.) Duncan said that the foundation (and/or excavation) had cost 50 thousand dollars.

I said, “And the doors and windows cost that much too!”

Duncan laughed and said that he’d just bought an apartment for the same amount as the doors, windows and foundations of the Roberts’ house (930203/5).

The second way the tradespeople compared purchases was to disparage how clients spent their money versus how they themselves would spend equivalent sums. In one lunch-time conversation,

...there was some speculation among the crew about how much the land for the house would cost. Charlie’s estimate was that he wouldn’t be surprised if it were about a million. “A million!” said Manuel, and looked incredulous. He thought about what he would do with a million dollars—he would go someplace warm, to relax. The others also speculated about what they would do with that kind of money, and the dominant theme was travel—travel to lots of places, or to one place where you could just stay and not have worries or concerns (921106/11).

Later, Paul also talked about how, if he had it, he would spend his money differently, and how he didn’t think much of how clients spent theirs:

Paul said something about how it would cost a couple of million by the end. “Do you
think it’s worth it, Jane?” he asked me. I said something (I can’t remember what) and asked him if he thought it was worth it. He said, “I can think of a million better ways to spend that kind of money. I wouldn’t buy a house in this area.” He said he would buy a place with some land where he could make a “man-made lake” (930415/7).

In expressing these views, the tradespeople showed that although they may have desired wealth itself, they did not covet what the clients had. They asserted a kind of independence, not just separating themselves from clients and their values but positioning their own choices and values as being preferable, and more worthy.

_Aesthetic critique:_ Tradespeople at the site were persistent and unsentimental aesthetic critics. Even the smallest details came up for routine assessment. Although sometimes their judgements were positive—they admired particular features, or took pride in their own handiwork—they were more often uncomplimentary. Appraisal was sometimes based on broad aesthetic considerations, as in the house that was deemed “not organic...it doesn’t fit together.” Sometimes it was scatological, as in the house with the lighting feature that looked “like shit.” Sometimes it was just as blunt but not as rude, as in one house that was a “big mistake” and another that was a “dog.” Other times, it was mockingly humorous. Charlie described one house, which combined Romanesque columns with tartan wallpaper, as “a real Roman-Scottish dog’s breakfast...some kibble here, some kibble there, and then some meaty bits” (930203/9). None of these comments were mean-spirited and many showed distinct aesthetic sensitivities. Through ongoing aesthetic

15Most of the comments in this section are not about the Roberts’ house but about other houses in the neighbourhood, or other houses that had been worked on in the past.
critique, the tradespeople asserted a countervailing superiority in the face of the clients’ greater wealth. "They may have the money," such commentary seemed to say, "but they are no better than us, because we have our own opinions, and better taste."

**Bad attitudes (towards the wealthy):** Client tales did not just focus on wealth but also on the people who had it. Although the tradespeople took individual clients on their own merits or demerits (the Roberts were popular; other clients were not), they viewed "wealthy people," as a collective stereotype, with some suspicion. Sometimes, tradespeople stated their disapproval explicitly, as in one carpenter’s blunt assertion that "I have a bad attitude about rich people" and another’s aside, about somebody doing a bad parking job, that "he was driving a Beamer, so I was pissed off already." Other times, their negative feelings came across in broadly dismissive stereotypes of what wealthy people are like (as in “a bunch of rich guys who want to see who can die with the most toys”), or in denying wealthy people the right to complain about their lives. In one such comment, Duncan first recited a list of extravagant expenditures, then topped it off with the insinuation that if they could afford all that, they should keep their minor discontentments to themselves:

Duncan kept talking. “The money some people have. They [a previous client family] have a house on Southwest Marine Drive. And they’re building a log cabin at Whistler. Big logs. 5000 square feet. In the middle of that, they take time off to take the whole family to Africa. And then they whine when something’s not working right” (921217/4).

At another time (and another site), I noticed the site foreman in conversation with the man from next door. After the neighbour turned his back, the foreman made a face, and pretended to
paddle the retreating neighbour in the behind with a shovel. He later explained that the neighbour had complained about a water hose hook-up between his house and the site: "He sold this property for $1.6 million and he’s worried about the cost of a bit of water" (920910/4).

There were exceptions to these views, and "wealthy people" and "tradespeople" did not consistently belong to mutually exclusive groups. But such attitudes were a common way that tradespeople judged the status of affluent people and expressed their disdain for the status differences that infused their working lives.

**Bad behaviour (by the wealthy):** Some tales about clients focused on their niceness and generosity, but they only came along now and then. "Horror stories," about working people being treated by wealthy people as if they were less human, were much more popular, and sometimes fuelled a whole coffee break. Sometimes these tales combined the theme of bad behaviour with "comparing purchases," for a double effect, as in this account:

"She was so obnoxious. And this pool cabana, it was about the size of the place I live. And she had this specially imported solar cover for the pool. It was just ridiculously expensive, just for the cover. Anyway, she was such an obnoxious woman. One day the guy was there to clean out the can [portable toilet] and he’d parked in the driveway. It was a big driveway, a U shape, and it wasn’t like he was even in the way or anything. And she came out and went like this." Pat clapped her hands together hard, twice. "‘You there!’ [said Pat, mimicking Mrs. X.] ‘Get out of the way.’ Can you imagine? She was so obnoxious. I would have just said, ‘where do you want me to put this stuff, ma’am?’ and

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16I met one carpenter--not at the study site but in the process of “shopping around”--who was a self-described “millionaire” and claimed to continue building and renovating houses because he liked the work.
dumped the shit on her lawn" (921210/6).

And in this one:

[She] would dress in furs and address everybody as “Workman.” “In fact,” said Charlie, “she never addressed anybody by name. It was always ‘my doctor’, ‘my lawyer’, ‘my grocer’...” (930209/8).

Other such tales shifted the focus from manners to business practices, but also coupled the topic of extreme wealth with dishonourable behaviour. The tradespeople spoke with scorn about clients who did not pay their bills but continued to maintain a high lifestyle. Charlie spoke one day of the “wretched excess” of the super-rich, combined with “the craftsman’s plight” of doing the work, carrying the costs, and taking the responsibility, with no guarantee of getting paid in full. Such tales often ended with crude or elaborate revenge scenarios, as in “dumping the shit on her lawn” as mentioned above, or going to “scratch up the Lamborghini” or going “up there to beat him up.”

Tales about bad behaviour, like all client tales, did two things. They showed how wealthy people had status, because they could afford to buy things and get away with things far beyond the reach of normal people. But they also showed how the status of monied elites was not accepted outright. Client tales cast wealthy people as superior, but always questioned the grounds and the expression of that superiority. Tradespeople noticed wealth, and noticed it acutely. But in consistently making the point that they were not impressed, they inverted the same status positions that they accepted, and claimed a superior social position of their own.
Architect tales: Architecture was as much a part of the backdrop of custom homebuilding as wealth was, and architects—past, present, legendary, and stereotypical—were as frequent a topic of conversation as clients. Like clients, architects were bosses, not colleagues. Relative to tradespeople, they were statused elites who had to be handled carefully. However, unlike clients who had status because of their wealth, architects had status because they were “mental workers,” not “manual workers” like the tradespeople. The focus of architect tales was thus on the nature of work, not conspicuous consumption. Again, two concurrent messages were communicated in these tales. The first message was about how mental work was, indeed, a marker of status. The second message was about how tradespeople inverted the prevailing order of things, and did not hold mental work in high esteem. Architect tales, like client tales, were more often critical than respectful, expressing indignation that although architects had the upper hand in the building process they often did not deserve it. Indeed, architect tales often had a sharper bite than client tales. That wealth had status, although it was decried, at least made sense. But the status of mental work did not have the same underlying social logic, and got a more dubious, antagonistic response. As with client tales, architect tales had a number of variants, which were: real work, knowing better, suspect motives, and getting the credit.

Real work: According to the tradespeople, although architects were “bigwigs” they did not do “real work.” Architectural work was “airy-fairy” and frivolous—the kind of work where you “just wave your hands in the air and have these ideas” (930810i/29). One way that tradespeople talked about how architects did not do real work was to make fun of architectural jargon. They repeated
phrases like "massaging the project," "pushing the design envelope," and "creating a wonderful feeling" with tongue-in-cheek sarcasm. They said—in mocking, exaggerated tones—that architects were interested in "drama" and "magic" without paying enough attention to what was "do-able and affordable."

Another way that tradespeople criticized architects' work as not being in touch with reality was by emphasizing the contrast between the "real structures" built at jobsites, and architectural plans which were only real on paper. This contrast was made often. On one occasion—a rainy, miserable day early in the job, when the site was still a big muddy hole—when I arrived at the site Ranjit welcomed me to the "real world." "It's not like the plans,' he said. 'It doesn't rain in the plans'" (921112/7). Other comments drew attention to the way that architects seemed to think that moving a wall was the same as moving a line on a drawing. There was the story about the "nudger," a tool used for bending rebar, which acquired its nickname when an architect suggested a major design change to "just nudge these walls over a bit" (921124/3). There was the reference to Frank Lloyd Wright, who, Charlie once noted with a disdainful shake of the head, was reputed to have talked about the similarity between changing a design with an eraser and moving a wall with a sledgehammer (930429/1). And there was Duncan's comment about the architect whose plans for a staircase paid no attention to how the stairs would be attached to the rest of the house (930511/7).

Among tradespeople, it was not just architects who did not do real work, and it was not just the
work that wasn’t real, it was the working conditions. Architects belonged to a broader group of mental workers, including a stereotype of office workers as “paper-shufflers” who wrote “a bunch of memos” (930420/2) but did not really do anything. Not only was the work unreal, the conditions were “pretty cushy.” Office workers did not have to work outside, get their hands dirty, or “go up and down a ladder forty times a day.” In one conversation, about “bureaucrats who work for the City,” one labourer exclaimed,

“Do you know what they do? They go for lunch in the bar. And then they go home at 3:15. That’s true!” (930420/2).

Another time, when the B.C. Hydro 12 o’clock horn blasted out the first four notes of “Oh, Canada,” one of the carpenters looked at the downtown skyline in the distance and raised his eyebrows. “They all get to go for lunch now,” he said. It was a miserable day and I, for one, was feeling extremely sorry for myself. At the moment, this comment was exactly right. It conjured a picture—firmly resented, untrue though I knew it was—of a uniform horde of warm, dry, well-paid office-workers trooping off to nice restaurants for long, cozy lunches. In this scene, I was a willing participant in the jobsite perspective that mental workers of all stripes (architects, office-workers, and myself, in my academic role, centrally included) did nothing of consequence, and had it pretty easy.

Knowing better: A second theme of architect tales that criticized prevailing status relations was that, not only was architects’ work frivolous and soft compared to work in the trades, it was also frequently done according to faulty standards, or incorrectly. Architects may have been the
superiors in the work hierarchy because they did the mental work, but tradespeople frequently talked about how they—tradespeople—were the ones who actually knew better. There were many expressions of knowing better. It was one of the most persistent topics of conversation within trades culture. Even though tradespeople were stereotyped as “manual workers,” architect tales about knowing better showed that manual work required knowledge too, and that people who did manual work knew and could do things that “mere” mental workers did and could not.

One expression of knowing better was the theme of aesthetic critique I mentioned earlier under client tales. Aesthetic critique applied to architects and clients equally. Evaluations of structure, shape, detailing, and colour were not just about clients and their tastes and expenditures, but also about architects and their design ideas. Although the tradespeople had to build things as they were told, they could assert a countervailing superiority in expressing their opinion about what they liked, and what they thought looked ugly or ridiculous.

But by far the more common way that tradespeople talked about knowing better centred on the theme of architectural mistakes and bad planning or judgement. The real and imagined delinquencies of architects were a frequent source of complaint among tradespeople, and were often itemized in detail. Tradespeople were particularly sensitive to these because they had direct consequences on their own work. They took out their frustrations in diagnostic tales which not only put architects in a bad light, but put tradespeople in a good one. Also, like tales about client extravagances, they were usually accompanied by deep sighs, facial gestures, and other nonverbal
signs of exasperation.

One motif in “knowing better” tales was about how, as Duncan put it, “sometimes architects don’t know how to do the most basic things” (930414/6). Or, as Dave put it, “they don’t get the idea of how things really work and how difficult or impossible it is to do some of the things they design” (930414/6). In more detail, Paul gave a long explanation of the problems that he saw in a design detail which called for a particular kind of building material. In summing up this story, he said, “See? You just can’t do that with medite” (930420/3). In the same tale, to emphasize the way that tradespeople knew what architects did not, Duncan repeated the common refrain that “architects should spend some time in the trades first, so they’ll know” (930420/3).

Another motif of “knowing better” was about how architects did not adequately think things through. The focus of these tales was on the lack of sufficient detail in architectural drawings. Tradespeople complained frequently about how architects did not think clearly and specifically about what the details were supposed to be. As an example, Duncan pointed out a drawing that he was having some difficulties with. “This is a drawing? Ha! It’s just some lines, no dimensions, no details about materials or how things are supposed to fit together” (930420/3). According to Charlie, “part of the architect’s job is to really just sit there at the damned drawing table and detail it. And that takes so much time and it also takes a lot of practical experience and it just doesn’t get done” (930810i/29). A related aggravation was not just drawings that were insufficiently detailed, but ones that were late. Tradespeople privately chided architects for not
doing their “homework” or for “holding up” the building process. Duncan and Charlie, in particular, complained frequently about how hard it was to proceed with the work in an efficient fashion if design decisions were delayed:

Duncan said they still needed a lot of details, and said something about how frustrating it was to have to move from one job to another and not be able to finish one thing, because they didn’t have enough information yet (930511/1).

In addition to complaints about designs that were insufficient or designs that were late, there were also complaints about designs that were wrong, although these were less frequent. Tradespeople often talked about mistakes in the possessive—“whose mistake?”—with a particular emphasis on the ones that were not their fault. Architectural oversights were given nicknames and became a part of the lore of coffee time discussion—for instance, “the discrepancy” and “the closet mistake.” But the mistakes were more often ones of omission—such as the oversights, lack of detailing, and lack of practical knowledge discussed above—rather than commission.

A final theme of “knowing better” involved the negative consequences for tradespeople of architectural mistakes. One consequence, as in Duncan and Charlie’s conversation above, was about how frustrating it was not to be able to work on a job and finish it. Others complained about this too, as when Paul said that all he wanted was “just to be able to finish one thing” (990114/4) and Manuel said that “there’s lots to do but there’s nothing to do because we don’t know yet” (930531/7). Another consequence was having to redo work that had already been completed one way, but had to be redone another way because a decision had not been made
soon enough or was changed midstream. In a conversation making fun of both architectural language and design delays, Duncan joked that a common building style was “Deconstruction” where there was no real theme and everything had to be taken down and done again.

In all of these tales about knowing better, architects figured as the central scapegoat, the ones whose shortcomings were responsible for most of the problems tradespeople had to face during the working day. They were scapegoats but they were privileged ones, not underdogs or victims, and it was their privileged status that made them all the more blameworthy. By association, architects fell among other “mental worker” elites who were viewed as a central source of problems in the world at large. Politicians were “sleazebags” and top executives were “raking in millions while the company goes bankrupt and the workers get laid off.” It was not just architects but the whole class of decision-makers at large who did not know what they were supposed to know, and were not making the right decisions. Architects and mental workers were supposed to be superior but they were not. Tradespeople, on the other hand, did the real work and were the ones who really knew, although their social position, according to one carpenter, was to “just do what we’re told.”

Suspect motives: Another theme of architect tales was the theme of “suspect motives.” In these tales, architects\footnote{Some of these tales were not specifically about architects but about engineers. But they all belonged to the same group of “mental workers,” elites, people who make the decisions but do not get their hands dirty so I have included them all under the same category of tale.} were once again cast as superiors who had authority but whose superiority was...
utilized in the wrong way, or for the wrong reasons. These tales provided dishonourable motives for why architects did what they did, in not supplying sufficient details, etcetera. All of these reasons centred on attributing moral inadequacy to superiors who did not, in one way or another, take the appropriate responsibility for their actions. They overbuilt or provided insufficient or inadequate design information because they did not want to be blamed. "They build everything like it's the empire state building because they do not want to be sued" said one tradesperson (921006/1). And they did not provide sufficient details in their designs because it "just puts them in a position of liability if the thing doesn't work" (930810i/29).

Getting the credit: The final theme of architect tales was about how, although architects did not do real work, did not do their work properly, or did it for the wrong reasons, they were the ones who got the credit once the work was over (while the tradespeople got the grief and got the blame). In an interview, Charlie summed up this grievance particularly succinctly:

People get sucked into building things with no drawings....And the person has had to use their own creative juice to make this three-dimensional object, to take it out of the flat, two-dimensional conceptual sort of world and make it real, and then [the architect] comes in and it's easy to see what to fix and he'll just say "change this and change this." So that person ends up building the thing three times and they frequently are on a fixed price and they end up losing their shirt! And [the architect] gets all the credit at the end of it all (930810i/29).

This point also came up regarding the way building projects were described in magazines. Architects got the credit, but tradespeople were barely named. "Maybe they print the name of the contractor in a footnote, but that's all," said one carpenter. "It's So-and-so's house, built by So-
and-So architectural firm" (930413/50). One time, a retired GCC carpenter named Joe showed me an article about a house that GCC had built some years ago. He wanted to show me a picture of a staircase he had built that had been particularly complicated.

"Do they say anything about you, here?" I asked.

"Oh no, they never do that, it’s just about design stuff."

Then he told me that was the staircase he’d fallen down when he’d broken his neck. He talked about it a lot, about how it had happened and being in the hospital. I remembered that Charlie had mentioned this accident on the first day I met him, and how he still felt “squeamish” about it.

"I guess they didn’t say anything about that here either?"

He just laughed (931009/j/3).

The tradespeople also talked about how there should be a way for them to be credited for their work, since their contribution to the building process was usually so anonymous. They spoke a couple of times about how there should be a “plaque” or something that credited an individual for a particularly difficult segment of the work, or listed the names of all the people who worked on a particular house. Also, in a conversation about what it was like to be a set carpenter for the movies, somebody said that the work was not very pleasant with “weird hours and chemicals and fumes,” but “at least you getting mentioned in the credits” (930423/7).

A counterpoint to tales about architects getting the credit and tradespeople not getting it were tales about tradespeople getting the blame for things like delays and cost overruns. George pointed out that an important part of his job was to ensure that this did not happen, by keeping close track of costs and changes:
“They [clients] don’t know. And who are they going to trust? It’s usually the architect who looks like he’s on their side. We have to be careful to detail the exact costs and so on. So if there’s a change I can say, ‘See? That wasn’t in the original plan. That wasn’t part of the original estimate. And we had to make this change, or wait for this design decision, which is why the move-in date had to be delayed’” (9300311i/5).

Even so, there was a sense among the crew that they still looked like the ones responsible for things that went wrong. “Blame the carpenter,” said Pierre one time, semi-facetiously. “It’s the guy holding the tools who fucks up” (921124/7). One time, shortly after Ed had joined the crew, he talked about what it felt like to be observed by the clients while he worked on a part of the job which was a particularly intricate result of a late design change:

“Beverley said hello and remembered my name. But I was still working on the same door as last time. And I was sure she must be thinking, ‘haven’t you finished it yet?’” (930803/2).

In contrast to tales about “knowing better” which—at least among tradespeople—scapegoated the architects, these tales reflected the view that in the larger scheme of things, even if architects were at fault, they got the glory, and that the genuine—and undeserving—scapegoats in the building process were more often tradespeople themselves.

In summary, all of these backstage tales were ways for the tradespeople to cast the supposed superiority of elites in a dubious light, and claim an inverted superiority on behalf of “normal people” and manual workers like them. But, of course, all of these critiques and evaluations were expressed backstage when the elites were not around. The inversion of prevailing status relations...
was thus never the only reality, and took place within a context where prevailing status relations were, at the same time, an accepted part of the scenery. It was okay to talk about such things at coffee, or in a relatively safe place. But there were no active expressions of overt challenge to authority or normal authority relations. Clients and architects were in charge. The tradespeople may not have liked it or agreed with what the people in charge were doing, but it was a fact of life, greeted with a shrug, or an expression of "that's how it is," and "you just have to live with it."

d) Textual authority

According to what I have said so far, status differences between tradespeople and elites were reflected in such customary parts of everyday life as clothing, working hours, and lines of decision-making. They were also reflected in the publicly deferential yet privately critical ways tradespeople acted towards clients and architects as the nearest elite representatives, especially in the tales tradespeople told about elite status markers such as wealth and mental work. But there was another important status marker within trades culture I would like to introduce, which I have labelled textual authority. The kinds of status differences between tradespeople and clients/architects I have already touched on were reinforced by the way certain textual practices had a superior social value to those associated with "mere" manual labour. In some respects, this is a continuation of what I have already been saying about mental work, although I address it separately because of the special relationship between textuality and education. Mental work was not something you could see; it was represented by texts. The superior status of mental work and
of certain textual practices were two sides of the same coin.

It was interesting, first of all, to notice the variety of textual practices that flourished at the jobsite. There were two kinds. First, there were textual practices associated with tradespeople. The tradespeople at the site did a lot more textual work than I had anticipated, although little of it had the standard look of a formal document or "text." For instance, in the house itself, it was often impossible to talk about the work to be done without drawing a picture, for illustration. "Do it this way," Duncan would say to Paul, explaining how to make a cut by drawing a rough sketch of lines and angles on a piece of wood. Or Puran would show Manuel how to dig a section of trench—to what depth, in relation to what section of formwork—by drawing a diagram in the dirt with the pointy end of a stick. Or Pierre would explain to me what he meant by a rafter's "birdsmouth" by sketching an imaginary diagram in the air with his index finger. It was also impossible for the carpenters to do the math involved in making complicated cuts or measurements without writing out the equation on an available surface. Scribbled computations dotted the site here and there, on unfinished surfaces, wood scraps, and the office wall. Inside the site office there was a whole other set of textual practices at play, as Charlie made countless lists, and kept thick books of records of the progress of work at the site.

The second set of textual practices evident at the site included the designs, plans, specs (specifications), diagrams, licences, permits and many other forms of administrative and regulatory paperwork that accompanied the building process. These textual practices—the official
ones—were not native to the site in the same way that the ones mentioned above were, although they were an equally essential part of the building process. A job could not start or continue without approved plans and permits governing and approving the progress of work. These textual practices were associated with architects, engineers, inspectors, and other functionaries who, from the perspective of the jobsite, sat in offices and often did not have faces or names. These documents were also much more conventionally textual in character than the ephemeral scribbles, calculations, and lists indigenous to the site.

It was interesting to notice also, and more importantly, that although there were two kinds of textual practices at the site, only one kind—the latter, official kind—was legitimate and carried authority. Thus, there were two kinds of textual practices but only one kind of textual authority, and that belonged not to tradespeople but to those who generated, signed or stamped pieces of paper. The people with status, the “big important people”—architects, designers, engineers, and to some extent clients—were at the same time the ones who were most involved in the building process at the textual level. Textual authority and status were, in this way, fused together. What this meant, from the perspective of the jobsite, was that authority came from elsewhere, and belonged to others. It meant that plans and permits, and the people who worked with them, carried more legitimacy and authority than nails and boards, and the people who worked with them. Thus, although there were textual practices native to the site itself, they were incidental and not very important in the scheme of things. It seemed, in the same way, that the manual practices native to the site were not very important in the scheme of things either. They had to be done, of
course, but doing them was not invested with the same kind of stature, significance or legitimacy as drawing up plans, or stamping a permit. As Charlie pointed out one day, “architects can be famous for designs that haven’t ever been built, and may not even be buildable” (930318/3).

The status—or at least the authority—associated with official textual practices at the site was evident in the way that the progress of the job was governed by the flow of documentation to and from the site. It was an aspect of the job that Charlie, in particular, was preoccupied by and struggled with on a daily basis, since the flow of work was determined by whether a certain set of architectural plans had or had not arrived, or whether a certain document had been signed by the building inspector. If needed plans were delayed, then Charlie had to find other work that could be done to keep the crew busy. Until the inspector signed the document no further work could be done either, and again, other things had to be found to keep the crew busy.

Nobody at the site thought that the authority vested in official texts was wrong or unnecessary. They needed the architectural plans in order to know what to do next, and they accepted the permits, licences, and inspections as a part of what needed to be done to ensure that buildings are sound and safe. However, in the same way tradespeople challenged the status associated with wealth and mental work, they sometimes expressed resistance to and inversion of prevailing status relations associated with textual authority. As always, though, this was contradictory. They invoked textual authority as a way of gaining more status for themselves, and they were critical of it for being inefficiently managed and for not being “real work.”
The way that tradespeople invoked textual authority as a symbol of status and legitimacy was an element of backstage tales on the theme of getting the credit. As I mentioned above, credit was associated with the act of signing one’s name, as in the idea of putting all the workers’ names on a plaque, or inscribing a particular worker’s name alongside a particularly skilful piece of work. Credit also had textual connotations in the way it was associated with who or what got written up in magazines. Tradespeople could see their lack of status in the way that their names and accomplishments were glossed over, or not included at all.

The critique of prevailing status relations associated with textual authority came in both written and verbal form. I associate the written form of critique with the standard building practice of sketching diagrams and doing numeric computations on unfinished walls. Although during most of my time at the site I just noticed or watched other people’s calculations or drawings, there was one time when I held the pencil and sketched something on the living room wall, to explain it to Ranjit. The incident was momentary, and the activity of drawing on the walls was no big deal at all; everybody did it. But when I got home, I wrote in my fieldnotes about my feelings on doing something that was, for me, out of the ordinary:

Drawing on the living room wall! It’s one of those things that you just don’t do. I felt like a rebellious child. Where were the crayons? And where was my mother, that I could even think of such a thing? (930419j/2).

I do not impute such feelings to the GCC crew members, for whom drawing on walls was as normal as banging nails. But this experience gave me a sense that there was a tinge of defiance associated with this standard (for carpenters) work practice. It was a sanctioned way of going
against the normal social rules. The tradespeople at the site were far from graffiti mongers—
although they sometimes used graffiti as a form of social play—but there was something of the
graffiti artist’s rebellion in being able to scribble on the walls of a million dollar house.

However, by far the most normal form of criticism related to textual practices and textual
authority was not textual in itself but verbal—another feature of backstage tales. Often, as in the
case with getting credit mentioned above, it was just another dimension of the same broad lines of
critique of mental work and mental workers. For instance, in comments about how architects and
other elites did not do “real work,” the work they did was unreal precisely because it was “on
paper” or at a desk. In the following exchange between Duncan and myself, not only did we both
assume a direct linkage between working at a desk and being “the boss,” Duncan also faulted
working at the desk—what bosses did—as not being “productive”:

In the office, Duncan went to sit at Charlie's desk.
"Are you still the boss?" I asked.
"Yes. Charlie's back tomorrow." Duncan grinned. "I'm glad."
"Why? Don't you like all the deskwork?"
"No. I want to get back to doing something productive" (930420/1).

Ranjit’s comment to me about how it did not rain in the plans, and the joke about the “nudger”
were critiques of textual authority in the same manner. From the perspective of the tradespeople,
official building documents may have been necessary and carried authority, but they were inferior
and unreal, and the people who worked with them were out of touch with reality.
Other criticisms of textual authority emphasized the association between textual practices and cumbersome bureaucracy. Charlie, in particular, complained about textual work as more of an interference than a help. "I hate scheduling," he said one day, in a conversation about how things never happen when they were supposed to. "I figure that things just happen when they happen" (921102/9). He also talked about how the people who handled the textual side of things did not do things in a straightforward way:

Charlie had some more to say about the soil engineer. He said that the soil engineer had done his drawings and submitted them to the architect. Then the architect had to pass it on to the structural engineer, but they still hadn't heard from him yet. "I don't know why the soil engineer and the structural engineer can't just talk to each other," said Charlie, shaking his head (921027/4).

On another occasion, he was frustrated by how the textual materials he dealt with were sometimes incomplete, or did not answer the questions he needed answered to be able to get on with the job:

When Charlie was talking about the paperwork, he mentioned the drawings that he had talked about last week, that had to be received and signed by the building inspector before they could proceed with the work. "We got the papers by fax, not hard copies. Minus a couple of things that would have been nice to have, like a [professional engineer's] stamp." He went on talking about these drawings, [saying] that the important thing about them, from the perspective of the building inspector, was simply that they complied with WCB regulations and that the site was deemed safe. But he seemed to imply that other people had other expectations about these documents, and also that the documents didn't provide a clear yes/no answer to the kinds of questions they were supposed to answer [to be able to get on with the work] (921117/2).

One final incident revealing the critical view of textual authority within trades culture occurred not at the jobsite but in my own living room, in a conversation with a carpenter friend of Ed's. We were speaking somewhat philosophically about some quirky aspect of modern life, I can't
remember what. Ed's friend made a point, to which I replied, "you know, that's really true. Someone should write a book about it." He shook his head and said, "Well, if it's true, then it's true. Why write it down? What difference would a book make?" (930919/3). I took his point of view to be that writing was a form of social control, a way of imposing legitimacy on aspects of human life which were, in their own right, already legitimate. Although I did not agree with him then (and do not still, otherwise I would have given up this project long ago) I found his perspective that we get our sense of reality too much from books and other media, and not enough from the world around us to be an idea worth thinking about. Although I do not propose that all the critiques of textual authority in the trades expressed the same degree of social criticism, I believe they started from a similar place. The view from the trades was that textual practices had status, but non-textual practices such as trades work did not, even though trades work was more sensible, and more "real."

Interpretive Summary

The focus of this chapter has been on how status was infused within trades culture. I have shown how, according to prevailing status relations between tradespeople, clients, and architects, tradespeople felt and acted as subordinates to the other two groups whom the tradespeople styled as elites. Tradespeople and clients/architects, although they worked together every day, belonged to different and differently ranked occupational circles. I have also shown that wealth, mental work, and textual authority were particularly important markers of power and status, strongly associated with clients, architects and other elites. In their public behaviour, tradespeople
behaved with deference towards elites, and acquiesced to prevailing status relations. However, in their private opinions, as expressed in the medium of backstage tales—especially ones about wealth, mental work, and textual authority—tradespeople were critical of prevailing status relations, and asserted that while elites might have status and be in charge, tradespeople knew a thing or two that the elites did not.

What I want to do in this summary is to take my interpretation one step further. Two points come together here and perhaps seemingly contradict each other. The first pertains to my characterization of tradespeople’s criticism and inversion of prevailing status relations—their sideline evaluations of how clients spent their money and how architects did their job—as “backstage tales.” The idea of a tale has decidedly fictional connotations, as in “tall tales” that stretch the truth or are completely made up. And, true enough, the backstage tales among tradespeople contained elements of exaggeration. They did not express much interest in the clients’ and architects’ side of the story, and usually cast tradespeople in a good light. But—and this is the second point—I have also characterized the tradespeople’s perspective as containing an element of truth, and penetrating the cloudy ideological assumptions of the prevailing culture. Client tales, especially the ones about “wretched excess” and treating workers unfairly, showed that tradespeople were sensitive to issues of the distribution of goods and social inequality. Tradespeople were acutely aware that some people had status and economic advantages that they did not, and that there was no reason they could see to justify why this was so. In particular, architect tales showed that tradespeople were sensitive to the ways in which the status differences
between mental and manual labour reflected a strong social bias and also sometimes got in the way of the efficacy with which the work was carried out. The mental work was not all taken care of by the mental workers--the architects, designers, and others involved in the planning and design process--alone. On a daily basis tradespeople had to solve problems and work out details that had not been worked out yet. They did a good deal of creative, conceptual work in the process of translating two-dimensional designs into three-dimensional structures. Consequently, tradespeople were not sufficiently credited for their conceptual input; indeed, the rigours of their manual input were also taken for granted. Moreover, tradespeople were in a vulnerable position because they had to account for the costs, and often took the blame if the work was delayed or over-budget. With this division of mental and manual workers into two unequal camps, communication problems got in the way. Neither architects nor tradespeople gave much credence to what the other side knew. The division between knowers and doers, and the different status associated with them, made the work more complicated, rather than making it go well or go better. The presumed manual/mental dichotomy got in the way of the work itself which, to be done most effectively, required a genuine integration between the mental and manual parts of the building process.
I have talked a lot about status in trades culture. But where does education fit in? I now turn to a discussion of the place of education in relation to all the features of status I presented in the preceding chapter. Education was connected with status in two ways. The first way concerned how tradespeople spoke about education, and how their comments frequently made a direct connection between education and status. Education did not appear in jobsite tales as a prominent marker of status in the trades in its own right, at least not as prominent as wealth, mental work and textual authority. However, it was closely associated with all of them. Client tales and architect tales in particular were full of allusions to education as yet another example of "wretched excess," and yet another aspect of the dominance—and insufficiency—of mental work. In this way, education was just another signpost in the status landscape I have already portrayed. In being associated with these other manifestations of status, education was a symbol of an elite, prestigious "insiders" world, of which the trades had no part. The second way education was connected with status was not so much a part of how tradespeople spoke about education but how they did not speak about it, or assumed it had nothing to do with them. Education figured in the status landscape of the trades as much by its lack of presence as by the form its presence took. Many tradespeople wondered why anybody studying education would want to study them; many non-tradespeople assumed that a study of education in the trades would be a study of remedial education, or low educational attainment. Education was seen by tradespeople and non-tradespeople alike as something that had little to do with the everyday trades world. Education
was something that was associated with what tradespeople lacked more than what they had. The way that education was seen to be lacking in the trades said as much about status as the way education was enmeshed with a handful of other status symbols and markers of privilege.

The main objective of this chapter is to show what the educational dimension of status looked like in trades culture. I begin with a brief clarification of what I mean by education, and how I came to this particular view of education in this project. I follow with a presentation of excerpts from my field experience, beginning with evidence of the presence of education as a status marker in the trades, then proceeding to evidence of the way education's perceived absence from the trades also carried status messages. I conclude with an interpretive summary which, as in the summary of the previous chapter, emphasizes how the view of education and status from within trades culture contributes to a cogent criticism of existing contradictions and presuppositions about the meaning of education in the wider culture.

Although this chapter is the crux of my interpretation—where I have been working towards all along—it is somewhat shorter than the previous chapter. That is because I am building on work I have already done, drawing connections between education and aspects of status that have already been established. It is quite a bit like the building process itself. At the jobsite, it took a long time to build the house foundations, which had to be solid and well laid-out in order to support the rest of the structure. But once they were in place, the subsequent stages of construction—when the house became a house—were more visible, and went much more quickly.
As I said earlier in the text, I began this research project with a loose interest in understandings of education in trades culture, but without a clear idea of exactly what it was about education—or trades culture—that I was looking for. As the project progressed and I became immersed in the details of fieldwork and analysis, I went through long periods of uncertainty about what I was doing, and why I was in the field at all. For a long time I thought the concept of “culture” was the source of my struggle. Okay, I would think, here I am in my gumboots pulling bent nails from this pile of used 2x4s, and I am supposed to be learning something about culture. But what on earth is culture anyway, and what have these boards and nails got to do with it? Those questions were troublesome enough. But as time went on I realized that the concept of “education” was giving me equal trouble. The boards and nails spoke even less directly about education than they did about culture.

Even so, there were moments, which even I could recognize, when education was clearly of consequence. When Charlie talked about going to university, Paul talked about taking shop in high school, and George talked about how he didn’t care about the training of people he hired, just how they did the work, the topic of education was front and centre. Also, when Duncan showed Paul how to adjust the frame of the coping saw, and when Charlie explained the theory behind the excavation procedure to the assembled crew, although education was not a topic of discussion, education in the form of on-the-job teaching and learning were happening before my eyes. Education was there, sure enough, in all sorts of elements of cultural life. But education
encompassed so many diverse things. Amongst all of them, what was the aspect of education at the heart of my research interest? That was the question I struggled with the most.

It was not until I could articulate my understanding of status and backstage tales that my interest in education came into focus. Backstage tales spoke of the tradespeople’s sense of and resistance to prevailing status relations. Although many aspects of education in the trades interested me, I came to realize that how tradespeople spoke about education was of particular interest, especially how they spoke about it—often in disparaging terms—as elitist and not very practical. Backstage tales carried an image of education that automatically associated it with wealth, mental work, and textual authority—in other words with clients, architects, and other representatives of elite society. Although such things as on-the-job teaching and learning mattered to tradespeople, they were not the kinds of things tradespeople meant when they used the word education. Education meant formal schooling, and formal schooling meant prestige and authority. Thus I came to see that it was the symbolic meaning carried by the word education that was at the heart of my interest, and that it was an important part of the picture of status in trades culture taking shape in my mind.

**Education as a status marker**

In this discussion of education as a status marker in trades culture, I begin by revisiting the status markers I introduced in the previous chapter—wealth, mental work, and textual authority—and showing how education fits into the picture. Much of my understanding of the importance of these status markers was drawn from backstage tales. In the same backstage tales I also found
frequent allusions to education as just another status symbol. When tradespeople spoke about wealth, mental work, and textual authority, they were also speaking, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly, about education. I will recount a number of backstage tales on the topics of wealth, mental work, and textual authority which show what this looked like within everyday workplace culture. But the importance of education as a status marker did not stop there. Education was associated with status and authority in other more generalized ways, and I will give some examples of those as well.

a) Wealth

I have already shown how wealth was a central theme of client tales. These tales reflected a persistent fascination with examples of luxury and excess and how wealthy people had access to special dispensations and privileges beyond the reach of the average tradesperson. Although these tales naturally often centred on the tremendous expenses involved in custom building, they sometimes touched on other trappings of the affluent lifestyle—cars, vacations, face lifts, expensive wines, live-in nannies. Education was high on the list too. In these conversations, in amongst the cars, the costs per square footage, and the expensive exotic trips, education figured as just another privilege with a high pricetag, another inaccessible feature of conspicuous consumption. For instance, in one conversation at lunchtime, the crew was talking about a family GCC had once worked for, listing off a number of remembered luxuries.

“How many cars did they have? I can’t remember.”

“Oh, and the kids all went to some private school.” (930309/13).

At another time, Duncan spoke about another past client, who had a daughter about his own age.
"She was nice. But then she went to Harvard," dropping the name "Harvard" the same way somebody might say "Rolls Royce" or "a million dollars." Something prestigious and expensive. He made a face. "Of course," he went on facetiously, "I could have gone to Harvard too."

"Of course," I replied, carrying the joke. "Me too" (930325/9).

Another example of how education—especially university education—was associated with luxury, rich people, and things outside the realm of normal people was evident the way Charlie talked about being a university student. A self-described "working class kid from Burnaby" (930810i/8), one of the things he did at university "just for fun, just, kind of, to see what would happen" was to join a fraternity. At the fraternity, he met people from a much wealthier social circle than he was used to:

"...when you joined [the fraternity] you started to meet these people who were like our clients, that had come from old Vancouver money and that they just--this was life, this is the way life is. It was like, 'well of course, you live in a mansion don’t you? Doesn’t everybody?'" (930810i/8).

In such tales, education was a prize, and a trophy—a part of the rarefied domain of wealthy elites, very far away from ordinary, everyday realities.

The connection between education and wealth was not just that it belonged on wealthy people’s luxury shopping lists. It was also sometimes seen as just plain expensive, and therefore in itself—even discounting Harvard, fraternities, or private schools—not easily within one’s grasp. Again focussing on university education, the choice of whether or not to go to university had a different meaning for different people at the site. For Charlie it had been undertaken easily and willingly
even though he had not graduated, whereas for Paul, it had never had an ounce of appeal. “Ugh, school!,” he said to me once. “I don’t know how you stand it. Why do you do it, Jane?” (930521/4). However, for others, opportunity and choice were not that clear cut. Manuel sometimes spoke wistfully about having wanted to go to university, but it had not worked out because he and his family had not been able to afford it.

“What would you liked to have studied?” I asked him.
“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “I liked math. A little bit history and geography. Maybe engineering, that’s a nice job. But anyway, you know, it just wasn’t....” He let the rest of the sentence dribble away. (921202/4).

Duncan also spoke about university education as being remote because of the barrier of money, with the added point that elites, in addition to having the money, also had extra privileges and advantages:

“Who can pay the tuition?” [he said, in the same conversation about the woman who went to Harvard.] “My girlfriend’s father is a prof out there [at the university], so she doesn’t need to pay. But for the rest of us. Hmph” (930325/10).

Education was, in its associations with wealth, a step up the social ladder. As such, the tradespeople treated it with the same kind of superiority and scorn they treated other markers of wealth and privilege. Once again, Duncan’s comments about Harvard were a case in point. After Duncan and I joked that, of course, we could have gone to Harvard too, he went on in a more serious vein to say that not going to Harvard actually made for a better and healthier life:

“Actually, I’m glad I didn’t have that kind of pressure. My parents are proud of me for being a carpenter. It was just, ‘whatever you do is okay,’ I didn’t have to go and get the big degree or be the big successful lawyer” (930325/9).
And Paul, with his native scorn for schooling and books, could not see any more value in paying for education than he could see in paying for big houses in expensive neighbourhoods.

"Can you imagine my Dad paying for private school? He could save the money and buy me a Bronco!" (930423/9).

b) Mental work

Mental work, as I showed in the previous chapter, was a central theme of architect tales. Architects had status not because of their wealth but because they were mental workers who occupied a dominant social position relative to tradespeople who were “only” subordinate manual workers in comparison. Architect tales focused on the kind of work architects did, relative to the kind of work tradespeople did. In these tales, although architects’ work had status, it was often criticized for being soft, silly, and impractical, as well as for not being done in a way that tradespeople felt that it ought. There was often, also, a close association between architects’ work, mental work generally, and the institution of higher education. Architects were “big important” mental workers whose formal training was mandatory and based at university; tradespeople were “lowly” manual workers, whose formal training was based at vocational school, and was not mandatory at all. Because of their university educations, architects were also supposed to be better off, smarter, and to know things. The background assumption was that “they have been to university, so they should know what they are doing.” Architect tales reinforced this supposition at the same time as they criticized it, and suggested that although architects were supposed to be educated, it was tradespeople who were more likely to know the necessary things to be able to get the job done.
Although the connection was often not made directly, an implicit part of the subtext of tradespeople's backstage tales about "knowing better" was a critique of the formal education system. When tradespeople debunked architects—privately, of course—for not knowing things, they were also debunking the university curriculum for not having taught them the right things. The countervailing assertion of superiority in these tales was that architects did not learn what they needed to know at university, and that tradespeople, through their closer connection to the "real world," had the better educations after all.

As I say, much of the association between the failings of architects and the failings of formal schooling was implicit. But on the occasions when the architecture curriculum came up for discussion, the tenor of the comments expressed precisely this point of view. One carpenter from a different jobsite told a story of an acquaintance who had worked as a builder for several years, but had subsequently applied to architecture school.

"He was really experienced, and knew a lot. But his application was rejected. When he asked why, one of the profs told him, 'you're not really suited to the program. It's because you have too much practical building experience.'" (930428/3).

In one conversation at lunchtime, some of the GCC crew members, as well as Chuck, the painter, talked about what architects learned at university.

"They don't learn anything useful it seems," said Chuck.
"Yeah, I know," said someone else. "It's like they've got all that education and they never even know what a building site looks like."
"And they don't even care if the roof leaks."
"Some of them, it's like a signature," said Charlie. "This is a special architecturally-designed creation. You can tell by the puddle in the living room.""
Duncan carried on with the same theme. “They should have tarps with their signature on it: ‘Leaks by [a well known local architect]’” (930810/2).

Architects were important representatives of the world of mental workers within the trades but they were not the only ones; the world of mental workers was not limited to architects. Likewise, the association between education, mental work, and who did or did not “know better” was present in other kinds of conversations, not just architect tales. The whole social landscape within and beyond the trades was characterized by a sense that mental work in general—not just what architects did—stood for something of implicit social value, that the trades, as a locus of manual work, lacked. One example of this was evident in an exchange that I had with Chris, a general contractor at a site where I did a brief pilot study prior to embarking on full-fledged fieldwork with GCC. Chris was an expansive talker and a good publicist. He spoke with enthusiasm about the high calibre of the work his company did, and of the carpenters who worked for him. In short, he bragged about them. The tenor of his bragging was to say that his sites were well-run and his workers were good because many of them had been to university.

In making his point about meticulous workers and quality work Chris also stated that “fifty to sixty percent of them have a university education.” He also related care, quality, and educational background with being ‘professional’. “You can tell right away it’s different. It’s like an office. People do their work with a professional attitude.” (Dawson, 1992b, p. 5).

Because they had gone to university, they were better workers, and in being better workers they were more “professional,” as though being an ordinary tradesperson at a “regular site” meant being careless and unprofessional. According to Chris, his sites were better and more efficient
than regular sites because it was more “like an office.” Chris claimed a heightened status for his sites by claiming they were different from what you would usually find in the trades, drawing on the assumption that good work and professionalism were somehow inherent to mental work in a way that it was not inherent to manual work, or at least regular manual workers.

Although Chris’ comments drew on taken-for granted values about work widespread in the general culture, they did not reflect the attitude of a typical trades jobsite, where normal values were often inverted and set on their ear. Chris was speaking as a promoter rather than as a “regular trades guy.” At the jobsite, the more common view was that although people in offices were called professionals, their work was not necessarily done in a particularly professional manner. One day Yves, a GCC carpenter who was at the site a couple of times, told a story about his frustrations in dealing with a particular government office.

“They never answer the phone. And you go into the office and nobody’s working,” he said. “You can’t even see anybody at their desk.”

“Maybe I’ll try that,” said Charlie. “Next time the phone rings I just won’t answer it” (930119/6).

Another important place where the connection between education, mental work and status showed up in my field experience was in the way that tradespeople often responded to me, my presence, and my research project. I always introduced myself as a university student, and explained a bit about why I was there. This identified me early on as being one of the “elites.” At first, the tradespeople’s responses were usually polite, but careful. Some asked me whether I was working for the clients or architects. Others assumed, when I announced I was from the
university, that I must be a student in a school of architecture. When they found out I was not, the response was mixed, a combination of relief and lamentation. When I introduced myself to Dave, the electrician, I explained that I was from the university.

"Are you an architecture student?" he asked. I said no. He laughed and said, "good!" (930415/6).

When I introduced myself to another worker, a carpet layer, he asked the same question. In the face of my denial, he said it was too bad, because architecture students ought to hang around jobsites more often.

"They should do what you’re doing. To see what this side of the work is like. It would be such a big help, because so often they don’t have any idea" (930830/3).

Although my affiliation with academia in some ways lapsed into the background the more I showed up for coffee and helped with menial work, it was also a recurring part of my interaction with some of the regular GCC crew members. As someone who came from the university, I was treated as someone who was supposed to know the answers, and was mildly taunted when I did not. On the first day I met Ranjit, for instance, he singled me out as a student and therefore someone who should know things:

Ranjit was working on a section of the excavation supports. I said hello. Then Ranjit asked me to calculate something about where the brace or the notch should go. It was something like calculating an angle. "If the pole is 8 feet tall, and the brace is 6 feet long, what should the angle be?" Something like that. I said, "I don’t know. You tell me." Ranjit grinned at me. "You don’t know? Aren’t you a student? Don’t you go to school?" (921106/6).

We had a similar exchange the following week:
Ranjit was there again today, and he called out to me, “how much is a thousand and (something or other) centimetres in inches?”
“You tell me.”
“I didn’t go to university” (921112/2).

And again, in response to a question I had about how to use a particular piece of building equipment,

Ranjit asked me, “Didn’t you learn how to use one of these in school?”
I answered, “they don’t teach you about this in my department.”
“Maybe they should.”
Duncan looked down from the wall and added, “Yeah, maybe they should.”
I nodded. “Maybe they should” (921215/3).

In these comments, Duncan and Ranjit used my lack of answers as a basis of elliptical criticism of education and what it was supposed to teach but did not. “School” had status because it was associated with having the answers, but it was debunked for not teaching practical and useful things; again, it was the tradespeople—who had not been to university—who really had the answers, knew how to operate the equipment, and “knew better” although they did not have status on their side.

Another aspect of my eliteness as a university student was not just that I should know things, but that I had it easy, and had a soft, privileged lifestyle compared to the hard work of trades. This was evident in the way GCC crew members sometimes joked with me about the irregular timing of my site visits. For instance, I had the reputation (undeserved, except in a few cases) of being a “fair weather” presence at the site. “It must be a nice day, Jane’s here” Pierre would often
announce, on days when I arrived and the sun was shining. Or on days of bad weather he would greet me by saying, “what are you doing here today? It’s raining.” Also, because I had no set schedule and never stayed at the site for the entire 8 hours of the GCC working day, I was teased for keeping lax hours. “What are you doing here?” Charlie said when I arrived early in the morning. “It’s not even coffee time yet” (930203/1). Or, “this is a nice time to come to work,” said Duncan, when I arrived at morning coffee. “She comes to work for coffee and lunch time” (930616/7). And, on a day when I did not stay as long as usual, Manuel said, “Are you leaving already? You just got here. It must be nice. Can I have your job?” (921118/4).

In trades culture, university education was associated with both mental work and a life of privilege and ease. As a university student I got to come late, leave early, and keep a loose, unregulated schedule, similar to the pattern of presence at the site of both architects and clients. From the perspective of the jobsite, my position as an academic aspirant gave me a certain status along with others, such as architects, whose work was associated with university credentials, but it was not really work—and besides, as Ranjit so often liked to point out—in this way also aligning me with architects—I did not even know the answers anyway.

c) Textual authority

As I have said, textual authority and mental work were two sides of the same coin. Official textual practices that carried authority at the site—such as architectural plans, and building permits—were the “written down” manifestation of elite influence. Education was an important
part of this mix. In trades culture, education was strongly symbolized by such things as books, papers, and tests. Education and textual authority were almost synonymous, they stood so closely side by side.

Education and textual authority were closely bound together in a not uncommon jobsite position that connected the unpleasantness of formal schooling with the dominance—and distastefulness—of learning from books. One day at the site, the crew had to work out some complicated geometrical calculations concerning the roof. Manuel took a scrap of wood and wrote out the formula for the Pythagorean Theorem, and talked about having learned it at school. Puran replied that

...he never learned about that [in school], and that anything from books was a waste of time. “I didn’t like school. Especially reading. The best way to learn is by doing. Like how you learn to drive a car...” The real learning, for Puran, was when you did it yourself (930302/11).

Puran went on to connect textual authority with both mental work and status by linking the Pythagoras Theorem with architects, and making fun of Manuel for putting on airs.

Puran looked at me and rolled his eyes. “He thinks he’s an architect now,” he said to me, but loud enough for Manuel to hear. Manuel just shrugged. “It’s interesting,” he said. I agreed (930302/11).

Paul was another who associated school with books and reading, and did not like to learn that way. In an interview, he talked about how he did not like to sit still and had never liked reading. He went on to talk about the theoretical side of the apprenticeship program he was in, saying that

“it was okay. The classroom stuff is sometimes okay but it’s boring. I like it better just to be
learning on the job” (930721/13).

On another occasion, when many of the crew members had signed up to take a refresher first aid course, Paul was nervous about “going to school.” He associated the course with difficulty and the possibility of failure.

“It won’t be hard will it?” Paul asked Charlie.
“Oh yes,” said Charlie. “It’s a killer.”
“Well, if I fail just don’t make fun of me.”
“Oh we will. If you get 98 and everybody else gets 99 we’ll throw shit at you.”
“They’re giving me a hard time, Jane. I’ll go if you go.”
“No way” (930203/7).

Education and textual authority were also associated with opportunity and privilege. One day when I showed up at the jobsite I noticed a small triangular block of wood with the words “plumb” and “cheek” handwritten on it to be used (as I was told later) as a template. But whoever had written them had been fooling around, and instead of writing the words normally had written “pluuuuumb” and “cheeeeek” with an excess of vowels. I remarked on this, pointing out the block of wood to a group of crew members working nearby.

“Who is the one with the fondness for vowels?”
Puran pointed at Duncan. Duncan took off his earmuff ear-protectors and said, in a mock-defensive tone, “well, everybody can’t go to university” (930311/2).

In this small incident, Duncan not only associated spelling with education, he associated incorrect spelling with lack of educational opportunity. On a different occasion, Dave the electrician used the theme of spelling mistakes to communicate a similar understanding. When I told him that my project was about education in the trades, he responded by saying,
"Oh, right. Well, I'm edumacated. I can spell school. S-K-O-O-L" (930415/5).

For both Duncan and Dave, spelling mistakes—even intentional ones—served as a cultural symbol, combining deficiency, exclusion and education into one enmeshed bundle of status messages. Tradespeople, by their own self-deprecating humour about being bad spellers, acknowledged their position on a lower social rung.

Spelling mistakes connected textual authority and education in other ways as well. The examples of textual authority I have been discussing have assumed a general connection between textual authority and mental work, or at least having a certain kind of knowledge. But there was also an assumed connection between textual authority and wealth. Since wealthy people had money and status they were supposed to be educated too. From the perspective of the jobsite, the assumption was that if a person was wealthy they had better also be educated and literate. In the following tale, the literacy level of a past client was remarked on with some intensity:

Charlie mentioned an incident concerning a very wealthy client GCC had done some work for in the past. "This guy...inherited something like 40 million dollars. He sent a letter and George showed it to me. You could hardly read it. This guy could hardly read or write. He probably didn’t have an education past grade 10.” Paul, who was sitting across from me, said, “That makes me sick!” And the concrete guy, who had come back inside and was sitting with us, said, “Imagine that a guy can be a millionaire and can’t even read or write” (921218/17).

According to Charlie, Paul, and “the concrete guy,” there was something out of place in the natural social order that someone could be wealthy and illiterate (and being illiterate and uneducated went hand in hand). The assumed natural order of things was that wealth, education,
literacy, and social position all went together.

Turning from wealth back to mental work, the final strand of evidence I want to discuss on the theme of education, textual authority and status goes back to the topic of my presence at the site, and my identity as a university student. As a university student, as I have said, I was identified as a mental worker and consequently as someone with elite affiliations. To introduce the added dimension of textual authority into this, not only was I a university student, but I was a person who wrote things down. I showed up at the site with a notebook. Although I did not call a lot of attention to my notebook, I did not hide it, and could frequently be seen writing in it in the site office. As a university student my job clearly had a textual orientation. The notebook was the most visible part of my social role as student, and identified me as an alien rather than a worker like everybody else. This in itself carried a number of status messages that were remarked on in a variety of ways.

Although my work was completely unrelated to the formal textual practices that regulated and governed the building process, it also carried a peculiar kind of authority. As someone whose work centrally involved textual practices, I was identified as having—at least potentially—some kind of dominant managerial function. That was partly what was going on when tradespeople asked whether I was working for the clients or the architects. Was I one of Them? It was also partly what was going on in how tradespeople responded to my notebook. My notebook was not quite to be trusted. “Nobody knows what she writes in there,” Charlie said once at coffee,
indicating the notebook that happened to be in my lap (930330/6). I offered to show it to him, but he shook his head. "You had better be careful," George said on another occasion, when he was introducing me to two crew members I had not met before.

"Did you know your every move was the subject of research? She takes notes. You never know what she is going to write about you. You’d better be nice, so she’ll write nice things."

"I always write nice things" (930311/2).

It was as if my notebook and my university connections were associated with a sense of surveillance. It wasn’t just the notebook, although the notebook was a central symbol. "Whose mistakes are you looking for?" one of the carpenters asked me, shortly after he started working at the site. "Whose mistakes did you see today?" One day, when Pierre made a mistake on a section of formwork, Paul pointed to me on the other side of the site.

"Way to go, Pierre. Jane was watching. She’s going to put it in her notebook."

Pierre looked at me and made a face (930107/7).

Also, the aspect of my research which involved having research participants sign consent forms carried strong connotations of surveillance and power. Tradespeople viewed consent forms with suspicion. Although for the most part they respond to my presence in a low-key way, they responded to consent forms as an intrusion, which conjured up all the suspicions they might have been harbouring about what my research was "really" about. "What am I signing away? I’m probably signing away my car or my bank account" (930203/10) said Puran, when the matter of consent forms came up. "You’re signing yourself into the nut house," said Paul, "which is where you belong" (930203/10).
In this way, the association between textual authority and education carried connotations of supervision and control. As somebody who was a university student and at the same time engaged in textual practices as a key work activity, I was suspected of being a potential inquisitor or management spy, in a position to look for mistakes, and make judgements about other people’s work performance.

As usual, however, that was only half the story. My textual practices may have carried authority but they were debunked as not being “real work.” If I was at the site but not involved in some aspect of helping with work tasks--sweeping, or stacking boards, or pulling nails--I was not thought to be working but to be “standing around” or “doing nothing.” Even writing in my notebook counted as doing nothing, or at least doing something easy. One day, Manuel came into the site office to get a tool, while I was sitting on a chair in the corner writing in my notebook.

“It must be a nice job,” Manuel said to me, “to just sit and write all the time.” I said that it was a pretty nice job, but that I also found writing very hard. Manuel nodded, but he didn’t look very convinced. The hard work of writing was one thing, but the hard work of digging a trench in frozen ground on a cold winter day was another thing altogether, and made sitting at a desk writing seem quite lax. “Hard work” had two completely different kinds of meanings (930423/4).

On another occasion, while I was walking around the site I overheard Manuel trying to explain my research project to a new labourer. When he saw me, he called me over to help him out. I said a bit about my research topic, and that I was writing a thesis.

“Oh,” he said, and nodded with comprehension. “So it’s just going to be something to read.” Then the conversation was over and he got busy with his work (930506/7).
It was clear that "something to read" did not hold a lot of importance for him. It seemed that the labourer was able to slot my work into a category of being "just another useless report" and thus easy to dismiss. Textual practices associated with education may have had connotations of authority and status, but as with other manifestations of status at the site, they were denounced as not being particularly relevant or useful. In short, education was associated with status in trades culture in all sorts of ways. But, like the other status markers with which it was associated, education was subject to ongoing critical assessment and review.

The absence of education

Education did not just figure in the status landscape of the trades in its associations with wealth, mental work, and textual authority. It figured in the status landscape in its presumed absence from the trades as well. Education was not just automatically associated with elite status. It was also, just as automatically, not associated with tradespeople and trades work--or, if it was associated with them, was assumed to be something they lacked. The concept of "the trades" and the concept of "education" had a deficit relationship. Because of the different sectors of society that they were both assumed to represent, they were thought to have little or nothing to do with each other.

The first piece of evidence I would like to introduce on this theme goes back to the comment by Ted the plumber which I cited at the beginning of the first chapter. "We don't have an
education," said Ted one spring day at lunch time, when I told him about what my research project was about. "That's why we're here" (930420/6). As I took some pains to point out in chapter one, this statement did not express a literal truth. The workers at the jobsite had a variety of educational backgrounds; some had been to university, some had been to vocational school, and so on. Also, as a non-union site, no educational credential or trades qualification was required for most of the tradespeople working there. What Ted's comment seemed to mean instead was that, regardless of educational experience, the trades—at least in a non-union setting—were not viewed as an "educated" occupation in society. Ted's comment characterized the trades as a place where education did not count. Likewise, it communicated the unspoken message that in the same way education did not count in the trades, the trades did not count in the wider society. The most important thing about education in Ted's comment was how its very absence—something "we don't have"—identified the trades as a cultural backwater, on the social margins.

Other tradespeople made similar comments, suggesting the same point of view that education and the trades did not normally and naturally fit together. Like Ted's comment, many of them were in response to my presence at the site, and to the fact that education was the central topic of my research project. A frequent response to my project at the jobsite was a kind of puzzled "what has education got to do with us?" For instance, when I first described the general theme of my research to Pierre, he asked me bluntly, "Why us? Why do you want to study us?" (9211102/2). Although Pierre was referring specifically to GCC in this question—why did you pick this company?—it also carried an undertone similar to the one in Ted's comment. It was as if he were
saying, “but we’re not educated--so what are you doing here?”

Others communicated a similar message by making light of my research interests. One day, when I was explaining my project to a worker I had not seen before, Paul called out from a few feet away, “It’s not really about education, don’t listen to her. She just wants to meet cute guys and hear all the swearing” (930203/5). Another carpenter who was at the site temporarily saw me going around the site with a big garbage bin picking up wood scraps.

Rudy was working up on the second floor on the window casing. When he saw me picking up scraps, he said “Oh, I get it. The education thing isn’t real after all. You are just here so you can collect free firewood.”

“Oh, hey, good idea. Too bad I don’t have a fireplace” (930311/14).

It was particularly interesting that very few of the tradespeople I met made a direct connection between my declared interest in “education and the trades” and the kind of education most strongly identified with trades work, namely formal trades education. It was as if trades education did not count as education. It was generally not what came to mind when I introduced the topic of “education.” The typical response was far from being “she is interested in education, so she must be interested in trades education because that is the kind of educational background most commonly associated with this kind of work.” One carpenter, from a different site, made a direct comparison between trades education and getting an undergraduate degree.

“It’s just the same as a university degree, or it should be. You do your four years and you learn some things about life, this way or that way. I think it’s pretty much the same thing, but with trades education you have a skill at the end of it” (930507/2).

But this association was rare, and for the most part the connection between my stated interest in
education and trades education did not spring readily to mind; what came to mind was a blank. As in the conversation with Dave the electrician, where I told him I was not from the school of architecture, when he found out I was from adult education, it meant very little.

"Are you an architecture student?" he asked. I said no. He laughed and said, "good!" I said I was from the faculty of education, in the adult education department. "Oh. That doesn’t have anything to do with anything." (930415/6).

This kind of response was not consistently the case, of course. During my field experience I had a number of in-depth conversations with people about trades education and about the apprenticeship system as a technique for providing people with the necessary trades skills and knowledge. But most of these conversations were with people who were (or had been) actively involved with trades education as a focus of their work, and I had sought them out because of that involvement. I spoke with a carpenters’ union official, who was interested in trades education curriculum content because it was part of his job to oversee union-based continuing carpentry education. I spoke with a retired carpentry instructor from a local vocational college, who was interested in trades education techniques because he had taught in a trades program for several years. I spoke with an administrator of a branch of the Home Builders’ Association who was interested in trades education provision as a way to professionalize and legitimize the home building industry. However, in the context of the study site itself, there was only one person who responded to my topic with a direct reference to trades education. That was Harry, a GCC carpenter who worked at the site from time to time. When I first met Harry, he made an immediate connection between my study and formal trades training:
I told him I was “doing a study of the jobsite, and I’ll be here from the beginning to the end, a couple of times a week.”
“What’s the study for?”
“I’m a graduate student in Adult Education. I’m interested in education and the trades.”
“Are you interested in the apprenticeship program then?” (921118/2)

As I learned later, Harry had worked as an administrator with a vocational institute for several years, and his interest in formal trades training arose out of that background. Otherwise, as I said, for other tradespeople at the site the connection between my project and trades education was tenuous at best. Even getting people to talk about their formal training background and experience was like pulling teeth. It was not mandatory, because of the non-union character of the site; it was not a common experience of “entry” that all had shared. It was a non-issue. I found myself not asking about it much because it was not a subject that naturally came up. When I did ask, I generally got short, indifferent answers. George and Charlie’s responses were typical. When I asked George whether he had any formal trades training or whether he had picked it all up on the job, he said that he and Charlie had once taken a trades “refresher” course together some years ago. When I asked what he had thought of it, and whether he had found it helpful, he said,

“It was okay. We learned some stuff.” (930311i/15).

But he did not elaborate and was much more interested in talking about how the instructor had come to work for GCC once the course was over. Charlie’s response was similar.

“I guess it was helpful. There was some stuff about heavy construction I didn’t know, but I didn’t really need it anyway. But the instructor was great. Good carpenter. The funny thing was, he came to work for us afterwards.” (930810i/23).
I should confess that the tradespeople were not alone in their bemusement about what my project was about, what kind of connection between education and the trades they should assume, and what education had to do with them. Often, I was as perplexed as they were—and it was my project. I expect part of their blankness had to do with my poor explanations of what I was really interested in. I did not know exactly what I was looking for, and did not know how to explain it, or even steer the conversation in the right direction. I waffled, and spoke in vague abstractions. I said I was interested in educational backgrounds, working knowledge, on-the-job learning, and skills development without knowing exactly what I meant by any of these terms, without knowing whether they were even the right terms, and without being able to describe any of them concretely. Sometimes I even forgot that education was at the heart of my research focus, and was as surprised as my listeners to hear myself saying that I was from an education department. This lasted throughout my field experience, and although I was often intensely uncomfortable about my inability to state my purposes clearly, I was not able to do anything about it, other than stumble along. Thus, in making the connection between education and the trades, I did not give the tradespeople much to go on. In retrospect, this may not have been such a bad thing since, having no direction from me, the tradespeople were left to express the kinds of thoughts—perplexed though they might have been—which came most naturally to mind. And in the end it was their perplexity from which I learned something important.

It was not until late in the analysis that I realized this very struggle to name my research interest was, in itself, a part of my data. One thing that interested me about education in a trades setting
was precisely what I have been talking about: the presence of absence. I was interested in why education was such a non-issue for so many tradespeople, when there was clearly so much to learn and know. I was also interested in knowing why it had the associations it did—with university rather than with trades school, with books and tests, rather than with learning and knowledge. But it was difficult to make a focused research agenda about something that was not on people’s minds, or at least not in a conscious way. How do you study something that is interesting because it is not supposed to be a part of the culture? How do you recognize that its presumed exclusion from the culture is culturally significant? It took a good deal of struggle to recognize that absence counted as data. It was partly through not knowing what my research was about that I was eventually able to determine that the presumed non-association between education and the trades was telling me something important. Indeed, not knowing what my research was about was important evidence of the very non-association I was struggling to understand.

So, the tradespeople at the site did not make a spontaneous connection between education and the trades, and even I, the one in charge of the whole project, did not make a natural connection between education and the trades. But we were not the only ones. Another source of evidence about the way education was not associated with trades culture, or was associated in a deficit sort of way, was among non-tradespeople in the surrounding culture. Tradespeople I encountered during my field experience often had a hard time crossing the gap from the trades to education. At the same time, non-tradespeople I encountered had an equally hard time crossing the gap from
education to the trades. Or, when they crossed it, they carried along a number of questionable assumptions about what tradespeople were like, and what kind of education they needed.

Of course, non-tradespeople were not really the focus of my study, and unfortunately during my field experience I did not pay very systematic attention to what kind of evidence I might gather about trades culture from settings that were not specifically of the trades. However, there was a particularly memorable incident involving non-tradespeople’s associations between education and the trades which took place while my fieldwork was still in progress. I wrote about it at the time in my field journal, and although it was not a formal part of my fieldwork, it stayed in my mind and has played a role in shaping my interpretations.

The non-tradespeople involved in this incident were, coincidentally, not only non-tradespeople, they were teachers. Some worked as adult education practitioners or administrators, and some worked in the public school system. None had any experience working in the trades. We had all taught together in the past and, after going our separate ways for some years, were having a small reunion over dinner at a Japanese restaurant. When it was my turn to tell the others what I was currently doing, I said I was working on research for my dissertation. Of course, people wanted to know what it was about. I gave my usual vague reply about doing an ethnography of a building site, exploring the topic of education and the trades. I described the response to my topic at some length, in my field journal:

Well, that was as far as I got. A lot of quite derogatory comments ensued. I don’t remember what everybody said but the implication was that trades guys were morons, and
that if I was doing anything about education and the trades I must be studying illiteracy because nobody had anything beyond a grade ten education and they probably did not know how to read and write. The negative stereotypes that flew around the table were quite shocking to me. Somebody made a comment about tradespeople with their pants down around their hips, showing the crack of their bum. Somebody else put on an accent, pretending to be a tradesperson who talked like Tarzan. “Ugh. School. Me not need school. Me can spell ‘beer’, eh?” (They were also shocking to Ed, who was the only trades guy there. He didn’t say anything at dinner, but I could tell he was mad. In the car on the way home he said something about how appalling it was for teachers to have such narrow, biased attitudes about things they knew nothing about. “No wonder kids come out of school thinking the trades are just for dumb fucks.”) But what I noticed particularly was the thing about education. The assumption among these teachers was that if I was studying education in the trades then I must be interested in something remedial—something for dummies (journal#4).

In this conversation, the assumed natural connection between education and the trades was as a deficit. Education figured in the trades, in the assumptions of these teachers, as something which trades people lacked. Lacking education, lacking intelligence, and lacking status were all part and parcel of the same cultural stereotype.

Of course, as with everything else in this interpretation, trades culture never offered just one consistent point of view. At the same time as tradespeople’s and non-tradespeople’s views of the relationship (or non-relationship) between education and the trades reinforced prevailing status relations, there was always room for contradiction. So far I have talked about how education was associated with statused elites and how, because tradespeople supposedly lacked education, they also lacked status. But prevailing status relations were often inverted within trades culture as well. Education may have been a symbol of other people’s status. But education was also a
symbol of other people's inadequacy and inferiority as well. Although in some ways the
presumed absence of education made the trades inferior, in other ways, the presumed absence of
education actually made the trades superior. From this inverted perspective, formal education
was not a status marker at all, but the reverse. Status resided outside the formal education
system, not in it.

One example of this was the way formal education was viewed with indifference at best, and
sometimes with downright derision, as a means of acquiring useful skills and knowledge. Getting
a formal education, a trades education or any other kind, was not automatically equated with
being able to do the work, or to do it well. Paul and Puran's negative view of learning in
classrooms and learning from books was one aspect of this. Learning for them was decidedly
experiential. Formal education settings, systems, and techniques were not what they considered
helpful for learning what they wanted and needed to know. A similar view was reflected in
George's comments about what he was looking for when hiring new carpenters. When I asked
George in an interview about whether he considered formal training important in selecting new
employees he said, "I don't care about that. I just care how long they've been doing it"
(930311i/2).

George was looking for background and experience. It did not matter what kind of credentials
anybody had, it just mattered what they could do. Another carpenter, making a similar comment,
also brought in the theme of textual authority to reinforce the point that in the trades, a
countervailing set of values held sway.

“The thing about the trades is that it’s what you can do that counts. The attitude is ‘we’ll
give you a try and if it doesn’t work out, we’ll let you go.’ They don’t care where you
studied or whether you have the right credentials; that’s not the important thing. Who
cares about what it says on a resume. It could just as easily be bullshit anyway. Like what
my carpentry instructor said, ‘For god’s sake, if you want to have a resume don’t go and
get it typed. They’ll think your mother did it for you, and you can’t write’” (journal#3).

Sometimes, the tradespeople who seemed to have the highest status in the trades were actually the
ones who were not only extremely skilled but also represented the antithesis of the formal
education system. Charlie spoke about a carpenter who had previously worked for GCC who
was “a really amazing craftsman” and was at the same time a “sort of backwoods guy”
(930827/6). Although he was not “educated” he had a tremendous level of artistry and skill. A
general contractor at a different site spoke about a similar character.

“This guy was brilliant, just brilliant. He could do anything. Something that I might figure
was impossible, he would say, ‘sure, no problem,’ and it would be done. But, you know,
he never finished high school and sometimes I wondered if he could even read and write.
I don’t know how he did it. But he was the best carpenter I ever worked with.”
(920910/3).

Ed talked about a carpenter he had worked with in the past with equal reverence, and with the
same note of respect not just for his skill, but for the fact that he was self-taught, and
conventionally uneducated.

“He was the kind of guy who never read a book or took a course, but he just seemed to
have this incredible knack for carpentry. It was like he’d been doing it all his life.
Actually I think he had; since he was really young anyway. Maybe he couldn’t talk much
about what he knew, but he could just do this stuff, the most beautiful, meticulous work.”
(Journal#3).
These tales were like legends. The craftsmen may have been real, but in the way others talked about them, they took on an almost mythic quality. I detected a sense of rebellion in these tales, similar to the kind of rebellion I associated with “writing on the walls.” These tales praised the flouting of conventionality. There was reflected glory in the achievements of independent iconoclasts who had not “bought in.” There was an undertone of great pride associated with tradespeople who knew things and were tremendously accomplished, and were at the same time completely unconnected with formal institutions and credentials. In these tales, counter to prevailing status relations, education did not count for much at all. Instead, tradespeople placed greater value on learning that was outside orthodox educational conventions of the school and classroom. These tales were a way of turning the tables: “Real skill,” they seemed to say, “has nothing to do with school. Skilled tradespeople learn from the world; school is for wimps.”

As before, the view that prestige could be derived from not having a formal education rather than from having one was not restricted to tradespeople alone. Even non-tradespeople critical of the trades as a place for uneducated dummies expressed this contradictory view. Interestingly enough, going back to the reunion dinner with the teachers I mentioned above, the teacher who was the most derogatory about tradespeople was also the most complimentary. Some of her comments reflected the crassest of stereotypes of tradespeople as ignorant low-lifes. But then the conversation turned a corner and she began to speak of her father. He was a mason, who had hardly any formal education himself. Although she had spoken of his ilk with derision, she now
spoke with tremendous pride of her father the mason's dedication and integrity. My field journal contains the following summary of this aspect of the conversation:

It was the most amazing thing. Suddenly the tenor of the conversation was completely different. She said her father had worked extremely hard all his life and was a good man. In comparison to many educated people she knew, he was the most honest and wise person she had ever met (Journal#4).

So the contradictions were everywhere. They were not just within trades culture but in the contradictory ways the trades were perceived and valued by others.

To sum up this section, there were a number of ways that education was a significant feature of the status landscape in its perceived absence from the trades, as well as in its perceived associations with the elite status of others. Education was by and large not associated with tradespeople and trades work. Tradespeople--and non-tradespeople--connected it with the successful world "out there," but not with the dirty, dusty "here" of the jobsite. Trades education was generally not encompassed within the meaning of the word education. When education was associated with the trades, as at the teachers' reunion, it had dismissive connotations. The assumption was that tradespeople had an educational--and hence intellectual--deficit and the kind of education suited to the trades must be remedial. However, sometimes the status value of education was inverted. According to countervailing notions of prestige and authority within trades culture, status was not associated with education at all, but with freedom from it.
Interpretive summary

The focus of this chapter has been on how, in trades culture, education had important status connotations. The previous chapter looked at how status was infused within trades culture; the present chapter looked at the way education was a key feature in the status landscape. In the first part of the chapter, I showed the various ways that education, although it did not have a strong profile in its own right, was connected with other more visible status markers, namely, wealth, mental work, and textual authority. Through these associations, education was a symbol of eliteness and authority more than it was a symbol of learning and knowledge. It was one more feature of cultural life which tradespeople associated with the dominance of others and their own socially subordinate position. In some ways tradespeople accepted the status connotations that education carried, but in other ways they rejected it, and viewed it with disdain. They were critical of how education was associated with prestige but did not teach people useful things, and was a way of having it easy. In the second part of the chapter I showed how education carried status connotations not only in how it was associated with elite others, but in how it was not associated with the trades. The way tradespeople--and not only tradespeople--figured that education had nothing to do with the trades, was part of the profile of how the trades lacked status within the surrounding culture. Of course, the same inversion of prevailing status relations was a feature of this aspect of trades culture too. Education was a status symbol, true enough. But there was a counter-school perspective that flourished at the jobsite too. Education was a status symbol, but it was also orthodox and soft. Real skill and knowledge were held in esteem, and were not necessarily connected with formal training. Indeed, they were held in special esteem.
when formal training was not in the picture at all.

In the summary of the previous chapter I suggested that the status divisions within trades culture were sometimes an impediment to the overall effectiveness of the building process—especially those status divisions involving mental versus manual work, and textual authority. In conjunction with their lack of status and manual orientation, tradespeople were not credited for their conceptual input into the building process; tradespeople were not much involved in the decision-making, and sometimes the decision-makers did not have sufficient knowledge of the trades side of the building process to make the best decisions. As I said before, the division between knowers and doers, and the different levels of status associated with them, sometimes made the work more complicated rather than making it go well or better. What I want to suggest in this chapter is that education, because of its strong associations with other status markers, was implicated in this state of affairs. Education contributed to the way the trades lacked status, and to the way the work did not go well. It helped to shape the status divisions between knowers and doers. Architects, being university educated, were supposed to know better and have the answers. Tradespeople, being allegedly “not educated,” were not. The very division between university training and trades training, and the automatic assumption that the former counted as education while the latter barely had a profile, played a key role in disadvantaging the essential contribution of the trades to the building process. It would appear that we live in a society which assumes the default view that “they’ve been to university, so I had better believe them” and correspondingly does not assume the view that “they are experienced tradespeople, so I had better
believe *them.*” These assumptions are built into the status landscape of the trades and of the wider culture beyond.

I also suggested in the previous chapter that tradespeople’s backstage tales, while one-sided, penetrated widespread assumptions and contained important critiques of the wider culture. Tradespeople’s backstage tales about wealth, mental work, and textual authority showed the way these things were privileged in society, and the way they carried implicit cultural biases. Likewise, tradespeople’s tales about education contained a similar element of cultural critique. In their critical comments about education, tradespeople did not embrace received assumptions that education works equally for everybody, or that it automatically teaches people important things, or teaches them effectively. As outsiders to the educational process, tradespeople associated education with the orthodoxy of privileged elites, saw that in their own lives things did not always conform to orthodox assumptions, and the world looked quite different.
In this, the final chapter, I revisit what I have said in the preceding chapters, and bring it all to a close. Although I have called the chapter the “conclusion” to suggest finality, the goal of cultural analysis is not to provide firm answers, but a different way of looking. Therefore, rather than conclusive answers, this chapter provides a general summing up. I discuss what I have learned from this study and why I believe it is of value. Since I acknowledged from the beginning that this study is not an end point but a step along the way, I also provide some suggestions for future research, and possible ways to go from here.

I begin the chapter with a summary of the interpretive story I have just told, to bring the important points together. I then proceed to a discussion of what I have learned, stepping back from the interpretation to put it in the context of broader perspectives and concerns. For want of a better term, I have called this section “lessons from the field” and my comments address both what I have learned from this research experience as well as what the implications are, if what I have learned is correct. These lessons pertain to the four thematic areas I have explored in this project, namely, a) culture, b) status, c) the meaning of work, and d) the meaning of education. My comments about culture stress the importance of backstage tales as a medium of cultural expression, and of contradiction as an essential element of the cultural fabric. My comments about status stress the central importance of status as an element of cultural identity, and the
importance of tacitly agreed-upon status markers as a way of communicating status 
understandings. My comments about the meaning of work address the taken-for-granted 
assumptions and biases about work that operate in our culture, with an emphasis, of course, on 
the negative stigma of work in the trades. And finally, my comments about the meaning of 
education explore how education is connected with these assumptions and biases, and how, if the 
education system took this connection more seriously into account, it would look quite different.

In the suggestions for further research which close the chapter, I provide four possible approaches 
that would expand on the issues raised here, each from a slightly different angle. The first 
suggestion is for an analysis of education as cultural practice, the second is for an in-depth textual 
analysis of current debates, the third is to do a comparative analysis of vocational and academic 
curricula, and the fourth is to examine, in a more personal way than a dissertation allows, the 
experiential dimension of the themes explored here, especially the meaning of work and 
education.

Summary

This document has told the story of education that I read in the undertones and contradictions of 
trades culture. That story was about how status was an important part of the cultural landscape, 
and education was an important status marker. In the cultural landscape of the trades, status 
belonged to others, not to tradespeople themselves. Education was one of the things that told 
them so. To tell the story, I first discussed in detail what status looked like in the everyday
practice of a custom home building jobsite. I showed how, at the jobsite, clients and architects were elites who had high status, relative to tradespeople who were "normal people" with no particular claims to status or social prestige. I showed how the status of clients was invested in their wealth, of architects in their being mental workers, and of elites generally in the authority vested in the textual practices that governed everyday life. I showed how status messages were inscribed at the jobsite in the minor offhand details of everyday life, such as jokes, hardhats, lunchboxes, gossip, graffiti, building plans, and patterns of what was okay to say when, and to whom. According to these status messages, tradespeople and the work they did were granted little acknowledgement or esteem. I showed how these messages were also inscribed in the world beyond the site—for instance, in how I felt "unclean" when I went to the university from the jobsite in workclothes, and in how non-tradespeople had stereotypes of tradespeople as being ignorant and dull.

Having explored the theme of status in detail, I then turned to a discussion of how education fit into the picture. I showed how in its presence and absence, education was another strand in the way that status differences were built into everyday practice. In terms of presence, education dovetailed with all of the other status markers that carried meaning at the site. Education was associated with the wealth of clients, with the mental work of architects and with the textual authority of all elites. It was associated with all the things that carried status, and all the things with which the trades were not associated. In terms of absence, education figured in trades culture not just as a status marker but also as a lack, a deficit, and a non-issue. This contributed
to the way the trades lacked status, influence, or value.

Status was a central theme in the story, but not the only theme. A second theme was about contradiction. The tradespeople in my study partially accepted prevailing status relations, but at the same time partially criticized them and turned them upside down. Tradespeople took their lack of status largely for granted, but they were also critical of prevailing status symbols and status holders, and asserted a countervailing superiority: They (elites) may have had the status, but we (tradespeople) knew better, and had the moral high ground. With regard to education in particular, tradespeople accepted the prevailing assumption that education meant knowledge and intelligence. But they were critical of education too, and scorned the same assumptions they lived by. For instance, architects had the education, but did not have the knowledge to show for it. Education granted status to others but it did not generally serve the trades; tradespeople regarded education as one of many factors that set the agenda in the wider world—although it did not do a very good job of it—and did not set it to the advantage of tradespeople.

Tradespeople’s views were contradictory, but that does not mean they were confused. Both aspects of the trades perspective were culturally grounded and astute. The first, accepting, side of things reflected an understanding of the mythic narrative that shaped the prevailing culture. The second, complaining, side of things, reflected an understanding of how the mythic narrative was narrow, biased, and did not tell the whole story. In part, the tradespeople’s complaints may have been sour grapes, but in part they provided insightful critiques of prevailing cultural biases. In
their criticisms, tradespeople saw how these biases influenced the world of work, and impinged on
the quality of their own working life. They saw how, according to prevailing cultural biases, the
two parts of the building process--conception/execution, mental/manual, design/construction--
were dichotomized into two solitudes, unequally balanced and unequally favoured. The people on
the mental side--the educated, textual side, the one associated with knowledge and success--gave
the orders, got the credibility, and took the credit. The people on the manual side--the supposedly
uneducated, non-textual, workclothes and lunchbox side--responded to orders which they could
not influence, whether the orders were adequate or not; they got little recognition, and more often
than not got the blame. These are important cultural problems, which tradespeople had some
insight into, but little say about.

This story, as I stated from the outset, is a highly interpretive one. I have not tried to present a
set of objective answers to a finite problem, but to look at the everyday world differently,
examining some taken-for-granted assumptions about work, status, and education embedded in
everyday actions and presuppositions about the social world. I have tried to read between the
lines of the prevailing cultural narrative wherein trades work is considered "lowly" and part of its
lowly status is because it lacks an educational cachet. The interpretation is mine, but it owes
much to the words and actions of the tradespeople who have been the focus of this study. Geertz
(1973) has said that cultural interpretation "is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the
guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses" (p. 20). If my guesses and
explanatory conclusions have been good ones, then it remains to be pondered: What is the
significance in knowing this, and seeing things in this particular way? What lessons can be drawn? What are the implications? That is what I want to talk about next.

Lessons from the field

I said at the beginning that as a cultural analyst, I start from a philosophical position that understanding must be grounded in everyday experience if it is to impart anything meaningful about the human condition. Cultural analysis gives testimony, and testimony helps us connect in a grounded, open-eyed way with the forces that shape our lives. The results may not be absolute, but the process of enquiry helps us to gain a clearer understanding of some of the subtle forces at work in the world that shape what we do and who we are. My main purpose and goal in this study has been to look hard at one small corner of the world, to try to see the familiar as strange, the strange as familiar, and to see beyond and beneath everyday assumptions. Cultural analysis gives testimony, but what has this testimony helped to connect with? What have I learned from seeing beyond and beneath everyday assumptions about status and education in trades culture? As I said above, there are four “big important issues” at the heart of this exploration. They are: culture, status, the meaning of work, and the meaning of education. I will say a bit about each of them.

First, however, I should say a brief word about generalization. I know that in qualitative studies it is said that it is not advisable to generalize from the data, because the samples are so small and the process so subjective (Marshall and Rossman, 1989; Silverman, 1993). I understand and even
endorse the scientific reasons for caution. However, in my comments below, I am not speaking as a scientist who purports to have proven a state of affairs conclusively, but rather as a social observer and critic who is reflecting on the wider implications and relevance of her interpretation. Following the example of Sennett and Cobb (1972), this “involves speculation and generalization far beyond the boundaries of the conversations themselves” (p. 10), not for the sake of claiming that this one jobsite stands for the whole world of the trades writ small, but as a way of moving, however conjecturally, from local perceptions to general possibilities (Geertz, 1973).

a) Culture

Culture is and remains a difficult concept. Culture is like breathing—so essential to human life that it is hardly noticed and, when noticed, hard to consciously isolate and examine in its particulars. In the process of doing this study, there were two characteristics of cultural life which I learned to pay close attention to, and from which I learned a great deal. They were backstage tales and contradiction. Both have been, in different ways, keynote features of my analysis. I have focused on backstage tales as an important medium of cultural expression, and on contradiction as an important element of how people live within and negotiate cultural constraints. They may seem very mundane things upon which to hang an interpretation, or to underscore as critical features of cultural meaning. But culture is, in its very essence, utterly mundane. These mundane features of everyday life are precisely the things of which cultural experience, understanding, and communication are made.
The thing about backstage tales which brought them to my attention from the very beginning—although in a very unfocussed, tentative way—was my own participation in them. When I began looking at trades culture I found myself caught up in and telling the same kinds of tales that proliferated at the jobsite, about the cost of this faucet, or the lack of detail in that design, and so on. People in my life with no background in the trades were curious about such tales as well. They wanted to hear them, and participated with their own stories of excess, and facial gestures suggesting dismay and amazement. I began to think that such tales were an important part of our taken-for-granted understandings of the social world. I undertook this study with a sense that there were some very important underlying messages being communicated in the everyday banter I engaged in, as both listener and speaker. These expressions of belief, chagrin, or complaint, couched sometimes in humour, sometimes in gossip, and sometimes in peevish annoyance, contained a whole world view. I talk elsewhere in this chapter about some aspects of that world view—about what it says about education, status and the trades—but I want to emphasize here that the medium is as important as the message. In my analysis of the backstage tales at the jobsite, I have explored how we define ourselves, both individually and culturally, by the backstage tales we tell. Backstage tales are among the richest modes of communication available to explore the culture we inhabit, and the parts of it we most take for granted. We are all participants in backstage tales, and we use and animate taken-for-granted stereotypes when we tell and hear them. Backstage tales are very important because they tell us so much about ourselves as cultural members, about the values that get under our skins, and about how these values function in our daily lives, as we negotiate the relationships and the dynamics at play all the time around us.
The other important dimension of culture that I have explored in this study is contradiction. It would be convenient, and much easier to account for human behaviour, if cultural values and beliefs were consistently accepted and adhered to, and if cultural participants settled into the cultural landscape with no opinions about it, and without making any fuss. However, as I have learned in this study, culture does not work that way—or, at least, people do not always respond the same way to their cultural surroundings. That, too, is cultural. Cultural perspectives are mobile and partial rather than fixed and monolithic; their mobility and partiality show up in the persistent strands of contradiction which are part of the landscape. Trades culture allowed the tradespeople in this study room to move—to think, evaluate, and express themselves within the constraints of the culture they inhabited, but not as automatons or prisoners. In their everyday conversations with each other and with me, tradespeople expressed many values and beliefs about status, education, and the worth of trades work. Their comments may not have been an expression of deep inner conviction, but reflected shared judgements and understandings. Their comments also challenged and questioned those same beliefs at the same time. Both dimensions, contrary as they might have been, went hand in hand. Trades culture is not special in this way. Cultural life generally is riddled with contradictions. I have learned, through this study, that contradiction is an essential facet of culture; recognizing it is a critical step towards understanding cultural processes and the vagaries of human action.

b) Status

Status, as I have said before, was not a concept that mobilized this study from the outset. I had a
tentative sense at the beginning that I was interested in issues that touched on such themes as values, (in)equality, and social identity (Walzer, 1983). Status was one of many words in my vocabulary for the same broad area of concern. Regardless of terminology, the underlying theme of this study--identified as status, for the connotations of self-perception it carries with it (Lipset, 1969; Turner, 1988)--has been the element of relative social evaluation which was a key feature of trades culture. I began with a sense that the way tradespeople identified their occupational identity as "lowly," and the basis upon which such an identification was made, contained important messages about underlying meanings that shape our culture. My conclusions are not much different, except that I am better informed and more deeply convinced that status--like moral tales and contradiction, even subsuming them--is an essential part of the cultural equipment of everybody, not just tradespeople.

One of the major contributions of this study has been to show what status and the link between status and education in the trades looked like in a grounded, cultural way. Saying that the trades lack status is not in itself startling news. Neither is it startling news to say that education contributes to the status picture. That university carries a certain cachet and trades school does not is hardly headline material. But what this study has shown is how these messages and understandings are communicated in the course of everyday life, and especially how education is invested with a lot of social meaning, even far away from settings that are conspicuously educational. With regard to status, as with so much in culture, little things say a lot. An important contribution of this study has been to examine a sampling of those little things to see
what they say, and how they tell us what they do. The word status by itself does not tell us very much. But to locate understandings of status in such key features of cultural life as backstage tales, wealth, mental work, and textual authority gives a much clearer picture of how status works as an aspect of individual and cultural experience.

Of course, again, it is not dramatic news to say that if we want to look at status in everyday life we should consider something like wealth. Wealth is a known status marker. There is no particular news in that. But to examine how wealth figures in the everyday conversations of people who work in a setting where wealth is a part of the social horizon provides a much clearer portrait of how people respond to wealth as a status marker, how they position and understand themselves relative to it, and how they both accept and invert the implicit status relations that wealth carries. Likewise, to examine how mental work and textual authority also figure in the everyday status landscape provides a fuller picture of how these are taken-for-granted features of cultural life that carry implicit power and prestige, and of how this very "implicitness" figures in everyday working life. Also, examining how all of these status markers are a feature of how ordinary working people understand education provides a very important, grounded profile of how education is a part of how all people think, not just what teachers and learners do. The examination of the notion of status this study provides has brought an abstract concept down to the ground, and provided a way to see how it is embedded in everyday actions and evaluations of ourselves, others, and of "what is going on in the scheme of things."
c) The meaning of work

This has been a study of trades culture. But trades culture is present not only in trades settings. It is also present in the relationship between the trades and other occupational contexts in the wider world. As I have shown, tradespeople do not just interact with tradespeople, they also interact with—and have ideas about—architects, designers, clients, and many other social and occupational groups. Relationships with and assumptions about these others is an important part of trades culture. Trades culture is not contained within rigid, exclusive boundaries but is shaped by a social horizon which includes many other kinds of work and workers. Part of the reckoning of status in trades culture involves the relative status of the trades in relation to other occupations.

So trades culture fuses into the wider culture. Although I have been looking at the trades specifically, my broader focus has been on the meaning of work in a much more comprehensive sense. In the same way that trades culture did not stop and start at the jobsite perimeter, my focus did not stop and start with the trades only. To borrow Geertz's (1973) famous statement that ethnographers “don’t study villages (tribes, towns, neighborhoods...); they study in villages” (p. 22, italics in original), I did not study the trades, I studied in the trades. My goal was not just to explore trades culture but to explore understandings and values associated with different occupations and the role of education in shaping them. The trades happened to provide a particularly provocative vantage point from which to explore such interests, because of the widespread cultural assumption that the trades lack value because they do not require formal academic credentials. My comments in this section are thus on two levels. I first discuss what I
have learned about the meaning of work in general, and secondly discuss what I have learned about the meaning of work with specific reference to the trades.

Through the process of doing this analysis, I have learned to consider the occupational configuration of conception and execution—envisioning a thing and bringing it into being, knowing and doing, mental and manual work—carefully. I have come to believe that we inhabit a culture where conception and execution are so divided up that they are hardly seen to be in relationship with each other. Conception work not only has prestige that execution work does not, but because it has prestige it sometimes crowds the stage. Conception is not only seen as the best thing, it is sometimes seen as the only thing. Making plans and decisions is hard. But making plans is not the same as following them through. Moreover, following them through is seldom a simple matter, and carries hardships of its own. It does not help matters that occupational groups such as tradespeople, who are charged with the tasks of follow-through, seldom get much credit or reward for their efforts.

In a similar vein, I have learned to pay attention to the idea of “getting the credit” and to think about what people know who are not given credit for knowing. People whose knowledge is societally validated and certified get to say what counts as knowledge, and what correspondingly does not. So, for example, extrapolating on the theme of textual authority, in a literate society it is the literate who set the agenda and who, in setting the agenda, implicitly associate literacy with ability. Those whose knowledge is in their hands, bodies, memories, or some other capacity that
is not recognized in the same way, do not get the same recognition for what they know. What do people know who are not in a position to say? Quite often, much more than they are given credit for.

In this study, moreover, I have come to see that the prevailing culture contains deeply embedded assumptions about what kind of work is hard and what kind of work has value, and that these assumptions are tied more to occupational status than to actual hardship or actual worth. I am reminded of two comments by Walzer (1983) which particularly help me come to the point about what I have learned about the meaning of work. In his exploration of the notion of distributive justice, Walzer introduces the theme of “hard work” and examines the view of hard work commonly held within our present, distributively unjust, society. Hard work, according to Walzer, is not work that is hard because it is challenging but because it is gruelling, relentless, and unrewarded—not the hard work of writing a book, say, but the hard work of emptying bedpans, digging ditches, or cleaning up garbage. He claims that it is often taken for granted that those who do the hardest work in society are those who are somehow, in doing the hard work, getting their due:

Because of their race or sex, or presumed intelligence, or social status, they deserve to do it, or they don’t deserve not to do it, or they somehow qualify for it...[although] it would be hard to say what the hard workers of this or any other society have done to deserve the danger and degradation their work commonly entails; or how they, and they alone, have qualified for it (1988, p. 166).

For Walzer, this set of assumptions is part of a mythic narrative about work in society that is far
from acceptable or just. A first step in doing something about it—about the common understandings we may not intellectually embrace but are happy enough to tolerate while they serve us, and while there is somebody else to do the emptying, digging, and cleaning—is to at least expand our awareness about what hard work is, and what the hard workers are up to: “One way to break the collusion,” says Walzer, regarding our general disregard for hard work, and hard workers’ consequent disregard for themselves, “and perhaps the best way, is to make sure that every citizen has a working knowledge of the working days of his hardest working members” (p. 176).

Following from Walzer’s moral position and my own experience in studying the cultural context of one particular group of hard workers (although tradespeople do glory work compared to the hard workers cited in Walzer’s example), I have learned that we live far too easily within an unjust and inaccurate framework of assumptions about statused and non-statused work. I reiterate Walzer’s admonishment that at the very least we need to know more about the working circumstances of a vast range of workers in society, as a first step towards looking beyond the given, and recognizing the injustices embedded within our most unquestioned and uninformed beliefs and practices. Thus I am calling for greater efforts to problematize our understanding of what work is and how it is valued. One way to do so is to do as I have done in this study, examining the way status is at play in the workplace, and the way statused understandings of work are infused within everyday work practices and relationships, and are a part of the prevailing world view. Work, on the face of it, is the most ordinary of notions. It is a word that
we use easily and unquestioningly. But, digging beneath the surface of common meanings and understandings about work, there is a wealth of insights to be found about who we are as a people, and what the undercurrents and political relations are, within the taken-for-granted order of things.

Turning from the topic of what I have learned about the meaning of work generally to what I have learned about the meaning of work in the trades, let me first address two possible and related misconceptions that could be taken from this study regarding authorial bias, and the question of whose “side” I am on. The first concerns my efforts to see things as tradespeople see them, and to articulate the sense I have made of their point of view. I could, in light of this declared perspective, perhaps be accused of partiality and taking a sympathetic rather than an objectively detached stance. Admittedly, my aim has never been to set myself up as an impartial judge of whether or not the tradespeople’s view of the world is utterly right and true. But my aim has never been to be a devoted advocate either. This study is not intended as a eulogy for the noble and downtrodden tradespeople who are all wonderfully brilliant and decent, yet terribly mistreated and oppressed. There is ignorance, incompetence, and laziness in the trades, the same as anywhere else. But the clause “the same as anywhere else” is key. Because they wear workclothes and tool belts does not give tradespeople any special premium on either brilliance or stupidity, in the same way that having a lot of money or a Harvard education does not give so-called elites any special premium on those things. For the most part we know that, yet there remains a set of biases, assumptions, and stereotypes—about tradespeople, wealthy people and
many others—which we must win our way past in order to recognize that social identity and individual identity do not always conform to type. My aim has not been to reverse the stereotype of tradespeople but to open it up for examination.

The second possible misconception raises the added concern of whether I have not only been speaking one-sidedly for tradespeople, but equally one-sidedly against clients and architects. I have collected and examined tradespeople’s backstage tales about clients and architects, but I have paid scant attention to how things look from the other side. It may appear that in recounting these tales I am a purveyor of negative stereotypes that are as unrepresentative as the ones about tradespeople I have wanted to challenge. I have talked about contradiction and the way tradespeople inverted prevailing status relations, and it may seem I have been doing some inversion of my own. Yet it has not been my purpose to blame clients and architects for the things tradespeople say about them, or to set them up as the “culprit” in the lesser status of working people. My aim has been to draw attention to the culturally inbuilt tendency to position tradespeople in one place on the social hierarchy, and to place architects, wealthy people, and other elites in another. It is not the individual clients and architects I have been talking about, but the inclination of tradespeople--and all of us--to cast them in a superior and privileged social position, and the inclination of those cast in that position to take their superiority for granted.

To take the particular instance of the relationship between architecture and the trades, what I have learned in this study is simply to pay attention rather than to make assumptions or assign
immediate blame or credence to either party. I have learned that architects, by virtue of status and education, are not more inclined—nor less—to have the better answer or be right. Likewise, I have learned to wonder what it means when a child who likes carpentry is told that “you should be an architect”—as if carpentry did not count and architecture were unproblematically the pinnacle of achievement in the building process. I am not suggesting this is bad advice. But I am suggesting that there is something to contemplate, regarding the underlying suppositions and social messages about the meaning of work and occupational choice, contained within this advice. I by no means want to diminish the profession of architecture or disregard the artistry and even genius which some architects bring to their work. But I do want to say that it takes another kind of artistry—and occasionally even genius too—to build the structures which architects design. It is due more to social bias than to just deserts that the creativity of design is granted a kind of esteem that the creativity of production is not deemed to merit.

Thus, I have not intended to invert prevailing assumptions and insist that all tradespeople do, in fact, know better, and that all architects do not. Rather, I have come to see our culture as containing a predilection to unthinkingly position architects as elites who tower over tradespeople. It is important to know we do this and be alert to the misunderstandings embedded in such unreflecting behaviour. For illustration, I am reminded of three accounts I recently happened across that touch, in different ways, on assumptions about the way status is associated with the building process. The first was a radio interview with a Vancouver architect about why there has been a greater incidence of leaky apartment buildings in recent years. The architect
claimed that the fault lay in shoddy workmanship and certain defects in the building code. However, my partner, Ed, who also heard the interview, claimed that it was because architects opted for designs that were chic and trendy, but inappropriate for the local climate. I am not able to arbitrate over who was right. However, I did notice that it was an architect, not a tradesperson, who got to be the expert on the radio, name the problem, and to deflect accountability onto the perceived deficiencies of others. Perhaps it was just an architect’s version of a backstage tale—although it was a public assertion and far from backstage. It would seem, then, that some tales are more backstage than others. It is this imbalance over who gets to say—rather than the strict veracity of what gets said—which is the essential point I want to emphasize and underscore.

The second account was an article I came across in a recent issue in the trade journal, *Fine Homebuilding*. The article was written by a former architect on the topic of why he had decided to leave the profession of architecture (Maynard, 1996). His argument paralleled very closely my interpretation regarding the division between manual and mental work. He claimed that architecture had become overly isolated, entangled in the abstract and theoretical, with little communication or sympathy between designers and builders. In his view “the construction process should integrate builder and architect....[w]e must practice the fine art of building not in theory alone, nor exclusively in the practical consideration, but in the thoughtful integration of both” (p. 16). My conclusions support the view that such a thoughtful integration is a rare thing indeed. And I would add that the culturally entrenched false dichotomy and differential status
between both sides of the building process is part of the reason why.

The third account comes from a somewhat tangential source, namely (I blush to admit) murder mysteries. Fictional detectives, in addition to offering a pleasant leisure-time diversion, also offer an interesting commentary about the social world. For instance, there is Morse, Colin Dexter’s well-educated Oxford detective who features in a popular series of mysteries novels (and now made-for-television dramas). Morse loves opera and keeps his mental faculties honed with crossword puzzles and literary verse. But there is also Rostnikoff, a Russian detective who is the main character in a series of mystery novels by Stuart Kaminsky. Rostnikoff is trying to survive the corruption and decay of late communism. As a good representative of proletariat culture, instead of crosswords, one way Rostnikoff likes to engage his brain is by figuring out plumbing problems. Rostnikoff finds plumbing conceptually intricate, and approaches plugged drains and leaky pipes with intellectual zeal. Before I began this study, I would have taken it for granted that crosswords and poetry signified a level of mental sharpness that had nothing in common with plumbing whatsoever. But now that I have a better appreciation for the kind of conceptual involvement that various kinds of trades work involves, I have come to see them as lying much closer together than I previously recognized, and to reflect on and rue the bias that caused me to think otherwise.

d) The meaning of education

So far in this chapter I have provided a broad summing up of what I have learned regarding
culture, status, and the meaning of work. Now I turn to a discussion of what I have learned about the meaning of education, and the implications of my interpretation for educational thought and practice. This discussion is divided into two parts. The first part involves a return to the current popular debate about the relationship between education and work I introduced briefly in chapter two, which I characterized—as represented particularly by public policy—as part of a mythic narrative shaping public consciousness rather than a real-life snapshot of the events of the day. I want to revisit that debate with fresh eyes, drawing on the insights from beyond the mythic narrative I have gained from this study, as a basis of rebuttal. The second part of the discussion is a bit more ambitious. I want to put forward some broad suggestions about how education might be structured very differently, if the interpretation of the cultural meaning of education put forward in this study is on the right track, and were taken more seriously into account.

A broad characterization of the general tenor of the popular debate might go something like this: We live in a world where times are changing at breakneck speed, economies are becoming more globally competitive, and technology is getting more sophisticated. Many people do not have the skills and knowledge they need to keep up with technological advances and changing workforce conditions. To address this situation, the learning system has a critical role in “preparing students and workers for the world of work....All components of the system do have a role in developing knowledge, skills and attitudes for the workplace” (British Columbia Labour Force Development Board, 1995, p. 1).
If public perspectives such as I have characterized here—especially as crystallized in the earnest
declarations of public policy—are indeed a form of mythic narrative as I, following Kliebard
(1990) contend, an appropriate approach to assessing mythic narrative is by looking not so much
at questions of truth or falsity, but rather at questions about whose voices are included in the
narrative, whose are excluded, and whose interests are being served. My hunch from the
beginning was that the mythic narrative emphasized education’s legitimizing role without
acknowledging the extent to which education is, first, imbued with cultural freight, and second
imbued with a particular kind of freight which serves to the advantage of some and the
disadvantage of others—such as tradespeople.

And what have I learned? First, a confirmation. In the current discussion, education is portrayed
in its functional capacity only. Education consists of routine systems and practices—teaching and
learning, getting credentials, and acquiring skills—that are organized around social conformity and
order. Fair enough. But what I have confirmed in the process of carrying out this study is that
there is another side of the story, which carries important information about less conventional and
utilitarian aspects of cultural life. The popular debate perpetuates a functionalist way of looking
at the relationship between education and work, without taking into account the other ways in
which education is important in people’s lives—as an element of meaning. This study has been an
exploration of the ways education is not just part of what we do but how we think, interact, and
make judgements about ourselves and others and the wider culture that penetrates and surrounds
us. Tradespeople, like all of us, go through their daily lives against a vast backdrop of taken-for-
granted understandings about education and the "good life." These understandings are multiple, complex and often contradictory, but they are fundamentally important to acknowledge, in order to gain insight into the deeper realities of cultural life. They are important to acknowledge because, for people such as tradespeople in particular, to whom education does not grant any particular esteem or social cachet, education not only carries cultural meaning—it often carries cultural meaning with negative overtones. In an educational and occupational hierarchy where the trades are implicitly located on the lower end of a largely unspoken social scale, education carries few positive associations. For many tradespeople, education has not done much for them, and has little to do with their occupational reality. They do not think that the way to solve a problem is to take a course. They do not see education as having served them particularly well. They are not averse to learning, but do not automatically link "education" and "learning" together in the same breath. Education, from the perspective of trades culture, signifies the elite privilege of others, more than—as public policy would have it—the growth and potential of the whole population. For tradespeople, education is a marker of status interwoven with many others, all of them part of a system which tells them that their work is insignificant. From the perspective of trades culture, the positive enthusiasms expressed in mythic narratives about education as the hope of the future, at best ring hollow, and at worst discount the experience and perceptions of a sector of the population it purports to represent.

I have also learned that the view from the jobsite provides a valuable perspective from which to ask the kinds of questions which need to be asked about the public discussion. From the point of
view of trades culture, one might reasonably ask about the public discussion about education, "who is doing most of the talking?" It is generally those who have themselves been privileged within the educational system who speak out as advocates of the education enterprise. At least, it is not generally tradespeople who are doing the talking. It is generally educators and other mental workers, coming from a position of relative status and privilege, who are the dominant voices in the debate and who hence are in a position to name the problem and the character of social need. In short, from the point of view of the jobsite, the public discourse about the relationship between education and work can be seen as being located within a particular, and particularly privileged, class place, which takes existing status relations for granted, and permits little genuine voice to tradespeople and others who are marginalized and de-legitimized by reified occupational and educational biases.

The perspective from the trades also provides a particular vantage point from which to evaluate not just who is talking, but what is being said. For instance, one key theme in the public debate is about the inadequate or declining skill levels of the workforce. There are "shortages of skilled workers" (British Columbia Labour Force Development Board, p. 20) which calls for a "need for generally higher skills across the whole range of future work" (p. 20). The argument put forward that this situation has arisen because "skill needs of the present and future are radically different from those of the past" (p. 20) sounds reasonable enough. But in light of my interpretation that status was an important factor in the way things at the jobsite sometimes did not go as well as they might have, an interesting alternate way of looking at things suggests itself. If we take the
case of the trades as an example, maybe the widely diagnosed problem of “declining skills” is not so much about skill at all, but about the imbalanced, hierarchical way the world of work is organized. Granted, the concern about declining skills is in part driven by the perception that work is changing and new skills are required to accommodate the new workplace. But regardless of whether the work is changing and whether it is “new” or “old” skills that are required, there is a further question about whether skills, old or new, are even recognized for what they are. Rather than skills declining or work changing, it might be instead that some skills are not being recognized because they do not conform to a narrow set of assumptions about what skill looks like, based on the cultural associations of some occupations—and not others—with status markers such as mental work, textual authority, and educational credentials. Or it might be that status-related assumptions about the relationship between manual and mental work (and workers), and attending impediments to communication, are colouring general perceptions about the nature of both work and skill. For instance, the incident from the jobsite comes to mind, where one of the carpenters was concerned about being seen by Beverley, the client, as slow because it was taking him a long time to deal with a problem that had come about because of a late design change. In such a situation, it is easily conceivable that Beverley, in her unfamiliarity with trades work, might go away shaking her head about the declining skills of tradespeople. Yet the problem, from the jobsite perspective, had not been one of Ed’s lack of skill but of poor organization on the part of the architect, in not getting the design completed earlier and in not thinking through the implications of one design choice over another. If anything, the lack of skill could be attributed to the architect—the one supposedly with the “education”—not the carpenter—the one supposedly
without. This is a minor and partially hypothetical vignette, but I propose it as a possible analogy to the wider situation. What might look like one--subordinate and “uneducated”--person’s lack of skill might well derive from another--dominant and “educated”--person’s lack of foresight and detailed planning.

Thus, in summing up my discomfort with the public debate’s assumed easy commerce between employment, the economy, and education there are two reasons why I find it so important to recognize the mythic character of some aspects of how work and education are unreflectedly connected, and to examine the culture messages that are communicated within prevailing mythic narratives about the relationship between education and work. First, the public debate is a simplistic portrayal of a complex problem, which acts as a kind of a smokescreen. In casting current social problems in the language of economic competitiveness and skills development, there is no acknowledgement of the larger problems of social inequity--and the back-to-back privileging of some sectors of society and the marginalization of others--which need to be addressed. Further, the public debate, in the way that it calls for more education, skills development, training, and upgrading for those who lack the necessary credentials, casts a burden of responsibility on people who supposedly lack skills and are perceived to be failing, for whatever reasons, to keep pace with the changing times. However, drawing on the analogy of the carpenter and Beverley and the architect’s late design changes that made the carpenter speak of feeling like he looked slow, I suggest that the perceived skill problem that we face is not only or necessarily that some people lack the necessary technical skills, but that other people, often those
more prominently placed to speak of societies' ills and remedies, lack the perspective to clearly diagnose where the problems lie, and what needs to be done to fix them. From the perspective of trades culture, the problem is not entirely or necessarily one of skill deficiencies, but of the bifurcation of tasks into more and less prestigious occupational roles, lack of foresighted and comprehensive planning, and insufficient recognition of how manual and mental work are not dichotomous but merely different parts of a whole, and need to be considered equally, and together.

Taking the perspective of trades culture into account, the problem is not just one of how education is linked with employment and the economy in current public discourse, but how manual and mental work are divided and embedded into different sectors of the educational enterprise. The false division between conception and execution is reinforced by the division of curriculum areas into different tracks—for instance, academic and vocational, and in the context of this study, design and production—which are granted different degrees of social value. When one track is held in higher esteem than the other, and sets the terms of evaluation, the whole system suffers. As in the case of the jobsite, when conception is granted status and execution is taken for granted, and when textual representations carry more weight than production and implementation, then difficulties ensue. The education system, in order to foster meaningful learning, has to find ways to challenge and reframe the duality between conception and production, rather than reinforce the unequal differences between them. Real learning, some say (Freire, 1970), involves the reciprocal integration of conception and execution, theory and practice. The education system
needs to support this integration, not just at the level of pedagogical practice--through, say, apprenticeship and experiential learning--but at the level of organization and structure. Government initiatives such as Skills Now, and reports such as *Training for what?*, pay a good deal of lip service to the idea of integration across the curriculum, and endorse the idea that a bifurcated education system is not effective. However, because of the instrumental orientation that shapes these policy directions and the resulting efforts towards change which they engender, they reflect little recognition of the holistic nature of knowledge and understanding. In this context, discussions about integration are more about gearing the education system to produce effective workers and meet the needs of industry, than about acknowledging and developing curricula that effectively address the epistemological and social dimensions of knowledge for work and knowledge for life. In raising the subject of integration, I am not talking about employability skills, for the sake of the employer. Nor am I talking about greater accord across disciplines and program areas, i.e., how the vocational students at the local community college should take a course in existential philosophy, and the existential philosophy students should learn about pipefitting, or heavy duty mechanics. Rather, I am talking about recognizing the way that heavy duty mechanics, pipefitting, and existential philosophy are conceptually connected, and that the social divisions associated with the social construction of these different lines of work and study are laden with presuppositions which need to be opened up for examination. Rostnikoff, that Russian detective with the fascination for plumbing, would know what I mean.

*Training for what?* purports to speak for the interests of business and labour. If jobsite culture is
taken to represent a small (and admittedly non-unionized) corner of the labour perspective, there are certainly some ways in which the views expressed in this report and at the jobsite overlap. Most particularly, the critiques of university-based academic study as being abstract, impractical, and insufficiently oriented towards relevant workplace skills expressed at the jobsite have some echo in the views expressed in *Training for what?* which endorse an altered balance in educational provision away from academic study in favour of more applied program areas. From this angle, the policy discourse as expressed by *Training for what?* appears to capture and represent the mood of the tradesworkers who participated in this study. And yet, according to my interpretation of the words and actions of those tradesworkers, there was a strong sense of disenfranchisement within trades culture. Policy, as they spoke of it (or more accurately did not speak of it), had nothing to do with them. And indeed, although there is a certain superficial commonality of perspective between jobsite discourse and the views expressed in *Training for what?*, there is one important way, illuminated by this study, that the policy discourse, even although making claims that the tradesworkers at the jobsite would likely endorse, did not represent jobsite interests. The root of the critique about university education expressed at the jobsite was about *status*, about how university seemed to place other people in positions where they got more recognition for their work, were viewed to be more intelligent and successful, and were in a position of greater power and authority. The root of the jobsite critique was about a sense of social inequity and about feeling like subordinates in a work process wherein their labours had equal value in achieving the desired end results. In the instrumental, functional, industry-led orientation of policy documents such as *Training for what?*, attention to the status-
laden social aspects of the relationship between education and work were completely missing. In this ringing absence, the policy discourse, although superficially in accord with the interests of working people, has little to say about their real interests at all.

In bringing this discussion to a close, there is one final point I would like to make about what I have learned from doing this study regarding the meaning of education. It pertains to a deep-seated contradiction that lurks at the heart of this work. Throughout this interpretation, I have taken the perspective of trades culture very seriously. I have not claimed that the words and actions of the tradespeople recounted in this study, as I have interpreted them, are to be taken as the only perspective, but that they are thought-provoking, at times insightful, and have something to tell us about the underlying assumptions of prevailing beliefs and practices about education and work. However, their opinions have often times been very critical of exactly the kind of activity I am engaged in. From the point of view of the jobsite, writing a dissertation is at best an elitist, airy-fairy endeavour. It has little practical application, is not considered real work, and, as the labourer said, results in nothing substantial but “only something to read.” I have said, moreover, that such opinions as theirs are worthwhile, and that such an activity as mine—academic, highly statused, and hugely symbolic of textual authority as it is—rides along on the backs of the people who do the real work. The tradespeople do the work; I get a PhD for watching them. I have been, throughout this project, engaged in highly conceptual and textual work, one underlying theme of which has been to accord value to those who speak of precisely such work with scepticism, and ask questions about its merits, its privileged social position, and the practical
worth of the resulting educational credential it yields. I confess that I have sometimes stumbled over this contradiction, and have woken up nights wondering whether the whole exercise has been a bizarre, hypocritical exercise. And yet I continue to value my own efforts, and to recognize that although I get to sit inside in comfort and write about the unsung efforts of those out there in the rain digging ditches or in the hot sun framing the roof, this is hard work too. Surely the purpose of gaining a working knowledge of the status associations of the work of others, and of the culpability of the education system in perpetuating status imbalances, is not simply to invert the whole status order but to work towards a broader view that takes in a range of considerations about the different kinds of merits of different kinds of work in society. To draw, one last time, on Walzer's (1983) notion of distributive justice, it may not be that there is much flexibility in changing the physical requirements of this kind of work or that--ditch-digging, roof-framing, and dissertation-writing, for instance, take place where they must. However, as Walzer has attested, and this study has explored in detail, the status system associated with different kinds of work is a cultural phenomenon, and therefore at least theoretically allows room for the possibility of change. In a just society, or Walzer's vision of it, negative and the positive goods--including negative and positive status--must be shared, not hoarded or fixed into a single, unbalanced pattern of distribution, where the status, the credit, and the rewards all flow one way. Learning, through the kind of cultural analysis presented here, about how work is valued or not, how values are communicated through status symbols including formal education, and what other kinds of workers are up to at the workplace, is a first step towards a broader possibility of budging the prevailing distributive imbalance just a little.
Suggestions for further research

As I have said before, this study is not an ending but a step along the way. That being the case, the note I would like to close on is: where next? How might the thematic issues that have been raised and explored here be carried further, to continue the inquiry that I have started?

As I have also said before, the process I followed in carrying out this study has not been linear and orderly. Sometimes it has felt like stumbling around in the dark, reaching for contours in the shadows that I could barely grasp or see. In short, it has been a developmental and iterative process which took shape as it went along. One consequence of following such a flexible course is that it has left many avenues open for other projects and future research. The four suggestions for further research which I introduce below are in some respects a short catalogue of "roads not taken." They represent four possible ways this research might have gone, which for one reason or another were left aside or were too large to encompass, as the research focus became more specific. These suggestions are not the only ones, and none of them has been worked out in detail. They are ideas—a select wish list of alternate possibilities, informed by the experience and hindsight of having chosen the direction I did.

I) The first suggestion is for an analysis of education—or, more specifically, learning, as cultural practice. My focus in this study has been on the story of education as an element of cultural meaning. But as I pointed out at the beginning, there is a story of education in trades culture lurking behind this one, which is about how education in addition to being a feature of status
relations was also a feature of everyday work activity. In contrast with the way formal education figured in the backstage tales and statused interactions that were a part of the cultural life of the jobsite, informal education figured in the cultural life of the site in quite a different way. I am referring to ongoing transactions of informal teaching and learning. Nobody called it “education.” It was just an ordinary unremarkable part of working life. Crew members routinely had to learn how to do new things. They frequently gathered in small groups or pairs to figure out—sometimes democratically, sometimes autocratically—how to go about a particularly vexing task. Some people openly and easily asked for help; others did not. Sometimes knowledge was passed on in a mentoring exchange and sometimes it was barked out like marching orders. Educational labels clung to certain personalities—the “teacher,” the “star pupil,” and the “slow learner.” Informal learning and teaching patterns, practices and attitudes such as these were inscribed in trades culture as much as statused understandings of education were, and were equally intricate, contradictory, and intriguing in their own way. It would be interesting to carry out an ethnographic analysis that examines this aspect of education in culture, as the central research focus.

When I review my fieldnotes, I notice that the theme of informal learning in the workplace was often at the edge of my attention. Sometimes I used the phrase “learning in the workplace” to tell people what my study was about (although I was never clear—and so, of course, neither were they—about what that meant exactly). Sometimes I payed attention to educational exchanges, and sometimes I reflected on my own role at the site as a learner and neophyte and how different
people related to my lack of knowledge in different ways. It might be that a re-analysis of my
corpus of fieldnotes would reveal a good deal of informative data in response to such questions
as: What does “learning in the workplace” really look like?” Who counts as a teacher--and as a
good teacher--and why? Who counts as a learner, in what kinds of situations? What kinds of
interactions are educative, or counter-educative? What are the kinds of knowledge that matter in
this workplace, and what works to communicate this kind of knowledge best? How much and in
what way do social factors--i.e., gender, ethnicity, age--influence the teaching/learning exchange?

ii) My second suggestion for further research is for an in-depth textual analysis of current public
debates about education and work. In this study, I have alluded rather broadly to the popular
debate about the relationship between education and work which booms out of our television sets,
radios, newspapers, and spokespeople’s mouths, transmitting a narrow, utilitarian understanding
of education with little recognition of how education carries social significance which is
sometimes counter to the mythic narrative of education as the great provider of skills and fixer of
foundering economies. But I recognize that I have alluded to this debate loosely and in somewhat
sweeping terms. In this study, I have concentrated on the interpretation of themes in my field
experience to the regrettable exclusion of a thorough analysis of the detailed elements of the
popular debate which lurks in the background. I would like to propose such an analysis as a line
of research in its own right, bringing the popular debate from the corner of my eye into full
scrutiny. The starting question, stepping back from the position I have taken in this study, would
be: Is there a popular debate? Assuming that my impressions are borne out, it would be a
worthwhile supplement to this study to conduct a detailed textual analysis of the current discourse about the relationship between education and work as it appears in the media, public policy, and other modes of public expression.

Although I have not considered the specifics in detail, my general approach to data collection would be to select a predetermined time period (a day, a week, a month, a season, a year) and conduct a survey of the occurrence and variations on the theme of education and work that appear in media coverage. That would include listening to the radio, watching television news and current affairs programming, listening to political announcements, reading the daily news, magazines, and journals which come from a variety of political slants. Drawing on this body of data as a corpus, I would then conduct an in-depth analysis of the frequency of commentary on the theme of the relationship between education and work, and the sub-themes and trends which emerge. Some of the broad issues I might look for include: How much is actually being said about skills/training/education/work and the relationships between and among them? Is it indeed a popular topic, or is it in fact relatively uncommon or unremarkable compared with the other topics that receive a lot of play? Who are the sources and who are the experts—and who are not? What are they saying? What are they not saying (and am I really right in saying that the view of education as a feature of cultural meaning is not a part of the standard discourse)? What are the different perspectives about education and work that emerge? How does this coincide with who is doing the talking? What kinds of beliefs and assumptions about the relationship between education and work are expressed? Other issues, more specific to the themes I have pursued in
this study are: How are different kinds of occupations portrayed in terms of the status they do or do not have? How does education figure as something that supports that status position? I propose that a detailed textual analysis of this sort would make a very effective companion piece to the study I have carried out, providing another perspective on how education, work, and the relationship between them are deep-seated aspects of popular culture.

iii) My third suggestion for further research is focused on the formal education system. My proposal is specifically to conduct a comparative analysis of the similarities and differences between vocational and academic curricula. In this study I have pointed rather directly at the educational system as a key systemic mechanism for perpetuating the “two solitudes” dichotomy between mental and manual work, via the social and structural divide between academic and vocational curricular pursuits. I have of course used the division between the study of architecture at university and the study of the building trades at vocational school as a focal example. However, again because of the particular focus of this study on the interpretation of field experience, the in-depth comparison and contrast of academic versus vocational studies of the building process was beyond the scope of this work. As with the public debates mentioned above, the curricular background of trades culture has remained in the shadows, and would profit from much more detailed analysis. It would be interesting, for one thing, to see whether the tradespeople were right in saying that architects don’t learn about the building process, and seeing conversely how much (and what kind of) attention is paid to the design aspect of building in vocational school. It would be interesting as well to examine whether the kinds of status
differences between mental and manual work I have drawn out of the subtext of workplace
culture are also inscribed within the different curricula of the architecture school and the trade
school, and if so, how? What are the underlying cultural and epistemological assumptions which
underlie both curricula? How are they the same or different? What do such similarities/
differences reflect about the way knowledge is organized and valued in the prevailing culture?
Such an analysis would provide a needed contextual confirmation—or refutation—of the
mental/manual divide as it is reflected not just in the social dynamics of the workplace but in the
very structures of the educational system.

iv) My final suggestion for further research is something of a departure from the previous three. I
have saved it for last because it is the hardest to talk about and the closest to my heart. Research
is both an outward and an inward journey. My first three suggestions have involved various ways
of looking more widely outward; my final suggestion, on the other hand, involves looking more
deply inward. For me, an essential aspect of ethnographic research of the sort I have attempted
here is that it involves some exploration of the murky depths and humblingly apparent limits of
one’s own knowledge and assumptions. One of the reasons why this study has been such a
struggle for me to write is because I have been entangled in questions, hesitations, and
uncertainties the whole way. What do I mean? Why do I think this? How do I know? Do I dare
assert what I know? How do I relate my story to other people’s ideas? Do I trust my own
insights? Can I recognize my own blindness? Such preoccupations do not make writing easy. In
some respects it has felt like a struggle about the very roots of knowledge itself. In other
respects, though, it has felt more mundanely like a simple struggle with genre. Quite frankly, I am not sure that writing a social science dissertation has been the best or most accommodating—and it certainly has not been the easiest—mechanism for me to explore the kinds of questions I wanted to explore. My final suggestion for further research is to take the field experiences and the themes that emerged from those experiences and write about them in a whole other way, with permission to be more creative, to go deeper, and to not worry so much about the distinction between fact and fancy. This study has been work; now I want to play.

What would that look like? Good question. Here is a start. It would be an anthology of poems, essays, vignettes, photographs, and maybe even dreams. It would include such things as: a poem about a plumb-bob, the simplest, oldest, most beautiful, and most accurate of everyday tools; another poem about the ultra-modern laser level, and how it broke down; a copy of the magazine photograph of the stairs where Joe fell down and broke his neck; a vignette about Ranjit with a pencil stuck in his turban talking about perfect mitred corners and his vision of the afterlife; a series of photographs of the faces of every tradesperson who worked on the Roberts' house, and another series of photographs of their hands; an essay about Duncan and Paul figuring out how to calculate an angle of a single roof beam; a vignette about the crew talking about how the radio weather report is usually addressed to people who spend most of their time indoors, and seldom mentions people who work outside. And so on.

I could keep on listing ideas for more and different research projects for quite some time; I have
barely scratched the surface of possibilities. The world is an interesting place. The themes that I have explored in this study—the meaning of education, the meaning of work, status, and culture—are all essential elements of the real and significative landscape of the times. This study has been barely a drop in the bucket in the examination of taken-for-granted features of everyday life. To return to the quote by Simone de Beauvoir which prefaced this work, the more we bring such features of everyday life into focus, and examine the underlying values and meanings embedded there, the more we “draw our strength to live and our reasons for living.”
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APPENDIX: LIST OF NAMES

The main crew:
- George Campbell Construction (GCC): building contracting firm
  - George Campbell: building contractor
  - Charlie: site foreman
  - Duncan: carpenter, assistant site foreman
  - Pierre: carpenter
  - Sol: Pierre's dog
  - Ranjit: carpenter, uncle of Puran
  - Puran: carpenter, nephew of Ranjit
  - Manuel: carpenter's helper
  - Paul: carpenter's helper

Other GCC employees (past and present):
- Ed: carpenter (and my partner)
- Harry: carpenter
- Bao: carpenter's helper
- Norman: carpenter
- Rudy: carpenter
- Yves: carpenter
- Geoff: site superintendent
- Joe: carpenter, now retired
- Louise: carpenter, now administrator

Temporary GCC employees:
- Stephen: carpenter
- Pat: carpenter
- Aaron: labourer

Other tradespeople (subcontractors):
- Ted: plumber
- Jim: drywaller
- Chuck: painter
- Dave: electrician

Others:
- Eric and Beverley Roberts: Clients/owners
- Frank: architect
- Chris: pilot study general contractor