

**The modernization of the postal service: Identity, public service,  
and the meaning of work**

Daniel Forbes

Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

Supervised by Dawn Lyon and Tim Strangleman

School of Social Sciences

November 2023

## **Thesis Abstract**

This thesis attempts to understand the occupational culture and identity of postal workers between 1970 to 2000, investigating the importance of the ethic of public service. The study explores the importance of the experience of the Second World War in establishing a culture within the postal service, whereby a high value was placed on work as a service for the good of the public, and the way in which postal workers came to identify with this ethic. It examines how processes of modernization, that began with the removal of the postal service from the civil service in 1969 and accelerated with the election of the Conservative government in 1979 and the subsequent commercialization and marketization, led to a weakening of this service ethic, and erosion of the working culture and means of occupational identity of postal workers. However, this was not just a story of transformation, there were important continuities. The research is a case study of postal workers who were employed in the postal service in the Cannock Chase area of Staffordshire during this time, utilising an oral history method.

## **Acknowledgements**

As with undertaking anything of this nature, I am indebted to a number of people without whom I would never have been able to carry out and complete this research.

Firstly, I am grateful to the University for granting me a Vice Chancellor's Scholarship which meant that I could embark on this research.

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my supervisors, Dawn Lyon and Tim Strangleman. I would never have got to the point of submission had it not been for their unwavering support and guidance. I feel privileged to have worked with them and they have my admiration as both sociologists, and human beings.

I am also indebted to Chris Wright who was my Master's dissertation supervisor at Aberdeen and helped shape much of my early thinking regarding the project.

My admiration and thanks go to all of the postal workers of the Cannock Chase area who I spoke to over the course of this research. I was constantly humbled by the amount of time they were willing to give in their conversations with me and I was honoured to listen to the stories of their working lives and their love of the community.

And to my family, who had to suffer me throughout the time that I have spent completing this. Family is important in this story, and it was important for me being able to carry this research out: my wife, Gem, who seems to always support me no matter what and who's love has kept me going in all of this; my children, Ash, Melody, Megan, Sophie, Shay, Seaneen,

Sonny, and Banksy, without who life would just not be the same; my parents, Andy and Shirley (so much of my mum is in this project): they have always encouraged me in everything I have done and I am so grateful to have them as parents; and my grandad, this is his story too.

## Contents

<b>Thesis Abstract</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Contents</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>List of illustrations</b>	<b>ix</b>
<b>Introduction</b>  Driving north: grandad, the postal service and me The postal service: a general context <i>The origins of the British postal service</i> <i>The development of the modern Post Office: Roland Hill and the Penny Post</i> <i>The post-Second World War postal service</i> <i>The significance of the uniform</i> <i>The relationship with the armed forces</i> Identifying the gaps Thesis Structure	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter One: Literature Review</b>  Literature Review Introduction The ‘end of work’ ‘New capitalism’ and individualization The ‘end of work’ and occupationally based identity Enduring occupational identity? Workplace culture and collective identity at work	<b>31</b>

<p>Nostalgia and identity</p> <p>Framing the debate: ‘the end of work’ and identity at the workplace</p> <p>Public sector reform: new public management and the ethic of public service</p> <p>Working in public services: professional work</p> <p>Working in the public sector: manual work and public enterprises</p> <p>The ethic of providing a service to the public</p> <p>The public service ethos and public service motivation</p> <p>Delineating the research</p>	
<p><b>Chapter Two: Methods: Researching the Post</b></p> <p>Research Questions</p> <p>Introduction</p> <p>Research framework and design</p> <p>The research site</p> <p>Approaching an oral history of postal workers</p> <p>Forming close relationships and being an ‘almost insider’</p> <p>Giving and taking in the research context</p> <p>Re-telling stories and lives</p> <p>Entering the field: qualitative interviewing and the problem of COVID</p> <p>Sampling</p> <p>COVID-19 and the interview medium</p> <p>Talking to postal workers: in-depth, semi-structured interviews</p> <p>Documentary research: COVID-19, using archives, and making choices</p> <p>The context of documents: manner and means of production</p> <p>Analysing the context of documents</p> <p>The ‘Quality’ of research</p> <p>Ethics</p>	<p><b>71</b></p>

<b>Chapter Three: Traditional postal work and identification</b>	<b>116</b>
<p>Introduction: establishing ‘traditional’ postal work</p> <p>‘I read the news today, oh boy...’ a day in the life of a postal worker</p> <p><i>Heading out to work</i></p> <p><i>The Delivery Office: sorting the mail</i></p> <p><i>Sorting in the villages: rural Sub-Post Offices</i></p> <p><i>The autonomy of the walk</i></p> <p><i>Later morning: Back to the DO</i></p> <p><i>The second delivery and time for home</i></p> <p>Delineating ‘Traditional’ Postal Work</p> <p>Reflections on the day</p> <p>Conclusion</p>	
<b>Chapter Four: Modernizing recruitment to the Post Office: from nomination and direct application to the use of agencies</b>	<b>155</b>
<p>Introduction</p> <p>Post-war recruitment in the postal service: how grandad ended up at the postal service</p> <p>Nomination: becoming a postal worker in the post-war period</p> <p>Being nominated: the 1970s and 1980s</p> <p>Negotiating Occupational Identity</p> <p>Moving away from nomination: the use of agencies</p> <p>Conclusion</p>	

<b>Chapter Five: Careers in the Post: culture, modernization, and management</b>  Introduction  Developing a career: what it meant to progress in the post-war service  Progressing to PHG in a modernizing service: increased responsibility and status  From PHG to DOM: moving up and walking back?  From old school to graduate managers  Conclusion	192
<b>Chapter Six: Becoming a Business: the commercialization and intensification of the postal service</b>  Becoming a Business: the commercialization and intensification of the postal service  Introduction  A different kind of service?  Grandad, postal work, public service, and social change  Being embedded in the community: postal work and community (non)work  The deeper side of postal workers' community (non)work  The public service ethic and the modernizing postal service  Reflexively adapting or performing 'traditional' postal work?  Conclusion	227



<b>Conclusion: Identity, culture, and community: change and continuity</b>	<b>261</b>
<p>Going out with a bang</p> <p>The ‘legacy of the war’ and ‘tradition’</p> <p>Public service, the ‘workplace family’ and relations of trust: the condition of time in ‘traditional’ postal work</p> <p>The condition of time in a modernizing service: the erosion of public service and the breakdown of trust</p> <p>The maintenance of ‘tradition’?</p> <p>Identity and the importance of public service</p> <p>False consciousness or a critical nostalgia?</p> <p>Individualization: reflexivity and ontological security</p> <p>Issues of change and continuity: a summary</p>	
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>283</b>
<b>Appendix One: Participant Information Sheet</b>	<b>314</b>
<b>Appendix Two: Consent Form</b>	<b>316</b>

Word count: 87,570

## List of Illustrations

- 1.1 grandad's and Nan's notice of rental agreement on their new prefabricated bungalow in Armitage
- 4.1 notice of grandad's appointment as a postal worker
- 5.1 Letter of notification for grandad passing his exam for his civil service commission as Post Office and Telegraph Officer
- 5.2 Newspaper cutting of grandad receiving a digital watch to commemorate his appointment as postmaster
- 6.1 Early postal uniform
- 6.2 Mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century uniform
- 6.3 Grandad at UPW conference social evening, 1962 Margate
- 6.4 Group photograph at UPW course, Westgate-on-sea, near Margate
- 6.5 Postcard from UPW conference, 19<sup>th</sup> November 1962 Margate

## **Introduction**

### **Driving north: grandad, the postal service and me**

I was driving. That was how all this started. I was on the return leg of an over 800-mile round trip from my home at the time, in a small coastal village just north of Aberdeen, to my hometown of Rugeley, in the Cannock Chase area of Staffordshire. The purpose of this two-day, there-and-back drive was to drop the kids off at my mum and dad's house. It was the October mid-term break and I needed my parents to take care of them whilst they were off school. It was 2009 and I had just started my Master's degree at the University of Aberdeen and needed to attend classes that week (I was doing an MRes in Social Research). I also needed to come up with a research topic for the modules I was doing that semester and beyond. It's amazing how so many things start from chance, how a coincidence can just spark a thought that snowballs; not just the thoughts that happen from there though, but all the things that happen out there in the 'real' world as a consequence.

I really enjoy long drives, the act of driving, the experience of being in the car, and the time and space to think. Over the years I spent living in the north of Scotland I undertook the same drive on numerous occasions, taking in thousands of miles, encompassing the beauty of the many different roads and landscapes across Scotland and England that I would pass through. I was listening to the radio, tuned to 5 Live. I used to like listening to that kind of topical, news-based talk content rather than music when undertaking that kind of journey. On my journey north to Aberdeen, alone in my car on that day, there were two main items on the news that were being repeated over and over. One was the ongoing saga of Wayne Rooney and Manchester United. Apparently, Rooney had handed in a transfer request, but Sir Alex

Ferguson (then manager at Manchester United) had dissuaded him from leaving. The other was the impending industrial action of postal workers at Royal Mail over changes in working conditions on account of the modernization of the service.

There must have been other stories on the news on that October day (I don't think it was that much of a slow news day), but those are the only two that I can now recall. It seemed quite funny to me really: both stories were about people expressing a form of dissatisfaction as regarding working conditions and were also examples of how neoliberalism had transformed the workplace (though with entirely differential results for the workers in question). Though I am a football fan, I quickly found the repetition of the Wayne Rooney story rather irritating. The story regarding the industrial dispute at Royal Mail however, sent several cogs whirring, and with hours to think, I let some of these thought processes settle on the connections that I had with this story.

I have always considered the study of the work context to be an important topic. As people born into the capitalist world, we are compelled to work to provide for the means of our material existence. So much of our time is spent in the endeavour of work, often in physical spaces removed from our homes and our loved ones, carrying out activities under the direction of others, and in some cases, finding little or no meaning in the nature of that work. The thought of the significance of work as not just an important, but a fundamental site of analysis in social life was engendered within me as a boy. When I was 14, my dad took voluntary redundancy from the power station following the privatization of the electricity industry. He had worked at Rugeley-B power station for 20 years. Dad hadn't particularly liked his job but had carried it out day-in-day-out for 20 years nonetheless so as to provide

for us as a family<sup>1</sup>. The appreciation that the newly created company of National Power, who had taken over from the Central Electricity Generating Board in the process of privatization, showed to dad on account of 20 years of his life, was a watch. It was a fairly nice watch. But in my mind, it didn't equate to 20 years of the life of an adult individual during their prime years.

This is to me what makes the analysis of work so important. The time of our very lives are run down whilst in our work situations, being directed in our work lives by the very forces that perpetuate the socio-economic and political systems within which we move through time and space; the organization of capitalist societies and the experience of work are inextricably linked. Moreover, the form of organization that work may take across differing times, social spaces, and sectors of the economy matters in terms of the very life experience of the constituent members of society: Whether one finds work alienating or fulfilling matters to the experience of life. For some, however, it is argued that the experience of meaningful and fulfilling work is merely a chimera, a nostalgic idealization of the past (Gorz, 1999), dismissed as a 'false consciousness' (Beck, 2000; Bauman, 1998; 2005), something that can make us complicit in our own exploitation. Although I do believe there is merit in this argument, I think it serves to diminish and belittle the everyday lived experience of people and their own interpretations of their working lives. And so, I believe, the study of the everyday experience of work (in this case of postal workers experiencing processes of modernization) to be of important sociological interest.

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<sup>1</sup> To mark these 20 years of service, dad received a watch and a certificate. It was a fairly nice watch, but always seemed to me to not really measure up to 20 years.

My dad's working situation was one where the relative material 'reward' that his job provided was more important than doing something that for him would have been intrinsically satisfying. I remember at the time finding it incredibly sad that people spend so much of their time engaged in an activity that does not really carry much significance to them outside of the remuneration they receive. That people can spend such a large amount of their lives engaged in an activity that is relatively meaningless to them still to me sounds wrong.

Back in the car, on my drive northwards to Aberdeen, the case of postal workers seemed interesting, representing something different in the post-industrial society; it still does now. In an era of declining trade unionism influence, postal workers were engaged in a prolonged industrial battle in relation to the 'modernization' of the service. Over the course of a political programme that stripped back the state and the public provision of services, the postal service staved off privatization for a considerable amount of time<sup>2</sup>. In addition, over the duration of this process, there was an emphasis within social theory on the declining influence of work as a basis for the construction of identity (Beck, 1992; 2000; Bauman, 1998; 2005; Gorz, 1999), a trend of thought collectively characterised as the 'end of work' literature: postal workers represent something that appears to go against this grain. The industrial conflict seemed to be about more than simply pay and/or conditions from workers with an instrumental approach to work (though things such as pay, and conditions are obviously significant in such matters). The question occurred to me as to if these were workers who still identified with their work, and the notion of providing a public service: people who actually cared about what they were doing and were fighting for a job they loved?

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<sup>2</sup> The privatization of Royal Mail would of course, ultimately come by 2016. But when we look at this in relation to the privatization of other nationalised industries over the 1980s and 1990s, the maintenance of their status as a publicly owned company till then is quite remarkable, particularly as privatization was very much 'on-the-table' as far as many of the politicians of this era were concerned.

This is the story of where that fight came from; the story of the culture that was fostered in the immediate post-Second World War era and was internalised and perpetuated by postal workers and passed on to subsequent generations. In this way, postal workers were socialised into this culture and way of working; a culture I am here referring to as ‘traditional’ postal work. This does not mean that it was a traditional way of working, but it was a way of working that gained such a level of ingrained-ness within postal workers, that it came to be viewed by them as just the way that things should be done: a traditional way of working. This is not to say that all postal workers held to all the facets of traditional postal work to the same level, or that they all experienced ‘traditional’ postal work in the same way; or even that in the process of inter-generational transmission, that subsequent generations of postal workers experienced ‘traditional’ postal work in the same way that their predecessors had. But that there was a common thread that connected these postal workers that can be identifiable through this working culture.

At the beginning of the 1970s, the working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work would have been deeply ingrained within postal workers, and largely accepted as the ‘right’ way to do things. However, this was the era that witnessed the start of its protracted and disputed demise. The era when the seeds of the implantation of a new kind of working culture were attempted to be sown. The postal workers I was listening to reports of whilst I was driving northwards were still defending the remnants of the working culture that I depict and analyse here

The analysis of work can tell you a lot about the society in which that workplace is situated, its priorities, values, and biases. How a workplace treats its workers tells us something profound about how working conditions are framed and configured at any given time and the

power relations that underpin them. Looking at processes of modernization within a public service not only shows us how the experience of work is changing as a result of these processes, but it also tells us something about the way in which those services are configured, the position of the state as regards the concept of services, the relationship between the state and its people, and the nature of community.

Processes of economic restructuring from the mid-1970s onwards changed the nature of the social world that we inhabit (Harvey, 1989). The kinds of changes that these processes precipitated formed the backdrop of my formative years. I grew up in a mining town (that was soon to become a former mining town with the closure of the last collieries in the area in 1990 and 1992) with a backdrop of the Miners' Strike of 1984; with my dad working in another nationalized industry (electricity: there were two, large coal power stations in the town), which would soon be privatized in 1990. These very local changes were a part of broader socio-economic and infrastructural changes that shaped the nature of the kind of chances and opportunities that I (and my generational contemporaries) would face as an adult entering the world of work.

Indeed, my personal biography is highly significant within this research in a number of ways. My young life had shaped my interest in work as an interesting and important subject of study, informed my choice of the postal service as a topic of research as well as my choice to situate my research in the very area I grew up in. Through this choice to situate the research there I was able to mobilise my biography in the field<sup>3</sup>. In this way, the trajectory of my own biography is bound up with the forces that shaped the nature of the changes to the working lives and working culture of the postal workers I talked to. The story of my life was entwined

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<sup>3</sup> This will be discussed in more detail later.



with the stories of the postal workers. The very processes that had begun to re-shape the working lives of these postal workers over the 1970s, 1980s, and into the 1990s (the processes that resulted in the modernization of the postal service and had led to the industrial conflict that was being discussed on the radio that day in 2009) had also shaped my young life. It was a very different world by the mid 1990s to the one that I would have encountered had it not been for these processes and had entailed a very different future for me than would have otherwise been: one that would have likely meant a lifetime down the mine or in the power station that had been the future of the previous generations of children from my hometown<sup>4</sup>. With this in mind, my personal biography (in relation to these socio-economic changes) was central to not only the way that I approached the research and the process of writing it up, but also in the way that I was even in a position to undertake such a thing in the first place.

But this after all though, is a story of connections: of the identification of postal workers to their labour; to that labour being a service for the good of the public; to a working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work; to the communities that they serve. But it was of how my own personal biography connects me to the story that I reflected on during my drive on that October day from which this research began to emerge.

Some of my earliest memories are of being with my grandad, I spent a lot of time with him when I was young and look back on the time very fondly. Grandad would often take me out in his old, but pristine, metallic blue, Morris Marina. We would go out for walks on Cannock Chase, the large forest at the heart of the area, with his dog, ‘Patch’, a smallish whippet cross.

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<sup>4</sup> Though I would not like to underestimate the hardness of this life, I sometimes find the certainty and security of this kind of life very appealing.

The dog was just about the fastest thing I had ever seen in my young life. It would always run off, whenever grandad took it off the lead. Yet he would always take the lead off again, claiming it would be ok this time. But lo-and-behold, off it would go! Grandad was into his mid-60s at this point, and never had a prayer of catching it. The dog would be gone for hours, though you would occasionally catch glimpses of this brown and white blur, running in the distance, and hear the odd bark here-and-there. Eventually, he would trot back, panting and tongue lolling in its mouth. I think really, it just wanted to run; he always came back.

One of the other places we regularly visited was Abbots Bromley, which lies about six miles to the north-west of Rugeley, on the way to Burton-on-Trent. It's a lovely drive to the village, heading down out of Rugeley, over the river Trent and out into the country lanes in the old Morris, passing the small villages and farmland and over the Blithfield reservoir<sup>5</sup>. In Abbots Bromley we would stop off at the Sub-Post Office there. Grandad knew the couple who ran the office and would go for a chat with them. We would sit in the back room there, just behind the office. It was a kind of parlour room, with an old range cooker. He would have a cup of saccharine sweetened tea, and I would be given a glass of orange squash and some sweets, pear drops were always my favourite (and still are). At five, I didn't really know anything about the postal service; public service would have meant absolutely nothing to me, and I had definitely, never heard the word modernization. The Sub-Post Office at Abbots Bromley was just a nice place to go with my grandad.

Our visits to the small Sub-Post Office in Abbots Bromley were due to grandad's association with the postal service. He had spent 24 years of his working life there. He started at the age

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<sup>5</sup> Blithfield reservoir is an enormous body of water, created by the flooding of a farmland valley in the 1940s and opened in 1953. It has a long low and straight causeway that passes over it. The reservoir area is quite beautiful and is popular with local birdwatchers. It is also though, now popular with 'boy-racers' due to that long straight stretch of road.

of 36, in 1956, as a postal worker from the delivery office (DO) at Rugeley. From there he had progressed onto counters as a postal and telegraph clerk. This was a rather unusual progression route as most who progressed onto the higher grades would move into the position of postman higher grade (PHG). But grandad was never one to do what people expected of him, and I think that it was more like an office job was something that appealed to him. During his time on the counters, he became head clerk, and started to 'act-up' as postmaster. He was also the area union rep for the Union of Postal Workers (UPW) (later to become the Communication Workers Union). Towards the end of his working life, he was promoted to Postmaster at the nearby town of Brownhills where he retired at the age of 60.

Grandad ended his working life at that small Sub-Post Office in Abbots Bromley, helping the couple who ran the office on a casual basis after he retired. His working life had started in the pot-bank though. He was born in 1920, into a small, terraced house in Shelton, Stoke-on-Trent. In the early 1930s the small family moved to Armitage, near Rugeley and at the age of 14, he unwillingly followed his dad into the potteries industry at Armitage Ware, where he was apprenticed to him as a packer. On starting work at the pot bank, he quickly became involved in trade union activities (he always claimed to have been a shop steward from around the age of 14).

The outbreak of war in 1939 saw him leave the pot-bank and join the RAF, serving in India and in the Burma campaign. After the Second World War, grandad found it difficult to forge a career. According to my mum, he had always wanted to 'make something of himself', but the work he was able to find in this period did not offer him this opportunity. He and my nan were beginning on their shared life following their marriage in 1945. They had a new home, a prefabricated bungalow on a small estate of other prefabs in Armitage. It was a modest place,

but one they were very pleased and proud to call home; a little under five years later, in 1952, my mum was born and completed their small family. When grandad found his job in the postal service it meant a great deal to him. It was a steady and safe job, in a respected organization. It was a job where he could 'make something of himself', build a career. But also, it was doing something that was important: it was a service for the good of the public. It was a job that grandad was proud of, and he was proud of his achievements within the Post Office.

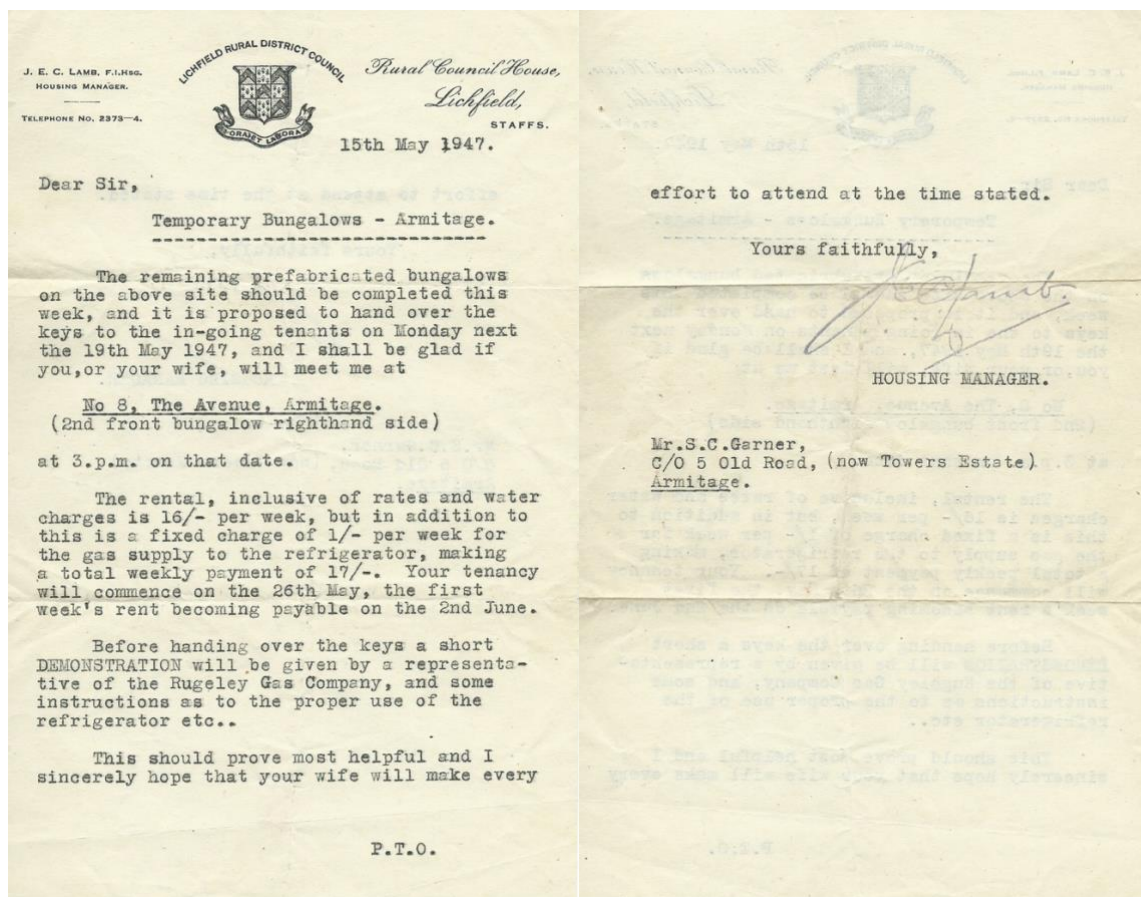


Fig 1.1 grandad's and Nan's notice of rental agreement on their new prefabricated bungalow in Armitage

Those were my thoughts on that long car journey that day, provoked by the story on the radio. I knew that I wanted to go forward with this. Just as grandad had regarded his work as a postal worker to be important, I felt that looking into the issue of working in the postal

service to also be important. These 21<sup>st</sup> Century postal workers were striking over the form of modernization, but where did this all come from? There seemed to be a gulf between the service of my grandad's era, to a service on the brink of privatization. How had the experience of work changed? What had happened in terms of the working culture of postal work? It seemed important to understand this transition from the service of my grandad to a modernized service from the perspective of the social actors involved, placing their own meanings of the social action involved within the unique socio-cultural and historical context (Geertz, 1973); to understand this change in the way that the work of postal workers was conceived: from that of a public service, to customer service.

My focus in terms of timeline within this thesis is from 1970 to 2000: the period where the modernization programme in the postal service took root and subsequently began to accelerate. This timeline enables the exploration of the working culture of the post-Second World War period, how it was established and perpetuated, and also how it came to erode towards the end of the century. The timeline is sandwiched between two significant pieces of legislation that mark a distinct change in terms of the orientation of the state towards the postal service: the Post Office Act (1969), and the Postal Services Act (2000). The Post Office Act (1969) ushered in the start of modernization, severing it from the Civil Service through it ceasing to be a department of state and creating it as a public enterprise. This change was instigated to instil a more commercial outlook in the postal service (Keenlyside, 1977). The Postal Services Act (2000) signified a distinct new stage in the modernization of the postal service, moving from a phase of commercialization to a phase of privatization<sup>6</sup>. The Act converted the service from a public enterprise to a public limited company that was

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<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that there was no agenda towards privatization in the former phase. Over the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the issue of privatization repeatedly raised its head.

wholly owned by the government, paving the way for the eventual private sale of the organization.

This thesis is the story of this transition that took place over the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. From not long after my grandad's time on his 'walk' ended, when the modernization of the service began, up to the end of the century. It is beyond the scope of this research to look at the run up to privatization that happened this century, this would make the focus of the study too wide. The focus of this study is instead on how things began to change, and also on how the continuities with the past were maintained. It is a story set within the macro-structural transformations that began to occur from the mid 1970s onwards, that for the postal service entailed the onset of modernization and commercialization. Through this story, this thesis attempts to understand the experience of work for postal workers during these processes of modernization: how modernization affected the ethic of public service and occupational identity of postal workers; how it changed the working culture of postal work and the way in which workers operated within the community.

I do this through the use of 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973), seeking to understand this experience of work from the perspective of the postal workers who experienced it, looking beneath the surface to uncover the complex layers of social action to interpret its meaning. And though this story is set within the context of wider debates regarding the neoliberalization of work, the centrality of work in the formation of identity and the restructuring of state involvement in the economy, it is very much based within the everyday practices and routines of postal work and so aims to situate this meaning within the context of the everyday labour of those postal workers (Geertz, 1973). It is also a story that is embedded within the community from which it is produced, that of the former mining towns and

communities of the Cannock Chase area. It encompasses the position of postal workers within those communities and the social significance of their labour.

## **The postal service: a general context**

### The origins of the British postal service

The postal service has a long history in Britain, being one of the oldest institutions in Britain that is still in existence today (Campbell-Smith 2012). This history, and consequently the development, of the postal service in Britain, has always entailed that it was at the heart of the British state. In terms of its origins, this is on account of its proximity and significance to royalty. As such, the postal service in Great Britain, the Royal Mail, holds a rather unique position as an organization in that it is much more than just another organization; it occupies a place within the very fabric of the nation<sup>7</sup>. Though there had been instances of informal systems of posts going back many centuries, war between England and Scotland in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century entailed the establishment of a formalised system during the reign of Edward IV (Robinson, 1948). However, this was only a temporary system. It was not until a century later, during the reign of Henry VIII that a permanent postal system was established to facilitate the Kings communications.

In order to enable the running of this system Cardinal Wolsey appointed Brian Tuke as *Governor of the King's Post* in 1517 (he was subsequently given the title of 'Master of the

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<sup>7</sup> This position is something that may very well have contributed to the difficulty that successive governments faced in terms of attempts to approach the privatization of the postal service. Its position within the public consciousness as a part of the fabric of the nation may have entailed a political inexpediency in terms of privatization that industries such as electricity, water or rail did not possess. This history and position is also significant in terms of the development of working culture and the way in which that culture was mobilized in terms of defence in the face of modernization and attempts to privatize.

Posts' in 1517). It was Tuke's responsibility to provide the king with news from distant places (Campbell-Smith 2012). When a particular post was required, the desired route would be divided into sections of approximately ten to fifteen miles with people laid on at each of these 'posts' to look after the requirements of the horses and the postboys; sometimes a Royal messenger might be carrying dispatches all the way, in which case they may have ridden through the posts, with a fresh horse at each station (Robinson 1948: 7). However, this was very much an exclusive system, it was after all the 'king's post' and not something for the general public.

The development of a postal service for public use arose against the backdrop of the Stuart dynasty, over the first half of the 17th Century. Prior to this point the service was technically only for the delivery of state messages, though personal letters were carried with the tacit acceptance of the overseers of the post. The system that subsequently developed arose through the idea that the postal service could be self-supporting, with the state deriving income from the carriage of the correspondences of private individuals (whilst also enabling the state to monitor the communications of seditious individuals). So, in 1635, during the reign of Charles I there was an extension of the postal system to a service available to the public, the profits of which went directly to the state. This aided the creation of the monopolistic postal system that became ingrained in Britain (Robinson, 1948).

The period of the protectorate saw the passing of an act of Parliament to establish a system of fixed rates throughout Great Britain. The act stated, 'that whereas it hath been found by experience that the writing and settling of one General Post Office [...] is the best means not only to maintain certain intercourse of trade and commerce betwixt all the said places to the great benefit of the people of these nations, but also to convey the public despatches...' (cited



in Robinson 1948: 23). Here we can see the start of the postal service not only being central to the state in terms of the royalty, but as it also being at the heart of the very operation of the social life of the nation, facilitating the operation of business as well as personal affairs.

Following the Restoration, the postal service made one of its most significant early developments: the development of the ‘penny post’. This was based on a system that had been first developed and operated solely within London by an official named William Dorking and had revolutionised the system there. Charles II decided to incorporate the ‘penny post’ into the General Post Office (GPO) (Campbell-Smith, 2012). This illustrates the beginnings of a state monopoly of the post for which the general public had access. However, it also took on another function in terms of espionage (Robinson, 1948). As such, the postal service experienced a great expansion over the 18<sup>th</sup> Century as Britain began the process of industrialization. As the pace of industrialization increased, so did the activities of the postal service, and the revenue that it generated (Robinson, 1948). However, by the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the postal service increasingly came to be seen as primarily an instrument of taxation. But it is highly significant that this early phase of the development of the postal service in Britain, and that the modern(ized) organization that we see today traces its origins back to this: it was this exclusive king’s post that was to become Royal Mail with a monopolized position as the nation’s provider of communications services and an integral aspect of state infrastructure.

#### The development of the modern Post Office: Roland Hill and the Penny Post

The beginnings of the modern postal service grew out of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the changing communication needs of the newly industrialized society. The Postage Act (1839)

represented the greatest transformation in the British postal system since 1635 (Robinson, 1948). The Act transformed the business model of the GPO, establishing the principle of the sender paying postage and the setting of a uniform delivery cost throughout the nation, regardless of the distance. In doing so it stopped the postal service being primarily an instrument of taxation.

In 1837 Roland Hill<sup>8</sup> privately circulated his pamphlet on postal reform: *'Post Office Reform: its Importance and Practicability'*. His proposal aimed to eradicate the convoluted and overly complex system of posts. The system of the time had high tariffs that were often differentiated (the three offices that existed in London all charged different tariffs). In addition, charges were made on the basis of the number of sheets of paper sent and distance travelled, with the recipient generally paying the postage (Daunton, 1985). Following presenting his ideas to parliament, Hill was tasked with improving the postal service in Britain, through acting as an advisor to the treasury.

Hill's concept for the Post Office was the development of a uniform 'Penny Post', to roll out across Britain. His plan was subject to much criticism at the time and was seen as a potential drain upon limited resources (Campbell-Smith, 2012). The development of the penny post needs to be viewed in relation to wider, macro socio-economic changes in Britain over the 19th Century in terms of industrialization. During this period, Britain experienced massive demographic change, with a population explosion and consequent shift from agrarian to urban society. This put a great strain on the postal system as although the population of the country was increasing, the revenue generated through the post was not. Hill's assertion was

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<sup>8</sup> Hill, however, was a divisive figure within the Post Office at this time (though he subsequently came to be revered) and many people did not agree with his ideas or conception regarding the aims and purpose of the Post Office.

that high tariffs were acting as an inhibitor to growth (Daunton, 1985). Alongside these demographic changes that were stretching the system, there were also innovations (directly as a consequence to industrialization) that enabled a change in the approach to the running of the postal service: the invention of the steam engine entailed the development of a new form of transport meaning that things could be moved around the country at speeds hitherto unimaginable (Campbell-Smith, 2012).

The onset of industrialization, and the strengthening of liberal capitalism created a perceived need for reform to be initiated within the postal service. This pressure for reform involved the creation of an argument that would have echoes across the next century and beyond: that the postal service should be run along more business-like lines. Hill's proposal amounted to a transformation in the way the post was paid for. Letters would no longer be charged for based on the number of sheets, with weight instead being the criteria. There would also no longer be any differentiation in charges on account of the distance involved. Instead, there would be a uniform charge for any distance, with the charge paid for by the sender rather than the recipient (Campbell-Smith, 2012). In this way, in operating the service along commercial lines, the cost of operating the post could be decreased, along with the amount of tax payable on it; Hill predicted that the effect of this would be a postal service that was more profitable and thus, would generate more money for the exchequer (Campbell-Smith, 2012; Daunton, 1985). As a result, a higher volume of post could be handled, and thus, a lower price could be maintained (Daunton 1985).

The results of these reforms had important ramifications for the future of the postal service, the way that it would operate and the form that the organization would take. As such, the universal charge would persist into the future and form the basis of the public conception of

the post as an important service for the public (rather ironically as its foundation was in ensuring the commercial viability of the service), rather than as a tool of taxation. Also, the notion of the post as a public service enabled the engendering of a service ethic amongst postal workers: a pride in providing a service that was appreciated by the public (Campbell-Smith 2012). The workforce of the postal service over the 19<sup>th</sup> Century has been characterised as being fairly conservative, with a regard for tradition and a working environment marked by routine, stability, and discipline (Campbell-Smith, 2012). However, there was also an evolution of the trade union movement over this time, which could act as a check against the disciplinarian nature of the service (Campbell-Smith, 2012). In addition to this, there were changes in terms of the composition of the workforce as a consequence of the Elementary Education Act (1870), which entailed an influx of women into clerical positions within the postal service (Glew, 2010).

However, though the postal service is perhaps viewed as a pioneer in terms of championing women's employment in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Campbell-Smith, 2012), this employment was largely constrained to these clerical positions as the postal service had not opened up all grades equally (Glew, 2010). In addition, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century the civil service introduced a Marriage Bar, which meant that married women could not join the civil service and were required to resign their positions when they did marry (the Bar was suspended during the war but reintroduced in 1919) (Glew, 2010). Despite this though, the pioneering label in terms of gender equality is maybe to some degree deserved, albeit relatively, with the postal service in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century leading a campaign for wage equality for women clerks in 1910, applying pressure for flexible application of restrictive gender labour legislation (Glew, 2010).

As a result of the early operating form of the postal service, and its eventual incorporation into the civil service and status as a Government Department, a high degree of centralization in terms of its management functions developed. That the Post Office was run by civil servants entailed the management style that evolved was largely reactive. Advancement within the organization was largely based around seniority rather than competency and as such, lent itself towards generalist rather than functional specialists and professionals (Campbell-Smith 2012; Daunton 1985). The result of this was that the postal service was not set up adequately to operate on the more commercial footing that was demanded moving into the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

The history of the postal service in Britain, and the way in which it became the monopolized provider of communications entailed that it became a sphere of government activity that touched the daily lives of people (Robinson, 1948). Not only did it have the monopoly in terms of the delivery of letters, but as new forms of electronic communication came into being from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, these also came to fall under the purview of postal service. The Telegraph Act (1868) entailed that telegraphs were incorporated within the monopoly that the organization had over communications. The aim of the nationalization of telegraphy was so that it could work in the better interests of the nation in the operation of the free market (Campbell-Smith, 2012). In addition to this, it was subsequently argued in 1880 that telecommunications were also covered under the Telegraph Act and incorporated into the monopoly, though contracts were granted private operators to encourage as much competition as possible (Campbell-Smith, 2012).

The postal service further wove itself into the public consciousness even further through branching out from the business of communications and expanding its reach through offering

financial services. In 1861 the idea of the Post Office Savings Bank was introduced by Gladstone. This helped to expand the idea of the role of the postal service in society (Campbell-Smith, 2012). The aim of this was to try to inculcate a culture of frugality in the working class; the Post Office Savings Bank went on to become the largest banking system in the country. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the postal service was also offering such products as government stocks and bonds, as well as insurance. The 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw a further venture for the postal service into a national banking system in 1977 with the National Girobank. The Girobank was put forward as a ‘bank for the unbanked’ (Campbell-Smith, 2012). This was a bank for the people, open at convenient hours and accessible for people in rural areas, reinforcing the importance of the physical post office in the social lives of communities in Britain.

The working culture within the service was further shaped by the events of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in the shape of the two World Wars (Campbell-Smith, 2012). However, postal workers seemed to have retained an element of this conservatism in terms of trade unionism up till the strike of 1971 (Gall, 2003), which can be seen in relation to a period of change for the service as it emerged from the civil service and was a sea-change in terms of industrial relations (Daunton, 1985).

### The post-Second World War postal service

By the foundations of the welfare state in the immediate post-Second World War era the postal service was a multifaceted public service that was the primary point of contact between the government and the population (Campbell-Smith, 2012). It had become a central aspect of the way in which people organised their lives and ensured the smooth running of business

through distributing communications to all parts of the country, and beyond. It was the medium by which the government could communicate with its population and distribute its social security measures. The workforce of the postal service came to be increasingly filled with ex-servicemen, returning from the war. It was seen as a good employer for ex-servicemen, with its hierarchical nature, discipline, and respect for authority (Campbell-Smith, 2012). This had a profound effect on the working culture within the postal service, suffusing it with military ethics of demarcated lines of responsibility and discipline (Campbell-Smith, 2012).

However, the postal service of the 1960s was already perceived as being out of step with the times (Johnson, 2014). From the mid 1950s, the government had attempted to encourage the service to adopt a more commercial ethic (Clinton, 1984). It was seen as being a rather monolithic organization, whose operational rigidity and functional diversity was seen as barriers to efficiency, and whose operations had remained largely unchanged since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Campbell-Smith, 2012). The postal service still occupied its historical position as a Government Department, and part of the Civil Service, something that was also seen as inhibiting innovation and change (Campbell-Smith, 2012; Daunton, 1985).

Largely because of its tradition and regularity of operations over the centuries, the postal service had developed an ethos of a service ethic, a pride in the provision of a service that was valued by the public (Campbell-Smith, 2012). However, it was a period of decline for the postal service, in terms of both throughput and revenue, and alongside the labour-intensive nature of postal work, the net result of this was operational disadvantage (Daunton, 1985). Successive governments attempted to exercise greater control over spending in the service (Clinton, 1984).

Following the election victory of the Labour party in 1964, Anthony Wedgwood Benn was installed as Postmaster General. His primary objective was to enable a more commercial and business-like organization. To achieve this, an old idea was revived, one that had been mooted in the early 1920s: the splitting of the Post Office from the Civil Service (Campbell-Smith, 2012). The proposal proffered by Benn was that the Post Office would cease to be a Government Department, and consequently also break off from the Civil Service. Instead, the service would be a nationalised industry. The Post Office Act (1969) passed through Parliament in July 1969 and the Post Office became a publicly owned enterprise.

The separation from the Civil Service was undertaken to make the service more profitable: to be more commercial in outlook and operate along more business-type lines (Keenlyside, 1977). In the initial post-Civil Service era for the post office there was relatively little change for the postal service (Daunton, 1985). Postal workers seemed to have retained an element of their historic conservatism in terms of trade unionism up till the strike of 1971 (Gall, 2003). This can be seen in relation to a period of change for the service as it emerged from the civil service and was a sea-change in terms of industrial relations (Daunton, 1985). Following the break of the postal service from the Civil Service in 1969 it was posited that the organization began to suffer from an ‘identity problem’, a lack of clarity or ambiguity as to its role: should it be considered as a publicly owned business, or a public service (Baker, 1976; Dearing, 1986).

As a part of the drive towards greater efficiency and profitability, the postal service revived plans from the pre-war era to mechanize the system (Campbell-Smith, 2012). The aim of these plans was to reduce the need of such high levels of labour dependency (Sutton, 2013).



The idea behind mechanizing the system was to speed up the process of sorting incoming mail for distribution to Delivery Offices. The initial machines for this purpose came into being after trials in the 1950s and 1960s. Following the introduction of a scheme known as the Letter Post Plan in 1969, there was a massive stride towards the goal of issuing a post code to each address in Britain to drive the introduction of sorting machines and transform postal work (Sutton, 2013). This second generation of sorting machines came into operation from 1975, massively speeding up the sorting process, and creating engineering as a significant role within the postal service (Sutton, 2013).

There was growing pressure for reform of the service from the mid 1970s. The Carter review of 1977 was tasked to analyse the performance of the service. The review concluded that the service had been inadequate in adapting to commercialization and that there was a retention of Civil Service habits (Pitt, 1978; Daunton, 1985; Campbell-Smith, 2012). In terms of work within the service though, postal workers were becoming increasingly discontent due to the intensification of work processes, working the same hours as they had done in 1971, but increasingly under situations of greater pressure (Keenlyside, 1977).

The late 1970s saw a brief experiment with industrial democracy whereby union representatives were given equal status on the corporate board of the postal service. The experiment came in for critique on both sides with management perceiving union members as obstructive to change and efficiency proposals, whilst the union saw participation with management as being a deviation away from representing worker interests, legitimising capitalist control (Batstone *et al*, 1983). By the time the renewal of the scheme was up for discussion, the political climate had changed due to the election of the Thatcher led

Conservative Party in 1979, which brought with it an ideological transformation in the way the public sector was perceived.

This growth in prominence of new right and neoliberal thinking had led to increased critique of the service, questioning the validity of the monopoly, and even promoting the privatization of the service itself (Campbell-Smith, 2012). Competition was seen as the key to increased efficiency and service improvement with a postal service under private ownership (Senior, 1983). As a consequence of the new right critique, the postal service embarked on a process of marketization as attempts were made to acclimatise the organization to market conditions. The Conservative administration of the 1980s made a definitive break with the past. The focus now was firmly on business performance and achieving commercial levels of service, as opposed to providing a public service. This entailed an increasing emphasis on public relations and marketing, and growing importance of business analysis (Dearing, 1986).

Due to the political inexpediency of privatization, Total Quality Management (TQM) was introduced in 1988 as a means to develop private sector customer care within the service and create a more market-oriented approach, where employees were expected to orient themselves around the concepts of quality and customer service (Jenkins *et al*, 1995). The rhetoric of quality was central to the process of public sector reforms: that efficiency, consumer voice and choice, decentralization, and the creation of ‘quasi-markets’ were all changes that related to ‘quality’ (Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio, 1995b). It was the intention to create a new culture within the postal service, permeating all aspects of the organization, and centred around continuous improvement and displaying a unified, cross-organizational approach to quality and the customer (Jenkins *et al*, 1995). This new culture does not seem to have extended to transform the gendered nature of postal work though. Despite the

pioneering efforts of the postal service in equalizing employment over the early 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries (Glew, 2010; Campbell-Sith, 2012), the postal service continued to disadvantage women, a position that has been historically maintained through the relationship between the trade union, management, and male and female workers (Jenkins *et al*, 2002)

As part of this modernization process, a system of functionalization was introduced. The business was separated out into three separate operational areas with the justification of reducing overlapping areas of responsibility: processing, delivery, and distribution. This entailed a greater degree of functional specialization and resulted in wide ranging worker dissatisfaction (Jenkins *et al*, 1995; Martinez Lucio *et al*, 2000). Postal workers were concerned regarding the lack of control that they were able to exert over their work. In addition to this, there was a process of deskilling of roles and little chance of advancement, and tasks were regarded by workers as monotonous (Giga *et al*, 2003). Modernization processes were also seen as a threat to standardized work, with fears of franchising, and postal workers having to ‘buy their walk’ as a prelude to privatization (Martinez Lucio *et al*, 2000).

In addition to this, the discourse of quality proffered by the Government did not necessarily go uncontested: their conception of ‘quality contrasted to the conception of many public sector workers who felt that services should be organized for the public good’ (Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio, 1995a: 1). Therefore, ‘quality’ became a point of contestation, both for and against marketization and privatization (Martinez Lucio *et al*, 2000). However, the implementation of TQM had an ulterior motive, with management wanting to show that changes could be bought in at the local level and outside of the bargaining structure (Darlington, 1993; Gall, 2003). In this way, modernization, in relation to wider changes in the

industrial relations framework, included a number of attempts to circumvent the trade unions and traditional worker priorities. In addition to TQM, there was also the introduction of HRM techniques and the attempted implementation of team briefings (Darlington, 1993; Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio, 1995b).

Such attempts by postal service management to bypass the trade union were attempts to control the narrative over modernization and garner worker support for changes in working practices to pave the way for privatization and put pressure on workers not to participate in industrial action (Beale and Mustchain, 2014). However, efforts to circumvent the union were largely unsuccessful with postal workers actively contesting modernization (Martinez Lucio *et al*, 2000; Gall, 2003). Postal workers instead displayed an enduring industrial strength and confidence, reinforced by victories in industrial conflicts over the 1980s and 1990s. The fight against modernization was framed by the CWU in relation to the notion of public service provision, conflicting with managerial interests of commercialization (Gall, 2003). The modernization programme over the 1980s and 1990s had resulted in a deterioration of the relationship between postal workers and managers (Beale and Mustchain, 2014) and a rise in the fear of workplace bullying and violence (Giga *et al*, 2003).

### The significance of the uniform

By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century the beginnings of the postal service as a uniformed public service came to be seen. The service itself dates the first official issue of uniformed clothing to London General Post letter carriers as being made in 1793. This comes slightly earlier, though ended up developing contemporaneously to the development of other uniformed service in the case of the police and the fire brigade (Ewen, 2006). The Bow Street Runners, a

fore runner of the police, had formed in 1748/1749, and following expansion came to have uniformed patrols, and uniformed constables by the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Their uniforms entailed that they were instantly identifiable by the public (and developed a similar ethos of public service) (Ewan, 2018). Such forms of police, and the postal service, were out on the streets each day and their uniform conveyed a message to the communities they served.

The identifiable nature of uniforms can entail differing forms of responses from the public. It has been noted that police uniforms have the possibility of carrying negative connotations, particularly within certain sections of society, because of the perception of the people within those uniforms (Bell, 1982; Whitfield, 2006). However, the wearers of the uniforms of the postal service did not really carry these same connotations: it does not entail the same baggage as they are not necessarily (or perhaps directly) involved with the exercise of coercive power. This perhaps explains in part the good relationship between postal workers and the public. The first uniforms of the postal service were scarlet cut-away coats with blue lapels and cuffs, waistcoats, and tall beaver hats with gold band and cockade. The scarlet in the uniform was intended to display the link of the postal service to royalty. It was an element that that they would retain within their uniforms in one way or another for many years.

However, in 1868, in addition to scarlet piping to maintain this link to royalty, the uniform began to display a distinct link to a military style, in terms of navy-blue tunic which buttoned up the front. In the post-Second World War period, it was felt by the postal service that there should be a maintenance with tradition in terms of the composition of the uniform, and it was felt that fashionable clothing was not appropriate for the service. But by the 1980s the style of the uniform starts to take on a distinctly more casual tone, bringing in elements of the latest fashions into their design.

### The relationship with the armed forces

The relationship of the postal service with the armed forces was not reserved to just the two World Wars of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Indeed, as stated above, the service itself can trace its very origins back to armed conflict. Over the 19<sup>th</sup> Century though, this relationship was cemented. In 1816 there was a number of volunteers from the postal service to aid with communication in France after victory over Napoleon. The 49<sup>th</sup> Middlesex Rifles was formed entirely from volunteers from the postal service in 1868. The regiment was renamed in 1880 and saw frontline action in both Egypt and Sudan, in addition to overseeing communications during the Boer War. At the onset of the Great War in 1914, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Post Office Rifles battalion was formed. The battalion saw frontline action at the Somme and Passchendaele, suffering a great number of losses. Over the course of the Great War, Post Office Rifles received 145 gallantry awards (The Postal Museum),

### **Identifying the gaps**

Much of the research that has taken place in terms of work at the postal service has been from either a managerial (Jenkins *et al*, 1995; Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio, 1995a; Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio, 1995b; Martinez Lucio *et al*, 2000; Giga *et al*, 2003; Beale and Mustchain, 2014), or an industrial relations perspective (Martinez Lucio *et al*, 2000; Gall, 2003; Darlington, 1993). As such, there is a lack of a sociological analyses of work within the postal service, understood as an organization that had become a part of the very fabric of the nation, in terms of the effect of processes of modernization, ongoing from the early 1970s, on the experience of work. How did modernization effect the public service ethic that was noted by Campbell-Smith (2012)? Was there a gendered experience in relation to processes of

modernization? And how did the working culture of postal workers, and the way in which they identified with their labour change as a result of modernization processes?

## **Thesis structure**

As we can see from this brief overview, the postal service has been known by a number of different names over the centuries it has been in existence. At its founding it was primarily referred to as the king's post. After the granting of the first monopoly in 1635 it was known as the Letter Office, or during the protectorate as the General Post Office. The term Royal Mail came to be used after it was painted on the outside of mail coaches from 1784, and so could be used interchangeably with Post Office from here. More recently, following the functional split of the organization, the name Post Office was retained on the side of the business involving physical post offices, whereas Royal Mail was used for deliveries (Campbell-Smith 2012). As a consequence of this nomenclatural ambiguity, for the purposes of this thesis I have chosen to use the term postal service, though I primarily deal with the organization that became Royal Mail. However, I have not altered the way in which different interviewees have referred to the varying aspects of the postal service as what they are referring to is implicit within their discourse. When I use the term counters, I am referring to the side of the business that retained the name Post Office.

The next chapter of this thesis will take the form of a review of relevant literature. I will be looking at the research areas of occupational identity, and workplace culture, followed by New Public Management (NPM), and the public service ethos (PSE) and public service motivation (PSM). Following this review, I will present a delineation in terms of what this

research is addressing, how it builds on literature relating to the postal service, NPM and the modernization of public services, PSE and PSM, occupational identification and culture, and the neoliberalization of work. In doing so this will enable the identification of the research questions that this work will attempt to answer. Following this I will then detail the methods and methodological framework I used to answer these questions and discuss the way in which these methods were employed in the field, in addition to the ethical considerations that I encountered. I will then present four empirical chapters that deal with, the working culture of postal workers in the period of 1970-2000, the significance of forms of recruitment, progression and management, and the transformation of the postal service into a business.



# **Chapter One**

## **Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

The introduction sets the scene as to how and why I came to be interested in the experience of work within the postal service as an area of research. I gave a brief overview of the context of the postal service over the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century to set the context of the research. In doing this I showed how there was an ethic within the postal service of seeing work in relation to the importance of providing a public service (Campbell-Smith, 2012). The postal service was one that was steeped in tradition, male dominated, and possessed a militaristic type bearing (Johnson, 2014). The separation of the postal service from the Civil Service in 1969 ushered in a period of change and modernization within the postal service for the aim of commercialization and marketization (Jenkins *et al*, 1995; Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio, 1995a; Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio, 1995b; Martinez Lucio *et al*, 2000), leaving questions as to what this means for the nature of the ethic of public service within the postal service, and the effect on the working culture and occupational identification of postal workers.

I will now review relevant literature that frames this project. I start with a brief overview of key currents in sociological thinking concerning work in the post-industrial society. This will set the scene for a review of the literature as regards to workplace identity, as to the extent, and way in which, individuals may use their daily labour as a nexus through which identity may be formed. Following this I discuss literature on workplace culture, and the way in

which this culture can serve as means through which daily labour is experienced and understood. As my own research is focussed on the past (albeit through the lens of the present), and on a period in which the organization and practices of work within the postal service were changing, I discuss the significance of nostalgia and memory when looking at issues of workplace identity and culture in the experience of work.

Furthermore, due to the focus on the postal service in this transitional period, I discuss relevant literature on the reforms to the public sector that took place following the general election victory of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party in 1979. These reforms can broadly be thought of as neoliberal in nature, though they followed a somewhat pragmatic trajectory, rather than an overtly ideological one (Johnson, 1990). The reform of the public services was characterised by a movement termed new public management (NPM), a combination of an extension of managerialism, entrepreneurialism and a drive towards marketization and privatization. This review will demonstrate the wider context of public sector reform within which the postal service was situated.

Finally, I review literature on the ethic of providing a public service. This is somewhat of a diffuse concept and so this review will focus on the two separate, but related concepts of public service ethos (PSE) and public service motivation (PSM). The focus of these concepts is on the pride that people experience working within public services in performing labour for the public good.

## **The ‘end of work’**

Over the last decades, much has been written within the sociology of work concerning fundamental changes to the nature, and experience, of work in the capitalist, western world. This has centred around the ‘end of work’ literature (Strangleman, 2007), suggesting that there has been a generalized flexibilization and de-standardization of both work locality and time, promoted by employers in response to globalized competitiveness (Beck, 1992). The increasing importance of knowledge means the contemporary experience of work is one of impermanence, compelling individuals to use their own resources to negotiate the labour market (Rifkin, 2004) and adapt to dynamic changes within it (Standing, 2009). The ideal of full-time, standardized labour is said to have eroded (Bauman, 2005) and the ‘job for life’ disappeared (Beck, 2000), entailing that work for many has become uncertain and unstable (Bauman, 1998). It is important to note though, that this was a ‘standard’ for only certain sections of society and was a gendered notion of a standard. The distribution of flexible and casualized forms of labour is said to have led to more insecure forms of employment, with fewer benefits, rights, and lower wages (Harvey, 1989). These processes are associated with a reduction in numbers of the working class, in terms of a core of workers, who receive good remuneration and trade union representation (Standing, 2009).

The ‘end of work’ literature highlights the negative connotations of the proliferation of de-standardized forms of employment, in terms of the increased experience of instability and the proliferation of alienating and dehumanizing forms of work. It has been noted by some though, that the flexibilization of labour is not inherently negative, and that for some, the experience could even be considered to be a form of labour emancipation, where work can be pursued as a form of aestheticism, in a more individualized fashion, involving a greater

degree of freedom of choice (Gorz, 1999; Bauman, 2005). However, these forms of work tend to be limited to those in a privileged position within the labour market, with those at the bottom of the market facing uncertainty and insecurity (Bauman, 2005).

Standardized, full-time labour was the product of an organised form of capitalism (Lash and Urry, 1987), that occurred at a particular point-in-time in the post-Second World War era within the industrial modernity. In addition, the creation of the welfare state entailed the needs of citizens were met by the government through professionally delivered and objectively managed services (Osbourne and McLaughlin 2002). The period of the long-boom was characterised by rigid accumulation and central planning (Harvey, 1989). The society of the industrial modernity was one that produced a greater degree of trust between the members of that society; it was a society that experienced a more developed level of connection (Putnam, 2000). This connected society entailed institutions that worked towards these forms of social capital, lubricating the societal connections, helping to look after society. This social connectivity is significant in sustaining social conduct through the networks of mutual obligations that they imply: generalized reciprocity creates a norm out of this behaviour through these mutual obligations (Putnam, 2000). In this way, trusting that others will also do good maintains the connected community: doing societal good becomes a virtue in itself. However, although this society was one of greater connectivity, it was also one that was characterised by intolerance of lifestyles that differed from 'the norm', discrimination on the basis of gender, race, sexuality, social class, or religion (Putnam, 2000).

From the mid-point of the second half of the 20th Century, society is said to have transitioned from an industrial, to a post-industrial modernity, characterised by flexible accumulation and the espousal of the free market (Harvey, 1989). This move to a new phase in the evolution of capitalism and society

has been variously referred to as ‘new capitalism’ (Sennett, 2006); ‘light capitalism’ (Bauman, 2000); ‘risk society’ (Beck, 1992); ‘late modernity’ (Giddens, 1991); ‘information society’ (Castells, 1996); ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman, 2000); or ‘reflexive modernity’ (Beck, 1994; Giddens, 1994; Lash, 1994). These changes in the nature of social life have implications for self-identity, and the way in which work has traditionally been the basis from which to generate and sustain identity (Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 2005).

How did postal work and the culture of ‘traditional’ postal work fit within the system of generalized reciprocity and networks of trust within the connected communities (Putnam, 2000) of the industrial modernity? How did the transition to this new phase of modernity effect this position? The ‘end of work’ literature would suggest that a workplace such as the postal service would be the site of the experience of increased flexibilization, de-standardization, and instability. Was this the reality of work for postal workers moving into this ‘new capitalism’, or was their experience instead characterised by significant continuities with the past?

### **‘New capitalism’ and individualization**

Elias (1991) considered that as societies increasingly became more complex, there is a corresponding change in the locus of the relationship between the ‘I’ and the ‘we’, with society becoming increasingly individualistic and characterised by more impermanent social relations. In this way, the movement to the post-industrial, neoliberal era is characterised by a generalised individualization, whereby the institutions of the industrial modernity begin to lose their significance through processes of detraditionalization; the religious, familial, and

social structures that had previously shaped life-trajectories are loosened, as people are compelled to be the authors of their own fate (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992). This implies a circumscription of the capacity of work to generate and sustain both individual, and collective identity. There is a change in locus away from work, and the responsibility for the construction of identity becomes an inherently individualized project (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). Processes of individualization are meaning that the logic of late modernity is becoming internalized by people in terms of self-responsibility and bonds of mutual responsibility are dissipating (Giddens, 1991). As a consequence of this, individualization is associated with a fundamental shift in the nature of community whereby people are increasingly less engaged in the civic sphere (Putnam, 2000).

Processes of individualization reflect the ‘reflexive modernization’ of society. This is a process that implies an increasing power of agency over structure, whereby the traditional social relations and certainties of the industrial era begin to dissolve (Beck, 1992). The abstract class structures of the industrial phase of modernity begin to lose their relevance to the reflexive individual and the influence of the ‘agents of class structure’ (such as trade unions and class-based politics) decline (Lash, 1994). As a result of this, the individual is compelled to choose in relation to the construction of their own biography; they become the author of their own biography and ‘a choice among possibilities, *homo optionis*’ (Beck, 1997; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001). This choice is reflected in the proliferation of many differing forms of ‘lifestyles’, much of which would have been seen as against the norms and values of the industrial society. However, though this choice goes hand-in-hand with a rise in tolerance of differing lifestyle choices, there is also a demise in the generalized level of trust within society (Putnam, 2000).

This proliferation points to a lack of relevance for both individual and collective based occupational identities for people in the post-industrial society; due to the sheer proliferation of choice identity is now secured through consumption, rather than production (Bauman, 2005). This is not implying an individualism that posits people living in complete isolation (Elias, 1991), but rather a change in the way the single relates to the plural. The demise in work as a foundation of identification and rise of consumption entails that people increasingly seek a sense of community through interests that they pursue in their leisure time, through their interests and consumption patterns. As these kinds of interests are necessarily fragmented, they bring together those with common shared interests, rather than being inclusive communities (Bellah *et al*, 1985). As such, in the individualized society we can speak of 'lifestyle enclaves', the identification with which is based on personal choice, free from traditional boundaries (Bellah *et al*, 1985). In this way, identity is a reflexive creation, sustained and understood in terms of individual biography (Giddens, 1991). So, what can individualization show us about the experience of work for postal workers between 1970 and 2000, moving into this new phase of capitalism and going through processes of modernization? Were postal workers showing an increasingly individualized orientation to work and becoming authors of their own biography (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992), a reflexive creation (Giddens, 1991) in terms of their own 'career' trajectories?

Reflexivity is not just reflection upon the self. It is a confrontation with the self in terms of actively shaping the self in relation and reaction to the multiplicity of options as regards to risk in the new modernity (Beck, 1994b). However, there are both reflexivity winners and losers: 'reflexivity winners' are generally those who come from the middle classes who possess the educational and social resources necessary to be able to keep up with the pace of changes and have the necessary skills to succeed; the reflexivity losers tend to be those who

come from the class of workers from the classical proletariat from industrial modernity (Lash, 1994). This highlights the importance of education in negotiating success in the new modernity: an increased duration of education tends to be associated with more opportunities as regards to career and the ability of the individual to have more autonomy as regards to the labour market (Beck, 1992). This raises the question as to the reflexivity ‘losers’ and ‘winners’ (Lash, 1994) within the postal workers? Did particular postal workers become reflexivity ‘winners’, and if so, what resources did they call upon to achieve this?

For Giddens, well-being is bound up with a sense of continuity of self-identity: a maintenance of personal narrative as a part of the reflexive project of the self (Giddens, 1991). This ontological security is a psychological defence for the fragile self-identity. Ontological security is found through the routines and regularities of everyday life, and the ‘pervasive influence of habit’ that can protect us from the psychologically detrimental effects of unpredictability and uncertainty (Giddens, 1990). That said, due to the inherent uncertainty and unpredictability of modern life, identity may be prone to fragility (Giddens, 1991). The experience of a fractured personal biography, i.e., a person who may have an inconsistent experience of continuity in their biography, may engender this sense of fragile self-identity. But what were the consequences for the fragile self-identity in terms of modernization and being a reflexivity ‘loser’? Did the modernization of the postal service represent a threat to postal workers in terms of their ‘ontological security’ (Giddens, 1991)? And if so, what kinds of resources did postal workers call upon in terms of the defence from such threats?

However, the dichotomy between selfhood in ‘traditional’ and contemporary society has been criticised as being overly simplistic, historically ignorant and bordering on ethnocentricity (Adams, 2005; Jenkins, 2000). Just as tradition may not indeed be as traditional as is depicted



through such theorizations (Heelas, 2006), the reflexivity and individualization attributed to contemporary society may be more grounded and restraining through structure and authority than is assumed (Adams, 2006; Heelas, 1996; Craib, 1992). Instead, significant continuities with the past are pointed to, with the need for a more sophisticated (Craib, 1992) and historically sensitive (Inglis, 2014) understanding of contemporary society.

### **The 'end of work' and occupationally based identity**

Debates on the 'end of work' have focussed on the extent to which work can still be considered central to the construction of identity. Identity can be thought of as being both an internal, individual thing, which pertains to a sense of the self in relation to biographical trajectory, and collective identity, which is in relation to the sense of a feeling of belonging to a social group, with its own distinctive history (Jenkins, 2000). These forms of identity are shaped through tradition, which provides individuals with a sense of belonging through which they understand their social worlds (Thompson, 1996).

Both individual and group identification concerns processes of classification, whereby we define both what we are, and what we are not, through the delineation of similarities and differences. This is an internal process, but also looks outward in terms of both the positive and negative categorization of others: the definition of both the 'I' and the 'we' can be found in relation to what it is not, as well as what it is (Jenkins, 2000). Occupational communities consist of people working at the same physical space, or people from disparate locations engaged in the same occupation, who use that occupation as a means of distinguishing their community from others and possess a set of values and pride for the work they carry out

(Salaman, 1971). For members of occupational communities, work can act as a crux around which the rest of life can be built and organised, providing friendship circles and socialization activities (Salaman, 1974).

Groups can also serve to identify what they are and what they are not through their collective performances as a team. Goffman's (1959) analysis demonstrates how teams can collude through their performances to attempt to manage the perception that an intended audience may have of that team. When such team performances are in progress it is possible that the actions of any one or more team members may disrupt them through inappropriate conduct that may conflict with the image that the team wishes to put forward. In this way, team members exist in a web of reciprocal dependence that bind them together in their performance of their roles; they are in a state of reliance on the conduct and performances of others (Goffman, 1959). Because of this, existent members of a team tend to prefer to select new team members who might be thought to be trusted to perform in-line with the desired team performance (Goffman, 1959). Furthermore, such team performances can cut across traditional lines of demarcation in terms of status and serves as a form of cohesion in organizations. However, when large divisions between such statuses exist in organizations, these can be reflected in terms of differential team performances (Goffman, 1959).

This demonstrates how through the collective acting of what the team is, team members can reinforce the boundaries of their occupational community and the forms of acceptable behaviour that are consistent with it. Where a team member believes in this team performance, their private actions (ones performed without an audience) can be maintained in terms of the standard of the team performance. This maintenance is performed with the thought of a type of 'unseen audience' who may punish any deviations (Goffman, 1959).

However, it is not necessarily the case that all the actions that team members may engage in will be in accordance with the coherency of the image that the team is attempting to portray. Such elements of the performance are hidden from sight and go on ‘behind the scenes’, away from the gaze of an audience. Such actions do not necessarily detract from the team performance, or the individual team member’s belief in their own performance. The dual nature of the role of team member as simultaneously performer and audience make it necessary to conceal such ‘discreditable facts’ they have had to learn about the performance from their self (Goffman, 1959). Those who transgress the rules of the performance in front of an external audience can leave themselves open to sanction from the team; such sanction should only occur ‘behind the scenes’, away from the gaze of the audience (Goffman, 1959).

Mars (1982), demonstrates how ‘unseen’ transgressions that go on ‘behind closed doors’ can constitute a form of informal economy at work; though such transgressions may be forms of cheating and fiddling, they can also be thought of as constructive in the employment relationship. Mars (1982) employs a form of moral ambiguity in drawing a distinction between cheating as an everyday and normalised aspect of employment, and more deviant, criminal behaviour. Such informal economies in the workplace may be tacitly accepted, and supervisors may indeed be complicit in due to the positive effects they can have on the whole. Such cheating may constitute an informal method of workplace equalization, be an alternative method of workplace reward, or reinforce a sense of group solidarity. Workers engaging in these forms of ‘cheating’ may not consider that they are doing anything wrong, and for Mars it can be a normal and even positive form of behaviour (Mars, 1982).

Forms of standardized employment in the industrial modernity seemed to provide a solid basis in terms of identity construction, an axis around which other activity could be organised

(Bauman, 1998), where questions of identity construction were settled by birth, through tradition (Bauman, 2005). This meant that cultural traditions could be passed through processes of intergenerational transmission (Strangleman, 2012), with people growing up with a clear idea and expectation in terms of their projected working life. However, this form of identity construction tended to be a gendered construction due to such 'standard' forms of employment being predominantly male in nature. The instability and uncertainty of contemporary employment posited by Beck (2000) and Bauman (1998; 2005) is said to have moved work from its central place in the construction of identity. As a consequence, the site of identity construction has moved, from production to consumption (Bauman, 1998). The past is seen in relation to the present as a sharp contrast, with the former characterised as collective and the latter as individualised.

Similarly, to Bauman (1998; 2005) and Beck (2000), Sennett (1998) posits insecurity of work as having implications for the construction of identity. However, though there is convergence between Bauman and Beck, and Sennett, they differ on how work in the past is viewed. For Beck (2000), and Bauman (1998; 2005), though work in the past created a solid base, the identity constructed from it is construed as false consciousness since work has always been dehumanizing. Further to this, Gorz (1999), characterises the valorization of the kinds of collective bonds and relationships that were created through past work as a nostalgic idealization of things that were, in actuality, rather weak in nature.

On the other hand, Sennett (1998) sees more profound implications of a moral dimension from the transition to 'new' capitalism. Although work in the past may not have been ideal, the stability that it provided was able to sustain the development of 'character' and identity. In this way, changes to the organization of work are interpreted as a debasement of the work

experience, which has implications for the development of moral identity, and ‘character’. The short termism and fugitive relations that are fostered through the ‘new capitalism’ are inadequate for the development of character through sustained narrative (Sennett, 1998). Furthermore, Sennett also sees the transitory nature of work as being problematic in terms of only being able to generate weak attachments between workers as it does not lead to a collective experience of time. This has implications in terms of relationships being able to be based in mutual trust (Sennett, 1998). As such, Sennett sees a capacity in contemporary society to de-skill people in terms of necessary competencies in working alongside each other. For Sennett (2012) the erosion of the informal collective bonds and social mutuality that was established and reproduced at the workplace is expressed in terms of the loss of cooperation.

However, the interpretations of the past proffered within the ‘end of work’ literature have been criticised as sweeping and unrefined, based around the notion of a dichotomous split between the past and the present, with work in the industrial society characterised as permanent and collective, contrasted to post-industrial instability and individualization (Strangleman, 2007; Potter, 2015). For Strangleman, this presentation of past work as merely meaningless and dehumanizing denies the agency of workers in the industrial modernity, depicts them as just ‘passive victims of capitalism’, and ‘does violence’ to their experience (Strangleman, 2007). Though Sennett’s account of work, and both collective and individual identity, displays more historical sensitivity than those of Beck (2000), Bauman (1998; 2005), and Gorz (1999), it is still based in a dichotomous split between the past and the present. Alternatively, Strangleman (2007) advocates a sociology which places events within their historical perspective, attempts to understand the experience of people in relation to the change that has occurred, treats that experience with respect, and looks for the enduring

continuities between the past and the present. And indeed, to understand the present, there is a need to come to a better understanding of the past (Strangleman, 2023).

From this, how are we to conceive of the occupational identity of postal workers? If we are to take the account proffered by Beck (2000), Bauman (1998; 2005), and Gorz (1999), then we should see any identification that postal workers had with their labour as ‘false consciousness’, a simple nostalgia for the past. However, in seeking to come to a better understanding of the past (Strangleman, 2023), and placing events within their historical perspective (Strangleman, 2007), can we come to a more nuanced idea of the form of identification with work for postal workers? How significant was postal work in terms of generating and sustaining identity, and how can this be integrated with the importance of the service ethic (Campbell-Smith, 2012)? In addition, how did the culture of ‘traditional’ postal work matter in terms of the team performance (Goffman, 1959) of postal workers and how did the enactment of such performances serve as a resource against modernization? In what way did modernization effect this team performance (Goffman, 1959)? How did the mutual dependence of the team in terms of its performance matter as regards the recruitment of new postal workers? In what way did the informal economy of ‘cheating’ (Mars, 1982) operate within the culture of ‘traditional’ postal work and how was this affected through modernization?

### **Enduring occupational identity?**

In terms of work in the industrial modernity, Strangleman (2012), demonstrates the significance of being trained by the generation of workers who had served during the Second

World War for those beginning their working lives during the period of the long boom: the period of relative stability and growth experienced in the decades following the war, enabled through Keynesian economic management (Dumenil and Levy, 2004). The ‘legacy of the war’ shows the possibility of how younger workers were provided with a sustainable moral order through the enacting of discipline and structure from this older generation. Through this kind of routine practice, workers could develop a ‘sustainable life’ and derive a sense of identity around work (Strangleman, 2012).

In this way, the dismissal by Beck (2000), Bauman (1998; 2005) and Gorz (1999) of the experience of work in the past as one of ‘false consciousness’, characterised as a simple nostalgia, is a condescension (Strangleman, 2007). Changes have entailed that younger workers in the contemporary workplace do seem to display a more individualized and instrumental approach to work, demonstrative of a break in the moral order in terms of the generational transmission of workplace culture. This does render work-based identity as more problematic, but the nature of shared experiences entails that the inter-generational relationship is more complex than is assumed in the ‘end of work’ literature (Strangleman, 2012). And so, whereas work-based identities may have changed, they are not entirely disappeared. Did the process of modernization within the postal service have a similar effect to the one noted by Strangleman (2012) in terms of a more individualized approach to work and break in the moral order?

Potter (2015), demonstrates how the fragmented nature of contemporary work-life trajectories, means that though individuals can still frame their identities in relation to work, there are profound consequences for the self and work relationship. The pertinent issue becomes the way in which the fluctuations of the work-life trajectory are negotiated within

the continuity of biography. In this way, meaningful work and alienating work should not necessarily be seen as binaries, the issue is more concerning the negotiation of the trajectory (Potter, 2015). 'Self-work', or identity work (Bauman, 2001), helps people to negotiate the transitions and disruptive events that individuals may encounter in contemporary work (Potter, 2015; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). This is seen as a method by which individuals maintain or restore their sense of self in the face of such instability; an 'intrapersonal endeavour' that shapes, sustains and personalises the work-life narrative (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003), through which the reconstruction of identity narratives can be enacted (Giddens, 1991). In this way, work-life trajectories can be centred around notions of career as a subjectively ordered project of the self, oriented externally to any organization and outside of the traditional job-for-life or organizational loyalties (Hancock and Tyler, 2004; Ashforth *et al*, 2008), where attachments to work are of a personal nature in terms of the responsibility to the self and to that career, rather than to the organization or collective (Foster, 2012).

However, the capacity for such transitions, or disruptive events, to provoke the possibility of work-related identity loss has been highlighted (Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly, 2014). Such transitive periods involve processes of 'sense-making', where people attempt to understand who they are and who they may be becoming. In this way, these events can lead to the possibility of a disruption of a work-related identity, whilst also being an opportunity for growth, depending on the way in which emotions are processed within the transitional period (Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly, 2014).

On the other hand, Doherty (2009) points to the capacity of the workplace itself in retaining significance as a source of identity and meaning, an important focus of an individual's social



relations, despite the involvement of differing employee ‘voice’ mechanisms. Although Doherty establishes the importance of work for individual feelings of self-worth, there is a tendency to conflate work commitment and job satisfaction with identity (Doherty, 2009). In addition, the continuing strength of occupational identities at work is pointed to through the failure of managerialist attempts to proffer alternative forms of organizational narrative in pursuit of managerial change (Mackenzie and Marks, 2019); or to reorient worker values through exposure to corporate culture (Baugher, 2003). In this way, identity can be experienced through such processes of reform, which can be perceived as disrespectful (Strangleman, 2004).

Furthermore, an occupationally based identity, rather than more subjectively based understandings of ‘career’ or identity work, can act as a resource for the negotiation of change and instability in the work-life trajectory, even in terms of the contestation of managerialism, in addition to negotiating and managing transitional life-events (MacKenzie and Marks, 2019; Revely and McLean, 2008). The significance of occupational identities even post-departure from an occupation has also been suggested. This is a ‘rearticulated’ version of occupational identity that is reproduced in the light of the change that has occurred (MacKenzie and Marks, 2019).

So, how did identity within a modernizing postal service work? Accounts emphasising ‘self-work’, or the subjective negotiations of work-life trajectories (Potter, 2015; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) indicates that people can use their own resources and create their own work identities. Such people can become the reflexivity ‘winners’ as noted by Lash (1994) and become the author of their own career. Did postal workers attempt to manage their careers within the service in such a manner? Or, was there an enduring capacity for an identity

founded within labour still possible moving through the era of modernization? Could postal workers call on their work-based identity as a resource within processes of modernization against the onset of managerialism (MacKenzie and Marks, 2019; Revely and McLean, 2008), and in what way could the service ethic within the postal service (Campbell-Smith, 2012) be seen to intervene in this?

### **Workplace culture and collective identity at work**

Though the ‘end of work’ literature positions collectively based occupational identities as waning in the face of a generalized individualization, such collective identities, expressed through collective bonds, have been found to be significant for people going through transitionary events in the work-life trajectory, such as redundancy, life crises, and resistance to increasing individualization (Gardiner *et al*, 2009; Mackenzie *et al*, 2006); as well as in relation to forms of organizational change (Humphreys and Brown, 2002; Mackenzie *et al*: 2006, McBride and Martinez Lucio, 2011), and processes of work-life change (Strangleman, 2012). Collective identities can act as a resource, in terms of a collective memory resource, when experiencing such times of transition and processes of change (McLachlan *et al*, 2019). Occupational communities have also been shown to be an important resource in terms of negotiating the labour market during disruptions in the work-life biography (MacKenzie and Marks, 2019) as well as after redundancy (Mackenzie *et al*, 2006).

The collective bonds of occupational communities have also been shown to provide important socialization outside of the workplace, which acts as to further reinforce the camaraderie experienced within that occupational community (Mackenzie *et al*, 2006). In

addition, occupational communities have also been compared in nature to a family in terms of the bond between members (Cooper *et al*, 2016).

Strangleman (2012) notes the importance of inter-generational transmission in relation to workplace culture for workers to become embedded within their work. This is not a quick process; it takes time for people to become a part of their work (Strangleman, 2004). And as noted by Sennett (1998; 2012), the experience of time in relation to the contemporary workplace is one which is inadequate in terms of fostering collective social relations and cooperation. In this way, the stability and predictability of the workplace of the past had enabled the emergence of a particular moral order. This was achieved through processes of discipline, whereby a mutual respect of workers from differing generations and differing grades was engendered and the authority of those in the higher grades was legitimized (Strangleman, 2012). However, though there was a shared notion of occupational culture between older and retired workers, this transmission to the next generation of younger workers was becoming more problematic, with these workers not seeing the shared values of the workplace as significant anymore (Strangleman, 2012).

The possibility of this erosion of workplace culture and identity is expressed by Strangleman in terms of the loss of a moral order and sustainable way of life (Strangleman, 2012). For Waddington (2023), the loss is expressed in terms of the loss of camaraderie. Camaraderie was an experience that equated to much more than just friendship, and indeed existed independently of it. Camaraderie consisted of acts of dependency and care, expressed through the language of workers 'looking out' for each other, the loss of which was experienced on a profound level (Waddington, 2023). It has also been asserted that workers have felt that this kind of camaraderie would be difficult to find in alternative forms of employment

(Mackenzie *et al*, 2006). However, it should also be noted that though collective identities can provide this kind of camaraderie and togetherness, they can also act in an exclusionary manner, meaning that those who do not adhere to certain norms, or possess particular characteristics, can be excluded.

For Gelfand (2018), the camaraderie and togetherness of such occupational cultures, and even their exclusive nature, can also be utilised in terms of resistance to change. This is done in relation to tight and loose cultures. In tight cultures people tend to exhibit more cooperative and coordinated forms of behaviour and will be more conscientious. However, such tight cultures also tend to be less tolerant, more conventional, and less diverse. On the other hand, loose cultures will be more tolerant, diverse, and creative, whilst being more disorganized, impulsive and with a lack of coordination (Gelfand, 2018). For Gelfand, neither of these cultures is necessarily better than the other and can exist in differing degrees of strength of tightness or looseness, or even mixtures of structured looseness, or flexible tightness. Tight cultures possess stronger social norms, which can make them more resistant to change. In addition, the presence of existential threat, either real or socially constructed, can have the effect of further tightening that culture, mitigating that threat with the togetherness of the group (Gelfand, 2018).

So, in terms of the postal service, how can we conceive of the occupational culture of postal workers and how was this culture being affected through the modernization process? Was there a breakdown in the relationship between the generations (Strangleman, 2012) and decline in the nature of collective social relations and forms of cooperation (Sennett, 1998; 2012)? Was there an erosion in the sense of camaraderie (Waddington, 2023) felt between postal workers? How useful is the notion of tight and loose cultures (Gelfand, 2018) in

understanding the culture of ‘traditional’ postal work, and how postal workers reacted to processes of modernization? Did the relative ‘tightness’ of ‘traditional’ postal work aid its persistence over time?

## **Nostalgia and identity**

As noted above, the idea of attributing work in the past as a significant site in terms of meaning and the generation and sustaining of identity has been criticised as ‘false consciousness’: a nostalgia that amounts to a type of romanticised reminiscence (Beck, 2000; Bauman, 1998; 2005; Gorz, 1999). However, for Strangleman the dismissal of the feelings and rememberings of people concerning their working lives is a condescension devoid of historical perspective (Strangleman, 2007). This nostalgia is far from a false consciousness. It is a sense of loss or grieving for the change that has occurred in relation to the moral order and social relations that structured their daily lives, and the stability of that framework (Strangleman, 2012; 2013). It is a provision of meaning from a sense of worth, a basis of solidity derived through ‘loving memories’, though should not be considered as conservative or regressive (Gabriel, 1993).

Davis (1979) positioned nostalgia in terms of the dialectic between the past and the present, invoked in the light of change and anxiety; it is the negotiation between continuity and discontinuity (Atia and Davies, 2010). Therefore, nostalgia is as much about the present condition as it is about the past. It is about making sense of the processes of change that have occurred and a feeling of longing for the sense of safety and security that was experienced from that past (Davis, 1979), or a retroactive attachment to that past (Loveday, 2014) and

refuge from the present (Gabriel, 1993). In a simple way, the past is something that just ‘makes sense’ (Strangleman, 2012).

For Davis nostalgia is rarely simple. It is more of a critical engagement with the past, a reflective interrogation of memory (Davis, 1979). This can take the form of the ‘radical imagination’, whereby critiques of the past can be articulated, and does not just lament the passing of an era, but examines it (Gibbs, 2021). Nostalgia is about the ‘structure of feeling’ of the circumstances that produces such accounts of the past (Williams, 1973), meaning that in the face of periods of change and disruption, a sense of continuity of identity, or ontological security, can be produced through such nostalgia (Davis, 1979; Gabriel, 1993). So, what is the form of nostalgia displayed by postal workers? If they display a ‘simple’ nostalgia then we can indeed conceive of their occupational identity in terms of a ‘false consciousness’ in a manner akin to the ‘end of work’ (Beck, 2000; Bauman, 1998; 2005; Gorz, 1999). However, if their reminiscences are more of a reflective nostalgia, then the ‘end of work’ debate in relation to the identity of postal workers does begin to look like more of a condescension. In this case, a sense of historical perspective can be asserted (Strangleman, 2007) through this research.

### **Framing the debate: ‘the end of work’ and identity at the workplace**

The debate surrounding the ‘end of work’ paints a rather more complicated picture in relation to work and identity than the one depicted by Beck (2000), Bauman (1998; 2005) and Gorz (1999). And although Sennett (1998) is more sensitive to accounting for the lived experience of workers in the past, for him the instability of contemporary work means there is reduced

scope for individuals to form their continuity of experience into character. The experience of identity at work was not one of ‘false consciousness’, or simple nostalgic reminiscences, these were real people whose experiences should be treated with respect, and who were making sense of the change they had experienced and the loss that had gone along with this (Strangleman, 2007; 2012).

The contemporary workplace is indeed one where there is an increasingly individualized orientation towards work, particularly for younger workers, though the relationship between generations is complex (Strangleman, 2012). The work of Potter (2015), Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003), Hancock and Tyler (2004), Ashforth *et al* (2008) and Conroy and O’Leary-Kelly (2014), acknowledge the continuing importance of work in constructing identity. But this is a work-based identity that is subjectively constructed, away from the workplace and from traditionally based occupational identities. It is an identity that is constructed in the light of notions of career and of the entrepreneurial self; an increasingly individualized work-based identity.

However, this does not necessarily preclude the possibility of enduring forms of occupationally based identity. Though processes of change and transition may provoke more reflexive utilization of subjective career, or self-help resources in a form of an entrepreneurialism of the self, occupational identity can be a possible resource in the face of organizational change and work-life instability (MacKenzie and Marks, 2019; Revely and McLean, 2008). It is also important to note that workers still conceptualize an ideal of a work-life trajectory within what can be considered as a ‘traditional’ frame of reference. This persistent need of workers for stability in their work-life trajectories is seen as a discursive need (Strangleman, 2007; Potter, 2015), a nostalgia for permanency (Strangleman, 2007).

However, this should not be considered as a ‘simple’ nostalgia (Davis, 1979), but moreover is a means by which workers make sense of the changes that have taken place within the workplace, and the loss of the moral order of the past (Strangleman, 2012; MacKenzie and Marks, 2019): a ‘reflective’ nostalgia (Davis, 1979).

This points to the need for an approach which accounts for the specific work conditions under which identity is formed: one that displays an historical sensitivity to the workplace context, that places any change in the basis of identification in perspective of that history and is sensitive to the continuities and the change, whilst respecting the experience of the workers who experienced it (Strangleman, 2007).

### **Public sector reform: new public management and the ethic of public service**

In this next part of the literature review I will be discussing relevant literature relating to reform in the public sector, in addition to the public sector ethic.

The OPEC crisis of 1973 was the first post-war crisis of capitalism and precipitated a number of crises around the globe (Harvey, 2010), eventually leading to the collapse of Keynesianism as the economic management model (Harvey, 2006). Such structural problems in the economy were leading to a growing call for a change in the philosophy of economic growth, from extensive to intensive (Eichengreen, 2007). From as early as the 1960s, a process of banking deregulation had begun where bank capital was created as a separate circuit of capital, freed from national boundaries and rhythms and able to move into differing types of



activities (Lash and Urry, 1987). In this way, neoliberalism was positioned as the only answer to such structural problems, with monetarism as the way to cure stagflation (Harvey, 2006).

The crises of the 1970s were positioned as crises of governance rather than of capitalism (Harvey, 2006), and so, neoliberalism can be seen as a way of re-establishing class interests (Dumenil and Levy, 2004). This meant the 'financialization of everything', with the concentration of accumulation moved to financial institutions (Harvey, 2005; 2006). As a consequence of this, government policy over the 1980s began to be directed towards the protection of financial institutions and the liberalization of markets (Harvey, 2010; Standing, 2017). Deregulated finance has resulted in widespread consequences for work (Kalleberg, 2015). The prioritizing of shareholder value and short-term profit has entailed an expansion of low-income employment, flexibilization of the workforce, an increase in insecurity, and decline in trade union power (Peters, 2011; Darcillon, 2015). This means that there has been a redistribution of risk with the regulation of class relations working in the interests of capital (Grady, 2017).

Running alongside the debate surrounding the method of capital accumulation and the rise of financialization was the critique of the welfare state from the neoliberal, 'new right'. This critique centred round the notion that the state-run welfare services and centralised bureaucracies of the industrial era were too large, inefficient, interventionist, and so, incapable of dealing with the dynamism of the information society and knowledge-based economy (Eliassen and Sitter, 2008). The logic of neoliberal thought was that the ineffectiveness of public enterprises was due to their lack of exposure to the market (Noon and Blyton, 1997). Neoliberalism espouses the free market as a means of transforming society and the use of private enterprise in public service provision (Connell *et al*, 2009),

with that provision being characterised by individual choice to meet individual needs (Osborne and McLaughlin, 2002); that the liberalization of monopolized markets could deliver this efficiency, and public services more appropriate to modern society (Eliassen and Sitter, 2008). The implicit assumption being that the private sector is inherently more efficient and effective, but the aim, ostensibly, was to reduce public sector spending (Pollit and Bouckaert, 2004). The political debates concerning public sector inefficiency and the perceived need to reform seeped into the public consciousness. In this way, such things as the queue at the post office could be mobilised as illustrative of the waste and inefficiency of the post-war welfare society (Moran, 2007). What was once characterised as welfare directed to those in need in a society connected through mutual obligations and generalized reciprocity (Putnam, 2000) is juxtaposed with disincentivized, welfare dependent people waiting for handouts (instead of being self-reliant individuals) (Moran, 2007).

So, with the election victory in 1979 of the Margaret Thatcher led Conservative Party came the advent of marketization and managerialism within the public sector (Pollit and Bouckaert, 2004). Thatcher's neoliberal inspired reforms consisted of the privatization of state-owned industry, welfare reform and deregulation of the labour market and industrial relations systems (Johnson, 1990). The restructuring instigated by the Conservative Governments of 1979 to 1997 was not necessarily abandoned with the ascension to power of New Labour in 1997, with core aspects retained as a part of the 'Third Way' (Roper *et al*, 2005), symptomatic of the European 'left-wing' social democratic parties embracing free-market policies from the 1980s (Cramme and Diamond, 2012). Most of the Conservative's restructuring was not reversed by New Labour: privatized industries were not brought back into public ownership, and the policy of managerialism was maintained (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004).

A fundamental aspect as to the justification of the reforms began by Thatcher at the end of the 1970s was that Britain needed both moral and economic regeneration (du Gay, 1996). There was said to be a dependency culture in Britain at this time (MacDonald, 1996); an ‘anti-enterprise’ culture that was engendered by the welfare state (du Gay, 1996). The ‘enterprising culture’, of self-reliance, individual responsibility and risk taking generalized to all parts of society, set against what was seen as the generalised ‘anti-enterprise’ culture of the Fordist-Keynesian period, was seen to provide this kind of regeneration (du Gay, 1996). ‘Entrepreneurial government’ was said to maximise efficiency and effectiveness, enabling a demand for choice and quality in services. This was achieved through exposing the public sector to market mechanisms, enabling competition between service providers, and integrating the public, private and voluntary sectors in solving the problems of communities; a process where clients were redefined as customers (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992). Such changes were legitimated through the rhetoric of competition, choice, entrepreneurship, and individualism (Connell *et al*, 2009). The implementation of this programme was achieved through the extensive integration of managerial methods from the private sector, with business managers often used in advisory capacities, marking the advent of what became known as New Public Management (NPM) (Pollit and Bouckaert, 2004; Dawson and Dargie, 2002).

### **Working in public services: professional work**

NPM is associated with the application of Human Resource Management (HRM) techniques for dealing with staff, who are encouraged to adopt ‘entrepreneurial attitudes’ (Diefenbach,

2009). The restructuring of public services introduced a market-orientated flexibilization, whilst also including a systematization of work, with increased managerial control (Broadbent and Laughlin, 2002). However, though the rationale behind the reforms was that public services freed from centralized bureaucracy would be more efficient, the result has tended to be the expectation on staff to do more with less (Gill-McLure and Seifert, 2008; Siltala, 2013). The implementation of managerialism in the public sector has been associated with a gendered organizational culture that entails the disadvantaging of career progression and limiting of potential for women (Edwards, 1998; Miller, 2009).

Much of the research concerning the effect on work in public services through the implementation of governmental reforms and NPM has centred on the experience of professionals. The post-war welfare state period was associated with the precedence of professional specialism (Leicht *et al*, 2009), where professionals were afforded wide ranging autonomy (Broadbent and Laughlin, 2002) and were enabled to respond to perceived social need (Gill-McLure and Seifert, 2008).

Increasing managerialism has been a challenge to traditional working cultures and occupational identities within professional work, related to the enactment of professional autonomy: NPM is seen to have circumvented the capacity for those professionals to be able to carry out their jobs in the way they think fit (Berg, 2006; Andersen and Andersen, 2007; Gill-McLure and Seifert, 2008; Leicht *et al*, 2009; Coffey *et al*, 2009), which has been set alongside an agenda of de-professionalization (Healy, 2009) and interpreted as against the ethic of public service (Siltala, 2013). This process of de-professionalization seems to run counter to the neoliberal ethic of increased autonomy, and so can be thought of as a form of deskilling, that degrades and alienates the worker (Braverman, 1974). In addition, the

proliferation of new forms of intensified bureaucratization within professions under neoliberal managerialism, in the guise of such things as ‘outcomes’ and ‘aims and objectives’, has entailed increased control and surveillance (Fisher, 2009). This ‘market Stalinism’ (Fisher, 2009) means that ICT can be used to monitor employees, and the measurement of performance becomes an end in itself with the meeting of performance targets being more about a PR exercise than the substance of that work (Fisher, 2009).

However, despite this inhibitory effect, it has been argued that professionals were able to retain a significant amount of control over their work and exercise a restrictive effect on the reforms (Kirkpatrick *et al*, 2005). Because of this de-professionalization, erosion of autonomy and deviation of the service ethic, management had to be highly reliant on worker commitment to their job (Coffey *et al*, 2009). Intensification as a result of implementation of NPM has led to a loss of morale (Gill-McLure and Seifert, 2008). For those who have moved into management positions within the public sector there has been a prevalence of long working hours, expanding responsibilities and increasing pressure to meet deadlines, entailing high levels of stress (Kelliher and Parry, 2015).

In the face of de-professionalization, professionals found several ways to resist, combat, and circumvent reforms and assert a level of autonomy over their day-to-day work. This included moving to temporary work where increasing administrative workloads could be avoided and professionals could re-connect with their work (Leicht *et al*, 2009). Resistance could also take the form of the utilization of professional identities as a resource by means of culturally distancing themselves from the reforms (Andersson and Tengblad, 2009; Carvalho, 2012).

If the experience of professional work in the public sector has been affected from the implementation of NPM in terms of the circumventory effect on the perceived ability to carry out their work in a manner they think appropriate (Berg, 2006; Andersen and Andersen, 2007; Gill-McLure and Seifert, 2008; Leicht *et al*, 2009; Coffey *et al*, 2009), might similar patterns be reflected in an unskilled occupation such as postal work? With the existence of an ethic of public service within postal workers (Campbell-Smith, 2012), could the restriction of the ability to practice work within this ethic through modernization and increased managerialism entail similar feelings to those in professional occupations? How might this process be thought of in relation to deskilling (Braverman, 1974) and ‘market Stalinism? And how might the service ethic be utilized within occupational identity in terms of resisting such processes (Leicht *et al*, 2009; Andersson and Tengblad, 2009; Carvalho, 2012)?

### **Working in the public sector: manual work and public enterprises**

For non-professional workers in the public sector, NPM has entailed large scale changes in working practices, such as the introduction of Total Quality Management (TQM), HRM, and flexible working practices that attempted to bypass trade unions and traditional worker priorities (Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio, 1995a). From the general election of 1979, the privatization of the nationalized industries was only a minor part of its agenda. However, from its election to a second term in 1983, policies of liberalization and privatization came to the fore (Pollitt, 2004). I have already discussed changes in working practices in the postal service because of public sector reforms in the previous chapter. So, the postal service will not be dealt with explicitly here.

In preparation for privatization, a process of liberalization began to be implemented within the public enterprises. This preparation involved a growing emphasis on flexibility (Ferner, 1988; Harris and Godward, 1997; Strangleman, 2004), and the implementation of redundancy programmes in the purported pursuit of efficiency (Drakeford, 2000; Bagwell, 1984). These policies led to increased industrial conflict and a change in approach towards industrial relations within the nationalized industries (Ogden, 1993; Fairbrother and Poynter, 2001; Strangleman, 2004), which became a site for the contestation between managerialism and workers (Ferner, 1988). This contestation became characterised by an increased militancy on the part of trade unions (Bagwell, 1984), set alongside underhanded management tactics on the part of management in attempts to break trade unions (Pendleton and Winterton, 1993). However, in a somewhat different experience to the other nationalized industries, the electric industry saw less industrial conflict in relation to liberalization processes and the preparation for privatization, predominantly down to the experience of other industries previously. As a result of the more cooperative stance, the union was able to exert more influence on the shape of privatization on working practices (Ferner and Colling, 1993).

The reform of public sector work was oriented on the insertion of a new type of culture that was based on a customer centric focus (Fairbrother and Poynter, 2001). The rhetoric of ‘quality’ became central to the pursuit of this new culture and became associated with a legitimization of public sector reforms: that efficiency, consumer voice and choice, decentralization, and the creation of ‘quasi-markets’ were ‘quality’ improvements (Pendleton, 1995). This, however, existed in tension with an agenda of resource reduction (Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio, 1995b). One of the consequences of this discourse of ‘quality’ is the possibility of workers being ‘made-up’ to conceive of themselves in relation to it, of the attempt of management to shape the identity of workers in such terms (du Gay 1996).

However, this does not imply passive acceptance of the discourse or the attempted imposition of identity. Contestation occurred as the governmental conception of quality contrasted to the conception of many public sector workers, who felt that services should be organized for the public good (Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio, 1995a). What was the effect on the working culture of postal workers of this attempt at the insertion of a more customer focussed (Fairbrother and Poynter, 2001), or 'enterprise culture' (du Gay, 1996)? Did postal workers passively accept this discourse (du Gay, 1996), or did they actively resist it? And if so, how significant was the notion of services being organized for the public good (Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio, 1995a), and the ethic of public service with postal workers (Campbell-Smith, 2012) in the resistance of this culture and the maintenance of their prevailing culture?

'Quality' became a point of contestation, both for and against marketization and privatization, with unions arguing that public ownership is fundamental to the needs of the public (Martinez Lucio *et al*, 2000). So, the government conception of 'quality' can be conceived as narrow, centred on value for money (Pendleton, 1995). To ensure that 'quality' was being achieved, implementation initiatives such as Total Quality Management (TQM), and performance indicators were introduced. 'Quality' improvements were used to justify asserting managerialism over professional authority and to make structural changes to working practices and industrial relations, through attempts to introduce flexible working practices and HRM (Pendleton, 1995; Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio, 1995c).

Managerialism has tended to lead to a deterioration in the relationship between workers and management (Harris and Godward, 1997; Fairbrother and Poynter, 2001; Diefenbach, 2009) and an erosion of the respect that had characterised the previous style of relationship



(Strangleman, 2004). The insertion of a new class of manager who had not worked their way through the grades undermined the moral order of the workplace, with progression previously being legitimized through seniority and experience on the job. This went hand-in-hand with an attitude of dismissal towards the past (though that past could be invoked by management to suit its own purposes), reinforced through a new management that was stylized as modern, and a workforce as regressive (Strangleman, 2004). Was there a similar break-down in the legitimacy of experience and seniority in terms of progression (Strangleman, 2004) in the postal service, with a deterioration in the relationship between management and workers (Harris and Godward, 1997; Fairbrother and Poynter, 2001; Diefenbach, 2009) in the postal service? What kind of effect did this have on the way that day-to-day work was carried out within the postal service?

In general, NPM has been associated with a decline in working conditions, staff morale, job satisfaction and motivation (Diefenbach, 2009), and even health and well-being (McDonough and Polzer, 2012). In addition to this, it has also been associated with the weakening of collectivism, the routinization of work (Fairbrother and Poynter, 2001), an increasing individualization of approach to work along with a reduction in commitment to work from younger workers (Strangleman, 2004) and the erosion of traditional public sector values of fairness, impartiality, and equality (Dawson and Dargie, 2002; du Gay 1996).

### **The ethic of providing a service to the public**

As stated earlier, there was an ethic within the workforce of the postal service that had developed over the centuries, in a pride of providing a service to the public, that was valued

by that public (Campbell-Smith, 2012). This presence of an ethic of public service within the postal service is further reinforced by Alan Johnson: ' We Postmen were uniformed civil servants proud to be performing in a public service essential to the country's social fabric' (Johnson 2014: 17). Indeed, Johnson noted the serious nature of how some postal workers took this ethic of the provision of the post as a 'service and a duty': to not do the job properly amounted to letting down both the public and their fellow postal workers (Johnson, 2014).

However, much of the research that has taken place on the importance to workers of work that is a service to the public has been done so in relation to work within the civil service or types of government related employment. This is largely taken up with two related and similar, though not identical concepts: public service motivation (PSM) and the public service ethos (PSE), which relate to the notion that particular people are motivated to carry out work that is a service to the public (Rayner *et al*, 2011).

The public service ethos developed out of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century civil service reforms and is concerned with an ethical framework from which to guide practice, including honesty, integrity, impartiality and objectivity, along with a commitment, or sense of 'duty' to the provision of a service to the public (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988), and moreover, a dedication to the good of the public (Pfiffner, 1999). This ethos can be seen as a set of dispositions that are internalized and so give work practice an infrastructure, binding members together in a common commitment (McDonough, 2006). Historically, people have been attracted to work in such positions of public service precisely because of the principles espoused within PSE (Horton, 2006).

In a similar way to a commitment to the provision of a service to the public in PSE, PSM places a high value on intrinsic reward, as opposed to extrinsic reward, in relation to work that is perceived as important; that making a ‘contribution’ is a reward in itself and is a source of pride (Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008). External recognition of that contribution is also significant in PSM as a source of pride (which acts as a reward) for their work (Kernaghan, 2008). In this way, public servants are motivated to carry out work in relation to the public good and that is important to society (Perry, 1996; Perry and Wise, 1990; Perry and Hondeghem, 2008). PSM works in a similar fashion to employee engagement. Those possessing higher levels of PSM are likely to have increased job satisfaction and organizational commitment, which will have a contingent effect on levels of performance at work (Perry and Wise, 1990; Miao *et al*, 2019). Organizational identification is bound up with how PSM positively relates to performance: if a worker identifies with their organization and incorporates the values of the organization into their self-concept then they are more likely to perform at a higher level (Liu and Perry, 2016; Miao *et al*, 2019).

In this way, we can see how people who feel a certain way about working for the good of the public may be attracted to work in particular roles; often because of qualities they already possess. Hochschild’s (2012 [1985]) work on emotional labour gives us a useful way to understand how people manage the emotion work that goes with performing a public service role where you deal directly with members of the public. In such roles it is important to project a sincere warmth which will induce a trust and provoke an emotional response from the service user. Emotional labour can be a great source of stress on the worker and involves a situation whereby the ‘feeling rules’ and social exchanges have been taken from the private domain and repositioned in public where they can be subjected to supervision and control (Hochschild 2012 [1985]).

For some, this emotional labour may take the form of short bursts over multiple points during the working day where they may not get the chance to develop close attachments to customers. For others, there is a necessity to develop deeper forms of relationships with longer points of contact (Hochschild 2012 [1985]). However, emotional labour is vulnerable to speed-ups where it becomes harder for workers to execute their labour in this deeper, more personal, and empathetic fashion (Hochschild 2012 [1985]).

Because of this we can see how marketization and managerialism has introduced factors that are antithetical to PSE and as such, has caused a disruption in this internalized set of dispositions in that it challenged the notion of the way in which it is possible to practice as ‘good’ public servants (McDonough and Polzer, 2012), and challenged the existence of PSE (Carr, 1999).

Though these concepts are concerned with the service ethic of those engaged within civil service occupations, I think they hold a value in terms of explaining the motivations of postal workers engaged in manual work in a public enterprise. The workplace of the postal service is characterised by a sense of importance placed on working for the good of the public (Campbell-Smith, 2012). How useful is this ethic of public service, in relation to PSE and PSM, in understanding the occupational identity and culture of postal workers and the way in which they experienced their day-to-day labour? Did this commitment, or sense of duty (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988), or motivation to work for the public good (Perry, 1996; Perry and Wise, 1990; Perry and Hondeghem, 2008), play a large part in these forms of identification? If so, was modernization experienced as a disruption in terms of the ability to practice for the public good (McDonough and Polzer, 2012)? And could this sense

of a public service ethic be said to have aided to the maintenance of occupational identity and the working culture of postal workers, a resource in terms of resistance in the face of processes of modernization and increased managerialism? How did the public service ethic inform the emotional labour of postal work and what was the effect of modernization on this emotional labour?

### **Delineating the research**

This research investigates the experience of work for postal workers in the postal service between 1970 and 2000, in the context of modernization processes that were ongoing during this time. This experience is investigated in relation to how modernization affected the working culture, the way in which postal workers identified with their labour and the ethic of public service, the social significance of postal workers and the way in which postal workers related to the communities they served. However, though this emphasises change as a result of modernization, there is also a focus on the enduring and significant continuities that were maintained with the past. This research is based within the everyday practices and routines of the daily labour of postal workers.

The period from the 1970s onwards was one of intense social, economic, and political change as I have set out above. It is both timely and important that a sociological re-examination of this era be undertaken in terms of workplace identity and culture. Postal workers are an interesting case, and so are a good case for such an account, indicated by the longevity and strength of resistance against modernization, manifest in the relative strength of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) against a backdrop of de-unionization and societal

individualization. Postal workers can be seen as a distinctive research subject in the context of the modernization of public services. Furthermore, the research is based in a research site that had a large proportion of the population employed through nationalised industries (such as coal and electric), and so is an appropriate place to research changes in employment within nationalised industries.

As stated in the introduction, Campbell-Smith (2012) identified the historical presence of the ethic of providing a valued service to the public. But how significant was this ethic in terms of the day-to-day experience of work, the working culture of postal workers, and their occupational identification? How did this ethic inform the daily practice of labour of postal workers in relation to the way in which they operated within the community? From the late 1980s with the introduction of TQM, the process of change within the postal service began to accelerate and there were attempts to insert a new kind of culture within the organization, one more focussed on customer service and based in the disciplining ethic of the market (Jenkins *et al*, 1995). This culture was in direct conflict with the prevailing working culture of postal workers and the ethic of public service provision. So, how did the modernization process affect this ethic of public service, the working culture, and the way in which postal workers identified with their labour? And what type of resources did postal workers use to combat such processes of change?

A significant amount of debate within the sociology of work occurs outside of mainstream sociology, and without the sociological imagination (Halford and Strangleman, 2009). There is abundant literature in relation to the managerial, trade union and organizational perspective (see Batstone *et al*, 1983; Gall, 2003; Martinez Lucio, 1995; Martinez Lucio, *et al* 2000; Beale and Mustchain, 2014; Mustchain, 2017) concerning the modernization of the postal

service, in addition to the historical work that has been carried out (see Clinton, 1984; Campbell-Smith, 2012). This research makes an original contribution through providing a sociological account of the everyday experience of work within the postal service during the process of modernization. This research focuses on the meaning of work in the postal service and the effects of modernization on identity and working culture, integrating this with the significance of the ethic of public service (Campbell-Smith, 2012). I pay close attention to the lived experience of postal workers, based in the routines and rhythms of their day-to-day labour. In this way, the research also makes a novel contribution to the literature in relation to work in the post-industrial society.

This research adds to the debate surrounding the ‘end of work’ debate (Beck, 2000; Bauman, 1998; 2005; Gorz, 1999), building on the work of Strangleman (2004; 2007; 2012) in demonstrating the authenticity of occupational identity and working culture and countering the criticism of ‘false consciousness’, or ‘simple nostalgia’ in relation to work identities of the past. I make an original contribution through the adding to this debate of a new occupational context in the form of the postal service, and integrating the importance of the ethic of public service (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988; Perry, 1996; Perry and Wise, 1990; Perry and Hondeghem, 2008), with occupational identity and working culture, whilst engaging in theories surrounding team performance (Goffman, 1959), ‘cheating’ (Mars, 1982) and emotional labour (Hochschild 2012 [1985]). I place events within their historical perspective (Strangleman, 2007), in order to come to a greater understanding of that past (Strangleman, 2023). In doing this I demonstrate how ‘traditional’ postal work fits into the connected society (Putnam, 2000) of the traditional modernity. I also engage in debates surrounding individualization (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992) and ontological security (Giddens, 1991) in relation to the experience of work in a modernizing public

service. I present an account that displays historical sensitivity (Craib, 1992), and points to the significant continuities with the past (Inglis, 2014).

I will also add to debate surrounding the effects of NPM on work in the public sector and make a novel contribution by utilising the way that the loss of professional autonomy through such processes of modernization has been conceptualized (Berg, 2006; Andersen and Andersen, 2007; Gill-McLure and Seifert, 2008; Leicht *et al*, 2009; Coffey *et al* 2009) within the context of unskilled work in the postal service. This research makes an original contribution through showing how an ethic of public service (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988; Perry, 1996; Perry and Wise, 1990; Perry and Hondeghem, 2008) can mediate in the experience of the implementation of NPM and increasing managerialism through its significance in terms of the occupational identity and working culture of postal workers, acting as a resource in terms of the resistance of such processes. In doing this I will mobilise the concept of tight and loose cultures (Gelfand, 2018) to explain how the working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work both resisted modernization and persisted (to a certain extent) despite modernization.



## **Chapter Two**

### **Methods: Researching the Post**

#### **Research Questions**

On the basis of the discussion in the previous chapter, I have identified the following questions that this research will answer:

- How can the working culture of postal workers be delineated and how was this culture affected through processes of modernization?
- How was the occupational identity of postal workers affected through modernization? Was this identity one of ‘false consciousness’ or ‘simple’ nostalgia?
- How significant was the ethic of public service to the occupational identity and working culture of postal workers and their day-to-day experience of labour?
- Did processes of modernization lead to an increasingly individualized orientation towards work?
- Was modernization a threat to the ontological security of postal workers experience?
- How did the occupational identity and working culture of postal workers act as a resource to resistance to modernization? How significant was the ethic of public service in relation to this?

## Introduction

This research has taken the form of a case study of the experience of postal workers during ongoing processes of modernization between 1970 and 2000. The modernization of the postal service is set within the context of a society that experienced intense economic, political, social, and labour market change from the mid-1970s onwards, precipitating a seismic change in the nature of social life, including pervasive societal individualization (Bauman, 2000; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). The case study is of postal workers operating within the Delivery Offices (DOs) of the Cannock Chase area during this time.

In this chapter I discuss the methods and methodology used in this research: an oral history and institutional ethnography of postal workers working in the Cannock Chase area between 1970 and 2000, using in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews. I initially give an outline of the research design and framework, and a brief overview of the site. I then detail my approach to conducting the research, the nature of the research context in terms of the construction of knowledge, and the relationship between myself and the participants in the research. Following this, I discuss the organization of interviews and the sampling process. I then discuss documentary research, the process of selecting and using archives and selecting appropriate documents, approaching documentary research, and analysing documents. Finally, I demonstrate how I ensured the ‘quality’ of data collected and enacted a reflexive approach to the research, in addition to providing a discussion of ethical considerations.

It is important to note that field-work for this research took place over the spring and summer of 2020, between May and August. This coincided with a time in which social restrictions were in place as a consequence of the onset of COVID-19. The initial interviews that were

conducted in the latter part of June were during the period of the ‘first national lockdown’ (which was from March to June 2020). During this phase of social restrictions, people were compelled to remain in their homes and only leave for reasons of necessity. It was also not allowable to visit other people’s homes, outside of any ‘bubble’ arrangements. From July 4<sup>th</sup> most of these restrictions were lifted, though when visiting other people’s homes, it was required to follow social distancing rules (Brown and Kirk-Wade, 2021). This obviously had far-reaching implications as regards the carrying out of fieldwork. The implications of COVID-19 on this research will also be discussed here.

## **Research framework and design**

As a case study, the orientation of the research is towards the ‘experiential knowledge’ of events, with a focus on the social and political context within which the case is situated (Stake, 2005). The study of a novel case is good for purposes of theory testing, raising issues as to the applicability of general theories in specific situations (Platt, 2007). It can be used to discern if the theory corresponds with the data gathered, and under what circumstances certain theories apply, and so lead to the development of a more complex theoretical model (de Vaus, 2001). A case study of postal workers in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century can be seen as an appropriate means of conducting an investigation concerning the experience of work within a public service undergoing processes of modernization.

My approach is that of a sociology of everyday life, in the manner of Smith’s (2005) institutional ethnography. This is an approach that prioritises the standpoint of the everyday experience of people, rather than treating them as research objects (Smith, 2005). So, rather

than this being an ethnography of the postal service (or of the Deliver Offices within the research site), it is an enquiry into the everyday experience of the labour of the people within these settings, looking at the routine interactions of those people in the context of this institution (the postal service). This entails a focus on the normal, routine, and everyday actions through which people experience and construct their social world; this focus on what might otherwise be seen as mundane and unremarkable serves to uncover the institutionalized nature of these interactions (Smith, 2005).

This research sits, broadly speaking, within a constructivist framework. This entails that knowledge is seen as historically and culturally contextual: a situated or indexical truth (Gergan and Gergan, 2007). This is in opposition to foundationalism/neo-positivism, seen as a means of eternalising a certain set of assumptions, morals, or social practices (Rorty, 1980). Representations may be able to achieve a certain type of ‘validity’, but this does not entail universal truth, but rather a situated truth. Whereas this does lead to the proposition that all claims may be valid in some place and at some time, thus leading to the closing of dialogue (Gergan and Gergan, 2007), such closure does not have to be an inevitability. Rorty sees plurality as a means of continuing cross discourse dialogue. In this way, the search for commensuration of discourses can be seen as a route to closing off dialogue, reducing all possible descriptions to one (Rorty, 1980). For Rorty, the aim should be the *continuation* of conversation, rather than the search for ‘truth’ (Rorty, 1980). Through a constructivist framework, social reality is posited as a meaningful construction that is constituted linguistically (Delanty, 1997). From this, language can be positioned as a tool of representation, but not a mirror of nature (Rorty, 1980).

In addition, the actual 'practice' of postal work also requires particular attention. All forms of work are inherently embodied, and in terms of postal work this means the learning, practicing, and enactment of the rhythms and rituals of the day. As such these predictable and episodic rhythms become 'second nature' to the trained and practiced worker, actions that are carried out in an almost automatic fashion and perpetuated on a day-to-day basis. So, a particular attention is necessary to the daily rhythms of work. Work is an 'everyday' practice, and as a consequence, I aimed to keep the 'everyday' at the heart of my method: the physicality of the walk; the dexterity and synchronicity, as well as the cooperation and collaboration, of the sorting process.

### **The research site**

The research site is the Cannock Chase District, an area located in south Staffordshire, not far from Birmingham and at the southern extreme, bordering on the Black Country. The area derives its name from the forest of Cannock Chase, the remnant of the former Royal Forest of Cannock, known locally as just 'the Chase'. It is a picturesque place which was designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in 1958<sup>9</sup>. Along with Rugeley, the other principal towns of the area are Cannock and Hednesford. The larger county-town of Stafford lies just to the north of Cannock Chase, and the Cathedral City of Lichfield just to the south. There are also a number of smaller towns, former mining communities, and villages that are situated in the area.

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<sup>9</sup> My paternal great-grandfather, journalist, and writer 'Mac' Wright (who wrote under the penname of 'Pitman') was pivotal in the establishing of this designation for the forest. He authored books on Cannock Chase and helped to found the Friends of Cannock Chase Society.

I grew up in the now former mining town of Rugeley during the 1980s, situated to the north of the area and on the border of the forest. When I was growing up, the landscape of the area consisted of a combination of the industrial, coexisting with the countryside and the rural. The cooling towers of the power stations of Rugeley dominated the skyline of the area for much of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and until their final destruction in the summer of 2020, sitting alongside the farmland and fields of the villages and the forest of the Chase at the heart of the area. This industrial heritage is now all but wiped from the landscape, with the only physical and visible clues to the toil of generations of workers being the odd monument to the coal mining heritage of the area, a few museums, and the former miners' social clubs.

The area has a rich history of coal mining, lying on the Cannock Chase coalfield. In the earlier history of mining there were many small-scale mines across the area<sup>10</sup>. Mining activity began in more earnest from the mid 1850s with the onset of deep mining, and the establishing of numerous coal companies in the area. This caused an influx of coal miners into the area and caused the growth of the many mining communities (Cannock Chase Mining Historical Society, 2020). By the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century and following the nationalization of the coal industry in 1947, production was increasingly being concentrated in fewer, larger collieries.

Both Lea Hall colliery and Rugeley A power station opened in 1960 at Rugeley, followed by Rugeley B power station in 1970. By the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the end was nigh for the coal industry, and this cornerstone of the local economy. Employment in these industries

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<sup>10</sup>There were so many of these mines littered across the forest that now, no one is really sure where they were situated. Their location has simply been forgotten. As a child I roamed extensively over the Chase and was always warned about straying from the established paths and routes as it was possible to fall down abandoned shafts that had been forgotten about. We never really did heed such advice. Falling down mine shafts was among the many things that we considered just happened to other kids.

was decimated as a result of the restructuring of the labour market that was enacted by the Conservative administration of the early 1980s. By the last decade of the century, only two collieries remained. In 1990, Lea Hall closed after only 30 years in operation, with coal mining finally ceasing in the area with the closure of Littleton Colliery, just outside Cannock, in 1993. The privatization of the electricity generating industry in 1990 also entailed redundancies at the two power stations (dad worked at Rugeley B from 1974, just four years after it opened, till four years after privatization, taking voluntary redundancy in 1994<sup>11</sup>). So, the period between 1970 and 2000 was a period of significant change in the local labour market due to economic restructuring. This was not only a period in which postal workers were experiencing the modernization of the service they worked within, it was one where the communities that they served were being shaped and re-shaped through wider socio-economic and political change. The experiences of this period continue to be felt to this day, particularly in relation to the miners' strike of 1984-1985<sup>12</sup>. The closing of the mines also meant that in the early part of the 1990s, a few of these former miners found employment within the postal service.

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<sup>11</sup> I vividly remember the firework display laid on by Npower to 'celebrate' the change in ownership. The firework displays at the power station were always special and attracted many people. There was a community feel behind the gates of the station with much leisure provision available for workers and their families, which we all participated in: a social club, golf course, and a lake with a sailing club. We spent a lot of time on the power station site enjoying the facilities, as a family.

<sup>12</sup> Though I remember little of the conflict itself, I was only five at the time of the strike, the effect on the community was profound and was something that I definitely felt growing up. I remember as a young man, some 15 years after the strike, I had a pool match at a local pub. Getting up to play my match, I walked towards my opponent, only to be pulled to one side by my captain and be told in no uncertain terms, and definitely in no 'jokey' manner, 'you've got to beat him, he's a fucking scab'. The man in question was still not allowed in most of the pubs in town and was shunned by the majority of his former workmates. I had never been so nervous about playing a game of pool.

## **Approaching an oral history of postal workers**

Oral history is a distinctive and powerful means to record the experiences and perspectives of individuals and groups. It enables the documentation of personal relationships, domestic life, and work alongside family life, that can be absent from other sources. It highlights subjective experience and the personal meaning of lived experience, bringing to the fore things that might otherwise have remained hidden (Perks, 1998). The highlighting of this lived experience can add a new dimension to the knowledge that is generated, accounting for the complex and multi-dimensional nature of reality (Thompson, 1988). The use of oral history in relation to the study of work enables a focus on differing groups and events and can serve to recreate day-to-day experience in the context of the workplace, and the ways in which people interpret and understand that experience.

In approaching this oral history, I carried out in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews with postal workers who worked within the postal service between 1970 and 2000 in the Cannock Chase area. This interviewing methodology enables the exploration of the way in which individuals' think and the way they feel about their worlds in order to understand and reconstruct their experiences and the nature and details of events (Rubin and Rubin, 1995; Gray, 2009). Central to the methodology of interviewing is the assumption that the interviews in themselves provide some degree of access to the social worlds under investigation, where language is central to the constructing of knowledge and meaning is produced through the deployment of language within relationships (Gergan and Gergan, 2007; Mason, 2002).

In his seminal oral history study of people's experience of work, '*Working: People talk about what they do all day and How They Feel About What They Do*' (1972) Terkel describes



himself as ‘no more than wayfarer’, a ‘stranger’, who as regards the research context was in receipt of the generosity of the participant, who was giving more than they were receiving from that context (Terkel, 1972). My own position carrying out this oral history of postal workers of the Cannock Chase area, however, was not really one of a stranger. There were certain things that were pertinent in terms of my personal biography which entailed that I was an ‘almost insider’. This was a status that was important in terms of my research and methodology. It enabled a type of conversational ease within the context of the interview that I think would have been harder without these elements of my biography. This is not to say that there were no status differences, my educational and institutional status set-up one such differential. However, through my biography I was able to establish commonalities and engender rapport from which to build an effective and more natural kind of conversation in the research context (Legard *et al*, 2003).

The participant though is giving within the relationship of the research context; not only giving a recollection of their past, but also an interpretation of the events that made up that past. This does seem to set up somewhat of an imbalance in terms of the relationship in the research context. Some of this imbalance is addressed through the nature of how the research relationship is conceived. Within my methodology, I am not conceiving of the research relationship as one of ‘data miner’ and ‘informant’ (Mason, 2002). The participant is actively involved in the creation of knowledge from within the context of the interview (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004), which can be thought of as a conversational narrative that is organised and informed through the collaborative, creative relationships formed and informed through the perspectives of both parties.

In this way, the interview can be seen as a ‘collaborative effort’ in the creation of knowledge. It is inevitably bound by its specific historic and contextual situation (Fontana and Frey, 2008; Legard *et al*, 2003). Participants can be redefined as active collaborators in the knowledge creation process, setting up the interview situation as one where knowledge is constructed (Legard *et al*, 2003). So, the approach to the interview adopted here is of the ‘active’ interview. This approach entails an attention to both the substantive issues of the interview and also the manner in which knowledge is constructed: the ‘how’s’ and ‘what’s’ of the interview (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004). So, the epistemological concerns of data construction can be addressed, whilst keeping the substantive content of interviews at the fore. It acknowledges that the data does not ‘speak for itself’, but instead explicates the discursive processes through which meaning is produced (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004).

When the construction from within the interview situation is emphasised, this can lead to concerns and debates concerning issues of validity and stability of the data produced; that beyond its context of production, it is meaningless. However, to assume that these realities cannot be tapped in some way confers ‘narrative omnipotence’ (Miller and Glassner, 2004) and to do this would belie the point to substantive interests in research. But whereas the interview, and research in general, may not mirror the social world, it can provide access to some aspects of it, such as experience and the meanings that people attribute. And through the emphasising of the interactional quality of the interview, the achievement of ‘inter-subjective depth’ can be made (Miller and Glassner, 2004). So, it can be an aspiration to achieve the capture of portions of social experience and reality, whilst the limitations of data should be recognised in terms of a one-to-one fit to reality; it can be asserted that data can be meaningful beyond its context of production (Legard *et al*, 2003).

In terms of promoting a collaborative emphasis within the interviews, on a practical level, this meant that I attempted to make it clear to my collaborators that they were the experts, the people with the knowledge and did not try to place myself above them in terms of status. I will return more to the issue of giving and receiving in the research context later. I would first like to deal with the issue of my ‘almost insider’ status, and the forging of close relationships.

### **Forming close relationships and being an ‘almost insider’**

The foundation of my enactment of oral history in this research context was based around the development of active human relationships, between me as a researcher, and the participant, or collaborator in the creation of knowledge. The rationale is that to remain detached would be unlikely to foster the kind of openness from a collaborator needed to develop the deep understanding that is sought (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). Though social differences can be a barrier to the generation of meaningful data, the social researcher can attempt to minimize these differences and inequalities (Brewer, 2000).

The way in which I did this on a practical level was through the utilization of my personal biography. Though I was not an ‘insider’ to the research in terms of the conversational context, i.e., I have not worked for the postal service, there were a number of ways that my personal biography laid out common ground for the development of close relationships in the research context; relationships in which perceived power imbalances could be attempted to be equalised. This laid the foundation for me to be something like an ‘almost insider’: someone with some shared common ground that established a legitimate interest in their labour, without laying claim to any expertise as to the actual content and form of that labour. Furthermore, I was an ‘almost insider’ in a few different ways.

Firstly, my grandad was a postal worker: some of my collaborators remembered him and had dealings with him in relation to the union (though none had actually worked alongside him); other collaborators did not know him, I made them aware of his work history. Secondly, I was from the same place as them: I talked with the same accent and used the same colloquialisms that they did; I knew the places they were talking about and shared the same affinities with these places that they did; I had grown up in the communities they served during the time-period we were talking about. This is important as in the working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work community is important. All of this helped to give me a degree of ‘authenticity’ as regards the research context, as someone with a legitimate interest and who could be trusted when recreating their past experiences. It helped to create a rapport with my collaborators and approach the research situation in a context of parity, whilst giving my collaborators a position of the expert in terms of the conversation.

In addition to this, there were a number of connections between myself and my collaborators. These connections were not always known by me or them prior to the research situation but would come out through the course of the conversation. Among these connections were, someone who had grown up with my mum and played with her as a girl; someone whose husband had worked down the pit with my uncle and drank in the pub owned by my paternal grandparents; someone who had volunteered at the rescue centre where I had got a dog; someone who had been in my sister’s year at secondary school. These connections almost always proved to be beneficial to the nature of the conversation, enabling a further level of ease, helping us to get to a level that aided the recreation of experience.

There were a few instances where such connections did prove to be slightly problematic, albeit only temporarily. One collaborator had known me when I was a boy, having lived in the same street. As a postal worker he would go to bed early in order to be ready for his early rise in the morning. As a young boy who liked loud music and playing football, I was somewhat of an annoyance to his sleeping patterns and would receive many complaints as to the noise and nuisance that I was causing. I am rather ashamed to say that young Daniel did not really understand or care for the necessities and pressures of his day-to-day routines of work at this time. In preparing for this interview, I think I felt the weight of the guilt of every disturbance and every complaint. In other interviews, a person was discussed who, because of their behaviour in the postal service, was viewed in a particularly negative fashion by postal workers. This was a person that I had known very well some years earlier and someone who I still hold a good opinion of (despite what had happened during their time in the postal service).

In these instances, I put my own personal feelings to one side and kept those things at an emotional distance. But was this the right thing to do? Was this in the spirit of the context of collaboration that I had tried to create? I think in the former example, I could have maybe opened with an apology! This might have helped to have engendered a greater ease, a greater feeling of collaboration. I think it was more embarrassment at my younger self that caused me to try to just put it to one side, and to just ‘get on with it’. The danger in doing this was that it could have put me in the position of being just a ‘data miner’, just performing those actions in order to get the most out of the research situation, something that I had always wished to avoid. Whereas I do think that I avoided that trap, we were able to engender an aura of ease in the research context and move into a situation of collaboration, I do think that I would approach a similar situation differently in the light of this experience.

In terms of the latter example, I think that my approach was, more-or-less, the right way, or at least, not the wrong way, to do it. Though giving my personal feelings regarding this person may have been honest, it would have run the risk of breaking down the rapport that had been built up within the research context. Although this could again be thought of as withholding my personal feelings on something in order to benefit the research situation, divulging my own thoughts on this individual would have benefited no one. In addition, though my approach was one of maximising the mutual trust of the research context, with the creation of knowledge as a collaborative, it was a situation where I had my own research objectives. In this case, it served neither the interest of my collaborators or the objectives of my research to divulge my feelings. Indeed, omitting certain personal feelings for pragmatic or practical reasons is something that happens throughout the course of much human dialogue on a day-to-day basis.

The other, highly significant point to address in terms of being an ‘almost insider’ is in relation to the closest relationships that it was necessary for me to negotiate along the course of this research: that of my grandad and my mum. However, there is obviously a complication here as grandad died in 2007. As a consequence of this, much of the detail of his life comes through my mum. This means that I had no first-hand accounts of his life events (other than a short document that he dictated to mum in the form of what he referred to as his ‘testament’), and of the emotions and feelings that he himself would put to those experiences in his own words. The accounts of grandad’s life are of what mum remembers: what she recalls him talking about, the feelings and opinions that he held about particular things, and the feelings and opinions that she might attribute to him based on her knowledge of him as his daughter. This means that my grandad’s life as presented here has been filtered

through my mum. Throughout this process, mum felt a big weight to want to faithfully represent her dad. We held many hours of conversations, where through a collaborative effort, we attempted to reconstruct grandads' life. This reconstruction is interesting as we were reconstructing what was effectively two different people. For mum it was a dad who was strict and slightly overbearing, a man with a traditional outlook and bad temper, and for whom she never felt good enough (though I do not believe this to have been the case). To me he was grandad, a fun and easy-going man who took me places, bought me treats and watched football with me.

I think the process was rather cathartic for both of us. For mum it challenged her view and allowed her to reflect on his achievements and the attributes and talents that he possessed and that had aided his progression through the postal service. For me, it fleshed him out as a more wholistic human being rather than as an idealised and unrealistic figure. Though there are obvious difficulties with this method, it enabled us to gain some access to a social world that would otherwise have remained inaccessible. The narrative of grandad's life is undeniably significant in terms of this research. His life, and the story of his working life in the postal service, provide the context from which this research is based. His story is one that pertains to the post-Second World War society, and his working life illustrates the foundation of the working culture of 'traditional' postal work as established in this period and running up to the 1970s. His life serves to set the scene as to what was at stake, and as to what was about to come under pressure of change.

On the whole, I think my status as this 'almost insider' was a positive status for me to possess in relation to the research and was highly significant in terms of the nature of the data I was able to obtain and the final research output. I do not think that I would have been able to

obtain the same kind of level of richness or depth to the data as I did had it not been for this status. I also think that it enabled me to inhabit their social world in a way so as to authentically reconstruct and interpret their social world. It was beneficial in terms of engendering relationships that maximised an equality in status, whilst furthering the objectives of the research. It enabled a way of interacting that was both natural whilst retaining a purposeful focus with an ease of conversation. In filling my role as this ‘almost insider’ within the research context, it was necessary for me to maintain a reflexive approach in terms of what I was bringing into the research context and how this status could affect it. The people and places that I held in common with my collaborators had the potential to be both a positive and a negative. So, it was necessary for me to interact reflexively with my own biography through the process of the evolving interaction, adapting as the context itself demanded, whilst acknowledging that at the same time my own biography was active in shaping the nature and manner of the knowledge that was produced.

### **Giving and taking in the research context**

I now wish to return to the point of the collaborator as giving more than they receive. We can see that even in a situation where relationships are more equalised in terms of perceived status dynamics, where we redefine the very nature of a participant as a collaborator in the creation of knowledge, an issue still remains as to the extent of the imbalance in what is being given. However, through the practice of oral history, collaborators can experience a sense of empowerment through the recollection and interpretation of past events (Perks, 1998; Grele, 1985). In this way, oral history can give back to the people who lived through that history, creating it, through their own words (Thomson, 1988).



In my own experience of carrying this oral history of the postal workers of Cannock Chase, I felt privileged to be at this site of the reconstruction of the lived history of these individuals. Over the course of my fieldwork, I had conversations with 16 postal workers, over 22 separate sessions, totalling around 30 hours. The sense of catharsis that people seemed to gain from talking through their experiences was palpable. In all but one of my conversations with postal workers, there was an explicit statement as to how they had enjoyed talking about their work-lives. For some, this was despite the fact that they had to talk about things that they still felt bitter about.

Joanne, a postal worker who had started as a casual worker in the late 1970s had always felt that she had experienced differential treatment in relation to opportunity on the basis of her gender. Despite this treatment, Joanne went on to have a long and varied career in the postal service, moving into Delivery Office Management positions, as well as a role in planning, though she felt that she always had to fight more, and work harder for her opportunities than her male counterparts. Telling her story was important to Joanne. She was proud of her achievements, but also bitter about the context they were achieved within.

Ken had become a postal worker in the early 1980s following the demise of the potteries industry. He was angry at having his integrity questioned when mail had gone missing at the DO. He felt that it was the fault of the service for changing the way they employed postal workers that such a problem could occur. And also, quite simply, he thought that he had earned more trust than that. Ken had been able to tell this story and express his anger at the postal service. His trustworthiness was very important to him, and he was able to assert this.

These are just two examples of the many things I heard over the course of my conversations where these postal workers seemed to experience moments of catharsis through the process of telling their stories. My collaborators seemed to enjoy talking about their working lives: they enjoyed thinking about things that they had not thought about for a long time and reconstructing their past experiences; they enjoyed talking about the people that they had worked with, the camaraderie of being on the post and the relationships they forged with the community; they enjoyed being the centre of telling *their* story, of being the focus. Moreover, there was a desire to tell the story of a way of work that was now fading into the past within a postal service that was conceived in an entirely different way to the one in existence today; a desire to show why that work was important, and the ways in which it contributed to the community.

The empowerment and catharsis of the telling of their story is perhaps best summed up through my conversation with Dorothy, a postal worker at the Sub-Post Office in Abbots Bromley who had all but ‘inherited’ her role from her mother in the 1980s. I spent around three and a half hours at Dorothy’s house, which included a number of cups of coffee and a tour of her back garden. Dorothy’s enthusiasm for her former job and for the community she served shone through as she discussed them. She became engrossed in the recreation and mimicked the actions of her process that she would go through every morning as she sorted the mail.

The three or so hours in the company of Dorothy were rather wonderful: she *wanted* to tell her story, and that of her mother before her. As I made my way back up the corridor of her cottage when I was leaving, we stopped a moment before the door. She looked at me and told me very earnestly that she had ‘loved’ her time as a postal worker, and that she had

absolutely ‘no regrets’. Furthermore, that if she had her time again would want to do the same. It was a pleasure to have been with Dorothy as she recreated her work-life; to witness someone who had no regrets over their working life seemed a rather beautiful and rare moment. It was definitely my favourite and most treasured memory from my 30 or so hours of conversations with postal workers. The enjoyment that Dorothy derived from telling the story of her working life was palpable.

### **Re-telling stories and lives**

So, we can see that, to some extent, the issue of giving and taking is addressed through this kind of catharsis that can be achieved through the research context: these were people that seemed to want to tell their stories and got something out of telling them. However, this is not where this element of ‘giving back’ stops. Whereas the telling of them within the research context may be positive in and of itself, the element of giving back needs to extend beyond this. On a normal basis, it is questionable as to how many people the stories of Dorothy, or Joanne, or Ken may reach beyond those of their immediate experience. The stories of postal workers from this point in time might not be one that gets re-told beyond this.

In this way, the research process gives the opportunity to give back through telling the stories of people that may have otherwise gone untold, to uncover what would have remained obscured. With this, the lives of Dorothy, Joanne, and Ken, and of all the other collaborators, are important to tell. This is not just because they tell us something about the working culture of postal work and the changing nature of the experience of work within a modernizing public service, but also because the narrative represents their very lives; this carries a weight and importance in its own right.

The writing of research therefore represents an important form of giving back. In terms of the nature and process of writing, oral history represents a departure from traditional ways of presenting social science research; it challenges accepted judgements and brings to the fore the lives and stories of the individuals' that are of concern within the research. It is demonstrable as a method of a democratised form of research that can tell stories that otherwise might not be told; breaking down what impedes the connection between writer and audience, academia, and society, through the creative and cooperative nature of oral history (Thomson, 1988). In the writing and dissemination of research, the working lives and experiences of my collaborators can reach an audience that it otherwise would not have, and the narratives of the form of work that they participated in can be preserved in this way.

The weight and importance of the telling of the lives of Dorothy, Joanne, Ken, and all their fellow postal workers is something that I felt greatly in the writing process. I hope my telling of the stories through my writing of social science research does justice to them: to their daily labour, to their service, to the thoughts and feelings that encompass the events of their work-lives. I want to represent them as real people, who worked hard at a job that, by-and-large, they loved and thought of as important. Their experience of that day-to-day labour mattered and so, as a social scientist, it is important for me to represent this experience in a way that does justice to both their years of labour, as well as the debt that I incurred in receiving the generosity of their time and their stories.

I hope that I have repaid some of that debt in the telling of these stories. To some extent, the validity of my representation can be checked through member validation. My mum has read draft chapters of my thesis in order to check the 'validity' of my representation of the

working life of my grandad. She believes that my representation is a faithful one. It is my intention to share summaries and/or copies of my thesis (in an appropriate format) with the postal workers who collaborated with me over the process of my research.

### **Entering the field: qualitative interviewing and the problem of COVID**

As stated earlier the lockdown that happened as a consequence of the COVID-19 epidemic had a profound impact on the nature of social life over much of 2020. This also entailed an impact on the way in which I was able to carry out my field-work between May and August of that year. I had planned to carry out face-to-face interviews with postal workers, but the COVID-19 situation was to limit my ability to do so. Interviews happening earlier in my field-work all took place via the phone, using an app to record the interviews. Following the easing of restrictions in July, a limited number of face-to-face interviews took place.

### **Sampling**

For the aims of the research, I wanted to talk to postal workers who had worked in the Cannock Chase area between 1970 and 2000. This was to look at how the modernization process that had begun in the postal service in the 1970s had affected the experience of postal work and the working culture of postal workers during this time period. I attempted to sample postal workers from across the three decades so as to get a spread of workers who had started at differing points along the modernization process. The sampling process was highly affected by the situation created by COVID-19, which will be discussed below.

As noted by Terkel (1972), sampling often necessitates a certain degree of pragmatism. This was no different in my case. My initial sampling was helped via a ‘gatekeeper’, a contact I have in the shape of a personal friend who has worked as a postal worker for around ten years. This is a person I have known for a number of years on a personal level. This gatekeeper put me in touch with my first two collaborators, who then, through a process of ‘snowballing’, put me in touch with a further three postal workers to talk to.

However, at this point, the snowball started to slow down, and I began to struggle to obtain new people to talk to. I think that this problem was exacerbated by the effects of COVID-19. My gatekeeper was a current postal worker, and so was designated as an essential worker. This meant that any requests that I made of him at this time would have added to the stresses that he was, no doubt, already experiencing in working within a situation of increased workload and also with civil restrictions in place and duties to their own families. As a consequence of this, I decided that it would be unfair to make too much in the way of additional requests for contacts, and instead, tried to display sensitivity in terms of my expectations of them at this time.

To mitigate for this slowing down of the snowball, the inappropriateness of making additional requests on my gatekeeper, and that I could not be in the area at that time because of lock down rules for COVID-19, I took to social media. I joined a number of local Facebook groups in the Cannock Chase area and asked permission from the administrators of those groups to post regarding my research, to ask if anyone would like to participate. Social media proved to be an excellent tool for getting in touch with people. Several people contacted me via direct message to express their interest and I was able to give them

information regarding the research. In addition, if anyone expressed an interest in participating, I would then email them a participant information sheet, and consent form.

A number of the interviews I managed to obtain via social media were with people who were not actually on social media. In these instances, I managed to make contact with relatives of former postal workers who would discuss the research with them and get me in touch. In most of these cases, because of these individuals' lack of liking of digital methods, I would arrange for the participant information sheet and consent form to be sent to them in a physical format by my mum and dad.

Table 1: Sample of postal workers

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Date started</b>	<b>Length of service</b>	<b>Job role</b>
1. Harry	60-70	1991	20-30 years	Postal worker; PHG; DOM (retired)
2. Ken	70-80	1983	30+ years	Postal worker; PHG; relief DOM (retired)
3. Ellen	50-60	1990	30 + years	Postal worker (current)
4. Joanne	60-70	1970s	30+ years	Casual postal worker; postal worker; PHG; relief DOM; planning (retired)
5. Alex	80-90	1980s	30+ years	Postal worker; Union Rep (retired)
6. Dorothy	70-80	1980s	25+ years.	Postal worker (retired)
7. Steve	60-70	1976	40+ years	Postal worker; PHG; relief DOM (retired)

8. Dean	40-50	1997	20+ years	Postal worker (current)
9. Gary	40-50	1999	20+ years	Postal worker (current)
10. Amanda	70-80	1980s	10+ years	Postal worker (retired)
11. Phil	80-90	1974	25+ years	Postal worker (retired)
13. Jeff	60-70	1970s	30+ years	Casual postal worker; postal worker (retired)
14. Ian	70-80	1968	4 years	Casual postal worker (retired)
15. Dave	60-70	1980s	25+ years	Postal worker (retired)
16. Kevin	70+	1969	25+ years	Postal worker; PHG (retired)

In addition to this sample of postal workers, over the course of my research I also held countless hours of conversations with my mum concerning my grandad's time with the postal service as well as the wider aspects of his life. In writing-up my grandad's life, I also utilised a document that he dictated to my mum in 2006. This document was titled by my mum 'an oral testimony of Stanley Charles Garner'. The document contains as much of what he said, as my mum could keep up with to write down. It included details of his life that even she did not know at the time. I also spoke with an old colleague of my grandads from the counters at the post office. This conversation aided my understandings of his progression to the counters side and his approach to work in general.



To aid my understanding of the general context of postal work I also held conversations with a representative from the local branch of the Communication Workers Union, as well as an official from the national office.

### **COVID-19 and the interview medium**

When it became apparent that there was going to be a substantial period of time where I would be unable to carry out face-to-face interviews, it was necessary for me to make some decisions. Firstly, for practical reasons in relation to time constraints, it posed too big of a risk to the research to delay interviewing, as at this time, it was uncertain as to how long restrictions would remain. With this in mind, it was necessary for me to decide what way would be best to carry out remote interviews. Modern technology offers a number of different communication methods. However, I also needed to assess the communication preferences of my sample in relation to these communication technologies.

One of the strengths of conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews face-to-face is that the immediacy of human contact means the intricacies of human interaction can be incorporated into the construction of knowledge. Such things as body language, and the facial expressions that make-up face-to-face human interaction are integrated within the analysis. In addition to this, the visual cues of face-to-face interaction provide important information as to the way other people may be feeling about the conversation that is taking place. We can see if a person is upset, or if they do not wish to proceed with an element of a conversation. These non-aural aspects of the interview can be a significant aspect of the data gathering process.

The benefit of modern video-telephony software technologies is that it raises the possibility that at least some of these aspects may be captured for knowledge creation.

However, any decision on the use of such technologies was not necessarily a simple one. The majority of my sample of postal workers were over the age of 60, and whereas, it should not necessarily be assumed that just because such technologies were not prevalent through their working lives that they would have no familiarity or comfort with their use, it is important to retain a sensitivity to communication preferences so as to ensure that the medium that is used is appropriate for the individual who is using it. Though there were definite advantages for the nature of the data collected by using video-telephony technology, these advantages could be neutralised if someone was not comfortable with their use in this context. With this in mind, though video-telephony was seen as advantageous, I sought to establish the communication preferences of all to ensure the method used was the one that they were most comfortable with (Hanna, 2012; Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst, 2016).

All of my collaborators in my research in this earlier stage of fieldwork chose to use a standard telephone call, as opposed to a video-call as they decided that they felt more comfortable with this medium. Unfortunately, this obviously entailed that there were elements of the interview situation that remained inaccessible because of both not being face-to-face, and also, not having a visually enabled dimension to the conversation. However, because of the limitations encountered on the basis of COVID-19, conducting interviews via telephone represented a practical and pragmatic choice to progress with the research at this point in time. Though this element of the interview situation was denied through COVID-19 and the lock down situation, I still think that the interviews that I conducted through the medium of the telephone were ‘good’ interviews. I was able to establish good rapport with

my collaborators, who were very engaged in the research and stated how they had enjoyed the opportunity to discuss their working lives, and the data that was obtained was rich, full, and carried the detail and emotion of the experience they were depicting.

The easing of restrictions raised the possibility of beginning face-to-face interviews.

However, this was not necessarily a straightforward choice either. Whereas there were no longer any civil limitations as regards face-to-face interviewing, the ethical consideration to not place research participants at risk of harm was of paramount importance at that particular time, as the potential consequences of those risks were of such magnitude. My sample can be seen to have been at a greater risk of harm as a consequence of their age, due to the increased susceptibility to the virus with increased age. As such, this ethical standard was of higher importance than the presence or absence of civil restrictions. This meant that as not only a social researcher, but also a human being, I had a duty to the people involved and their families, whilst also having a duty to keep myself and my family safe and well. So, decisions to proceed with face-to-face interviewing were made on a case-by-case basis and needed to account for factors such as any respiratory illness, i.e., asthma, COPD that could entail an increased risk with infection.

In preparing for interviews at this stage, I asked all my collaborators what their preferred method of conducting the interview would be, along with discussing any factors that could entail a raised risk in relation to the virus in order to establish the best way to proceed. Based on this, I held four face-to-face interviews; with two people it was decided to conduct telephone interviews. In terms of the face-to-face interviews that I conducted, I attempted to minimise any risk within the research context: I arrived at my collaborators' homes wearing a mask; there was no physical contact, e.g., handshakes; conversations were held socially

distanced, at around two meters or more. These provisions did add somewhat of an unusual air to the start of the conversation, however, after this initial period, I was able to establish more of a normal feel to the interactions and aid the development of more naturalistic conversations.

### **Talking to postal workers: in-depth, semi-structured interviews**

As discussed earlier, in keeping with an in-depth, semi-structured approach to interviewing, I attempted to create a context where the form of interview was similar to that of a conversation, though one that is oriented around the research topic. The conversational quality of this form of interview meant that I was careful not to make any of my collaborators feel rushed, that the conversation could progress in a leisurely manner (O'Reilly, 2005). In order to establish this conversational quality for the interview, it is important to develop a rapport (Legard *et al*, 2003). This was something that I attempted to establish from the very outset of the conversation.

I started all the conversations using more general questions to ease collaborators into the research situation (Fontana and Frey, 2008). I would normally open-up conversations by asking my collaborators what their memories of the area were from when they were growing up, or when they first moved to the area (if they had grown up, or previously lived elsewhere). I found this to be a good opening to establish an ease and rapport within the conversation as we could always find common ground around the people and places that we both knew. In addition, at this stage of the conversation, I would also ask questions relating to contextual information to help frame the context for later questions. Starting the

conversations in this way was to ease the collaborator from the level of the everyday, on to a deeper level, to the thoughts and feelings that may be sub-conscious (Legard, *et al*, 2003).

In enacting this form of in-depth, semi-structured interview, it is necessary to employ a mixture of structure and flexibility, in order to both address the research topic, whilst also adapting to the differing circumstance of each individual collaborator in the interview context, meaning that each interview is unique, can be made to fit that individual, and may go in differing directions (O'Reilly, 2005; Legard *et al*, 2005). On a practical level, this meant that I went into each interview situation with a list of themes or topics that I wanted to cover within the conversation. This document acted as an aide-memoire, to ensure I covered important aspects for the research, such as the importance of public service. This document was a living document though, for the course of the conversations, and so, when something came up in a conversation that I wanted to come back to in subsequent conversations, I could record it there.

To foster this conversational style within the interview situation it is important to use open-ended questions, allowing for responses to be richer and more interpretive in nature and is not restrictive of the range of possible responses (O'Reilly, 2005). In my own conversations, I was interested to understand how important public service was to postal workers. So, rather than just asking 'was public service important to you?', which had the potential to provoke a rather limited response, i.e., yes, or no, I instead would ask my collaborators something more like, 'what did it mean to you for your work to be a public service?'. Though phrasing questions in such a manner had the potential to develop deeper responses, even when using open ended questions responses may still lack a certain fullness of detail. More 'in-depth' responses can be gleaned through the deployment of follow up questions to gain a greater

understanding and comprehend the reasons, feelings, beliefs, and opinions that underpin the responses given (Legard *et al*, 2003: 141). Such follow-up questions can be formulated through picking out areas from responses that could be interesting, areas to develop further and simply asking if the collaborator could amplify on this, i.e., ‘you just mentioned that there were people that you would help with things when you were out on your walk. Could you tell me a little bit more about that?’

As with the above example, it was my aim to ensure that the conversation was not too abstracted. Ensuring that the conversation is kept within the context of the practices of the everyday routines to which they pertain enables them to be re-constructed more effectively (Mason, 2002). In addition, more detail may be gleaned through enquiring for examples of tasks that collaborators are responsible, which can then be explored in detail systematically (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). Though, through the conversations I was wishing to explore more abstract concepts, the public service ethic, work-based identity, and workplace culture, this was grounded within the practices and routines of everyday work-life, through the very activities and experiences of their day-to-day labour.

Active and effective listening is an essential skill, to understand what is being said and formulate further questions that dictate the direction of the interview (Legard *et al*, 2003). As such, it was important to guard against fatigue. As a consequence, I did not arrange more than one interview on the same day, so as to ensure I could engage effectively in conversations. The issue of fatigue is also an issue for the collaborator though. Some conversations went on for more than three hours. This length of interview only occurred in my face-to-face interviews, my longest telephone interview was around an hour and a half. During conversations I was very aware to look out for fatigue in my collaborators. This is obviously

more difficult to do over the phone, so I was very aware of the necessity to ask if a break was required. On telephone conversations I would normally ask at around an hour if they were able to carry on. Most of my telephone conversations lasted for a little over one hour, with subsequent follow up conversations arranged at a later date. In face-to-face interviews I could look out for visible signs of fatigue and ask if a break was required. In these interviews everyone expressed a desire to carry on until they had come to their natural conclusion.

It was also necessary for me to be aware of the possibility of misunderstanding of meaning, as it is important to try to be attentive to my collaborator's way of understanding (Mason, 2002). However, concepts are not always understood in the same way by both parties as a result of their overlapping social worlds (Cicourell, 1964). I am not a postal worker and did not understand some of the terminology relating to postal work. The first time that I heard mention of a 'frame', I had no idea what it was and had to ask for clarification<sup>13</sup>. However, these requests for clarification can be turned into an attribute in the interview context whereby myself as the researcher can be taught the meanings of distinctive words and concepts (Rubin and Rubin, 1995) with the collaborator taking on the role of an expert, educating the researcher (Miller and Glassner, 2004).

### **Documentary research: COVID-19, using archives, and making choices**

I undertook the documentary stage of my research to supplement the interview data that I had already obtained: to work alongside it and support it by way of triangulation (Gidley, 2018). I

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<sup>13</sup> This was in my interview with Steve. I really think he couldn't believe my ignorance when I had to ask! For purposes of clarification here, the 'frame' in reference is a sorting frame, which postal workers sort the incoming post into, ready to go out on deliveries.

planned to obtain official Royal Mail documents that could shed further light on some of the issues regarding culture and processes of change within the postal service. However, a further effect of the COVID-19 epidemic and lock down was the closure of public places, institutions, and businesses. The effect of this was that in terms of the projected timeline of the project, I was unable to access the institutions I had intended to for the documentary stage of the research. This had an impact as regards the completion of the project. However, I was able to subsequently access these institutions to obtain the necessary documents.

As a part of a scoping exercise, I identified two archives that would possess the documents that I required. In trying to identify the kinds of documents that would be appropriate for this stage of the research, it was necessary for me to find documents that were official Royal Mail documents, that gave an access to the attitude of the organization towards its employees across differing points in time along the duration of the timeline of the project. In addition to this, I was also interested in documents that could provide access to the attitudes of postal workers towards their job, and the experience of their labour.

The two archives that I identified were the archive of the Postal Museum, and the information service/library of the Communication Workers Union (CWU), the main trade union representing the postal workers of Royal Mail. Both archives had extremely helpful and dedicated staff, who provided me with a great deal of assistance and goodwill over the course of my visits there. However, they were very different in terms of the physical organization of the documents held within the respective repositories. This had very real implications in terms of the process of document identification for the research.



The archive at the Postal Museum is situated upstairs at the museum site in central London, not far from the main Post Office at Mount Pleasant, in what is called the reading room. Access to the reading room is mainly by appointment and it is necessary to identify the items to view by ordering these items on their online system. The archive has an online search facility to interrogate the catalogue to identify potential documents. The catalogue is fairly comprehensive but can be a little difficult to navigate. However, the librarians at the reading room were subsequently happy to help me navigate their system to use the catalogue more effectively. The systematic grouping of items within the catalogue meant that, following the guidance I was given, it was fairly easy to select items that would possibly fulfil my criteria for appropriate documents. Having selected these potential appropriate documents, I would order them to view and assess. Documents were presented to me in labelled folders, with each item also labelled. This made the process of identifying and dating each document very easy.

The second archive I used was the information service/library at the CWU headquarters in Wimbledon, in the Borough of Merton, south-west London. The library holds a large amount of reference material in relation to postal work, and the trade union movement, as well as extensive records of CWU activities going back a number of decades. These records included records of annual conferences<sup>14</sup>, records of executive committee meetings, records from particular committees, and records from branches. In addition to this there was a section of internal, union documents that were categorized through what the documents pertained to, as well as a large amount of uncategorized, seemingly miscellaneous documents. The archive

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<sup>14</sup> I could not help but think whilst I was looking at these shelves of records of conferences that mum had told me of how she attended conference a few times when she was a child with grandad who would be there in his capacity of area representative. Conference was a nice trip down south to the seaside at Margate for mum. She enjoyed it and remembers the trips fondly. I found it quite strange and almost tantalizing that those shelves certainly held the details of the conferences attended by grandad and a part of mum's childhood; something there that I could not quite reach.

was in the process of removing a large amount of material to another site and so consequently, they had a large amount of material that was not particularly categorized in any way. The thought of being able to unearth a document that no one had looked upon for decades was highly appealing to me; the thought that something in there could unlock a pathway for the research that might otherwise not be revealed. I felt like the time spent sorting data mining could be time well spent. This store of material was a veritable treasure trove of wonderful documents, though not all of which were useful for my needs. The librarian at the archive was enormously helpful and knowledgeable and was able to answer my questions in relation to particular documents concerning their origin, purpose, and age. This enabled me to interrogate the documents more effectively in order to make decisions about them.

The table below shows the documents that were identified for this stage of the research. The documents predominantly consist of staff handbooks and information booklets, as well as one management report.

Table 2: sample of documents

Document	Year	Archive
An Introduction to the Post Office: A Training Handbook	1959	Postal Museum
The Post Office Staff Handbook	1958	Postal Museum
The Post Office Staff Handbook	1968	Postal Museum
Customer Counts (Post Office management report)	1983	Postal Museum
Your Royal Mail (staff information booklet)	1987	Postal Museum
Customer First: Total Quality in Royal Mail (staff handbook)	1991	Postal Museum
Training Handbook: Royal Mail Conduct Code and Attendance Procedure	1994	CWU Information Service/ Library

### **The context of documents: manner and means of production**

Documents are an integral part of the modern western world, for both individuals' everyday lives and public life (McCulloch 2004). They are of 'pervasive significance' (Atkinson and Coffey 2004), and occur naturally within society, i.e., they are not manifest as a consequence of researcher production and are often readily available as many are produced for the purposes of reproduction and circulation (Potter, 2004). This is a significant point when we

look at the postal service. As a formerly state-owned enterprise (and it was in state ownership during the time period in question for this research), the postal service was an enormous bureaucracy within the British economy and as a consequence, over the many, many years of its existence, it has generated a vast number of documents, as any organizations do through the course of their everyday activities; so, accounts that do not utilise documents miss an important aspect (Atkinson and Coffey, 2004).

In addition to this, the placement of the organization in relation to its social significance, its relationship to the state, and links to royalty has entailed that a certain importance has been placed in terms of the identification, storing, classification, and categorization of its own, internal documents: archiving has been important in the postal service and has been approached diligently, and professionally, something which is highly advantageous to someone attempting research in relation to the organization. This is, after all, an organization whose primary purpose of existence is communication (ensuring that the intended recipient of a communication becomes the actual recipient of that communication), it seems logical for there to be an abundance of written material. In this way, documentary research is an appropriate method in investigating cultural change within the modernizing postal service (Atkinson and Coffey, 2004).

There is an interesting aside to this though in terms of the intended recipients of some of the abundance of written material that the postal service has generated over the years. One of the series of documents that I became interested in using as a part of the documentary stage of my research was a series of booklets that were produced and aimed at new recruits into the service as a form of training booklet, 'an introduction to the post office'. This booklet seems to have been first produced by the postal service in the immediate post-war era. Within a

folder that contained some of these booklets were also a number of internal communications and memorandums. These communications pertained to a worry from the hierarchy of the postal service as to if new recruits were actually receiving the booklets they were creating. The issue seems to have been raised around 1954 and was still being discussed within internal communications in 1959.

My initial perception as regards to this was that I found the concept that the fact that the state monopoly provider of communications was experiencing difficulty over such a period of time in communicating with its own workforce quite ironic, and actually pretty funny. However, the example also serves to make a wider, more pertinent, and more important point about the analysis of documents: that an attention beyond just the content, to the context of a document is necessary (Prior, 2004; Potter, 2004). With documents such as the ‘introduction to the post office’, there is a need to also analyse such factors as their origination, the method and reason, and the circumstances of the consumption of the document (Atkinson and Coffey, 2004): an attention to the socio-historical situation of the documents production (McCulloch, 2004).

In practice it can be productive to approach documents in terms of a topic and ask questions concerning the processes of social production through which the documents have gone (Prior, 2004). In terms of the introductory booklet, we know that it was the postal service that produced that document, but it would be important to consider under what influences the postal service were under in producing it, i.e., they were a part of the state apparatus and so it’s messages should be interpreted under that context of social organization. Questions of the ‘purpose’ of the document are also important within this: the introductory booklet is there to do something. The ostensible purpose of the document is to act as a form of induction for

new recruits, a source of information about the service. However, if we look deeper, we can see that the document is about imparting a particular vision of the service and what it should be, trying to inculcate new postal workers into a particular vision of the organization. In this way, we can see how documents are productive as well as produced (Prior, 2004). Once they are ‘out there’ they do something; they are a form of technology, affecting the social worlds within which they circulate (Prior, 2003). Therefore, a concentration of a document’s relation to the social world is required; otherwise, documents are decontextualized and isolated (Prior, 2003).

So, documents are ‘recipient designed’ and as such carry implicit assumptions concerning the supposed consumer and use an appropriate language for that audience (Atkinson and Coffey, 2004). However, the relationship between production and consumption is not straightforward (Prior, 2003). Though the introductory booklet may tell us something about the way in which the postal service was attempting to impart their own vision of the organization, and its culture, it does not tell us how postal workers interpreted that message, and to what extent they absorbed that message into their own actions and practice as postal workers. This means that it is necessary to look at these messages in relation to what the interview data says about their own practice, both in relation to working culture, and daily labour (though these things are of course inter-related). The point regarding the distribution of the booklet and the possibility of a gap between the intended audience, and the actual readership, is also illustrative of the complex nature of the relationship between production and consumption (though it still tells us something about the organizations vision of the postal service, which is significant in itself).

In addition to this, and in relation to the significance of the actual editorial production of a document, we also encounter the issue of how documents may mean different things at different times (Prior, 2003). The introductory booklet was written within the framework of a postal service management that operated within a particular societal articulation. So, as the structural formation of society begins to change, and the philosophical principles that underpin them, the way in which later iterations of the booklet move through the production and editorial process also begin to change as the ownership and management of the service was inextricably linked to the societal formation. So, through this series of documents we can begin to trace how changes in wider society began to be reflected in the way the postal service attempted to convey their messages and inculcate their new recruits in their vision of the service. We can also see how documents can come to be viewed over different times. So, the service and social connection of the latter era, comes to be viewed as inefficiency, and what is 'quality' comes to be paradigmatically redefined. The meanings of concepts are not static, which entails a sensitivity to their situatedness (Gibbs, 2007).

This point also relates to how documents may be consumed as people are not passive recipients of these messages. Just as postal workers may, or may not, have absorbed the messages of the postal service through the earlier forms of the introductory booklet, analysis of these booklets as the paradigm of editorial supervision begins to change does not tell us how, or if, these messages were incorporated into everyday practice and routine. This is because documents are never fixed as they have to be consumed, and this is situational: they may first enter fields as receptacles, but they then become agents in their own right, open to manipulation by others (Prior, 2003). So, whereas we can see that documents are written with intent and that they can be considered as productive and active in their fields, it is not necessarily straightforward to determine what that intent is and in what way they are

productive for varying individuals. However, the messages within these documents, and the various implications and connotations that may arise from them, can be analysed alongside the data gathered from the interviewing of postal workers.

### **Analysing the content of documents**

My approach in dealing with the written content of documents has been one of starting by examining the identification of key themes (Perakyla, 2005). In doing this, I tried to allow for the emergence of themes through the data, whilst also utilising key concepts informing the study, aiming to give a degree of flexibility whilst retaining a clarity of focus (Potter, 2004). This meant that coding was undertaken to facilitate analysis by way of a process of data reduction (Potter, 2004; Gibbs, 2007), applying such concepts as the service ethic, commercialization, and social connectedness.

However, as stated earlier, the meanings of concepts are not static, so analysis needs to display a sensitivity to their necessarily transient nature. In this way, coding a document enables analysis to go beyond a description of contents to a thematic analysis in relation to research aims (Gibbs, 2007). Texts can also be looked at in terms of their literary style, the format they follow and the *type* of language they use. Many may use language in a way that is unfamiliar in everyday talk but is familiar to its audience as they tend to draw on a stock of phrases that are well understood and established, and their deployment is to present the world in a particular way. In addition, the language can be analysed in terms of its rhetorical features: the way in which language is deployed to persuade (Atkinson and Coffey, 2004).



In analysing documentary evidence from the postal service within this research I looked at the discourse that the service attempted to put forward in relation to how they conceptualize the service at differing points in time, and as to how this relates to the modernization process, and the working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work. I also looked at documents from the CWU to look at how there were competing discourses surrounding the process. It is interesting how both these competing discourses at times deployed the same concepts but interpreting their meanings in differing way. One example of this is the competing discourse of quality between the postal service and the CWU. The analysis of discourse looks at how discourses are constructed and given verisimilitude; or indeed how seemingly correct things are undermined (Potter, 2004). There is attention in terms of literary nature, but also the way in which the constructed discourses may then construct differing versions of the social world (Potter, 2004).

In this way, analysis can examine how discourses were achieved and what their independent aims were. So, the ‘realities’ that documents produce can be seen to be constitutive of a particular documentary ‘level of reality’, with a degree of freedom from other forms of data. This does not mean that they are necessarily or intentionally deceptive, but that they are a particular and distinctive *version* of reality (Atkinson and Coffey, 2004). Therefore, the aim is not to give a value judgment on the competing discourses surrounding the events, and to state which one is more accurate, but to look at the way in which particular versions of ‘quality’ were created, the intentions behind these creations and the way in which they were consumed.

However, it should also be noted that documents are not isolated entities. They exist in relationships of inter-referentiality, and so, analysis should also look at the ways in which

documents are related to other documents, in addition to interview data. In this way processes can be traced through an audit trail of documents and entails that analysis does not have to be predicated on the premise of individual documents as reflective of social reality, but rather as reflective of other documents existing in ‘intertextuality’, that can be conceptualized as a ‘semi-autonomous domain of documentary reality’ (Atkinson and Coffey, 2004).

The oft cited criticism of documentary research is that documents cannot be assumed to be portraying an objective viewpoint of the social world (Bryman, 2008), i.e., the introductory booklet presents a view of the postal service as conceptualized by the management of the organization. However, this should not necessarily be seen as problematic as this very subjectivity can be a source of data; and if documents were discounted on the basis bias, then it is likely that not many documents would be left to research (McCulloch, 2004). It should also be noted that documents identified as appropriate for study may not encapsulate the full documentary realities that were originally deposited: documents may be ‘selectively deposited’ (McCulloch, 2004), in addition to the fact that there is a selection process in terms of identifying which documents to include in the research. Documents, though, are not clear representations of social worlds and caution needs to be exerted concerning how such data is used. They are not reflective of the everyday operation of the settings within which they are produced as ‘accurate’ portrayals of the social world, but instead, they can be seen as particular constructions of the social world, aiming to reproduce it in a particular way for a particular purpose, constructed through given conventions. As a consequence, questions pertaining to the validity, or truth value, of particular documents are not necessarily of strict relevance as the issue concerns the form and function of documents (Atkinson and Coffey, 2004).

## **The ‘Quality’ of research**

One of the implications of a constructivist methodology is that it carries with it an assumption of anti-foundationalism, and that knowledge constructed through the deployment of a specific method will reflect the basis of that method: it removes privilege and entails the legitimacy of multi-vocality. However, as there may be no necessarily accurate way of reconciling representations and reality then there are contingent implications for research evaluation in terms of scientific principles of validity (Gergan and Gergan, 2007). This has led to the development of alternative means of demonstrating the ‘quality’, of qualitative research, that can vary between generalist approaches, and approach-specific criteria (Flick, 2007).

In the light of this, and following the strategy advocated by Flick, the approach to the ‘quality’ of the research adopted here will be one of quality promotion, whereby the issue of quality is grounded in, and addressed to the research process holistically, starting from the initial formulation of research questions, and progressing through the fit of appropriateness between those questions and the methods used and any ethical issues that surround the research, emphasising transparency in the process. In this way ensuring the quality of research is an explicit process, whereby readers of research reports can make readers aware of decision-making processes: how those decisions were made and how those decisions may have influenced the data, and indeed how different decisions may have entailed different results (Flick, 2007). It should be remembered that data is inherently connected to the methods used to produce it and therefore, over-claiming on the basis of that data should be avoided (Brewer, 2000).

## **Ethics**

As noted by Markham, any decision concerning methods is also a decision concerning ethics (Markham, 2003). In connection with a choice of interviews, one of the primary considerations should be that as the research involves close contact with humans, care should be taken to avoid harm to them (Fontana and Frey, 2005). The British Sociological Association (BSA, 2002) asserts that the advancement of knowledge does not suffice as a justification of the violation of the rights of others and that research with humans is constitutive of a moral and personal relationship with those studied.

To this end, researchers have a responsibility to ensure that research does not harm participants in either a physical, social, or psychological manner. That their participation is freely given and based on information regarding the research, given in a way appropriate to that participant. The anonymity of participants should be guarded, and potential threats to that anonymity anticipated. Furthermore, the ‘integrity of sociological inquiry as a discipline’, should be maintained (BSA, 2002).

In interviewing workers from the postal service, certain areas of interviews may approach topics concerning a tumultuous time within the organization and in wider society with the modernization programmes, de-regulation in the economy and the opening up of the labour market, and the introduction of more insecure forms of employment and the consequences that go with it: these subjects were approached with sensitivity and care. In addition, the issue of anonymity was taken seriously to protect individuals' identity. This means that particular care was taken to ensure that individuals are not identifiable via their responses and that strict data handling procedures were enforced.

However, it should be noted that the general ethical principles of autonomy, maximization of benefits, informed consent, privacy, and non-deception, do not necessarily guard against other forms of ethical violations (Christians, 2005). It has been proposed that if the research that is finally presented is of poor quality, then that in itself is ethically unsound: is it worth people giving their time and an insight into their privacy if the research is not of a sufficient quality (Flick, 2007)? In addition, the feminist orientation to research ethics attempts to go beyond the traditional perspective, emphasising the research participant as a human, who should be treated with the respect that this entails, rather than as a repository of data.

To this aim, research should strive towards not being needlessly voyeuristic into individuals' lives, should seek to promote behaviour that can empower the individual participant and forge relationships of an equal status with them (Merrill and West, 2009). In this way, social research should aim to maximise human interests as well as scientific ones (Kvale, 2007). A narrow focus of ethics, in terms of strict guidelines may imply the use of research subjects in an instrumental fashion and does not emphasise the collaborative effort of research (Merrill and West, 2009).

## **Chapter Three**

### **Traditional postal work and identification**

#### **Introduction: establishing ‘traditional’ postal work**

In this chapter, I wish to establish, through the case study of the postal workers working out of the Delivery Offices (DOs) of Cannock Chase, that following the cessation of hostilities in the Second World War, a particular working culture in relation to postal work became established. I am referring to this working culture here as ‘traditional’ postal work. This is not to imply that it was a ‘traditional’ form of work, that it dated a long way back into the history of the postal service (which after all, is a very long time), but more so because that was the way postal workers of the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century thought of it. To these workers, it was a way of interpreting, understanding, and experiencing their labour that had an air of permanence; it possessed a kind of verisimilitude. That things changed was an idea that provoked incredulity: this was the way after all that it was supposed to be. However, in actuality, this working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work was only a passing phase, a product of the particular point in time and space that it was situated within; a fleeting moment that would eventually be supplanted.

In subsequent chapters, I will illustrate how processes of modernization in the postal service, set alongside generalized neoliberalization, entailed that by the mid-1990s this form of work for the postal workers of the Cannock Chase area was in a state of transition: moving away from ‘traditional’ postal work as a means of understanding and experiencing their daily labour. In this chapter, a focus on ‘traditional’ postal work enables us to understand this

experience of work from the perspective of those postal workers, and the way in which they interpreted and felt about their daily labour. How this experience began to change will be dealt with in the subsequent chapters.

I wish, though, to go beyond establishing that ‘traditional’ postal work existed at this point in time. I will explicitly link the working culture to the society that emerged in the wake of the Second World War. This was the society where the state was inextricably interwoven in the very life-courses of its population, where people were cared for ‘from the cradle to the grave’. The postal service was not only a part of the institutional configuration of this new conception of the state, but it was also a site where the labour of individuals could contribute to the ideal of service to society. The working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work was reflective of this society. This is not though to paint an over romanticised picture of the post-war society. Although this society enabled a generalised stability and predictability, this veneer masked a society that was intolerant of lifestyles that differed from the established norm; hid many differing forms of abuses behind closed doors; limited choice and innovation; and maintained patriarchal power relations.

The working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work was formed within the general social context of the relatively stable conditions of the long-boom and embedded capitalism (Polanyi, 2001), though aspects of the working practices had undoubtedly been in place before this time. This working culture would have been the way in which my grandad would have interpreted, understood, and experienced his day-to-day labour when he joined the postal service in the 1950s. By the beginning of our time period in 1970, the culture was deeply ingrained in the routines and practices of daily labour. Their experience of work was characterised by connectivity: to the communities they served; to their fellow postal workers

(their workplace family); and the idea of their labour as a public service. 'Traditional' postal work formed a significant aspect of the identity of postal workers. This specific form of work had meaning to postal workers.

I will begin this chapter by narrating a 'day-in-the-life' of a postal worker in the Cannock Chase area at the start of the time-period. This will set the context for the experience of day-to-day labour of postal workers before the erosion of the working culture through modernization: the routines, rhythms, and practices of that labour. Through this I will illustrate how 'traditional' postal work was embedded within the daily practice of these postal workers. Following this, I will delineate the working culture of 'traditional' postal work. This conceptualization demonstrates how postal workers understood and interpreted their day-to-day labour and will serve to explicate what is being implicitly discussed when 'traditional' postal work is being referred to in subsequent chapters. It lays out what is at stake here: what it was that for many postal workers came to be considered as a loss.

In the narration of this 'day in the life', I will incorporate elements of my grandad's everyday experience in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the era that laid the foundations for 'traditional' postal work. It is another part of the connective story of postal workers in the area at this time: this story is one of connections and this connects grandad's experience with the postal workers who were going out on their respective walks in the later decades of the century. Postal work remained a comparable, though not identical, experience with the labour of my grandad. This is a story of continuity, as well as change. The narrative was constructed from the experiences of the postal workers I talked with, in addition to the numerous conversations I held with my mum about my grandad's time on the post.



## **‘I read the news today, oh boy...’ - a day in the life of the postal worker**

Mum remembers grandad getting up very early in the morning for work in the late 1950s, around 4am. His uniform would be laid out, ready to put on. Grandad always liked to keep himself smart, he felt the uniform was something to be proud of and that it was important to look the correct way for work. After all, the postal service was a uniformed service, and he was a public servant. The uniform was important, and it was part of his duty to:

...present a tidy appearance whether on or off duty. If any uniform-wearing officer attends for duty in a slovenly condition or not in the uniform supplied to him, he is liable to be put off duty and to lose pay for the period of his absence...[Staff Handbook, 1967]

I wonder how difficult it was for him to rise at that time in the morning, with the rest of the house yet to stir? Maybe it was just something you got used to, part of the discipline of work (Strangleman, 2012): perhaps more problematic for the younger ones and those who liked to go out drinking at night.

Alex started work with the postal service in 1980. Having moved to Rugeley from Birmingham a few years previously (out in the ‘country’), a job with the postal service offered him the chance of work that was close to home. He also served as the Communication Workers Union (CWU) representative<sup>15</sup> till the incorporation of the Rugeley branch into Wolverhampton and district. Alex illustrates how with time and repetition you could easily fall into the rhythm of early morning working:

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<sup>15</sup> Alex took over this role from grandad so knew him fairly well (another one of the lovely coincidences).

...you started early 5 o'clock, quarter to 5...to start with [it was difficult to get up for the early morning start] but once you've cracked it you was [sic] laughing. I used to set my alarm at about 20 past, 20 past 4. I'd press the snooze button for 9 minutes and then get up wash, wash, a quick glass of milk and then walk to work...

The early mornings in this way were a part of the discipline of the working day, part of what it actually meant to be a postal worker: the regularity of the habits and routines that postal workers could form a sense of identity around (Strangleman, 2012).

### Heading out to work

In 1956, after washing and having his breakfast (which he always pronounced in the 'Stokie' style, splitting up the syllables into their respective sounds: *'break-fast'*, rather than 'brek-fast'), grandad would have left the house to get his post-bike from the coalshed. He was meticulous in the way that he kept his bike (as several of the postal workers who I spoke to were), making sure it was always clean and serviceable (which must have been troublesome with it being kept in the coalshed), and fit to represent the postal service. Grandad's morning routines as regards his preparation for daily labour were important (Strangleman, 2012). He was creating himself as a postal worker, his physical representation of his labour. It enabled his identification in the community in relation to that labour (Ewen, 2006), and the social significance that such recognition entailed<sup>16</sup> (Kernaghan, 2008) in relation to a society marked by its social connectedness (Putnam, 2000).

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<sup>16</sup>I imagine that in the winter, in order to combat the cold weather, getting ready in the morning would have been an altogether different proposition. I wonder how much extra time he might have taken on those cold mornings to prepare for the conditions? Putting on his gloves in an attempt to warm his fingers and hands that would become chilled to the bone carrying the letters to the doorsteps of the houses of the town; putting on an extra pair of socks to try to stop his feet going numb, and long-johns to go under his trousers. If it was raining, he would have already been wet by the time he got to the DO to begin sorting.

He would have set out on the ride to Rugeley around half-past four in the morning. It's just over two miles from Armitage to the DO at Anson Street in Rugeley town centre, so the ride would have taken him about 15 minutes, arriving in good time to start work at 5am. In fine weather it would have been a nice cycle alongside the canal towards Rugeley. As he rode along the Armitage Road, he would have passed by the site that would become the home of Lea Hall colliery, and both Rugeley A and B power stations to the right<sup>17</sup>. In 1956 the construction of the colliery had been underway for two years; construction of Rugeley A had begun that year. Both Rugeley A and Lea Hall would open in 1960, with construction on Rugeley B starting in 1964, opening in 1970.

When grandad was cycling alongside the canal towards work in 1956, dressed in his smart uniform, with freshly polished boots, and his cap sitting on top of his brylcreemed hair, he would have been the epitome of 'traditional' postal work: even in his appearance he was performing his role of postal worker (Goffman, 1959), representing the service in the appropriate manner. As he rode the country road to Rugeley, he passed through a landscape that had been modelled and remodelled through the shifting imperatives of capitalism: the canal and pot bank representing the Industrial Revolution and early form of capitalism, alongside the power stations and colliery that would fuel this coming stage. An Amazon warehouse now stands on this site, representing both this latest form of capitalism, with its proliferation of highly insecure forms of employment and panopticon-esque regime of worker surveillance, and the demise of the postal monopoly, with its distribution and delivery facility<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> Lea Hall colliery was the first mine that was planned and sunk by the National Coal Board (NCB), and together with Rugeley A station was also the first joint venture between the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) and the NCB with coal sent directly from Lea Hall to the adjacent Rugeley A.

<sup>18</sup> Coincidentally, my first job after graduating from my master's degree was at this Amazon warehouse. There was a large security presence at the warehouse, and we had to go through metal detectors to move on and off the shopfloor. Workers were laid off at a moment's notice. A number of times I saw a supervisor go round and

It would have appeared to him as a stable, safe and predictable world, one where he was sure of his sense of self as a postal worker (Beck, 2000; Bauman, 1998; 2005; Gorz, 1999; Sennett, 1998); though it needs to be remembered that even in the period of the long-boom, this was not a universal experience, and many, particularly women, experienced non-standard forms of employment. The change that occurred within the postal service over the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century would have seemed incomprehensible to him back then (indeed, any form of change must have seemed like a distant proposition anyway, within the experience of the stability of post-war society). In reality, the first cracks in this model began to appear a mere 14 years later.

As grandad rode through the railway arches that usher you into Rugeley, demarcating it from the mining village of Brereton, along 'Horse Fair' towards the DO on Anson Street, the town centre would still have largely been asleep. Though as he entered the DO, accessed off a dirt track to the side of Market Street, behind The Bell pub, the semblances of the daily routines of the town would have been beginning to stir: the milkman on his rounds; the bakers preparing their goods; and the market traders setting up their stalls ready for trading. The DO in Rugeley was situated in the same place in the 1950s as it was by the start of our time period in 1970, and it is still in the same place now. And though the town centre now is a pedestrianised area that is no longer the bustling hive of activity it once was, in 1970, those town centre streets would have been much the same as the ones grandad pedalled through in 1956, as he arrived at the DO around 5am to sort the mail that had arrived that morning from Walsall, ready to go out on his walk<sup>19</sup>.

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walk up to people to tell them that they were not needed anymore and could leave now. Indeed, this was what happened to me at the warehouse.

<sup>19</sup> The walk is how postal workers refer to going out to deliver the mail.

### The Delivery Office: sorting the mail

At 5am the full-time postal workers arrived at the DO to sort the mail ready for delivery; part-timers and any casuals would start a little later. Postal workers tried not to differentiate between each other too much on the basis of status. They tried to present an attitude that they were all equal and there was a large degree of respect between the grades (Strangleman, 2012): postal worker, to postman higher grade (PHG), to delivery office manager (DOM). However, this was true up to a certain point, and largely from the perspective of the ‘standard’ group of workers, i.e., white, male, and full-time. Postal workers did seem to differentiate regarding a full-time, part-time division, largely on account of their not doing the full working day, which meant not carrying out the sorting process. This inevitably plays out in relation to gender (though it was never expressed in gendered terms), as women were more likely to occupy part-time positions. This has implications in terms of identification, as those in the more ‘standardized’ forms of employment are more likely to have the stable and consistent experience of time to be able to become embedded within their work and identify with it (Strangleman, 2004), or to foster collective social relations and develop character (Sennett, 1998; 2012).

The DOs up and down the Cannock Chase area were small and made for tight, cramped, and smoky workplaces. Mum thought the DO possessed a very particular smell, a strange and idiosyncratic one that she finds instantly identifiable; a fusty smell that was permanently tinged with the stale smell of cigarette smoke. Mum went to secondary school just round the corner from the DO on Taylors Lane. She would meet grandad at lunchtime and go to the Green Bus Cafe, just across the town centre. She remembers entering the DO through the back door to meet him, the same door the postal workers used. As she went through the door, she would have seen the day-to-day activities of the DO playing out in front of her. She

remembers the DO of the late 1960s as being a predominantly male environment (Johnson, 2014), where many workers smoked cigarettes as they worked, postal workers smart in their uniforms, with ties done up and blue jumpers over their shirts. To her the DO was a busy place, though one that she remembers as ordered and organised, calm, and focussed on the activities at hand.

I imagine the postal workers of the 1970s entering the DO at 5am would have entered an already smoky atmosphere, one beginning to come alive: the beat of postal workers sorting at their frames with the rhythm of practiced hands depositing the mail into pigeonholes; though with newer postal workers, still learning the ropes, having to look up to check for the correct place. The placement of mail by hand becomes learned reaction (Ingold, 2002; Wolkowitz, 2006; Sennett, 2009), the correct hole found with a barely perceived need for thought.

Though the DOs across the area made for close working conditions, the atmosphere was one of congeniality, with close personal relationships that were cultivated over time (Sennett, 1998; 2012). There would have been the gentle hum of conversation, the laughter between workmates having ‘the crack’, alleviating the monotony of routine work (Roy, 1959). The approach to work first thing in the morning was one of cooperation and collaboration (Sennett, 2012). Though each worker had their own individual sorting to do, they would work collectively to ensure that all the work got done, and that everybody left the DO on time at 7am.

Steve had started work at a butcher’s shop before beginning his career with the postal service in 1973, firstly at Cannock, and then subsequently moving over to Rugeley in 1976. He spent the rest of his working life with the postal service. Steve enjoyed the sorting process, and the time that he spent in the DO first thing in the morning with his fellow postal workers, and the

camaraderie that he experienced through such relationships (Waddington, 2023). Despite the cramped working conditions, for him the working environment in either of the DOs in which he'd been employed were

...usually very cramped. It was in Cannock, and it was in Rugeley, for a while, erm, quite close together. And the old, the old box type sorting...it was literally, one box for one street...it was all in one box so, you got whatever street in one box and the next box would be another street. They'd have to pull each box out with the mail and sort that again, so it was almost doing it twice...you're very close to the man next to you; I couldn't say you was [sic] working on top of him, but it was so close, a close way of working with people...

And Alex shows how postal workers would work together (Sennett, 2012) to ensure that the sorting process was done ready for deliveries to go out on time:

...you was [sic] in a large group and you was [sic] all doing sorting of different things and you all had to try and finish at the same time. And if somebody had a bit more sorting to do than others everybody mucked in and helped out...

But within the working culture of 'traditional' postal work, the closeness between postal workers was not just a physical closeness as a consequence of the dimensions of the buildings they worked (Salaman, 1971). They possessed a sense of themselves as a distinct group (Jenkins, 2000; Thomson, 1996), with values and pride in relation to the work that they performed (Salaman, 1971). Within this group there was a conscientiousness about the way they approached this collaboration, bound by the shared norms of their working culture that guided their team performance within the DO (Goffman, 1959). For many, the closeness they experienced within the DO was described in terms of it being like a family (Cooper *et al*,

2016): a ‘workplace family’. Mum remembers a closeness in these relationships that point to something beyond just working relationships (Mackenzie *et al*, 2006). This was a tight culture that had a strong sense of norms, was conscientious and experienced a great sense of togetherness (Gelfand, 2018). It is important to note that though there was this sense of family within the group, there were also points of exclusion (Gelfand, 2018), and it was a group that would have been ordered around the values and norms of white, working class, males. However, she always knew she was welcome in the small office on Market Street in Rugeley:

...I could walk into the sorting office, and no one was going to say ‘what are you doing here? Get out!’ I’d go in round the back way through the office doors; there used to be a gap in between the labour exchange and the post office that isn’t there anymore. I did it from when I was a very little girl to when I was a teenager...Dad was very friendly with Dave Page in particular. He lived in Handsacre and had children of a similar age to me. We hired static caravans next to each other in Bournemouth and spent our summer holiday with each other...I knew some of the families through dad cutting hair. I used to go with him to their houses. People used to make him a cup of tea and make him really welcome. When we used to go up to Eric Hatton’s, up in Brereton, near Birch Lane, his son used to be there too with his girlfriend. I used to dry her hair for her when I was there<sup>20</sup>...he never charged them, he should have done but he never did, it really was a close-knit workforce and a lot of them were a similar age...these people were there for years and years. People grew up together; families grew up together...

Ellen had several biological family members who were also postal workers. She had been nominated for her job by her cousin and though she started her employment with Royal Mail later in the time period in 1990, after the commencement of the modernization process, the

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<sup>20</sup> The son referred to here, of the postal worker grandad used to cut hair for, also became a postal worker. He and the girlfriend who my mum used to dry the hair of would later live in the same street that we did, where I grew up, and I would play with their children when I was a boy.



essence of ‘workplace family’ (Cooper *et al*, 2016) and strong sense of togetherness (Gelfand, 2018) at the DO in Rugeley was still very much alive:

...when I started, we were friends, we weren’t just work colleagues; we were friends. We used to go out together, birthdays, Christmas. At Christmas we used to finish your [sic] delivery on Christmas Eve, go back to the office and we used to have two, there was [sic] two or three cleaners on site...They would make tea and toast in the morning and then sit at the end of the room with the tray of tea or toast...Then on Christmas Eve they would put a buffet on upstairs; we call it the canteen; it’s just like a little kitchen with a room on the side...we’d have a couple of handfuls of people upstairs and a bit of music and a bit of buffet and we’d have a Christmas Eve do, like you know...

This demonstrates that in addition to the way in which they worked alongside one another, work acted as a focal point, a hub through which life could be organised in terms of their collective social relations, entailing friendship circles and a social life (Salaman, 1974; Mackenzie *et al*, 2006),

#### Sorting in the villages: rural Sub-Post Offices

Across Cannock Chase there are a number of smaller villages surrounding the larger towns of Cannock, Hednesford and Rugeley. In many of those villages stood Sub-Post Offices, though many of these have now since been closed. Mail would come into these rural Sub-Post Offices by van from the larger post offices situated in the larger towns. The postal workers at these Sub-Post Offices would also be arriving for work at 5am, to meet the incoming mail. The task of sorting for those workers at these small, rural Sub-Post Offices was completed in such places as sheds out the back of the office, in a draughty room out the back, or direct from the sacks off the back of the van.

Dorothy worked from the small Sub-Post Office in the village she has lived in all of her life. She took over the job from her mother in 1984, and though she worried at first that she was not going to be up to the task, Dorothy loved her job as a postal worker (Freidson, 1990) and took it very seriously. She has fond memories of the little DO, though it was just a shed out the back of the post office that was situated on the village High Street. She thought of it as a fun place, where she enjoyed working, although it could be very cold in the winter with just a calor gas stove for heating. For Dorothy her favourite part of the day was in the DO early in the morning, sorting the mail ready for deliveries as she began her working day:

[as we sit talking in her kitchen, she crosses her legs on her chair to demonstrate how she would sit whilst sorting the post, and began mimicking the action of picking up the mail and sorting them into the pigeonholes, in the fast and almost instinctive fashion that she had cultivated through her practice (Ingold, 2002; Wolkowitz, 2006; Sennett, 2009): ‘got me leg caught’ she says as she catches a foot under one of her legs]

...I used to enjoy sortin...sit in the little desk, little, narrow desk, about that wide it'd be, me [sic] pigeonholes in front of me, and me [sic] mother taught me how she used to do it: you put your letters on your knee, and get a pile here, and put 'em on your knee and put 'em in order on your knee and put 'em in the pigeonhole. I used to love doing that...you sit there and put it in order, you know, house-to-house number two and back. And the letter numbers were all the same in Baggot Street, and you know, it was very difficult. But I prefer to do that than take it out and you know. I used to love sorting the letters, putting them in order...

Dorothy's<sup>21</sup> love of the sorting process (Freidson, 1990) was slightly unusual from among the postal workers that I talked to, though she was by no means the exception. Though most postal workers seemed to have actively enjoyed the sorting process in the DOs in the morning, they did not express it in quite the effusive terms of Dorothy. For most, going out on the walk seemed to have been the favoured aspect of the job. This was an area where an element of autonomy was seen to be exercised over their labour by the postal worker: once they were out on their walk, they were pretty much left to their own devices, and had the time to be able to work in the way they wanted and perform actions that they felt were for the public good (Gill-McLure and Seifert, 2008). In contrast, the sorting process was seen as a more monotonous and boring part of the job and was a time of day where postal workers would engage in behaviours of banter or 'having the crack' to relieve or mitigate that boredom (Roy, 1959). However, the process of sorting seemed to appeal to the ordering sensibilities of Dorothy's mind. She seemed to take pleasure in the practiced element of it; her hands learning the places that the various letters needed to go, training them to aid the efficiency and speed of her sorting (Ingold, 2002; Wolkowitz, 2006; Sennett, 2009). She took pride in being fast at sorting the mail (as did Ken over at the DO in Rugeley). And the thought that she was both quicker and also made far less mistakes than those she worked with, gave her a lot of pleasure and satisfaction.

### The autonomy of the walk

At around seven in the morning the job of sorting the mail for the first delivery would be done and for the postal workers across the region, at the various offices and Sub-Post Offices,

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<sup>21</sup> And Dorothy's husband, it turns out, knew my uncle: my dad's brother, Cam. He'd worked with him at Lea Hall, but he also knew him from before that, through one of the village pubs, The Coach and Horses, just down the road from where the Sub-Post Office was. This was where my paternal grandparents had been Licensees in the 1960s and 1970s, when my uncle was a young boy and around the time my mother and father first met. This kind of thing seemed to happen a lot over the course of the research, and was I feel, of great importance in terms of the interview setting and the quality of the material that was generated within it.

it would be time to emerge from their respective DOs to begin their ‘walk’: part of the stable predictability of the discipline of the workplace that enabled the emergence of a moral order and the maintenance of collective social relations (Strangleman, 2012). The walks were all organised into Service Allocations (SAs), and were each assigned a corresponding name and number, e.g., Town 1, Town 2 etc.

Despite the many changes that occurred in the postal service because of modernization over the years, there is a simplicity to this stage of proceedings that had stayed much the same. The exertion and power of a human body: walking and delivering; feet and hands. For many postal workers, going out on the walk first thing in the morning was seen as almost a thing of beauty. The solitude before the day begins and the town wakes. The walk is seen by many postal workers as the most treasured aspect of their job: an element of the job where they were left pretty much to their own devices; where they could exercise their autonomy and do the job largely in the way in which they wanted, including performing actions in the community, for the good of the community (Gill-McLure and Seifert, 2008). Seven would also be the time at which the various part-time and casual workers would be starting work, arriving at the DO to collect and deliver the mail already sorted by their full-time counterparts.

For postal workers with town duties, it could involve a lot of walking when going out on the first deliveries. Alex recalls the long distances that needed to be covered on foot:

...I done [sic] every round in the office; all the walks...somebody bought me a pedometer and I set it up and I put that on meself [sic] when I was, when I was on the Town walk, up in Brereton or somewhere like that um I used to do half of another round and I was clocking up about 10 and a half miles a day, just walking...

Ken started with the postal service in 1983, at the DO in Rugeley, when he moved to Brereton, next to Rugeley, from the much larger and busier industrial area of Stoke-on-Trent. Ken had not moved to Brereton for work though, he moved to Brereton for love. He had met his wife, who lived in Rugeley, at a wedding and immediately fell in love with her. He moved south to live in Brereton to be with her. Brereton had seemed like a good place to live to Ken, somewhere more rural, away from the more built-up area of Stoke-on-Trent: *'I've always liked it here cos you've got the Chase. Coming from the 5 Towns, the Chase on your doorstep was magical'*. Ken loved the variety of the walks that went with the different duties. Sometimes getting out into the countryside that he loves so much to deliver to the villages, or in the busier and more populous town; it represented a way of connecting with the community and interacting with the people that constitute it (Horton, 2006):

...yea I got to know people really well and especially some of 'em, as families...Armitage, Hill Ridware, Hamstall Ridware, all around, all the town ones, local, Brereton, up Etching Hill you got to know hundreds of people, not all by name, you can't, but they knew you by face and some were very close and I've seen the children grow up with their children now and I do get cards; Christmas cards and you know like...

For the postal workers going out from the DO at Rugeley at seven in the morning in their vans, to the more rural areas and the numerous small villages that surround the town, the nature of the geography and demography made for a different kind of experience in delivering the mail. Joanne had started working for the postal service in the late 1970s. She was a single mother with two young daughters and had to juggle her job as a postal worker around caring responsibilities. Joanne would go on to spend 30 years working in the postal

service. She describes some of the challenges that postal workers can come across when delivering to these rural areas, particularly in more inclement weather:

...I mean they were sort of Colton and Abbots Bromley and out in the wilds. I mean the guys never used to see anybody, the farmers so Yea, yea, I know when I, we used to go, when I used to do the Armitage jobs; used to go down to the farms, remember going out to, down Tuppenhurst Lane and all the little farms down Tuppenhurst Lane and it was like about that deep in snow [she hovers her hand, palm down, around a foot off the floor]. And you used to have to leave your bike at the first farm, when it's about a quarter of a mile walk to the next farm, [laughing] 'oh how bad is it?'; and, 'will I get the tractor up there?'; and, 'well I've walked down so, yea you'll get a tractor back up to the bridge I'll bet, whether you'll get it up the bridge or not that's another thing!'

This point regarding the potential difficulties in delivering to the farms and the rural areas is further backed up by Alex, though he was equally as clear as to his enjoyment of going out on deliveries on these duties:

...I did enjoy going round the rural areas for delivery...you met all sorts of people, lot of farmers; I didn't realise there was such a lot of farms about!... used to leave 'em on the kitchen table and then have a chat with somebody, you know...I put the van in a ditch a few times, had to get towed out. There was always a nice helpful farmer or somebody to help you out... I was given a new van one day, and the gaffer said, 'you've got a new van', I said, 'okay, good', 'don't scratch it!', and I put it in the ditch! I run back to the farm, I said, 'Help me out, quick, quick, quick!', it was lying on its side in the ditch. There was that much mud, but it had hardly touched it. It hadn't even, hadn't even got a blemish on it. I had to climb out the passenger door. It was like coming up out of a submarine!...I didn't put a scratch on it. I washed it, took it home washed it...

Despite some of the perceived difficulties of doing 'the rurals', they were duties that postal workers generally loved to do. Many of them developed strong and enduring relationships

with the communities and would go out of their way to help the people of those communities (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988; Pfiffner, 1999; Perry, 1996; Perry and Wise, 1990; Perry and Hondeghem, 2008). The driving duties in ‘the rurals’ were often assigned based on seniority.

The forms of community (non) work (Lyon, 2009) that postal workers engaged with on their rounds should be viewed in relation to the public service ethic (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988; Pfiffner, 1999; Perry, 1996; Perry and Wise, 1990; Perry and Hondeghem, 2008). This was work that was experienced as an emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012 [1985]), that involved a form of deep contact with members of the community and entailed a relationship of trust between them. The way in which the postal service at this time was organised helped to facilitate this ideal within their work, as the service itself saw itself as existing within a web of generalized social reciprocity and social connectivity (Putnam, 2000):

...Our aims in Post Office training are simple: to equip you to tackle a new job efficiently and confidently, and to reveal the absorbing interest of work vital to the community...[An Introduction to the Post Office, 1959]

The ideal of public service was at the very heart of the organization at this time, and at the very heart of the working culture.

#### Sub-Post Offices and the ‘walk’

Following completion of sorting at the various Sub-Post Offices scattered across the region, just as with the postal workers of the larger towns, those of the smaller towns and villages, began their respective walks also at seven. The experience of going out on a walk for a postal

worker in some of the more rural locations can be very different to that of a postal worker doing a town walk: geography and demography was significant in terms of the day-to-day experience of labour. For postal workers in the outlying villages the sparse nature of the population on the walks could mean they might cover large distances on their bikes, but with relatively few properties in the way of delivery points. Dorothy reflects on how far in extent of distance she might cover over an average day:

...It was 22 miles a day I was doin [sic] on a bike. Yea, and me [sic] mum before me, obviously. And I used to go up Heathcote, then as far as the edge of the wood, along the Edgemore Road. I used to go to a house along there, and then up the park, and then come back and do part of the village as well...used to have to go across fields as well to Park, Parkside I think it was called. To Mrs Taylor's in the fields, used to have to lift me [sic] bike over their fence and go down the field to her house then come out in Watters Lane...

In describing some of her daily route around the countryside surrounding the village, we can see how Dorothy appreciates both the routine and established nature of her round, and the places within it; it was not just something that she had done, but her mother before her also. Her daily route and routines and the discipline with which she approached it were generationally established and were possessed of a predictability and stability (Strangleman, 2012). Furthermore, we can see how the geographical realities of the more rural areas, meant that the nature of the daily labour, in terms of the individual walk, is consequently affected. Dorothy had to travel longer distances across a different type of geographical location, via the windy lanes that undulate around the fields, and between the villages and hamlets, maybe riding across fields or needing to lift her bike over a hedge to get to her destination. As such, the geography of the area is intrinsic in creating the shape of her daily physical toil, a strict, physical discipline that embedded her within her work (Strangleman, 2012).



In this way, the rural differed from the town. Her own personal knowledge of that geography is also significant in terms of the way she performed her labour. She was active in the process of the creation of the shape of that labour. Her local knowledge was intrinsic in the creation of that labour, embedded in her disciplined practice (Strangleman, 2012) through the local knowledge of the community in which it was produced. Her affinity with the local geography, the topography and the local landmarks, in addition to the individuals and the families who live within the communities, further demonstrates the importance of (her) locality in her labour: it is not just the labour in itself that is important, but the place in which that labour is produced, and reproduced, that is also of fundamental importance to the understanding of the labour of the postal worker. She attached a fundamental importance to the community that she served (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988; Pfiffner, 1999; Perry, 1996; Perry and Wise, 1990; Perry and Hondegheem, 2008).

#### Later morning: Back to the DO

As the postal workers began to finish with their first deliveries, they would start to return to the DO; as Alex states about the completion of first deliveries:

...If you was [sic] on a walk you finished regular about half past 9...pretty well finished for half nine, quarter to ten. Then you was [sic] back to do your sorting for your second delivery...Quarter to 10 back to the office, have a break, cup of tea. The second delivery mail would come in about 10 past 10, you'd sort that up and then they'd let you, you couldn't go out before quarter to 11...

Not all postal workers working out of the DO would be on the same shifts. Some would work split shifts which would involve a shorter walking duty, followed by going out in the van

doing collections later on. Phil served in the regular Army in Germany in the late 1950s and early 1960s, before becoming self-employed as a roofer. He joined the postal service in 1974 and saw a great many parallels between life in the military and working in the postal service (Strangleman, 2012; Campbell-Smith, 2012; Johnson, 2014). Phil enjoyed his time as a postal worker and felt a particular affinity with the rural communities and loved going out to the villages in the vans, though he had a strong connection with the idea of serving the public in general (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988; Pfiffner, 1999; Perry, 1996; Perry and Wise, 1990; Perry and Hondegheem, 2008). As well as taking a great sense of pride in carrying out work for the good of the public (Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008), Phil also took pride in the recognition of his labour by others (Kernaghan, 2008), keeping a scrap book of times that he had been mentioned in the local papers due to his work (Kernaghan, 2008).

Phil describes the process of being on one of these split shift duties, doing one of the town walks in Rugeley and then the time-sensitive nature of the afternoon duties where the journey entailed the possibility of being late back in:

...you'd be on say section 10 which is the Pear Tree, you know the Pear Tree? The right, not the shops side of Horse Fair, but the other side, by the health centre, where it used to be then up Sandy Lane; and Hednesford road; and go on to Draycott Park. And it was a full delivery, but then when you finished at around half past 9, you went home and you came back in the afternoon for a van job and you had to go out and do a collection from the Abbots Bromley...anyway you used to do that and then when you went back you had to wait for all the other vans coming in...you would load you up and we was [sic] on the Walsall journey then, so you'd go to Walsall. So really it was, go on lads hurry up because we was [sic] quite a way out from Walsall. And when you go in you would, it's all queuing to get in like, so the later you was [sic], the later you got

back...Then they transferred under Wolverhampton and then used to do the Wolverhampton run...

We can see the regularity of work routines for postal workers that would have given structure to their day-to-day labour (Strangleman, 2012). During the 1970s and 1980s, before modernization came to exert a greater influence on the way postal workers went about their daily work (Jenkins *et al*, 1995), postal workers would try to work as quickly as possible to get all the work for the day completed early. If it was, there was nothing to stop them from going home early (Johnson, 2014; Gall, 2003). Gary recalls how, when working with one particular postal worker, they could motivate each other to work faster, or even compete with each other, running round to complete deliveries as quickly as possible:

...it was round 11; it was a good round. I filmed it, it was just like phh phhh [noises implying speed]. The van didn't go off ticking over, so we were done for half 11, when normally it'd be half 1, 2 o'clock. It was great mate, good laugh... Just destroyed it...you don't show nothing now, I don't run anymore. So now, you come back early they can send you out. So, I've slowed it right down, play the game, take my breaks. I'm not a machine, I can't run round for the next 20 years anyway. Me [sic] knees aren't, you know...

These kinds of things were technically against the rules. They were not really allowed to finish early in this way, but it was a form of 'cheating' at work that was tolerated and even tacitly accepted by supervisors and seen by postal workers as compensating for the routine nature of the work, as well as a form of equalization (Mars, 1982). That such practices went on behind closed doors entailed that it did not affect the team performance of postal workers as diligent public servants, or their self-image in the way they viewed the social significance of their labour (Goffman, 1959). However, this kind of thing was not just done in order to

finish early. It was also a form of ‘game at work’ (Roy, 1959); a way in which Gary and his fellow postal worker could relieve the tedium of the day and search for some meaning within their labour.

At this time, it was accepted practice to be able to get ‘a flyer’ if the mail had left the building; the important thing was that the work got done, not that you stayed until the official ‘knocking off’ time. The system of ‘job-a-knock’ was an attractive feature of the job for many postal workers. Postal work was poorly paid and routine work, such practices were seen as perks of the job, compensating for the kind of work they did (Gall, 2007). As Alex states: ‘...that was an incentive, see, do the job, do it right and you can finish’; and Ken:

...you could do your work in your own time and finish early. As soon as it was done you could go: ‘I’ve done it’, you know? I’d worked me [sic] breakfast, I had me [sic] breakfast here, but I’m finishing now cos [sic] I’ve done everything. Everything was cleared. And that was your incentive just to get finished cos [sic] that was the job...you were getting to know people really well and you had proper breaks as well and you were in the canteen...You had a family at the workplace...

The importance of the facilities on site, laid on by the postal service, and the close relationships between postal workers that they helped to inculcate, is further highlighted by Ellen:

...They would make tea and toast in the morning and then sit at the end of the room with the tray of tea or toast and if you were asked, ‘tea or toast?’ you would pay them the money and you would have tea and toast...when I started we were friends, we weren’t just work colleagues; we were friends. We used to go out together, birthdays, Christmas...They were really nice people, you know?...

The staff canteen offered postal workers the chance of a little rest during their day's labour, the canteen also served to reinforce the family atmosphere (Cooper *et al*, 2016) and sense of camaraderie (Mackenzie *et al*, 2006) within the DO, and the tightness of the working culture (Gelfand, 2018) of postal workers, aiding the sense of occupational community (Salaman, 1974).

### The second delivery and time for home

For those not working the kind of split shift described by Phil, after the break it would be time to start the sorting process for the second delivery. It could also be the point in time when any overtime might be offered. Overtime was highly valued; it could be a nice boost to the weekly wage<sup>22</sup>. As such, from around 10am, the sorting for second deliveries would begin. This process over in the Cannock DO is described by Kevin:

...After the break we'd come down and do a bit more sorting ready for the second delivery...that's it, unless I was offered the opportunity for overtime cover...a supervisor would come round and ask if anybody wanted to cover...they used to split it up, anyone who wanted overtime. There'd be 2 or 3 postmen, a few each, extra, extra money...

For those heading out on their second deliveries, the day was nearly done. The second deliveries would rarely contain a high volume of mail, and so most were fairly well certain of a nice and early finish. Back then, as all the postal workers readily pointed out, the office operated under a 'clear frame' policy (a disciplined element to work that the postal workers of this time took a lot of pride in<sup>23</sup>) (Strangleman, 2012). Postal workers would often go as

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<sup>22</sup> Grandad didn't agree with overtime. As far as he was concerned, overtime 'does someone out of a job'.

<sup>23</sup> That currently this policy is no longer in operation and that frequently the DO is now left with lots of undelivered mail at the end of the day is met with incredulity by the 'traditional' postal workers. This kind of thing would have been unthinkable then. It is just simply not the way that it should be done.

quickly as they could to achieve an early finish (Johnson, 2014; Gall, 2003), though such practices began to change as a consequence of modernization and the intensification of the working day (Daunton, 1985; Gall, 2007). Alex talks of this end of the day and the rush to finish:

...and you was [sic] pretty well finished an hour before your finishing time...you'd see 'em racing round trying to get the box to open; the key to open the post box, half eleven, usually. And that was the last thing they did. Empty that box and back to the office: clear the kitchen; dump all the mail; put it in the bag to be sent off to the main offices and you was [sic] off home then. 'I've finished now gaffer'; 'okay off you go'...cos [sic] you was [sic], you started early at 5 o'clock and you was [sic] ready for bed at 9, 10 o'clock, you gotta have at least seven- or eight-hours' sleep, or try to...

For some, though the working day may have been done, there was still time for socialization with their 'workplace family' (Cooper *et al*, 2016). The post-Second World War postal service had developed somewhat of a paternalistic attitude towards its workforce. They seemed to have seen it as their duty, in relation to generalized reciprocity (Putnam, 2000), to cater for both the social education, and the social enrichment of their employees to help make them better citizens and inculcate social capital (Putnam, 2000), as demonstrated through the introductory booklets given to new recruits in this era:

...Colleges of further education are concerned with that part of your life [social] as well as with your work...Education helps you to become a person of better judgement and more useful to the community you live in. Sometimes you need more knowledge, sometimes you need to understand people better...[An Introduction to the Post Office, 1959]

And:

...In most sections of the Post Office some form of voluntary outdoor or indoor sport is organised. You should ask and, if necessary, help to form a regular club to cater for your particular interest...[An Introduction to the Post Office, 1959]

Dave entered the postal service in 1969 and spent the best part of his 36 years at the organization at the level of PHG, supervising the activities of the postal workers at the DO over in Cannock. He remembers a number of social activities organised through the Cannock DO over the 1970s and 1980s, though this was waning from the mid-1990s. The number and variety of the activities that postal workers could partake in following the end of their working day is striking. Dave saw this as an advantageous aspect of his job:

...there used to be a Trent Vale sports and social club and they used to put on various things, go out for the day or a pantomime or whatever. And everybody had a deduction from their wages, directly from their wages to the sports and social club. We went to erm Birmingham pantomimes. We had day trips to Blackpool. The sports and social club bought everybody a pool table. They bought some, oh what do you call 'em? Cameras: video cameras, that people could hire from the sports and social club. No charge, just they bought 'em and took 'em up Cannock and anybody that went on holiday and wanted to use it they could have [sic] borrow it...

Over in the slightly smaller DO in Rugeley, Steve participated in organised First Aid competitions organised through the Rugeley DO over the 1980s and early 1990s:

...I used to be in the First Aid team, that was great fun; very stressful but great fun. We did loads of competitions. We used to be the Wolverhampton team and we did loads of competitions...First Aid; National First Aid competitions, Royal Mail ones, err, it was okay to help with your First Aid. Erm, you get on with people; made lots of friends...

The examples from Dave and Steve are illustrative of the organized social activities that postal workers could participate in once their daily labour was done. These activities not only cared for their social capital, but also promoted their place in the general reciprocity of social life (Putnam, 2000). It is significant that they were organized through work: a part of the institutionalised routine practices of everyday life in the postal service, entailing that work was central to leisure activities and friendship groups (Salaman, 1974) and enhanced the feeling of collective bond and camaraderie for postal workers (Jenkins, 2000; Mackenzie *et al*, 2006; Doherty, 2009). For some though, the opportunity for relatively early finishes that postal work afforded meant that they were able to hit the town pubs before most kinds of workers. Gary joined the postal service in the late 1990s after trying a few different jobs and also deciding that university wasn't right for him. He encapsulates this approach rather poetically: 'join the mail, see the world, be in the pub by 11'.

But, as illustrated before by Alex, the end of the day of labour is inevitably followed by the knowledge that it is necessary to rest to be up early enough, and be fit and rested enough, for the next day's labour (and to perpetuate the cycle of both the post and their working lives). Postal work is after all an inherently physical job, and one that is set within a time frame that falls slightly outside of the normal circadian rhythms of humans. Getting up at an early hour inevitably entails the necessity of getting to bed at a comparably early hour. Mum remembers vividly the necessity for her to ensure that grandad got his proper sleep at night, she would sometimes get into trouble for making too much noise outside on her swing in the garden in the evening in case it might wake him, a part of her daily routines to need to constrain her behaviour on account of his labour.



So, the day draws to an end: I imagine that his day's work would have made my grandad tired by the end of the day. The physicality and repetitive nature of postal work entailed a number of aches and pains that postal workers carry with them, and grandad would have been no different in that. His rest must have been welcome. When he got home though, my nan would have been there to ensure that the house was clean and that his dinner was cooked to fuel him again for another day. However, for female postal workers such as Joanne, they would not have necessarily been in such an advantageous position as their male counterparts. Arriving home for her would mean the start of a different, unpaid kind of labour, where she would have to deal with her domestic duties, and the care of her two children, before she could get to bed and get her well-earned rest. An extra shift that many of the male postal workers, my grandad included, would not have to put in.

### **Delineating 'Traditional' Postal Work**

The above illustrates an established culture of work, an occupational community around which life was built (Salaman, 1974). This was engendered through the disciplined regularity of work and experience of time, enabling the development of an identification with the labour that they performed on a day-to-day basis (Sennett, 1998; Strangleman, 2012). Postal workers had a strong sense of belonging through which they understood their social worlds (Thompson, 1996), and identification in terms of their labour in both the 'I' and the 'we' (Jenkins, 2000). It was a performance that had coherency across the group and was one that was sincerely believed in (Goffman, 1959).

From the 'day in the life' narration, it is possible to put forward the following principles as constituent of 'traditional' postal work. This offers a set of ideas for conceptualizing postal

work; a model through which to understand that experience which individual postal workers held to differing extents. As such, the following can be considered the formative aspects of ‘traditional’ postal work:

### **1. A service ethic and community embeddedness**

Work was carried out within a postal service that existed as a *public* service. Labour is carried out in service to the public, contributing to the general good of the community (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988; Pfiffner, 1999; Perry, 1996; Perry and Wise, 1990; Perry and Hondeghem, 2008). That it is community work is significant for postal workers. The performance of labour for the good of the public was a source of considerable pride for postal workers (Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008), as was the external recognition of that labour (Kernaghan, 2008).

‘Traditional’ postal workers were embedded within the communities in which they served. They both lived in, and worked for, and had an intimate knowledge of these communities. Postal work consisted of more than delivering the mail. It also consisted of types of community (non)work (Lyon, 2009). Community (non)work could be sociability, but could also be practical, such as helping with daily tasks, or even assisting to keep communities safe. Postal work had a relational nature. This labour was an emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012 [1985]) that was enacted with a love for the communities that they served and induced a trust and relationship with those communities.

## **2. Collaborative and cooperative work**

Work was collaborative and cooperative. In the close confines of the Delivery Office (DO), postal workers worked closely alongside each other during the sorting process. But this did not just involve a physical closeness. There was a collaborative and cooperative approach to work. They were 'in it together' and had an approach where they would all 'muck in' to get the work done on time (Sennett, 2012). However, the work practices did not always seem to fit with these ideals (Johnson, 2014; Gall, 2003; 2007).

There was a high degree of trust between postal workers: the mail is considered as important by them, and so trust is seen as an important capacity for a postal worker to possess (Strangleman, 2012). Trust is an important aspect in facilitating this collaborative and cooperative approach to work. The nomination system of recruitment is significant for this as it entails that those who have gone through this system have been vouched for by someone who is already a postal worker; somebody who is already trusted.

## **3. The workplace family**

Postal workers viewed each other as being like family: a 'workplace family' (Cooper *et al*, 2016). It is important to note though, that there was often significant crossover between workplace and biological families. There were many biological family ties within the DOs. These biological family ties were partly enabled through the nomination system of recruitment whereby postal workers could nominate candidates for available positions. The way in which the workplace was seen in relation to family

went beyond the biological; fellow postal workers who did not share biological family ties could also share this ideal of ‘workplace family’.

The relationships that postal workers had with each other could extend beyond working relationships. They were not just co-workers who would converse and relate over the course of the working day (Salaman, 1974; Mackenzie *et al*, 2006). They were involved in each other’s lives in a way that extended beyond the physical confines of the workplace (Salaman, 1971). They helped each other out in their daily lives and had close relationships. They were a tight culture who had a strong sense of norms, and were organised and conscientious (Gelfand, 2018). However, the exclusionary nature of this should also be noted, with inclusion tending to operate along the lines of particular ‘types’ of people (Gelfand, 2018).

#### **4. A tendency towards exclusivity**

The recruitment practice of nomination meant that potential postal workers (recruited via this method) were people who were already known to current postal workers. Postal workers consider this a means to ensure that new recruits were the ‘right kind of person’ (Gelfand, 2018). They were people who could be considered trustworthy.

However, it also entailed the possibility of certain groups of individuals being favoured over others in terms of recruitment practices. There was a lack of ethnic diversity (Gelfand, 2018) (though the Cannock Chase area was not particularly ethnically diverse at this time), and the workplace was predominantly male, with female employment mainly consisting of part-time positions.

## **5. Progression from within and a respect for management**

For those wishing to develop a career there was an established progression to the higher grades: from postal worker to Postman Higher Grade (PHG), and then the role of Delivery Office Manager (DOM). It was normal for those who occupied the DOM role to have worked their way up from the grade of postal worker.

Progression can be seen in relation to experience on, and knowledge of the job (Strangleman, 2012). Indeed, postal workers viewed this experience, and knowledge as a legitimating factor as regards the authority of those occupying the higher grades (Strangleman, 2012) within the DO. There was a tendency in 'traditional' postal work towards respect for the authority of DOMs and this respect was derived from their status as someone who had done the job and worked their way up (Strangleman, 2012). Traditional' postal work is characterised by generally good relations between the grade of postal worker and DOMs.

## **6. Representing the postal service in an appropriate manner**

The uniform was important. How postal workers presented themselves on their walk was significant to the way they interpreted and understood their daily labour. It was important to represent the postal service in an appropriate manner, with neat and tidy uniform and polished shoes.

The uniform was significant for how postal workers conceived of the social significance of their labour, and their position within the community. Postal work was seen by postal workers as a uniformed service, comparable to the Police or the Fire Service. The uniform was a signifier as to the social significance of their labour

(Kernaghan, 2008). A postal worker was someone within the community who could be trusted, the uniform identified them as such and so was a part of the performance of being a postal worker (Goffman, 1959).

## **7. The material importance of the post**

The post itself was seen as important. They were carrying important forms of communication, facilitating the very running of the country: the thing that kept business running and facilitating the communication between the state and the population, in addition to the personal correspondences of people. It reinforced the social significance of their labour. In addition, that it was Royal meant something. The post that was being delivered was being done so with Royal assent; it was the Queen's post till it was delivered to its destination.

The working culture of 'traditional' postal work was one that was to come under attack through the modernization process within the postal service (du Gay, 1996; Jenkins *et al*, 1996). The ethic of public service that underpinned the culture meant that this way of working was opposed to the aims of modernization. From the separation of the postal service from the civil service in 1969, the objective was for the service to operate on a more commercial basis, more like a business (Daunton, 1985; Campbell-Smith, 2012). However, this was a process that was to gain more definition and emphasis following the election victory of the Thatcher led Conservative party in 1979 (Campbell-Smith, 2012). Under the modernization programme that ensued over the 1980s and 1990s, with the effects of modernization intensifying over the middle of the last decade of the century (Jenkins *et al*, 1996; Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio, 1995b), all these aspects of the working culture of

‘traditional’ postal work would come to diminish in importance as a way of understanding the experience of postal work.

### **Reflections on the day**

There are a number of key things that we need to consider when looking at the story of the ‘day-in-the-life’, things that are significant in analysing the working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work. We can see from the day that postal workers saw their labour as a meaningful activity. The ‘end of work’ analysis proffered by Beck (2000), Bauman (1998; 2005) and Gorz, (1999), positions work as always having been dehumanizing and that any meaning derived from it in the past is ‘false consciousness’. In this way of thinking, work provides little meaning to the worker and the reminiscences of workers are dismissed as a ‘simple’ nostalgia (Davis, 1973).

However, the dismissal of work in the past in this way denies the agency of workers in the industrial modernity and ‘does violence’ to their experience (Strangleman, 2007). For Sennett (1998) it is the organization of work, and the experience of time as a consequence of it, that has implications for the meaning that can be derived from it. As such, dehumanization is not an inevitable consequence of work within capitalism but is instead related to the *organization* of work (Baldry *et al*, 2007). Differing forms of organization can suggest a moral dimension to work, in the fulfilment of intrinsic needs (Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008), in terms of a sense of self-worth, duty or purpose (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988), whilst also giving the opportunity for human interaction (Noon and Blyton, 1997). Durkheim posited that whereas the capitalist specialization of the division of labour can have

destructive tendencies, this is not necessarily inevitable: meaning can be found in work through the comprehension of its meaning (Durkheim, 1984).

In terms of postal work, the work itself was fairly routine, mundane, and physical. It would seem that there would be relatively little from which to derive a sense of meaning or non-instrumental satisfaction. Workers though did enjoy going out on the walk, an element of the job where they were able to exercise an element of autonomy over the way they carried out their work, where they were out in the open on their own and pretty much left to themselves (Gill-McLure and Seifert, 2008). But for postal workers, the identification and meaning that they found in their labour was not just from the walk, it was about much more than that. From Durkheim we can see that it is possible for individuals to find meaning within their labour when they have comprehension of its meaning. The working culture of 'traditional' postal work is underpinned through an ethic of public service. It is through this that postal workers not only comprehended the meaning of their work, but they also believed in the merits of its provision; that service was a good thing to do (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988; Pfiffner, 1999; Perry, 1996; Perry and Wise, 1990; Perry and Hondegheem, 2008).

This belief is a product of the society they came from. This society was a legacy of the Second World War, a deviation from the traditional liberal, laissez-faire capitalism that had characterised Britain previously (Lowe, 1993). The interventionism and collectivism required by wartime society and the economy had shown that a different way of doing things was possible. Though there was largely a consensus as to the post-war political settlement, some were more 'reluctant collectivists', who saw the broadening of the activity of the state as means to control the worst excesses of capitalism and guard against the crises of capitalism without actually entailing economic change.



On the other hand, there were those who saw the new society in more redistributive terms. But it was a society where the population was provided with several different services to provide for their needs; nothing short of a revolutionary change in the relationship between the state and the population (Lowe, 1993). This was a society where people could believe in the virtue of providing a service to the public. The public service ethos is a belief in the importance of working within services organised for the benefit of the public (Plant, 2010). In this way, work can be thought of as socially useful, significant to the community, and the satisfactions from performing such work can outweigh such things as working conditions and amount of remuneration (John and Johnson, 2008).

So, postal workers could find meaning in their work in the knowledge that they were providing a valued service to the community (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988; Pfiffner, 1999; Perry, 1996; Perry and Wise, 1990; Perry and Hondeghem, 2008). The social significance of their labour meant something to them (Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008), and in addition to that it gave them a status within the community (Kernaghan, 2008). This belief was reflective of the kind of society that arose in the post-war period. It entailed that despite the nature of the work that postal workers carried out, they regarded it as meaningful activity, something that they identified with and thought of as important. This ethic was held to such an extent by postal workers that the way it, and their working culture came under attack, through processes of modernization within the postal service from the 1970s onwards, was experienced on a deep level. Modernization attacked at the very basis of the identification that they experienced through their day-to-day labour.

## Conclusion

Postal work was an occupation that had seen relatively little change. It was routine, monotonous, and physical work. However, postal work was interpreted as a meaningful activity by the postal workers who engaged in it. They saw their labour as important, something to be proud of. This meaning can be seen in relation to the working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work, which developed out of the society created at the end of the Second World War. ‘Traditional’ postal work can be thought of as a collection of ideas through which we can understand the experience of the day-to-day labour of postal workers and the way in which they interpreted that labour.

The underpinning notion of ‘traditional’ postal work is that it is work carried out for the public good. Postal workers who are embedded within the communities that they serve, who possess an intimate knowledge of those communities and are connected to them, carrying out forms of community (non)work through the deployment of their emotional labour. Postal workers with the requisite experience could progress in the service, to PHG and possibly on to DOM. Progression is seen in relation to experience and knowledge of the post. As higher grades were filled with people who had worked their way up, they were generally viewed as deserving these positions as they had worked for it. Because of this, those who occupied these positions tended to be respected and have their authority viewed as legitimate.

There was a communal approach to work. The sorting of the mail that was carried out early in the morning in the close confines of the DO, was a collaborative and cooperative process. The relations that were forged between fellow postal workers seemed to go beyond those of just colleagues. ‘Traditional’ postal work was a tight culture that possessed a strong sense of

norms and commitment, though could tend towards exclusivity. They considered each other as like a family: a 'workplace family' and socialised with each other outside of work-time. This was in part enabled through the nomination system of recruitment whereby current postal workers could nominate others for vacant positions. These nominations meant that people who were already known to postal workers (which could sometimes mean biological family members) could be vouched for. Nomination helped to engender a large degree of trust between postal workers, perpetuating 'traditional' postal work as a tight culture. However, it could also entail exclusionary practices, whereby particular social groups could be favoured over others.

The uniform was important, an external signifier of the social significance of their labour. It demonstrated in a material way the position of trust the individual wearing it occupied within the community. The material reality of the post itself was also significant, a signifier as to the importance of postal work. Not only did it carry a symbolic importance in terms of it being the 'Queens' post, but through the physical action of postal work they were also facilitating the communication needs of the nation: connecting the state to its population, facilitating the smooth running of business, and enabling the correspondences of private individuals. They were the medium through which the delivery of those communications became possible.

The working culture of 'traditional' postal work needs to be seen in relation to the society from which it came from. This society was created in the aftermath of the Second World War and was both a reaction to the crises of capitalism experienced in the interwar period, as well as an extension of the kinds of collectivism that had been experienced during the war. This was a society of social connectedness and generalized reciprocity, where the population was looked after by state run services operating for the general good of the public and where the

state was active in the lives of its citizens, intervening in the economy to ward off the threat of crises of capitalism. The postal service saw itself in relation to this society and facilitated its employees to do so too, catering for the social wellbeing and social education of its employees. In this way, the working culture of 'traditional' postal work was both organically generated by postal workers and facilitated through the organizational formation and general societal conditions of the time. It is within this configuration of a society in which working in the service of the public could be construed as a virtue, where the seemingly routine and mundane occupation of postal work could take on meaning and social significance.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Modernizing recruitment to the Post Office: from nomination and direct application to the use of agencies**

#### **Introduction**

The focus of this chapter is the process by which people came to be postal workers: recruitment. Recruitment is significant when looking at working culture as it determines the type of person that works for an organization: the ways and means by which people are chosen as employees structures the kinds, or groups of people who may apply as well as who may be chosen over others. Therefore, changes to the mechanisms of recruitment have an influence on the kinds, or groups, of people that may be recruited. Established recruitment practices can perpetuate working culture through recruiting similar kinds, or groups of people for available positions. So, when recruitment processes are changed, this can have a contingent effect on processes of inter-generational transmission (Strangleman, 2012) and working culture. The analysis of recruitment can reveal a great deal about working culture: how it is shaped and re-shaped.

Up to the mid-1990s, it was normal for recruitment to take place through a process of nomination. This entailed current postal workers' nominating people they thought were suitable for available positions. Many postal workers from this time saw this as a reliable means to ensure the 'right' kind of people were recruited into the postal service, in keeping with their tight culture (Gelfand, 2018) and aided the stability of the moral order of the workplace (Strangleman, 2012). They felt that through nominating people for available

positions who were ‘known’ to them, they could ensure that new postal workers were responsible and trustworthy, fit to be postal workers and represent the service and perform in the ‘right’ way (Goffman, 1959). But how did recruitment practices reinforce the workplace culture of ‘traditional’ postal work? In what ways did modernization transform recruitment practice? What kind of effect did this have on workplace culture and the experience of daily labour?

In addition, recruitment practices are also a product of the society in which they were created, as are the individuals who go through those recruitment processes, and so, both vary over time. Earlier in the time period, there was an emphasis towards established and traditional institutions (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992; Lash, 1994; Bauman, 2005). The postal service saw itself as existing with these institutions in society in a web of generalized reciprocity and social connectedness (Putnam, 2000). But with the passing of time, we can see the waning of influence of such older institutions, with the involvement of the private sector and the growth of the enterprise culture (du Gay, 1996). Also, external factors relating to the structure of the economy entailed that people who had trained for a specific occupation, ended up working for the postal service, somewhere they had never intended to be. As such, this chapter will also look at the social factors that were involved in how people became postal workers. So, in what ways, and through which mediums, were postal workers connected to the postal service? What was the nature of the options and decisions they faced in their work-life trajectory? And how did postal workers who had trained in alternative occupations manage the loss of their occupational identity and find meaning in postal work?

In this chapter I will begin by looking at my grandad’s experience of his early work-life and coming to work at the postal service to set the scene for postal worker recruitment in the post-

war period. I will then look in more detail at the nomination process: how it worked and the effect that it had on working culture and the occupational community (Salaman, 1971), and at how people over the 1970s and 1980s came to be nominated. I will also look at how people who had trained in skilled occupations negotiated the loss of that occupational identity when the demise of manufacturing in Britain resulted in them working for the postal service; how the experience of work and the working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work meant that they found their labour to be meaningful and important (Sennett, 1998; Strangleman, 2012), particularly in relation to the ethic of public service (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988; Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008). Following this I will examine how as a consequence of modernization, the way that the postal service recruited workers was beginning to change in the drive for commercialization. In doing this, I will analyse the effect that this had on the working culture of the delivery office (DO), and the consequent effects on trust between postal workers and the experience of day-to-day labour. I will also look at the way in which people came into their process of recruitment was changing, entailing differing types of choices and options than was the case at the beginning of the time period.

In this chapter I will argue that the use of nomination in recruitment aided the maintenance of the workplace culture of ‘traditional’ postal work and the moral order of the workplace, entailing a high degree of trust between postal workers on the shopfloor of DOs (Strangleman, 2012) and maintaining the tight nature of the culture (Gelfand, 2018). These recruitment practices are seen in relation to the institutions of industrial modernity, within a generalized reciprocity and social connectedness (Putnam, 2000) that maintained them and made particular types of people as candidates for recruitment. However, this entailed that these recruitment methods could favour certain groups over others, leading to nepotistic and exclusive tendencies. The growing use of agencies in the recruitment process resulted in the

opening up of recruitment to new kinds of individuals who might not otherwise have had access to it. However, it also led to the breakdown of intergenerational transmission (Strangleman, 2012), the demise of trust, and diminishment of the working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work. The changes were a part of the commercialization of the service, attempting to instil an enterprise culture (du Gay, 1996), which was contested by postal workers (Darlington, 1993; Gall, 2003; 2007; Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio, 1995b; Martinez Lucio *et al*, 2000). By the mid-1990s, we can see that societal changes meant that people approaching the recruitment process were facing very different kinds of options and choices.

### **Post-war recruitment in the postal service: how grandad ended up at the postal service**

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, the RAF offered my grandad the opportunity to go to Nuremburg and perform guard duties. His father had other ideas though and persuaded him and my nan (who had not been married for very long at this time) to come and live with him in Armitage. My great-grandfather (who I never met), Charles, loomed large in shaping the choices and options that grandad had in his early life: enabling some and restricting others. Grandad’s early working life had been moulded by his father, shaping the kinds of decisions and options he faced. Like many people from Stoke-on-Trent, Charles worked in the Potteries industry (an area synonymous with the industry, popularly known as ‘the Potteries’).



In the late 1920s, Charles had found employment some 30 miles south of Stoke-on-Trent, in the pot-bank at Armitage<sup>24</sup>. Before he moved the family to Armitage, he would walk the 25 miles or so journey on a Sunday afternoon. He would spend his working week in Armitage and then walk back to the Potteries after clocking out on the Friday. The family moved to Armitage in 1931, when grandad was 11. It must have been a culture shock for grandad to move from the busy industrial potteries to the rural surrounds of Armitage, he did though, always retain a deep affinity with the village<sup>25</sup>. At the age of 14, he left school to follow his father into the factory at Armitage Ware<sup>26</sup> to be apprenticed to him as a packer. Grandad did not want to follow in his father's footsteps, he wanted to stay on at school and try and 'better' himself. However, this decision was one that was really taken for him by his father.

Like many young men of his generation, the Second World War disrupted my grandad's early work biography. At the age of 19, and just a year short of completing his six-year apprenticeship, grandad travelled to the recruiting office in Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent and joined the RAF. Mum believes that one of the primary motivations for him joining up was to escape the life that had been mapped out for him, and the job that he had not wanted. It was an opportunity to change the trajectory of his life. Grandad served in Burma (now Myanmar), and Northeast India, but his war was cut short when he contracted Tropical Sprue in 1943. The war not only altered the course of his work-life, but it also shaped his personal life. The war entailed that people from differing geographical and social backgrounds, who might

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<sup>24</sup> It was called Armitage Ware at this time, later to become Armitage Shanks and now known as Ideal Standard

<sup>25</sup> He always pronounced Armitage differently to most people in the area. Most local people pronounce it Arm-it-idge. He though had his Stokie way of emphasising vowels, and it was Arm-it-age

<sup>26</sup> 82 years after my grandad had started there, at the age of 37, I worked at that same factory, in the 'tank fit' section assembling the fittings on the cisterns of toilets. In a period of just a little under a century, five generations of my family had been employed there: my great grandfather and my grandad in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century; my dad worked there through an agency for a short time following redundancy from the power station in the 1990s; and for a brief period I had worked alongside my nephew (my sister's son) on tank fit in the 2010s, also through a recruitment agency.

otherwise have never met, ended up being thrown together<sup>27</sup>. My nan, Barbara, grew up in a different social world, from a middle-class family, and geographical area, growing up in Frinton-on-Sea, Essex. She served in the WAAF during the war and was stationed at RAF Innsworth. They met at the Records Office in Gloucester in 1944 and were married in Llanllechid, near Bangor in North Wales (where my nan's mum and siblings had lived during the war to escape the bombing) in December 1945.

Instead of going to Nuremburg, Charles wanted the young couple to come and live with him in Armitage, with my nan to 'keep house'. Nan's relatively comfortable and middle-class upbringing in Essex was far-removed from grandad's childhood in the shadow of the hovels<sup>28</sup> of Stoke-on-Trent. She had never had to fulfil any kind of domestic duties, and to say that it must have been a bit of a culture shock for her is probably somewhat of an understatement. I think my nan was always a bit at odds with the role in life that the stuffy, patriarchal society of mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century Britain entailed for her. Mum terms her as somewhat of a free spirit at heart, though her life as a woman and housewife at that time was constrained by the role society required of her. The living arrangement did not work out well for them. Mum thinks her grandfather only wanted them to move in for her to 'skivvy' for him (his own wife, grandad's mum, had died in 1943). She describes their new living arrangements:

...they had to go and live with my grandfather. Dad was going out to work and mum was to stay at home and do housekeeping. But she wasn't very good at it. She never was

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<sup>27</sup> In a similar way to how now the internet and social media dissolves geographical distances between people, meaning that people can forge relationships across spatial boundaries.

<sup>28</sup> Hovel was the name given to the strange but beautiful bottle oven chimneys that were once the predominant feature of the Stoke-on-Trent skyline from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. There were thought to be around 4000 hovels, and around 2000 by the 1960s, when the industry started to decline in the area. There are now only 47 left in Stoke-on-Trent.

really; it just wasn't her thing. His dad ended up saying that he could stay, but 'she had to go!'; so, they went...

They consequently experienced several difficult years trying to establish their life together, during which time, grandad would go through several different jobs trying to earn a living, start a career and better himself:

**(Mum)** ...when he was demobbed it was really difficult for him, I think. He did some awful jobs that paid very badly, and I think life was difficult...he worked at a laundry in Lichfield for a time

**(Dad – interrupting)** they both worked at Universal Grinding Wheel at the factory over in Stafford too, at Doxey. They made the grinding wheels for metalworking. They used to catch a lorry or something over to Stafford

**(Mum)** and he did hairdressing over in Burton...the travelling must have been difficult; he went on his motorbike

**(Dad – interrupting)** he worked in **Birmingham** training to be a hairdresser; he'd practice on tramps

**(Mum)** and with shaving balloons, remember that? Yea it was Birmingham not Burton; it was a hell of a long way to travel really when you think about it

**(Dad)** I think he must have had about five or six jobs after the war before he went to the Post Office; and he'd go on about it if you let him!

**(Mum)** It wasn't a happy time for him. They must have been awful jobs and didn't pay very well...he was just trying to find a living cos [sic] they'd just got married...he didn't have much choice really; they just wanted a home and just live their lives...

Becoming a postal worker in 1956 represented a significant 'step-up' for grandad. It was a steady and safe job, which carried a decent wage for an unskilled job, particularly for a man who left school at 14.

Mum:

...He'd gone to the labour exchange to see if he could get anything and asked about the Post Office. They told him they didn't think there was anything going. But dad didn't take their word and cos [sic] the sorting office was right next door to the labour exchange; he just went to the back door and asked them there. He did his test and was taken on as a postman...he thought it'd be a good place to work, somewhere he could better himself and advance...but a lot was necessity, he saw it as better than what he'd been doing before...

In the post-war years, the postal service viewed war service positively (Johnson, 2014; Daunton, 1985; Campbell-Smith, 2012). So, grandad's service bestowed him with labour market capital when he applied in 1956, meaning he was viewed as trustworthy and reliable (Strangleman, 2012). Trust was an important commodity on the shop floor of DOs and postal workers saw it as important to be able to trust one another. The nature of their role entailed that for a proportion of their working day, postal workers were left to complete their work in a manner in which they saw fit (Johnson, 2014). Consequently, it was necessary that they could be trusted to both complete their work and to deal honestly with the post, whilst representing the service in an appropriate fashion.

Date	Registered Number of Nomination Paper	Surname	Christian Name	Situation to which Nominated	Place	Minute Number
	52733	Garner	Marlyn E.	Postal	Nineclon	
	53585	Garrett	Peter A.M.	Tech.	Brighton T.A.	
	53854	Garrard	Arthur A.H.	Pmn.	S.E.D.O.	
	54489	Gardner	Barbara A.	C.A.	Cardiff MO	
	55191	Gardner	Kenneth R.	Pmn.	Harrow + Wembley	
	56380	Gardner	John	Postal	Kilmarnock	
	58927	Garner	Stanley	Pmn.	Stoke on Trent	
July	59940	Garland	John	S.A.	Launceston T.A.	
	63843	Garrett	John H.	Tech.	Nottingham TH	
	63844	Garlon	Edward	Tech.	Nottingham TH	
	64871	Gardner	Brian	Section A	B'ham T.A.	
August	67240	Larner	John	Pmn.	Birmingham	

4.1 notice of grandad's appointment as a postal worker (taken from the records at the post office museum.

Grandad's registration was in Stoke-on-Trent and his number: 58927)

The narrative of my grandad's life illustrates the importance of the institutions of industrial modernity in shaping and structuring the nature of the options and choices that he faced in relation to his working life (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992; Bauman, 2001). His family was significantly influential on his work-life trajectory: the social position of the family he had been born into, and the decisions his father made, channelled him into working in the pottery trade. The institutions of the state also inherently shaped the experience of his work-life: the Second World War de-stabilised his career and thrust him into a social milieu he would otherwise never have experienced; and after returning to civilian life, his status as a returned combatant was crucial in him finding employment in the postal service (Johnson, 2014; Campbell-Smith, 2012).

The society created after the war, in which he was still a young man re-approaching the world of work, the institutions of the state became ever more influential in peoples' lives, with an ethos of looking after society, of the general good (Lowe, 1995) and of generalized reciprocity (Putnam, 2000). However, though this way of life had an air of permanence, the

foundations were built on ever shifting sands. The kinds of decisions and options that people would face towards the end of the century, and the way in which recruitment was starting to take place, was starting to look very different than it had done for my grandad's, and the baby-boom generation (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Bauman, 2001).

### **Nomination: becoming a postal worker in the post-war period**

The majority of the postal workers I spoke to were nominated for their positions. For these postal workers, nomination was seen as a normal and even desirable system of recruitment. Nomination worked through current postal workers, who had demonstrated their own trustworthiness and reliability through their service, nominating someone known to them for available positions. Nomination acted as a 'vouch' for the general character of the person being nominated, of their trustworthiness and their reliability, that they were the 'right' kind of person. Nomination bestowed the same kind of labour market capital as my grandad's war service had done for him when he walked into the DO at Anson Street in 1956 (Johnson, 2014; Campbell-Smith, 2012). Nomination acted as a facilitator in the recruitment process and was still accepted practice in the DOs of the area moving into the 1990s.

The welfare state reforms of the post-Second World War period had entailed a kind of society where there was an experience of a greater degree of connection, where doing good was seen as a virtue (Putnam, 2000), and a state that saw its role in paternalistic terms, looking after its people (Lowe, 1995). The postal service very much saw itself as being embedded within this societal matrix, hence the significance of social institutions within the recruitment process.

Though they do not specifically mention the recruitment process, the Introduction to the Post Office and Staff Handbooks from the 1950s are demonstrative of this outlook from the postal service. There is a paternalistic feel about the approach of the service to its employees, who it seems to care about and want to look after. The postal service in this period aimed to not just train people to be competent at their job, but also educate them about the world they lived in:

...Education helps you to become a person of better judgement and more useful to the community you live in...you may find out much more about the way you fit into the world and into society...[An Introduction to the Post Office: 1959]

The postal service was a part of this connected society (Putnam, 2000), where there was a fit of everything working together to try to promote the general good, with postal workers enabling their own social betterment through their work in the community. Within this matrix of generalized reciprocity, we can see how the institutions of the industrial modernity take on significance within the recruitment process.

Joanne was a recipient of nomination. She started as a casual in the 1970s, sorting the mail from the van at the back of a Sub-Post Office, which she had done for two years before taking a casual role at the Rugeley DO and finally becoming a full-time postal worker. Eventually Joanne progressed through the ranks to occupy a number of management positions by the 1990s and dealt with staffing issues on a daily basis as a part of her work, though she felt that her experience of moving through that career was made harder on account of her gender (Edwards, 1998; Miller, 2009). Joanne illustrates the informal nature of recruitment processes during this time:

...In the early days, yea [nomination]. Later on we weren't allowed to do that, it was all advertised... it's got to be advertised and er you have to apply for the job...when I got the job I mean I had to take tests, I had to apply, take the test along with the other two people...and then if there was a vacancy and you knew somebody, like Barry... they'd closed the pits and he was out of work, with two young kids so, 'oh he's after a job, will you consider him?'...One yea, you know him, and you kinda [sic] put a word in...I think if you know somebody that's out of work and you know there's a job or there's a job at Rugeley...you know somebody who wants a job and you know the local manager, you'll say, 'well such and such is after a job, he's applied for it, so keep your eye out for him'...

This illustrates the nature of the social reciprocities (Putnam, 2000) that were at stake in relation to nomination. There was an informality at the heart of nomination, that took place via types of casual conversations: 'putting a word in'. However, this casualness and informality belie the complex social processes and power relations that underpinned it. Such processes show the basis on which 'traditional' postal work and the workplace culture of DOs operated; they were a part of an unspoken moral order within the workplace (Strangleman, 2012). These casual conversations and informal processes related to the collaborative and reciprocal nature of postal work at this time (Sennett, 1998).

Nomination created a bond of trust (Putnam, 2000). The postal worker making the nomination would only really recommend someone who would be likely to justify that recommendation: someone who they thought would be a 'good' employee and represent the service in an appropriate manner and conform to group norms (Gelfand, 2018). This creates an obligation for the nominee, who feels compelled to conform to the workplace norms and values (Salaman, 1971) and conduct themselves in a way that shows them to be a 'good' employee, aiding the intergenerational transmission of the culture of the workplace (Strangleman, 2012). Nomination helped perpetuate the workplace culture of 'traditional'



postal work because postal workers were more likely to nominate people who they thought were going to fit in (Gelfand, 2018), aiding in the definition of the ‘we’ (Jenkins, 2000). The casual conversations and informal processes created the reciprocities and dependencies (Putnam, 2000) that perpetuated the culture of ‘traditional’ postal work (Strangleman, 2012; Sennett, 2012): the form of recruitment reinforced the culture. The capital that is bestowed upon nominees gives them an advantage in terms of the labour market.

The significance of the bonds of trust between postal workers entailed that in practice, nominations came in relation to people not just known to current postal workers, but family members (Baugher, 2003). It was common for multiple members of the same family to work within the same DO, facilitated by recruitment through nomination. So, though nomination enabled a high degree of trust in the workplace, perpetuating the workplace culture, it could also mean the DO was a site of nepotistic recruitment practices that favoured particular social groups, whilst excluding others.

### **Being nominated: the 1970s and 1980s**

The ways and means by which people become any particular kind of worker is inextricably linked to the society in which those individuals are situated, and postal workers were no different in this. After the Second World War, people’s lives were organised around, and through state institutions. Government institutions delivered services in social security, health, education, and housing by professionals, and for the general good of the population, who had equal rights of access (Osbourne and McLaughlin, 2002; Lowe, 2005). In addition to state institutions, the family was also a pillar of industrial modernity that helped shape the

lives of people during this period. They both enabled and inhibited the types and extents of choices and opportunities people faced. These institutions had a pervasive reach in terms of how they shaped the lives of people in the post-war period (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992; Bauman, 2001). Society was seen to operate with a greater element of trust, where there was a greater experience of connectedness (Putnam, 2000). Grandad's example demonstrates the influence of such institutions on the choices and options that people faced: enabling some whilst constraining others.

Though it was not a necessary part of the process, the family was significant in how nomination operated on a practical level (Baugher, 2003) and it was common for postal workers to nominate members of their own family for available positions. Whether family members or not, nominees were people known by current postal workers so they could vouch that they were the right kind of person. However, this entailed that nomination could lead to an exclusive and nepotistic approach to recruitment, favouring certain groups of individuals over others to fit into the working culture (Gelfand, 2018).

Phil was in his 40s when he joined the postal service in 1974. He grew up far from Cannock Chase, in Surrey, where he attended a military preparatory boarding school. His ambition was to enter the military as a commissioned officer. However, at the age of 14 his mother pulled him out of school for him to bring a wage into the household. The family relocated to Rugeley in 1955 after being offered a council house on the recently constructed Pear Tree Estate, and Phil went to work at the nearby Littleton colliery. He did not like life underground and did not stick at it long. He enlisted in the Army in 1956, serving for six years. After the Army, Phil worked as a self-employed roofer, but, with a large family he needed a more reliable income:

...I was a roof tiler, worked for meself [sic]...but the post it was a blessing. I would have never have thought of it, but yea, my brother-in-law was there so, he says to me, 'Phil, come there', he says, 'one thing, your money's there all the time'...your money's there always guaranteed, your money's guaranteed!...the Army stood me in good stead as well, cos [sic] I mean the Army was a similar thing you was [sic] taught but you had to do it. If you was [sic] on at the Post Office and you was [sic] no good you'd be out...I was old, really old, when I started wasn't I? In me [sic] forties, me cos [sic] I was old, I'm old school you know...

Joanne was nominated by her aunt, in the late-1970s. She had to combine her role at the postal service with her domestic responsibilities, being a young single mother, raising two young children on her own following the death of her husband:

...when I first started I was doing casual work for 'em cos [sic] I was only round the corner and they knew if they phoned me up at 6 o'clock they were short staffed, I was like 'give me 10 minutes, I'll be right round'...there was [sic] two guys employed in front of me and then he was interviewing another...I said 'well you know I'm doing the job...I've been doing it nearly 2 years', so he said, 'oh well, you've got kids', 'And I'm doing it! I've got kids!', 'oh you might have to come back in an afternoon'...on that basis or because they knew they could drop on you in like keep you as casual and they could use you and abuse you when they liked... And you didn't get holiday pay; you didn't get the bonuses; you didn't get the Christmas bonus, and they were having three or four hundred bank Christmas bonus. Cos [sic] you were casual you didn't get it...

Dorothy started as a postal worker in 1982, at a small village Sub-Post Office when she was 36: a married woman with two young children whose work-life had always been based around her caring responsibilities. She had started her working life as a housekeeper, working for a household not too far outside the village. Dorothy's nomination came via her mother,

who was retiring and passing her position to Dorothy. She saw postal work as an improvement in her work-life, and liked the idea of community work (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988; Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008):

...I'd got to be up at half past five, I got to work at 6 o'clock. I thought, I'm never going to be able to do it...I was working at the college. I had to go a week's notice there. So, I went with me [sic] mother in the morning to learn the round for a week I'd finished for 9 o'clock then and then go to the college and work me [sic] weeks' notice out after I'd been on the post round...yea I think it really did, it was the making of me that job...me [sic] mum did it, me [sic] auntie Mary did it and I did it...

Phil and Joanne's stories demonstrate the importance of family in the recruitment process (Baugher, 2003). The family members who nominated them gave them a privileged access to the recruitment process. It was a more intimate kind of mediator than would come later with agencies, one that originated through society connectedness and generalized reciprocity (Putnam, 2000) and that eased the process for them and gave them advantage within it. This advantage though, entailed that some groups were favoured over others. Both Joanne and Phil came from postal families, and they both ascribed to the working culture of 'traditional' postal work. The nepotistic approach to nominating entailed that people with similar values and belief systems came into the recruitment process, and became postal workers, ensuring the maintenance of the tightness of the culture (Gelfand, 2018) and perpetuating it into the future (Strangleman, 2012). For Phil, his six years of service in the Army was also relevant, something he was well aware of (Johnson, 2014; Campbell-Smith, 2012). It demonstrated things that were advantageous for him in the process: he was disciplined, reliable and trustworthy, and the idea of providing a service was something he was familiar with (Strangleman, 2012).

Whereas, as with Phil and Joanne, Dorothy's recruitment was mediated through a family connection (Baugher, 2003), we can see in her case that connection seems even more close, even more intimate. She seemed to be indelibly connected to the postal service, and the community she served. There seems to be an inevitability about how she narrated her story. Rather than a recruitment process per se, it was more like her mother eased her transition into *following* her into the position. The closeness of Dorothy's connection is not just in relation to the postal service, it's also to the community. The communities in the villages surrounding the larger towns of the Chase are small and very close-knit, and the Sub-Post Office was integrated into village life. Dorothy loved her life working in the postal service (Freidson, 1990), a love that shone through in the way she narrated her life. She possessed no regrets about embarking on that life. However, her family connection seems to have been more of a tie: she was 'expected' to do it, exercising a limited choice.

For Joanne, though her family had provided her with an initial advantage in terms of her being taken on at the postal service, her family would also restrict her opportunity, in relation to her gender and the status as a caregiver that implied (Reskin and Bielby, 2005). It was common for postal workers to initially be casual before being taken on permanently. This was usually a matter of procedure, but for Joanne this process was not simple. Being casual did enable Joanne to combine employment with her domestic responsibilities as a mother. But she felt it took longer than necessary to be made permanent and that she did not get the same opportunities as her male counterparts, something she puts down to her situation and gender (Edwards, 1998; Miller, 2009): work was something she could not afford to turn down, and managers knew they could call on her at short notice. Joanne thought she carried out the job just as well as her male colleagues but needed to work harder to be taken on a

permanent basis and gain advancement<sup>29</sup>. It is important to note that the temporal context of her recruitment entailed the postal service were politically enabled to inhibit her progression to permanent status in that there was no legal obligation for the organization to do so. Though this society may have been a more connected one, it was also characterised by greater degrees of discrimination (Putnam, 2000).

Dorothy's role as a part-time postal worker allowed her to base her caring responsibilities around her work as a postal worker, caring for her two children after school (and when her children were adults she cared for her grandchildren). Though the social norms of the society had entailed that Dorothy fulfilled this dual role in the way she did, and though she found her double shift exhausting, she seems to have been happy with that role. So, although she was restricted in terms of opportunity to move into full-time employment, becoming full-time would have meant moving to the larger DO at Rugeley, something I don't think she would have *wanted* to have done on account of her connection: she was both restricted, though seemingly content within that constriction (though this of course was a society that implicitly told her that she should be content with such a constriction).

### **Negotiating Occupational Identity**

For a number of the postal workers I interviewed, the service was not really their career of choice. A common theme is one of starting a career to then have their career path disrupted. This was not necessarily something that was expected by those growing up in the decades

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<sup>29</sup> This was a recurring theme in her career. She did progress through the ranks and went on to fill a number of positions in local level management. However, she feels she had to fight for opportunities that male colleagues of similar experience seemed to get as a matter of course.

following the Second World War. Their career trajectory was supposed to be one of a job for life (Beck, 2000, Bauman, 1998; Sennett, 1998). However, by the 1970s the post-war economic consensus was beginning to break up. The rigidities of the Fordist-Keynesian system were seen as inhibitive and incapable of dealing with the repeated crises of capitalism (Harvey, 1989). There was an increasing emphasis on deregulation and the flexibilization of the labour market. This entailed a period of intensified economic and social change from the mid 1970s, changing the shape of the British labour market (Harvey, 1989). So, many people who had trained in a particular trade needed to find alternative employment.

Alex began his work-life in 1959, at the age of 15, when he was apprenticed as a sheet metal worker in the car industry at the 'Fisher and Ludlow' factory, in Castle Bromwich, near Birmingham. The motor industry in Britain was unresponsive to international competition and the flexible production techniques that had been utilised and was in decline over the 1960s and 1970s (Zeitlin, 2000). Fisher and Ludlow were no exception to the trend in the industry, and in 1977, following a take over from Jaguar, a programme of redundancies ensued.

So, by 1980, Alex found himself in need of alternative employment. He had already made the move out of the 'big city' (Birmingham) to the more rural location of Rugeley and Cannock Chase. Though he was a skilled worker with a trade, working at the Post Office was something that just made sense for Alex:

...there was [sic] big redundancies in the car industry cos [sic] it was a big change going on...so I found a job on the Post Office right on me [sic] doorstep...you know it was worth oh, 1980, it was worth another about £40 a week. You could walk to work. You know what I mean? It wasn't as much pay; it was a low rate of pay, but being as you

save on one and gain on another. It was so close, er home, and you finished, you finished at dinner time pretty well at 12 o'clock you was [sic] pretty well home...It was quite a change. They was [sic] quite a decent sort of lot the post people. One of the basic things with them, you had to basically be er honest. You know what I mean?...

Ken grew up in Hartshill, Stoke-on-Trent, just a mile and a half from where grandad grew up in Shelton. Like many from the Potteries, Ken went into the pottery trade, serving his apprenticeship and becoming a Master Potter at the Spode factory. Ken was very proud of his trade, but his family felt that pursuing an 'artistic' career in the trade was not 'manly' enough. That his family, particularly his father, derided his career choice is something Ken still feels very bitter about:

...me [sic] dad said, get out there and do what you can, but he expected me to do like lorry driving like me [sic] brothers and carpentry and that and I wanted to get in pottery industry...I've always been arty. I do a lot of art, and I've always had a flare for it and that's why I wanted to get in the pottery industry...He wanted me to be a mechanic or joiner or something very manly. And then I ended up being a master potter, but you know, and girl's paint! Oh yes, that's what he said! He told me...well with me going in the pottery industry he says, 'you know you're not one of those bent guys, are you?' I said, 'No dad, I want to'...

Unfortunately for Ken, the pottery industry was also in decline. Stoke-on-Trent was once the centre of the British potteries industry, with produce from factories such as Spode, Wedgewood and Doulton in demand throughout the world. But by the 1970s, just as the British car industry was struggling to be competitive in the global market, so was the potteries industry. So, these famous names of the industry, some of whom had been in operation since the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, began to trim their workforces. Ken's career was just one of



the victims of these changes. But as mentioned earlier, Ken's move to Rugeley had little to do with practicalities. He was somewhat of a romantic:

...that was my career but unfortunately, you know, circumstances in manufacturing and everything else going on...I was made redundant late '82'... I met me [sic] wife at me [sic] cousin's wedding in Stone and then, you know, I just met her there and fell for her straight away and we got married in '81 and I moved down to Rugeley...Yes soon as I saw her I says, 'I'm gonna marry you' and she just laughed...Yea and I've always liked it here cos [sic] you've got the Chase. Coming from the 5 Towns, the Chase on your doorstep was magical...So I was looking for work...I just saw the advertisement and went for the interview...I heard off the Post Office that I'd got an interview and that's when I went and I got the job full-time, and I got on the Post Office. I was taken on, which is very rare, full time straight away...

Neither Alex nor Ken were beneficiaries of the nomination system, they both just applied for their jobs directly. For Alex, practicality seems to have played a large part in how he went to work in the postal service. And though Ken painted a romantic story, there was still a substantial amount in the way of practicality as to him becoming a postal worker. Both Alex and Ken needed a job: they were out of work and needed to get by. The point in time of Rugeley DO needing labour coincided with the point in time of Alex and Ken needing employment. Alex no longer had to commute the 25 miles or so to Birmingham, saving money and gaining time with his family; Ken got to start setting up his home-life properly with the woman he loved.

But there was much more to these changes in work-life trajectory than just practical considerations. For both Alex and Ken, their work-life trajectory was disrupted through wider social-political and economic forces, altering the make-up of the British labour market (Harvey, 1989); their practical considerations regarding needing new employment were

because of things over which they could hope to exert no control, entailing the decline of manufacturing and industry in Britain. Socio-economic change played a large part in Alex and Ken finding their jobs at Royal Mail. Their position in relation to the structure was entailing the types of decisions that they were able to make in terms of the labour market. Structure had constrained their options in relation to the trade that had constituted their chosen career path. But despite the limitations and practicalities that had loomed large in terms of the work-life choices they faced and made, those choices entailed that the labour they enacted on a day-to-day basis was something that was both meaningful and that they identified with.

That both men found their labour meaningful and identified with the role of postal worker is no small thing. Alex and Ken both had a trade they had trained in; they were both proud of their trades and of their status as skilled workers. In contrast to this, postal work is unskilled, monotonous, repetitive, physical, and relatively low paid (Gall, 2003; 2007). So, how did these two men manage the loss of their occupational identity? This is a transition that encompasses moving from an occupational identity based in the skill of the work they are enacting, to one that was based on the service they were providing. It meant something to be serving the community and working for the public good (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988; Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008). This needs to be seen in relation to the society that they had both been born, and socialised in. The society that was created in the wake of the Second World War was one that looked after its population; that valued the collective good (Lowe, 2005) and where doing good was seen as a virtue in itself (Putnam, 2000). So, despite postal work being routine, that their labour pertained to the public good, made it meaningful for them. It compensated for the loss of their status as skilled workers and source of pride (Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008). The

element of public service was particularly strong with Ken, who saw his labour with the postal service as heavily associated with his other role as a magistrate; he equated the two as a part of his service to the community: his labour was helping people (Pfiffner, 1999).

### **Moving away from nomination: the use of agencies**

The election victory of Margaret Thatcher's conservatives in 1979 entailed an increasing emphasis on the neoliberal ethos of the transformative power of the free market on society (Connell *et al*, 2009). For Thatcher, this was not just about transforming economics, but was attempting a moral regeneration of behaviour through encouraging enterprise to arrest what was interpreted as the malaise of the social democratic state (du Gay, 1996). For the purposes of this, there was a move to try to make the public sector operate along more business-like lines, whereby enabling internal competition, the introduction of quasi-market conditions, and decentralizing authority were seen as means to increase efficiency and effectiveness (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992; Noon and Blyton, 1997).

This use of outside agencies for recruitment purposes was a part of this move to more private sector involvement within the public sector (du Gay, 1996; Connell *et al*, 2009; Osborne and McLaughlin, 2002), mediating the relationship between the postal service and the recruitment of postal workers. The change in emphasis in relation to recruitment constituted a move away from a process based on more immediate and personal relationships, and social connectedness (Putnam, 2000), from the things people knew about each other from their own experience. Recruitment processes became distanced from local managers and nomination came to be used less and less. There was a weakening of previously established connections

with the institutions of industrial modernity (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992; Lash, 1994; Bauman, 2005) and a demise in participation in the social sphere (Putnam, 2000): institutions such as the family and the Army declined in their influence in the recruitment process. The increasing use of agencies entailed a mediator more distanced from the postal service.

The use of agencies as mediating organizations in the recruitment process needs to be seen in relation to the proliferation of entrepreneurial culture from the 1980s onwards (du Gay, 1996). Agencies entailed the introduction of internal, quasi-market conditions into the postal service, entailing a formalization of the process, with positions now routinely advertised. In addition, it also created increased competition for postal worker positions. Though nomination was not the only means of recruiting postal workers, its use meant a tendency towards a closed approach towards recruitment. And whereas this perpetuated the working culture through generating similar types of postal workers, it also resulted in a rather exclusive recruitment process whereby certain groups were favoured over others, maintaining the tightness of the working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work (Gelfand, 2018). In this way, agencies created greater competition in the recruitment of postal workers through opening up the process to differing types of individuals who may have otherwise not had access. This flexibilization of candidate ‘type’ entailed the diversification of the kinds of people who were becoming postal workers, entailing a loosening of the working culture (Gelfand, 2018). Prospective candidates were no longer held to the same kind of rigid ‘type’ that people in previous decades had, opening up the recruitment process to individuals, and/or groups of individuals, who may have previously been excluded from it.

This change in the way that recruitment practices were enacted is reflected in the language of postal service documents from the 1980s and 1990s. The language of connectivity and

general reciprocity (Putnam, 2000) is all but gone, and is instead, replaced with the language of individualism. The leaflet 'Your Royal Mail' [1987], was aimed at postal workers to try to communicate the management vision of the postal service for the future. There is an emphasis within the leaflet on equal opportunities. Equal opportunities can be seen as a massive development in the rights of people at work in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Though such developments have unfortunately not eliminated discrimination in the workplace, they represented a massive step forward, and the possibility of recourse for acts of discrimination.

Equal opportunities, and the way in which they worked within recruitment practices, had an impact on the way in which 'traditional' postal work operated. This is not to say that 'traditional' postal work was racist, homophobic, or misogynistic, though like many workplaces during this era, many of these things may be expressed in the form of 'banter', or through forms of popular culture (i.e., magazines or calendars). However, it was an exclusive group that was held together in part through its 'sameness'. In part, the cooperative and collaborative (Sennett, 2012) nature of 'traditional' postal work was as a consequence of the tightness of it as a culture, but this also entailed that it had little in the way of diversity (Gelfand, 2018). A recruitment system based within the values of equal opportunities entailed a diversification of new recruits to postal worker positions and loosening of the culture (Gelfand, 2018).

As such, the working culture of 'traditional' postal work was diminished through and with a breakdown in processes of intergenerational transmission (Strangleman, 2004; 2012), entailing a transformation of the experience of daily labour. Postal workers began to find it more difficult to regard new recruits as trustworthy and reliable (Putnam, 2000). Nomination was based on a knowledge that was personal and immediate; it aided the engendering of

bonds of trust and reciprocity between fellow postal workers (Sennett, 1998; 2012). People employed through these newer channels could come to be regarded with scepticism and suspicion from their more established colleagues: from their perspective, these people had not established their appropriateness to represent the postal service and could not necessarily be trusted. Ken describes this:

...Well on the way we always had people that we put forward, you know friends, anybody. We always knew who was coming, who wanted the job. But later on, with the changes, Royal Mail decided to bring in agency staff...people we hadn't a clue, which we had problems with...and you know there was thieving and thing going on. I said, 'yea, but we don't know these people'...that's the sort of thing you have with agency staff...And we said to them this is the reason we always put people forward, cos [sic] we knew 'em and we never had that problem...

Ken's words demonstrate a sense of frustration at the situation (Strangleman, 2004). It was important to be able to trust the postal workers they worked alongside (Sennett, 1998): that they could be trusted to deliver the post, and not to either ditch their charge, or to steal it (Mars, 1982). This was something that they cared about as the post itself was viewed as something important within the working culture. It was important to know the character of who you were working alongside (Sennett, 1998), to know they would conduct themselves in an appropriate manner and conform to the team performance (Goffman, 1959). Ken saw the decline in trust as being a consequence of using agencies in favour of nomination, bringing in a new generation of worker who had a different orientation towards work (Strangleman, 2004; 2012).

For Steve, the people who were coming in did not have the same appreciation of what the job involved, or as to what it meant to be a postal worker (Strangleman, 2012):

... we always done [sic] it to people that we know [nominate], so we knew who wanted the job enough to stay. We had some in, they only stayed an hour, prepping up and I said, 'he's not going to stay, he's just not interested'; it was like having an empty shell there trying to teach him, and he left... He said, 'so is this it? Is this all?' I said, 'No you're just prepping the mail, you've got to take all this out...

Postal workers who had gone through the process of nomination were more likely to know what to expect from postal work. They were from the same families as, or knew someone who was, a current postal worker. This meant the reality of the work held less surprises than for people who arrived via an agency. So, postal workers were not able to be sure that new recruits would stay in their positions for any great length of time. This may seem to be a relatively minor consideration: why should it matter to a worker how long any other worker may stay in their position for (Sennett, 1998)? These processes were leading to the breakdown of the intergenerational transmission of the values of the workplace (Strangleman, 2012).

However, the working culture was one of working closely alongside each other, thinking of each other as a kind of 'workplace family' (Cooper *et al*, 2016), with a high degree of trust and communal values (Salaman, 1971; Strangleman, 2012). Postal workers were used to a low level of staff turnover in the DO. Not being sure that a new recruit was going to stay was not conducive towards engendering that trust (Sennett, 1998). The breakdown in trust (Putnam, 2000) had further consequences in terms of the relationships between postal workers. As it became harder to consider new recruits (those who were not known to them, so not 'one of them' before their employment had even commenced) as people you could trust, it became harder to forge the close relationships that had previously characterised

relationships within DOs (Sennett, 2012; Strangleman, 2004). This meant the decline of the ‘workplace family’ and of a collaborative and cooperative approach to work. Work was becoming less of a communal activity for postal workers.

Not only was work less collaborative and cooperative (Sennett, 2012), but there was also a problem in terms of commitment. Though in interviews, postal workers stressed their love for their job (Freidson, 1990) and commitment to providing a good service, over the 1980s and 1990s, there was an issue within the postal service in terms of motivating them to become engaged within the modernization process and align themselves with the newly emerging values. The internal postal service document ‘Customer Counts’ [1983] seems to have been aimed at management above the operational level to look at ways to solve the problems the organization were having with modernization. The booklet is fairly explicit in the way that it lays the blame of the failure of the organization to reach targets (Fisher, 2009) at ‘human failures at local offices’, and ‘directly reflects a wrong attitude’ of staff, and their supervisors and managers, who are ‘unable to do ordinary things well enough and are too ready to accept failure’. The importance of achieving targets had overtaken the importance of providing a public service (Fisher, 2009).

This casts existing staff as being the problem: those existing staff who are not on board with modernization. They are positioned by the postal service as a threat to the organization (Gelfand, 2018). This is then used as a basis through which to bring staff together in a new culture, one that is built around the culture of enterprise (du Gay, 1996). The postal service attempts to mobilise this culture through appealing to a commonality (Gelfand, 2018):



...We need to bring home to every person working in Royal Mail Operation that his or her job is important and there is a vital need for everyone to play a full part in getting service back on target...[Customer Counts: 1983]

And in addition, in the 'Customer First: Total Quality in Royal Mail' [1991]:

...It means an attitude of: "I like you, but I don't like what you do"...

For the postal service the problem with modernization and their problems at meeting new targets was characterised as being a cultural problem (the problem being 'traditional' postal work'), that necessitated 'complete cultural change' [Customer First: Total Quality in Royal Mail]. New recruitment practices and the growing use of agencies diminished the significance of the culture of 'traditional' postal work through a process of cultural loosening (Gelfand, 2018). The 'Training Handbook' [1994] asserts this new approach to recruitment by stating that 'standards' will be applied, following which training will be given to ensure that the new 'standards' of the organization are understood and achieved, inculcating new recruits within this culture of enterprise (du Gay, 1996). For existing postal workers there is also a process to attempt to inculcate this new culture through training, and the wonderfully ambiguous processes of 'counselling', and 'encouragement' [Training Handbook, 1994]. This effectively meant corrective action and was interpreted by many of the postal workers interviewed as bullying tactics employed for the aim of the intensification of work to meet the increasingly significant performance targets (Fisher, 2009). In their communication of this message, the postal service utilised the language of customer service, rather than public service and attempted to bring postal workers together through the creation of a common enemy (Gelfand, 2018).

Joanne's experience of relief management during the 1990s meant she had a great deal of experience dealing with people employed through agencies:

...they were a nightmare!...You'd phone up for somebody to come in and then you'd got to train 'em. You'd got to get the job prepped for them to start with, which is costing you money, and then you'd got to send somebody out with 'em on the first day to show them where to go. I would say 20 percent of 'em didn't want to be there anyway; 20 percent couldn't care less what they did or not. They sent us a 70 year' old guy to ride a bike out on the delivery, which was interesting; I think he did one day with Mary and fell off the bike!...

The problems Joanne faced illustrate how issues of trust arose. Their attitude to work was a big issue: they 'didn't want to be there' and 'couldn't care less'. Steve had a similar conception of the new recruits: they were like 'empty shells'. For both Joanne and Steve, it was significant that new recruits did not care about work (Strangleman, 2004) and so, did not make their performance in a way that conformed to the group norms (Goffman, 1959). This was in contrast to their own conception of their labour: it was important, socially significant labour; working for the community and providing a public service that had value (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988; Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008). This highlights an important issue concerning the contested nature of 'quality' in the public sector, with the term being mobilised as an argument both for and against marketization (Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio, 1995; Martinez Lucio *et al*, 2000). Government reforms of services were couched in the rhetoric of 'quality': that the commercialization of the service was about 'quality' improvements. However, we can see that for Joanne, who saw things through the lens of 'traditional' postal work, such changes were the antithesis of 'quality'. The contrast in conceptions impacted on that trust in the workplace. So, at a time when the postal service was

attempting to engender a more commercial outlook, postal workers were coming to be replaced with people who did not share the same conception of their labour.

The working culture, and in particular the public service ethic, was seen as inhibitive to modernization and commercialization (Daunton, 1985; Gall, 2003; Senior, 1983). Recruiting postal workers from a source that was less likely to perpetuate this tradition could be a vehicle for commercialization, encouraging workers to act in a more enterprising fashion (du Gay, 1996) through this loosening of the working culture (Gelfand, 2018). So, for postal workers, new recruits came to be seen as changing the way in which they experienced their daily labour (Strangleman, 2004). But for the postal service itself, recruitment could form a way of disrupting the working culture, diminishing it over time.

It was also felt by current postal workers that new recruits did not keep to the same standard as they would have expected in terms of how they represented the service.

Joanne:

...we did have one guy at Rugeley, he was er he was late 30s early 40s and we had a phone call from one of our customers to say that he was walking round with no shirt on; and he wasn't the most muscular gentleman we've ever had. So, we had to have him in and say, well you know, 'wear a T-shirt'...don't go bare-chested, it's not nice for the customers. We've had a complaint'...he didn't last long, to say the least, yea. I think when his 12 week's casual contract came up, we didn't employ him again but, and he wasn't particularly good at the job either...

It seems hard to conceive of such an incident in the preceding decades. Conforming to certain standards of behaviour and representation was important (Strangleman, 2012); it is not really plausible that a person considered unlikely to adhere to such standards would even be nominated. Postal workers were proud to wear their uniform. The uniform was a signifier as to the labour of a postal worker, a material expression of the social significance of their work. It meant something to put on the uniform and to be recognised by the people of the community in this way (Kernaghan, 2008). To represent the postal service and the role of the postal worker in the community in such a way would have been unthinkable.

This is because the tight culture of ‘traditional’ postal work had entailed that postal workers tended to adhere at a greater level to group norms, and display more conventional forms of behaviour (Gelfand, 2018). The opening up of recruitment processes had resulted in a loosening of that culture, meaning that forms of behaviour that were more disorganised and impulsive than had before been possible came to be displayed (Gelfand, 2018). This is not to say that such an act was allowable in the modernized postal service. It was still something that represented a transgression of the rules of performance in front of an external audience and therefore something that required sanction behind closed doors (Goffman, 1959).

However, this is felt far more deeply for those socialized into the culture of ‘traditional’ postal work. In the modernized service this was a transgression of the conduct code that should be dealt with in relation to it. Within ‘traditional’ postal work this is also a transgression against the group and against the performance of the social significance of their role. Disregarding the uniform in this manner displays the disjuncture with ‘traditional’ postal work; it would have constituted as letting both the organization and fellow postal workers down (Johnson, 2014; Strangleman, 2012).

In his role as PHG Dave was able to gain first-hand experience of the trustworthiness and honesty of these new types of recruits to the postal service. He seemed to have viewed them in a largely negative way (Strangleman, 2012), with some transgressing the norms of behaviour of the DO in a more deviant and criminalized way (Mars, 1982), extending to dishonesty in their dealings with the post, something he didn't think would have happened before:

...You know we had a couple of people caught thieving whilst doing my time. We was [sic] in the office, one end of the gallery is one way glass down on the delivery office. You can't see in, but we can see out...When they suspect somebody of doing something they shouldn't they'll put plants and just see if they'll take the bait...there was one, there was a load of free sample cigarettes being delivered. He was basically helping himself to them...err I think when once they started getting enquiries from the public about missing items it starts ringing alarm bells...

Dave's comments suggest the further implications in relation to trust and the changing moral order (Sennett, 1998; Strangleman, 2012). That new workers were not only questionable in relation to their approach to work, but their honesty in handling the mail was too. The dishonesty that was displayed in the incident he recounts, inherently clashes with his own conception of the labour of a postal worker. He also demonstrates how authority and the way in which power was exercised within DOs was changing (Strangleman, 2004; 2012) as a result of the consequences of new forms of recruitment. In addition to the effect on trust (Sennett, 1998), entailing a changing experience of postal work and weakening of the public service ethic (McDonough and Polzer, 2012; Carr, 1999), the postal service had to change the way it monitored its workers. Previously management would have to do little in the way of monitoring postal workers. The post was important in the working culture of 'traditional'

postal work: It was the Queen's post and should not be interfered with. This meant that postal workers practically policed themselves.

The postal service had to become more active in the exercise of authority over postal workers, introducing techniques to surveil the workforce that had hitherto been unnecessary. The way in which power was exercised changed. Previously power was more dispersed and there was not necessarily the need for a very active show of authority to keep the workforce in-line. This is changed to an increase in the show of managerial power over the workforce, with authority maintained via surveillance techniques and the threat of dismissal from their use.

The examples put forward by Joanne and Dave show a change in the moral order of DOs (Strangleman, 2012). This change is characterised by a shift in the kinds of behaviours that recruits to the postal service engage in to include criminalized behaviours (Mars, 1982). This is not to say that these kinds of behaviours become permissible, but that these workers try to 'get away' with behaviours that would have previously not been attempted. These were the kinds of behaviours that would have largely been self-policed by the postal workers (Gelfand, 2018) themselves and required little in the way of intervention from management. This was perceived as a drop in standards of the way that postal workers behaved by 'traditional' postal workers. They regarded these new recruits as untrustworthy. Furthermore, these new recruits did not seem to share the same conception regarding the importance of the labour of postal work (Strangleman, 2012): its social significance and the importance of serving the community. This was seen as diminishing the importance of postal work (Carr, 1999).

## Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored the process of recruitment to the postal service. The recruitment system of nomination had helped to reinforce and perpetuate the tight culture of ‘traditional’ postal work. It did this through generating candidates for available postal worker positions who were similar to those already working there. However, there was a tendency for this to also perpetuate exclusion within postal work, meaning that ‘traditional’ postal work was predominantly male and white. The process of modernization entailed an opening up of the recruitment process, with an increasing use of employment agencies. The use of agencies, and the emergence of equal opportunities policies, is reflective of wider societal changes in terms of a generalized individualization, meaning that this opening up was based increasingly less in social connectedness and generalized reciprocity. This highlighted a contrast between new recruits and those who had joined the service in the 1970s, 1980s and before. Though this meant a loosening of the culture of ‘traditional’ postal work, and the close personal relationships, and collaborative and cooperative approach to work that was characteristic of it, it also meant a diversification of the types of people who were recruited into the postal service. However, new recruits coming into the service through recruitment agencies from the 1990s were viewed with scepticism and distrust by those socialised into the culture of ‘traditional’ postal work. The performance of postal work enacted by these new recruits was interpreted as a violation by these ‘traditional’ postal workers and could sometimes cross the boundaries of what was tolerated as normal cheating into outright deviancy and criminality. They were seen as not ‘one of them’.

Recruitment processes could be mediated through institutions of the industrial modernity, such as the labour exchange or job centre, the armed forces, and the family. These things

need to be seen in relation to the social connectedness and generalized reciprocity of the time. This reinforced 'traditional' postal work through the bonds of obligation and trust that it created between postal workers. However, this could sometimes mean that the choices and options that people faced were constrained, whereas the opening up of recruitment processes was reflective of a wider opening up of choices and options. For those postal workers approaching the service following the rupture of their previously thought of as stable and lifetime careers, following changes in the structure of society, the loss of their trade, or craftsman, workplace identities were negotiated through the ideal of public service. This gave their work meaning and enabled them to interpret their labour in terms of social significance.

The issue facing the instilling of a new, commercial culture was one of staff and the working culture. Employing postal workers via channels where they were less likely to have preconceived notions of how work should be approached meant that those individuals were also less likely to be resistant to changes that were perceived as being against this ingrained working culture. This could serve to undermine and disrupt a culture that was viewed by hierarchy as inhibitive to change, thus making change a smoother and less turbulent process. However, the success of this, and conversely the longevity and durability of 'traditional' postal work, is perhaps another issue. Though the new forms of recruitment diminished and loosened the culture of 'traditional' postal work, it did prove to be rather durable and resistant to the transformative power of modernization. The pace of cultural change within the postal service was slow.

The changes in the way that people were recruited into the postal service altered the make-up of the workforce and the nature of interactions on the DO floor, but as a consequence, it also came to have a profound effect on the experience of work for postal workers. The change in



the make-up of the workforce that happened because of new recruitment practices, alongside other changes introduced in the modernization of the postal service, meant that the experience of work was beginning to no longer fit in with the model of 'traditional' postal work. The collaborative and cooperative work that was characteristic of 'traditional' postal work became more difficult in the face of such an erosion of trust: how can you work in such a way with people you have reservations with as regards to trust?

## **Chapter Five**

### **Careers in the Post: culture, modernization, and management**

#### **Introduction**

The focus of the previous chapter was on the importance of recruitment to workplace culture: how recruitment happened and mattered; how it had perpetuated organizational culture; and how changes to recruitment had disrupted organizational culture and began to transform the experience of work. This chapter will build on this analysis by looking at careers within the postal service: how established lines of progression helped to perpetuate the working culture (Strangleman, 2012); how the modernization of the management of Delivery Offices (DOs) was serving to disrupt that working culture; and how a new form of management was contributing to a transformation of the experience of work (du Gay, 1996).

The division of labour in the small DOs of Cannock Chase over the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s was a fairly simple one, created out of the post-war re-allocation of occupations (see Campbell-Smith, 2011; Clinton, 1984) and virtually indistinguishable from the 1950s, when my grandad came into the service. The grade of postal worker was the largest grade, having little in the way of differentiation of duties, other than those with driving duties. This was the appointment grade for the majority of workers. It encompassed full and part-time workers, who would also receive a separate allowance if they were drivers, the duties of which would normally be assigned based on seniority. Duties included the sorting of incoming mail received from the regional sorting offices into the various walks in the area, the delivery of

this mail and the collection of outgoing mail from the various collection points in the area to be dispatched to the sorting offices.

For those who wished to further their career there was an established progression route, from postal worker to postman higher grade (PHG), to delivery office manager (DOM). The role of PHG was created in the occupational reallocation and was there to perform 'superior duties' (Campbell-Smith, 2011; Clinton, 1984) and was recruited from the postal worker grade. DOMs had responsibility for the day-to-day delivery operations of the DO. So, in creating the role of PHG, a progression pathway was established for postal workers to potentially move up the grades towards (DOM) and possibly beyond (Campbell-Smith, 2011; Clinton, 1984).

Progression acted as a form of reward for those with the necessary experience, gained through longevity of service, which, in accordance with the principles of the civil service, should theoretically happen on the basis of merit. It was a recognition of service in the opportunity to move into positions with greater degrees of responsibility, authority, and status (Campbell-Smith, 2012) in addition to remuneration. The established progression routes helped to perpetuate the working culture of 'traditional' postal work (Strangleman, 2012) and were tied to the idea of providing a public service (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988; Perry, 1996; Perry and Wise, 1990; Perry and Hondelghem, 2008): 'traditional' postal work had framed their practice as postal workers and so was carried with them in their day-to-day duties overseeing daily operations within the DO. But what was the experience of postal workers who embarked upon their careers in the postal service using these progression routes during this time of modernization? In addition, how did modernization in relation to the higher-grade occupations begin to disrupt the way in which 'traditional' postal work operated, and how postal workers experienced and perceived their day-to-day labour?

The established progression route that was in operation at the start of the 1970s was perceived by postal workers to have usually resulted in the workers with the appropriate knowledge and competence progressing to the higher grades (Strangleman, 2012). Those progressing to PHG usually remained at the same DO, though this was not necessarily the case for those progressing to DOM. However, progression didn't always happen in a simple, meritocratic fashion; the exclusive nature of the culture of 'traditional' postal work could mean that particular groups were favoured over others (Gelfand, 2018). This meant in practice that the higher grades in the area at this time were mainly occupied by white males. The Cannock Chase area was not particularly an ethnically diverse area at the time and the DOs were no different. DOs were also male dominated environments, both in number and in culture. There were though several women working as postal workers, but predominantly in part-time positions. So, in what way did gender have an impact on progression to the higher grades? What was the female experience of progressing through the grades working in the postal service in Cannock Chase?

It was usual that the people who ended up filling positions in these higher grades were people who had done the job. Postal workers at this time had a large amount of respect for and trust in those in higher grades (Strangleman, 2012): they were 'one of them'. Modernization changed the shape of this management, with vacancies increasingly filled by graduates, who had not come through the ranks, and had no experience on the job, who were perceived as not 'one of them' (Strangleman, 2012). So, what was the effect of these changes on relations with management? How was respect towards management affected? The modernization of DO management entailed a shift in emphasis whereby measurement and accountability were taking on an ever-increasing importance. How did this shift in emphasis affect the experience

of daily labour? How did this impact working culture and the way in which postal workers perceived their daily labour?

### **Developing a career: what it meant to progress in the post-war service**

Grandad embarked on his own process of progression in the early 1960s. He decided he did not want to remain on the delivery side of operations and used a progression route created in the post-war reallocation of occupations and moved on to counters, to the clerical grade of postal and telegraph officer. The grade was not really intended as a progression route for those in the manual grades. The intention was that the position would be filled by those possessing a minimum educational requirement, something grandad obviously did not have, and so, he took an exam to be able to move over to counters. Mum attributes this desire to try and move on and up to his early life:

...he wanted to rise above what he had come from. He resented that his dad had made his choices for him in his career...I think he wanted to show that he could do better, he had some kind of attitude that he thought he could do better, but he didn't get the chance. He wanted to feel that he achieved something in his life, cos [sic] he was apprenticed into a job by his father; a job he didn't want to do...his progression to the counters was a big thing, he was quite proud of himself. He kept the paper till he died showing where he came in the people that took the exam. It shows his position of all the people who took the exam, and he was quite high up...I suppose he wanted to be somebody, some sort of vindication...that's what he wanted for me you see, but he ended up doing to me the same: what his dad had done for him, mapping out my future, he wanted me to be a teacher...

1199/58

CIVIL SERVICE COMMISSION  
POST OFFICE  
POSTAL AND TELEGRAPH OFFICER  
LIMITED COMPETITION, 1958  
MIDLAND REGION  
RESULTS OF THE WRITTEN EXAMINATION

**Notes**

1. In this region 354 candidates sat for the examination; 127 of these reached the qualifying mark of 230 and their names are shown in alphabetical order in List 1. All candidates in List 1 will be called for interview by the Post Office; examination marks for these candidates will be shown on the final table of results which will be issued by the Post Office after the interviews have been held.
2. Candidates shown in List 2 failed to reach the qualifying mark and will not be called for interview. They are arranged in the order of their total marks, and candidates with the same total are shown in alphabetical order.
3. Women candidates are shown by their Christian names.

The column-headings of the table are as follows:-

1	2	3	4	5	6
Index number in examination	Name	Total	Index number in examination	Name	Total
	Maximum mark	400		Maximum mark	400

List 1. Qualified candidates:-

1633	Abbotts, S.J.	4339	Bruce, W.
4416	Aldred, G.M.	2579	Brussey, Vera M.
1634	Allbut, W.R.	1647	Bryant, A.J.
1764	Ayers, J.C.M.	4341	Burns, J.J.
1626	Bailey, F.H.	1772	Butterworth, D.
1636	Baker, J.P.	2599	Caine, Molly M.
4441	Barker, W.	4403	Calow, M.R.
2603	Barrow, Gwynedd R.	1649	Cartledge, W.W.
1637	Battersea, A.C.	2597	Clapham, Jean B.
1638	Baxter, J.	1650	Clemens, S.
4386	Bewick, W.H.	2604	Cockburn, Sheila A.
2596	Blower, Sheila D.	4327	Cowie, D.F.
2594	Bradshaw, Louise M.	1713	Cox, J.W.
1646	Brook, G.	1701	Cummings, R.

-2-

1	2	3	1	2	3
List 1. Qualified candidates - continued					
1655	Dale, J.P.	1695	Morris, H.F.		
1757	Davidson, B.	1790	Morris, J.		
4406	Davies, E.G.	1686	Morris, N.		
1733	Davies, R.C.	4459	Morris, R.		
4346	Davis, E.W.	5259	Neiland, Joan A.B.		
5252	Dudley, Edith J.	1687	O'Doherty, M.G.		
2605	Eardley, Mary B.	1760	Peacock, S.J.		
1658	Eddowes, R.J.W.	1716	Plant, S.		
1659	Edkins, E.	4430	Raven, C.H.J.		
1630	Edmonds, G.B.	5260	Rhodes, Dorothy I.		
1660	Edwards, L.	1632	Risdale, D.C.		
4449	Ferryhough, F.P.	2590	Robbins, Edwina		
1782	Foster, J.D.	1754	Roberts, R.M.		
1783	French, W.J.	4452	Robinson, A.G.		
1661	Friswell, M.E.	4438	Rodulson, T.		
2582	Gameason, Beryl	4377	Smith, H.		
4349	Garner, S.C.	1745	Smith, L.C.N.		
1663	Germain, D.C.	4439	Sole, F.T.W.		
4403	Gilbert, J.D.	4379	Stanton, D.J.		
1708	Giles, A.A.H.	1747	Stewart, R.J.		
1666	Grigg, S.	5271	Stow, Pearl		
1667	Guy, G.W.	2601	Strickson, Margaret		
1800	Harris, W.E.	1803	Taylor, A.E.		
1784	Harrison, J.C.	2591	Taylor, Eileen R.		
1736	Hartley, R.E.	4433	Taylor, P.		
4450	Harvey, J.N.	5261	Thomas, Florence M.		
4355	Higgs, F.	4326	Tredwell, E.P.		
4356	Holliday, R.C.	4383	Twyford, G.W.		
5268	Hollingsworth, Margaret M.	1749	Wakefield, D.H.		
4410	Houghton, H.	1695	Walker, J.W.		
4357	Hubbard, L.	1696	Walters, V.W.		
1766	Hunt, W.C.	4388	Ward, D.		
1737	Hunt, K.W.	4471	Warrington, E.		
4452	Hynes, J.	4391	Welch, D.J.		
1674	Johns, M.A.	4392	Wells, J.A.		
4440	Jones, G.E.	4473	Wheeldon, G.H.		
1787	Jones, J.R.	1704	Wilkes, A.		
4412	Keightley, C.K.	1698	Williams, A.		
1788	Knight, L.	4474	Willis, A.		
1678	Leadbroke, R.L.	1765	Wood, A.		
2584	Lee, Patricia A.	4434	Woodrow, T.		
4456	Leith, G.A.H.	5272	Woodward, Audrey G.		
1679	Lester, E.C.	1721	Woodward, J.H.		
2585	Lewis, Janet	1705	Woolley, B.		
1709	Lucas, S.J.	1700	Wright, S.G.		
5274	Maclean, Jean L.	1722	Wykes, L.		
4362	Malone, J.J.	4329	Valentine, S.		
2588	Mims, Susan	1723	Young, J.L.		
4413	Morgan, J.				

List 2. Candidates below the qualifying mark:-

1730	Baker, W.A.	224	4399	Rayner, R.F.	227
4437	Lacey, F.	229	1735	Grundy, A.	227
1768	Bott, V.G.	228	4409	Hance, G.	227
1771	Breen, J.	228	1631	Hantle, A.R.	227

5.1 Letter of notification for grandad passing his exam for his civil service commission as Post Office and Telegraph Officer

Grandad was eventually made head cashier at Rugeley and would act-up as postmaster when the postmaster was away or ill. Not long before the end of his working life, he was finally made a full-time postmaster at the Post Office in the nearby town of Brownhills:

...he was proud of it...my dad was really all about his work and career: for himself. You can understand that, from where he came from, the kind of upbringing he had. He used to get thrashed with a leather strap by his dad. He had a very tough upbringing: he saw his dad hit his mum and she didn't have much money and he didn't want that for his family: he didn't like it. It really did shape his life. He rarely drank cos [sic] he saw his dad go that way. He just wanted something better; he was determined not to end up that way...He was a community minded person really and took his job very seriously...Dad was proud of what he achieved in the Post Office. He was very proud of becoming

postmaster, it made him feel that he'd achieved something, I think it definitely gave him a social status that he felt; that it signified something within the community...



5.2 Newspaper cutting showing grandad being presented with a digital watch, and my nan being presented with a bouquet of flowers to mark his appointment as a postmaster at an annual buffet dance

His progression was more than just rising into an elevated position, it was an outward sign of his achievement, and though, as previously stated, progression didn't always take place in a simple, meritocratic way, as far as he was concerned, he had worked for his position and got there on merit, as in line with civil service principles:

...Merit, not seniority, is the deciding factor in selecting an officer for promotion or for a post carrying an allowance for supervision, and the officer selected must be not only fully qualified, but actually the best qualified of the eligible officers for the performance of the higher work. This is not excluding seniority from its due weight...[The Post Office Staff Handbook, 1965]

The postal service represented a site where his work meant something and progression to the higher grades bestowed on him a particular status and respect from both his fellow workers (Strangleman, 2004; 2012), and from within the community, where his labour was seen as socially significant (Kernaghan, 2008), existing in a web of reciprocity (Putnam, 2000). When he progressed in his career with the postal service, he did so with this 'traditional' conception of the postal work, grounded in the importance of public service (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988; Perry, 1996; Perry and Wise, 1990; Perry and Hondeghem, 2008). The postal service was a uniformed service, on a parallel with the other services, and so progression within the service entailed status and deserving as the same respect (Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008). It was work to be proud of; to progress in his career with the postal service was a social signifier that he had achieved (Kernaghan, 2008). However, I always wonder if his working-class background and deep affinity with the trade union movement caused him some sort of internal conflict in his elevated position.

### **Progressing to PHG in a modernizing service: increased responsibility and status**

The role of PHG was based in the office and entailed duties such as handling the registered post, special deliveries, redirections and dealing with paperwork from postal workers that had been signed on deliveries. PHG's were responsible for ensuring that the various sections of the post all ran to time. During the time period, the day-to-day administration of the post was still carried out by PHGs on paper and the information technologies that would later characterise the role were still a distant prospect. This system was regarded by those PHGs as both trustworthy and reliable and the progression to the grade was deserving of respect (Strangleman, 2004; 2012).



To become PHG it was necessary to complete the required training. Postal workers who completed this training regarded it as comprehensive, something that prepared them for the role that they were moving in to (even regarding the process as more stringent than transferring to DOM). The course was a residential one that involved being away for two weeks. Steve, who became a PHG in the early 1980s after being with the service for around a decade, describes the training for PHG in the following way:

...It was a two-week course, and it was like you stayed there for two weeks' and they gave you a hotel room and everything. It consisted of learning all the paperwork, basically, I mean, I mean at the time you used to write all the, all the addresses out on little pink slips and then you had to, they showed you how to do charged items; how to do the returned items; how to do date stamps and cash on deliveries...I think it was about 1981. I remember cos [sic], because Madonna was top of the charts and because we used to be allowed out at night see and we used to go, shall we say, night clubs and I remember that being top of, top of the charts sort of thing and that's how I remember. Like a, 'Like a Virgin'...

Steve really enjoyed his new indoor duties and the extra responsibilities that came with being PHG. For him, that this increased responsibility also came with a little bit extra in terms of weekly pay, was a bonus:

...I loved it; I, perhaps I'm missing that now. It was just very active all day, you didn't really stop. We had kind of times where you had to be finished on like little sections and you couldn't afford to be out on sections. Say you were doing the register, or whatever you were doing, you'd got to be finished by a certain time. You was [sic] always under a little bit of pressure, but it was fine, I didn't have a problem with it...you got more money Yea, it's about £20 a week I think, something like that, which was a lot of money then...

For Steve, though the extra money that came with the role was nice, the responsibility and status that came with it was important: it meant something to progress and to be PHG (Strangleman, 2004; 2012). He enjoyed the responsibility of ensuring the smooth running of the day-to-day activities of the DO, and that he was trusted to deal with the more important aspects of the post. And though there were aspects of being a postal worker that he'd cherished and that he missed, such as being in the outdoors and the autonomy of the walk (Johnson, 2014), Steve found the task of administering the post on a daily basis challenging and the work more interesting; he also liked the status that went with the role carried with it the respect from the postal workers he oversaw (Strangleman, 2012). In addition to this, the point in time that he progressed to PHG entailed that his practice in this role did not conflict with his identification with 'traditional' postal work as there was still much coherence of the team performance across hierarchical boundaries (Goffman, 1959). The gathering pace of processes of modernization would alter this over the course of the 1990s though.

Steve saw his fellow postal workers as a workplace family (Cooper *et al*, 2016). The relationship between postal workers at this time was a close one, one that went beyond just being co-workers (this has been discussed in more detail in Chapter Three) (Salaman, 1971; Mackenzie *et al*, 2006; Waddington, 2023). There was a bond of trust between them (Sennett, 1998; Putnam, 2000; Strangleman, 2012) within the tight culture of 'traditional' postal work (Gelfand, 2018). The confines of the DO not only entailed close physical working conditions during early-morning sorting, but the working culture of 'traditional' postal work engendered collaborative and cooperative work, fostering close personal relationships between postal workers (Sennett, 2012). Progressing to PHG meant

something: those who attained the grade had accrued the necessary experience and had the competency on the job, and so earned the respect of postal workers (Strangleman, 2012). So, for Steve, to be in a position of authority and respect in relation to the postal workers with whom he held this common bond of trust (Putnam, 2000) was significant in terms of the way he perceived his labour (Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008) and the social significance of his work (Kernaghan, 2008).

Joanne also enjoyed the extra responsibilities and challenge that came with being PHG. And though, similarly to Steve, she too enjoyed the aspects of her new role that entailed being in the office, she liked that it also still kept her in day-to-day contact with delivery:

...it was a bit more responsibility than a postman i.e., you were responsible for all special deliveries and' 'erm that sort of thing, the blue bags, the green bags er yea, it was just it was a step up from postman, a bit more money, not an awful lot, er yea a bit more sort of. Yea a bit more of a challenge er sort of indoors and you used to go in the back of the post office and pick the bits up from the post office; used to have to go through and open, turn the alarms off in the post office...

The extra money that she gained from her advancement to the next grade though was significant for Joanne, being a single mother with two children to support. But, the postal service, and progressing to PHG, was much more significant to her than an increase in her weekly pay (Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008). Several of her family were employed in the postal service (Baugher, 2003). She had been a beneficiary of nomination, being nominated by her aunt, just as she nominated her own niece; she also had a sibling who became a postal worker. For Joanne, the workplace family (Cooper *et al*, 2016) was enmeshed with her biological family. She had been socialised into the idea of 'traditional'

postal work in even more of a fundamental way than most, and she took this with her in her work practice at the higher grades (Goffman, 1959). When Joanne progressed in the 1980s, it was still usual for those progressing to be ingrained in the working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work. The idea of ‘traditional’ postal work was still strong in terms of informing the way in which work was practiced in the service, and so those progressing to the role of PHG, in their experience and competence earned on the job (Strangleman, 2012), helped to perpetuate this working culture through their position supervising activities in the DO. However, Joanne felt that she had to always fight for the opportunities to progress that were afforded to male colleagues (Edwards, 1998; Miller, 2009) who were less experienced on the post and who had less competency in their work, demonstrating that progression did not always operate along these lines (Strangleman, 2012).

Dave enjoyed being a PHG, he found the work more varied and interesting compared to that of a postal worker, which he had found monotonous (Gall, 2003; 2007), though he did enjoy going out on his walk (Johnson, 2014). Dave’s perspective on the increased responsibility of being PHG was, however, slightly different from that of both Steve and Joanne. Despite the length of his service, and the time at which he began on his career, the provision of a public service was not particularly important to him, though he did still have somewhat of a ‘traditional’ approach. It was important for Dave to feel like he was doing a good job and he took pride in doing a good job (Salaman, 1971); it was important to him that the post went out on time and that the DO was clear at the end of a working day; it was important that the post was delivered on time and to the correct place; the post itself was important to Dave and it was also important to him that he was able to trust his fellow postal workers (Sennett, 1998; Strangleman, 2012) around the post that they sorted and delivered on a day-to-day basis. He felt a part of the ‘workplace family’ (Cooper *et al*, 2016) of his DO in Cannock, taking part in

many social activities with his fellow postal workers (Salaman, 1974; Mackenzie *et al*, 2006).

But he did not share this same orientation regarding the increased responsibility of being

PHG:

...the wages weren't fantastic, I think they were roughly about £20 a week more, which I suppose at that time, was really good...One thing we have to do in the afternoon we've got no supervisors on, so basically the PHG was in charge of the office, and we found that a bit stick in the craw a bit. Well especially the supervisor's job, like I say you've still got postmen in the afternoon, and you've still got customers coming in with complaints, and you have to deal with them...

Dave did not seem to see this responsibility in the same way. Some of it was more of an imposition rather than something to be taken pride in. It was interpreted as the organization taking advantage of the PHG, using them in a way that the extra payment and status did not compensate for. As such, the notion of 'traditional' postal work could sometimes serve as a means for postal workers at the grade of PHG to interpret responsibilities that could be considered as above their paygrade as justifiable (Coffey *et al*, 2009): they were responsibilities to be proud of (Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008), and ones that confirmed their status within the service and amongst their fellow postal workers (Strangleman, 2004; 2012).

For those who progressed to the role of PHG the role carried with it, not only greater levels of responsibility, but also an increased status that was respected by their fellow postal workers (Strangleman, 2004; 2012). The established progression routes of the post-war period served to reinforce and perpetuate the tight culture (Gelfand, 2018) of 'traditional' postal work through placing those in senior positions within the DOs of the area who had been schooled

in the idea of ‘traditional’ postal work (Strangleman, 2012). However, the modernization and commercialization of the postal service was beginning to not only change the shape of work (Jenkins *et al*, 1996; Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio, 1995b; Martinez Lucio *et al*, 2000; Giga *et al*, 2003), but it was also beginning to change the way that processes of progression were experienced.

### **From PHG to DOM: moving up and walking back?**

The DOM was responsible for the day-to-day operational running of the office. It was their responsibility to allocate the various walks, to ensure the smooth running of the system and that the incoming and outgoing mail was appropriately measured and left the building. The established progression route entailed it was possible for postal workers to work their way up from postal worker, through being PHG, up to the position of DOM and possibly beyond. It was accepted practice for DOM’s to be former postal workers who had risen through the grades. Their suitability for their post, and the respect and status they derived because of it, can be seen in relation to their experience on the post (Strangleman, 2012). At the beginning of the time period, it was also not unusual for the DOM to be a former serviceman (Johnson, 2014; Campbell-Smith, 2012; Strangleman, 2012). DOMs during this period were largely people who had worked their way up and proved themselves on the post: they were ‘postal people’. This was the way in which DOMs earned the respect of the postal workers they managed (Strangleman, 2012).

However, the marketization of the public sector that resulted from the Conservative Party election victory of 1979 entailed a managerialist approach to public sector management, with

the implementation of methods from the private sector in the form of New Public Management (NPM) (Dawson and Dargie, 2002; Pollit and Bouckaert, 2004), and the postal service was no exception (Campbell-Smith, 2012; Senior, 1983; Dearing, 1986). So, what it was to be a DOM was changing towards the end of the time period, with an ever-increasing emphasis on metrics and budgetary responsibility (Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio, 1995b; Jenkins *et al*, 1995; Fisher, 2009); it was no longer sufficient to just have experience from service and to have knowledge of the post (Strangleman, 2004; 2012).

In this way, this changed what it meant to be experiencing processes of progression at this time. Where progression could previously be theorised in terms of status and prestige, a reward for longevity of service and knowledge of the post (Strangleman, 2004; 2012), we can instead look at it in relation to the enterprise culture (du Gay, 1996), with individuals taking on the risks of their own career through embarking on processes of training to learn these new techniques. There is a change in capital as to the currency for progression, from experiential capital to knowledge. Processes of progression were not necessarily straightforward for postal workers who had been socialised into a workplace culture of 'traditional' postal work as they involved a more individualized approach: taking on the risk of their work-life trajectory, becoming the author of their biography, and engaging reflexively in the process (Beck, 1994; Beck, 1997; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Giddens, 1991).

Joanne believed the progression from PHG to DOM, to be less formalised than the one from postal worker to PHG. To do the job of PHG it was necessary to complete the two-week PHG training course. When moving up to the role of DOM it was not unusual for a PHG, with the necessary experience and competence on the job, to 'act-up' to the role of DOM. In this way, a postal worker would begin to do the job of a DOM, on a temporary, or cover basis, when

called upon to do so because of the absence of the DOM, before moving into the position on a permanent basis. Joanne describes how she went through the process of progressing to DOM:

...but like from that leading to management, I was doing the management job before I did the training...I went into the office doing PHG and then from there I did, if the manager was on holiday, Darren Fender, then I'd cover him. And then, I was offered the job of doing the 'day off cover' when the area, throughout the area I did the area 'day off covers', different offices, a different office every day. I used to do Wednesbury on a Monday, Cannock on a Tuesday and Wednesday, Walsall one day...they brought the scheduled day off in... I just used to go to whatever office had got that day off...you were only involved in that day's action, if you like...

Joanne went through a gradual process of progression, one of working up and filling in, in order to progress to the next level of her career, one that she had to disproportionately fight for (Edwards, 1998; Miller, 2009). Joanne did enjoy moving around to cover the various DOMs of the area. She found moving from office to office interesting and variable work; each office had its differing challenges, only having responsibility for moving the post on a given day, rather than total operations of a DO as a whole. It did mean, however, that she lacked a DO over which she could have responsibility as a whole and effect on a continuing basis over a period of time (Sennett, 1998). She had wanted to be able to be DOM at her hometown DO at Rugeley, but she was told it was not possible for her to do so at the DO where she had been a postal worker. She had been acting manager at Rugeley but was refused the job on a permanent basis. The organizations failure to allow her to fill this position on a permanent basis in Rugeley was a source of considerable resentment to her. She felt it was unfair that she was not afforded this opportunity, and if she was 'good enough to do the job'



when they needed her, then she should have been good enough to have got the job permanently, especially when the same opportunity was afforded to others:

...They decided no, you couldn't do that...if you wanted to be a manager, you'd have to go into a different office...it was wasn't fair because you were already doing the job but they trusted you to do that job...But it was being done and it's been done since...Why not just leave you where you are?... You haven't said anything in the last two years when I [sic] been helping you out and covering you when you're doing them a favour you know...It was very annoying, yea...we'd all applied to do the DOMs course, we'd all passed the initial test and two guys out of the office were put forward for the training course...my name wasn't put forward, and if I hadn't phoned the Area Manager and said, 'what the goodness gracious me is going on? I'm doing the blinking job! Why aren't I being put forward for the DOMs course?' I wouldn't of [sic] got on it. I had to push to where I go! I had to push to get where I got!...

Despite what Joanne considered to be unfair treatment by the organization towards her (Edwards, 1998; Miller, 2009), she continued to do her job diligently and with a commitment to the idea of the importance of providing a good service to the public (Perry, 1996; Perry and Wise, 1990; Perry and Hondeghem, 2008; Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988), and maintenance of her performance within the culture of 'traditional' postal work (Goffman, 1959). The organization calling on her as relief manager has echoes of when earlier in her career she was called upon as a casual. Joanne's commitment to the postal service seemed to transcend the unfair treatment that she experienced, though this commitment was in part due to the idea of the service, and in part to the construction of her own career biography (Potter, 2015; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Hancock and Tyler, 2004; Ashforth *et al*, 2008).

Over the 1970s and much of the 1980s, the day-to-day management of the service was being carried out in a less formal way than the one that would later characterise it. From the late

1980s, managers increasingly were being made more responsible and accountable in terms of the finances and budgeting of the office (Jenkins *et al*, 1995; Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio, 1995b; Fisher, 2009), and they were coming under increasing pressure to reduce the number of hours used for deliveries. Because of this emerging emphasis, it was seen as necessary to upskill management towards these new objectives for day-to-day operations (du Gay, 1996).

Harry became a postal worker following the closure of Lea Hall colliery in 1991. His family connections (Baugher, 2003) in the postal service had ensured he was nominated for his position as a postal worker. Upon gaining his position, Harry rose through the ranks relatively quickly, and was put forward for DOM training by the late 1990s. Harry did think of his job as important (Salaman, 1971) and felt an affinity with the idea of carrying out a public service; it was something that made him feel good. Most importantly, Harry wanted to feel that he was doing a good job. But he was more pragmatic when it came to the change in emphasis of the service, and the day-to-day management of it. The change in emphasis away from public service towards a more business-like postal service was considered as ‘one of those things’ by him, a consequence of changing times that should be accepted as such.

Harry describes what was expected of him as DOM:

...they were trying to up-skill the management team into being able to do what they wanted to do which was, you know, be more accountable for the finances and for the total running of the unit. You know, I mean it's all to do with making sure the system kept moving, and mail came in and it's measured, and it went out again...I was accountable for all of [sic] the unit. All of the posties that went in and did that, and the majority of my job was to make sure that all the mail left the unit and all the jobs that needed to be covered were covered and the jobs for the following weeks...It's all to do

with making sure the system kept moving and mail came in and it's measured, and it went out again...

Harry shows how there were new priorities for DOMs, priorities that had to align with the priorities of the service. The previous way of doing things was no longer sufficient and it was now necessary for DOMs to be more financially aware, to ensure that operations ran to budget and targets were met (Fisher, 2009): to be more commercial in outlook (du Gay, 1996). To achieve this, as a part of government aims to empower customers (Fairbrother and Poynter, 2001) in the public sector, delivery service standards were set for postal workers (Jenkins *et al*, 1995). It was no longer sufficient for DOMs to just know the post, know the job (Strangleman, 2012) and to look after the postal workers, and this being the case, it was necessary for those progressing from the role of PHG to DOM to be trained in these new ways. Harry did not really experience a rupture in terms of identification with this as he had not experienced the routine and habit (Giddens, 1991) necessary to form an identification with 'traditional' postal work due to the point in time he joined the postal service. So, as far as Harry was concerned his practice within his role as DOM did not violate a team performance, though other postal workers would have interpreted it as such (Goffman, 1959). For Harry, his practice was adhering to a new norm of performance: one that he felt was the future of the postal service, and not a part of its history.

In this way, DOM training from this period was more than just imparting new skills, it was also inculcating in a new culture of commercialization and entrepreneurialism, though this process was not as successful for some as (du Gay, 1996) it was for Harry:

...You will receive full training to enable you to work with your team to understand and satisfy the requirements of your customers. You will receive more support from your

boss and your colleagues in doing your job as they, too, will be working in a total quality way. You will feel more involved in the way you do your job and have the opportunity to influence how you do it...[Customer First: Total Quality in Royal Mail, 1991]

This does seem to retain an element of the paternalistic attitude towards the workforce that the postal service had displayed in the pre-modernization era. However, in a document aimed at managers and supervisors we can begin to scratch beneath the surface of the above statement and reveal the more authoritarian approach that had replaced the former paternalism:

...The ultimate success will depend upon Supervisors accepting that talking with their staff is a natural part of their job. It will depend upon Supervisors having to stand up and put across management information and views and so turn the notion of being part of management into reality and practice. It will depend upon them actively demonstrating that they are seeking to improve performance rather than just passing on a message...[ Customer Counts, 1983]

In addition, the possibility that there is any structural failure is explicitly ruled out. This is a problem of people:

...The task force activities has confirmed that there are no fundamental structural weaknesses in the mails circulation system, as such. Eradication of human failures at local offices, at railway stations, airports and other key points in the national mail hub would produce a step change in performance...[ Customer Counts, 1983]

Within the modernizing service, technological advancements in the shape of the introduction of post codes and new forms of sorting machines (Sutton, 2013) entails that the problem of the non-meeting of targets is a cultural one, alongside a failure of supervision. As such, the

postal service needed PHGs and DOMs to move out of that culture, that of ‘traditional’ postal work, and be a part of the entrepreneurial culture (du Gay, 1996). This meant conveying organizational imperatives to postal workers, intensifying daily labour to meet those targets (Fisher, 2009).

Managerial methods were deemed necessary to achieve a ‘quality’ that could not be achieved through the old style of management (Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio, 1995b). The principle was to create a way of working that values a customer-oriented approach (Fairbrother and Poynter, 2001) and instil a culture centred on continuous improvement (Jenkins *et al*, 1995). The notion of ‘quality’ of service was contested across the public service and used as an argument both for and against marketization (Martinez Lucio *et al*, 2000). These were people who had been schooled in the working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work, the new priorities clashed with the culture as they perceived it as it posited the postal service as a business, rather than a service. Indeed, just as modernization involved a reinterpretation of the word ‘quality’, the same could be said for the word ‘service’. The postal service mobilised the language of customer service in various ways to inculcate postal workers into a culture of entrepreneurialism (du Gay, 1996):

...Our top priority is to give our customers a thoroughly reliable service day in day out...We must continue to fight vigorously in the market place and there is no reason why we can’t be successful if we give our customers good value for money...[Your Royal Mail, 1987]

This is in contrast to pre-modernization, where postal workers interpreted their labour within the culture of ‘traditional’ postal work, where the postal service employed the language of

public service, and civil service values, placing the postal service and postal workers within a web of generalized reciprocity (Putnam, 2000):

...The Post Office exists in order to provide services for the public...[The Post Office Staff Handbook, 1967]

And:

...Clearly then, the Post Office has a particular responsibility in making life smoother and fuller for everyone...[An Introduction to the Post Office, 1959]

Some were able to adapt in a more effective way to this new emphasis and develop their careers in the postal service. These were the people who could do the ‘self-work’ necessary to engage in this new style of ‘career management’ (Potter, 2015; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). These were the ‘reflexivity winners’ (Lash, 1994). Both Harry and Joanne went on to have careers in more advanced positions. In Joanne’s case, despite working in management positions, she retained her love of the culture of ‘traditional’ postal work; she still thought that this way of working was the right way and retained her belief in the service ethic and bemoaned their loss. Her career advancement though, was seen in terms of her personally achieving despite the adversities and impediments that she faced in that career (Potter, 2015; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003): it was something to be proud of. It was also something that she approached in a pragmatic fashion in terms of her material need to support her family. In this way, she managed her participation within the new entrepreneurial culture (du Gay, 1996), but it was not one that was necessarily internalised by her and challenged her notion of what it was to practice her job in a ‘good’ way (McDonough and Polzer, 2012), and maintain her team performance (Goffman, 1959), a contradiction that she recognized.

Harry was also able to take a pragmatic attitude towards many of the changes: it was change and change just happens, it was something that you just accepted, and you got on with it. Fighting change didn't seem to be something that made sense to Harry as it was just fighting the inevitable. So, whereas he thought that public service was something good, something to be proud of (Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008), he did not particularly bemoan its loss. In his acceptance of his managerial accountability and responsibility he was affirming his own enterprising identity (du Gay, 1996) and taking responsibility for the construction of his own career (Potter, 2015; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Harry's attitude to this was that it was far more productive to do as good a job as you could within the system that was there and be as proud as you could of that. In this way, he could actively participate in this new way of doing things and be a part of the new culture. Though, as mentioned previously, Harry had not had the same longevity of service, habit, and routine (Giddens, 1991), and so the identification with the culture of 'traditional' postal service was not as strong.

Both Joanne and Harry became 'reflexivity winners' (Lash, 1994). They were able to subordinate their attachment to the 'traditional' culture, and engender an enterprise culture (du Gay, 1996), taking responsibility for their careers and creating themselves as a project through them (Potter, 2015; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003), becoming 'entrepreneurs of the self' (du Gay, 1996). This involved developing their own 'self-regulation' in a society that was no longer responsible for their being (Dardot and Laval, 2013), they had to prove their own worth and merit as regards progression. In a work context where the previous rules no longer applied, where their experience was not the guarantee for progression that it once

was, they were obliged to take on the risks of their own development and become the authors of their own biography (Beck, 1997).

For others who were going through progression though, the clash between what was expected of them in their elevated positions, and the culture they had been schooled in, was less ambiguous. For some it was more difficult to adopt a reflexive attitude (Beck, 1994; Giddens, 1994; Lash, 1994) in relation to their own progression due to their attachment to the ‘traditional’ way: the kinds of social relations that were being dissolved through individualization (Beck, 1992). In this way the changing notion of what it meant to be going through these processes of progression could be a dislocating experience in relation to identity (du Gay, 1996; McDonough and Polzer, 2012). This exposes the frailty of self-identity as a reflexive creation. The fragile self-identity is protected through habit and routine, protecting against the negative effects of uncertainties. Those who experience problems as regards the continuity of their own biography are prone to the dislocation of ontological insecurity (Giddens, 1990; 1991). Where there is a weaker commitment to identity (as in the case of Harry), through less exposure to a set of norms within a working culture, there may be a greater accommodation to change, and consequently less of an impact in terms of ontological security.

Steve was proud to be PHG, it was a job he loved (Freidson, 1990), and he liked the extra responsibility that it came with. In the next step in his career, Steve was given a job as acting DOM. He found that the step from PHG to DOM to be too much for him. He found that the job came with a lot of pressure and stress, that he found hard to handle (Kelliher and Parry, 2015; Gill-McLure and Seifert, 2008). He had to act in a way towards the postal workers that



he was not comfortable with, and this violated his sense of team performance (Goffman, 1959); it was a way of acting that DOMs had previously not been compelled to do:

...I did it for a couple of years', but I couldn't handle it, the pressure...I just give [sic] it a go just as a casual like [sic] acting manager thing [sic]...there's so much pressure on you every day and it really; I can understand why managers, you know, get ill...It was stressful. It wasn't for me I was, even my friends said that. Bless him, he's no longer with us, he said 'you know you're not much good at this are you?' He said, 'you're too nice'. And I was, I was too nice. I was too friendly with people, and it didn't work. Yea, and I couldn't be ruthless with, with people I've known all me [sic] life... It was a lot of pressure...

Ken also progressed from PHG to DOM, and he too felt that the way in which he had to go about his new role clashed with his own conception of the meaning of work in the postal service (McDonough and Polzer, 2012; Gardiner *et al*, 2009; Mackenzie *et al*, 2006). For Ken, fulfilling the role of the DOM also clashed with the way that he saw himself in relation to the performance of his labour (Goffman, 1959):

...they treat you different. You're not one of the group anymore...once you go in the management, they just don't treat you the same cos [sic] they don't want to say anything in case you say something...you can't be postman one week and a manager the next...you couldn't befriend anybody...so it was like 'us and them'...and I gave it up in the end. Yea, as I say because of how it was. It's who you knew and not what you knew. Yea, so I thought, what's the point, what's the point of doing all this work; trying to learn it and everything else, and I left? Yea, I just, just came out, went back on the rounds...

Ken and Steve's progression to DOM created a conflict for them. They had always seen themselves in the postal service in relation to 'traditional' postal work (McDonough and

Polzer, 2012), and this meant a collective attitude towards work (Salaman, 1971). Their workmates were like a ‘workplace family’ (Baugher, 2003; Mackenzie *et al*, 2006; Waddington, 2023) and progression to relief DOM duties placed them on the outside of that family. This had not been the case for progressing to DOM in previous decades (Strangleman, 2004; 2012). This was particularly big for Ken, something that affected the way that he saw himself in relation to his labour. His position as a DOM should have entailed the respect of his fellow postal workers, the workers who he respected himself (Strangleman, 2004; 2012). The notion of career was different to the one that they had conceived of earlier in their time with the service, it was one in which they had to take more active control over not just their own progression, but also the consequence of their own progression. This had the consequence of existential stress (Standing, 2009).

Unlike Joanne and Harry, Ken and Steve were not able to perform the kind of reflexive self-confrontation (Beck, 1994) that was necessary for career success in the modernizing postal service (Potter, 2015; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). They became ‘reflexivity losers’ (Lash, 1994). Ken and Steve could not set aside their connection to their identification with the workplace culture of ‘traditional’ postal work and become ‘entrepreneurs of the self’ (du Gay, 1996). Both Ken and Steve found this to be a destabilising and dislocating experience in terms of their own work-based identity (McDonough and Polzer, 2012). Their experience in progressing to DOM was a breach to their ontological security (Giddens, 1990), exposing their fragile self-identity on relation to their status as DOM, disrupting the continuity of their biography to the extent that both men sought security in the familiar. They took the option to move back down the ranks, reasserting their occupational identity as postal workers against increasing individualization, managerialism, and processes of change (Gardiner *et al*, 2009; Mackenzie *et al*, 2006; Humphreys and Brown, 2002; McBride and Martinez Lucio, 2011;

Strangleman, 2012). Going back to the performance of their labour (Goffman, 1959) that they knew and loved: back to sorting the mail and the autonomy of the walk again.

Steve:

...So, I went back on the rurals' for the rest of me [sic] time...I loved it, absolutely loved it. I went back on to Hamstall Ridware, Blithbury, Hamstall Ridware and everybody sort of remembered me and it was great...

For those who started their careers during the 1970s and early 1980s, the positions they ended up progressing into were not the same as how those positions had been earlier on in their career. Within the working culture of 'traditional' postal work there was a respect for those in the higher grades (Strangleman, 2012), in a team performance that crossed hierarchical boundaries (Goffman, 1959). In moving into these advanced roles at the time they did, Ken and Steve had stepped outside of the 'workplace family' (Cooper *et al*, 2016) that they both held so dear, and found themselves in a role whereby the achievement of targets as set to standards was the priority (Fisher, 2009). The way in which they had to work caused a disruption in their work-based identity and altered the way in which they interpreted their day-to-day labour and their status both in the workplace, and the wider community (Gardiner *et al*, 2009; Mackenzie *et al*, 2006; Humphreys and Brown, 2002; McBride and Martinez Lucio, 2011; Strangleman, 2012).

This meant they were transgressing their own team performance (Goffman, 1959), the self-sanction for which was to give up the status that had once seemed like a prize, and move back down to deliveries, where they could at least experience some semblance of the 'workplace family' and the job that they loved (Freidson, 1990). Others though, were able to do the 'self-

work' necessary to build their own careers (Potter, 2015; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) and become 'reflexivity winners' (Lash, 1994). For Harry this meant a pragmatic attitude to the way in which the new priorities of the postal service entailed that he had to carry out his duties. This is explained through his relatively lower length in service that had meant that the culture of 'traditional' postal work, was not as greatly ingrained in him.

### **From old school to graduate managers**

As has already been discussed, there had been an established progression route for postal workers, through PHG, and on to DOM. This had meant that DOMs had largely been recruited from people who had gone through the ranks; people who had done the job (Strangleman, 2004; 2012). Their legitimacy in the role that they carried out was derived through longevity of service, and experience on the job. This had entailed a large degree of respect from postal workers, who saw these managers as 'one of them'; they were postal people. This respect translated into fairly harmonious relations between management and workers. DOMs were trusted by postal workers, who perceived them as knowing what they were doing (Strangleman, 2004; 2012). In the earlier part of the time period, it was also not unusual for these managers to have been ex-servicemen.

Throughout the public sector, neoliberalization was challenging professional authority through the insertion of managerialism (Healy, 2009; Leicht *et al*, 2009). Although I am not claiming parity with postal work with professional work, we can see parallels in the sidelining of knowledge and expertise that has been gained through experience and practice, in favour of knowledge of managerial techniques. Modernization within the postal service was

also entailing a change in the shape of DO management and from the mid-1990s there was an emphasis on budgetary responsibility and accountability (Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio, 1995b; Jenkins *et al*, 1995). As such, there was a shift towards increased recruitment of DOMs from outside of the organization, rather than people who had worked their way through the ranks. This new type of manager had often gone through university, were already trained in the new methods, versed in the new priorities, and importantly, had not been socialised into the working culture of ‘traditional’ postal worker.

The insertion of a new type of manager who had no experience in the job caused resentment among postal workers because they had not *earned* their job (Strangleman, 2012). For someone like Joanne, who perceived that she had to work so hard for her progression, it was hard to take that people were inserted into the DOM grade who had no understanding of the way the post worked:

...they bring graduates in, and they know nothing about the business. They haven’t done from the bottom and worked their way up. They just come in at the higher level. They haven’t got a clue, half of them...it annoyed me anyway, that they could come in at that level anyway, I didn’t think it was fair, just not fair...

Postal workers perceived that the knowledge these managers had, came from the classroom, and not experience on the job. So, from their perspective the decisions they made lacked the proper foundation to them. There is a derision of knowledge that was gained through education, that the only legitimate way to have proper knowledge of the post is to have gained it through experience on-the-job (Strangleman, 2012). This is reflective of this shift towards de-professionalization (Healy, 2009) and managerialism (Broadbent and Laughlin, 2002), with the supplanting of the significance of professional autonomy (Berg, 2006;

Andersen and Andersen, 2007; Gill-McLure and Seifert, 2008; Leicht *et al*, 2009; Coffey *et al*, 2009). Ken characterises the parallel situation within the postal service as one where people who occupied DOM roles were out of their depth in terms of their competency on the post:

...they used to be postmen; knew what they'd got to deal with...they were bringing in graduates and they would go straight in top management. You can be a graduate, but it doesn't mean to say that you know what you're doing when you come in there and we had quite a few that hadn't a clue. They'd got the brains, they were very intelligent, this lad was but he just hadn't a clue what we were doing. It was like putting us on the moon and saying, you know, 'build a house' he just didn't know what to do...they didn't know the people...they didn't grow up with the people. Being a manager in an office that you'd worked in, you knew one another so, you know, there's that little bit of respect for one another and working with one another as well, but you know. At least you know he's worked his way up...

However, this depiction of incompetency needs to be seen in the context of the postal service being in a period of transition, and with a workforce who were not supportive of the types of changes that were being implemented.

In addition to this there was also a perception that what went with this new type of manager was a new management style. The management style of the previous era had been rigid and disciplinarian, but it was paternalistic in nature:

...The Post Office has a training programme designed to help you to understand our rules and methods of work, and to show where you and your job fit into the whole organization...After your training course you will go to your first office where your colleagues and supervising officers will continue the good work of the instructors to help you pick up your duties...[An Introduction to the Post Office, 1959]

The language used displays this paternalistic approach. They want to ‘help you’ to understand and show new recruits where they fit in to the organization. It makes it feel like they want to make the process as easy as possible and are acting in a benevolent way towards their employees. It is this ideal of benevolence towards postal workers from the higher grades that postal workers such as Ken and Steve held dear; an ideal that involved a commonality across those hierarchical boundaries (Strangleman, 2012).

There had been a large number of DOMs employed in the decades following the war who had served in the military, and this was reflected in the management style. However, DOMs had known their workforce, they had been postal workers themselves and were not seen as aloof or set apart from that workforce (Strangleman, 2004; 2012). There were generally good relations between postal workers and the DO level of management, with a coherency of attitudes as to how the service should be conceived. This meant that DOMs did not really have to manage by coercion, but rather, through consent. This relationship seems to have been characterised as a close kind of relationship.

Joanne:

... I mean back in the day... you knew all the staff there anyway and they kind of know you, you know them, you know what they’re like erm what their capabilities are, so you can ask them to do stuff and they know what you’re like, and what your capabilities are you know if they need anything or they needed to know anything they know they can come and ask you...

Despite this militaristic characterization of the previous era of management, the new kind of graduate managers were perceived by postal workers to be authoritarian. However, this authoritarianism is perceived in the context of the implementation of a new type of management culture, one that was focussed on customers (Fairbrother and Poynter, 2001) rather than the community; one that was focussed on budgetary responsibility (Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio, 1995b; Jenkins *et al*, 1995) rather than providing a service to that community, with the kinds of (non)work implicit within that; and of managers that were not seen as legitimate due to their lack of experience on-the-job (Strangleman, 2012). This was seen to lead to an increase in work-based conflict, with a fear of workplace bullying by managers in the face of increased workloads (Giga *et al*, 2003): coercive tactics to control the workforce as opposed to the previous rule through consent. Ken quite simply felt condescended too, looked down upon on account of his status as postal worker:

...He was so full of it, and we said, 'is that what you really want us to do?' and he was, 'Yes. I'm in charge. I've got the intelligence; I've got this qualification'. He didn't have a clue what qualifications some of us had. We were more qualified than he was! 'Oh yes, he thought we were quite menial. He didn't know I was a ceramic technologist you know. I had qualifications, and the electricians and everybody. We all had trades...the new ones, no: 'I'm the manager, do as I say!' That was what we heard; Yea, yea, 'we are managers, you do as we say. You are here to deliver it'...the culture of it changed which was a shame course I loved the job. Yea, yea, 'we are managers, you do as we say'; 'I am more superior than you are; you are a postman, you do as I say'...

The development of adversarial relations between managers and postal workers is related to the shift in orientation of the postal service to its workforce in general. As such, modernization, and managerialism were associated with an authoritarian style of management (Coffey *et al*, 2009), interpreted by postal workers as being heavy-handed, whilst also lacking



in the foundation of experience (Strangleman, 2012). This new management restricted (Leicht *et al*, 2009) the way in which postal workers were able to carry out their work in the manner that they best saw fit (Berg, 2006; Andersen and Andersen, 2007; Gill-McLure and Seifert, 2008; Leicht *et al*, 2009; Coffey *et al*, 2009), causing a clash with the ethic of public service (Siltala, 2013; McDonough and Polzer, 2012).

These managerial techniques have tended to infantilise workers, leading to a decline in morale (Diefenbach, 2009). It has also been associated with an intensification of work processes (Gill-McLure and Seifert, 2008; Siltala, 2013). In addition, we can see that as well as postal workers not respecting the graduate managers on account of their perceived lack of legitimacy, they felt they were also not being treated with respect by those managers, as illustrated by Steve:

... but some of 'em were, they'd got the old bad attitude kind of thing going on. As if they're better than you. And they probably were cleverer [sic] than us. Cos [sic] some of 'em had been to Uni, with respect, or college or whatever they had to take you know. But it doesn't mean you, you don't treat each other as equal when you're working...

The insertion of a new type of manager served to disrupt the working culture of 'traditional' postal work through changing the culture of the people who oversaw the activities of postal workers. This new managerial type could aid to promote an enterprising culture (du Gay, 1996), with the effect of loosening this tight culture (Gelfand, 1959) through new forms of supervision at a time when the meeting of performance and budgetary expectations was becoming increasingly important (Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio, 1995b; Jenkins *et al*, 1995; Fisher, 2009). These new managers had been to university and were trained in the new methods of management, and importantly, had not been socialised into the working culture of

‘traditional’ postal work. However, this led to a disruption in the previous good relations between postal workers and DO level management. Postal workers perceived new managers as illegitimate and not worthy of respect due to them not having earned their elevated positions (Strangleman, 2012). Their attitude was interpreted as aloof and led to a change in the way that power was exercised within the DO: from consent to coercion.

## **Conclusion**

The modernization of the day-to-day management of operations within the DO weakened the model of ‘traditional’ postal work. It did so by disrupting the connections that existed between postal workers and the day-to-day management of the service that had served to reinforce and perpetuate that culture. The introduction of managerialism and NPM techniques in the service brought with them new priorities in the shape of budgetary responsibility and accountability and meant that DOMs were increasingly being employed from graduates, rather than from people who had progressed through the rank. This disrupted the connection between postal workers and DOMs, leading to a clash of cultures.

In the post-war postal service to progress through the ranks to become DOM had entailed status and respect. There had been an established progression route in operation from the immediate post-war period which had provided a route for advancement from going into the service at the grade of Postal Worker, to becoming a Delivery Office Manager. People who progressed to this grade were seen largely as deserving of respect on account of the perception that they had earned their position. The new types of graduate managers were not seen as worthy of such respect on account that their learning had taken place in the classroom

rather than in the DOs or out on the streets on the walk. This led to a situation where the knowledge and decisions of these managers was not seen as legitimate as it was not built from a foundation of knowledge on the post. Whereas the relationship between ‘old school’ managers and postal workers had been largely harmonious, the relationship with new style ‘graduate’ managers came to be characterised by a more adversarial nature, as they were interpreted as being more authoritarian and disrespectful.

The insertion of a new type of manager broke the connection between the day-to-day management of the service and the working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work. As DOMs had previously had to work their way up from the postal worker grade, they had been schooled in the working culture, and so, they had carried this with them in the way they oversaw the daily activities of the DO. The new type of manager meant that there was now a new culture in this supervisory role, where the new style, enterprising culture could be asserted. In this way, the breaking of this connection aided the diminishment of the working culture.

Moreover, the experience of work for those moving through these processes of progression during this period was one that could put them at odds with the working culture within which they had been socialised. Progression was formerly seen as something to be valued; advancement was something to be proud of. Modernization meant that those who were going through processes of progression had to be trained in new managerial methods. This could mean that the way that they had to execute their role could clash with the way they conceived of the service, placing them on the side of an adversarial relationship they did not identify with. The priorities of the modernizing postal service were not necessarily the priorities that they thought should be those of the postal service. So, for some, despite the pride that was

involved with progression, it was something that caused a significant disruption in their self-identification and distress in terms of their ontological security. For some, this could be resolved by moving back on to deliveries where, though the role was changing and the model of 'traditional' postal work was weakening, they were still able to practice in ways that ascribed to this model and could re-establish their connection to the communities they served. Some though, were able to approach these processes in a more reflexive fashion and set aside their allegiance to 'traditional' postal work to further their careers; to use their resources to author their own work-life biographies within a workplace where the emphasis was moving away from communal approaches and becoming increasingly individualised in terms of success.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Becoming a Business: the commercialization and intensification of the postal service**

#### **Introduction**

The focus of the previous chapter was on the transformative effect of modernization on the nature of progression and career in the postal service. Progression had ‘traditionally’ worked in a manner whereby those who progressed to the roles of Postman Higher Grade (PHG) and Delivery Office Manager (DOM) were people who had gained experience through time spent as a postal worker. People who knew the job and had worked their way up. This largely entailed that postal workers respected those at these higher grades as they felt they had earned their positions through their day-to-day work (Strangleman, 2004; 2012). The form of progression served to help perpetuate the working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work, as those who were tasked with supervising the activities of postal workers, were themselves socialised from within that working culture. Modernization brought with it a change to how the management of the day-to-day activities of the Delivery Office (DO) was carried out, placing a greater emphasis on budgetary responsibility and accountability (Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio, 1995b; Jenkins *et al*, 1995; Fisher, 2009).

This change entailed a change in the experience of progression for those who had been socialised into ‘traditional’ postal work: for some this meant adopting a greater reflexivity to take charge of their own career to succeed (Potter, 2015; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003); for others the clash of cultures was too great, and the experience was one of identity crisis

and insecurity (Giddens, 1991; Gardiner *et al*, 2009; Mackenzie *et al*, 2006; Humphreys and Brown, 2002; McBride and Martinez Lucio, 2011; Strangleman, 2012). In addition to this, I argued that the growing employment of graduate managers was changing the nature of the relationship between postal workers and DO management, entailing increasingly adversarial relations (Giga *et al*, 2003; Harris and Godward, 1997; Fairbrother and Poynter, 2001; Diefenbach, 2009). There was a decrease in respect of DOMs by postal workers, with postal workers feeling new managers did not deserve their positions as they had not earned them through experience on the job (Strangleman, 2004; 2012). This clash of ideas was leading to the loosening of the working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work (Gelfand, 2018) with the supervision of postal workers increasingly being in the hands of those from outside of the working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work.

In this chapter I will build on this analysis through a focus on the connection and relationship postal workers had with the communities they served. I will show how the commercialization and intensification that came with modernization changed the nature of this connection (McDonough and Polzer, 2012) and how they thought they should carry out their work (Berg, 2006; Andersen and Andersen, 2007; Gill-McLure and Seifert, 2008; Leicht *et al* 2009; Coffey *et al*, 2009). In this way, modernization served to further diminish and loosen the working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work (Gelfand, 2018).

I will show how postal workers were embedded within the communities they served and performed forms of (non)work in the community (Lyon, 2009) that connected them to it and was experienced as a form of emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012 [1985]). This (non)work was important to postal workers: both in relation to how they viewed themselves as regards their labour, and the social significance of that labour. This community (non)work was not

necessarily part of their duties but was seen as what a postal worker ‘should’ do.

Modernization, and the commercialization and intensification of work that was a part of it attacked the ethic of public service within the postal service and made that kind of emotional labour more difficult to practice (Hochschild, 2012 [1985]). So, how did this modernization disrupt the connection between postal workers and their communities? How did it alter the experience of day-to-day labour for postal workers? And how was the importance of the public service ethic and the way in which they perceived the social significance of their labour affected?

### **A different kind of service?**

From the mid to late 1970s, postal workers were working the same hours as they had in 1971, but in a context of greater pressure and intensification (Keenlyside, 1977). But not only did modernization entail carrying out more work within the time constraints of their working day (Gill-McLure and Seifert, 2008; Siltala, 2013), the changes also meant that the way in which postal workers experienced their day-to-day labour was transforming. Modernization caused a conflict in terms of how postal workers interpreted and understood their daily labour through the working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work (McDonough and Polzer, 2012; Siltala, 2013). The change in emphasis of the organization eroded the working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work, breaking down the connection between postal workers and the communities they served, the postal workers they had considered as a ‘workplace family’, the organization, and the labour that they carried out: an emphasis from providing public service to providing customer service (du Gay, 1996), meaning that it was increasingly more difficult to enact their team performance (Goffman, 1959) in the way they had learned and become

acculturated to. However, this was an erosion, it happened over time. The changes that were implemented put 'traditional' postal work under attack, but these connections endured into the last decade of the century (and perhaps even beyond).

Former MP Alan Johnson, who served as a minister and cabinet member in successive Labour Governments between 1999 and 2010, became a postal worker in the late 1960s (he would later become General Secretary of the Communication Workers Union (CWU) in 1992) describes the importance of this ethic within the postal service in the 1970s: 'We Postmen were uniformed civil servants proud to be performing in a public service essential to the country's social fabric' (Johnson 2014). It was an organization where notions of 'duty' and 'service' were important and where not doing the job properly was seen as letting down both the public and their fellow workers (Johnson, 2014).

For Johnson, this ethic was in part due to the large numbers of ex-servicemen recruited by the postal service in the post-war period, a legacy of the war (Strangleman, 2012). This militaristic demeanour was reflected in some of the language that was prevalent within postal service terminology: work was 'duty'; instead of holidays postal workers went 'on leave' (Johnson, 2014). This can also be seen within official documents of the post-Second World War period:

...An officer may at any time be suspended from duty, if that course is considered desirable in the public interest in consequence of the officer being arrested, or having civil or criminal proceedings or charges of irregularity or misconduct made against him...[The Post Office Staff Handbook, 1967]



And:

...When an officer quits the Service he must return to the superior officer under whom he was employed at the time of leaving, all his uniform and any items of protective clothing which have not been certified as unserviceable, and all distinctive buttons and badges from old uniforms...[The Post Office Staff Handbook, 1967]

The military-like (and very male) bearing exhibited within the postal service at this time was not limited to the types of phraseology employed in relation to daily labour. There was also more than somewhat of a militaristic demeanour portrayed from the uniforms postal workers wore. This served as a material signifier as to the social significance of postal work: a job that required such a uniform must be 'official', must be important. This helped to reinforce an image of postal work as work to have pride in (Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008), and that should be respected.



6.1 Early postal uniform – letter carrier from the late 18<sup>th</sup>, early 19<sup>th</sup> Century

6.2 Mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century uniform

However, it should not necessarily be taken at face value that all postal workers within the service were diligently executing a service to the public. Many common practices of the time seemed to rather run contrary to the idealism and lofty visions of the service and of ‘traditional’ postal work. Practices such as intentionally taking longer to complete a walk to ensure that more streets did not get added to it or holding back items intended for second delivery to be added to the first delivery the next day ('shabbing') (Johnson, 2014). But though such practices seem to be contrary to the culture of ‘traditional’ postal work and the ethic of public service, they can be seen in relation to ‘behind the scenes’ actions, that whereas do seem to go against the kind of image that a team may be trying to convey through their performance, do not necessarily detract from that performance (Goffman, 1959). These kinds of practices though were thought of by postal workers as a normal and accepted way of doing things over the course of their day-to-day labour (Mars, 1982). They were also considered as compensating for the relatively low rate of pay in the postal service (Mars, 1982), as well as helping them cope with the monotonous and routine nature of the work (Roy, 1959). From the mid-to-late 1960s onwards, the postal service attempted to eliminate such practices, practices rather crudely referred to by Gall (2003) as ‘Spanish practices’.

Because of this, the intensification of work was seen as not only entailing that postal workers were having to carry out more work within a working day for the same rate of pay (Gill-McLure and Seifert, 2008; Siltala, 2013), but also that the ‘perks’ that had traditionally been expected (Mars, 1982), were under attack (Gall, 2007). The characterization of postal work in the post-war period is one where the pace of work was more leisurely (Gall, 2003). Postal workers out on their walk in the morning were able to get to know the members of the community who they served and strike up relationships with them in a form of emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012 [1985]). This aspect of their daily labour was significant in relation

to how postal workers perceived the social significance of that labour (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988; Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008).

The public service ethic meant that for many postal workers the provision of a service to the community (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988; Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008), one that was valued by that community (Kernaghan, 2008), was seen as a highly important aspect of their labour. Even after the drive to modernize and commercialize the service, this ideal was taken as more important than generating profit for the organization. The pace of work in the post-war period had facilitated kinds of (non)work (Lyon, 2009) that were carried out by postal workers in the community and the emotional labour that they entailed (Hochschild, 2012 [1985]). They were able to get to know people, develop deeper forms of relationships with them, and interact within the community. The intrinsic reward from providing a public service (Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008) was a fundamental aspect of the working culture of 'traditional' postal work. Commercialization was in direct conflict with this culture as it entailed the increasing commodification of work-time within the postal service (Jenkins *et al*, 1995; Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio, 1995b).

From the beginning of the modernization of the service in 1969, the culture of the organization and the way work was carried out could be seen as inhibitive to the objectives of this process. It was seen as necessary to eradicate such attitudes and traditions to achieve the kind of organizational culture change that was required (Daunton, 1985). This is reflected in HR material sent out to postal workers in the modernization process:

...Customer First involves a total, profound culture change in our organisation and in how we do things...[Customer First: Total Quality in Royal Mail, 1991]

The working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work was in conflict with the aims of modernization, and the commercialization of the service. The installation of the Thatcher administration following the victory of the Conservative party in the general election of 1979 only intensified both the pace and type of change within the postal service (Campbell-Smith, 2012; Senior, 1983; Dearing, 1986). This new government brought with it a different philosophical and political orientation towards the public sector, with a greater emphasis on commercialization and marketization (Pollit and Bouckaert, 2004).

### **Grandad, postal work, public service, and social change**

Grandad was part of the generation that went to war in 1939 as the Second World War took hold in Europe. The experience of the war had a profound experience in shaping the kind of society that was built in the post-war period. This was something not just borne from the horror of fighting, but from the experience of the whole of society (Lowe, 1995). It had been necessary for society to come together, to cooperate on a mass scale, work for the common good. The experience of war demonstrated how society could operate in a more collective fashion (Lowe, 1995). It was a society of higher levels of trust, social connectedness, and generalized reciprocity (Putnam, 2000). For Grandad this had more served to reinforce the kind of ethic that was already within him. He had always believed in a society that was not based on privilege and had been involved with trade unionism since the age of 14 in the pot bank. He believed in a society where the state looked after its people; in a state that provided services to its people that were run for the benefit of everyone.

During his time with the postal service, grandad combined his duties with his role as trade union representative. Trade unionism was very important to him, having first become a shop steward as a teenager in the pot bank at Armitage<sup>30</sup>, and as the Union of Post Office Worker's (UPW) representative he would regularly attend union conferences and events (see illustrations). He had a strong identification with being working class and with working class politics<sup>31</sup> (Beck, 2000; Bauman, 1998; Sennett, 1998). However, there is a certain ambiguity between grandad's trade union activities, his progression within the service, and eventual position as postmaster: the positions seem to be conflictual. Mum thinks that he did not really see a conflict and was equally as passionate about both his positions. Mum believes that grandad's bifurcated position did end up affecting him in terms of his relationship with the postal service:

...really management kind of saw him as a bit of a pain in the arse, a troublemaker, because of his union activities. He put in for hundreds of jobs as a postmaster, but they never came to anything, not until the end anyway. Then he got postmaster at Brownhills; I think they saw it as a way of getting rid of him. Cos [sic] if he'd had stayed on counters, they'd have had to put up with him till he was 65, but because he was postmaster, he could be compulsorily retired at 60. I don't know if he realised that he had to retire at 60, cos [sic] it came as such a shock to him. I think he was really upset; he wasn't ready to retire, he enjoyed his job...like a lot of people when they retire, I think he lost a bit of his identity, he was very proud of being a postmaster...

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<sup>30</sup>According to mum: '...He saw that people got a raw end of the deal and he didn't like it. So, he'd go up and argue the toss with the bosses, much to his dad's disgust; his dad sort of knew his place, totally different from dad who just didn't let that bother him. He resented privilege, that some people had it easy...'

<sup>31</sup>In the 1960s the Labour Party offered to pay for him to attend Ruskin College, with the aim for him to enter politics full-time with the party. However, according to mum, my nan's rather conservative family were horrified at the thought, and he was persuaded to pass up the opportunity, something that he was rather bitter about.



Pictures, from top:

6.3 Grandad at UPW conference social evening, 1962 Margate – grandad is sitting second from left, uncharacteristically with a pint in his hand - grandad is sitting next to his friend and colleague from Lichfield branch, Wally.

6.4 Group photograph at UPW course, Westgate-on-sea, near Margate - grandad is standing in the middle row, far left.

6.5 Postcard from UPW conference, 19<sup>th</sup> November 1962 Margate – you can see where grandad has marked his bedroom.

At the time of Margaret Thatcher's ascension to power, grandad was coming to the end of his working life, or at least the end of his career anyway. Turning 60 in 1980, he was compulsorily retired by the Post Office, something he did not take well. His union activities had entailed that even though he was good at his job, he was always viewed as somewhat of a troublemaker. He had a reputation, something that was remembered in the conversations that I had with several of the postal workers who knew him, and even one union official who remembered him. Mum believes that the postal service gave grandad his promotion in order to retire him at 60, rather than keep him on the counters for another five years. I don't know if it is true or not that this is what happened. It has always seemed a bit too much of a leap to me to think that the postal service would elevate him to such a responsible position for the purpose of retiring him. But maybe it was so; or maybe it was a happy coincidence for them to put someone reliable and trustworthy in charge (at least as far as the work itself was concerned), but also get rid of someone slightly problematic a bit earlier!

But grandad's retirement in 1980 meant that he retired before any of the larger changes from the Thatcherite programme of reform to public services had come into effect. This did not mean though that he had no opinion or feelings on what happened. The British Telecommunications (BT) Act (1981) enabled the privatization of the telecommunications part of the postal service and in 1984, 50.2 per cent of shares in BT were sold to the public. This was seen as the most important of the early privatization programme, a test case for later events (Institute for Government). Grandad was appalled at the sale of BT. He believed that the organization should be kept together, that the sale was bad for the postal service.

Grandad did not live to see the privatization of Royal Mail. He suffered a stroke at home in November 2006 and lived the last six months of his life in hospital and at Abbey Court care

home in Heath Hayes. He died after developing pneumonia in May 2007 at Stafford Hospital following a fall at Abbey Court where he broke his hip. He was 87 years old. Grandad's funeral was held at St John the Baptist Church in Armitage, the village where he had spent a large part of his life. The Communication Workers Union (CWU) sent a representative to the funeral; I read the eulogy. He is buried with my nan, Barbara, who died of cancer in August 1992.

Grandad had seen many changes in society over the course of his lifetime. The world was very different when he was born in 1920 in Stoke-on-Trent. I very much doubt he could have imagined the kind of events that his life would encompass and the type of social world that he would depart from; even the changes between his death in 2007 and the supercharged times of the 2020s seem immense. Over a century from his birth, the social world that children are born into now is vastly different to the one grandad encountered. Though it is one with more opportunity and choice (Giddens, 1991; Beck 1997; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; Bauman, 2005), more recognising of difference, tolerant and accepting (Putnam, 2000); it is also one of pervasive risk, unpredictability, and insecurity (Beck, 1992; Piketty, 2014), as well as less trusting and less socially engaged (Putnam, 2000). It is also one that is perhaps less cooperative (Sennett, 2012). In 2013 Royal Mail was floated on the stock exchange, with the remaining government stake in the business sold in 2015. It would have made him very angry. Alex, who took over from grandad as the local union representative, summed up quite nicely what his position would have been:

...He was quite a big union man, yes, yes [Alex laughs]...Oh he wouldn't have agreed with the stuff that's gone on...Your grandad, Stan Garner, he'd have blew [sic] his top; he would of blew [sic] his top!...It's nice to have known your grandad...he was a dedicated union man; he was good at his job...



Grandad thought that something would be lost in transferring the postal service into private ownership. That it was important for the service to remain as a public service and that it was important for it to be run for the benefit of the community.

### **Being embedded in the community: postal work and community (non)work**

The postal service of the immediate post-war period was a public service. This meant more than just postal workers delivering mail to members of the community: they *served* those communities (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988; Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008). Postal workers were embedded within the communities in which they operated. They were a part of the communities that they served; the communities were important to them because they were their communities. Serving these communities entailed carrying out forms of (non)work, carried out in the opposition between morality and instrumentality (Lyon, 2009), within the communities they lived to create a positive impact on those communities and the individual members who were constituent of it.

This (non)work (Lyon, 2009) was not a part of their official duties, yet it was a part of what was expected from postal workers as a part of their normal, day-to-day labour. (non)Work was carried out during worktime and remained un-commodified, and so, was viewed as anachronistic, antithetical to the forces of modernization. But for postal workers, in the context of the working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work, it was thought of as both what the inhabitants of the community expected of them, and as what they *should* do. Public service was seen by postal workers as an important aspect of the labour they carried out (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988; Perry, 1996; Perry and Wise, 1990; Perry and

Hondeghem, 2008) and was significant as to how they interpreted and identified with that labour (Siltala, 2013; McDonough, 2006), as well as to how they viewed its social significance (Kernaghan, 2008). The relationship with the public was important to postal workers, who valued the positive nature of those relations, something that was not necessarily the case with other uniformed services such as the police, whose uniform, unlike that of postal workers, could carry connotations of coercive power and discrimination (Bell, 1982; Whitfield, 2006).

For many postal workers, the community (non)work (Lyon, 2009) that they performed was fairly simple in principle. At the basis of it was a form of sociability as they were going about their deliveries. Steve, who had been a postal worker since the early 1970s, felt that at the heart of it, it was as simple as just being friendly when he was out-and-about on his walk in the mornings. But he felt that this was an intrinsic part of the job; it was *what you should do* (Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008). Even if this was just stopping for a chat, it was the role of a postal worker to *know* the people who were constituent of the communities they served (Hochschild, 2012 [1985]). It was an aspect of the job that Steve both identified with and loved (Freidson, 1990):

...I think it's cos [sic] I'm a very friendly, sort of chatty sort of a person. And generally, people want to stop and talk to you, or they want to give you a cup of tea or they're just, you know, they were just really friendly; not everybody. I mean you get the ones that won't, but a lot of people would stop and just talk...because you get to know people and you get to know about the villages where you go...because you need to be part of the culture that you're delivering to, I think...I feel as if I've been of use; I've done something important...

Out in the villages this was even more important due to the size of the communities and the closer-knit nature of the connections there. Ian operated from his father's village Sub-Post Office. He had worked as a relief postal worker when home for the summer from his university studies during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Ian felt that being friendly to the people in his community, to just stop and talk with people, meant you could begin to gain the trust of that community. The regularity of daily distribution aided the process of becoming known and trusted: doing the same walk day-in-day-out and seeing people at the same times at the same places (Strangleman, 2012). Stopping and talking meant that postal workers could not only learn the make-up of their communities, but they could also become trusted by them (Hochschild, 2012 [1985]):

...They'd see me coming and they'd be 'we've got you a cup of tea and a piece of cake', they knew exactly when I was going to appear. You know, everybody knew me...I learned a lot about the village and its people, just by talking...I could build up relationships with people I didn't know particularly well. But by delivering the mail to them, they knew me, and I became more familiar to them...so you had more of a rapport with them...they'd got confidence in me, so yes it was like a community thing in the village. It was very inter-related if you know what I mean because everybody knew everyone...it was instilled in me that what I was delivering was vital for the community...

This friendly nature could at times foster close relationships for postal workers with members of the community (Hochschild, 2012 [1985]), friendliness that goes beyond the transactional nature of just delivering mail. Though the villages surrounding the larger towns of the Cannock Chase area were more close-knit communities, close relationships between postal workers and members of the community were still fostered in the towns. These were relationships that could endure over time. Ellen, who became a postal worker in 1990 after

being nominated by her cousin, primarily did town duties from the Rugeley DO. She elaborates on this:

...I love to be out on delivery...there's so many people that you meet and, you know, you get to know your regulars and stuff and you get to know a little bit about 'em and it's surprising sometimes what people will talk to you about! They will tell you and you walk off and you just think, 'why on earth did they tell me that?!...

This aspect of the job was important. In part it is just being friendly, a disposition, passing the time-of-day to the people they were delivering to. But, in actuality it was much more than this. It involved a *deep* knowledge of the community and its constituents, and the development of social ties (Simmel, 1971; Blau, 1977) between postal workers and the members of the community. Postal workers were a part of the community that they were serving; it was more than just delivering the mail: as postal workers they were embedded within the community in which they served. In this way, 'being friendly' and just talking to people is a vehicle through which the postal worker could come to know the community and in turn, be known by that community: a form of emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012 [1985]). To know and understand the community enabled a postal worker to serve that community better.

The organization of work, and the ethic of public service, enabled the formation of these social ties through the 'physical propinquity' (Blau, 1977) that occurred as a consequence of these things. The organization of work gave postal workers the *time* to engage within their work-time in this emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012 [1985]), and the ethic of public service (Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008; Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988) entailed that they considered it *important* to engage in this way within the social space

of the community. The physical act of delivery is important to this, as this is what creates the spatial proximity that produces ties. But ties are dependent on these conditions: the postal workers as embedded within the community was a product of the temporal conditions of postal work, it means that they are tied to the members of the community, rather than just delivering mail to them.

Ellen elaborates how she would carry out her walk. The ostensibly basic way that postal workers would operate within the community hid something much more profound and significant. These were simple things, but things that entailed that postal workers were known in the community and trusted by that community: knowing the community and being known by the community:

...I used to come up to do this delivery and there was a guy who lived in Coulthwaite Way, I used to see him every morning stood by the side of the house, the bungalow having a cup of tea and you, it just starts with 'morning', or like if someone got a cup of tea you know and that sort of thing. Do you have time to have a cup of tea? You know that sort of thing, pleasantries. Then I started having the bag dropped there and then I started going in having a cup of tea. I used to do Coulthwaite Way, Kelly Avenue and McKie Way, and then by the time I got back he'd have a cup of tea on the table, and I'd sit for 10 minutes' and have a cup of tea. And I got to know his mum and I got to know his brother, just from him stood by the side of the house in the morning having a fag and a cup of tea...erm, but yea I do, that's the part of the job I do like. I still do stop, you know. Sometimes you're just pleasantries as you carry on walking; and you're just, you know, passing the time of day, 'are you alright?...

Ellen's words demonstrate an extra dimension in terms of the importance of a seemingly 'small' thing like having a cup of tea with someone (Hochschild, 2012 [1985]). However, such everyday and seemingly mundane routines and practices belie a social world that is

anything but, and through focussing on the ‘ordinary’ the complex and dynamic nature of social relations (Neal and Murji, 2015) can be revealed. In this way, the everyday practices of postal workers within the social space of the community helped to produce the community as a social space (Lefebvre, [1974] 1991). The social organization (i.e., the institutional arrangements, consensus politics, central planning) of the time enabled this form of production of the community through the social relations that it entailed.

Postal workers were embedded in the community, as in they were a part of the community that they served. They had a knowledge of that community and performed acts of (non)work (Lyon, 2009) that were for the benefit of the community as a whole. Postal work was a relational role, and this aspect of their work was seen as important by postal workers. The importance of this relational side came from the public service ethic, which placed the role of the postal service as one of providing a service to the public (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988; Perry, 1996; Perry and Wise, 1990; Perry and Hondeghe, 2008). The community (non)work that was carried out by postal workers may appear to be only simple, like pleasantries, but this belies the nature of them (Hochschild, 2012 [1985]). It was about knowing and understanding the community: the practices of everyday life that helped to produce the community. This way of working was enabled through the working conditions within the postal service at this time, and the type of society it was a part of.

### **The deeper side of postal workers’ community (non)work**

The forms of (non)work carried out by postal workers who were embedded in the community extended beyond sociability to deeper engagements, that would also involve practical tasks.

Ken became a postal worker in the early 1980s following the decline of the potteries industry. He felt a deep connection with the ethic of public service (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988; Perry, 1996; Perry and Wise, 1990; Perry and Hondeghe, 2008), and so, similarly to Steve and to Ellen, performing forms of (non)work (Lyon, 2009) in the community was important to him. Ken describes the kinds of shape this labour could take and how modernization was changing this way of working:

...Things like change a light bulb, you know anything like that. They could know they could rely on. We've found people injured; we've got the ambulance and the police and so on, like that: cos [sic] we were checking! But when it came to a business all you'd got to do was go out with your delivery. You weren't allowed to go in any property; you'd only got so long to actually deliver your mail...get it out; get it delivered; that's your job...

At times, community (non)work could go beyond normal everyday tasks, but all involved a more prolonged form of engagement (Hochschild, 2012 [1985]). Villages that did not have their own Sub-Post Office were served by van drivers from the DOs at the larger towns of the Chase. Doing 'the rurals' (driving out to the surrounding villages and farming communities) was a much sought-after van duty for postal workers. These duties were often assigned based on seniority and the postal workers assigned to them forged connections and bonds with the farmers and members of the community. Alex was assigned to 'the rurals' in the 1980s. He illustrates the types of (non)work that would be carried out on rural duties, things that were becoming incompatible with modernization and the pressure of work-time intensification (Hochschild, 2012 [1985]):

...I rounded sheep up [Alex laughs]: a little place that used to be called Thistlebank Farm, Abbots Bromley. We was [sic] trying to round up the sheep in this field. You couldn't see over the field, and I drove round the other side and round [sic] 'em up...

Postal workers who delivered to 'the rurals' knew their communities. Given the size and close-knit nature of these communities in comparison to the larger town, it was easier for postal workers, in the context of that type of local knowledge, to notice things that were out of the ordinary, or out of place. Out in the countryside in the surrounding villages, Dorothy saw it as a part of her duty to help look after her community (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988), to look out for things, to notice when something 'was not right', and notify the relevant authorities

...This one (**police**) man came up to me once in Goose Lane...he was in plain clothes... he says, 'Could you tell me where this gentleman is from this bungalow here?'...I said, 'I'm not supposed to give information out to strangers'...he got his ID out and he was a plain, plain. He was looking for this man who was selling drugs in the village: I said, '...I do know of him...I couldn't tell you where he is'; he said, 'If you do happen to see him can you ring us on this number'... and I always would take notes of cars, used to notice cars going passed one or two times...I took a photo, I took a car number...sent it to the police and it was it was a stolen car. Yea and they thanked me for that. And I used to keep an eye on the elderly people. If the curtains were drawn, the milk was on the step. I had, you know, shout, and see if they was [sic] okay and if not, I'd call a doctor or something...

Although much of the community (non)work that was carried out by postal workers was on the relational side of things, being social and friendly whilst out on their walk in the morning, such (non)work could also take a much more deep, prolonged, and involved form. This often took a practical form and could entail helping with routine day-to-day tasks that the members of the community needed assistance with. However, it could also mean helping the civilian



authorities with their duties. This was enabled through the knowledge of communities that postal workers had developed on account of being embedded within the community. Whereas the previous forms of non(work) involved shorter, more frequent instances of emotional labour, these forms entailed a greater investment, and more intense experience, in terms of time and closer forms of personal attachment (Hochschild, 2012 [1985]). The nature of that knowledge could often be affected by the nature of the community they were serving. The more rural communities tended to entail a deeper kind of knowledge due to the closer-knit nature of those communities. These forms of (non)work were seen by postal workers as things that they should be doing, as a part of executing a service to the public.

### **The public service ethic and the modernizing postal service**

As far as Ken was concerned, what went with community (non)work was a particular conception about what the service meant. The postal service was a public service (Campbell-Smith, 2012; Johnson, 2014), but it was also something that carried with it an important place within the community. To be a postal worker was to be someone important in the community, someone who was respected and recognised (Kernaghan, 2008). The labour that they performed had a particular social significance on account of that stature within the community. Ken expresses this in a way similar to how I remember grandad expressing it: the postal service was a *uniformed service*, one that entailed a certain degree of respect in being employed within it (Kernaghan, 2008). It meant that postal workers were instantly recognisable in the community on account of that uniform, and that the uniform served as a material signifier (Ewen, 2006), identifying them as someone who was trustworthy. In this

manner of thinking, the postal service was a service that should be viewed in the same manner as the other uniformed services such as the fire brigade or the police:

...cos [sic] you was [sic] just as official as a policeman would in theirs; like a fireman...You've best uniform and you'd all have to wear the same thing, shirt, collar, tie on; full uniform...we used to do school visits, and the kid's used to say, 'if you're in trouble somewhere come and see the police and the post people'. They used to see us like the police would. That they could trust us enough to go to us if they needed help...when I was working it was a service and it changed to a business...the service was for the community and communication and delivery. You were there as, like a fireman, like a policeman. You were part of the community, you were there. It was a service...I was working for the community...that was my job. If somebody needed help, we could do it...the uniform gives us that shield; it's that what you see, you know, yea, the uniform...if somebody sees it, they knew they could trust you...

For Ken, the casualization of the uniform was highly significant in the way that he felt about his job and the way that he was perceived by the public:

...Yea, once they changed all the uniforms...but that cos [sic] of the youths coming in, the younger and it totally changed...You know if you saw me in a uniform like that and then saw me the next day in a fleece, which they were, you know, they're still blue with a red stripe on and Royal Mail on there...it's totally different; it was totally different. The experience going round. I think what like, everybody said, well you're only a postman now you're in the fleece and that. I used to tuck me shirt in, but they were made so you could just have 'em out. All you do is just push rubbish through the door and me mother would say but you're different; you've got different things on. She could remember the full uniform. But they saw us as just somebody just shoving anything through the door. So, your bit of respect had gone really...

Ken is directly equating the commercialization of the service (du Gay, 1996; Keenlyside, 1977) with the casualization of the uniform. Both of which are linked to processes of

modernization and have entailed a perceived drop in the social status of his labour. The way that Ken was perceived by the public was very important to him (Kernaghan, 2008) as, in relation to the working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work, he conceived of his labour as being part of a connected society of generalized reciprocity, where doing good was a virtue in itself (Putnam, 2000). The smart and formal uniform was an outward sign, a material manifestation, of the good that Ken did, the social significance of his labour, and his place in society. This casualization was something that was akin to a transgression of the performance of postal work (Goffman, 1959). Whilst modernization was more ‘behind closed doors’ (Goffman, 1959), then this was not so bad as the performance could still be maintained: they still looked the same to the public. However, the casualization of the uniform meant that this transgression of performance was now in front of an external audience (Goffman, 1959).

The way in which work had been organised in the postal service from the post-war period had facilitated this approach to day-to-day labour (Johnson, 2014; Campbell-Smith, 2012). The pace of work was slower and there was time available within their working day to perform these types of (non)work (Lyon, 2009), with the emotional labour that was implicit within this (Hochschild, 2012 [1985]). Steve, who had joined the postal service in the early 1970s and had also progressed to the higher grades, was fully aware of how the nature of work organization within the postal service at this time enabled him to carry out his day-to-day labour carrying out these kinds of community (non)work:

...I’m an open sort of person and Royal Mail allowed me to be like that with people...it kind of taught you socialising skills, shall I say, cos [sic] you’re always out...always talking to people. I mean, that’s the one thing that you do miss...I was the most social person on me round ever...it never bothered me that people wanted to talk. I used to spend hours just talking, being friendly, you know. I didn’t really care what time I got back so long as I did me [sic] round...

The intensification of work was meaning that it was now harder for postal workers to engage in the emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012 [1985]) necessary to engage in these forms of community (non)work (Lyon, 2009). For some, it was not easy to accept or adapt to the new emphasis of the postal service (Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio, 1995a). Alex saw how many did not like this change in the experience of what it was to carry out their labour on a day-to-day basis and their ability to do their job the way they wanted (Berg, 2006; Andersen and Andersen, 2007; Gill-McLure and Seifert, 2008; Leicht *et al*, 2009; Coffey *et al*, 2009). Their connection to the ethic of providing a service to the public was strong and modernization in this way caused a conflict with the way in which they understood their labour (McDonough and Polzer, 2012):

...Well in 1980 and I suppose before, it was regarded as a service, you was [sic] a service...It's lost a lot of that now; it's not a service anymore...It used to be the GPO, didn't it? And that incorporated oh telephones and the General Post Office, but they privatised the telephones first...the maintenance department that was separated...then they took the parcels away which is now Parcelforce...Well its change isn't it. A lot of people don't like change and, er, it was a bit of a shock to some people. Some of the old one's used to harp on, oh we used to do this, we never used to do...

Commercialization was changing how postal workers identified with their labour (McDonough and Polzer, 2012). The ethic of providing a public service that they had once identified with was now declining in importance. For some, this was held to such an extent that it was experienced as a fracture in terms of their identity (Berg, 2006; Andersen and Andersen, 2007; Gill-McLure and Seifert, 2008; Leicht *et al*, 2009; Coffey *et al*, 2009). The individualization that is presupposed through the modernization process entailed the fragility of self-identity (Giddens, 1991). The satisfactions that had been derived through

the collective and collaborative approach to work, in addition to the provision of a public service, no longer provided the certainty of routine and habit (Strangleman, 2012; Sennett, 1998). The loss of this is experienced by some as a break in their ontological security, entailing an inconsistent experience in relation to the continuity of their biography (Giddens, 1991). In this way, we can perceive the prolonged industrial conflict that occurred in the postal service because of the implementation of modernization as not just about working conditions, but also on account of a defence of identity and the security of that identity (Gardiner *et al*, 2009; Mackenzie *et al*, 2006; Humphreys and Brown, 2002; McBride and Martinez Lucio, 2011; McLachlan *et al*, 2019; Strangleman, 2012).

But the commercialization of the service and the intensification of work time was not just meaning that postal workers could no longer practice forms of (non)work (Lyon, 2009) in the community, which had been enabled through the previous work arrangements. It also meant an erosion in the working conditions and benefits therein, which had been enjoyed by postal workers in those work arrangements. These benefits had been seen by postal workers as compensating for the relatively low rate of pay and the routine nature of the work (Gall, 2003; 2009). Alex describes this change in the material conditions of postal work:

...we used to sort all together, put all your rounds which means you would get out at quarter to seven and you was [sic] pretty well finished for half nine, quarter to ten. Then you was [sic] back to do your sorting for your second delivery and then you went out...you was pretty well finished an hour before your finishing time...but over the years Royal Mail have recognised that and they started to say that if you're there for eight hours, they want eight hours...But that was an incentive, see. Do the job, do it right and you can finish...but when you're going full bore all the hours that you're supposed to be working and more and you're back late, you haven't had a break all day

and then they pull a face when you say, can I have half an hour extra for doing all this extra work?...

The postal service communicated the modernization of the organization as one that was improving the service:

...Royal Mail has a simple target: to be recognised as the best organisation in the world distributing text and packages. Total Quality in everything we do is the aim; putting the Customer first our philosophy and way of getting that aim achieved...Customer First: Total Quality in Royal Mail, 1991]

For postal workers such as Alex and Steve, modernization meant working harder in the same work-time, for the same money, and had actually stripped away the quality of the service that they provided to the public as they could no longer practice their forms of community (non)work (Lyon, 2009) or emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012 [1985]). This is an effective deskilling of the labour of postal work (Braverman, 1974) in terms of a growing deployment of planning and rationalization of process, with an increasing emphasis on metrics and the need to meet performance targets (Fisher, 2009). This exposes a particular irony in that what is put forward as modernization, by the postal service, with a manifested language of dismissal of the past that went with it, can be conceived of as a demodernization. Work-time that could not be accounted for, that was not utilised in tasks that had a commercial value, were increasingly seen as dead time. This entailed the erosion of the working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work, with the ethic of public service no longer enabled through the working conditions within the service.

## **Reflexively adapting or performing ‘traditional’ postal work?**

Harry was nominated for his job as a postal worker in the early 1990s, having had several family members (Baugher, 2003) working at the DO in Rugeley. He had previously been a coalminer, working at Lea Hall colliery in Rugeley, but needed an alternative career following the closure of the pit in 1991. After moving into the postal service, he rose fairly quickly through the ranks to become PHG, before progressing on to become a DOM. Harry did see public service as important, but he was not as attached to this element of his job as many of his colleagues who became postal workers over the 1970s and 1980s:

...I mean at the time for me it's still, sort of, I provided a service to the nation... Well it was important really cos [sic] you were providing a service to the public you know. You're delivering the mail, and obviously it was an important job, though some people saw it more important than others. But for me it was like, you know, one of those... some people even felt proud to be doing it, if you like...

Harry's connection to the public service ethic though was not as strong as some of his colleagues. Providing a public service was something that he liked, but he was not particularly attached to it. He possessed more of a pragmatic view on the modernization of the service than many of his fellow postal workers. Harry's pragmatism meant he viewed commercialization as just something that happens; a change that entailed that one should just change along with it. Changing along with it was something that Harry did not really have a problem in doing and built his career as a consequence (Potter, 2015; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). He saw modernization as being about becoming more professional, business-like and customer focussed as an organization (du Gay, 1996; Osborne and Gaebler, 1992), and though he did feel some pride in providing a public service, the

change was not one that he really experienced as a loss. For Harry it was simply adapting to the times. The loss of the 'traditional' way of doing things was merely the price to pay for efficiency and professionalism. Maintaining connections to things like the service ethic was what Harry described as a 'legacy' attitude. Harry was more committed to a new form of team performance (Goffman, 1959) of postal work.

The lesser strength of Harry's attachment to the service ethic is perhaps explicable by the lesser amount of time he had been in the service before the intensification of modernization processes in the mid-1990s. He was someone who had already started what he thought was to be his career down the mine. However, the decimation of the coal industry had altered the path of his work biography and the fact that he had already experienced a period of radical unrest and the demise of his industry is significant. When Harry entered the service in 1991, he was in his 30s and had two children, and the process of modernization and commercialization was already well under way: he had not experienced the habit and routine of 'traditional' postal work necessary to base his identification in it (Giddens, 1991).

The changing moral order of the workplace (Strangleman, 2012) to the new neoliberal one was something to adapt to (du Gay, 1996) rather than something to bemoan or interpret as a loss. Harry's approach to the commercialization and the erosion of public service was not one of the break-down identity (Giddens, 1991). In the face of the breakdown of more traditional, collective sources of meaning (Beck, 1992), he changed with things, able to reconstruct his identity in the light of modernization and reflexively author his own biography (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1997). In adapting to the changing moral order in the postal service, Harry became the author of his own work-biography, taking ownership of



his progression within that new moral order (Strangleman, 2012), which was offering him the chance of a new career.

This is not to say that Harry did not care about his job. He had a deep belief in doing a good job; he took a great deal of pride in doing that job to the best of his abilities (Salaman, 1971), but his performance (Goffman, 1959) was one that was based in the culture of enterprise (du Gay, 1996): that it was important for the customer to receive value for money and quality of service. For Harry, there was no incongruity between the way in which he conceived his daily labour and the modernization of the service. His ethic was more in relation to work itself than to the postal service as (non)community work (Lyon, 2009). Doing a good job and putting in your daily graft was important for him in terms of his personal identification and for justifying his wage packet. Though providing a public service was important, work and career was more important (Potter, 2015; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

Ellen joined the service later in the time-period, in 1990, so at a time when the modernization process was already well underway. But she had still very much been schooled in ‘traditional’ postal work. Practicing her daily labour in a way that was commensurate with the way she had been schooled was important to her. This included such acts of community (non)work (Lyon, 2009) and a deep engagement with the community (Hochschild, 2012 [1985]). However, such practices are in a diminished form, more of an anachronism rather than as part of the everyday routines and practices of daily labour. The social arrangements that had once enabled the day-to-day practices that helped produce the social space of community that ‘traditional’ postal work sat within were no longer in place. This now meant that a different form of community was being produced through everyday practice, one that

was more transactional than relational. But maintaining the performance (Goffman, 1959) of her job in this manner was important to Ellen (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988; Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008), so much so that even in the face of the intensification of worktime, she still tried to maintain this performance, even if to a lesser extent, in a manner she could still consider to be like ‘traditional’ postal work:

...I think it as pride....Pride in your job innit [sic]? It’s just pride in your job, what you’re doing I think, yea. For a lot of new staff, it is, yea **[less important]**...it is just a job, go to work, do your job, come home, you know. It’s easy to say it but, and I dow [sic] do that. I do, you know, get up, go to work, come home that’s it, job done; but I still want to take pride in the way that I do my job, personally...I like to do things properly...

For Ellen, to maintain her practice in this way was a point of pride; a pride in the way that she performed her job and as to what the service itself represented. In his re-working of Goffman, Scheff (2013) discusses shame as a key driver of human behaviours in late modernity, something that drives ‘performances’, to hide shame and be accepted by others. The risk that shame implies within individualised societies, where people are compelled to go it alone, means people engage in performances to suppress and hide that shame (Scheff, 2013). The individualization of the workplace that came along with the modernization process entailed that Ellen no longer experienced the satisfaction from the relationships she found within the communal working conditions of the DO. But she is able to act out a minimized form of ‘traditional’ postal work whilst out on her walk.

The pride (Scheff, 2013) that she feels on account of this is a mask to the shame at not being able to carry out her daily labour in the manner that she was socialised into. We can also see

this in relation to ontological security (Giddens, 1991). Shame is a part of the breakdown identity, the fragile identity. The carrying out of the practices of ‘traditional’ postal work in this way can be seen as habits and routines that guard against the breakdown of ontological security; patterns of behaviour and routines to act as protection from anxiety (Giddens, 1991).

That her performances are public performances is also significant. This is also about what other people’s perceptions are about her practice as a postal worker, about what the community thinks about her in terms of the perceived violation of her performance (Goffman, 1959). This is significant as Ellen saw a part of the value of her labour in relation to the social significance of it, and the way in which she formed an integral part of the connected society and generalized reciprocity (Putnam, 2000). In engaging in her minimized ‘traditional’ practices, she can abate some of the negative self-image that she feels in relation to how she thinks other people view her. Ellen interprets her former practice in relation to how she came to practice her job, how the service was and how she thinks it should be. In addition, that her routine and habitual practices maintain her identification with ‘traditional’ postal work (Strangleman, 2012) entails that she experiences more difficulty in transitioning to the entrepreneurial culture (du Gay, 1996) as she experiences processes of continuity and change within her daily labour.

Commercialization and intensification were reducing the scope for postal workers to practice in the manner of ‘traditional’ postal work (Berg, 2006; Andersen and Andersen, 2007; Gill-McLure and Seifert, 2008; Leicht *et al*, 2009; Coffey *et al*, 2009), and perform community (non)work (Lyon, 2009). However, postal workers found ways to maintain this practice, albeit in a diminished way, in the modernizing service as a way of re-asserting their occupational identity (Gardiner *et al*, 2009; Mackenzie *et al*, 2006; Humphreys and Brown,

2002; McBride and Martinez Lucio, 2011; Strangleman, 2012; McLachlan *et al*, 2019; MacKenzie and Marks, 2019) and culturally distancing themselves from the ‘new-style’ postal service (Andersson and Tengblad, 2009; Carvalho, 2012).

For those who entered the service in the earlier part of the period, over the 1970s and 1980s, there was a tendency to have a stronger connection to a public service ethic. This was before the pace of modernization, as well as its reach and effect had increased. This does not mean that postal workers entering the service later did not possess a service ethic or adhere in different ways to the working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work. But that moving towards the end of the century, ‘traditional’ postal work was loosening as a culture (Gelfand, 2018), and diminishing in importance as the way in which postal workers conceived their labour.

The experience of work-time was being transformed for postal workers. It was meaning a reduction in their autonomy in terms of they were no longer able to do the job in ‘the way they saw fit’ (Berg, 2006; Andersen and Andersen, 2007; Gill-McLure and Seifert, 2008; Leicht *et al* 2009; Coffey *et al* 2009). The previous attitude of ‘as long as the work gets done’ no longer fitted in with the modernizing workplace. Modernization meant that more work in the same amount of time was now required (Gill-McLure and Seifert, 2008; Siltala, 2013). Though it might be construed that these former practices were contrary to an ethic of providing a public service, postal workers did not consider this to be the case (Goffman, 1959; Mars, 1982). As far as they were concerned, there was a discipline around work that meant that they always ensured the work got done (Strangleman, 2012).

## Conclusion

The working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work was underpinned by an ethic of providing a public service, which was a significant factor in the identification between postal workers and their day-to-day labour. This ethic entailed placing an importance on carrying out forms of community (non)work. This was not a part of their duties but was considered normal practice and was made possible by the way in which the postal service was organised at this time. Such (non)work might at times have had an air of superficiality, but this belied a deeper social complexity that helped reproduce the community as a close and cohesive space. It could involve brief bursts of interactions, and consisted of sociability and talking, but could also involve deeper and longer interactions that can be thought of in terms of an emotional labour that entailed a bond of trust between postal workers and those communities. In this way, postal workers were embedded within the community: their work was an investment of the deep knowledge that they possessed of those communities, that they were themselves a part of. This work was seen as important by postal workers and reinforced their interpretation of their labour as socially significant.

The commercialization of the service entailed an intensification of work that meant that there became a more limited scope for practicing such forms of non(work). The prioritization of targets meant that there was less worktime within which to execute the required emotional labour to carry it out. The speeding up of these interactions was perceived by postal workers as a kind of deskilling of their work; a demodernization that disrupted the kinds of close relationships that postal workers had with their communities and undermined the service ethic and perceived social significance of their labour. The weakening of the public service ethic hits at the very heart of ‘traditional’ postal work.

However, traditional postal work was obdurate and durable. Those with a strength of identification with 'traditional' postal work found it difficult to assimilate to the new culture of enterprise. This could be experienced as a threat to ontological security. As such, 'traditional' postal workers found ways to maintain the performance of their daily labour in the 'traditional' manner, albeit in a reduced fashion. This maintenance served as a resource, a form of protection for identity in the face of the destabilizing effects of modernization, guarding against the shame and anxiety that was associated with the disruption to identification caused by the new performance. This meant that modernization entailed processes of continuity and change for such 'traditional' postal workers. For those with a weaker form of identification, it was easier to adopt the new culture and be more pragmatic towards change.

The casualization of the uniform served as an outward sign of the reduction of the social significance of their labour. Their previous smart uniforms had entailed that they were a uniformed service, like the police or the fire brigade, and deserving of the same kind of respect. The introduction of casual forms of uniform was interpreted as a violation of their performance, diminishing the importance of their labour, and reducing their significance in the community. As far as postal workers were concerned, it meant that the public would perceive them differently.

## **Conclusion**

### **Identity, culture, and community: change and continuity**

#### **Going out with a bang**

I was born in 1979, four weeks and one day following the general election that saw the Conservative party of Margaret Thatcher, defeat the incumbent Labour party Prime Minister James Callaghan. Keynesian economic management had proved unable to deal with the repeated crises within capitalism from the mid-1960s, bringing about a period of socio-economic change and the advent of flexible accumulation (Harvey, 1989). The advent to power of the Conservatives in 1979 marked the start of a political programme that built on these beginnings of change and was a catalyst for the more wide-ranging changes that were to come. With it came the complete abandonment of Keynesianism and the start of the neoliberal reform that would continue over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, with the privatization of state-owned industry, welfare reform, and the deregulation of the labour market and industrial relations framework (Johnson, 1990). Though this point did not necessarily mark the start of change, either in society in general or in the postal service in particular (a starting point for change is much harder to pin down than that, it is much more diffuse and happens rather incrementally), it did mark a point where a political programme for change, was placed alongside a society where the beginnings of change had already taken root.

The society that I was born into, and which formed the early part of my socialization over the course of the 1980s was a very different world than the one I stepped into as a fully-fledged

(in a legal sense anyway) ‘adult’ on the 1<sup>st</sup> of June 1997, four weeks and three days after the general election that saw the landslide victory of Tony Blair’s ‘New’ Labour, proclaiming ‘Things can only get better’. So much had changed over those eighteen years, much of that change encompassing the timeframe of the modernization of the postal service, and the experience of work for these postal workers. This change was not really something that I appreciated or thought about at the time; I suppose as an eighteen-year-old this is not something that you do. Looking back, I feel differently. The benefit of the distance of time is that it gives a perspective with which to view and analyse the things that have happened, the change that has occurred: to examine it. I feel that in a way this parallels the process that the postal workers who became my collaborators went through as they recollected their working lives.

My postal worker collaborators were looking back on their working lives from the present, trying to make sense of the change that had happened and the loss of the moral framework that had shaped their lives (Strangleman, 2012), in a critical engagement with their past: a reflective nostalgia (Davis, 1979). And for me, in looking back on the change that had encompassed the lives of these postal workers, I was also looking back at the processes and changes that had characterised my own life: of the society I had grown up in during the 1980s and how I had come to be an adult in my mid-40s in the 2020s, making a sociological account of their working lives. The very changes that had changed the nature of the working lives of these postal workers, that caused them to mourn the loss of the moral framework that had shaped their lives, were the changes that had entailed that I ended up here, looking back on all of this. I can’t help but think that had I been born a generation earlier, then the trajectory of my own work-life would have been very different, as would my sense of my own work-based identity.



For me, it is fireworks that seem to represent the point of departure, when the moral framework that had shaped my young life began to change. As a young boy I spent a lot of time behind the gates on the site of the two power stations at Rugeley, where my dad worked. The power station provided several leisure facilities for the workers and their families: a social club, a golf course, a boating lake, football pitches. We spent our Saturday afternoons at the social club, playing space invaders on the table-top arcade; went to Christmas parties there where I would dance to Agadoo and the Ookie Cokie and get the Beano annual from someone dressed as Santa; go out sailing with my dad on the boating lake. Whole social lives were lived behind the gates of the power station and it was a large part of my formative years, in much the same way as the 'workplace family' at the Rugeley DO had been for mum a generation before: work provided a structure by which life could be organised (Strangleman, 2012). This relational aspect to the way in which work was organised was informed through the same kind of ethos that entailed that those postal workers went out into the community and performed their community (non)work (Lyon, 2009). There was a fundamentally relational aspect to work that has eroded in the time since.

Every year in November there was a firework display at the power station. It was an event that was organised and ran by workers from the station and was attended by all the families of the workers (also by people in the community in general, though non-worker families had to pay to attend). They were wonderful events which we would very much look forward to every year. There was a van selling baked potatoes, and we would stand in front of the enormous fire, fed with pallets and bits of furniture collected from workers months in preparation of the event, spiralling our sparklers and writing our names in the air with them. In 1990, as the electricity industry was being privatized, turning from the Central Electricity

Generating Board (CEGB) into National Power, there was another firework display; this one organised by National Power. This one was bigger, better, and longer than any of the others that had gone before<sup>32</sup>. I remember being awestruck at the amazing colours and the sheer noise of it. This was the fanfare that ushered in the era of privatization at the power station. Looking back, it also seems to me to represent a line of demarcation at where the sense of community that we had experienced behind the gates of the power station began to fade. Not that this happened straight away, but the events got less, and the sense of structure that had been provided, began to be less important. At around the same time in the postal service, the pace of modernization was beginning to gather speed, and the way in which postal workers were experiencing their day-to-day work, was beginning to change.

As I became an adult in the late 1990s, I did not really know what the future was going to hold for me. The trajectory of both my life, and my work-life, is one that I could never have predicted as an eighteen-year-old. However, had I been born a generation earlier, this would almost certainly have not been the case for me. It is likely that I would have had a job for life and would never have left my hometown. My own question of identity construction would have been settled through birth and tradition (Bauman, 2005). This is both a positive and a negative. I may have been deprived of the security and predictability of a ‘standard’ biography, but my own ‘*homo optionis*’ (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001) biography has involved levels and types of opportunities and experiences that I would otherwise have never encountered. In this way, I can see that my own life, and work-life, trajectory is one that is inherently bound up with the changes that transformed the working lives of the postal workers.

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<sup>32</sup> As if to make an implicit point maybe? As to how bigger, better, shinier, louder, and more exciting the future was to be in this new era.

This brings me back to grandad. In the narrative of postal workers that I have presented, my grandad represents the foundation of the moral world that they went to work in: a moral framework derived through the legacy of the war and transmitted through the discipline and structure of the workplace (Strangleman, 2012) and located within a context of social connectedness and generalized reciprocity (Putnam, 2000). This was the moral framework that structured the early part of my socialization, a framework that had begun to erode by the time of the fireworks.

But had this erosion entailed that the foundation from work to provide me with a basis of identity entirely disappeared with the passing of the industrial modernity, and that I am now constituted in terms of my identity by what I consume rather than what I produce (Bauman, 1998)? Maybe this is true to a certain extent. The work-life biography that I have been in the process of writing through my condemnation to choose (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001) has been one that has entailed that I have never really had the consistent experience of time within a particular form of work to develop an identity from it, or sense of belonging to it (Sennett, 1998). I find it a rather interesting, though slightly ironic point, that someone whose work experience has entailed that they have never really developed an occupationally based identity, should have a profound desire to research the occupational identity of others. But perhaps the fundamental point here is that the relationship between generations is complex (Strangleman, 2012). And so, though my work-life trajectory has been a transitory one, that has encompassed differing types of labour, in differing areas, there is a common thread which, when it is followed, encompasses the way that I have negotiated that trajectory (Potter, 2015).

It is that thread that is significant both in terms of encompassing the working lives of these postal workers, and me as a sociologist. That thread is the importance of work with meaning: of feeling that through the enactment of this labour of sociological writing I am at least trying to do something that contributes to something larger than the 'I'. This may seem like somewhat of a grandiose statement, but I feel it is more idealistic intent. That through my own identification in terms of this work, I am able to do justice to their work and to articulate their sense of identification with it, the sense of loss that goes with the changing of the moral order within which that work took place, and the way of life that accompanied it.

In this way, though I am attempting to reflect on this period of change in a way that does not do violence to the experience (Strangleman, 2007) of those postal workers who enacted that labour on a day-to-day basis, this is not by the way of a 'simple' nostalgia (Davis, 1979) that does not engage critically with the aspects of this society, and of 'traditional' postal work, that can be seen in the light of social exclusion. This was after all an era that had a greater prevalence of restrictive and repressive attitudes as regards to gender, race, nationality, and sexuality, all of which bear relevance to the case of 'traditional' postal work. To me this would run counter to the ideal of intent. These issues should not be left out of the light of scrutiny but placed alongside the loss in the final analysis. This is a reflective nostalgia (Davis, 1979), one that aims to be historically sensitive (Inglis, 2014), and place events in historical context (Strangleman, 2023), in order to come to a better understanding of the past (Strangleman, 2007). This, I hope, is work to be proud of, and is the legacy of the thread that I have taken with me, inherited through my grandad, and embodied through the postal workers.

## The ‘legacy of the war’ and ‘tradition’

I have been referring to the working culture of postal workers as ‘traditional’ postal work. As I have stated before, referring to it in this way has not been with the intention to imply that this was the way that things had *always* been done within the postal service. This would imply a very long maintenance of such a culture and way of doing things due to the sheer length of history of the postal service. The foundations for ‘traditional’ postal work were laid in the immediate period following the Second World War; the erosion of ‘traditional’ postal work had its beginnings by the start of the 1970s, only two and a half decades after the end of the war. ‘Traditional’ postal work occupied this particular point in time, associated with the ‘standardized’ (at least for some) forms of labour of this period. But for the people who occupied this point of time, it came to be seen as the way things *should* be done; as a way of doing things that was *traditional* and had been inculcated by an *old school* of workers, many of whom had served during the war: a collective that defined itself with a sense of belonging and of its own history and tradition (Jenkins, 2000; Thomson, 1996).

The 1970s represents a kind of turning point, a sea change against ‘traditional’ postal work where things began to change (a gradual change, not a revolutionary change), a process of modernization and commercialization that had begun with the removal of the postal service from the civil service in 1969. By the middle of the 1990s, postal work looked very different than it had when my grandad joined the service in 1956. This is not to say that it was entirely different, or unrecognisable. There were certain continuities with the past that we can point to, showing the complex nature of the relationship between generations and the more problematic nature of work-based identities (Strangleman, 2012).

It is hard to underestimate the significance of the experience of the Second World War as an influence in the forming, and reproduction of ‘traditional’ postal work. This is both from the way in which the experience of a more communal form of the organization of society during the war came to influence the post-war society (Lowe, 1993), in addition to the way in which those who had served during the war then shaped the working culture within the postal service in terms of discipline and structure, providing a moral order for the workplace: the ‘legacy of the war’ (Strangleman, 2012), that was fostered through the relatively stable and prosperous conditions of the ‘long-boom’ (Harvey, 1989). This was a society where there were greater degrees of trust, where people were sustained in a web of mutual obligations (Putnam, 2000). The postal service at this time was a product of this society, whilst also helping to reproduce it through enabling its employees to practice their labour in the manner they did. It was this organizational form that facilitated the carrying out of forms of (non)work in the community, entailing the deployment of the emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012 [1985]). These forms of community (non)work (Lyon, 2009) were seen as important by postal workers, something that they should do on account of a deeply held public service ethic.

### **Public service, the ‘workplace family’ and relations of trust: the condition of time in ‘traditional’ postal work**

The ethic of providing a public service underpins the culture of ‘traditional’ postal work. In a way similar to that found within the constructs of the public service ethic (PSE) and public service motivation (PSM), postal workers were motivated to do work that they felt was good for, or important to society (Perry, 1996; Perry and Wise, 1990; Perry and Hondeghem,

2008), possessing a sense of ‘duty’ as regards that provision (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988), and placing a high regard on the *intrinsic* rewards of such work, as opposed to the *extrinsic* rewards (Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008). Postal workers were bound together through the internalization of these principles (McDonough, 2006) and were proud to provide an important and valued service to the public (Johnson, 2014).

I am not trying to suggest that intrinsic reward was the only motivational factor for labour in the culture of ‘traditional’ postal work, but that it was highly significant. Postal workers were still performing their labour in terms of need, i.e., they had to work in order to live. But these intrinsic rewards were extremely important and formed the basis of the working culture of postal workers and the way in which they came to be embedded in their work. This entailed that providing forms of community (non)work (Lyon, 2009) was highly important in postal work in terms of a source of intrinsic reward. Such (non)work was enabled through the organization of work before modernization and a conception of work time as not necessarily commodified. Community (non)work was a highly significant factor in the coherent team performance (Goffman, 1959) of ‘traditional’ postal work. But the pride of performing such labour was not just an internal process, external recognition of the social significance of their labour as a significant source of pride concerning their labour (Kernaghan, 2008).

The condition of time moving into the 1970s was an important factor in the reproduction of ‘traditional’ postal work. The way that time was experienced in terms of a continuity of experience and sustained narrative of employment enabled people to become embedded in their work (Strangleman, 2012). In addition, it also aided the development of ‘character’ and the skills necessary for social mutuality and cooperation (Sennett, 2012; Strangleman, 2012).

The working culture was tight in terms of the way they worked with each other, in terms of both physical proximities, but also in terms of cooperation and a strong sense of norm conscientiousness (Sennett, 2012; Gelfand, 2018). A close cooperative way of working was very important to postal workers, as was the way in which they were involved in each other's lives in wider social life, something that my mum remembers well from when grandad was a postal worker. This closeness was often felt by postal workers to be like a 'workplace family'. These were not the social relations of mere workmates, but of people who had wider significance in their lives.

However, this sense of the 'workplace family' was not just important in the figurative sense, it also carried with it biological significance. There were several people working within the Delivery Office's (DOs) who had multiple members of their family also working there. Whereas this could aid a closeness, or togetherness, and reinforce the strong sense of identification that was felt in terms of the collective identity, or the 'we' at the workplace, in relation to both what they were, and what they were not (Jenkins, 2000), it could also operate in an exclusionary manner. Those who did not conform to what the 'we' was, as defined by the group, could be excluded (Gelfand, 2018); the way in which work was organized at this time, could mean that certain individuals might not get opportunities for either employment, or advancement, on the basis of particular characteristics: because of not being 'one of us', the 'we'.

In relation to what became the 'we', respect and trust were fundamental principles within the culture. They can almost be seen as commodities which enabled the cooperative and collaborative forms of work to operate. It was important for postal workers to be able to trust each other due to the nature of working with the post: postal workers possessed a strong



group definition of the 'we' (Salaman, 1971; Gelfand, 2018). The generation of trust was enabled through the bonds of obligation that were created through such things as the nomination system of recruitment (where people came ready defined in relation to this 'we') and the relationships that were allowed to develop through the experience of time (Sennett, 1998). In addition, the manner of progression reinforced the culture through rewarding experience on the job (Strangleman, 2012). Authority was legitimized through this experience, meaning there was a great deal of respect for people at higher grades (which was reciprocated) because they had done the job. This reinforced the culture as the people who supervised the activities of postal workers, were people who themselves had been socialized in the culture of 'traditional' postal work. There was a consistency of performance across these hierarchical boundaries (Goffman, 1959).

### **The condition of time in a modernizing service: the erosion of public service and the breakdown of trust**

Though attempts to modernize and commercialize the postal service had begun in the 1970s (Campbell-Smith, 2012; Daunton, 1985), following the election victory of the Conservative party in 1979, reforms began to take on more of an ideological bent, gathering pace by the late 1980s (Jenkins *et al*, 1995). These processes of modernization attempted to disrupt the prevailing culture, and insert a new culture (du Gay, 1996).

The commercialization of the postal service undermined the culture of 'traditional' postal work in a number of different ways. Primarily among these is how it acted to undermine the notion of the ethic of public service. Commercialization entailed a changing emphasis in the

way that time should be treated within the postal service. In the working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work time is not particularly conceived in a commodified sense; so, there is not necessarily a problem seen in time spent in work from which no monetary income can be derived. This left a gap for practices of carrying out community (non)work (Lyon, 2009). Money was not seen as important in such practices by postal workers, as the important factor was their utility in terms of the public good. This involved an emotional labour by postal workers (Hochschild, 2012 [1985]), who invested their time and feeling in interactions with the community, with whom they developed relationships of trust.

The experience of the intensification of time made this kind of emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012 [1985]) more difficult to practice, with forms of community non(work) (Lyon, 2009) conceived of as ‘dead time’: time from which no monetary value can be derived and so, not to be tolerated. Commercialization entailed the stripping back of the amount of time possible to be spent in working in the public good with acts of community (non)work, preventing postal workers from carrying out their work in the way they thought it was best done (Berg, 2006; Andersen and Andersen, 2007; Gill-McLure and Seifert, 2008; Leicht *et al*, 2009; Coffey *et al*, 2009). As such, the intensification of work time undermined this ethic of service (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988; Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008; McDonough, 2006) that underpinned ‘traditional’ postal work.

Changes to recruitment meant an opening up of the *type* of people who became postal workers. This did mean that there was less exclusivity in terms of recruitment, but it also entailed a weakening of the bonds felt between postal workers. Postal workers perceived that there was now no way of knowing that you could trust the person you were working alongside as these were people who were not known to them. It was felt that they did not

necessarily possess the same conception of work as they did: they did not conform to the same team performance (Goffman, 1959), possessed a more individualized outlook (Strangleman, 2012), and could not really be considered as a part of the ‘we’ (Jenkins, 2000). The erosion of bonds of trust and obligation meant that the forms of cooperative and collaborative work began to decline, as relations within the workplace became more fugitive (Sennett, 1998). Consequently, there was a breakdown in the transmission of values and the moral order of the workplace onto the new generation of workers (Strangleman, 2012), eroding and loosening the working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work (Gelfand, 2012)

Furthermore, these changes also led to a reduction in the *pride* that was felt from the performance of work for the good of the public. In one way this was from an internal sense of pride that was derived through doing work that contributed towards the good of society (Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008). However, the external recognition of the importance of their labour was also an extremely important source of pride (Kernaghan, 2008). For postal workers, a visible sign as to the deterioration of this recognition, and so of the social significance of their labour, was manifest in the ‘casualization’ of their uniform. In ‘traditional’ postal work, the uniform had been an outward sign as to the significance of their labour, and the officialness of postal work. As modernization progressed, and the ethic of social service was eroded, the uniform became increasingly less formal. The casual nature of the uniform was a violation of the performance of ‘traditional’ postal work (Goffman, 1959) and was perceived as a reduction in the degree of external recognition as to the social significance of their labour.

## **The maintenance of ‘tradition’?**

The transmission of this new type of entrepreneurial culture, however, was not always passively accepted or necessarily successful (du Gay, 1996) and the change that happened was gradual. Even though modernization changed the way that work was carried out within the DOs and had consequent impacts on the working culture, there were also significant continuities with the past, due to the complexity of the relationship between generations (Strangleman, 2012). Postal workers continued to find ways to practice their work in the manner of ‘traditional’ postal work, maintaining their team performance (Goffman, 1959) in this manner, as a form of resistance in experiencing processes of transition, change and increasing individualization (Gardiner *et al*, 2009; Mackenzie *et al*, 2006; Humphreys and Brown, 2002; Mackenzie *et al*, 2006, McBride and Martinez Lucio, 2011; Strangleman, 2012) and guarding against the breakdown of ontological security (Giddens, 1991). These practices reasserted their identification with that culture, albeit in a minimalized form. However, there was still a distinct sense of loss at the passing of the ‘traditional’ way of doing things, at the togetherness that was experienced as a consequence of it.

## **Identity and the importance of public service**

Strangleman (2012) noted the importance of the structure and discipline of day-to-day labour as significant for the formation of occupational identity. For postal work a fundamental aspect of the day-to-day practice of postal work was the ethic of public service (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988; Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008). The ethic was the basis from which postal workers identified with their labour and was enacted

through the carrying out of forms of community (non)work (Lyon, 2009). This work was not part of the normal duties or responsibilities of postal workers, but was non-the-less, carried out as a part of the regular routines of their daily labour. It was work that was carried out in the community, for the good of those people within that community.

This was a relational activity, an emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012 [1985], that could consist of something as simple as just social pleasantries, a conversation, or a cup of tea, but could also consist of deeper interactions that involved more of a substantial investment and prolonged period of time. However, on a different level it could also involve assisting the civil authorities in keeping communities safe. But in some ways, the actual form that the community (non)work (Lyon, 2009) took was not really the important part in terms of the identification; it was more the fact that it took place that was important. There was a simplicity to community (non)work, but this belied the complexity of what was taking place and the way in which it helped to reproduce the community.

Part of the importance of the community to the identification of postal workers is on account of that they are from the communities that they served: they were a part of those communities and embedded within them. What this meant was that postal workers had a deep knowledge of their communities and used that knowledge in the day-to-day practice of their labour through their emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012 [1985]). Postal workers were connected to their communities and felt a sense of responsibility to those communities. This connection and sense of responsibility was what was being enacted through the ethic of service via acts of community (non)work.

‘Traditional’ postal work was about more than just delivering the mail. Postal work as a job involves unsociable hours, and is routine, and monotonous. The service ethic meant that the labour of postal workers had meaning; that they were providing something important to the public, something they could be proud of, in a similar way as with PSE and PSM (Horton, 2006; Rayner *et al*, 2011; Staats, 1988; Perry, 1996; Perry and Wise, 1990; Perry and Hondeghem, 2008), something that had social significance in the perception of that public (Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008). The postal service provided people who wanted to work for the good of the public, but were in a routine, unskilled occupation, with a place where they could do so, where they could experience such intrinsic rewards, as noted with PSM (Perry, 1996; Houston, 2000; Kernaghan, 2008). I am not trying to imply that this was the only reason for people wanting to work in the postal service. These were normal people with bills to pay and children to feed, and so their primary reason to work was to satisfy the immediate needs that they had in these regards. But their identification with the ethic of public service was important to them and gave their work meaning.

This is not to imply that everything about the way that postal workers went about their daily labour was consistent with the public service ethic. It was normal for postal workers to do such things as take longer than necessary to do a walk, hold back items intended for the second post, or get ‘fliers’ (Johnson, 2014; Gall, 2003). However, these things can be seen as normalized ‘cheating’, that could be considered a perk of the job, compensatory for the relatively low rates of pay (Gall, 2007) and were tacitly accepted by supervisors, distinguished from more deviant and criminalized forms of behaviour (Mars, 1982). These things did not violate the team performance of traditional postal work as they went on behind closed doors (Goffman, 1959). Though this is not exactly consistent with the public service ethic, it did not necessarily detract from it, or from the identification with it.

### **False consciousness or a critical nostalgia?**

It is evident that the reminiscences of postal workers should not be dismissed as ‘false consciousness’ or simple nostalgia (Beck, 2000; Bauman, 1998; 2005; Gorz, 1999). We should treat the memories and recollections of the work-life experiences of these postal workers with the respect that they deserve in order to come to a more nuanced idea of the form of identification (Strangleman, 2007). The recollections of postal workers presented here seem to display a genuine affection for their labour. They talked of their time on the post with a sense of fondness, love, and even reverence (Gabriel, 1993) and displayed a distinct identification in terms of the service ethic, and the communities they served.

However, it was also evident that they engaged critically with that past, interrogating their recollections (Davis, 1973), and examining them (Gibb, 2021). Postal workers were aware of such things as the biases and stereotypes that had shaped their work-lives, the effects that their labour had made upon their bodies and the ways in which they had been exploited. They discussed such things clearly and critically, whilst maintaining an identification with their day-to-day labour. Change in the workplace, and the demise of the ethic of public service that they had identified with and the moral order of the workplace, was experienced as a loss. This was a loss in terms of the structure and stability that work had provided in a world that ‘made sense’; looking from the present to the past, trying to make sense out of the change that has occurred (Davis, 1973; Strangleman, 2012; Strangleman, 2013).

The behaviour and approach to work of some new recruits by the mid-1990s just didn’t make sense to these ‘traditional’ postal workers. It did not fit in with their moral order and the way they conceived of the service and violated the team performance that they had internalised

(Goffman, 1959). Such things as having to keep watch on workers to ensure that items of the post did not go missing did not fit in with their conception of the way that work *should* be. This was criminal behaviour that went well beyond the normalized and accepted forms of cheating (Mars, 1982). You should be able to trust the person you worked alongside: their honesty, and the integrity of their performance (Goffman, 1959). These things were just expected in ‘traditional’ postal work.

### **Individualization: reflexivity and ontological security**

In a way similar to that found by Strangleman (2012), new recruits coming into the postal service from the mid-1990s were perceived by ‘traditional’ postal workers as having a more individualized and instrumental approach to work. There was a decline in the importance of intrinsic reward, in favour of extrinsic reward, and relations in the DO were becoming more fugitive (Sennett, 1998) as you didn’t know how long any person may be working alongside you for. Consequently, there was a demise in the sense of the ‘workplace family’ and the extent to which postal workers socialized with each other, and participated in organized activities, began to decline.

For those who could take on a more reflexive attitude in terms of their work-life trajectory, there was a different form of reward that was possible: that of career (Hancock and Tyler, 2004; Ashforth *et al*, 2008). The kinds of ‘self-work’ (Bauman, 2001), that was necessary to negotiate this changing workplace (Potter, 2015; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003), entailed that the new logic of the workplace had to be internalised and taken forward into practice: they had to become a part of the new entrepreneurial culture (du Gay, 1996). This involved



an adoption of a reflexive attitude in taking on the responsibility for the construction of this career and identity (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992). Those willing to take on these risks and gain positions within a newly conceived form of management based around metrics, budgetary responsibility, and the importance of meeting targets (Fisher, 2009) became the 'reflexivity winners' (Lash, 1994).

With these postal workers, there could be a clash in terms of the identification with 'traditional' postal work and the service ethic, and that of the entrepreneurial culture (du Gay, 1996). This identity clash was negotiated through a process of pragmatic management. Though an identification with 'traditional' postal work was held, pragmatic considerations concerned with the notion of career, and the differential rewards that are associated with it, were seen to override this. However, where there was a weak identification with 'traditional' postal work, the new enterprise culture could be taken up without crisis. In this way, 'traditional' postal work could be perceived as just a thing of the past. As such, the pursuance of career became a pragmatic choice in terms of a reflexive confrontation with the self. Such things as the perceived importance of providing for the family acted as an important mediatory factor.

For Joanne, there was another factor that was pertinent in terms of her negotiation of her career trajectory. She had always felt that she had to work harder, wait longer, and apply more pressure, than her male counterparts, to get opportunities for progression. This is consistent with findings that the implementation of managerialism has been associated with the disadvantaging of career progression and the limiting of potential for women (Edwards, 1998; Miller, 2009). In order for her to succeed, she felt she had to be like a man in a man's world.

For those ‘reflexivity losers’ the adoption of the identity associated with the entrepreneurial culture (du Gay, 1996) was too much of a clash with their identification with ‘traditional’ postal work. Disruptive events such as these can cause periods of transition for people where they struggle to make sense of what is happening (Conroy and O’Leary-Kelly, 2014). For postal workers such as Ken and Steve, this process involved a rupture in the sense of self-identity and represented a threat to their ontological security (Giddens, 1991). The sustaining of their performance of their role in relation to ‘traditional’ postal work (Goffman, 1959), acted as a form of defence against the negative consequences of modernization and disruption of identity. This performance, albeit in a reduced way, could mask the shame that was felt on account of not being able to perform work in the ‘traditional’ way (Scheff, 2013). This is a process of both continuity and change, in both practice and identification into this modernizing era and can also be seen as a way in which postal workers could culturally distance themselves from that modernization through the continuation of their ‘traditional’ practice (Andersson and Tengblad, 2009; Carvalho, 2012).

### **Issues of change and continuity: a summary**

Though modernization began to change the working culture of ‘traditional’ postal work, and the form of identification of postal workers with their labour, this was a gradual process. Though much had changed from my grandad’s time in the 1950s and 1960s, there was also much continuity up until, and into the 1990s. There is much that he would not have recognised in working in the postal service in the 1990s: there had been a diminution of the service ethic and a restriction of the ability to carry out forms of community (non)work.

There had also been an erosion in the sense of trust between postal workers, in the 'workplace family' that my mum remembers experiencing when she was a young girl, and in the way that postal workers worked alongside each other in a collaborative and cooperative way in the DO first thing in the morning. I think that he would have found these things particularly galling and probably unsettling.

But grandad was a fighter and had fought all of his life. Maybe that was another legacy of the war. I think that he would have been proud of the extent of the fight that postal workers put up in the face of modernization over the 1990s and into the 2000s (see Gall, 2003; 2007). I think he would have been proud at the extent of continuities of experience that postal workers were able to exert over their work and form of identification with that work in the face of the incursion of managerialism and attempts to shape the cultural identity of postal workers. The relative time it took to privatize the postal service as opposed to the other nationalized industries seems indicative of the extent of the importance of this identification with the endurance of this resistance over such time. Though it was a fight that ultimately failed, I think he would have been impressed with the level of fight that was directed to postal service management. This would be a useful area for further research.

I think though, that similarly to the postal workers who were my collaborators over the course of this research, he would feel the loss of the structure of a way of life. This is part of what makes the illustration of this case important: because it is representative of an erosion in the practice of social forms that were relational in nature, that were about mutual social bonds and communal relations; skills of cooperation, collaboration, and reciprocation, grounded in social connectivity and the importance of community. The loss of such things raises important questions concerning the maintenance of social mutuality and cohesion. And

though ‘traditional’ postal work also raises significant issues from that era in the shape of attitudes towards gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and lifestyle choices (that contemporary society still contends with), we could perhaps learn lessons from both its positive, and its negative examples.

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## Appendix One: Participation Information Sheet

Dan Forbes – University of Kent

### The Dawn of a New Era? Modernization and Royal Mail

I am inviting you to take part in this research study. I am a PhD student at the University of Kent, and I am researching into the experience of postal workers from the initiation of organisational change within the service from the 1970s onwards. You are being asked this due to your employment at the Post Office at this time. The study is looking at the experience of postal workers, told from their own point of view, looking at workplace identity and organisational change in the Post Office. I will be carrying out interviews from April 2020, to September 2020. **It is likely that interviews will take place over two to three separate occasions of around an hour each. Participation in the study is purely voluntary and you are able to withdraw at any point in its duration. Interviews will be recorded and all recordings will be held securely by the researcher.** You can request that any part of an interview be redacted if you do not wish it to be included within the final write-up of the research. This study will give you the opportunity to tell your own story, in your own way, of your working life.

Should you decide that you wish to participate in the study, then, initially all relevant background and contextual data will be gathered. This will be stored securely, under password protection, by the researcher, who will have sole access to this data. The interviews can be carried out in a place that is convenient and comfortable for you, be it your own home, a coffee shop, or pub. Interviews are likely to take around an hour to complete, and it is anticipated that you will be involved in two to three interviews. Before the commencement of any interviews, and during the interviews, you can ask any questions that you may have concerning the research and the interview process. It is your right to be able to withdraw from the research at any stage should you so wish.

The research will form the basis of my PhD Thesis, and the data produced will be deposited in the archives at the University of Kent where it will be available for any future secondary analysis and/or any future publication. Following the research, I will also provide you with information regarding the results and conclusions from the research and can offer any feedback you may have to me regarding both the research process, and any conclusions that have been drawn from the research.

This research is being funded and supervised by the University of Kent. If you have any further question concerning the study, or you would like any more information, then please contact Dan Forbes: Tel – 07480295332 or [df276@kent.ac.uk](mailto:df276@kent.ac.uk). In the event that you should have a complaint, during any stage of the research then please contact Tim Strangleman or Dawn Lyon at the University of Kent: [t.strangleman@kent.ac.uk](mailto:t.strangleman@kent.ac.uk); [d.m.lyon@kent.ac.uk](mailto:d.m.lyon@kent.ac.uk)

Thank you for taking the time to read this and for your consideration.

Thank you,

Dan Forbes: PhD Candidate, University of Kent, SSPSSR.

## General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) Privacy notice for research – University-level

As a university we use personally-identifiable information to conduct research, including to improve health, care and services. As a publicly-funded organisation, we have to ensure that it is in the public interest when we use personally-identifiable information from people who have agreed to take part in research. This means that when you agree to take part in a research study, we will use your data in the ways needed to conduct and analyse the research study. Your rights to access, change or move your information are limited, as we need to manage your information in specific ways in order for the research to be reliable and accurate. If you withdraw from the study, we will keep the information about you that we have already obtained. To safeguard your rights, we will use the minimum personally identifiable information possible.

The University Charter sets out that ‘the objects of the University are to advance education and disseminate knowledge by teaching, scholarship and research for the public benefit’ (paragraph 3).

Health and care research should serve the public interest, which means that we have to demonstrate that our research serves the interests of society as a whole. We do this by following the UK Policy Framework for Health and Social Care Research.

If you wish to raise a complaint on how we have handled your personal data, you can contact our Data Protection Officer who will investigate the matter. If you are not satisfied with our response or believe we are processing your personal data in a way that is not lawful you can complain to the Information Commissioner’s Office (ICO).

The University of Kent’s Data Protection Officer can be contacted at:  
<https://www.kent.ac.uk/infocompliance/dp/contact.html>

## Appendix Two: Consent Form

### The Dawn of a new Era? Modernization and Royal Mail

Dan Forbes

#### Participant Identification Number for this project:

1. I confirm I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. If I need to contact the researcher then I can use the following contact details: 07480295332 or df276@kent.ac.uk .

☐

3. I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis, though there is still a possibility that identification may still be possible. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses I understand that the publication of anonymised direct quotes as a consequence of the research may occur.

☐

4. I agree to take part in the above research project.

☐

5. I agree to have my interview recorded.

☐