Macho men or pragmatists?[*]

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Over the last decade or so occupational health historians have produced a large body of work which has helped identify weak regulation and corporate irresponsibility as major causal factors of occupational disease, injury, and death. Combined with the archival evidence some historians have also successfully used oral testimony to help reveal the personal experiences of occupational injury and disease. Amongst the writers using this methodology McIvor and Johnston have explored the male-dominated asbestos and coal-mining industries and have argued that the need to earn income forced many workers to become inured to risk. They have also posited that a deeply entrenched **machismo work culture** existed and that this was exacerbated by the workers' need to maximise income.[i] Drawing on the oral testimonies of chemical workers – an equally male dominated and hazardous industry - I will argue that an overriding need to earn income forced generations of workers to face and deal pragmatically with risk and danger. They did not seek or accept risky and dangerous work to demonstrate or nurture machismo but rather these conditions were imposed upon them by those who had a much greater power and control over the workplace. This paper will therefore seek to qualify the thesis posited by McIvor and Johnston.

Show slide Richard Fitzpatrick

Richard Fitzpatrick left school in 1931 aged 14 to begin earning his living. He had a brief stint in a dairy and then went to work with a local demolition firm. It was here that he first encountered some of the immediate and obvious dangers found in the workplace. He continued in this job until 1939 when he started working in the chromate manufacturing firm of J & J White of Rutherglen. I asked Richard what he knew of Whites chemical works before he went to work there:

PLAY 'I really didnae think it was a place to be workin' in

So, just as with most workers who went to work in Whites both Richard and his father suffered the effects of a perforated septum

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PLAY – **hole in septum**

PLAY – chrome ulcerations

And, like many who worked with chromates they would also sustain damage to their skin in the form of chrome ulcerations or as they were known by the workers chrome holes.

As we've already heard, based on what had happened to his father Richard didn't think Whites was a place to be working in so I asked him if he had been frightened about going to work there. This is the reply he gave to that question

PLAY 'Naw, naw, I wisnae frightened about anything.

Richard's rejection of my suggestion that he might have been frightened could be perceived of as machismo. Machismo is defined as an exaggerated sense or display of masculinity which emphasises courage, physical strength, aggressiveness or even a lack of emotional response. As I said at the beginning McIvor and Johnston have commented on the presence of 'a deeply entrenched machismo work culture' within the asbestos and coal-mining industries [ii] However, I believe that to define what was happening in this way is to inadvertently give a negative and inaccurate description of workers and how they responded to the working conditions they had to endure and over which they had only limited control.

The culture of machismo in this context has to be seen as emerging from and acted out as a consequence of the exploitation of the worker at the point of production. As we've heard, Richard's own explanation for his lack of fear was that he had been 'well bred as a worker.' This can only mean that he had learned to accept that work and danger were inseparable. He didn't take risks to prove his masculinity. He became the man he was as a consequence of being repeatedly exposed to both work and danger and this taught him the need to overcome or suppress instinctual

fears and apprehensions. Working in poor and dangerous conditions became a norm allowing him to be accepting and pragmatic about the situation hence his view that: 'It wis a job and it wis money.[iii] His learned values of work then became rooted serving as standards from which to measure others.

This can be heard in his comments made about a fellow Whites worker:

PLAY Great wee gentleman,

To the historian of occupational health and safety this scenario presents a clear picture of poor and dangerous working conditions. However, the fact that pipes were badly maintained and leaked onto the bodies of the workers was presented by the narrator as a matter of fact situation – it was normal. We're also told that his workmate was accepting of the poor and unsafe conditions sustaining several injuries to his body but 'typically' making no complaint. The admiration of physical strength and the ability to ignore the discomfort and pain of the chrome and liquor holes is obvious but is this evidence of a machismo work culture?

From this testimony and other work I have done on this chemical plant there is little doubt that the working conditions in Whites were poor and that those who went to work there would have had some knowledge that they too could become injured. However, there is no evidence to show that the injuries sustained by the Whites workforce were caused by a machismo work culture – by the men taking unnecessary risks. The work was available locally and local men in need of work went to work there. When they did - many became injured **just by being there**. The alternative was to work somewhere else – perhaps on a demolition site, or a shipyard, a steelworks, or even down a coal mine – all jobs that were on offer to the working classes and all equally hazardous just by being there. In Richard's case there is even some evidence to show that he took what limited steps he could to avoid injury.

PLAY 'If you were working with the stuff [chromates]

Indeed – it was just one of these things. This sort of statement helps to demonstrate the routine acceptance of poor working conditions and their effects. Richard had

been bred as a worker and had learned to take what limited steps he could to avoid becoming injured or killed. The fact that he and many others lost the septum and suffered from chrome ulcerations simply reflects the fact that they were expected to earn a living and that they were expected to do so in poor and risky conditions. They didn't always wear their muzzles when they walked about the plant but is this really evidence of a machismo work culture? As Richard himself said 'what else could he have done?'

A case of rheumatic fever forced Richard out of Whites in 1945 but some years later and still suffering from the physical damage caused by his exposure to chromates he did what many others had done before and submitted a claim for compensation – a way to deal with occupational injuries and death that had been promoted by the state and employers since the late nineteenth century.

PLAY My father was seventy-five and I thought he should have

I should point out that the £75 award was made posthumously - and hence to his Richard's mother.

By the 1960s, trade unions had become more established and confident within what had been an intrinsically anti-trade union industry. Often having to work with limited information and resources they nonetheless successfully campaigned for improved working conditions and brought to a halt the use of certain carcinogenic substances that had claimed victims for years.[iv] Despite these efforts dangerous and unpleasant working conditions continued to be found in the industry including in some firms that were reputed to be the best. For example, in the 1970s a wage-payment system was introduced by Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI) which ranked jobs by their level of danger.

Show slide – sodium workers

By assessing jobs in this way ICI were placing a value on the health and safety of their workforce, a value which was calculated in relation to the overall cost of production which of course allowed for profits to be generated.

Show slide – chopping cyanide

Crucially, however, these types of 'wages for risk' schemes helped legitimise and normalise the continued presence of risk and danger in the workplace and helped underpin future systems of risk assessment including the informal negotiations around 'dirty money':

It is of course possible to criticise the practice of negotiating for 'dirty money.' However, as I have argued employers sought to normalise risk and danger through the implementation of their 'wages for risk schemes' – schemes that were allowed to operate by the government and which were policed by an under-resourced inspectorate. Both wages for risk schemes and negotiations for dirty and danger money were endorsed by employers and ignored by the state. Of course these schemes rendered risky and dangerous conditions acceptable, production remained unhindered, and they offered a cheap alternative to the costs associated with the proper prevention of hazards. For the workers, constrained by social and workplace structures, this was an opportunity to increase their wages in the short term. The alternative to this scenario would have been to refuse to do to the work. However, as one former chemical worker told me the men needed the income and the work and to refuse to do dirty work often led to management threats of process or plant closure. This was also at a time when processes were being exported to other countries which had more compliant workforces and an even less robust regulatory system than the UK. So, under these circumstances it was the norm to negotiate for dirty money and I would argue that this was nothing to do with machismo but simply a pragmatic response.

However, where specific occupational health threats had been discussed at a wider public level and acknowledged by the state and employer through the implementation of robust regulations and practices workers, especially those in trade unions, were more able to respond to risky and dangerous situations in a determined manner.

The removal of blue asbestos insulation at a chemical plant in Dumfries provides an example of how an informed and empowered worker could respond to risk. In this first clip the narrator reveals his suspicions and distrust of the employer

PLAY We had heard aboot blue asbestos

As shift supervisor he was shown the works order and the detailed removal procedures for the asbestos which stated the work had to be done under negative atmosphere. Unaware of what this actually meant he asked the chief engineer responsible who replied, 'Oh they'll have some sort of extraction system.' On the weekend of the asbestos removal the shift supervisor asked the contractors how they intended to create the 'negative atmosphere' but was told that they had forgotten to bring the extraction system. The shift supervisor telephoned the senior engineer to let him know what was happening and recalled the engineers and his own response to this situation:

PLAY I'm gonnae see the shop steward' I says 'there's no way if that's blue

So we can see that even with legislation in place this worker had to make a determined stand to prevent this potentially dangerous situation taking place. He had refused to sanction the work despite being encouraged to turn a blind eye. This decision was made possible for him because he had knowledge of the legislation, he knew about the potentially lethal consequences of blue asbestos, he had a trade union behind him, and he would also have known that given the circumstances if this incident had been made public both the company and subcontractor would have been in trouble. If this incident had happened a few decades or so earlier he would probably have reacted the way others did when they handled asbestos - in ignorance and in danger and for that he may have been assessed as contributing to a machismo work culture.

Conclusions

What I have tried to argue is that most workers had little choice but to sell their labour power even when risky or dangerous conditions were on offer. Consequently their attitudes and responses were shaped by their experiences and by allowing

generations of workers to be exposed to these conditions employers and the state were complicit in normalising the situation. Richard Fitzpatrick dismissed suggestions of fear in relation to his starting work at Whites. But he didn't do this within a culture of machismo but in his own words because he saw himself as having been 'bred as worker' – danger and work were interlinked, it was just one of those things, it was a job and it was money. He and others didn't chose poor and dangerous working conditions to prove they were men – they became the men they were because of their exploitation by others and ultimately the bodies of many men became damaged in their attempt to earn a living for themselves and their families.

Thank you for listening.

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[i] For example see: R. Johnston and A. McIvor, 'Dangerous Work, Hard Men and Broken Bodies: Masculinity in the Clydeside Heavy Industries, c.1930-1970s', *Labour History Review* 69 (August 2004) pp.135-151; and McIvor and Johnston, *Miners Lung.*

[ii] McIvor and Johnston, *Miners Lung*, p.237; Johnston and McIvor*, Lethal Work*, 2000

[iii] SOHCA/022/ Richard Fitzpatrick

[iv] For a more detailed account see D. Walker, Occupational Health and Safety in the British Chemical Industry, 1914-1974