Race, Gender and Networks in Portfolio Work: Difficult Knowledge

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Abstract: This paper reports findings of our qualitative research exploring the multiple ways in which race, gender and class processes impact on portfolio work, with particular attention to networking processes.

Our study focussed on "portfolio work", a recently-identified category where individuals create packages of self-employed work arrangements to contract their skills in a variety of contexts. Portfolio workers are, in effect, independent knowledge workers whose work conditions are inherently flexible and often mobile. In particular, we have been examining individuals' negotiations of networks as an essential activity of both learning and labour in portfolio work. This paper presents one part of our findings, emanating from our analysis of 18 interviews with men and women of colour who are self-employed in portfolio arrangements in western and central Canada. This part focuses on the experiences of these individuals negotiating what are clearly gendered, racialized and classed knowledge networks of self-employment. We conclude the paper with implications of this analysis for deeper understanding of gender and race issues in work and learning, particularly in self-employed portfolio work.

The Centrality of Networks in Portfolio Work

Self-employment and particularly portfolio work has been increasing in Canada, now occupying over 17% of Canadian workers, with the greatest growth occurring among women (Fenwick, 2003). Researchers of portfolio work or "the boundaryless career" have described it as an important emerging category of self-employment deserving closer study (Cohen & Mallon, 1999; Gee, 2000; Gold & Fraser, 2002). A central activity in the work and learning of portfolio self-employment appears to be participation in multiple networks. Some have argued that such individuals' employability depends on ability to adaptively and flexibly 'shape shift' to integrate themselves into and produce knowledge for different networks (Garrick & Usher, 2000; Gee, 2000). Knowledge issues within these networks can be understood in two ways. First, portfolio workers' capacity to find and maintain the clients who provide their income is closely linked to the value placed on the knowledge they offer to these clients, a value which depends on shifting need, worker's credibility, client's perception of knowledge relevance and degree of trust, 'packaging' and selling of knowledge, etc. Second, portfolio workers' labour is bound up with continuous production and 'transfer' of knowledge. As such, they need both connections with networks of information and opportunity, and the capability to identify and translate knowledge in different networks. Portfolio workers' participation in networks, therefore, involves building client relationships and exchanging knowledge for income, accessing others' knowledge and translating it to local problems, and brokering knowledge or 'bridging' across different contexts. Within these networks, portfolio work may be experienced as hostile as well as exhilarating. Challenges include crossing boundaries between organizations and occupations, creating new vocational identities, adjusting to risk and flexibility forming the new psychological contract of the boundaryless career, and creating non-traditional worker-employer relationships (Cohen & Mallon, 1999; Gold & Fraser, 2002). Gender inequities exacerbate the challenges of these conditions for women (Fenwick, 2003; Hughes, 1999; Mirchandani, 1999). Women's mobility through self-employment is deeply influenced by their access to 'business networks'. Staber and Aldrich, 1995) argue that "networks are crucial assets for owners" and "affect the life chances of their enterprises" (p. 444). In contrast, many self-employed women of colour experience networks as structures of nepotism and exclusion (Mirchandani, 2002).

Much of this literature, typical of the growing literature on self-employment, has focused on white men and women, or ethnic minority men. The "woman entrepreneur" has become constructed in an essentialist manner focusing on the sex of the owner, without addressing issues of race at all (Mirchandani, 1999). These studies highlight the gendered nature of self-employment, but fail, as Zeytinoglu and Muteshi (2000) note, "to be attentive to how race, class, and citizenship have been underlying forces in the constructions and arrangements of flexible work, and how that work is differentially experienced by women along the trajectories of difference in industrialized countries" (p. 111). The result is a positioning of Whiteness as an invisible norm. And just as in adult education literature, as Shore (2001) shows, all others are compared to the White norm and described as deficient and disadvantaged, as though their rescue depends on the dominant group. "Whiteness as the unexamined norm has left the burden on groups who have less power to create ways in which they can achieve more and become more like the norm" (p. 128).

Insights from Feminist Anti-Racist Theory

To be better attentive to these intersecting forms of inequality in our own analysis, we have drawn from feminist anti-racist theory which highlights the situated and interrelated nature of race, gender and class as processes in specific geographical and historical contexts. Glenn (1999) argues that such "processes" take place through representation (symbols, images), micro-interaction (norms) and social structure (allocation of power along race/gender/class lines) (p. 9). Razack (1998) urges exploration of the meanings of this dimensions, and their shifting relations, as they come together to structure individuals in different and fluid positions of power and privilege (p. 12). Our analysis examines the ways that racialized, gendered and classed forms of stratification intersect and overlap in sites of portfolio work, and particularly in the processes of networking that become central activities in the labour of portfolio workers. That is, both client networks and networks of colleagues who may be sources of opportunities and new knowledge are situated within hierarchies of privilege and inequality linked to race, class and gender differences. People of colour, and especially women who depend upon these networks for their employment and knowledge experience exclusion and disadvantage. However, they learn strategies for survival that demonstrate high levels of resilience, resourcefulness and creativity, defying stereotypes of the helpless victim that appear in literature describing ethnic entrepreneurs and immigrant women. Further, some construct resistant positions requiring them to learn how to negotiate difficult race politics as part of portfolio work.

Methods

This qualitative study used a life history approach (Dominicé, 2000) to explore work experiences narrated by 'portfolio workers': self-employed individuals who contract their services to various organizations and clients in a variety of employment relationships, in what may be described as portfolio work. This paper focuses on a portion of the findings produced in the entire study, in which over 40 men and women based in five Canadian cities who described their work in these terms are being interviewed in-depth. Interviews and subsequent analysis explored two general areas: 1) individuals' perceptions of and learning strategies for coping with the *conditions of portfolio work*, including benefits, challenges, resources, economic structures and so on; and, 2) individuals' learning through *negotiation of knowledge networks* as part of portfolio work, including access and inclusion/exclusion, nature of knowledge produced, recognition of their knowledge, and strategies of participation. For this paper, findings are reported from 18 interviews with men and women of colour among the participant group, and one woman who works with people of colour. These participants live and work in Ontario and

Alberta in a range of sectors, including manual labor such as garment work, construction and custodial work, as well as professional work such as education and nursing. They report a variety of gendered, immigrant-related and racialized experiences confronted in their work histories. In-depth interpretive analytic procedures (Ely, 1991) were used to create and validate a narrative representing each participant's experiences, after which transcripts were coded and categorized at increasing levels of abstraction to discern both shared and exceptional themes. Then transcripts were analysed critically using a feminist anti-racist frame (Glenn, 1999; Morokovasic, 1991; Rasack, 1998) to identify the active ways in which men and women of colour structure their self-employment in a labour market characterized by simultaneously occurring racialized, class-based and gendered exclusionary practices.

Participation in Networks

People who are self-employed spend considerable time and energy developing networks, both client and collegial, to support their work. As part of the process of generating and sustaining these relationships, they identify fruitful points of connection and actively construct positions for themselves at the nexus of these points. This process involves considerable labor additional to the multi-faceted work of self-employment, and considerable learning. This learning is partly strategic, partly about the structures of power, and partly about deciding how to position oneself within these structures. As Anne, an organizational developer, observed, "Some of the learning just comes from being in the wilderness and being a woman. Being a racialized woman means that I had to learn how to survive. That is quintessentially about organizational power" (ll.1417-1419).

Establishing Credibility. Nancy, a white woman interviewed explained, "Without networks there isn't a business – it exists in the networks" (Nancy, ll. 1240). One's past job is crucial, she noted, for building credibility with prospective clients of providing valuable knowledge, and for linking the portfolio worker to the higher decision-making levels in the organizations to whom contract services are being pitched. Reputations are built in an informal, tacit realm where judgments about a person's capability and trustworthiness can be based on hunches, rumor, appearance and personal prejudices. Meg, an organizational developer who often worked in partnership with a black woman, claimed: "It's very much word of mouth and in that respect it's very privileged too because it's mostly white people hiring" (ll. 872-873). In a competitive market of service offerings, without the instant status and credibility afforded by employment with a recognized organization, portfolio workers must find ways to prove themselves trustworthy to each new client. As Sasha explains,

> When you say to someone you're a freelancer they don't know what to make of you. And they're not exactly sure whether you're serious. And they're not exactly sure where what they tell you is going to wind up. It would be much easier if I could say I'm working for [a major corporation]. (Sasha, ll.524-531)

Educational credentials would appear to be key in establishing credibility, but almost all of the individuals interviewed who were new immigrants to Canada had been forced to find work in occupations other than what they had been educated to do. Accreditation for their own professional qualifications involved either extensive further training and internship or expensive examinations. For example Elena, a professional engineer, found the only jobs open to her upon arrival in Canada were cleaning and sewing. After some months in the difficult conditions and low wages of a garment factory, she quit and began to contract out her own sewing services. Clive, a dentist, started a cleaning business then an alarm installation service on the side to help pay for his cleaning equipment, as well as a DJ business to earn extra income at night. So from

the start, these people confront the learning challenge of building credibility in unfamiliar networks – in areas much different from their training – at the same time as they are learning how to do the new work. But the credibility and networks they are building is for manual labor or non-professional services, which moves them further and further from spheres in which their own knowledge might be contracted. Women especially, regardless of their professional qualifications, tended to be drawn into portfolio work that contracted feminized labor of cooking, child care, home nursing, sewing and cleaning. This physical low-wage labor isolates portfolio workers from broader, inter-organizational networks and requires long hours to make a living wage, thus inhibiting workers from building professional networks and development. But even among women knowledge workers who contracted to larger organizations, the struggle for credibility was acute, particularly among women of colour:

> Maybe because I'm a woman, maybe because I'm visible minority woman but sometimes more difficult for people to take me seriously because they don't know the knowledge that I have. They underestimate the values that I have and I find that I, I have to convince people. I have to work harder convincing people in order to make them realize that I do have a great knowledge in Human Rights which I've worked in this area for seventeen years. (San San, ll. 282-287)

Thus for women like San San, a layer of special persuasive work accompanies the marketing work required of all portfolio workers to establish every contract. She cannot rely on her reputation and networks to simply unfold in the way that other white portfolio workers experienced after a few years of hard building work: SH must continually push.

Working the Network Boundaries. Clive, like many others we interviewed, relied almost exclusively on his "own community" (Filipino, in his case) for his client networks. While these ethnic community networks appear to be densely interconnected and extensive especially in the cities, they are not without difficulties. Clive says he does not draw business from his own community because,

> I suppose your own people expect you to do things for them for nothing you know where as you know the other people you give them a price they say, 'Yea or nay.' You know your own, they want you to do it for nothing or they try to beat you down with your price and then OK if you agree from that and you do the job then the other trouble is getting your money from them. You know so. It's more hassle working for your own so I, I try to stay away from them. (ll 352-358).

Yang, a nurse, explained that she needed clients who were willing/able to pay for her foot care services: these did not often come from her own contacts in her South Asian-Canadian community. She also felt that members of her community expected special low rates and extra services. So Yang, married to a Canadian man and having access to wider networks through her 17 years working in a Canadian hospital, avoided networking with her ethnic community.

Many of these portfolio workers are restricted to limited-return single-client contracts. That is, they must do the same marketing and relationship-building labor to sell one service to one client as they might do to win a contract with an organization with multiple needs, potential repeat contracts, and wide contacts. Further, the personal network which tended to characterize Elena's sewing business was restricted to single referrals received among her immediate acquaintances and their friends: her referrals depended on the extent to which she pleased each client. While she took pleasure in producing a garment that made a woman happy, she admitted frustration with her clients' unwillingness to pay the actual labor costs of her creations. Like other women interviewed whose home-based portfolio work offered free lance personal services

such as foot care, Elena found herself lowering her rates to accommodate certain people's expectations for cheap products and services. As a free-lance journalist, Sasha fought narrow containers created for her in white networks, where she was called only to do "the ethnic or culture piece" where she is suspected of bias towards the minority – and where she still struggles to get her name spelled correctly on her byline. Yet Sasha observed that among members of her community her work is also met with suspicion, requiring additional effort on her part to allay their fears,

> convincing people of minority groups that I'm not out to nail their community. I'm not out to make them look like a bunch of pimps, hookers, gangsters, drug dealers, am I missing something? Muggers. (ll. 773-776)

Sasha found herself positioned either as a "white" or "brown" reporter in different situations, requiring her to first figure out the position and second to work it in ways that neither alienated (risking loss of the contract), perpetuated stereotypes (which her very career was dedicated to resisting), nor diminished her professional credibility.

Becoming Visible. This pushing work starts with gaining simple visibility: being recognized. Anne, a self-employed organizational developer who specializes in anti-racist work, compares her work to her white partner's:

> I had to learn how to make myself visible, how to make myself heard, how to get credited with some level of competence and then how to build on that to actually being able to work effectively. All (laughs), that's before I even start getting to learn the organization and that's not something that [Meg] has to do. (Anne ll. 1429-1436)

In a separate interview, Meg confirmed this differential treatment. She also observed that follow-up contract offers and referrals stemming from work she and Anne had facilitated as a team tended to be directed to Meg, such as one situation when Anne "had just done a session with them on racism and she was utterly brilliant in this thing and not, you know, challenging".

> I get a lot of calls because I'm a white person. I do good work but so do lots of people of colour and they're not in that network. And there's a resistance to bringing new people into the network particularly if there are white people hiring (Meg, ll.1264-1267)

Meg engaged in cross-referrals for work in racism, trying to link white employing organizations with contractors who were people of colour: However, she began feeling uncomfortable with a certain reification of whiteness in such acts: as though a person of colour must rely upon the white person's recommendation for visibility. As she worked with her partner, she developed some awareness of how her white privilege worked in everyday interactions:

I'm still learning all the ways, all the ways that exercising power is wired into my not so post-colonial need….I would say that racial identity for me is a key thing. (Meg, ll.1226-1234).

For Anne and San San, both well-educated women of colour who intentionally inserted themselves into white networks, their continuous burden apparently included not only the weary tasks of creating a presence and proving their value and credibility again and again, but also the task of educating whites about racial dynamics.

Implications for Work Learning Theory

Portfolio work, in its ongoing learning/doing processes, relies upon networks. These continue to be gendered and racialized. Here we have discussed the structural inequities configuring networks of portfolio workers: immigrants forced outside their own professional networks and knowledge, the isolation and additional labor constituted by a reliance on gendered one-to-one networks that may offer limited referrals, the difficulty for people of colour to gain access to (white) organizational clients offering well-paying knowledge contracts, and the work

involved in becoming visible and gaining credibility. points out the contradiction in this work: "So when Meg and I walk in a room, the attention that goes to her means that I have to fight to make myself visible. Isn't that ironic considering I'm called a visible minority?" (ll. 1427-1429).

Our findings illuminate three main themes: forms of exclusion operating in networks; forms of learning and emotion work demanded of individuals occupying racialized and gendered positions to participate in these networks; and the resistant subject positions and work undertaken by some to not only survive but also challenge deeply inequitable conditions of self-employment. In the learning processes experienced by different individuals to negotiate these networks, different identities and workloads are created. Some struggle to insert themselves into dominant networks, some name and challenge the structures of these networks, while others take on the work of crossing boundaries among networks. These findings can help challenge limited 'victim' portrayals and stable racial categories, and shed light on the layers of work confronting those who must learn to negotiate difficult race politics in addition to the outsider challenges facing all portfolio workers. For whites embedded in these networks, there is opportunity here to, as Manglitz (2003) suggests in analysing White privilege in adult education literature, learn to recognize and challenge their privilege and the power that is embedded in their everyday interactions, and to develop a rearticulation of White identity that is progressive and actively antiracist.

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