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Blue-Collar Work, Career, and Success: Occupational Narratives of *Sisu*

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Abstract

This study examined underground iron ore miners' occupational narratives to uncover how their stories socialize miners into blue-collar careers and reinforce their work identities. Through the root theme of *sisu* (Finnish for inner determination), underground miners create a status hierarchy that is used to construct a sense of pride around their work and to establish milestones of success for themselves and others in their work-group. Furthermore, they communicatively construct exemplars that guide their performance and decisions during the unfolding of their work experiences. Their discourses provide alternatives to white-collar conceptualizations and practices of careers and success.

Keywords: blue-collar work, occupational narratives, careers

Sisu (SIH-soo or SEE-soo): (1) inner determination; (2) courage, tenacity, stubborn determination, energy and a will and an ability to get things done. (Kolehmainen, 1957, p. ix)

A cursory look around any bookstore or newsstand reveals the ubiquity of career in our daily lives. How-to books on picking the right career and racing up the corporate ladder are shelved alongside magazine articles that laud rich and powerful executives (e.g., Bolles, 2002; Kroll & Goldman, 2003). Although the success stories portrayed in these media serve to establish largely unattainable ideals, these kinds of materials

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can be useful for individuals who are pursuing traditional white-collar career tracks in reaching modest to moderate levels of professional and financial success. However, for the vast majority of Americans, the standards of success portrayed in these cases are not just an improbability, but a systemic impossibility. Blue-collar workers, who compose more than a quarter of the U.S. labor force (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000), are at a particular disadvantage in terms of attaining this type of career success.

In contrast to white-collar careers, which focus on knowledge work, opportunities for hierarchical advancement, and management of employees, blue-collar occupations are defined by their physical labor component and generally are characterized by stationary hierarchical level (typically in low ranked positions) and management by supervisors or mechanical controls (Ansberry, 2003; Gibson & Papa, 2000). R. Thomas (1989) explains that because blue-collar occupations typically are not tied to an ascending staircase or ladder of career development, which is the "normative, achievement-oriented model of careers" (p. 354), workers holding those positions often are considered to have jobs instead of careers. Although blue-collar work experiences do not align with white-collar criteria of career and success, R. Thomas argues that these workers still have meaningful work experiences and accumulate skills over time. Therefore, he outlines a blue-collar career theory that positions blue-collar work histories as careers, but careers that are constrained in terms of choice. Additionally, R. Thomas identifies several mechanisms that are used by blue-collar workers to make sense of their lack of choice. What he does not explain, however, is how members of specific blue-collar occupations actively shape and are shaped by workgroup views of career and success.

Our goal is to present some ways that one group of blue-collar workers, underground miners, make sense of career and success through analysis of their occupational narratives. As such, we not only provide insight into the miners' assumptions and negotiations about work decisions, relationships, and performance, but also help to explain why routine career development initiatives derived from white-collar premises (e.g., reward and recognition programs) may not meet the needs of the groups they are intended to serve. Moreover, as blue-collar jobs have been attracting fewer newcomers because of employment instability and negative reputational issues (e.g., low status, task repetitiveness, injury rates), the new blue-collar world faces labor shortages (Aepfel, 2003; Ansberry, 2003). Occupational discourses produced by blue-collar workers may supply alternative visions of career and success that can be used to develop theory-informed employment programs and possibly attract new employees to the blue-collar workforce.

Career Theory and Occupational Narrative

Career and Success

Although Arthur, Hall, and Lawrence (1989) broadly define career as "the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time" (p. 8; see also Arthur, Ink-

son, & Pringle, 1999), implicit in their explanation and demonstrated throughout their *Handbook of Career Theory* is that the dominant understandings of career emphasize linear career patterns to the exclusion of other possible models (see Buzanell & Goldzwig, 1991). For example, Kanter's (1989) three basic career forms connote progression, usually in the form of upward trajectories. Bureaucratic careers are distinguished by growth and progress (advancement within an established hierarchy); professional careers are defined by craft or skill (increased status, reputation, and challenge in assignments); and entrepreneurial careers are developed through the formation of new value or organizational capacity and the creation of relative upward growth by adding rungs below the career actor.

Although Arthur et al. (1989) assert that "everyone who works has a career" (p. 9), non-supervisory blue-collar workers typically are assumed to neither have nor want careers (R. Thomas, 1989). Instead, they are believed to hold jobs that are not linked to any pattern representing progression or upward mobility. Furthermore, training for climbing existing ladders often is inadequate or the career ladders themselves are inaccessible to blue-collar workers, leaving laborers in bottom-rung positions. Unlike other career theorists, R. Thomas acknowledges that blue-collar workers have meaningful series of work experiences and skill accumulations over time. However, he characterizes blue-collar careers as careers without choice. R. Thomas argues that the social milieu of class, organizational arrangement of occupations, and labor market segmentations operate independently and cooperatively to limit blue-collar opportunities.

First, class constraints (e.g., educational opportunities) reduce choice and provide differential preparation for work (see Perrucci & Wysong, 2003; Willis, 1977). Whereas students in middle- and upper-class school districts are guided toward college, students in working-class schools are directed (and direct themselves) toward attending vocational schools or are encouraged to bypass further education in favor of immediately joining the workforce in low-paid, low-status jobs. Second, choice for blue-collar workers within their careers is limited by the ways that companies construct and link various occupations. In an effort to control production and stay competitive, organizations have deskilled trades (i.e., professional craftwork) into partial craft occupations (i.e., discrete, semi-skilled jobs) that are separated vertically and horizontally from one another, thereby creating discontinuous skill ladders. Furthermore, unions, in their drive for solidarity and security, exchange meaningful career ladders for protections ensured by generic skill categories, flat wage structures, and seniority systems. Third, workers' career opportunities are limited due to the segmentation of labor markets by skill level and the division of core and peripheral enterprises.

As a result of these major characteristics, the normative achievement-based model of career is not well suited to evaluating blue-collar occupations (R. Thomas, 1989). Although there may be some distinctions between different shopfloor or industrial jobs that align with traditional notions of career development (e.g., craftsmen are ranked more highly than semi-skilled or line workers), most blue-collar workers have careers that would be considered, in a conventional career parlance,

plateaued or dead-end careers (R. Thomas, 1989). R. Thomas maintains that blue-collar workers attempt to make sense of their lack of choice by engaging in multiple coping behaviors: adopting instrumental attitudes (i.e., viewing work as a means to other ends), touring (i.e., switching between jobs of fairly equal skill level to add diversity to experience), benchmarking career with cycles of activity (e.g., manufacturing cycles or pay periods), constructing games around the work to create challenge (e.g., *making out*, Burawoy, 1979), and focusing on internal status hierarchies that may be invisible to outsiders.

Just as the characteristics, assumptions, and language of conventional career models do not take into consideration blue-collar workers, neither do traditional and new career definitions of career success. Judge, Higgins, Thoresen, and Barrick (1999) define career success as "the real or perceived achievements individuals have accumulated as a result of their work experiences" (p. 622). Most commonly, in scholarly research, success has been operationalized as a combination of objective and subjective measures (e.g., Judiesch & Lyness, 1999; Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001). Specifically, salary growth and number of promotions are the objective measures and career satisfaction, or individuals' satisfaction with their career development, is the subjective measure (for the most frequently used scale, see Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990).

However, these common criteria of salary growth, promotions, and occupational prestige are ineffective for evaluating the success of blue-collar occupations. In general, blue-collar workers are compensated considerably less than white-collar workers. On average, they work 4.9% more hours per week than white-collar workers, but earn 33.5% less, and are less likely to receive such benefits as medical insurance, personal paid time off, sick and severance pay, and educational assistance (Mishel, Bernstein, & Schmitt, 2001; U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Additionally, comparing salaries and promotions within blue-collar occupational groups can be ineffectual in gauging individual achievement because unions push for protections that come in the forms of uniform flat wage structures and that support promotion opportunities based on seniority rather than individual contributions or unique skill sets (R. Thomas, 1989). Therefore, although blue-collar workers do experience salary increases, little opportunity exists for them to distinguish themselves from peers in terms of salary or promotions. Moreover, because blue-collar positions often are clustered together as bottom-rung jobs on organizational charts, blue-collar advancement may be imperceptible to organizational and occupational outsiders. Finally, the new career, or series of employer-employee contracts, focuses on employability as the primary criterion for success. However, employability is an illusive quality for workers who often lack the formal education and financial safety nets required for rapid interorganizational movement (see Buzzanell, 2000).

In short, blue-collar careers lack the most frequent cultural meanings and signs of success (i.e., financial remuneration, organizational status). Even more recent alignments of success with passion for work, career happiness, and freedom to do what one enjoys often presume white-collar salaries, employability security, and jobs that offer challenge and autonomy (e.g., Arthur et al., 1999; Bernstein, 1997; Henderson,

2000; Komisar, 2000), attributes missing in most blue-collar careers (R. Thomas, 1989; Zweig, 2000). However, blue-collar workers devise their own designations of occupational success through status hierarchies (e.g., those built around seniority, job skill, or perceived danger of certain jobs; R. Thomas, 1989). Like the communicative accomplishment of *being a man* in Teamsterville (Philipsen, 1975, 1976), of creating dignity by the working poor (Newman, 1999b), and of maintaining membership as one of the working-class lads (Willis, 1977), workers who cannot achieve or who do not aspire to mainstream notions of career and success may locate alternative means of establishing these qualities in their lives. They construct occupational prestige, criteria for good work, and coherent subcultures through cultural indicators, such as jokes and stories, and through artifact interpretations (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Barley, 1983; Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982). The logic behind their alternative constructions of career and success can be understood through occupational narratives.

Occupational Narratives

In work and organizational contexts, narratives possess the transformative power to mold individual and organizational identities, recreate power structures, socialize newcomers, increase organizational identification, and solve problems (Mumby, 1987; Putnam, Phillips, & Chapman, 1996; Somers, 1994). For miners and other blue-collar workers who engage in dirty work, discourses also socially construct esteem-enhancing occupational identities, strong workgroup cultures, and positive social identities that provide affirmation for the work they do (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Organizational stories, according to Brown (1990), are ways of shaping organizational reality. Three major functions of these stories are reducing uncertainty by providing information about organizational activities, managing meaning by framing activities in terms of organizational values, and bonding members by presenting points of shared identity.

However, the stories told by the miners in this project are not organizational stories in the strictest sense of the term. The term *organizational stories* implies membership in a particular organization. However, many miners faced work realities that made stable association with a single organization difficult at best: Layoffs and mine shutdowns often resulted in workers migrating from mine to mine looking for work and numerous strikes realigned workers from company- to union-centered organizing. Furthermore, due to the occupational inheritance of blue-collar positions, particularly in blue-collar communities where alternative employment opportunities are limited, employees often are socialized into a work culture prior to their formal organizational entry via their communication with friends and family who are members (Gibson & Papa, 2000). For these reasons, we explore *occupational narratives*—stories that people tell at and about work that are not tied exclusively to a particular organization. Consequently, these occupational narratives include stories passed down from fathers and grandfathers, as well as stories passed up from sons, grandsons, and granddaughters.

Occupational narratives, as told by multiple generations within the miners' occupational community, serve as what Richardson (1990) calls *cultural narratives*. Cultural narratives consist of stories that are sociologically significant in that they possess the ability to create and support a social world. Richardson specifically identifies occupation as a type of culture, noting that stories about particular occupations (among other types of cultures) "provide exemplars of lives, heroes, villains, and fools as they are embedded in larger cultural and social frameworks" (p. 127). As such, by learning about the people who fulfill these roles in specific communities, we can gain valuable insight into their value and belief systems. Therefore, to understand how underground miners (re)create recurring patterns of meaning about career and success, we ask: *What themes of work, career, and success emerge from miners' occupational narratives?*

Method

Participants

To recruit participants, the first author contacted an active member of the retirees' union and asked him to identify retired miners who would be able and willing to take part in an interview. Using the initial list of 58 names, she contacted and interviewed miners using both convenience and snowball techniques until saturation was reached. Before the start of each interview, the three IRB-approved forms, required as part of the research protocol, were explained: the informed consent document; a waiver of confidentiality, which gave participants the choice of having their real names or pseudonyms used; and a release form for the Central Upper Peninsula and Northern Michigan University Archives to permit donation of tapes and transcripts for preservation. All but one participant requested that their real names be used and all but two signed the archival release form.

Thirteen retired underground iron ore miners participated in this study. The average age of these miners was 70 (range of 47 to 86 years) and the average education was 10th grade (range of fifth grade to a master's degree). Seven (54%) earned high school diplomas, three (23%) attended vocational school (for auto body repair, electrician training, and welding), one completed some college, and another holds a master's degree.¹ The participants represent a variety of European ethnic backgrounds—Finnish, French, English, Italian, Irish, German, Swedish, and Norwegian—roughly representative of the population in the area and even more representative of miners in the region (Boyum, 1979; Magnaghi, 2000).

With regard to occupational tenure, the average mining career for the men interviewed lasted 27.4 years, ranging from 13 to 38 years. Among the men who stayed with the mine until they earned a full retirement, the average career lasted 32.4 years. Due to the broad age range of the participants and the last underground iron ore mine in Michigan closing in 1979, these former miners spent between 5 and 26 years working in underground mines, with an average tenure underground of 15.2 years. Nine (69%) of the miners who were still working at the time of the last underground

mine closure transferred to aboveground open pit mines, where they worked until retirement. The participants retired or left mining between 1959 and 2002. Ten of these men retired and collect monthly pensions from the mining company. One man retired from the United Steel Workers union, and another retired from the Michigan Department of Social Services. One of the men has not yet retired. He has worked and continues to work in local and elected state government positions where his focus is on protecting workers' rights.

Author Positionality

Throughout our collaboration on this research project, the first author held primary responsibility for data collection and analysis and was guided by the second author. The first author's positionality in this project—as both cultural insider and outsider—gave us a unique perspective for studying blue-collar communication. She grew up in the blue-collar community in this study and both of her grandfathers, as well as their fathers before them, were miners. Although miners are leery of scholarly investigations and often refuse to talk to outsiders (Magnaghi, 2000), as an insider she not only had access to stories but also was familiar with research participants' values and language. As an outsider, she was distanced enough from the mines in the community—in terms of her white-collar career track, graduate school education, and personal and immediate family's financial independence from the mines—that she was able to view the situation more critically (see Fitch, 1994).

Procedures

Data gathering

Data gathering began at the Central Upper Peninsula and Northern Michigan University Archives. There, the first author screened microfilm archives of the local newspaper, the *Mining Journal*; perused vertical files on union movements, mining disasters, and other history relevant to the local mines; and listened to a collection of eight tape-recorded interviews conducted in 1994 with retired underground miners. She conducted a two-hour in-depth interview with a local mining historian who explained the evolution of safety measures implemented by the mines. She collected dozens of newspaper articles, procured copies of special collections published by the local newspaper, and located copies of historical books published by the local mining company. Based on the information and insight gleaned from these sources, we developed a semi-structured interview protocol (see Mishler, 1986) that delved into six areas relevant to occupational identity: family background, work history, work conditions and safety, organizational values, union involvement, and current events.

The length of the participant interviews ranged between 37 and 170 minutes, with an average length of 79 minutes. In total, we collected and analyzed more than 48 pages of single-spaced transcripts, 21 pages of double-spaced notes, 17 hours of taped interview data (from the 13 interviews), 40 photographs, 5 books, 2 videos, and doz-

ens of newspaper clippings and archival documents. Taking some of the data from publicly accessible observation records and leaving our own data in community archives, we ensured that the data would be admissible as evidence for claims about the experiences of life for these miners (Fitch, 1994).

Data analysis

We identified stories using Brown's (1990) criteria—sense of temporality (sequencing), story grammar (explanations and transitions that tell plot, characters), relevance for membership, and ring of truth. Following the identification and interpretation of stories, we used inductive analyses to derive themes or semantic units within and across stories and other data in iterative patterns through multiple readings and conversations about data and emergent themes (Charmaz, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). For inclusion in our study, themes needed to exhibit: *recurrence*, "same thread of meaning, even though different wording indicated such a meaning"; *repetition*, "repetition of key words, phrases, or sentences"; and *forcefulness*, "vocal inflection, volume, or dramatic pauses which serve to stress and subordinate some utterances" (Owen, 1984, p. 275).

Results and Interpretations

To answer the research question—What themes of work, career, and success emerge from miners' occupational narratives?—we found that we first had to identify the predominant, underlying discourse or sensemaking logic that connected details about work processes and practices, workplace relationships, and significant occupational events for the miners. In our case, participants repeatedly told stories about *sisu*, a Finnish word that roughly translates to "inner determination" and has been likened to qualities such as perseverance, determination, courage, and guts (Aho, 1994; Kolehmainen, 1957).

Sisu acted as a root theme and relatively stable occupational meaning through which specific lines or webs of thought, such as current perceptions and values associated with career and success, connected. We found that *sisu* acts as part of these miners' occupational ideology in that *sisu* provides coherence in perspective about an occupation and its relation to the larger society. However, *sisu* is less about explaining and interpreting "what the occupation does and why it matters" (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 421) than it is about core occupational community values. As such, *sisu* preserves and transmits core occupational community values that then shape (and are shaped by) day-to-day behaviors. The root theme of *sisu* served an important discursive function for the miners by establishing a cluster of premises around which they drew meaning from their work and constructed discursive boundaries around occupational membership. Accordingly, the heroes, villains, and fools in the mining community were directly tied to those who had *sisu*, those who violated *sisu*, and those who lacked *sisu*.

Heroes as Workers with Sisü

Immigrants from Finland settled many of the small mining communities in the region. However, *sisu* was not a word or quality reserved for only Finnish miners but transcended ethnic heritage by its association with occupational values. Rather than the community being divided by cultural and ethnic differences, the common thread of *sisu*, whether or not it was explicitly identified as such in their stories, provided a means of occupational identification and united the miners into a strong occupational community. Ernie, a 77-year-old former miner, shared the following story about two miners for whom he had incredible admiration. He began:

I can tell you another story about two Italians: John and Angelo. They worked next to us and they had hit a real hard seam of iron ore, called blue steel. It was blue and hard. And they were adjoining contract and we used to eat in the traveling road in between. So my dad and I—it was about 11, 11:30—so we were going to go over there. And they were drilling. So we were going to tell them to come and eat. And they were drilling and you could tell from the sound of the machine that they were in some hard ground. And it looked like a fog coming out of that machine. That mist. That oily. And their headlamp was just bouncing like a laser. You could tell they were vibrating. And we went there. And John, John was about six-foot-two, six-three, and he had muscles that he even didn't know he had. And Angelo was shorter, but he was just as firm and chunky. And John put that machine off and threw his hat on the ground. "*Dio Cane!*" [Italian for "God is a dog!"] . . . He looked up like that [glaring up at the ceiling and shaking his fist], he said, "Why you make this goddamned ground so hard?" he said. "I'm just trying to feed my family!"

Miners worked in a four-man contract, a two-man team on day shift and another on afternoon shift. The miners' job was to extract ore from the ground by advancing drifts, horizontal passages dug off of the main underground tunnel. Their task was achieved by completing rounds, a drilling-blasting-digging-setting routine. Each round required a pair of miners to drill 21 to 28 4½-foot-deep holes into the breast of the ore body and fill each hole with 6 to 8 sticks of dynamite. The miners would then wire the dynamite, place blasting caps on each hole, and hook the explosives to a primer wire. The miners would evacuate the immediate area to seek shelter from the blast 20 to 30 yards away, and detonate the area. After the explosion, they would shovel the ore into mine cars and put up a timber or steel set. A set consisted of two 9-foot legs placed on the sides of the blast opening to hold back the crumbling walls and a 6-foot long cap that was placed on top of the legs to support the weight of the ceiling.

In exchange for their labor, miners were paid an hourly base rate, called company count. In order to earn income beyond their base rate, miners had to exceed their quota of one round per 8-hour shift. Completing one round per day was a challenge in and of itself, but when miners hit blue steel, as did John and Angelo, it was even more daunting. Described as "hard, featureless, foreboding" and "diamond hard" (Etelamaki, 1996, p. 41), blue steel was the term used by miners to refer to a mass of iron ore that had no seams or layers. Without the cracks found in other ores, it was difficult, if not impossible, to start drilling. Jackhammer-like drills bounced across the

smooth surface instead of drilling into the ore body. To further complicate the process, driving a drift required miners to drill forward (i.e., into a “wall”), not down (i.e., into the “floor”). Not only were miners unable to use their body weight and force of gravity to assist them, they also had to support the weight of the 70-pound machine, drilling many of the holes at levels at or above their shoulders. On this particular day, John and Angelo were falling far behind on their quota. If they were to have any chance of meeting their quota, they needed to drill all 20-plus holes in the blue steel before the end of the day. Ernie continued:

Angelo just shook his head. So we went to eat. And they were wringing wet. Pushing like that. Well, took 10, 15 minutes to eat and we went back and you could hear them go drilling again. Then about 3:30 when we start going down the ladders to go down, you know, the holes were, you know, being detonated. And you always counted the holes. If you had 26, 28 holes, you tried to count to 28 so you could tell the oncoming shift that they all went. That there are no missing. And John was counting, “One, two, three- -.”

But that’s what you call *sisu*. If you sat in that mine, you’d hear a hundred stories like that.

The values of determination, perseverance, courage, and guts were evident within Ernie’s story of John and Angelo’s struggle. Enduring against the seemingly impenetrable stone wall required a lot of *sisu*. The unrelenting vibration of the jackhammers caused muscles to fatigue and arms to go numb. Rather than giving up, John and Angelo were determined to drill all their holes and count the dynamite blasts at the end of their shift, “One, two, three- -.” These two occupational heroes did not win Ernie’s admiration by achieving more than other miners on the shift. They earned his respect through their will not to surrender. The outcome of their efforts that day was recorded in the company logs as a routine—if not a substandard—event: finishing slightly less than one round during their shift (even though they finished drilling and blasting, they did not put up the set). Although the recorded outcome was not out of the ordinary, what makes this a story of *sisu* is the extraordinary struggle John and Angelo endured.

When *sisu* is used as the criterion against which work and success are judged, the hero or success story is markedly different from typical white-collar occupational heroes. In contrast to white-collar success stories that are predicated on individual achievement and recognition (e.g., Kroll & Goldman, 2003), in blue-collar discourses of success, individual rewards and recognition largely are absent. The occupational heroes in the miners’ stories were not promoted for their hard work; they did not earn raises, bonuses, or other external trappings of success that would have distinguished them from their peers. They simply were men who did what had to be done and reported back to work the following day to repeat the cycle once again.

As Fitch (1994) explains, in order for qualitative data to constitute evidence, claims should be based on an adequate selection of the total corpus of data, rather than on a single case. In our interview data, we located numerous stories where the heroes were people who exemplified *sisu*. Other stories of *sisu* recounted by miners included

grocery owners who refused company directives designed to end strikes and prevent union organizing, miners who survived being buried under piles of ore and rock, and miners who coped with the death and dismemberment of coworkers, friends, and family members.

Villains as Workers Who Violated Sisu

Although *sisu* was the miners' core organizing principle and ethic, most miners admitted that their primary incentive to work was money. Miners wanted to earn enough to maintain a satisfactory standard of living. For the older participants in our study, earning enough meant stable housing, food on the table, warm winter clothes, and shoes that fit. For younger participants, it also included the financial means to drive relatively new vehicles, take family vacations, and send their children to college. In essence, the miners socially constructed a mutually agreed upon standard of living and viewed as greedy any individuals who actively pursued material wealth beyond that level. In those instances when some miners cut corners or pushed too hard in order to make "more than enough," participants viewed their actions as inexcusable violations of the workgroup's culture and norms. Whereas the heroes in this occupational community are those who emulated an exemplar of *sisu*, the villains are those who violated the principle. Keith, a 48-year-old retired miner, described one such violation:

They were always the contract next to us. And you know how it is: competition. Who's going to get the first round in and who's going to blast first? Well, when we got there, me and my partner were younger at the time. And we always, 99 percent of the time, had our drilling and were ready to blast before them. So we would wait until they were ready so we both blast at the same time. Well, then the few times that they would beat us they wouldn't wait. They would smoke us out. We got into a pretty bad rumble for probably a year I bet. And then we wouldn't wait for them. It was getting ugly for a while. . . . Outside of the mine he was a nice guy, eh, but underground, for that almighty dollar, boy, they didn't give up. They would kill their ma for an extra buck.

Many of the miners told good-natured stories of competition where adjoining contracts would push each other to advance the drift as quickly as possible (cf. Burawoy, 1979). In these instances, one-upmanship for the sake of competition was acceptable behavior. However, when the core of the competition was based on individual pursuit of wealth, it was unacceptable. On the surface, villains were not markedly different from heroes like John and Angelo: They did not take full advantage of breaks, they risked fatigue and injury, and they did not quit when others would have. However, when miners' motivation for exhibiting this level of inner determination moved from "just trying to feed my family" to "that almighty dollar," the associated risks imposed on themselves, and particularly on others, were despicable.

Greed is extremely hazardous in mining, and the consequences of competition can be deadly. Blasting an area before it was evacuated could—and on occasion did—have fatal results. William, a 79-year-old miner, told a story about two coworkers who were killed in a blasting accident. A two-man team had drilled and charged their

holes. Before blasting, they approached the miners in the adjacent drift to give them a chance to stop their work and seek shelter from the nearby detonation area. The miners they approached declined the opportunity by saying, "Go ahead, it won't bother us." Tragically, when the miners returned to their drift and set off their charge, it set off all the holes that the adjacent contract had been drilling and the two boxes of dynamite at their feet. William, who was working in another part of the mine at the time, explained: "So me and my partner went in there after that. And all we did was pick up pieces of them guys."

Although greed may be a contributing factor to this accident (the men who were killed presumably ignored the risk in order to continue making progress on advancing their drift), William did not label the miners as greedy, most likely out of respect for the dead. Yet miners and surrounding community members are much quicker to attach the label of greedy to mine managers and owners when assigning culpability for similar misfortunes. For example, corporate greed has been linked to the 2002 incident in Somerset, Pennsylvania, where nine miners were trapped in a flooded underground mine for 77 hours after warning signs of an imminent flood were ignored and miners were ordered by supervisors to continue operations (McCollester, 2003). Greed has also been linked to the 1992 explosion at the Westray coal mine in Nova Scotia, which took the lives of all 26 miners working at the time when production was prioritized over safety (Jobb, 1994).

Fools as Workers Without Sisu

Whereas miners were quick to identify heroes who possessed *sisu* and villains who violated *sisu*, they frequently hesitated to identify fools who lacked *sisu*. Unlike the contemptible villains, miners did not fault the fools for not being as tough as some of the other men. Instead, our participants pitied fools for their perceived weakness and protected their identities. Early in the interview process, miners dodged questions requesting stories about coworkers whom they did not admire. When the question was worded in such a way that it asked participants to bring to mind a specific person, they unanimously responded with a disconcerted pause followed by an excuse: "No, I can't say that there was anyone like that. I got along with everyone." Upon rewording the question to "Think about the qualities that you didn't respect in other coworkers. Can you give me a specific example of those qualities or tell me a story about a particular instance?" miners were once again quick to jump in with stories. Unlike stories of specific heroes or revered old-timers, miners' accounts of fools were generalities that depicted nameless, faceless miners who lacked *sisu*. Jim, a 71-year-old miner, told the following story about the type of worker he did not respect when he was a supervisor:

When a guy wouldn't give the company a day's work for a day's pay! Them were the guys I had problems with. Couldn't pound it into their head: You got a good job, you got good pay. Why can't you give the company a day's work for that pay?

If I had a hard worker, man, him and I would get along great. A guy that I could say that I wanted this done. Well, I always figured I would never put a man to do something that

I wouldn't do myself. And if I could go in there and I knew how much work I could do, in what I told them to do, say drifting or whatever, his work could be accomplished in a day. Even if you had problems or you were a slow worker. And you would go in there later on when you made your second [inspection] round through the mine and you'd see how much work that person did and you knew darn well, he sat down and didn't do nothing or he was out chewing the fat with somebody else, interfering with them when they were trying to get a day's work done.

In this community, *sisu* was the standard against which self and others were judged. Those who did not meet the standard were met with pity and disdain. Not giving a fair day's work for a fair day's pay, or in other words, not working hard enough or taking the easy way out, was looked down upon for two main reasons: because these attitudes or work ethics were incomprehensible to miners who took pride and found dignity in good work; and because these actions made work more difficult for others. What is particularly significant about Jim's story is that the worker not only failed to work to his full potential, he also prevented someone else from doing his job. There is an assumption in this community that all miners desired to embody *sisu* and that preventing *sisu* enactment was an action to be pitied.

In a similar vein, those who were unable to recognize *sisu* in others were also regarded as fools. Edwin, an 82-year-old retiree, recounted an incident in which a supervisor initially had denied a request for additional help. The supervisor accused Edwin and his father (his work partner) of being lazy and threatened to send them home for the day. Edwin expressed his feelings of vindication as he explained that the supervisor quickly learned that the particular job required a third miner and the request was ultimately granted. The supervisor's granting of the request finally acknowledged the workers' *sisu*, but his delay left him being viewed as a fool.

Discussion

Our primary contribution is the identification of the centrality of *sisu* in these blue-collar workers' discourse and occupations. Through *sisu*, miners discursively construct a strong occupational culture that enables them to find dignity and meaning in their work despite outsiders' perceptions of dangerous and dirty work conditions and of lack of success as defined by normative models of financial gain and hierarchical advancement (see Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). While miners largely dismiss white-collar models of success, their *sisu* discourses and related practices serve to establish identifiable milestones of success that are meaningful in their occupation and daily work. Through *sisu* exemplars that occurred repeatedly in the miners' occupational narratives, the miners transmitted in a concise fashion a complex constellation of words, behaviors, attitudes, occupational artifacts, values, and occupational and community history. *Sisu* became the basis of their careers as they strove to emulate those who embodied *sisu*.

Although not identified as such, stories of *sisu* date back decades in organizational literature (e.g., Gouldner, 1954; Tokoi, 1957). *Sisu* still is apparent in contemporary

stories in which old-timers correct newcomers' work behaviors and values (Gibson & Papa, 2000). Moreover, elements of *sisu* are evident in a wide array of occupations, including white-collar careers (e.g., the ethic of hard work, see Bernstein, 1997) and non-paid work (e.g., Ansberry, 2004). However, how workers discursively construct *sisu* and how *sisu* operates to inform workers' occupational identities, choice of work, exemplars of success, and definitions of careers has not been investigated. Furthermore, when taken as a whole—that is, a philosophy, moral process, means of constructing occupational identities, and an aspect of occupational ideology—*sisu* may be unique to blue-collar work.

Sisu is a dynamic phenomenon in that organizational members discursively enact and modify *sisu* over time. It continually (re)creates a model for how blue-collar workers live and perform day-to-day activities within their communities. For previous generations of miners, *sisu* was enacted primarily through hard, physical labor. In more recent years, technology has eased many physical demands; yet, *sisu* is still called upon to deal with struggles faced by members, such as recent shutdowns and layoffs caused by the struggling steel industry (United Steel Workers of America, 2001, 2002). *Sisu* also can explain the will to live (J. Thomas, 2002) exhibited by the Pennsylvania coal miners who recently survived being trapped in a flooded underground mine, despite the seemingly insurmountable odds and outsiders' doubts (Kozuch, 2002).

Caveat and Limitations

Caveat

Despite the theoretical contributions of this research to understanding blue-collar discursive and occupational processes in workers' own terms, other frameworks could prompt different readings of these data. These alternative interpretations pose interesting counterpoints to our portrayal of miners' careers. Viewed with a critical lens, miners' stories could be used to support the existence and critique of *sisu* as a hegemonic ideology that workers embrace such that they actively consent to and participate in their own exploitation (e.g., Wicks, 2002). Then again, viewed from a gendered lens, *sisu* operates as a way for working-class men to find dignity in hard, dirty, dangerous work that is not linked to measures of status and success in a white-collar, masculine world (e.g., Lamont, 2000). Finally, a temporal-generational lens could be applied because our participants' recollections may be tempered by time, their respective generations (i.e., more than half lived through the Great Depression and several were old enough to work—or at least look for work—during that period), and their passage to the end of their lives, prompting them to portray their work and careers with some sort of closure. However, because career development is based on the meanings people assign to situations and who they desire to be (Arthur et al., 1999), we chose an interpretive framework. This approach enabled us to examine workers' words and stories in ways that represented not only how they made sense of past events, but also how they constructed their present identities and relationships (LaRossa, 1995).

Limitations

Although we achieved saturation, it is possible that different stories and findings might be located if we interviewed additional miners. Likewise, geography, occupation, and the centrality of the mines within the community also may have influenced miners' stories in ways that may not be evident in other blue-collar workers' narratives. Furthermore, our participants were men who made entire careers out of mining. Their stories probably do not reflect the values of other blue-collar employees—especially those who worked in mines but left to pursue other types of blue-collar work (e.g., construction, factory work).

Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, our findings point to several ways in which blue-collar careers can be best described and evaluated with standards that are developed from close analysis of meanings that are assigned to work and career by blue-collar workers themselves. Specifically, these data suggest that blue-collar workers communicatively construct exemplars of success based on the specifics of their occupation, community, and work itself. Career research should continue to explore the meanings of career that are relevant to career actors' experiences and to derive theory based on examination of workers' discourse and practices. Of great importance is analysis of the discourse and practices of any occupational group that does not fit normative models of career and success (e.g., unpaid family care providers, Peace Corps workers, dirty workers, and those with multiple, boundaryless careers; see Arthur et al., 1999). Organizational communication theorists and practitioners could suggest alternative career discourses, values, and metaphors that better meet socioeconomic, cultural, and global workforce realities (see Buzzanell & Goldzweig, 1991).

Practical Applications

As mentioned above, career development initiatives that are based on assumptions or models that do not fit lived experiences of work groups can be problematic. We identify and suggest improvements to some less-than-optimal policies and programs, such as reward and recognition programs, career counseling or job training programs, and outplacement services.

First, white-collar models often are used as the bases for reward and recognition programs. Many programs acknowledge employee excellence with raises and titles. Although money is important in blue-collar workers' lives, programs need to expand their ideas for recognition. Internal compensation programs, particularly those compensation packages that are based on bonuses for exceeding quotas, can have harmful effects. They create exterior and objective constraints that shape definitions of legitimate goals (i.e., profit motives) and ways of reaching those goals. In an analysis of factors that led to the Westray mine explosion, Wicks (2002) explains that "Rather than tie workplace behaviors to safety, a remuneration schedule was implemented

that served to increase the instances of risk acceptance and the frequency of safety violations" (p. 321). Therefore, financial incentives—especially to individuals and small clusters of workers—may not always be the best way to reward workers.

Instead, using *sisu* as a criterion for success and recognition, alternative reward and recognition systems could be implemented to acknowledge workers who exhibit inner determination. Peer-initiated and organizationally-supported recognition programs could be developed for people like John and Angelo who persisted against a particularly daunting task without violating safety rules and for workers like William who help to clean up after bloody accidents. Because internal status hierarchies are important to blue-collar workers for establishing a sense of dignity and recognition by peers and newcomers (R. Thomas, 1989), perhaps programs could create honor badges that are bolted onto hard hats or sewn onto uniforms as ways of recognizing workers with *sisu*.

Second, career counseling or job training programs can face serious barriers to effectiveness in that unions often draw a hard line between workers and management, and crossing the line can carry significant social costs since once-strong bonds with coworkers often are severed (R. Thomas, 1989). Several of our participants mentioned that they were offered either promotions to supervisory positions or smaller advancement opportunities (e.g., steady dayshift work) but declined them in order to preserve social bonds with peers. Furthermore, many blue-collar workers derive a sense of accomplishment from working in their specific craft areas and taking a promotion to a supervisory role would eliminate an enjoyable and meaningful part of their work (R. Thomas, 1989). To further complicate the matter, union-supported employment structures often require seniority clocks to be reset when workers switch to higher-skilled positions (e.g., from line to craftsman training programs). Because the seniority clock can have significant consequences, particularly during tight financial times when layoffs are allocated based on lack of seniority, the job insecurity associated with reset seniority clocks—whether real or perceived—may preclude workers from making potentially fulfilling career moves.

If organizations are truly interested in honing the skills of some of their talented workers, then career counseling and job training needs to be accompanied by risk or psychological assessments and organizational assurances that make risky career moves—whether from laborer to supervisor or from partial craft to craft—less intimidating. Peer mentoring programs and career shadowing of employees who have made the jump are relatively inexpensive ways to help those who want to advance. Furthermore, such support may help organizations engender greater company loyalty and community support.

Third, with regard to outplacement services, blue-collar workers are at far greater risk of layoffs, strikes, overseas competition, and technology displacement than are other occupational groups (Mishel et al., 2001; Perrucci & Wysong, 2003). When companies provide outplacement services to assist workers in finding new employment, the tactics employed, although well-intended, can be misguided. For example, programs designed to retrain workers and assist them in finding new jobs include workshops on résumé writing and interview skills. However, these skills are relatively

unimportant for blue-collar work. Blue-collar workers would benefit more from skills such as filling out standardized application forms, learning to operate new machinery and computers, and completing patent applications (Ansberry, 2003; Tejada, 2003). By listening to miners' and other blue-collar workers' occupational stories, outplacement intervention programs can be designed to meet better the unique needs of the people seeking services.

Another issue that has been unique to blue-collar workers is that layoffs generally affect entire communities (Newman, 1999a). If one of the criteria for success is staying in the community, interventions could focus on economic initiatives that use the special skills of the laid-off workers. For instance, master electricians and mechanics could teach in apprenticeship programs at local high schools or community colleges. If locating work in the community is not a viable option, perhaps intervention efforts could include relocating groups of workers to an industrial startup organization planning a mass hire. By transferring clusters of workers to a new town, some of the sense of community could remain intact, as families and friends could remain together, even if their addresses change. This solution would be beneficial to both the employees and the employer because the company would kick off with a group of workers who have a strong bond. Moreover, keeping workers from a specific unit together could help allay the negative feelings that result from loss of connection during downsizing, regardless of the color of employees' collars (e.g., Parker, 1996).

Where such community relocations are not feasible, blue-collar workers may experience emotional acculturative stress (i.e., negative feelings when their sense of self is threatened by challenges to their occupational cultural identity; see Allen, Amason, & Holmes, 1998). Somewhat parallel to Allen et al.'s Hispanic employees, blue-collar workers such as the miners in our study who participate in a masculine, community-centered culture may experience acculturative stress when they move on to different types of work and workplaces. Allen et al.'s findings suggest that training to enhance workers' personal communication competence and supervisors' abilities to provide support might improve adaptation success. In addition, such training also might enable workers to express feelings of loss or frustration at changing occupational conditions and individual work situations. For example, human resources professionals can be trained to recognize behaviors associated with loss and to devise and deliver grief counseling.

Conclusion

This project began with a desire to tell holistic accounts of blue-collar workers in a particular occupation through their own voices. Underground iron ore miners shared stories that described their abilities to enact career processes and moral standards that were meaningful to them. In the future, additional work needs to be done to develop a full organizational communication theory and related policies of blue-collar work that include varied aspects of career discourse, identity construction, and meanings of success.

Note

1. Only one miner in this study, Waino, graduated from college (and later earned a master's degree). He was one of a small handful of men picked for an education program sponsored by the mining company in which he signed a quit slip agreeing that, in return for the company accommodating his school schedule, he would resign his position immediately upon graduation or in the event that he dropped out of college before graduation. Therefore, Waino's occupational narratives of being a miner reflect a time when he, like his coworkers, did not have a college degree. Despite his educational progress, his stories exhibited the same themes as the other participants. Therefore, we included his accounts in our analysis.

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