SNIPPET

CUTTING-EDGE APPLIED RESEARCH

IN THIS ISSUE

EDITOR'S NOTE

by Dr. Rosaleen Ow (Reviewing Editor)

This Issue contains two articles related to understanding the challenges of improving the welfare of low wage workers who are in disadvantaged work conditions.

Tan Zhi Han's article on cooperatives highlights a topic that has not received much attention in terms of its relevance to the social service sector. In spite of some challenges, the idea of cooperatives is worthy of exploration as an alternative to more conventional approaches to help lower income workers secure a fairer and more controlled environment towards earning an income and protection from exploitative employment conditions.

Asher Goh's article provides insight into the experiences of low wage youth employees and how structural barriers are individualised as personal deficits and are obstacles to gaining better or full time employment among youth with low formal education. Credentialism in society is deeply entrenched and the effort to better value work experiences and job skills vis-à-vis high academic qualifications has to be an on-going endeavour in society.

Both articles are thought-provoking and of relevance for social service providers, policymakers and economists concerned with low wage earners and improving their future opportunities.

Co-operatives in Singapore's Social Service Sector

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Keywords: Co-operatives, Collective ownership, Capital-labour relations, Organisational model, Civic society

Introduction

In the light of recent national conversations that have re-looked at protecting workers in Singapore (Tan, 2023a), the co-operative model has been explored as an organisational structure for improving the plight of vulnerable workers. In this article, I first describe the core principles and features of co-operatives and their benefits that have been found internationally. Then, I outline a brief history and context of co-operatives in Singapore, followed by an explanation of its relevance to the social service sector. Practical concerns and challenges of starting and sustaining a co-operative are considered before a discussion of their location in the broader socio-political context of Singapore. In sum, while co-operatives have potential to empower workers and promote a fairer distribution of income by virtue of their core principles, they are likely to work within the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable and constructive in relation to the state and the economy.

Core Characteristics of Co-operatives

To better understand what a co-operative is and distinguish it from other organisational forms, I will first describe the common features of co-operatives.

First, co-operatives have collective ownership of their capital and profits (Mill, 2008). While collective ownership does not necessarily translate to an equal distribution of capital among members in the organisation (Quah et al., 2021), it connotes that all members have control, especially in terms of economic participation and deliberation about how the fruits of their labour are allocated and shared fairly (Hoover, 2017; Piketty, 2021). Unlike a traditional firm where non-shareholding workers are alienated and excluded from decision-making processes that determine profit distribution and wages, the capital in co-operatives is not the exclusive property right of a minority group of shareholders, but are common property across all members (Piketty, 2020; Quah et al., 2021).

Collective ownership is therefore closely tied to the second characteristic, that all members participate, in one way or another, in the key decision-making processes of the co-operative. Many authors have proposed models for the operationalisation of shared decision-making. These models include, but are not limited to, sociocracy (Kempson & Simmonds, n.d.), staff trusteeship (Orsi, 2017), stewardship (Basterfield, 2022), workplace democracy (Hatcher, 2007; Quah et al., 2021), and participatory socialism (Piketty, 2020), in which every member has a voice and equal voting rights—one member, one vote—within the organisation (Working Class Movement Library, n.d.). To strike a balance between incorporating every member's voice and maintaining operational efficiency in decision-making, many of these models do not require all members to be involved in making decisions at every level. Instead, these models include mechanisms that prevent functional silos from being formed and allow for inter-departmental mutual checks and reviews within the co-operative (see Kempson & Simmonds, n.d.; Orsi, 2017). Nevertheless, all members vote for key decisions, such as the election of its key management positions (Mill, 2008).

Third, co-operatives are formed primarily to serve the social and economic interests of its members, and not all workers. Although they tend to be "businesses with a social mission" or "a good cause" that benefit non-members (SNCF, 2023), co-operatives need not have an altruistic mission that supersedes the members' interests. Some co-operatives, especially worker co-operatives, are established to create employment for retrenched workers during economic crises (Hoover, 2017; Smith & Rothbaum, 2013). Moreover, most co-operatives still run on a profit-based business model. FairPrice, which is probably the best-known co-operative in Singapore, aims to serve "the lower to middle-income groups" by "moderat[ing] the cost of living for Singapore residents" but must still "compete with private companies" in the capitalist market (Chia & Peh, 2023, pp. 13, 25, 106).

In addition to other common characteristics of co-operatives, such as voluntary membership and an emphasis on members' education and training (Scholz, 2022), these core principles of co-operatives are thought to bring about benefits, both at the individual and societal levels, which are elaborated next.

Benefits of Co-operatives

Historically, co-operatives were formed as an alternative to the standard capitalist firm. Essentially, the co-operative model presents an economically viable alternative to the exploitative relations between capital-owners and workers in a capitalist market; it is therefore undergirded by principles of fair and just distribution (Owen, 1813). Workers of co-operatives are not alienated from the products of their labour (Quah et al., 2021), and they are thus incentivised to increase their productivity to directly reap what they sow (Mill, 2008). For example, in Up & Go, a co-operative comprising cleaning professionals, workers earn higher wages and have equal decision-making powers in wage determination, which is not concealed behind an algorithm opaque to workers found in many platforms today (Scholz, 2022).

Economically, researchers and advocates have argued that co-operatives are more resilient during crises due to greater member loyalty and risk-averseness (Ang, 2023; Bajo & Roelants, 2011; Birchall & Ketilson, 2009; Scholz, 2022). As all members benefit from the co-operative's growth, the economic motivation in maximising the efficient allocation of resources within the co-operative is retained (Jossa, 2020). At the same time, well-established co-operatives have mechanisms in place such that members do not fall prey to perverse incentives, such as "cash[ing] out" their investments (Tan, 2015, p. 9). In Mondragon, one of the largest and longest-running co-operatives in the world, there are institutions in place to safeguard capital accumulation. For instance, capital returns are distributed fairly based on members' working hours and an agreed-upon compensation index, and they are issued only after a minimum number of years after the member's exit from the organisation (Bajo & Roelants, 2011).

Extrapolating the key characteristics of co-operatives to the societal level, advocates of co-operatives often promulgate the co-operative institutional structure as a solution to offset worsening polarisation from the uneven distribution of income and wealth in many post-industrial economies (Piketty, 2020). Together with elements of collective decision-making, co-operatives are also conceived of as vehicles of greater social inclusion should their democratic and participatory features spill over beyond the realm of work and become normalised in everyday life (Quah et al., 2021). However, further research is necessary to examine the impact of co-operatives on such macro-level outcomes beyond the boundaries of the co-operative organisations themselves.

Co-operatives in Singapore

The co-operative movement was formalised in Singapore in 1925 when the Co-operative Societies Act came into effect (see Tan, 2015 for a detailed history of co-operatives in Singapore). According to Ang (2023) and the Singapore National Co-operative Federation (SNCF, 2023), the first co-operatives that were set up in Singapore were credit co-operatives—also known as thrift and loan societies—that aimed to "safeguard financial interests of members" by offering tightly regulated financial loans for lower-wage earners. Besides credit co-operatives, the rest of co-operatives in Singapore are classified as consumer and services co-operatives, which provide various non-financial goods and services to their members and the public (Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, 2022).

Today, all co-operatives in Singapore must be registered with the Registry of Co-operative Societies, which is a department under the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY). The Registry regulates co-operatives' registration, dissolution, organisation, management, and credit supervision in Singapore (MCCY, 2023a). In addition, the SNCF was registered in 1980 to organise and represent Singapore's co-operative movement, propagate its core principles, and provide advisory services and training for affiliates, among other functions (Tan, 2015). The SNCF is also a member of the International Co-operative Alliance, a supranational organisation that represents and serves co-operatives worldwide (International Cooperative Alliance, n.d.).

On the societal level, co-operatives in Singapore were conceived of by the government as constituent organisations of civic society and self-help institutions (Tan, 2015). This dovetails Singapore's "many helping hands" approach (Ang, 2017), which encourages community members, philanthropy, and the private sector to work together with the government to provide social assistance for those who are less well-off in society. This notion of collaboration between civic society, businesses, and the government was also articulated recently in the Forward Singapore report launch (Tan, 2023b). In other words, co-operatives are imagined as having the potential to complement the state in the provision of goods and services that may not have been fulfilled by the market, especially for more socio-economically vulnerable groups in society.

The FairPrice supermarket co-operative—under the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), whose main role as a trade union is beyond the scope of this article—is an illustration of such a collaboration. Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Keng Swee had expressed that the FairPrice co-operative was a critical instrument in moderating the cost of living, and Goh provided the supermarket co-operative with a strategic direction for its set-up (Chia & Peh, 2023). According to Tan (2015), supporting the social missions of co-operatives was also a means for the government to help residents from the lower economic strata indirectly, without necessarily handing cash assistance to them directly.

Thus, the flourishing of such self-run co-operatives emboldened with a social mission would alleviate the state's burden to provide support and services for the target groups that these co-operatives aim to serve. The co-operative model has also appealed to the social service sector in Singapore.

Relevance of the Co-operative Model for Social Services in Singapore

Although co-operatives are run like businesses, the co-operative model has been explored in Singapore's social service sector because of some of its principles and features that align with social service approaches (see IPS, 2022). For instance, members' collective ownership and participation resonate with asset-based community development (ABCD) approaches, which leverage on existing community members' strengths, resources, and social capital for "the betterment of the community" itself (Lee et al., 2020, p. 12; Mathie & Cunningham, 2003; Ng-Tay, 2020). Unlike prescriptive, needs-based

approaches, ABCD initiatives rest on the premise that the community members can express their own goals and take charge of their own development (Rasip, A., 2021).

Thus, the co-operative has been thought of as a possible model for social service agencies deliberating how to convert their interest groups—grounded in ABCD principles—into member-led, self-sustaining enterprises. Interest groups may comprise community members engaged in income-generating activities based on their own craft-based, culinary, or other skills that can be delivered as a good or a service to consumers. Agencies hosting such interest groups may be keen to institutionalise them into autonomous, fully-fledged registered entities, in alignment with the overall goal of empowering members, as well as due to practical considerations such as financial sustainability and scalability.

Unlike home-based businesses, which are confined to residential dwellings and operated only by occupants and tenants of the respective residential units (URA, 2023), formalising such interest groups as co-operatives would allow for greater production capacity without the staff and venue constraints of home-based businesses. Nevertheless, setting up a co-operative—like any business—requires seed capital, committed members, knowledge in finance and accounting, and management skills. Co-operatives are mandated to fulfil a checklist of Annual Statutory Requirements for Co-operative Societies by the Registry of Co-operative Societies (2023), as well as further guidelines pertaining to their set-up (MCCY, 2023a). Hence, the practical considerations of converting interest groups to co-operatives will be elaborated next.

Considerations and Challenges of Co-operatives in Singapore's Social Service Sector

This section discusses the key practical considerations in setting up and sustaining a consumer and services co-operative in Singapore, from the individual to the institutional level, largely in the context of the social service sector. The concerns and potential challenges highlighted are inferred based on secondary sources, and they are not intended to prescribe criteria or requirements for determining the establishment or dissolution of a co-operative.

Financial and Management Knowhow. Members may not be equipped with the knowledge and skills in meeting the statutory requirements of co-operatives, such as submitting Annual Reports, Audited Financial Statements, and holding Annual General Meetings. While members may receive training grants from the Central Co-operative Fund (see MCCY, 2023b for more information on the types of grants, eligibility, application processes, etc.), there might still be other barriers to entry in the enrolment of training courses offered by external providers, such as minimum qualifications and suitable course timings. Nevertheless, it is possible to explore skills transfer from the agency hosting the interest group to the members prior to their establishment as a co-operative.

Self-Esteem. Beyond practical skills, there is a question of whether the target members of the co-operative can grasp and internalise the core co-operative principles and features. Given that many community members or "clients" from the social service sector are from lower-income households or hold disempowering lower-wage jobs, the co-operative principle of workers' collective ownership and the potential value generated from their own labour in such a self-managed organisation may not be easily conceivable to them (Hong, 2022). In short, it is important to consider the extent to which the target members feel sufficiently confident to embrace and adopt the co-operative model that would fundamentally alter the employment relations and the subordinate positions that they might have been accustomed to (Jossa, 2020). Nevertheless, with adequate coaching and guidance while still organised as an interest group, target members may eventually feel empowered to take on such a self-owned venture.

Membership Expectations. On the inter-personal or inter-member level, it is crucial to examine what the co-operative membership entails. For worker co-operatives whose primary interest is to provide members with paid work, members are workers who contribute their labour in exchange for a decent wage (Hoover, 2017). However, for co-operatives whose primary interest is to provide a good or service, the role of members is more ambiguous. Membership may grant consumers with exclusive access to services or purchase at discounted prices, much like retail membership. This raises the question of whether members should also partake in the production of goods or the delivery of services, or at least contribute in some way to the co-operative, rather than just be a passive recipient or "beneficiary" of services (Basterfield, 2022; Ng, 2022). If membership is tiered in a way that distinguishes "shareholding" key officers, workers, and consumers, the hierarchical structure risks veering the co-operative away from its core principles of inclusive member participation and fair distribution of income (Tan, 2015). Thus, consumer and services co-operatives may explore ways to institutionalise membership obligations such as providing platforms for resource sharing and member collaboration (see A Good Space, n.d.).

Commitment. Additionally, it might be challenging for members who are time-poor—especially those with caregiving or other family obligations—to contribute substantially to the operations of the co-operative (Tan, 2022). Community members who must attend to household, caregiving, or other such everyday work may be able to find time for interest groups hosted by social service agencies due to the flexible nature of their activities. However, self-running and sustaining a co-operative, especially with its statutory reporting requirements, necessitate a level of commitment that runs contrary to the flexible working time arrangements that the time-poor members prefer to have. Perhaps, having key founding members with a common motivation to start the co-operative venture and who can commit their time is a necessary condition for its establishment (Bajo & Roelants, 2011).

Funding and Financial Sustainability. On the institutional level, co-operatives need to be financially sustainable not only for its members, but also via a business model that aligns with their social mission and statutory obligations. For instance, NTUC FairPrice had experienced struggles with finding a balance between its dual objectives of maintaining profits and fulfilling its social mission – in keeping prices affordable while having to compete with corporate supermarkets. Chia and Peh (2023) also highlighted a disadvantage that co-operatives must contribute 20 per cent of their profits to the Central Cooperative Fund, which is 3 percentage points higher than Singapore's corporate tax rate. In addition, the extent to which co-operatives without their own seed capital can retain their independence is also unknown, if they must rely on external funding or grants for starting up (Hong, 2022).

To better make sense of these institutional considerations, it is crucial to examine the location of co-operatives in the larger, national context. How much influence does the co-operative sector have in promoting its core principles, especially with respect to workers' collective ownership? What is the potential for the co-operative movement to grow in Singapore?

The Relations of Co-operatives with the State and Economy

Insofar as co-operatives may complement the provision of goods and services by the state and the market, the core principle of collective ownership connotes the co-operative's power struggle over the means or mechanisms behind the distribution of earnings, where the decision-making authority lies among the workers themselves as capital-owners. In essence, the traditional conflict between capital and labour is resolved, or at least mitigated, by the merging of these two into a collective entity. Even for platform companies, co-operatives such as Driver's Seat Cooperative based in the U.S. have been established to wrestle data—hidden behind opaque algorithms—away from platform companies to the platform users for greater transparency and autonomy over how their data is collected and used in the calculation of earnings (Scholz & Schneider, 2017; Zainuddin, 2023). In this struggle over the control of wage determination, amongst other decisions, the

motivation of such co-operatives is inherently antithetical to the interests of conventional profit-driven firms, especially those hiring similar workers or producing similar goods and services.

Yet, co-operatives are not entirely divorced from the market, given that they still operate within the same economy as the other firms. Given that co-operatives tend to have a social cause and yet need to sustain profits, they usually face an internal conflict in terms of their business goals. For instance, Chia and Peh (2023) have characterised NTUC FairPrice's identity as inherently contradictory, where it constantly straddles profit generation and price minimisation. While these goals are not mutually exclusive, achieving both might be at the expense of another. Like facing a trilemma, Noam Chomsky has commented that the Mondragon co-operatives still entail exploitative relations with non-members, such as low-wage workers in offshore production locations, in order to be financially sustainable while keeping to the co-operative principles among their members (Romeo, 2022).

In addition to civic society and the economy, co-operatives in Singapore also directly intersect with the state, as they are regulated by and registered under MCCY. Therefore, co-operatives need to navigate and situate themselves within this intersection, especially as an entity that is potentially linked to organised labour, which is tightly controlled by the state (Deyo, 1989). Hence, any form of labour organisation by co-operatives must find itself in alignment with tripartism, which emphasises "harmonious industrial relations" and cherishes Singapore's "business-friendly environment" (Iau, 2023). Much like how the term "civic participation" is still adopted by the government after the conclusion of the Forward Singapore exercise (Tham, 2023), as opposed to the more liberal "civil society" (Tan, 2017, p. 71), the co-operative movement is bounded within a space that is obliged to be cordial and amenable to the superordinate spheres of the state and the capitalist economy. Furthermore, the nature of the statutory requirements of co-operative entities indicates that co-operatives in Singapore are fundamentally treated as a business entity, and not an activist or civil movement.

Moreover, it is evident from the persistently low number of co-operatives in Singapore—between 80 and 90 in the past decade (MCCY, 2023c)—that co-operatives remain as a relatively unfamiliar organisational model. There was no new co-operative that registered in financial year 2022 (MCCY, 2023d). Although these are only two indicators of the prevalence of co-operatives nationwide, members of the local co-operative movement have also acknowledged the general lack of public awareness of what co-operatives are and do, even among businesses in Singapore (Tan, 2015). While the small size of the co-operative sector does not indicate its lack of viability, it is telling of its place and prominence in Singapore society. Nonetheless, the co-operative sector has, and continues to serve as evidence that operationalising its core principles is feasible, giving credence to these principles which develop solidarity among like-minded individuals that transcend individualistic norms found in conventional firms led by major shareholders.

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Unpacking Credentialism and its Impacts on the Young Working Poor in Singapore

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Abstract

Low-wage work is often stigmatised due to its unpleasant work conditions within the broader society. Drawing from the in-work poverty study, this article uses three cases to illustrate the impacts of credentialism on low-wage work and training. The research found that young respondents in menial work described their work in positive terms despite the tedious nature of their work. Respondents also expressed difficulties qualifying for training due to their low education level. The article discusses the implications of credentialism on low-wage work and training and envisions a greater social change in broadening what we value beyond credentials to include skills.

Introduction and Literature Review

Low-wage work is often stigmatised and undervalued in society. Traditionally linked to hard or menial work, the general populace sees these jobs as less favourable as education levels rise. Within the academic literature, the concept of hard work is broadly understood both as an objective work condition and subjectively through the experiences and interpretation of the workers in such jobs. Research by Ashforth & Kreiner (1999) and Slutskaya, Simpson, Hughes, Simpson, & Uygur (2016) looked at the unpleasant nature of hard work, with an emphasis on the "physically hard menial labour and embodied toughness" of such work (Ramirez, 2011, p. 98). Other related characteristics of low-wage work in the literature include how such jobs can be dangerous or dirty (Johnston & Hodge, 2014). The literature on low-wage work also examined the subjective conditions of such work, including the experiences, feelings and interpretations of workers who are in menial work. For example, menial work is often male-dominated and this leads workers to justify and form their work identity around masculinity and their breadwinning role (see Slutskaya et al., 2016).

Within Singapore's context, the concern over inequality in the country led to a fundamental relook at the issue of low-wage work. Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister Lawrence Wong has on multiple occasions pointed out a gulf in how society values different types of jobs. He mentioned that Singapore's economy values "cognitive abilities" over "hands-on and heart work" (Ang P., 2022). DPM Wong also emphasized the need for Singaporeans to take a broader definition of what a 'good job' is, recognizing an individual's skills instead of one's paper qualifications (Ang, 2023). These discourses reflect the government's attention to a fundamental divide between the value of intellectual work and menial or care work, with the former seen as more highly valued. The value placed on intellectual work comes from a systemic emphasis on credentialism, where academic abilities and qualifications are used as a marker of ability to sort individuals within the school system and later into jobs that pay better. The government's Forward Singapore report released last October outlined the government's directions to provide support for structured training and pathway progression for blue-collared work and support ITE graduates in upgrading their skills to reduce wage disparities between ITE graduates and polytechnic/university

graduates (Forward Singapore Workgroup, 2023). The report also envisioned the move towards multiple pathways of success rather than one narrowly defined by grades (Forward Singapore Workgroup, 2023).

The concept of credentialism has its roots in Weberian sociology (Brown, 2001). Credentialism can be understood as sorting by abilities beyond the school system to stratify individuals into the various roles and functions of society (Brown, 2001). Brown (2001) looked further into the credentialling theory, which is the barrier to sorting workers entering the jobs they seek. Beyond organizing individuals into job roles based on perceived capabilities, these certification regimes also organize social life and define the meaning of education and skills within a given society (Hansen, 2011). Hansen (2011) explained further that it was due in part to the professionalization of the education sector away from society. This saw the actors within the school system guided by education policy and development, which led to a system where advantages are compounded to those who do better in the education system and are more well-resourced financially and socially.

Current research on credentialism in the Singapore context is centred on the selection of political leaders who are technocratic elites (Tan, 2008). Tan (2008) wrote of how the selection process for political leaders is exemplified through a system where prestigious scholarships are awarded to those who can do well in a series of interviews and written tests. The system aims to look out for those with the right attitude and character among candidates with exemplary results (Tan, 2008). A concern associated with credentialism is how the advantages that credentials confer may provide compounded advantages to those with the relevant qualifications (Hansen, 2011). This was similarly expressed by Tan (2008) who was concerned with how the system may cause inequalities to widen.

While the issue of credentialism has been well-established in understanding individuals who succeed within the system, little has been said about the impact of credentialism on those who may not do as well in the school system. Using data from the In-work Poverty and Challenges of Getting by Among the Young study, this piece aims to analyse three cases to illustrate the impacts of credentialism on lower-educated and low-income young respondents.

Methodology

This article draws on data from the NUS Social Service Research Centre's In-work Poverty and Challenges of Getting By Among the Young study (fieldwork conducted between 2021 and 2022) targeting lower-income and lower-educated young adults aged 21-40 and of polytechnic and below. The findings from this article come from in-depth interviews with respondents from the study. A qualitative approach was used since the article hopes to gain an understanding of the experiences of lower-educated and low wage workers within the structural conditions of credentialism and how they interpreted and felt about their experiences. From an advocacy standpoint, understanding the views and experiences of low-wage workers will also shape dominant discourses more holistically toward the needs of these workers.

These respondents were sampled from 1,900 survey respondents in the same study. Selected respondents were contacted by the researchers to check if they were interested in taking part in the in-depth interviews. If they agreed, interviewers would arrange with them at a place and time of their convenience to conduct either a physical or Zoom interview. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analysed according to salient themes.

Findings and Analysis

1. *Hard work and the credentialised jobs market*

The low wage workers interviewed are amenable to poor and menial work, at times keen to showcase their pride and the positive aspects of their work. One such respondent, Adam[1], was working as a retail assistant in a budget chain. His job involves restocking goods when they run out. In the interviews, he mentioned that the work was tiring as he had to carry heavy loads. However, he expressed a sense of pride in his work as he was the only male employee in the shop and related that the female employees depended on him to complete menial tasks in the shop. He also sought to dispel public perceptions of the job, as seen from the following quote:

> Because mostly... they ask me, "Hey, you really Singaporean ah? You (are) working so hard. I really saw many Singaporeans work here but 2 days, 3 days they cannot work, they say 'very tired', they go." I just tell them I really work before this. I really (have) been try(ing)… when I start(ed) my work is tough… tougher than this. Then this one is easy for me.

From the above, Adam related how the people he interacted with were surprised that he was Singaporean, which points to the perception that such low-value menial work was often dominated by low-wage foreign workers. This is a result of credentialism since young Singaporeans are often perceived as less likely to want to partake in menial work.

Adam's response thereafter showed a conscious effort to prove to both the people he interacted with, including the interviewer, that his work was relatively easier than past jobs because of him working very hard. This was despite him fully expending his paid medical leave and taking no-pay medical leave while he was nursing a leg injury from his job during the interview. His response also showcased a sense of bravado as he pointed out how he worked very hard from the time he dropped out of secondary school.

Through the interviews, a pattern emerged where workers who were in low-wage menial labour were painting a positive or neutral picture of their work to the interviewers. This goes against the reality of their work as the same respondents often recounted seemingly negative aspects of their work such as physical challenges of the work and long and irregular working hours. One respondent who was working in a series of delivery and mover jobs that were physically demanding, mentioned the following (emphasis mine):

> Long time, I never have easy job before, for me all challenging ah, *hard work, hard stuff to do* everything, *but I love it* ah.

We also found that these workers justified hard work using their breadwinning role or by reframing their work in a positive light and reclaiming dignity from a job that is stigmatized in the eyes of Singaporeans. Here, this argument will be advanced further by looking at the broader societal ideas of credentialism and meritocracy. This is done by analysing further their perceptions of their work in relation to their education. Most respondents engaging in menial work had lower educational qualifications than the rest of the interview respondents.

Most respondents in menial work were less positive about their chances of getting jobs outside of what they were doing. They cited their lower educational status as a barrier to finding other jobs with better prospects. For Adam, the retail

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[1] All respondent's names in this article are pseudonyms.

assistant, he was cognisant that his low education was a limiting factor to him moving into other kinds of work with better job prospects:

> So other Singaporeans are working for easy job. Yes, they have (the) knowledge to do their easy job la. My knowledge is Primary 6 only… 'Cause I very low primary, after Primary 6 I started to work… small work … that's why these jobs (are) all easy for me.

Adam's quote introduced a dichotomy of jobs that are either 'easy' or 'difficult', which is parallel to what most would consider white- and blue-collar work respectively. He accepted that those who are involved in 'easy' or white-collar work are those who are more highly educated. In speaking about his own experience, he highlighted the years of experience from the point he left school to explain why he found menial work easy. The pervasiveness of Singapore's credentialism normalised Adam's understanding of his position in the job hierarchy. Adam thus reframed his experience (Ashworth and Krenier, 1999) based on his years of working in menial jobs. Within the credentialised system where individual hard work and effort are valued in society, Adam's quote can be understood as him justifying the value of his work as he navigated the narrow opportunities available to him.

The narrow opportunities available to respondents in menial work were not lost on respondents. For many of them, this was their reality when getting a job. Multiple respondents related their difficulties in getting a better job due to their lack of education. Johan is a packer in the logistics sector and has only a Malaysian equivalent of our Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) certificate as he dropped out of school in secondary three. His job history consisted of odd jobs or ad-hoc work found through a recruitment agency. Johan admitted that he preferred such work to customer-facing roles due to his introversion. Most of the work he was involved in required physical strength such as delivering or packing goods. For Johan, his low education was a barrier to getting a full-time job since his Malaysian education certificate was not recognized in the context of Singapore's job market. He was cognizant of how his education level was a limiting factor for him in finding full-time work in Singapore:

> For me, because I really don't have any qualifications for me to apply for full-time straight away, then I don't have any prior experience in the full-time (job) right, so it's like if I want to apply also, they also consider me like not the main candidate for the work lah.

From the above quote, Johan was resigned to the narrow opportunities that were available to him due to his low education level and lack of experience in full-time work. He believed that upgrading was a way out of his predicament although this did not materialize as he felt too dejected after multiple job changes in the past few years.

2. *Training credentialism*

Credentialism is not only prevalent within the jobs market. Our study found that respondents with highest education N Levels and below faced difficulties in accessing training options (Ng, Goh, Ho, Tan, & Neo, 2023). This can be attributed to a credentialised training sector that further narrows the options lower-educated respondents have to advance in their jobs. Joseph worked as an ad-hoc renovation worker who is involved in various renovation tasks such as plumbing and electrical works. Despite his interest in going for training, he found that he could not qualify for most training courses as his highest qualification was N Levels. He also tried to enter the offshore and marine course in the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) but faced difficulties as he had to take an entrance examination in academic subjects, which he admittedly "forgot a lot" after years in the workforce. Joseph's example pointed to the credentialised nature of the training sector, which was also shared by another participant with N Level qualifications.

Respondents such as Johan and Joseph believed that training was a way to upgrade their skills and achieve greater mobility in terms of the opportunities that would be open to them as a result. However, the credentialised nature of the training ecosystem narrow their hopes for advancement, as seen from Joseph's comments on his prospects below:

> I'm not sure if I have the opportunity to learn more then I just do it lah because I just having 'N' Level cert, so I have nowhere to go already. So people give me some opportunities, I just need to get it, get that opportunity and experience it lah. Then from there can learn lah.

Joseph was speaking about how he valued every opportunity to learn new skills on the job. From the quote, Joseph felt a sense of hopelessness when reflecting on his job prospects, going as far as saying that he has "nowhere to go already", which pointed to what he considered to be the lack of value of the N Level certification in the current job and training markets.

Discussion and Conclusion

Using three cases, this article sets out to understand the effects of credentialism through the perspectives of low-wage low-educated young workers in menial jobs. Despite the stigma attached to menial work due to the credentialised nature of Singapore society, young workers with lower educational qualifications painted a neutral to positive light on the work that they do. Respondents' views on how their education level affected their job opportunities in the jobs market showed that beneath the positive reviews of their jobs, many also accepted that they had narrow opportunities in the jobs market. The positive or neutral testimonials should thus be understood both as acceptance of their social locations based on their credentials and a conscious effort to reframe the work that they do in positive terms to both the interviewers and the public. Credentialism also has impacts on training, with respondents of N Levels and below saying they face difficulties in accessing training which they believe can allow them to achieve mobility.

This has several implications:

1. The first is the individualisation of structural problems. The sorting of jobs based on one's credentials is a structural issue that employers and society accept and practice in the current jobs market. While there are recent calls to shift the emphasis to greater value of skills instead of qualifications, the anecdotes from the interviews still point to the overwhelming perception among those with the lowest education (O Levels and below) that it is "normal" for them to be in menial work due to their education level. This can be seen from how these workers attributed their jobs and lack of training opportunities to their low education level, which is a tacit acceptance that their current social location is due to their personal failings within the education system in the past. Such perceptions shift their focus away from the negative aspects of credentialism and issues with the social structure. Beneath their positive reviews of the job, what is left unsaid is how their efforts to work hard may not always equate to them advancing out of poor work. Many of them acknowledge this when reflecting on the narrow range of opportunities available to them. Their job histories also show a series of lateral moves within similar labour-intensive and low-paying industries, and others face difficulties in accessing training due to their education level despite being willing to upgrade their skills for advancement towards better-paying jobs (Ng et al., 2023). Even if they qualify, the cost of time and resources for training may also be much greater for individuals living on their paycheck from hand to mouth.

2. Another implication of such positive testimonials of hard work lies in how they may obscure the actual conditions of their work. The workers' testimonials should not be seen as having full acceptance of their work conditions. Many of the respondents candidly shared the difficulties that they faced at work. However, they quickly qualify this by saying they either are fine with it or highlight their efforts to overcome difficulties. It would thus be a simplistic reading to consider the conditions

of low wage work as acceptable since these workers' portrayal of their acceptance and adaptation to their work conditions were a result of the narrow opportunities available to them. The work by employers, unions, and the government to improve the work conditions and pay of those at the bottom needs to continue.

3. The final implication is a point of introspection for us within broader society to examine the question of what we should value: achievements or skills. The discussion of credentialism both in academic literature and the political discourse in the local context points to the dominant way of assessing one's abilities through educational attainment. While using one's qualifications to sort individuals into jobs seems fair given the investment in terms of time and effort individuals put in to get the requisite qualifications, it obscures the unequal starting points of individuals and how skills can be nurtured through gaining experience on the job. Over time, there have been efforts to look at other areas like skills attained and experience, but they come on top of requisite educational qualifications which presents difficulties for society to come to a consensus on alternative dimensions of assessing ability. The issue of credentialism in the training sector is especially worrying given the country's policy direction to de-emphasise educational qualifications and improve job prospects through training. Such experiences can be especially demoralizing to those who placed hope in the training system to help them advance in their jobs. Even as the government tries to shift the discourse from an emphasis on credentials towards skills, this can only work if employers and training providers shift the needle on their requirements for employment and training, and society shifts their perceptions towards valuing skills over qualifications.

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