

The Roots of Inertia

Why don't low-skilled workers try harder to better their condition? While this might seem a neoliberal question, it weighs on Barbara Ehrenreich's mind:

I was baffled, initially, by what seemed like a certain lack of get-up-and-go on the part of my fellow workers. Why didn't they just leave for a better-paying job, as I did when I moved from the Hearthside to Jerry's?

She starts with some textbook economic answers. There's transaction costs:

Part of the answer is that actual humans experience a little more "friction" than marbles do, and the poorer they are, the more constrained their mobility usually is. Low-wage people who don't have cars are often dependent on a relative who is willing to drop them off and pick them up again each day, sometimes on a route that includes the babysitter's house or the child care center... I have mentioned, too, the general reluctance to exchange the devil you know for one that you don't know, even when the latter is tempting you with a better wage-benefit package. At each new job, you have to start all over, clueless and friendless.

And information costs:

There is another way that low-income workers differ from "economic man." For the laws of economics to work, the "players" need to be well informed about their options...

But there are no Palm Pilots, cable channels, or Web sites to advise the low-wage job seeker. She has only the help-wanted signs and the want ads to go on, and most of these coyly refrain from mentioning numbers. So information about who earns what and where has to

travel by word of mouth, and for inexplicable cultural reasons, this is a very slow and unreliable route...

Soon, however, she appeals to industrial psychology. Employers win workers hearts and minds – what Ehrenreich calls, “the co-optative power of management, illustrated by such euphemisms as associate and team member.” And don’t forget learned helplessness:

Drug testing is another routine indignity. Civil libertarians see it as a violation of our Fourth Amendment freedom from “unreasonable search”; most jobholders and applicants find it simply embarrassing...

There are other, more direct ways of keeping low-wage employees in their place. Rules against “gossip,” or even “talking,” make it hard to air your grievances to peers or-should you be so daring-to enlist other workers in a group effort to bring about change, through a union organizing drive, for example. Those who do step out of line often face little unexplained punishments, such as having their schedules or their work assignments unilaterally changed. Or you may be fired...

The big picture, though, is that the capitalist system breaks workers’ spirits:

So if low-wage workers do not always behave in an economically rational way, that is, as free agents within a capitalist democracy, it is because they dwell in a place that is neither free nor in any way democratic. When you enter the low-wage workplace-and many of the medium-wage workplaces as well- you check your civil liberties at the door, leave America and all it supposedly stands for behind, and learn to zip your lips for the duration of the shift. The consequences of this routine surrender go beyond the issues of wages and poverty. We can hardly pride ourselves on being the world’s preeminent democracy, after all, if large numbers of citizens spend half their waking hours in what amounts, in plain terms, to a dictatorship.

The obvious response to all of these stories, however, is: “Why don’t the same factors prevent *high-skill* workers from trying to better their condition?” Let’s consider each in turn.

Transaction costs. While high-skilled workers have fewer problems with transportation and child-care, they also have much more *specific* skills. This seriously impedes job search. To find a new job, most nuclear engineers – and many professors – would have to not just sell their homes, but move to a new city. The high-skilled are also more likely to be in two-earner families, which makes relocation doubly disruptive.

Information costs. Firms often publicly advertise low-skilled wages. This is much less true for high-skilled jobs.

Hearts and minds. High-skilled workers seem much *more* likely to identify with their employer – and to define themselves in terms of their work.

Learned helplessness. Again, the indignities required for starting a high-skilled job probably exceed those for low-skilled employment, especially if you’re a government contractor. Once hired, however, the petty indignities high-skill workers endure are admittedly lower. (Here’s why).

The capitalist system. Almost no employer cares for kvetching, but high-skill workers probably feel freer to speak up on the job. Off the job, however, they are probably *more* worried about offending bosses, co-workers, or clients. Who cares what a waiter posts on Facebook? In any case, why should lack of voice *reduce* enthusiasm for exit?

So why then don’t low-skill workers try harder to better their condition? All of Ehrenreich’s answers prove too much. The better story is simply that there is a *distribution of desire to better your condition*. In short, *human beings have heterogeneous ambition*. Some burn to rise; others take life as it comes; most lie somewhere in the middle. And though mere desire hardly ensures success, ambition usually works in the long-run. The more you want to better your condition, the better your condition eventually tends to become.

Like Ehrenreich’s story, my story explains why low-skill workers seem “stuck.” Unlike her, however, I can also explain why high-skill workers seem mobile. In short, what my “heterogeneous ambition” story lacks in Social Desirability Bias, it makes up for by explaining mobility *and* inertia, rather than inertia alone.