



Occupation and Self-Worth

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Through an extended reference to Alfred Lubrano’s autobiographical essay “Bricklayer’s Boy,” along with several other examples, Matthew Thomas analyzes the social norms connecting vocational occupation with feelings of self-worth. Thomas’s essay was written for Writing I with Dr. Tonnia Anderson.

THE QUESTION “WHAT DO YOU DO?” is a staple in casual conversations at family reunions, when meeting new people, and even when talking to good friends. This question is a product of the social importance that the general public puts on occupation. The short essay “Bricklayer’s Boy” is author Alfred Lubrano’s narrative on the relationship between himself and his father, a relationship heavily influenced by occupation. Topics of self-worth, importance of family, and the impact of occupation are described in the essay. The most prominent topic is self-worth, which in itself is a concept that takes on many iterations based on the different ways people perceive it. Lubrano’s “Bricklayer’s Boy” presents a case study for examining the impact of occupation on self-worth where social and family expectations are the cause of the impact.

“Bricklayer’s Boy” deals centrally with the author’s blue-collar upbringing. Lubrano starts by providing background about how his father is a bricklayer who works a tough job to allow his children to go to college and avoid being stuck with low-paying, labor-intensive jobs. He then explains the conflict between his father and himself over the issue of career choice, since Lubrano chose to pursue his passion and become a journalist over his father’s desires of him obtaining a high paying career in advertisement. The rest of the essay’s body describes Lubrano’s typical interactions with his father after becoming a journalist, but the end of the essay is especially important. There, Lubrano tells an anecdote about his father stating that he was envious of how his son has a career he actually enjoys, compared to his resentment towards the difficulty of his bricklaying job. Lubrano’s story demonstrates how social and family expectations impact occupational choice.

Occupation can be broken down into two types: a career and a job. These two terms are often used as synonyms; while the distinction may not matter in casual conversation, for the purpose of this essay, the difference should be made clear. According to Lynn Mattoon, “a career takes much more motivation and forward-thinking effort than a job.” Mattoon expresses that the end goal of the occupation is what determines if it is a career or a job. For example, the public would want its children’s teachers to view their occupation as a career rather than a job, since they want teachers to care about the success of their children and strive to be better teachers. Another key difference between a job and a career is the time span that typically characterizes each type. A career is often an occupation that takes up a large portion of the occupant’s life, whereas a job rarely concerns the long term. Social and familial views are also an important factor. Generally, society and families would view a career more positively than a job because of the advantages associated with a career. Occupation’s two forms, career and job, both influence the occupant’s identity in many ways, but the most prominent way is how it affects self-worth.

Self-worth is greatly influenced by occupation due to the factors of an occupation: the amount of money earned, the type of occupation, and the enjoyment of the occupation. The amount of money earned from an occupation affects the occupant's self-worth because it is typical of humans to see financial success and self-worth as the same thing. However, according to Richard A. Easterlin, money is not equivalent to happiness, which is a factor of self-worth. In his article "The Economics of Happiness" Easterlin states, "[I]f happiness and income are compared at any point in time, those with more income are, on average, happier than those with less" (31). Despite this, people still connect high income with positive self-worth partially because people attribute a higher income with a tougher, more important occupation ("Sorrows of Work"). This informs how different types of occupations are attributed to a more positive or negative self-worth based on biases towards specific occupations. The final key factor of the way occupation can affect self-worth is the amount of enjoyment one gains from one's occupation. Occupants will never think positively about occupations they do not enjoy; thus, their sense of self-worth will diminish along with their negative view of their occupations. Norman S. Care states this perfectly in his essay "Career Choice" when he writes, "a society's structural makeup can 'affect' (block, encourage, thwart, promote) career options" (287). These factors of occupation all impact self-worth; however, without the expectations of society and family they would not do so.

Society's high value on occupational income is one aspect of occupational effect on self-worth present in "Bricklayer's Boy"; readers observe the conflict between Lubrano and his father over Lubrano's career choice. Society connects income and self-worth together because a higher income typically translates to a more important occupation, and material wealth is seen as a very important thing to most people, which is simply a result of human greed and jealousy. This social norm is seen in "Bricklayer's Boy" when Lubrano's father argues that Lubrano should go after a higher-paying

job in advertising rather than one in journalism even though Lubrano knows he will be happier being a journalist (343). Lubrano's father has given into social norms and given up on his dream of being a singer. Instead, Lubrano's father has settled to be a bricklayer so he can support his family and give them the opportunity at a better life. Lubrano's father, along with society itself, is arguing that a higher paying occupation is more important than what Lubrano desires to do when he states that Lubrano should get a position in advertising. This importance society puts on a high income is what causes occupational income to affect self-worth. This is the relationship discerned in "Bricklayer's Boy".

In "Bricklayer's Boy," the way each Lubrano and his father are treated based on their occupations shows how self-worth is affected by differing types of occupation due to social expectations. The different views assumed of different occupations illustrate how self-worth is influenced by the type of occupation. In "Bricklayer's Boy," employers' treatment of Lubrano's father's is also an excellent example of this; Lubrano describes his father's feelings: "Once the walls are up, a place takes on a different feel for him, as if he's not welcome anymore" (342). Lubrano's father's self-worth suffers from the social stigma placed on blue-collar workers such as himself.

Another example of the social expectations of different occupations can be seen in the interview "The High School Basketball Coach" (Rowe et al.). In this interview, a basketball coach, James R., is asked about his occupation and specifically about his recruiting practices, but the important point to take from this interview is how James talks about his interactions with parents and faculty members. James explains, "Parents are fucked up. They are. Because, like, everyone thinks their son is an All-American, right? So they just scream at me during the game. . . . They're yelling at me all the time" (371). This shows how social norms affect his self-worth based on his occupation. The parents know they can get away with this kind of behavior because, sadly, this is typical behavior according to society—coaches must deal with it since they are coaches. If James had

almost any other occupation, this kind of behavior would be treated with extreme contempt. Different types of occupation manifest self-worth due to the social norms placed upon them. This is seen in “Bricklayer’s Boy” along with the interview.

“Bricklayer’s Boy” provides a heartwarming ending when Lubrano’s father states that he is happy, even envious, of his son for loving his occupation. Studs Terkel’s interview with Carl Bates’s interview in “Working,” similarly, also shows how enjoyment from occupation is the ultimate deciding factor of self-worth based off occupation; however, family expectations can have a strong affect on this. Family is extremely important to most people, and consequently the enjoyment of occupation depends partially on family expectations. This is seen in “Bricklayer’s Boy” when Lubrano and his father resolve the issue of Lubrano’s occupation choice:

“You know, you’re not as successful as you could be,” he began, blue-collar blunt as usual. “You paid your dues in school. You deserve better restaurants, better clothes.” Here we go, I thought, the same old stuff. . . . “I envy you,” he said quietly. “For a man to do something he likes and get paid for it—that’s fantastic.” . . . To thank him for understanding, I sprang for the deodorant and shampoo. For once, my father let me pay. (346)

This interaction allows Lubrano to finally fully enjoy his occupation because his father finally understands that, despite being paid less, Lubrano enjoys his occupation. Bates’s story is also a solid example of how someone who wholesomely enjoys his occupation has a more positive sense of self-worth. In his interview that was published in Terkel’s “Working,” he strictly talks about how his life is directly connected to his occupation as a mason. Bates states that “[m]aybe thirty years, I’ll know a place where I should have took that stone out and redone it but I didn’t. I still notice it. The people who live there might not notice, but I notice it. I never pass that house that I don’t think of it” (340). This shows that not only that he enjoys his occupation but also how his occupation influences his self-worth.

Occupation is a significant part of life in not only the purpose it plays but also in the way it impacts self-worth. Self-worth derives from occupation in result of the factors of occupation: amount of money earned, the type of occupation, and whether or not the occupant enjoys her/his occupation. These factors, however, would not be possible without the expectations of society and family. Society's expectations, or social norms, are what give power to the different types of occupation and shapes views of occupational income. Familial expectations are what give the enjoyment factor of occupation power to influence self-worth. Lubrano's "Bricklayer's Boy" provides a perfect case study for how occupation impacts self-worth due to expectations of society and family. These ideas should be taken into consideration when judging self-worth based off occupation because an incorrect conclusion can result from doing so. ►►

►► WORKS CITED

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