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Wanted – straight talkers: stammering and aesthetic labour

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Abstract

The discussion of aesthetic labour has largely been confined to ‘looking good’. However, aesthetic labour also includes ‘sounding right’, where ‘excellent communication skills’ is an almost mandatory component of job advertisements. Much success in the labour market is therefore predicated on employees possessing the right verbal characteristics. In this article empirical research with men who stammer is used to extend our understanding of the issues which surround aesthetic labour. Findings demonstrate routine discrimination – by employers and the men themselves – with reference to a perceived speech–role fit. For the men, aesthetic labour is an embodied emotional labour: representing the effort between what is said and how it is said. Their sometime inability to sound right saw the men seek to enhance their knowledge or emphasize other communication attributes, such as listening. The article highlights the difficulties for anti-discrimination policy to offset the entrenched, socio-cultural nature of what constitutes employability.

Keywords

aesthetic labour, discrimination, emotional labour, employability, sounding right, speech–role fit

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Introduction

The theory of aesthetic labour originated from scholars observing an increase in job advertisements, mostly in the hospitality and retail sectors, seeking to recruit employees who were stylish, attractive and well-spoken (Warhurst et al., 2000). Following this theoretical development, a proliferation of empirical work ensued. Aesthetic labour points to the information we gather via our senses – sight, sound, touch, taste or smell – and the meanings that we attribute to this information. Research informing the theory of aesthetic labour focuses on sight and sound, and has been popularly termed looking good and sounding right. Yet despite the proliferation of research studies, and the two aspects of aesthetic labour, there has been a particular focus in the literature on looking good. This has resulted in a comparative neglect of research examining sounding right.

Aesthetic labour scholars have, however, explored speech in combination with looks: research has examined the retail industry (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007a), performing arts (Dean, 2005), hairdressing (Sheane, 2012) and the airline industry (Spiess and Waring, 2005). In those few studies that have specifically examined speech, researchers have considered accents (Nath, 2011) and dialects (Eustace, 2012); yet these studies are predominantly set in the context of employee–customer interactions (Chugh and Hancock, 2009; Hampson et al., 2009; Johnston and Sandberg, 2008), paying little regard to sounding right inside the organization between work colleagues.

At the workplace, an employee who is regarded as a proficient orator is also considered to be self-confident (Street and Brady, 1982) and effective (Gallois et al., 1992). As

such, they are said to have the capacity to inspire others toward behaviours that are preferential for the organization (Berger, 1994). If we were each to pause and consider this voice, how does it sound? No matter of its gender or its accent, it would be safe to assume that the voice you are attending to is not that of a person with a stammer. Those who experience speech dysfluency are considered socially inept, shy and lacking in confidence (Von Tiling, 2011) – arguably, not the description of someone who has just emerged from the successful career mould.

One per cent of the population is thought to stammer, with 80 per cent of adults who stammer being men (Lees, 1999). Consequently the drive for sounding right, specifically demonstrating fluent speech, may impact on 290,000 employees in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2013), but what is the impact? This research, under the umbrella of aesthetic labour and touching on a range of Goffman's work (1959, 1963, 1981), explores that question. This article reports the findings from interviews and group discussions with men who stammer. It relays their experiences of aesthetic labour, focusing on sounding right, within the sub-themes of employment aspirations, recruitment and selection, the role of speech and the role of other senses.

This article is split into two main parts. The next section reviews extant literature on communication at work (emphasizing man's talk), aesthetic labour and speech dysfluency. The research methods are outlined, and then the findings are presented using the subthemes noted above. What is unique about this study, and its participants, is that rather than focusing on different individuals with different accents or dialects, or differing gendered voices, it explores the experiences of, and responses to, the same

person fluctuating from sounding ‘right’ to sounding ‘wrong’. This vocal fluctuation typically occurs regularly and rapidly, but, crucially, fluency can also change over an extended period of time. A number of participants have experienced prolonged periods when they have had a progressive (and sometimes permanent) improvement in their speech fluency or have ‘become’ fluent and then for personal reasons such as bereavement or illness have experienced increased dysfluency. Consequently, exploring their stories offers the prospect of increasing our understanding of aesthetic labour and sounding right from a distinct viewpoint.

Communication at work

The inclusion of ‘essential: excellent communication skills’ as a requirement in the person specification of a job application pack would result in little shock and invoke minimal outrage. An important aspect of these ‘excellent communication skills’, and in an interpersonal exchange arguably the most obvious, is speech. Accordingly, being a skilled verbal communicator is treated as a justifiable requirement in the workplace.

The theory of aesthetic labour developed as a result of researchers noting the emergence of job advertisements which, either explicitly or implicitly, required potential candidates to look good and sound right (Warhurst et al., 2000). Aesthetic labour extends Hochschild’s (1983) work on emotional labour, the study of which advanced in the context of a growing service industry where improving the customer experience, via the demonstration of enthusiasm or displaying composure under pressure, is considered an integral part of an employee’s role and vital in adding organizational value. Emotional labour theorists examine the layers of effort and the impact when employees put on an

‘appropriate’ face during interactions with customers (Nixon, 2009). However, Warhurst and colleagues shifted the attention away from the emotions which lay beneath the face to the face itself, and employee aesthetics including looks, dress code, personal grooming and body shape all came under academic scrutiny. These studies, typically in retail and hospitality, have found that discrimination, or ‘lookism’, is rife: employees’ looks play a significant role in recruitment and promotion decisions (Pettinger, 2004). However, it has been suggested that Warhurst and colleagues have divorced the *state* of the face from the emotional effort in the *process* of putting on a face (Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006; Spiess and Waring, 2005). Scholars have argued that there is a connection – an embodiment – that cannot be ignored: the *process* of aesthetic labour is an emotional effort and when aestheticized for organizational gain (Hall and van den Broek, 2012) then aesthetic labour is an emotional labour (Sheane, 2012).

The few studies of aesthetic labour that consider speech have typically limited their focus to what is said as opposed to how it is said (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007a). As a result, this research has missed an important aspect of verbal communication: at the workplace, the manner of communication – how we speak – shapes power structures (Hardy et al., 2005). Being a skilled orator invokes an impression of confidence (Tannen, 1995) and authority (Sharma, 2007), increases the chance of success in the recruitment process (Ugbah and Majors, 1992) and helps career advancement (Curtis et al., 1989; Tucker and McCarthy, 2001; Warner, 1995). Leaders are often thought to be charismatic by virtue of their ability to dispense flowing speeches (Bormann, 1972) and adjust the pace and tone of their voice to target the audience (Gardner and Martinko, 1988). In doing so, they

are said to be better able to persuade (Berger, 1994) and coordinate the beliefs and actions of others (Donnellon et al., 1986). The importance of talk at work, and its link with employability, is also reaching higher education: university graduates are being encouraged to improve their verbal communication skills, over other modes, in order to achieve career success (Gray, 2010). Additionally, the economic downturn has seen an increase in the demand for elocution lessons, with individuals seeking to either retain or gain employment by learning to present themselves more eloquently (Patton, 2012).

Man's talk

In Goffman's (1959) classic work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* he advances a dramaturgical perspective where actors are wholly engaged in seeking to encourage the audience to believe that they possess 'appropriate' attributes. Crucial to this perspective is the study of the manner in which actors present themselves in order to create apposite impressions, with the role of language being vital in this inherently symbolic and interactive social process (Goffman, 1959, 1963). Ways of speaking are gendered and denote social status: men use verbal communication to affirm their hierarchical position (Tannen, 1995). Man's talk is dominant (Juodvalkis et al., 2003), directive (Aries, 1987), attention-seeking (Kramer, 1977), controlling (Leet-Pellegrini, 1980) and assertive (Gallois et al., 1992). Men interrupt more than women (Mayo and Henley, 1981), with the aim of gaining power (Amason and Allen, 1997) and emphasizing the maleness of their identity (Case, 1994). Male lawyers (more so than female) are encouraged to be aggressive in their talk; this is considered to highlight their role as informed professionals and improve their persuasiveness (Pierce, 1995). Men in other career fields are also told

to demonstrate vocal clarity, forcefulness and directness of speech to assist their employment prospects (Taylor and Tyler, 2000).

Natural talk

This propensity for a ‘right’ communicative style in the workplace and for verbal homogeneity is pervasive and enduring. Synchronization of speech between dyads harmonizes and mediates between social expectancy and interpersonal attribution (Tannen, 1995). A speaker who is able to coordinate the timing of their vocal delivery to match the audience’s expectations and own speech style, termed the in-time principle, achieves a greater connection with the audience (Clark, 2002). This speaking-in-time phenomenon – that is, sounding both how I would expect and like me – maximizes identification (Street et al., 1983) and belonging (De Cremer, 2004), sounds natural to the audience, increases interactional richness (Barry and Crant, 2000), and has been witnessed between the successful job candidate and interviewer during recruitment (Liden et al., 1993). Consequently and significantly then, research suggests that the prevalence of an analogous manner of speech in the workplace serves, at both the conscious and non-conscious level, to perpetuate and reinforce its usage.

(Un)natural talk?

Yet, verbal communication is innately disrupted. Natural talk contains a range of disturbances including pauses, interjections and revisions (Goffman, 1981). The rules of turntaking are governed by the use of gaps, and these lapses are a fundamental part of conversation (Provine et al., 2007). Dysfluent speech, however, contains more and longer interjections and pauses. The dysfluency disrupts the rules of natural talk, is

considered a wrongness of speech (Goffman, 1963), and makes interruptions, intentional or otherwise, by the audience more likely. Associated with their speech patterns, people who stammer (PWS) are subject to a number of negative stereotypes – they are categorized as socially deficient, emotionally unstable, awkward and self-derogatory (Ham, 1990); and shy, quiet and introverted (Von Tiling, 2011). Considering that organizations are increasingly sites of high drama where being one of us and making a good impression is key to career success (Roberts, 2005), then experiencing speech dysfluency represents a significant impairment which may exacerbate inequality (Young and Massey, 1978) and mean that PWS are less likely to be successful in their careers (Crichton-Smith, 2002; Yaruss, 2010). However, there is a lack of research in an organizational frame which explores the nature of the impact of speech dysfluency and employment. This study, linking directly with aesthetic labour, specifically sounding right, aims to address this gap.

Method

Participants responded to requests at stammering support events and to emails sent to members of stammering self-help groups. Data were collected via self-help group sessions, interviews or conversations, and from a total of 36 participants: 21 were self-help group attendees only; five were individually interviewed only; two were both self-help group attendees and individual interviewees; and eight were individual conversations, averaging 20 minutes, which took place at a national speech awareness event. These conversations were immediately written up as field notes and word-processed the following day. All other interactions, self-help groups and interviews

lasted an average of 90 minutes, and were digitally recorded and data transcribed. Participants were drawn from the north of England, the Midlands and south Wales. Their ages ranged from early 20s to mid-60s, 59 per cent were married, 6 per cent were BME, and 21 per cent were unemployed or retired. Of those who are or have worked, their employment histories span a range of organizational settings including the third sector, civil service, catering, architectural, healthcare, design, media, construction, publishing, legal and IT. Data are fully anonymized and presented as expressly agreed with participants: each has been given a pseudonym and are identified via agegrouping, with their employment type being noted only where pertinent.

The interviews were designed to elicit a sense of how participants experience aesthetic labour. As such they were asked to describe life as a PWS, focusing on their workplace experiences. This narrative approach offers participants the opportunity to air personalized accounts and allows them to present their world in a way that is responsive and respectful to their chosen interpretations (Rhodes and Brown, 2005). Data were analysed via fragmenting into broad themes, such as career choice and recruitment, and coded using NVivo 9. They were then further analysed and categorized: amending, adding or removing codes until there emerged a greater clarity and conceptual understanding (Charmaz, 2011). This inductive process was informed by moving between theory and data but is grounded in the data and emergent themes (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This approach engendered a sense of how aesthetic labour was part of the work and employment experience for participants, and led to the themed presentation below. In some cases participants' experiences are relayed using extended stories. This

presentation aligns with the sociological ethos of highlighting the experiences of under-represented groups (Taylor et al., 2009) and, given the research topic, is considered particularly important in giving voice to participants.

Stammering and the workplace

This section presents findings drawn from the interviews, self-help groups and conversations detailed above. Experiences are reported within the sub-themes of employment aspirations, recruitment and selection, the role of speech and the role of other senses.

Employment aspirations

All participants stated that their stammer had affected their employment aspirations. Their perceived inability to sound right influenced their career choice – as one reported, ‘I had to think about what I could do, not what I wanted to do, what really didn’t come into it’ (Chris, 30–39). Nearly three-quarters of participants reported that their speech dysfluency meant certain roles were ‘definitely out of bounds, like a policeman, soldier or something’ (Robert, 40–49). They typically looked for jobs where ‘talking was low down the list of tasks, so manual work’ (James, 30–39), ‘filing or stacking shelves’ (Luke, 30–39) or ‘doing things with my hands’ (Stephen, 40–49). Participants spoke of their school days as being difficult (also Butler, 2013), with over 70 per cent reporting low educational achievement: below the level they considered they were capable of achieving and at general education level only. Consequently, they often lacked the qualifications to move beyond ‘lower-level work’ (Matthew, 30–39), and when career

advisors and teachers typically ‘pointed to the building site’ (Peter, 30–39) then ‘aspiration wasn’t an option, it was who’d have you’ (Robert, 40–49).

Recruitment and selection

Aesthetic labour is predicated on the notion of presentational rules that are cultural and contextual. These are variously defined as attributes or characteristics (or sometimes skills) which within the working environment are mobilized, developed and commodified (Witz et al., 2003). Presentational rules mobilized in the recruitment process, specifically during a job interview, offered challenges for participants. However, prior to this there was the dilemma of whether to declare their stammer on their application. Two men said they had on one occasion ‘decided to come out on the form’ (Philip, 30–39); both reported that they did not progress beyond that stage. Once in an interview, sounding right for the majority of participants equated to being fluent and was linked consistently with sounding ‘strong’ (Philip, 30–39), ‘powerful’ (Daniel, 30–39), ‘assertive’ (Luke, 30–39) and with gaining respect. As Simon notes:

What’s an interview for other than to find out if you’ll fit in? Yes it’s about being able to do the job but it’s more than that, it’s will you fit with us, do I like you, will the team like you, and the clients, customers will they actually listen to you, respect you, and being like this [a PWS] doesn’t fit that. You are not respected. I’ve never been respected for what I have to say. This voice is not what they [organizations] want. (Simon, 40–49)

Following a series of unsuccessful and ‘nightmare-ish’ interviews (Daniel, 30–39), many found work by being ‘given a job’ (Fred, 30–39) via family or friends. Two-thirds reported their jobs were ‘out of the way’ (Arthur, 50–59), ‘in the back room’

(Tim, 40–49), ‘in the warehouse’ (Graham, 30–39), or ‘behind the main desk so I didn’t see customers and, more importantly, they didn’t see me’ (Henry, 30–39). More than half remarked on their struggle with, on the one hand, being ‘so bloody frustrated to be offered such a mindless job and then to bloody take it’ (Tim, 40–49) and yet ‘so thankful that they took me on when I’m like this’ (Norman, 30–39). The word most often used when discussing their success in the recruitment process was ‘grateful’, with many saying they thought the organization was being generous or ‘taking a risk’ (Karl, 30–39) in offering them employment. When asked why they thought they were given the job, participants offered two main responses: (i) the nature of the job meant ‘no-one else would stick it’ (Arthur, 50–59), which often indicated a lonely, ‘mindless’ (Tim, 40–49) or repetitive job; or (ii) participants had an increased level of skill in an area where that skill was scarce and/or speech was not considered integral to the job requirements. When participants fitted this category then employers were ‘accommodating’ (Stephen, 40–49) and, as in Stephen’s architectural firm, made changes to maximize their ability to perform at work.

Over 70 per cent of participants discussed the changing work context where they thought the roles that are, or would be, available to them are decreasing. Those men who were reaching or had reached the end of their working careers described how – despite their time in work being ‘frustrating beyond, I just couldn’t tell you’ (Martin, 60–69) – they thought it was even more challenging for PWS to gain employment in the current work environment. They referred to the lack of technical skills training, practical work, apprenticeships and the declining manufacturing industry, ‘where talking’s not all, it’s

one part of who you are at work, but these days it seems that the opportunities for developing skills are changing and what they [organizations] are looking for is changing too' (Walter, 50–59). One man in his early 20s who was applying for administrative posts illustrated the current climate when he said: 'I know it's tough for everyone now, but what the hell can I do when I talk like this?' He went on to describe a recent job interview:

He [interviewer] told me to go and look for something more suitable. He said that office work was definitely not for me because I wouldn't be able to get on with people in the office because they work hard but they also have a laugh and I wouldn't be able to join in. He said that he was only thinking of me and that he didn't want me to be unhappy. He said I could do the job mostly. He said he'd have to warn the customers about me and that most would probably understand but yeah he said I should look for something more suitable. When I asked 'like what?' he said outside work like gardening or something where I was on my own. I mean, can you imagine how I felt? I mean there's loads of things I can do, why don't they think about that. There's more to work than talking straight isn't there? Some straight talkers talk rubbish but that's alright is it? (Brian, 20–29)

In sum, all participants stated that their stammer had an influence on their employment aspirations and/or the recruitment process, whether via self- or other selection. Interestingly, when describing their avoidance of specific roles they often referred to posts in law enforcement or the military – roles typically associated with masculinity, assertiveness and respect. In describing how they knew their voice did not fit employers' requirements, many participants were told not only of their mismatch for the specifics of the job or the likelihood of a detrimental impact on customers, but also of the possible negative impact on team dynamics if they were appointed. It is significant that the majority of participants – just over three-quarters – reported that they agreed with the employer when they were told that their voice did not fit. This declaration was often linked with a discussion around the changing nature of work where participants referred

to the reduction in manufacturing and technical posts where they felt that they, and their voice, would be a better fit (also Nickson et al., 2004). The growth of employment in service and retail which led to the theory of aesthetic labour, they believed, has further decreased the career opportunities for PWS.

The role of speech

In describing the day-to-day experiences of aesthetic labour and speech dysfluency the article will draw on the stories of four participants. Their accounts encapsulate and are representative of others who participated in the study. They talk about the behaviour of those around them, including colleagues, managers and customers, but also how they respond. The first story comes from a participant who has experienced a transition from being a person who stammers to being ‘fluent, my stammer just went as I got older’ (Walter, 50–59). His story offers insights into the changing nature of aesthetic labour. Now in his 50s and working in the construction industry he stammered ‘quite badly’ from the age of 5, but found that he experienced improved fluency from his late 30s. This story relays his entry into the workplace, and his experiences as both a fluent and dysfluent speaker:

I was coming up to leaving school, had no qualifications, no idea what I could do. I couldn’t speak in a way that fitted most jobs. As it turned out my cousin’s firm wanted a labourer ... he persuaded them I’d be ok. I was always told I didn’t speak like I was in the [building] trade. If reps, customers or suppliers came on site and I used to answer their questions, because I made sure I knew my stuff, they’d look to anyone around me like they wanted confirmation of what I’d said. And it wasn’t that they didn’t understand me because I could have accepted that but they did understand me. One of the others just used to have to shout ‘yeah that’s right’ or ‘aye what he said’ and they’d go off happy. Jesus, when I look back now I wonder how I coped with it all the time not being valued, not just as a man but as a person.

But then now I'm fluent, the difference, it's like living a different life. I'm treated as a whole person with knowledge, expertise, like I've got ideas and I suppose my voice fits what I'm saying. (Walter, 50–59)

The lack of a fluent manner of speech appears to result in a divergence in speech–role expectancy for his audience, and this is then suggested to lead to them questioning his knowledge ‘just because of how I say it’ (Walter, 50–59). Those participants who have experienced varying degrees of dysfluency consistently reported that their level of fluency directly impacted on whether their message was heard and acted upon, including when they occupied the same work role. They repeatedly remarked on the importance to the audience that their ‘voice fits’ their role and the message they are conveying (Walter, 50–59), which then goes on to influence the audience’s response. This is summed up by another participant: ‘no matter what you’ve got, your knowledge, expertise or your background, when answering a question, or definitely if you want something done, if you stutter it out you may as well not bother’ (Chris, 30–39). These remarks suggest that what denotes sounding right differs depending on role and the nature of the interaction between speaker and audience. Any divergence in speech–role fit appears to result in an audience questioning whether the message is credible.

From an organizational viewpoint, the function of aesthetic labour is to promote a positive image with the aim of achieving beneficial outcomes (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007a), and this is often set in the context of customer service. The second story comes from a man employed in the IT industry. He talks about the impact of the customer culture and of his speech being managed by his manager:

I was in IT at the beginning when it was an isolated job. I got into it because I fitted the job. [But] the job changed, it was more about customers and selling ... all talk and less ability. Obviously I didn't fit this new regime and he [his manager] made it obvious he wanted me out. He said that customers didn't like talking to me and that the other guys were having to work harder to make up for me. I felt bloody awful. I mean who the hell as a professional man wants someone covering their arse for them but as well as that I knew I was doing more of other things. They'd [colleagues] come to me with queries on technical stuff because I kept up-to-date and they didn't. Lots of customers would email queries in but I was made to feel, well I was told, that I wasn't right for the place because of my stammer. (Charles, 40–49)

The changing work environment and the replacement of technical or manufacturing skills with verbal skills were strong themes in the men's stories, with the apparent pressure of customers' needs affecting their recruitment opportunities but also their treatment by managers in their existing posts. These two stories demonstrate an emotional labour embedded in aesthetic labour: they highlight that the men try to offset the drive for sounding right – and, instead, display a professional face – by enhancing their knowledge above that of their colleagues. This action enables them to show that they add value; that is, to be right even if they do not sound right. The stories also indicate that the drive to sound right results in the men feeling devalued and is perceived as a form of verbal emasculation.

The role of other senses

The next two stories describe participants' interaction with others, both inside and outside the organization, and how they draw on other senses during these encounters. Participants reported that they are sometimes 'kept away from customers' (Matthew, 30–39), and particularly 'important clients' (Norman, 30–39). One civil servant in his mid-40s reported that his manager asked him to stay away from key meetings with partners

because his speech ‘upset the flow of the meeting’ (Richard, 40–49). He described how he had developed relationships as part of the project team and, although he did not contribute verbally as much as others, he expands on how he considers he contributes in other, often overlooked, ways:

He [his manager] said that these partnerships are all built on getting on, being comfortable with each other, more so than what’s on the table. But while they’re talking they’re missing so much. They miss what’s not being said. They’re so busy talking they miss the body language, the feel of meeting. Best bloody training ever for listening is having a stammer. As a kid what did we used to do but listen? I used to follow-up the meetings with emails sometimes to clarify questions that were asked in a quiet or an unspoken way and obviously missed by those trying to outsmart each other. I think every meeting should have a stammerer. What is it financial, human and social capital? What about listening capital, does that exist? You should invent it. [He was thanked for his intellectual capital] (Richard, 40–49)

During this story where he describes his ‘listening capital’ Richard demonstrates an ability to gain self-esteem, and a positive communicative identity, via his focus on other attributes. He went on to describe these as ‘gifts’ and said that they were ‘often female traits I suppose’. Participants spoke of the increased drive for verbal dynamism in the workplace, discussed earlier, they considered that this is ‘all too often about making impressions’ (Henry, 30–39) and was ‘effectively bloody rubbish, white noise’ (Robert, 40–49) which drowned out other ways of connecting.

A belief in their possessing a heightened social responsiveness was reported by other participants in their dealings with customers or patients, but was sometimes set within a different frame. For example, a healthcare worker thought his ability to connect was aided by his stammer: ‘patients also see me, I suppose, as flawed’ (Alan, 20–29). The

belief in the powerful effect of exposing a personal weakness, moving beyond making impressions, was also noted by a participant who works in the third sector:

[People in meetings] have no idea how to interact with someone like me; it's a whole different dynamic. We seem to get more co-operation when I'm there. I seem to bring it down to a human level. It may be because I can't play the ego games and so they stop playing them. It's about being open and I make it about listening with effort if that makes sense. With me there they have to listen properly. (Oliver, 30–39)

This exposition of the role of other senses highlights three main themes. First, the increased drive for verbal communication in the workplace was considered to be eradicating other ways of connecting. Second, participants described how others came to them for their ability to listen and be supportive; this was often followed by a quip about their inability to talk back, but this use of humour did little to offset participants' recurring remarks of their apparent heightened intuition and social awareness. Third, when participants reported that they had developed these other attributes, they often referred to them as 'female traits' (Richard, 40–49), 'more often seen in women, some might say' (Peter, 30–39) or 'showing my feminine side' (Oliver, 30–39). This reflects the literature of communication at work, discussed earlier – specifically straight talk and its alignment with masculinity. Those participants who were unable to fit this mould developed, or referred to their development of, other communication traits and if not representative of 'man's talk', they considered them as being representative of femininity.

Discussion and conclusion

This article advances the literature of aesthetic labour by exploring employment and speech dysfluency. People who stammer (PWS) work in labour markets that are

dominated by the belief that sounding right equates with, among other things, fluent speech. The exploration of the employment experiences of PWS in a range of contexts and roles, outside the customer service focus of many studies of aesthetic labour, and looking beyond what was said to also include how it was said, adds to our limited understanding of sounding right at work (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007a). Moreover, PWS offer a distinct perspective because they are typically unable to align their speech to an organizational norm. Consequently, this study explores the impact when individuals cannot, as opposed to will not, comply with the vocal requirements of their workplace. This opens up the debate of not lookism but soundism in work and employment more broadly.

This article adds to the literature and debates that surround aesthetic labour in several ways. First, employers were found to routinely base recruitment and promotional decisions on sounding right. Extending prior studies, the process of assessing whether an individual sounds right was underpinned by the notion of a speech–role fit. Data suggest that a speech event is assessed by the audience for fit, with the manner of speech and the role (potential or current) of the speaker intersecting in this assessment process. If the manner of speech fits the role of the speaker, then the message is regarded as credible and, as a result, the speaker is regarded as sounding right for the role. Broadening our limited knowledge of sounding right, the process of assessing speech–role fit was identified in workplaces which were not customer-facing along with those that were. Employers often considered that participants did not achieve the required speech–role fit and cited the possible detrimental impact on customers, the conversational flow in

meetings, or office banter. As a result, for the majority of participants, recruitment success was more likely in lower-level roles, roles which were solitary and/or posts where speech was not considered integral to role performance. This recruitment assessment held unless the men possessed skills which were scarce or valued by the employer (Grugulis and Vincent, 2009). It is then that employers were ‘accepting’ and supportive, and an audience will ‘wait for words’ or ‘listen with effort’. This study suggests this is not the norm however, and for the majority of participants discriminatory behaviour was commonplace.

Discrimination occurs when a trait is used in an attempt to restrict an individual’s opportunity for social inclusion or economic advancement (Adnett, 1989). Historically, studies of discrimination have focused on groupings such as age, ethnicity and gender. Aesthetic labour has extended this work to explore discrimination which is sometimes more subtle (Van Laer and Janssens, 2011); although it is clear that the discrimination reported by the men in this study was far from subtle. Moreover, and contrary to other studies of speech discrimination (Eustace, 2012; Nath, 2011), it is of concern that those discriminated against largely considered their treatment justifiable. Participants reported struggling with the emotional labour embedded in the demands of aestheticized labour, describing the effort of trying to enact a fluent verbal performance at work. However, they typically considered that this effort toward speech fluency is necessary and that this quest for sounding right is right, despite its frustrations. In addition, participants expected and not only accepted this discrimination but were sometimes implicated by limiting their career choices to those roles in which speech was reduced. This, albeit

understandable, behaviour demonstrates the all too common and restricted notion of what constitutes employability (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005). This is in contrast to the movement for those with other impairments, such as dyslexia, where employees now expect, and employers are expected to make, adjustments to facilitate full access at work.

Anti-discrimination and positive action policies aim to support employees with a disability or impairment towards an equitable outcome in the workplace. Yet following reasonable adjustments, if employees are not considered to be qualified then exclusion is not deemed discriminatory (Foster, 2007). The entrenched stigma of speech dysfluency, together with the rise in devolved decision-making – where managers are increasingly autonomous and accountable – highlight the struggle for legislation to detect and address discrimination for PWS (and also for other employee groups – see Fevre et al., 2011). Moreover, any policy will be challenged in the face of self-discrimination. In spite of, and maybe because of, these challenges, policy-makers, organizations and individuals need to recognize and address the loss of skills, knowledge and ideas that results from excluding those that are ‘different’ from our workplaces.

Second, and building on the above, this article further contributes to the debates by portraying emotional labour as pivotal in aesthetic labour and the need to sound right (see also Nath, 2011). It is argued that *what* someone says is affected by *how* someone says it. Operating between *what* and the *how* is the manner of speech: this intervening process adds tones of emotion to the voice which, when aestheticized as part of the work role, represents an embodied emotional labour. Furthermore, there was another feature of emotional labour which emerged in this study: participants who felt that they

did not sound right for their role often devoted additional effort to improving their professional face by enhancing their work-related knowledge or skills. This action was seemingly an attempt to offset their manner of speech and suggests their belief in the substitution of ‘skills’ (Grugulis and Vincent, 2009). This finding is increasingly salient when we consider the aesthetic attributes which reflect forms of social and cultural capital such as age, gender, class and ethnicity, and how the emotional labour integral to sounding right, and specifically to speech–role fit, may impact on other employees. This raises the question of whether other workers who may consider that their speech will not fit certain roles (i.e. women or those from ethnic backgrounds) feel a similar pressure. It is acknowledged that this research studied an ‘extreme’ group but, as with the study of fashion models and looking good (Entwistle and Wissinger, 2006), the examination of extremes may expose practices that exist but are less easily seen, or heard, in other groups.

Third, the level of and interaction between aesthetic and emotional labour involved in speech events was found to vary in different types of interactions (see also Payne, 2009). Sounding right in a one-off, transactional encounter is instructive, subservient or sometimes superordinate (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007b), and was found to invoke a pressing form of emotional labour in an attempt to match the audience’s immediate speech expectations (Nath, 2011). However, in continuing relations, not considered in prior studies owing to their transactional focus, participants were able to draw on other attributes such as social intuition or ‘listening capital’. It is in the context of continuing relationships that emotional and aesthetic labour meet, offering opportunities for the

building of multilayered relations where sounding right plays just one part. It is acknowledged, however, that workplaces will need to change significantly before ‘listening capital’, as other softskills, becomes valued. In considering the ongoing softskills debate, this study contributes another factor: findings suggest that, although speech – just part of the communication bargain – may be being amplified, scripted or otherwise organizationally managed for enthusiasm or composure (Eustace, 2012), as a direct result, the ‘skill’ of listening to colleagues and to customers may be being diminished. This, again, highlights the connection between emotional and aesthetic labour in the manner of speech, but also suggests a link between speech and other skills such as listening.

Fourth, this article has concentrated on the experiences of men and speech dysfluency owing to the gendered nature of stammering in adulthood. This focus added another dynamic in considering the notion of man’s talk. Findings largely align to extant literature where ‘strong’, ‘powerful’ and – most importantly in this study – ‘fluent’ are linked with masculinity and with being ‘respected’ at work. This verbal style was in stark contrast to the way in which the participants reported that they presented. The men discussed the omnipresent quest for sounding right in the workplace and described their inability to achieve the required level of speech fluency in terms of a verbally activated emasculation. This research aligns with prior work in this regard, but contributes to our understanding of the interaction between masculinity and speech in describing how the men responded. Specifically, participants emphasized their holding of what are typically regarded as ‘female’ communication traits, as exemplified in ‘listening capital’. They

referred to these traits positively – against the inferiority claims of prior studies of emotional labour, service work and men (Nixon, 2009) – being described by one participant as a ‘gift’. This response is suggested to offer the men a way of gaining back some self-esteem and providing them with a valued communicative identity (also Eustace, 2012).

Given the relative newness of this field there are a range of studies that would usefully add to our understanding, and build on this exploratory study of sounding right in the workplace. These future studies may be able to address the limitations of this research both in terms of the sample and approach. There are limitations in the conclusions that can be drawn from the experiences of 36 participants. However, modest sample size is often a feature of qualitative research, with the strength being in the depth of insight into participants’ experiences. Moreover, the experiences of those with a disability or impairment are rarely generalizable (and rarely aim to be): depth trumps breadth in advancing our understanding (Shakespeare, 2006). The sample was drawn from stammering selfhelp groups or stammering events, and was self-selecting. As a result, there may be bias towards the inclusion of those who are more concerned about their stammer, or those who are more accepting of their dysfluency. The focus on male participants is also a limitation, not just in terms of reducing the representativeness of the findings but in the neglect of themes that might be specific to females who stammer. However, given the dominance of stammering in the male adult population, it is considered that this approach offers value. Yet it is clear that this is not a men-only issue

and there would be much to learn in exploring the workplace experiences of women who stammer.

Furthermore, and looking more widely than this study, there is a need to examine speech discrimination, or soundism, at work – to explore the extent, nature, function and impact of its reach. In relation to speech–role fit, this research has highlighted that there are instances where employers are accepting and accommodating of dysfluency, and occasions where an audience will wait for words. It would be of interest to explore the impact of an individual’s manner of speech in the workplace and when, in an organizational context, the manner of speech matters and when it does not, and why. Social class, often a strong theme in other studies of aesthetic labour, did not emerge in this research. This could be because the dysfluency overrode any consideration of the accent beneath, but further studies exploring social status and sounding right in a range of contexts would add value. In conclusion, this research has highlighted how an individual’s manner of speech impacts on their work and employment opportunities. It is suggested that the drive for sounding right, along with the perception of a speech–role fit, is exacerbating inequality, discrimination and social exclusion, and may also be to the detriment of other ways of connecting.

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