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From Security to Opportunity?:
Precarious Employment Among Managers and Supervisors in New Zealand

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Eva McLaren
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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the phenomenon of job security, insecurity and the ability to maintain continuity of employment. Assumptions regarding the nature of work are being altered by globalization, organizational flexibility and increased power for management in relation to labour. Furthermore, the move from welfarism to neo-liberal prescriptions of governance in New Zealand since 1984 has created challenges for individuals who are required to become self-reliant and responsible.

The experiences of eight informants in management and supervisory roles are reviewed here, providing an 'insiders' point of view on change in the workplace in the ethnographic tradition. The research is guided by the governmentality theory of Nikolas Rose, and Zygmunt Bauman's analysis of contemporary insecurity. Contextual influences on the employment environment in New Zealand are outlined.

Findings are discussed in relation to the following themes. It has been argued that job insecurity is endemic at all levels within organizations and can no longer be expected as part of the employment relationship. Employment continuity requires reflexivity of knowledge, as well as the constant questioning of the assumptions upon which the foundations of work are based. The central argument of the thesis is that employability requires an acknowledgement of the rigours associated with increasingly contingent work and an awareness of norms and strategies that are needed to assist all those currently involved in the hazards of working life, those excluded from it, and those who will join it. The development of a semblance of personal autonomy is required in order for 'freedom' to provide opportunities rather than insecurity, fear and exclusion.
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# CONTENTS

Abstract........................................................................................................................................... ii

Acknowledgements............................................................................................................................ iii

Contents................................................................................................................................................ iv

Chapter 1 Introduction......................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 2 Review of Theory and Literature
  • Introduction.................................................................................................................................. 5
  • Globalization and the Transformation of Capitalist Societies and of Work........................................ 6
  • From Security to Opportunity?....................................................................................................... 10
  • The Transformation of the Modern Subject.................................................................................... 12
  • Different ‘Capacities for Action’ - a Divided Labour Market?........................................................ 18
  • Summary..................................................................................................................................... 23

Chapter 3 Contextual Influences on the Employment Relationship
  • Introduction.................................................................................................................................. 26
  • Changes in New Zealand Society................................................................................................... 27
  • Changes in Employment Legislation
    Style 1: Compulsory Arbitration.................................................................................................... 29
    Style 2: The Employment Contracts Act......................................................................................... 30
  • Decline in Unionization.................................................................................................................. 34
  • Changes in the Nature of Work....................................................................................................... 35
  • Changes in Workplace Governance............................................................................................... 37
  • From Management to Leadership?.................................................................................................. 38
  • Summary..................................................................................................................................... 41

Chapter 4 Methodology
  • Introduction.................................................................................................................................. 43
  • Multicultural Social Analysis......................................................................................................... 46
  • Ethnography as Research Method
    Reflexivity..................................................................................................................................... 47
    Ethics........................................................................................................................................... 52
  • Research Procedure
    In-depth Interviews......................................................................................................................... 52
    Interview Guide............................................................................................................................... 53
    Key Informants................................................................................................................................. 54
    Data Analysis................................................................................................................................. 56
  • Summary..................................................................................................................................... 57
Chapter 5  Windows on the World of Work:
Structural Influences
• Introduction ........................................................................... 59
• Informants ............................................................................. 60
• Globalization ......................................................................... 63
• Changes in Society ............................................................... 66
• Education .............................................................................. 71
• The Changing Work Environment ........................................ 73
• Summary ................................................................................ 78

Chapter 6  Windows on the World of Work:
'A Tapestry of Feelings'
• Introduction ........................................................................... 81
• Personal Employment Experiences ....................................... 81
• On Security ............................................................................. 84
• Workplace Governance ....................................................... 88
• Continuous Learning .......................................................... 93
• On the Future and Advice to Children .................................. 95
• Summary ................................................................................ 99

Chapter 7  Summary and Reflections
• Summary of Findings ............................................................... 102
• Reflections on Methodology ................................................ 108
• General Reflections ............................................................... 109

Appendices  Appendix 1: Information Sheet ............................. 112
Appendix 2: Interview Guide ....................................................... 114

Bibliography ............................................................................. 117