

LEARNING THROUGH WORKING LIFE: SELF AND INDIVIDUALS' AGENTIC ACTION

Stephen Billett & Margarita Pavlova, Griffith University, Australia

Billett, S. & Pavolva, M (in press 2005) Learning through working life: self and individuals' agentic action. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*. (24) 3

Abstract

Individuals' capacity to be effective throughout their working life is now claimed to be necessary to sustain individual, local and national well-being. Yet without knowing more about individuals' motivations to continually learn throughout their working life, it remains uncertain how realistic are these expectations. This paper examines the transitions and continuities in a year of the working lives of five individuals. It illuminates how their identities, subjectivities and sense of selves are exercised through the churning and transformations that comprises their working lives. Although accepting the intertwining between the individual and social, the primary focus here is on individuals and their sense of self. Against some predictions, the five individuals were able to enact their working lives in ways that broadly served their personal interests and goals, even to their detriment. This included achieving continuities associated with their sense of self in negotiating transformational workplace requirements. These findings from just five workers prompt consideration of a more relational basis for conceptualising learning throughout working life and role of the self in that process. It suggests that learning throughout life is aligned to personal as much as the social suggestion of the workplace, employers or government and that external mandates and regulatory practices may be insufficient and ineffective in securing lifelong learning goals.

LEARNING THROUGH WORKING LIFE: SELF AND INDIVIDUALS' AGENTIC ACTION

Abstract

Individuals' capacity to be effective throughout their working life is now claimed to be necessary to sustain individual, local and national well-being. Yet without knowing more about individuals' motivations to continually learn throughout their working life, it remains uncertain how realistic are these expectations. This paper examines the transitions and continuities in a year of the working lives of five individuals. It illuminates how their identities, subjectivities and sense of selves are exercised through the churning and transformations that comprises their working lives. Although accepting the intertwining between the individual and social, the primary focus here is on individuals and their sense of self. Against some predictions, the five individuals were able to enact their working lives in ways that broadly served their personal interests and goals, even to their detriment. This included achieving continuities associated with their sense of self in negotiating transformational workplace requirements. These findings from just five workers prompt consideration of a more relational basis for conceptualising learning throughout working life and role of the self in that process. It suggests that learning throughout life is aligned to personal as much as the social suggestion of the workplace, employers or government and that external mandates and regulatory practices may be insufficient and ineffective in securing lifelong learning goals.

Change and working life

Maintaining and improving the capacity of individuals to be effective in work is now being held as an important goal in the maintenance of individual, local and national well-being, including the standard of life and social provisions (i.e. health, aged care, education) (Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development, 1996). Rather than cyclic periods of high and low economic activity, structural adjustments in global economic activity and capacities now require individuals in paid employment to continuously develop further their skills throughout their working lives (Green, 2001) to contribute to sustaining the level and scope of national economic well-being. It seems that in contemporary times, individuals are being mobilised by governments (Field, 2000) and employers alike to participate energetically and resourcefully in a global competition against counterparts in other countries, throughout their working lives. Central to this participation is individual's capacity to continually develop and transform their skills. Beyond maintaining the continuity of individual employment, the purposes for this ongoing improvement include buttressing domestic economic goals associated with quality of life including the social provisions that individuals or their families require now or later. Within this ambit is a neo-liberal goal of individuals helping themselves as government seeks to enable rather than provide (Edwards, 2003). Yet, without knowing

more about how individuals engage in and learn through work and throughout working life, how they confront change and, perhaps most saliently, are motivated to learn, there can be little certainty about whether the expectations placed on individuals by government and employers are realistic. What initiates and directs individuals' learning throughout their working lives is far from being fully understood. Accordingly, it is important to know more about how individuals learn throughout their working life, how they exercise their agency in participating in and learning through work and on what basis is this agency exercised. In short, what is it that directs individuals' lifelong learning?

The investigation reported and discussed in this paper focuses on these questions and, in particular, the role of agentic action – how individuals construct their goals for and act (Somerville & Bernoth, 2001) – in learning for and through work. This, of necessity, includes its relationship to individuals' subjectivities or sense of selves. From a post structuralist view, subjectivity refers to individuals' conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions that shapes their relations with the world (Weedon, 1997). A concern here is to identify relations between personal and social agency in its immediate and pre-mediate (i.e. those occurring earlier) forms and their consequences for subjectivity. That is, a consideration of how social suggestion is mediated by individuals' intentionality and agency; and their sense of self. This seems salient because, despite the growing acknowledgement of the roles that are played by social and cultural practices (Ratner, 2000), institutional regulations (Grey, 1994) and societal expectations (e.g. Cho & Apple, 1998) in initiating, sustaining and guiding individuals' thinking and acting, there exists a relational interdependence between these forms of social suggestion and what is enacted by individuals (Billett, 2003) in the immediate social moments that constitutes their engagement in work. So, despite the press of immediate environmental factors, such as those exercised in workplaces (Billett, 2000; Grey, 1994), and the strength and pervasiveness of the norms and values of the community in which work is embedded (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2003; Somerville, 2002), individual engagement, learning and development is not wholly captive to these forms of social suggestion. Instead, individuals are able and, indeed, need to exercise independence from social suggestion in order to maintain their sense of self and identity (Billett S, Barker M, & Herson-Tinning B, 2004; Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004). Motivated by the array and intensity of the social suggestion encountered in contemporary times, Gergen (2000) uses the term 'social saturation' to highlight the demands currently being made upon individuals, such as those found in work in late modernity (Beck, 1992). Yet, to maintain their sense of self and identity, and to buffer themselves from constant social suggestion, individuals can and perhaps have to be selective

about their engagement with much of this suggestion (Valsiner, 1998). From this perspective, individuals' intentionalities are in need of being exercised agentially (Hodkinson & Hodkinson, 2004), yet selectively and relationally in interactions with the social world to withstand constant threats to their sense of self (identities and subjectivities) which also has societal and cultural geneses.

Individuals' agentic action comprises bodily and mental action. It also has direct links with the kind of learning that arises from individuals' interaction with the social world. Wertsch (1998) distinguishes between compliant learning (i.e. mastery), which is superficial and may well be the product of forceful or compelling social suggestion of the kind which Valsiner (1998) identifies, and learning in which individuals engage willingly (i.e. appropriation) to a concurrence between what is experienced and individuals' values and beliefs. Given that richer or deeper kinds of learning likely requires effortful engagement buoyed by interests and intentionality (Malle, Moses, & Baldwin, 2001), this kind of learning may arise more frequently when individuals' interests and agentic action are engaged. However, claims about mastery and appropriation inherently leading to more or less valued kinds of learning need to be treated sceptically. Being confronted by something that is inconsistent with individuals' beliefs may indeed lead to rich learning, because something inconsistent with existing knowledge and/or beliefs may have to be confronted and reconciled, as in the Piagetian concept of equilibrium, and it may, in turn, transform individuals' existing knowledge. Appropriation might also result in the uncritical acceptance of existing practice (e.g. the marginalisation of certain individuals or groups). So, appropriation might be analogous to Piaget's (1968) concept of assimilation -- the social suggestion being integrated with what is already known -- through individuals actively seeking to appropriate that social suggestion. This is because individuals exercise intentionality in making sense of much of the social suggestion, through co-construction mediated by individuals' pre-mediate experiences in their personal histories or ontogenies.

Weedon (1997) holds that, in contrast to the humanist accounts that claimed individuals' sense of self is fixed and coherent, post structuralist accounts "propose a subjectivity that is precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourses each time we think or speak" (p.32). From these perspectives, when exercised, individual intentionality and agentic action stands as being central to individuals' learning and development throughout their working lives in terms of how and what they learn through inter-psychological processes (Vygotsky, 1978) -- those between individuals and social sources. This proposition necessitates a concern to illuminate and inform the prospects for

achieving the level of economic goals that employers, governments and governmental agencies propose for lifelong learning. This includes identifying how lifelong learners should be conceptualised and how best their agency might be exercised throughout working life.

In exploring these propositions, this paper proceeds firstly by identifying some conceptual bases for understanding learning through work and the role that individual agency and subjectivities play in that learning. Following this, the procedures for, participants in and findings of a study that examined these concepts are described and discussed. The findings are elaborated in sections that discuss how the changing work of the five individuals was aligned to their interests and intentionalities, how individuals' goals preferences and intentionalities are intertwined with their work and working life and the central role of their personal agency in shaping how they work and the interdependence between the changing work and 'sense of self'.

Constructing knowledge and identity: Agentic action at work

Work is a key component of adult life and, for many, it is the means through which their identity is shaped and exercised (Noon & Blyton, 1997; Pusey, 2003). Consequently, changes in work and the relationship between individuals and their workplaces may well have pervasive consequences for individuals and their learning. Understanding how individuals' continued engagement in working life, with its churning and transformations, is therefore likely linked to their subjectivities or sense of self. In this way, analysis of engagement in and learning through work centres on the relational interdependence between the gift of the social (Archer, 2000) (e.g. geneses of subjectivities, cultural demands and situational requirements) and individual contributions (e.g. intentionality and agentic action) to thinking and acting, and therefore learning (e.g. Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000). This relational interdependence is continually and transformationally being negotiated as both social and individual intentions, and their relations are transformed. Pavlova (2001) argues that in a society of consumers, individuals' subjectivities that were previously related mainly to work and constructed mainly on the basis of work ethics, are now being constructed on different bases. Self-identity and meaningful existence, she argues, now resides increasingly in the market place, with the individual now charged with the task of self-construction. This is analogous to Rose's (1990) concept of the 'enterprising self', the individual entrepreneur whose focus and direction is towards Foucauldian self-regulation and 'individualisation' aimed at securing the employers' economic goals and, therefore, securing their identity as an employee. In this way, inherently

individually constructed set of intentions may also be characterised by resistance to or the clever manipulation of the regulatory practices of the workplace, as much as either unquestioning compliance to them or their expedient reproduction of the self. That is, the exercise of agency may not always be directed towards securing further social subjugation or faithfully reproducing existing subjectivities. Instead, it may focus sharply on securing more personal goals.

Compounding the case for a view of agency as needing to be being exercised through and mediated by the regulatory practices (e.g. Bernstein, 1996) of the workplace or as Smith (1999) prefers 'ruling relations', is what is claimed to be the increasingly socially constrained environment in which work occurs. For instance, a common claim is that, a continuous and logically coherent working life may be currently less available. Many new jobs are contingent -- fixed term and part-time (Carnoy, 1999). The notion of vocation as a pathway to self-identity is now claimed to be less likely, as well-regarded and assured jobs becoming a rarity (Bauman, 1998). Objective measures, such as high salary levels, the ability to enact social good or personal discretion in how individuals engage in work and for how long and to what level of intensity, engagement in interesting work in the humanist tradition may be becoming the privilege of fewer workers. According to Rifkin (1995), in the current social conditions, more than 75 percent of the labor force in industrialised nations engages in work that is little more than simple repetitive tasks that do not provide any gratifying and meaningful identity for the workers. Beck (1992) proposes that contemporary (modern) society presents greater risks than in former times, rendering a greater sense of insecurity and uncertainty. Work and working life appeared no exception. Giddens (1991) claims that contemporary society is generative of anxiety and has individuals standing before it as anxiety ridden. Yet this is questioned by Fenwick (1998) who identified agency, discretion and personal intentionality in the actions and agency of her small business operators in their working lives, as did Billett and his co-researchers (2003 & 2004). These studies identified agentic action on parts of individuals who were not constrained by the social practices of work in which they engaged. While the studies by Fenwick (1998) and Billett et. al. (2003) focussed on small businesses operators, possibly without the kind of regulatory practices that Grey (1994) identified in a corporate accountancy practice, a recent study included workplaces with complex regulatory practices (Billett et al 2004). This then leads to the question about how individuals construct and exercise their sense of self in these times, and through diverse kinds of work.

Rifkin (1995), Bauman (1998) and Beck (1994) offer the view that for many workers, there is a limited prospect of constructing a life-long identity on the basis of high status and

highly discretionary work. Yet, apart from the judgements of external observers there are other bases for what constitutes meaningful work and workers' identity and through which individuals might exercise their sense of self. Employment in even routine, but very necessary and productive work, may provide individuals with a source of material comfort, the ability to consume, yet provide for their family and themselves to progress personally and socially. Somerville, (2003) notes how few aged care workers initially select this work as a career. However, their engagement often leads to a valuing of and an identification with this kind of work. In this way, construction of the self as a worker may be prized differently dependent upon the observer's values. Dewey (1916) held that the meaning of individuals' work is found in its consonance with their life goals or directions. There is no common or objective sense of satisfaction and self that individuals will derive from participation in paid work, it is more person dependent and situational (Noon & Blyton, 1997). Yet, such a proposition is not to advocate an 'anything goes' kind of relativism. Instead, it suggests that individual subjectivity, identity and sense of self play a key role in the valuing of work for the individual, rather than socially structured legitimising characteristics (e.g. high discretionary, status and remunerated work). Further, not all individuals' paid work will provide the desired personal identity or sense of self, nor will everybody necessarily seek for their sense of self to be realised through their paid work. So then what are the bases for this self-construction and its legitimisation?

In considering what might comprise a benchmark for the exercise of personal agency or self, O'Doherty and Willmot (2001) hold it is unhelpful to view the exercise of personal agency in terms of humanistic ideals of an autonomous and free self. They propose instead individuals working to identify a 'sense of self' in their work. Given the negotiated relationships between individuals and workplaces, and the need for individuals to engage in practices constructed by others, it is more useful to view personal agency in terms of individuals securing a 'sense of self' within contested and negotiated relations of workplaces. Even when able to exercise high-levels of freedom, this perspective offers a device for individuals to secure a sense of well-being and satisfaction that is associated with workplace goals, rather than the more problematic humanistic conception of agency - 'being themselves'. (p.117). Gergen (2000) claims the individual in contemporary times has become dislocated from both romanticist and modernist conceptions of self. Romanticism, he argues, associated self with personal depth in the form of passion, creativity and moral practice, whilst the modernist self is consumed with reasoning rationally about beliefs, opinions and intentions. Yet, in contemporary times, he holds, a sense of self is constructed on different

bases as individuals respond to a multiplicity of often incoherent and disconnected relations that bombard them from multiple sources of media, including those that are electronic and fleetingly transience in ways distinct from earlier times. Therefore, rather than ‘being oneself’, which he argues is unrealistic in such socially saturated times, the locus for the self in contemporary times can be seen in terms of a capacity to negotiate and construct a ‘sense of self’ from what is encountered. This does not necessarily imply some chaotic privileging of a highly individualistic epistemology. Instead, it reflects a constantly shifting and uncertain foundation of what comprises the self. This positions interactions between the individual and the workplace as being negotiated, contested but, above all, as highly relational. It follows that individuals may attempt to construct a sense of self or be themselves within the socially-derived constraints of their work.

Given the likely relationship between individuals work and their sense of self, it follows that as the requirements for work and the means of participation in work are being transformed, there may be consequences for individuals’ subjectivities and possibly a renegotiation of the self. Understanding these consequences may be enriched through a consideration of the enactment of human agency and the kinds of decision that reside within that agency – the exercise of agentic action. This is the focus of individuals’ self-construction and life goals as they negotiate the social world with its inevitable suggestions that constitute the social experience. This focus may need widening to include propositions about achieving humanistic goals of complete personal autonomy, otherwise this denies the negotiated and mediated relationship between individuals’ intentionalities and agentic action and the social suggestions and regulatory practices that comprise work practices. In this way, learning throughout working life can be viewed as a transformative journey as individuals selectively negotiate their engagement in work, and changing work requirements, work practices and the shifting bases for participation in work. Throughout, individuals’ identity, subjectivities and actions will likely be engaged in selective yet contested and interdependence with the social world. A key element of agentic action is how it shapes individuals’ decision-making in and for their working lives, including how they engage in the demanding processes of extending their knowledge throughout their working lives. These sets of concerns motivated the investigation reported below.

Procedures

The investigation reported here attempted to identify the bases by which five individuals engage in their paid work and what guides their practices and decision-making within their

working lives. The principal method of data gathering comprised a series of sequenced tape-recorded conversations with the participants in the form of semi-structured interviews. A key concern of the investigation was to continue the conversations through a process of refinement and extension of data over a year-long period. These conversations occurred approximately every six weeks over a 12 month period. The interviews comprised responses to questions constructed to elicit data about work, working life, life outside work, transitions in working life, and the bases for and exercise of personal agency through work. The aim was to map changes in working life, subjectivity and decision-making over this time. The interviews were also used to assist in verifying tentative analyses and deductions from previous interviews. The analysis included identifying the trajectories of participants' working lives and their ontogenies including life outside of work. To refine and appraise the initial analyses, the data from each interview and its initial analysis were discussed with participants in subsequent interviews.

Participants

The five participants were selected to include different kinds of work and modes of engagement with work, as well as diverse work histories (e.g. migrant, part-time worker). However, there was no attempt to secure participants who were well positioned to exercise personal and autonomous agency. The participants were as follows. Lev is an electronics engineer who works for a large multinational corporation as part of the team designing and producing rail transportation systems. Mike is an automotive mechanic who works as a supervisor and coordinator in a large motor vehicle dealership, working among the workshop and sales departments, and customers. Lyn works part-time as a member of small team of workers in a wholesaling business in the metropolitan fruit and vegetable market. Her work, two or three days a week, commences at 2.00 am and continues into the day until the orders are complete. Carl works as a broker for a large national insurance brokerage company on a commission-only basis. He is essentially a sole-operator business within a large enterprise. Ken is a manager of an information and communications technology unit within a corporatised state government department. His unit has particular responsibilities for electronic security across the department. These five individuals represent diverse forms of work, which entails different kinds of performance requirements and means of engaging with work.

Commonly, each of these five individuals had taken diverse and circuitous pathways in arriving at their current work. Lev learnt his electronics skills in the Russian military and practiced them in transport related work, before migrating to Australia. However, upon migrating he initially involuntarily engaged in relatively menial and unrelated, and, for him, demeaning work (e.g. hospital night time orderly) while developing the English language proficiency required to secure employment as an electrical engineer. Only when his English proficiency had improved was he able to exercise his preferred vocational practice. Mike's paid work has consistently focused on being a motor mechanic. However, much of his working life has been as a road-side service mechanic assisting motorists whose vehicles have broken down. His move into a supervisory position is relatively recent. Lyn has engaged in a range of work, most of which would be classified as being low-skill and low paid (e.g. retail work, detailing cars in sales yards and factory work) while continuing her role as being the sole parent and provider for her three children. Carl was a professional sportsman before retiring to take up insurance brokering. So there is clear discontinuity between his original and current career. Ken grew up in and remains part of a Christian community and his first work experiences were church-related activities. He then engaged in a range of service-oriented occupations (e.g. retail, restaurant management, pest eradication) before developing expertise with security using information technology. Through this expertise he became a manager of an information technology unit within a corporatised government department. So, of the five participants' only one has had a continuous vocational path: Mike (who is interested in customer servicing as much as the mechanical aspects of his work). The others, by different degree, have experienced discontinuities or transformations in their working lives and occupational identities. With Lyn, that identity remains unclear, uncertain and immature and she works to transform her identity from the sole caregiver to her children to that of a worker. These trajectories suggests that lifelong learning is more than being generative of skills it is about negotiation and remaking occupational identities and subjectivities through uncertain pathways of constructing career trajectories. In each of these pathways there emerges particular kinds of intentions associated with these five individuals' personal goals and the exercise of agency in attempting to secure those intentions. These are discussed later. It is worth noting, however, the sharp contrast in the experiences of these individuals and the kind of developmental trajectory that was advanced by (Erikson, 1968). Here, the trajectories emphasise the need to secure the sense of identity or self through disruptive and uncertain pathways, rather than negotiating psycho-social crises that were primarily sourced within the individual as they negotiate their sense of identity and worth at socially sanctioned stages that

Erikson proposed. In order to understand the context in which these negotiations occur, it is instructive to elaborate upon the changes to work and work practices, and their consequences for these individuals.

Changing work

Each of the participants experienced change and the transformation of work requirements in recent times, including during the year-long data gathering period. Yet, rather than being disruptive and disarming or marginalising, as some accounts predict (e.g. Bauman, 1998; Beck, 1992; Rifkin, 1995), these five individuals have absorbed these changes, which in some instances were also quite instrumental in bolstering their career progression and identity formation. Lev's current employer has been affected by the downturn and crisis in the global aviation sector following the attacks on New York and Washington. Previously, he had held a similar position in a large Australian enterprise which, upon being taken over by a multinational company, had centralised its maintenance work elsewhere, rendering him redundant. However, this redundancy saw him move to his current, more prestigious and well paid job. Because he works in the rail transport division he has been spared redundancy again. As the corporation seeks to shift its focus to away from aviation, the rail transport division is currently being given some primacy, thereby securing his employment.

Mike works as a supervisor, coordinating relations between clients and the automotive workshops. His current position is in large part a response to the extended warranty periods offered by automotive manufacturers to customers purchasing new vehicles. These warranties tend to wed customers to dealerships. The purchase of a new vehicle is now the beginning, not the end, of the relationship between the customer and the dealership, which has particular consequences for workshop staff. Interacting with and maintaining clients has become a key focus for dealerships because clients may go on and purchase another new vehicle at the end of the warranty period. Mike, it seems, possesses the combination of technical and interpersonal skills and the kind of sentiment required to address customers' needs and coordinate work activities to support the continuity of positive relationships between the dealership and its customers. Therefore, the introduction of long warranties has required new or refined skills of customer service for mechanical staff. All this has resulted in an opportunity for Mike because he possesses the kinds of capacities required for this new role and interests in customer care. So, the standing and security of Mike's employment have been enhanced by the extended warranty arrangements now being enacted by automotive manufacturers.

Moreover, he enjoys this kind of work as it brings together a range of professional interests associated with automotive engineering, customer service and some personal preferences about dealing with people and precision in one's work.

Lyn's workplace, like the other wholesale businesses in the fruit and vegetable market, tends to have high employee turnover. Work there commences at 2 a.m. and continues until all the orders have been dispatched to retail customers. Lyn is a relatively new employee, and is aiming to secure and develop a niche role for herself. Changes in this workplace include staff leaving or going on holidays and the new component of the business: the export of fruit and vegetables to retailers in Papua New Guinea. Lyn's employment is buoyed by her capacity to fill in as opportunities occur and also through her interest in managing the export orders, which includes her becoming solely proficient in customs processes. As Lyn is in the process of seeking and forming an occupational identity, opportunities afforded by new requirements in the workplace (i.e. export orders) served to bolster her place in the work team and make more secure her position.

Carl's work as an insurance broker has experienced considerable change recently with the introduction of governmental regulations and legislation that demand greater evidence and transparency when advising clients about insurance quotes. Each quote is now documented more meticulously and takes far longer. Consequently, small insurance quotes and policies have become less attractive to Carl because of the additional work and minimal return. These small quotes have been passed on to the company's clerical employees. However, as Carl prefers to work on high value policies and provide services to large policyholders this has come to suit his preference for work and its profitability. Carl who likes working on large insurance projects because of social interactions and relations, is now directing more attention to these kinds of projects because of the legislated changes. He reports being successful in this venture. Moreover, in the second half of the year he became involved in a lawsuit in which a potential client claimed malpractice and a failure to insure a property that was subsequently destroyed by fire. However, the meticulous record-keeping required under the new legislation provided clear documentation that no policy agreement had been entered into. So, these changes served Carl's interests well in terms of his preferred business focus and the capacity to withstand a legal challenge.

Ken's work involves electronically-based security systems within and outside the government department. Recent heightened concerns about security have done much to enhance the standing and permanency of his work. Although he does not fully support all his boss' initiatives, the new emphasis on security has supported Ken's work role. In particular, it

has buttressed his goal of securing well-paid employment that will take him through to retirement. This goal arises from an early working life characterised by low paid and insecure work. Consequently, changes that have brought about the requirement for a heightened security regime in his department and elsewhere are assisting him achieve this goal. So a significant change in the global environment and sentiments of workplaces has served to bolster and make secure his work, and indeed elevated his standing in the workplace.

So, although changes to work bring about challenges and intensification, in the case of these five workers, it has also supported the continuity and development of their work-related goals. Against the researchers' expectations and predictions in the literature, the churning and transformations that have impacted these five individuals' work have broadly served to buttress their employment standing. That is, changes in work have assisted, not inhibited, these individuals' career development. In at least three instances, there is a clear coincidence between their work goals and the changing requirements of their workplaces. Moreover, as discussed below, these changes permit the projection of their personal values into their work. Certainly, elsewhere in the corporation for whom Lev works, there have been significant job losses, career truncation and dislocation for workers. Also, in Mike's workplace not all mechanics or their supervisors welcomed the need to work more closely with clients. However, the experience of these five randomly selected participants suggests that generalised claims about changes in work leading to dis-empowerment, marginalisation, and the generation of anxiety may be overstated. Instead, a more nuanced and less prescriptive relationship between changes in work and individuals' continuity and identity may be required. This might represent a more useful way of depicting the relationship between changing work and changes in workers. To consider this relationship in more detail, it is useful to identify the role that these individuals' identity, motivation and goals played in how they engage with changing workplaces, and how that effected their sense of selves.

Identity, motivation and goals

Each of the participants claimed that their work was largely a means to an end. Interests outside their working lives were of greater importance than their work and working lives. For Lev, family life, aesthetic pursuits and a small business installing security equipment were claimed as important goals beyond the workplace. He directed efforts into his small business, and looked to this and his salary to generate the income he required to maintain his life-style, to educate his son and take him to Russia in order to learn about his parents' cultural heritage.

He stated that he would readily change jobs if it could secure him greater financial benefit. Mike stated that rather than working in the dealership he would much prefer to spend his time messing around with his computers. His home life was claimed, in part, to be taken up with working on computers (of which he owned many). In the penultimate interview he referred to purchasing two exotic spiders, for which he cared and established video technology to monitor and record their movements. In this way, his home life was used to exercise other vocations. These activities were taken seriously. These, and his family, were the ends to which his work efforts were claimed to be directed. As a single parent, Lyn's goals were to provide more for her family through work (e.g. buy a house, have a holiday). She referred to her existing rental home as being too noisy and the need to move somewhere far quieter for herself and her children. Also, she was hoping to secure enough money to take her children on a holiday to the beach.

Carl emphasised the importance of his family life, his good relationship with his wife and his interest in his children and their development. He is also involved in coaching junior sports teams. Carl claimed some colleagues' divorces were a product of focusing too much time and energy upon their work and neglecting their home life. The lesson here was salient: there had to be a balance between work and family. Ken was quite insistent that his family and church represented the ends towards which his work efforts were directed. His commitment to a life outside of work was evident in the weekly tithe he paid to his church community and the senior role he played in its governance. He stated that beyond retirement he would never think about his paid work. In this way, all five stated life outside work as the major focus point of their lives and 'being themselves'. All this serves to support the claim that work is not the only force that shapes individuals' identity (Pavlova 2001). That is, work is not some monolithic and irresistible practice that alone secures individuals' sense of identity and self. The participants referred to specific cultural activities, interests and communities that played a significant role in who they are in how they see themselves, and provided evidence of the exercise of agentic action in their lives outside work. This is akin to them wanting to 'be themselves' (O'Doherty and Willmott 2001). Dewey (1916) holds that vocations are individuals' directions in life and not constrained to paid employment, however high or low in societal standing. The opposite of vocations, from the Deweyian perspective, is not leisure, but activity that is aimless, capricious and involves dependence upon others (Quickie, 1999). In their lives outside work, the participants demonstrated the exercise of their vocation as parents, local sport coach, church leader, technology enthusiast, entrepreneur, etc.

As Dewey (1916) held, each of us is not restricted to just one vocation, which seems to be the case here.

Despite emphasising their life outside of work, each of the participants also acknowledged the importance of their working lives to their sense of fulfilment: their sense of self. By different degrees and in different ways, each referred to the importance of being respected as being effective and valued by their peers and other workers, and being identified as a person from whom others would seek advice and be valued for their counsel. Yet, each is required to be effective at work, so they can secure their employment. Underlining this concern about respect were issues associated with identity and sense of self. While, claimed to be not as important as their life outside work, the evidence suggests that their sense of self as something negotiated, shaped and sustained in the workplace. There was a rich intertwining between individuals' sense of self in the workplace and outside of it.

Lev referred to his work as securing the societal status of a respectable middle-class occupation (i.e. electrical engineer) as well as the financial freedom that a good salary provided for him and his family. That is, the professional standing of his work afforded him a particular level of status in the community and lifestyle that was regulated by his occupational identity. Since arriving in Australia, Lev has worked agentically and intentionally to become proficient in English and realise fully the application of his electronics knowledge in well-paid, high status and productive employment. However, as noted, this came only after a period of engaging in menial and unfulfilling work roles, constrained by his poor English language. So his current job provides a sense of self that is more closely aligned to 'being himself' in so far as it represents a step towards the ideal he is trying to achieve. That is of higher levels of remuneration, autonomy and discretion at work. Yet, he remains frustrated at not being able 'to be himself', in his approach to work and his conduct in the workplace; his dress and work habits have been questioned. He also feels under-utilised in his current position and believes he has the capacity to contribute more and is deserving of much higher remuneration and better conditions. Also, his work has not provided close friendships with his colleagues, he notes with regret. For Lev, positive relationships with others are an important part of his identity and sense of being. These he realises through socialising in the local Russian émigré community. This suggests a sense of work identity and agency that is strong, yet frustrated by a lack of potential fulfilment, acknowledgement and respect. In short, while not allowed to 'be himself', he feels his 'sense of self' is also threatened.

Mike, the mechanic, has high professional and personal standards, and strong views about understanding clients' needs and responding to those needs. These are central to his

identity as a worker and what constitutes a decent human being. A key feature of Mike's vocational purpose was to provide service to others, in which he found satisfaction and personal fulfilment. He referred back to his earlier career as a mobile service operator assisting stranded motorists, often holidaymakers, whose vehicles had broken down. He reported satisfaction in being able to assist these individuals and minimise disruption to their holidays. At the commencement of the research project, Mike was experiencing difficulties with another supervisor in the dealership. The conflict was over who had line authority within the workshops. This was threatening his commitment to the workplace. Subsequently, it was reported that this matter had been resolved in his favour. Then, despite claiming his home interests were primary, he began to spend more and more time at his workplace. He went in early and came home late, sometimes driving to and from work in vehicles with persistent or difficult-to-diagnose faults. In earlier interviews, he claimed that he had no career ambitions beyond the supervisory position he currently held. There were more important things to do. However, by the later interviews he had changed his mind. He noted his intention to apply for a more senior position in the future. In this way, his new role in providing a high-level of service is consistent with key personal intentionalities and subjectivities; of 'being himself'.

For Lyn, work in the fruit markets provides an opportunity to demonstrate her capacity to perform roles other than being the caregiver to her children, and outside of the home. She consistently reported having a strong sense of industry and organisation, and desire to build a further financial foundation for herself and her children. These intentions were the basis of her directing her energies proactively to her work; being herself. Becoming a paid worker and having sole responsibility for an area of work seems to fulfil an urgent need to re-affirm her identity outside the home. In the first interview, she expressed an interest in becoming competent in the purchasing and transportation of fresh herbs. This arose from an opportunity in previous employment. By the second interview, her intentions and agency were directed to another opportunity: being responsible for export orders. This requires understanding and responding to quarantine and custom requirements in which she alone would be knowledgeable. As the year progressed, she reported and was observed as having established herself well within the workplace, not only in a further specialist role, but as a keen, proactive and reliable worker. Her intention was to become indispensable in the workplace and was buoyed by the owners' positive comments and gestures towards her, such as offering her additional hours. Towards the end of the year, she was offered a job to manage a plant nursery in an attractive coastal city about 100 kilometres north of where she lived and worked. She turned this offer down, despite it having many of the attributes that she claimed to be working

towards. It would also offer her a living environment quite different from the one in which she had expressed constant dissatisfaction. Yet, the intertwining between her work and the work lives may have influenced this decision. Such a move would disrupt her children's lives. Also, she had met a man who operated a forklift at the fruit market, and they became engaged. So while exercising her agency in establishing herself within the workplace, there is also an intertwining between the workplace and her life outside of work, which in this case caused her to reject that job offer and move to a coastal location that seemed to meet other important goals.

Following a successful career as a professional sportsman, Carl now views himself as a successful insurance broker. He enjoys insurance brokerage work, the interactions with business people his work brings, the freedom to develop his clientele and contacts, to manage his own time and capacity to watch his business grow. So, there are aspects of his working life as being highly consistent with his sense of self and through his interactions with clients is able to get close to 'being himself'. Given the freedom he enjoys in his job and his indebtedness to the brokerage company in making this opportunity possible, Carl is in no hurry to achieve his ultimate goal of ownership of a brokerage firm. Ken finds his work rewarding because it is an area of growth and employment security, which was not a feature of his earlier working life, and should provide him with meaningful and well-paid work until retirement. Nevertheless, he takes pride in his efficient management of a unit within a government department, which reinforces his sense of self. He claims that any stable, well-paid work will suit his needs, because he does not associate his identity with work. So his work identity is shaped by more general employment goal of security of employment, not the particular kind of work. From his working life he wants to secure permanent and well-paid work, which positions him to direct his energies towards his church community and family. Yet, he works hard to secure this goal.

In these ways, the process of self-construction for each of these workers relates to and represents an entwining or interweaving of both working life and that outside of it; this is reflected in efforts seeking to secure their self, and possibly 'be themselves'. The degree of their relative importance differs across these individuals and is likely to fluctuate over time as particular events or priorities arise in one or the other lives. For instance, Ken is not interested in securing his autonomous self through work, although he wants to exercise a 'sense of self'. Yet, he is not alone. Common to all participants was a strong desire to exercise their 'sense of self' in the workplace; and where possible for these individuals to 'be themselves', which encompassed an intertwining of both life inside and outside work. There were differences

between the role work plays for male and female participants. For the male workers, work was a given, as something that has been with them forever, with the identity and sense of self being renegotiated through changes in their work. For Lyn, work is now playing a more important role, it is something through which she is seeking to 'be herself' in a different way. She is attempting to establish her working identity on more firmer and permanent bases.

However, for each of the five individuals, work relates to their identity: they are identified as an engineer, supervising mechanic, effective worker, diligent and trusted insurance broker and manager. Moreover, all five participants were able to exercise a part of their personal agency through their work. If the exercise of individual agency is through personally fulfilling activities is a measure of the link between individuals' identity and their work, it might be concluded that all five individuals were exercising their 'sense of self' and engaged willingly and interdependently in their work. That is, part of their construction of self and the exercise of agentic action is being directed and remade through interdependence with their work. This sentiment reflects what Pusey (2003) concludes is the role of work for middle Australia – "For nearly everyone work is a social protein, a buttress for identity and not a tradeable commodity." (p.2) Each participant referred to the importance of being able to exercise their agency in their work activities. Whether it was the ownership of the work undertaken, the possibilities of trying to do new things, being able to manage oneself, exercising standards of work and discretion that reflect individual goals, or the enactment of personal licence, the significance of the exercise of agency was amplified by each informant.

All this suggests the significance of agentic action in assisting and directing individuals to exercise their 'sense of self' through their work, with a goal beyond that of being able to 'be oneself', albeit through work or life outside work. Only one participant experienced major disappointment over the 12 month period of the study. This arose when Lev, on returning from a training course, became highly proactive and corresponded with each of three departmental heads about how his newly developed skills could transform the profitability of their departments. His invitations were treated with silent dismissal, not even acknowledgement. This suggests his agency had brushed against and possibly contravened the workplace's regulatory practices and set himself as violating these practices. He also recounted angrily how the national human resources manager had failed to acknowledge his existence when visiting the office where Lev worked. These incidents threatened his sense of self, and he responded accordingly. He resented the status afforded to others, such as this manager, while his own contributions went unrecognised. This may well have been the motivation for his pro-activity in promoting his services to senior management. It is possible

that his exuberant agency led not to his desired promotion, but being reassigned in new work duties.

Self, agency and identity at work

Through the intertwining of work and life outside of work, these individuals are held to exercise a sense of self in efforts to 'be themselves'. For some participants this was more readily achievable than for others through their work. For Ken, his family and Church community and relative lack of interest in the specific focus of his work meant that workplace conflicts were less significant to him than Lev, for instance. So although both of these individuals worked in large organisations that exercised regulatory practices (Bernstein 1996) they were relational, have less impact upon Ken than Lev. Ken was able to work around a new boss' agenda. Lev's sense of self seemed more violated by having his suggestions and existence being summarily dismissed. In these two cases, employees in large organisations prescribe a set of rules that regulate employees' behaviour and relationship towards the others; their regulatory practices. True, these work practices were not as prescribed as others have recorded (e.g. Grey, 1994). However, what is amplified in this study is how individuals' sense of self influences how and for what purposes they engage with work, and negotiate their sense of self accordingly, as exemplified by Lev and Ken's distinct responses.

In conclusion, and against some predictions and expectations about changes adversely affecting workers, it was found that change for these five workers had either buttressed or facilitated their standing in the workplace and their vocational goals. While all five participants claimed that their working life was merely a means to an end, the evidence suggests their identities, agentic actions and subjectivities were exercised in their work in 'being themselves' and in consideration of securing their 'sense of selves'. By different degree, there was evidence of an interdependence and intertwining between work and life outside work. In particular, it seemed that these individuals' capacity to exercise their agency at work was strongly associated with how they valued that work and identified with it as permitting them to exercise a 'sense of self'. It reflected how they might exercise their efforts in participating in and learning through their working life. This suggests that for lifelong learning to be successfully enacted by governments and employers, some consonance between the qualities of work and individuals' identity and interests may be required. Otherwise, there would be a contested ongoing negotiation between individuals' sense of self and goals of the work practice. What the evidence suggests here is that because of these negotiations, the humanistic and perhaps unlikely goal of 'being themselves' may not be

always be possible to drive individuals' intentionalities and agentic action at work. However, for individuals to exercise a 'sense of self' in their work, they need to go on and engage in ways that sees the attainment of their interests and intentionalities. For instance, and both Ken and Lev as workers in large and regulated workplaces participated in training courses offered by their employer. Nonetheless, in both instances the experience was unsuccessful. Ken had no choice but to be involved in the same courses repeatedly and Lev was unable to implement what he had learned from his course. So they were unable, respectively, to participate in a way and enact the outcomes of these courses that exercised their sense of self.

The findings here also suggest a lack of certainty about the kinds of learning that will arise from individuals' engagement in the workplace, even when intentional learning experiences are provided. The consonance between individual and workplace goals that are identified in the study may well lead to unreflective, uncritical and limited learning outcomes. The sense is that, in some ways, Lev has had the richest of learning experiences. While not fully accounted for in Wertsch (1998) account of appropriation and mastery, Lev's contestation with the workplace comprised a rich learning experience, albeit not the kind of he desired. At the commencement of interviews he celebrated living and working in Australia, because he could exercise his agency and intentionalities to their full in and in ways not possible in Russia. By the final interview, his sense of self and, perhaps overly idealistic views about his adopted country were being tested. This suggests that learning throughout working life arises as much from dissonance, as cognitivists have long claimed, than through appropriation where shared values exists between the learner and the social practice.

Hence, in conclusion, this small study prompts the need to consider lifelong learning in terms of individuals' drive towards securing a 'sense of self' and 'being themselves', both in their work and lives outside of work. Therefore, achieving lifelong learning goals maybe directed as much by individuals' intentions, than those urged by government and employers. As Field (2000) suggests the mobilisation of the self will be likely realised in ways that are commensurate with the self. Here, these are seen as individuals being directed to simply 'being themselves' and reconstructing themselves in the processes, yet in ways consistent with their changing needs, rather than being captive to external sources. Of course, the likely rebuttal to such a view is that these five workers are not typical and that these findings are aberrations, rather than reflecting the common picture of contemporary work and workers. Perhaps, other research will be advanced that demonstrates this and reinforces the orthodox view.

References

- Archer, M. S. (2000). *Being Human: the problem of agency*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- Bauman, Z. (1998). *Work, consumerism and the new poor*. (Buckingham: Open University Press).
- Beck, U. (1992). *Risk Society: Towards a new Modernity* (M. Ritter, Trans.). (London: Sage).
- Bernstein, B. (1996). *Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity: Research Critique*. (London: Taylor and Francis).
- Billett, S. (2000). Performance at work: Identifying the smart workforce. In R Gerber & C Lankshear (Eds.), *Training for a smart workforce* (pp. 123-150). (London: Routledge).
- Billett, S. (2003, 1-3 December 2003). *Individualising the social - socialising the individual: Interdependence between social and individual agency in vocational learning*. Paper presented at the 11th Annual International conference on post-compulsory education and training: Enriching learning cultures, Gold Coast.
- Billett S, Barker M, & Hernon-Tinning B. (2004). Participatory practices at work. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 12(2), 233-257.
- Billett, S., Ehrich, L., & Hernon-Tinning, B. (2003). Small business pedagogic practices. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*. 55(2), 149-167.
- Carnoy, M. (1999). The Great Work Dilemma. In J. Ahier & G. Esland (Eds.), *Education, Training and the Future of Work 1*. (London: Routledge).
- Cho, M. K., & Apple, M. (1998). Schooling, work and subjectivity. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 19 (3), 269-291.
- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and Education*. . New York: The Free Press.
- Edwards, R. (2003). Ordering subjects: Actor-networks and intellectual technologies in lifelong learning. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 35 (1), 54-67.
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity, Youth and Crisis*. (New York: Norton).
- Fenwick, T. (1998). Women's Development of Self in the Workplace. *International Journal of Lifelong Learning*, 17(3), 199-217.
- Field, J. (2000). Governing the ungovernable: why lifelong learning promises so much yet delivers so little. *Educational Management and Administration*, 28 (3), 249-261.
- Gergen, K. J. (2000). *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*. (New York: Basic Books).
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity : Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Green, F. (2001). Its been a hard day's night: The concentration and intensification of work in the late Twentieth Century Britian. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 39 (1), 53-80.
- Grey, C. (1994). Career as a project of the self and labour proces discipline. *Sociology*, 28 (2), 479-497.
- Hodkinson, P., & Hodkinson, H. (2003). Individuals, Communities of Practice and the Policy Context. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 25(1), 3-21.
- Hodkinson, P. H., & Hodkinson, H. (2004). The significance of individuals' dispositions in the workplace learning: a Case study of two teachers. *Journal of Education and Work*, 17 (2), 167-182.
- Malle, B. F., Moses, L. J., & Baldwin, D. A. (2001). Introduction: The Significance of Intentionality. In B. F. Malle, L. J. Moses & D. A. Baldwin (Eds.), *Intentions and Intentionality: Foundations of Social Cognition* (pp. 1-26). (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press).
- Noon, M., & Blyton, P. (1997). *The realities of work*. (Basingstoke, Hants: Macmillan).

- O'Doherty, D., & Willmot, H. (2001). The question of subjectivity and the labor process. *International Studies of Management and Organisation*, 30 (4), 112-133.
- Organisation of Economic and Cultural Development (OECD). (1996). *Lifelong Learning for All*. (Paris: OECD).
- Pavlova, M. (2001). *Ethics of Work or Ethics of Life? Shall we respond to the demands of the new economy?* Paper presented at the Knowledge Demands for the New Economy, Brisbane, Australia.
- Piaget, J. (1968). *Structuralism* (C. Maschler, trans. and ed.). (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul).
- Pusey, M. (2003). *The Experience of Middle Australia*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press).
- Quickie, J. (1999). *A curriculum for life: Schools for a democratic learning society*. (Buckingham: Open University Press).
- Ratner, C. (2000). Agency and culture. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 30 413-434.
- Rifkin, J. (1995). *The end of work: The decline of the global labor force and the dawn of the post-market era*. (New York, NY: A Jeremy P. Tarcher/ Putnam Book, G.P. Putnam's Sons).
- Rose, N. (1990). *Governing the soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*. (London: Routledge).
- Smith, D. E. (1999). *Writing the Social: Critique, Theory and Investigations*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press).
- Somerville, M. (2002). *Changing Masculine Work Cultures*. Paper presented at the 11th Annual International conference on post-compulsory education and training: Envisioning practice -- Implementing change, Gold Coast. (Brisbane: Australian Academic Press)
- Somerville, M. (2003). *Who Learns?: Enriching learning cultures in aged care workplaces*. Paper presented at the 11th Annual International conference on post-compulsory education and training: Enriching learning cultures, Gold Coast. (Brisbane: Australian Academic Press)
- Somerville, M., & Bernoth, M. (2001). *Safe Bodies: Solving a Dilemma in Workplace*. Paper presented at the Knowledge Demands for the New Economy. 9th Annual International Conference on Post-compulsory Education and Training., Gold Coast, Queensland. (Brisbane: Australian Academic Press)
- Valsiner, J. (1998). *The Guided Mind: A Sociogenetic Approach to Personality*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press).
- Valsiner, J., & van der Veer, R. (2000). *The Social Mind: The construction of an idea*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press).
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society - the development of higher psychological processes*. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press).
- Weedon, C. (1997). *Feminist Practices and Post-structural theory, (2nd edition)*. (Oxford: Backwell Publishers).
- Wertsch, J. V. (1998). *Mind as Action*. (New York: Oxford University Press).