

CAREER AS A PROJECT OF THE SELF

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There is a widespread view that the move towards market-based forms of employment, shifting more risk onto central employees, has transformed the culture of organisations and the nature of careers. My presentation will explore how managers understand themselves and their careers in a context of global corporate restructuring, reinvigorated market competitiveness, and the decline of secure employment.

Three broad academic accounts of workplace identities in the age of 'new' global capitalism can be distinguished. Some theorists emphasize 'cultures of control', claiming that the new workplace imposes more responsibility on employees for their own work, and therefore requires new workplace cultures which manipulate employee identities to achieve control (Casey, 1995; du Gay, 1996; Kunda, 1992). Others see the removal of bureaucratic structures as ultimately freeing employees to chart their own autonomous course through reflective identity formation, popularised in the notion of the 'portfolio career' (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996; Kanter, 1989), but also associated with the image of a 'post-traditional' society (Giddens, 1994; Beck 2000). Finally, there is the view that the uncertainty and unpredictability of the 'new capitalism' is a fundamental threat to people's capacities to generate sustaining workplace identities (Sennett, 1998).

Taking up these issues, I report on an Australian study that analysed the career narratives of 136 middle-managers in the private sector and show that the empirical data do not neatly fit any existing models. Contemporary managers' career stories were dominated by a 'market' narrative, in which they placed themselves as strategic actors making choices in a social world constituted by market-like interactions. This market narrative frames how managers understand risks to their careers arising from the contingent actions of firms, and it provides a space for managers to reflectively identify their preferences and pleasures.

The study attempts to move beyond the existing analyses of managers' identity formation by focusing on the *interplay* between how managers put together their *reflectively constructed* self images with *culturally supplied* stories about themselves, and the *interplay* between its linking of individuals to *local* and *global* contexts. The new capitalism is neither a world of pure constraint, nor one of pure opportunity, and the analysis aims to provide a route to understanding the complex playing out of both features.

Paradoxically, changes to the structure of organizations and traditional bureaucratic careers have been far more modest than changes in career identity and orientations. Managers have come to view their careers in more individualistic terms, seeing organizations as offering resources and scope for self-development, rather than the basis for allegiance and identity formation. A career thus becomes a more individualistic project designed for oneself.

In conclusion, some caveats should be noted. First, the market narrative identified is most efficacious for those at the top of the skill distribution who have reaped large financial rewards from changes in employment relations. Second, while there is little difference in the interpretative resources that men and women adopt to make sense of insecurity, differences reappear because of gendered domestic identities. Finally, there is scant evidence of any broadening of the class background from which the modern entrepreneurial manager is drawn. In this sense, there is as much continuity as change in the new managerial career.