An addictive environment: Wellington film production workers’ subjective experiences of project based labour.

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ABSTRACT

This research explores freelance film production workers’ subjective experiences of project based labour using qualitative data from in-depth interviews with eleven male and ten female production workers. The paper suggests that the structural conditions of project based labour within the New Zealand film industry create a subjective experience in which the financial, creative, social and emotional rewards of employment are interspersed with the anxieties of repeated unemployment. The stark contrast between highly gratifying periods in work and highly aversive periods in between work produces an addictive psycho-social dynamic which repeatedly draws freelance production workers back into the industry. This dynamic can only be fully understood by considering the relationship between employment conditions and subjective experiences as an integrated whole.

Keywords: creativity, emotions, organisational culture, group dynamics
INTRODUCTION

Academic interest in the organisation and management of the various creative industries has increased markedly over the last two decades (see Banks 2007; McKinlay and Smith 2009; Townley, Beech and McKinlay 2009 for overviews). Research to date has been predominately functionalist in orientation and has sought to delineate and interpret the unique labour market and organisational characteristics of this economic sector (e.g. Ferriani, Cattani and Baden-Fuller 2009; Lampel, Shamsie and Lant 2006). Studies of the creative labour force have also adopted a functional perspective, often concentrating on the strategies which freelance workers use to gain and maintain employment within a project based labour market (e.g. Blair, Grey and Randle 2001; Jones and Defillippi 1996; Storey, Salaman and Platman 2005). As Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2010) note there have been relatively few studies investigating the subjective experiences of workers within the creative industries. Those studies which do exist generally highlight the stress, anxiety and insecurity which workers experience as a consequence of adverse structural conditions within the creative industries (e.g. Jones 1996; Paterson 2001). Whilst these studies provide valuable insights into creative workers’ experiences they leave unexplored the key question of why people choose to enter, and equally importantly, remain, within industries which are renowned for their highly competitive, insecure, arduous and badly paid working conditions. The research described here sought to investigate this conundrum, within the context of the New Zealand film industry, by asking a wide range of experienced freelance production workers to describe the rewards and challenges of their work.

The New Zealand film industry, like the film industry in most countries, utilises a system of project based network organisation. Diverse teams of highly skilled individuals are assembled for limited periods of time and disbanded once their part in a production is completed. The organisation producing a film therefore consists of a range of different companies, sub-contractors and freelancers who interact for brief, highly intensive periods of work. The smooth functioning of the system is dependent on clear and well-established status hierarchies and organisational roles and strong social networks within the industry (Bechky 2006). This facilitates the formation of relatively stable ‘latent
organisations’ comprised of individuals who have collaborated on a range of projects, share collective memories, skills and norms and can reassemble into smoothly functioning units at short notice (Ebbers and Winjberg 2009; Starkey, Barnatt and Tempest 2000). Within New Zealand the small size of the film industry ensures that latent organisations within the industry are particularly strong.

From a purely economic perspective project based organisation is well suited to the uncertainties of film-making since it limits entrepreneurs’ fiscal liabilities towards the labour force. The entirely project based structure of the contemporary film industry does, however, have other organisational ramifications which are more problematic. O’Mahoney and Bechky (2006) point out that employers who use this system have few incentives to train contract workers or hire people who lack the relevant skills and experience. This tendency is exacerbated within the film industry by the lack of formal training opportunities, a strong reliance on experiential learning and the very high reputational and financial cost of mistakes. Davenport (2006) suggests that this has resulted in a static industry which seeks to mitigate uncertainty by relying heavily on re-using past strategies and systems to ensure successful outcomes. The common perception of project based film organisations as more flexible, innovative and highly skilled than traditional organisations may therefore be a chimera.

Project based organisations only provide workers with short-term employment. In consequence, freelance film production workers expend considerable time and energy cultivating the intertwined social and professional networks which will enable them to secure future employment (Antcliff, Saundry and Stuart 2007; Blair, Grey and Randle 2001; Jones 1996). Networking and reputation maintenance are key mechanisms for gaining and keeping employment within an industry which relies almost exclusively on personal contacts and recommendations when allocating work. Networking is thus an act of self-enterprise which is essential to freelancers’ economic survival (Blair 2001; Smith 2010).

Successful freelance film workers belong to both open and closed networks (Antcliff et al. 2007). Open network contacts are loose acquaintances who may be contacted or recommended to others when searching for work. Sharing open network contacts carries expectations of reciprocity but is
perceived as a relatively weak obligation. In contrast, closed or project networks comprise people who have worked together previously and actively seek to re-create themselves as project teams whenever possible. Closed networks enhance employment opportunities and provide a degree of collective security within a highly individualistic and competitive industry (Bauman 2002; Delmestri, Montanari and Usai 2005). There is often a high degree of reciprocity between network members and strong levels of mutual trust which have been forged over time. There is also a sense of collective performance obligation, with network members striving to enhance both their own reputations and that of their team. The strong emphasis on social conformity and reputation within networks constitutes a mechanism by which the film workforce regulates its own behaviour in accordance with the exigencies of a project based labour market. Social relationships between workers help to maintain and reinforce industry norms and working practices even when these are deleterious to the economic and psychological well-being of the workforce. For example, freelancers may be pressured by other network members to lower their individual rates in order to ensure the team’s collective employment or to work excessive hours in order to maintain the network’s collective reputation (Ebbers and Winjberg 2009).

Empirical research into freelance film and television workers’ subjective experiences of work consistently finds that workers strongly dislike the financial insecurity, low wages, extreme competitiveness and general unpredictability of project based work and experience considerable distress and anxiety as a result of these working conditions (Dex et al. 2000; Ertel et al. 2005; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2008; Paterson 2001). These findings have led researchers like Ursell (2000; 2006) to investigate workers’ motives for remaining within the industry. Typical explanations have highlighted the intrinsic rewards of self-actualisation and creative labour (e.g. Caves 2000; Alvarez and Svenjova 2002) the link between creative work and self-identity (Bain 2005) and the social rewards deriving from work in high prestige ‘glamour’ industries (Nixon and Crew 2004).

The extant research into creative workers’ subjective experiences has tended to construct a fairly sharp dichotomy between the aversive extrinsic conditions of project based labour and the intrinsic rewards of creative work. In consequence, creative workers are sometimes portrayed as somehow
colluding with their own exploitation by choosing to remain within the industry because the actual or longed for intrinsic rewards outweigh the disadvantages. As Gill and Pratt (2008) point out such explanations are problematic because they polarise and atomise different features of workers’ experience rather than producing an integrated understanding. They therefore risk oversimplifying creative workers’ subjective experiences of project based labour.

In order to fully understand freelance film workers’ subjective experiences of project based labour it is important to recognise that for freelancers themselves periods in work and time between contracts constitute divergent aspects of an overall gestalt. Producing a complete account of freelancers’ subjective experiences of project based labour therefore necessitates investigating the interplay between the structural and psychological components of both environments. This research seeks to extend the insights provided by previous research into freelance labour within the film industry by showing how repeated experiences of insecure employment can have the paradoxical effect of strengthening workers’ involvement with the industry.

**METHODOLOGY**

This research utilised Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as a guiding methodological framework (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009). Essentially, this approach to qualitative research seeks to understand and interpret the experiential world of participants through careful and sympathetic analysis of events and issues which respondents find personally significant.

Respondents were accessed through the first author’s personal connections with industry insiders. These contacts then facilitated access to a wider group through their personal and professional networks. The twenty-one respondents were selected to provide a gender balanced and diverse mix of film production workers within the Wellington film industry. Six production workers who had recently left the industry were included to provide insights into the triggers for, and difficulties of, leaving the industry (see Table One for respondent details).

Respondents were interviewed individually by the first author in non-work locations. All interviews lasted over an hour with several exceeding two hours. Interviews were loosely structured and were
designed to explore respondents’ subjective experiences of project based work. The interview guide covered a variety of topics including entry into the industry, working conditions, time without work, networking and social relationships, intrinsic rewards of film-making, work-life balance, training and career development, gender issues and exit from the industry. Interviews were taped and then transcribed by the first author.

A three stage thematic analysis of the data was carried out. In the first stage each transcript was examined individually to identify key themes for that respondent. This involved assessing both the amount of interview space devoted to an issue and the emotional intensity associated with a specific theme. In the second stage the key themes from different respondents were compared and contrasted to identify commonalities or discrepancies between accounts. Finally the emergent themes from the entire data set were re-appraised to interpret the relationship between the structural conditions of project based labour within the New Zealand film industry and respondents’ subjective experiences of work.

**FINDINGS**

Most respondents described their work in intense and emotionally charged language. For many, working in the film industry was a way of life rather than a job and their sense of self was strongly invested in their work. Despite this, all respondents were highly ambivalent about film making, with four respondents using the term addiction to describe their relationship with the industry and thirteen describing themselves as feeling somehow compelled to repeatedly return to a work environment which they saw as damaging their financial, physical and emotional well-being. Sam\(^1\), a freelance special effects technician in his mid thirties explained:

*The film industry is kind of like an addiction in a lot of ways, because when you are on a job you’re totally consumed by it. Then as soon as it’s over you’re like – ‘Oh my God when is the next one going to be on’. You hear Peter is working on this or that this project is coming to New Zealand – oh really*

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\(^1\) All names are pseudonyms.
– oh wow – oh cool, and you kind of get your hopes up again and that keeps you going until such time as you hear that it’s not.

Sam’s description juxtaposes the high of being in work with the anxious wait for new work. This theme occurred repeatedly in all interviews and was the crux of respondents’ addictive relationship with the film industry. The interview data showed clearly that the structural conditions of project based freelance labour helped create a psychological context which augmented the rewards of employment and magnified the aversive consequences of unemployment. Consequently, many respondents sought to escape the financial and psychological insecurities of unemployment by accepting almost any work which was offered to them. The iniquities and uncertainties of project based employment thus had the effect of intensifying respondents’ psychological involvement with the industry.

The adverse economic effects of project based employment were described at length by all respondents. All found the constant unpredictability of paid work difficult. Workers with family commitments felt the financial insecurity particularly acutely, with several eventually leaving the industry for this reason. Respondents who had been in the industry for a decade or more all described decreasing pay rates and increasing competition, with several describing themselves as feeling trapped within a downward financial spiral they were powerless to change. Patrick, a highly successful art director in his early fifties, with twenty years industry experience, described a financial situation typical of many freelancers:

*I’m finding it a struggle to keep in operation…..I’m at the top of my game in the film side and basically my builder or plumber is more successful financially than I am. Intellectually and creatively it is working for me, but financially it really hasn’t been a winner.*

For many, the constant financial pressure worsened dramatically when they were between contracts, bills were mounting and no new work was available. The uncertainty of these periods meant that respondents were often unable to occupy themselves constructively and were totally focussed on gaining new employment. Alan, a set painter in his mid-thirties with two small children explained:
Jenny always talks about when I’m not working. If I don’t have a start date on another job I last about a week and then I start to get really scratchy….grumpy…oh god what’s going to happen next – I’ve heard about this other job but so and so might get it, I might not get it. It’s the uncertainty, you can’t plan anything. You can’t say I’ve got two months off let’s go and have a holiday and then I’ll start work and I’ll earn this much. You can’t do that - it’s all hand to mouth.

For most, the uncertainties and lows of unemployment lifted rapidly when work on their next contract started. In consequence, many remained within the industry despite feeling frustrated by their working conditions. As Hillary, an experienced producer in her late thirties with twelve years industry experience explained:

*I’m truly at the mercy of events that come up. And in a way to be let go would be a total relief, you know permission to be free to find other options. But while I still get work I’m quite addicted .....make hay while the sun shines, it’s that kind of mentality.*

Respondents described the experience of actually working on a film project primarily in terms of intensity and all encompassing involvement rather than enjoyment. For many, opportunities to collaborate with like-minded others on joint creative projects were the primary reason for remaining in the film industry. This applied to both those respondents who were employed in obviously artistic occupations and those in less creative positions. According to Ned, an experienced model maker who had recently left the industry after fifteen years experience:

*Most of the people involved in the film industry are artistic, that’s why they are there. It’s hard work and unglamorous most of the time, nevertheless it’s a creative process and you will find that most of the people involved, whether they are lighting or gaffers or grips, model makers or special effects, whatever, they are still reasonably artistic people.*

Working in project based film production is a short lived experienced in which production teams come together and are disbanded at short notice. Whilst professional relationships tended to endure across contracts personal relationships did not always continue as smoothly. Bechky (2006) has described the pressure cooker creative environment of film-making as a temporary ‘total institution’
in which workers are removed from their normal surroundings and thrust into a cloistered, intense environment where they work and socialise exclusively with members of the same project for periods of weeks or months. Many respondents described the close professional and personal relationships which resulted from this situation as one of the rewards of film-making, whilst simultaneously recognising the often short-term and context dependent nature of the relationship. Sally, a freelance producer in her forties with twenty years experience commented:

*If you’re away from home on a long job you become an instant family and you tend to work and play together. Boy, the stories I could tell. It can be quite hard when the job is finished, you do feel kind of let down…. you’ve had these intense relationships …..then suddenly you are ripped apart and when you haven’t got the common bond of the job you find you haven’t got a lot in common with those people outside the job.*

Repeated separations from family and other friends could result in the erosion of these relationships. Consequently, some respondents described themselves, or others, as relying heavily on the short-term serial relationships generated by their work. Women seemed particularly vulnerable to this problem with both male and female respondents suggesting that women made greater personal sacrifices in order to succeed in the industry. Susan, an art department assistant in her mid thirties who had just left the industry after nine years described the dilemma facing women:

*It’s a male run industry and it is hard. Most females will be in production and they become known as the production spinsters. First in, last out. They are very good at their job (but) it replaces all those relationships that they have to give up on …...’I’m not going to have kids, I’m not going to bother having a partner’ and that’s why they bury themselves in work. Well that’s an individual choice but it’s not my cup of tea….*

The highly charged, emotionally and intellectually stimulating context of working on a project was often followed by a withdrawal phase when respondents were unemployed, physically and emotionally exhausted, socially isolated and unclear about their future prospects. All respondents highlighted the stark contrast between this phase and the work environment. Several described
experiencing considerable depression when a contract ended with some resorting to prescription or non-prescription drugs to cope with this period. This phase generally only ended when respondents secured a new contract or actually started work on a new project. Ian, a special effects technician in his mid-fifties who had worked on numerous big budget feature films, acknowledged that he often suffered from depression and low self-esteem at the end of a project.

*I remember when the end of X came. I was working with a lot of other people from New Zealand and when it came to a close a lot of other people too went into depression. We’d spent so much time and it was hyper, full on ....then it suddenly stopped. You start thinking ‘oh god, I’ll never get employed again’ and all these thoughts go through your mind... then the phone rings and they want you there tomorrow and you’re into it again.*

During their interviews all respondents discussed the difficulties of leaving the industry. For some, these difficulties were primarily psychological and reflected their intense ambivalence about leaving an industry which they found highly aversive in some respects but which also provided an important outlet for their creative talents, a key part of their self-identity and much of their social life. The six respondents who had left the industry permanently all described a drawn out process of repeatedly deciding to leave freelance film work and then returning for one final project before finally relinquishing their industry ties. In contrast to permanent employment where resignation is irreversible the project based structure of film work facilitates this type of vacillation by continually supplying workers with opportunities to leave and re-enter the industry.

The network based structure of film work compounded freelancers’ ambivalence about leaving the industry. In contrast to other project based employment, where networks maybe crucial to securing employment but the work itself is relatively individualized, film making is an intensely social enterprise with a heavily inter-dependent task structure. Latent organisations of well co-ordinated freelancers are therefore crucial to the industry and production companies generally contract senior personnel on the assumption that they can quickly assemble an experienced team. These teams have strong normative rules which are transgressed if freelancers wilfully damage team cohesion by
rejecting suitable contracts. A decision to reject contracts whilst searching for alternative employment therefore carries both the economic risk of expulsion from a highly valued closed network and the social and moral stigma of disappointing and alienating friends and colleagues. The social demands of project based labour can thus create a context where freelance production workers can repeatedly feel obligated to accept contracts despite seriously considering leaving the industry. Deborah, a former personal assistant in her early forties recounted the rapid social and professional isolation which effectively ended her career after she turned down a follow on contract with a famous director:

_I was completely exhausted and emotionally frazzled so I took the opportunity to resign. When I got back to (home) all these people that I had connected with were just like – snap- never seen me before. The only professional contact I had was (name) Even at the film premiere and the post thing – it was like - no one spoke to me.....I didn’t have anything to offer because of where I found myself at the end of it all._

Workers who had made a firm decision to leave were still faced with the practical difficulties of securing alternative employment. These problems were compounded by the small size of the New Zealand economy which meant that permanent employment in related work areas such as corporate communications or corporate film production was very limited. Respondents were also hampered by employer’ prejudices against contract workers, with several respondents commenting that traditional employers seemed concerned about their reliability and worried that they would become restless in the more sedate environment of mainstream organisations.

The film industry’s reliance on experiential learning and personal recommendations rather than formal qualifications created further problems as respondents often had high skill levels but few formal qualifications. All respondents recognised the importance of retraining or gaining further qualifications but several highlighted the difficulties of doing so whilst still continuing to work in the film industry. Donald, a design engineer in his late thirties with seventeen years industry experience explained:
It’s very difficult to further your education. There are courses I want to do but I just can’t do them. I can’t put my name down on a piece of paper saying I’m going to start there and finish there, it just won’t happen. If someone rings up I’m gone.

Some respondents had tried to develop alternative employment by running small businesses which used their creative talents alongside their film work. However, the exigencies of film work seldom combined successfully with the financial strains and time commitments associated with the start up of a small business. Film contracts often took priority and in consequence most of these small businesses failed because respondents were tied up on a film contract. As several respondents noted, the psychological and practical difficulties of getting out of the film industry were often as great as the difficulties of gaining entry.

DISCUSSION

Social constructionists have long argued that personal identity is continuously constructed and reconstructed through people’s interactions with their social milieu (e.g. Shotter 2006). Conversely, social structures are created and maintained through the individual and collective actions of different players within the labour market. Much has been written about the ways in which freelance film workers act to organise, maintain and regulate a labour market which provides exploitive and insecure employment. Less attention has been paid to the ways in which the recurrent juxtaposition of paid work and unemployment shapes workers’ subjective experiences and labour market involvement.

The findings of this research show that the uncertain and dramatically oscillating social context of project based film production was reflected in respondents’ intensely ambivalent relationship with the industry and mutable sense of self-identity. Whilst in work respondents’ self-identity was strong creatively, professionally and socially. However, the uncertainty of their work meant that unease was seldom totally absent even when respondents were in work. Between contracts respondents self-esteem plummeted and their sense of personal, professional and social identity became increasingly fragile. This created a psycho-social context where respondents were continually anxious to secure their next contract but often vulnerable and isolated when negotiating the terms and conditions of their
employment. Respondents own anxieties thus ensnared them within the industry and helped re-create
the adverse structural conditions which disadvantaged them materially and psychologically.

Media workers’ subjective experiences of work are seldom considered in the ‘creative industries’
policies of governments (Hesmondhalgh and Pratt 2005). Within New Zealand, government policy
concerning the film industry is framed primarily in economic terms (Jones and Smith 2005; Kaino
2007; Prince 2010). The industry is seen as contributing directly to the New Zealand economy
through the tax and revenue windfalls garnered when big-budget, internationally financed films are
made using New Zealand locations, crew and technology, and indirectly through the increased
international profile of New Zealand which benefits other key industries such as tourism. Where
creative industries policy does consider film production workers it tends to portray the industry as
offering glamorous, life-enhancing work experiences a sophisticated world away from New Zealand’s
traditional commodity based industries. This perspective enables government policy to side-step
issues concerning the quality of working life within the New Zealand film industry. This is
unfortunate as government intervention through both legislative and policy initiatives could make a
considerable difference to structural problems within the industry. To give an example, many
respondents highlighted the differences in working conditions between Australia and New Zealand,
noting that holiday pay, sick leave, and superannuation benefits were paid to Australian freelancers
but were unavailable within New Zealand. Whilst legislation concerning such entitlements would
undoubtedly be initially resisted on cost grounds by industry power-holders it would make a
considerable difference to the lives of freelance production workers and, like recent improvements to
health and safety regulations, would eventually be accepted as part of the cost of filming in New
Zealand.

In conclusion, freelance production workers in the New Zealand film industry are a vulnerable and
underpowered group working in a highly competitive and insecure industry. This research suggests
that the structural conditions of project based labour within the industry create a subjective experience
in which the repeated financial, creative, social and emotional highs of short-term employment are
counter-balanced by the insecurities of repeated unemployment. The linked mechanisms of highly
rewarding periods in work interspersed with highly aversive periods between contracts produce an addictive psycho-social dynamic which repeatedly draws freelance production workers back into the industry. This dynamic can only be fully understood by considering the relationship between structural conditions and subjective experiences as an integrated whole.
REFERENCES


### Table One: Respondent Details

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<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Years in Industry</th>
<th>Work Areas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male =11</td>
<td>Mid 30s-50+</td>
<td>8 partnered 3 single 6 with dependent children 3 childless</td>
<td>7-30 years 8 still in industry, 3 left within past year</td>
<td>Model making, special effects, artist dept, dialogue coach, design engineer, assistant director, director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female =10</td>
<td>Mid 20s-50</td>
<td>7 partnered 3 single 4 with dependent children 6 childless</td>
<td>3-20 years 7 still in industry, 3 left within past year</td>
<td>Makeup, sculptor, designer, producer, casting supervisor, production manager, transport co-ordinator</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>