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Experiences of the New Economy in Calgary

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the impact of the "New Economy" on individuals in Calgary. Ethnographic research was conducted in four settings and interviews were used to elicit narratives of people's work histories and perspectives on work and their lives. These accounts are used to examine how people viewed their economic situations. A judgement sample was used to examine a wide range of individuals, providing for exploratory rather than representative results.

The use of social networks emerged as a main theme in the data, along with the tendency for personal interests to direct what an individual saw as important in their economic life. Expressions of concern in the form of fear or anxiety over one's current economic situation or future common in the discussion of the New Economy were largely absent. It is suggested that Calgary's economic history and labour market conditions at the time of the study influenced these perceptions.

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Dedicated to the Action Studies Institute and its founder.

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Chapter One

Introduction: The New Times, The New Economy, & The New Realities

Introduction

The “New times,” the “New Economy,” the “New Realities”; these terms have become part of everyday life - catch all phrases for the rapidly changing social, political, and economic environment in which we live. This thesis investigates how individuals in Calgary are experiencing and interpreting some of what is encompassed by these terms.

It has been stated that “The forces of contemporary capitalism are radically altering the structure of business enterprise, the organization of labour, the quality of life on and off the job . . .” (Leach & Winson, 1995: 343). Research into these transformations is however “. . . *terra incognita* as far as Canadian Social Science is concerned” (Leach & Winson, 1995: 343). Adding some contours and reference points to the “*terra incognita*” of these transformations by exploring the stories of people's working lives and situations, is the endeavour of this thesis.

The New Times, The New Economy, and The New Realities

Before continuing, an examination of what is meant by the New Times and the New Economy is warranted. These terms are linked together and often used synonymously with each other in popular discourse, yet each has some discrete meanings and references when examined carefully.

The purpose of this introduction is twofold. First is to add some clarity to the terms used and to identify some of the salient features that can be extrapolated from them. The second is to present the general macro context within which this thesis was written.

The New Times

The New Times can be more “positively” referred to as post-fordism, after-fordism, post-industrialism, postmodernism (Soja, 1994), as well as post-capitalism (Drucker, 1993; Bell, 1973). “Post-” something is the common denominator to all, and generally means after 1973. While all have slightly different perspectives as to the etiology of the New Times, there is a consensus that late capitalism has entered a period of transition. “The notion that something fundamental is happening, or indeed has happened to the world economy is now increasingly accepted” (Dicken, 1992: 1).

The magnitude of this transformation is yet to be realised, however it has been put on a par with both the industrial and agricultural revolutions (Toffler, 1980; Drucker, 1993; Giddens, 1991; Galbraith, 1977; Campbell, 1994; Beck, 1992; Rifkin, 1995).

We are watching the beginnings of a global economic boom on a scale never experienced before. We have entered a period of sustained growth that could eventually double the world's economy every dozen years and bring increasing prosperity for - quite literally millions (Schwartz & Leyden 1997: 116).

At its grandest, the New Times has been expressed as the beginning of an entirely new civilization. "Humanity faces a quantum leap forward. It faces the deepest social upheaval and creative restructuring of all time" (Toffler, 1980:10). A more conservative perspective might suggest that the "... gross institutionalized features of our common world economy are presently reshaping our societies and lives even more deeply and more radically than is generally realised" (Barth, 1997: 233).

Discussing this transformation along with its possible outcomes is difficult because we are still in the midst of it.

We are clearly still in the middle of this transformation; indeed if history is any guide, it will not be completed until 2010 or 2020. But already it has changed the political, economic, social, and moral landscape of the world. No one born in 1990 could possibly imagine the world in which one's grandparents (i.e., my generation) had grown up, or in which one's own parents had been born . . . The first successful attempt to understand the transformation that turned the middle ages and the Renaissance into the modern world, the transformation that began in 1455, was not even attempted until fifty years later: with the Commentaries of Copernicus, written between 1510 and 1514; and with Machiavelli's The Prince, written in 1513 . . . The next transformation - one that some two hundred years ago was ushered in by the American Revolution - was first understood and analyzed sixty years afterward, in the two volumes of Alexis de Tocqueville's Democracy in America (Drucker, 1993: 3).

We are however far enough into this transformation to be able to identify some of its key features.

One of the things that clearly can be said about the New Times is that we have entered a period of change.

There is nothing new about social change. However the common perception that change is endemic and enduring is relatively new. Until the emergence of modern industrial capitalism the general conception in whatever type of society was that things were about the same as they always had been (Crook et al., 1992:16).

It is not just that things are changing it is that "this time" the changes are different, they are perceived to be discontinuous and not part of a pattern.

"Thirty years ago people thought that change would mean more of the same, only better. They expected and welcomed this incremental change. Today we know that in many areas of life we cannot guarantee more of the same . . . "

(Handy, 1989: 6).

At this point the obvious concern is what lies behind the changes that are occurring? What is it that makes the New Times new? One of the answers is globalization.

The term globalization has become the economic and political mantra for our time. Just repeat it and economic movements and phenomena are explained. Unemployment here, an agricultural trade war there, a massive leveraged buy out yonder, a staggering bankruptcy under our unsuspecting noses - someone will inevitably say these are merely the consequences of "global economic restructuring" or just plain "globalization" (Chodos et al., 1993:1).

Globalization can be defined as: "A social process in which the constraints of geography on social and cultural arrangements recede and in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding" (Waters, 1995: 3). In

economic terms, globalization is defined as “. . . the increasing internationalization of the production, distribution and marketing of goods and services” (Harris quoted in Bryan, 1994: 2), or more precisely as “. . . the increasing integration of economies through trade and investment flows, and the creation of production in numerous countries through foreign direct investment in order to be internationally competitive” (Dobson quoted in Bryan, 1994: 2).

The concept of globalization is not new, “A global dimension had been part of the geopolitical considerations of rulers and nations since ancient times . . . most societies and cultures developed not in isolation but through a constant interplay and large - scale interaction with other communities” (Roniger, 1995: 260). What is new about the current situation is the intensity and degree to which individuals are being directly affected by, or incorporated into, the global economic system (Giddens, 1991). Global economic forces are increasingly becoming influential factors in individual lives. Traditional employment opportunities and modes of subsistence are now becoming more and more susceptible to the influences of events that transcend customary political, economic, and social boundaries (Lerner, 1994; Waters, 1995; Leach & Winson, 1995).

There are many theoretical perspectives dealing with globalization (e.g. Sklair, 1991; Rothstein & Blim, 1992; Dicken, 1992; Waters, 1995; White, 1995; Dicken, 1992). However I feel it is Wallerstein's (1974) “World Systems Theory” that most clearly articulates the general condition of the New Times. Wallerstein

focuses on the emergence of a world-system that is based primarily on capitalist ideals and the increasing international division of labour. He describes this system in the following way:

In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, there came into existence what we may call a European world-economy . . . It is a "world" system, not because it encompasses the whole world, but because it is larger than any juridically-defined political unit. And it is a "world-economy" because the basic linkage between the parts of the system is economic . . . (Wallerstein, 1974: 15).

The capitalist world-economy has seen the need to expand the geographic boundaries of the system as a whole, creating thereby new loci of production to participate in its axial division of labour. Over 400 years, these successive expansions have transformed the capitalist world-economy from a system located primarily in Europe to one that covers the entire globe (Wallerstein, 1990: 36).

The movement towards a global economy was accelerated first by rapid, high volume transportation technologies, and now, by the synergies between telecommunications, computers, and economics (Targowski, 1990).

Computerised networks and corporate infrastructures are complementing the evolution of the global transportation infrastructure, and together they are raising the barriers that used to separate national economies . . . for it is now possible for a person in Chicago to deal with an associate in Osaka, as easily as if they were in the same room together, sharing a conversation, and business documents (Targowski, 1990:190).

Communications technology has also radically transformed financial markets. At the touch of a keyboard, large sums of money move from one country to another in search of the highest return. A firm's

working capital can be invested overnight in interest-bearing assets in whatever market gives the highest yield. Minute changes in interest rates can trigger large enough changes in the flow of funds to create exchange-rate crises beyond the control of any government (Bryan, 1994: 2).

This point brings us to the discussion of the New Economy.

The New Economy

There is a magnificent - if hollow ring to the term New Economy. It evokes bold strides forward fresh frontiers and golden opportunities. But however catchy, it is an overly tidy euphemism for a series of messy structural shifts, from the globalization of financial markets to the reform of the welfare state. In fact on several levels, the magnitude of upheaval - and opportunity - associated with the rise of the New Economy parallels that of the Industrial Revolution (McMurdy, 1994: 28).

Arguably, it was Joseph Schumpeter (1934) who first identified the fundamental processes behind the New Economy. According to Schumpeter, we have entered a period of "creative destruction" in which increasingly inefficient economic and social structures collapse because they are no longer able to respond to the changing demands made of them. In due course new and more relevant institutions emerge, though the interim involves high degrees of uncertainty, insecurity and discomfort for many (Schumpeter, 1934).

Schumpeter saw technological innovation as the main cause for economic growth. Called Schumpeterian growth, this process is defined as " . . . capitalist expansion deriving from continuous, though fluctuating technological innovation financed by the extension of credit" (Mokyr, 1990: 6). Schumpeter

would see the New Economy as a reordering of economic and social institutions in response to technological innovations. In the 1800's it was the steam engine, now it is the microchip. In this view the "engine" of the New Economy is a combination of information technologies (IT) and computer and communication technologies (C&C) (Beck, 1992; Drucker, 1993).

What has essentially changed, and what makes the New Economy new, is that ". . . the basic economic recourse - 'the means of production' . . . is no longer capital, nor natural resources . . . nor labour. *It is and will be knowledge*" (Drucker, 1993: 8). "The social centre of gravity has shifted to the knowledge worker. All developed countries are becoming post-business knowledge societies . . . knowledge has become the real capital of a developed economy" (Drucker, 1989: 173).

The New Economy is based on knowledge not materials. Firms are increasingly becoming footloose, moving production to where there is cheap labour if they need unskilled labour. If some of the firm's operations require a pool of highly trained labour those operations will be based where such labour is available. Financial capital, which is equally footloose, moves across borders in search of the highest return. The rewards to knowledge will increase, leading to larger income disparities between the skilled and the unskilled (Bryan, 1994: 17).

The New Realities

Even in the flattest landscape there are passes where the road first climbs a peak and then descends into a new valley. Most of these passes are only topography, with little or no difference in climate, language, or culture between the valleys on either side. But some passes are different. They are true divides . . . History too, knows such divides. They also tend to be unspectacular and are rarely noticed at the time. But once these divides have been crossed, the social and political landscape changes. Social and political climate is different and so is social and political language. *There are New Realities* (Drucker, 1989:3).

The New Realities can be seen as the outcome of the interaction between the New Times and New Economy. The outcome of the dynamic interplay between rapid discontinuous change, globalization, and the digital revolution.

Ascertaining what the new realities are is difficult. This is partly for the previously mentioned fact that we are still in the midst of the transformation. And partly because the "reality" of a situation is largely dependent on the perspective of who is defining it. What follows is a brief outline of some of the more relevant issues as they relate to my general line of inquiry.

The first is the pervasive impact of the global economy. No nation is entirely self sufficient and national economies are increasingly becoming interdependent (Chodos et al., 1993). And as mentioned previously, individuals are increasingly being affected by, and even actively participate in, global economics. The Internet is the prime example of how individuals can interact with each other on a global scale. If you have a product or a service to sell you can put it on the global marketplace - something that was once only the purview

of the very wealthy, the very large, and/or the very powerful.

The globalization of the marketplace has effectively increased the levels of competition for both capital and labour. "Virtually anybody in the world can be a client or customer. Virtually anybody who does what you do can be a competitor" (A.A.E.C.D., 1996: 4). "If I introduce a new technology to create a market this morning, I'd better start working on ways to improve it this afternoon. If I don't someone else will, and my market share will begin eroding by sunset" (Smith quoted in Campbell, 1994: 50). "Hypercompetitive" is one word that has been used to describe the global marketplace. The liberalization of trade in both goods and services and the integration of regional economies into larger trading blocks such as the European Union and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) have created a world trading arena that puts an increasing emphasis on speed, innovation, and productivity (Goodman, 1996: 2).

The critical issue here is that producers are pressured to become more efficient, flexible, and adaptive in order to compete in a global economy and that often, the burden of these demands is being placed upon workers. Albo (1993: 123-124) suggests that "Canada today represents a *locus classicus* of defensive adjustment: labour market flexibility ensures that wage-earners bear the costs of the instability of international trade, budgetary restraints, and new production processes". It has also been suggested that "flexibility" is nothing more than a slogan used to erode workers' rights, heighten labour discipline, and increase control by placing them in positions of insecurity and uncertainty (Roniger, 1995; Workman, 1996).

The second new reality is a fundamental change in the nature of work. The nature and meaning of this change will be discussed in greater detail in a subsequent chapter. For now what needs to be said is that many of the expectations and traditional relationships between labour and capital are in a state of transition.

“At the heart of the Industrial revolution of the eighteenth century there was an almost miraculous improvement in the tools of production, which was accompanied by a catastrophic dislocation of the lives of the common people” (Polanyi, 1944: 33). As with the industrial revolution, many people in recent times have been, and will continue to be, displaced from their jobs due to a fundamental change in the “tools of production”.

Unemployment, underemployment, and job security for workers has been identified as “a major concern in North America as well as globally” (C.L.C., 1997: 3). “In 1995, unemployment in OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries amounted to 34.5 million people, or 7.6 percent of the OECD labour force - 3 million more than in 1983” (C.L.C., 1997: 3). “Global unemployment has reached its highest level since the great depression of the 1930”s. More than 800 million human beings are now unemployed or underemployed in the world” (Rifkin, 1995: xv). Over the last fifteen years Canadians have seen dismissals “unprecedented in modern times” (Drache & Glasbeek, 1992: 5). “Most people in Canada would rate unemployment as the most serious economic and social problem of the 1990’s” (Bryan, 1994: 135).

This general condition of high unemployment has created a mood of insecurity and uncertainty among many in the workforce. "Many Canadians have given up finding a full-time job that will lead to a career. Their main concern is a job with enough money to pay the bills" (Eisler, 1997: 25).

Instability is becoming a way of life for many Canadians as the realization that stable, full-time work is not something that they can expect (Eisler, 1997: 26). "A growing sense of social and economic insecurity is taking hold among families in Canada" (The Futurist, 1994: 58).

Along with the issues of insecurity and stability, a frequently expressed concern is that the world is polarizing into two potentially irreconcilable forces: an information elite that controls and manages the high-tech global economy and, on the other hand, a growing number of permanently displaced workers (Rifkin, 1995).

Virtually every country in the world is creating a two-tier society in the wake of the dramatic changes occurring in the nature of work. The question is whether one-fifth of the world's population - those gainfully employed in the emerging knowledge sector - have sufficient purchasing power to absorb the dramatic increases in production arising from the new Information Age economy (Rifkin, 1996: 18).

In a recent analysis by Statistics Canada, the average income of Canadians fell 6 percent between 1990 and 1995 (The Daily, 1998b: 2). As a result, the average earnings of an individual in 1995 were nearly equivalent to what they would have been in 1985. Sixteen percent of Canadian families are living in poverty as compared to thirteen percent in 1990 (The Daily, 1998b: 1-

2). This supports the contention that middle income Canadians are worse off now than they were five years ago (The Futurist, 1994). Sixty-three percent of middle income Canadians surveyed were expecting their standard of living to either remain the same or to worsen over the next ten years. Of these middle income families, fifty-four percent expected that their children will be worse off than they are (The Futurist, 1994: 59). "Canadians no longer define middle class by the opportunity it presents but by the burdens it carries: high taxation, fear of the future, and a feeling of being overwhelmed by events" (The Futurist, 1994: 59).

It is not simply unemployment, underemployment, the decline of wages, or a polarization of the labour market that are issues. It is that the very nature of employment is changing. "Non standard" forms of employment, such as part-time, contract, and self employment are on the rise, and represent the largest portion of new job creation in the 1990's (Picot & Lin, 1997:1). The problem with this is that many of these non-standard forms of employment offer little in terms of security, benefits, or compensation. And it is this that produces some of the concerns expressed above. Those that have "good" jobs, jobs in the high-technology and business sectors are doing quite well. "But those not able to break into these sectors are doing worse. They're having to settle for low-paying, part time jobs with no benefits" (Lee quoted in Gadd, 1998: A5).

The above does not indicate a very positive orientation towards the New Times. There seems to be a tendency amongst many social analysts and commentators to focus on the negative aspects of the transitional state that we

are in - focusing on problems instead of opportunities. There are some good reasons for this. Statistically speaking, there is no denying that for some people, "things are worse", or that serious concerns can be expressed over the some of the labour market trends that are emerging. I have chosen to try and limit the influence this had on my research. I have made efforts to not focus on the negative aspects of the changes that are occurring, or to tout the positive.

Summary

The focus of this thesis is to look at how individuals interpret and define their own economic realities. My entry question was this: How are the New Times being experienced by individuals? Essentially I am attempting to, as Eisner (1997) puts it, "to get at it", to describe what it is like to be a particular person in a particular situation. My methodology for "getting at it" was to collect individual narratives and to describe certain settings. My motive was to capture some of the things people saw or expressed as being significant or influential in their economic lives. What was important to them? What kinds of challenges and opportunities did they see? How did people feel about their existing situations and their futures?

Along with this, I was interested in exploring the themes of insecurity, stability, and uncertainty that are very prevalent in most accounts of the New Times.

No one denies that there is a sense of insecurity - real or imagined. The debate is over the relative importance of its various causes. Is it fear of the unknown in the face of the transformation of work itself, of the social value of work? Is it a shortage of jobs due to weak economic growth? Is it a deterioration in conditions of employment brought about by an unfair division between labour and capital? (International Labour Review, 1996: 93).

Here it is prudent to be cautious and not to assume anything. While these themes are very prominent in both the popular and academic literature, this did not necessarily mean that they were major concerns for the individuals I spoke with. Making the assumption that people felt insecure, or that insecurity was in fact inherent in a situation was something that I guarded against.

Also, as outlined, a main theme in the discussion of the New Times is the changing nature and meaning of work, and this was something that I wished to explore as well.

Thesis Organization

In chapter 2, I will be presenting some of the background motivations and theoretical orientation that influenced the specifics of my sampling and methodological strategies. Chapter 3 gives an overview of the general setting in which my research was based - the city of Calgary. In Chapter 4 I begin presenting my data with accounts that show some ways in which social networks are used. Chapter 5 deals with work, how it is conventionally understood, and how it is changing. In chapter 6, I will be giving examples of

the different ways in which work has been experienced by individuals. Chapter 7 begins with two accounts of how work is being reframed in terms of its socially defining features and what is expected from it. I then present two accounts of individuals who had developed specific attitudes and strategies in order to deal with some of the elements of the New Times. Finally I will conclude with a summary and discussion of my findings.

Chapter Two

Background Motives, Sampling and Methodology

Introduction

In this chapter I will present my sampling and methodological strategies. Before doing that however, I will discuss some of the background motivations and thinking that influenced the design of my research.

Background Motivations

The origins for my thesis were developed while working as a research assistant during the spring and summer of 1995. The project, entitled "NAFTA and the Social Restructuring of North American Cities" involved researchers in Guadalajara, Atlanta, and Calgary. The main objective of the study was to provide first-hand comparative analysis of the employment structures, labour market organization, occupational opportunity structures, and household labour organization in the three study cities. Assessing the changes in the interconnectedness of people in the three NAFTA countries, primarily through migration and through the growing interdependence of opportunity structures was also a concern of the study. My role was to assist the principal investigators of the Calgary research team (Dr. Alan Smart & Dr. Josephine Smart) with the preliminary phases of their research in the Calgary area. It was in this context, along with the support of my supervisors, that my thesis topic

evolved.

Event Horizons

Here I need to introduce the concept of the “event horizon”, a theoretical construct that I hoped to explore and develop through my research and that had an influence on my sampling and methodological strategies.

The concept of the event horizon as I am using it was actually originated by Ken Low, founder and president of the Action Studies Institute - a research bureau focused on human learning systems. In discussing the above project with Mr. Low, it was suggested that NAFTA represented a significant event within the continental economic horizons. It was a large - frame event that sooner or later was bound to have far-reaching effects on communities, businesses, and individuals in North America. The questions arising out of this included how were individuals framing this event in relation to the rest of their lives? How was this “wide frame event” perceived by people? More importantly, how, if at all, was this affecting the decisions that they were making in relation to their economic lives?

From that point I began to see that an investigation into the way people framed their economic world view would be both an interesting exercise and potentially valuable in developing a better understanding of how people were interpreting some of the challenges and opportunities of the New Times. I was particularly interested in exploring the relationship between the scope and detail of an individual's economic horizons and the way they saw themselves as

economic agents.

The Event Horizon Explained

The concept of an event horizon¹ rests on the fact that human consciousness is limited. This means that there are limits to the number of things that a person can attend to at any given time. Given that there are an infinite number of things in the world that one could possibly be aware of, or attend to, the question is: how do we decide what to pay attention to and what we can afford to ignore? This is where the concept of the event horizon comes into play.

At its broadest, an event horizon represents the limits of what is perceptually or cognitively perceived by an individual. The event horizon is a representation of the *contextually specific* boundaries of attention that are constructed and maintained by an individual.

The event horizons of an individual are comprised of two dimensions - space and time. Time relates to how far backward or forward one looks in time in order to understand, explain or anticipate and plan an event. The spatial dimension refers to the micro/macro levels of perception, the size of the contextual field and the scope and detail of relationships within that field.

In terms of existing frameworks, the event horizon concept is related to the concepts of "World View" (Kearney, 1984), ethnoscience or cognitive

¹ Stephen Hawking also uses the term "event horizon" to define the boundary of a black hole, which is similar to using the term to define the boundaries of human attention.

anthropology (Tyler, 1969; D'Andrade, 1995) and situational logic (Prattis, 1987). All are similar in that they look at how space and time are conceived of and ordered. Where they differ is in their focus.

The world view perspective of Kearney states that the dimensions of space and time are "world-view universals", and are fundamental to all cultures (Kearney, 1984: 89-92). His focus, however, is on how people look at reality and "the basic assumptions and images that provide a more or less coherent though not necessarily accurate, way of thinking about the world" (Kearney, 1984: 41).

The ethnoscientific perspective tends to focus on the cognitive and linguistic aspects of how people order their worlds. Again space and time are critical to this, however the focus here is in the ordering framework, or the classificatory systems used. How these classificatory systems lead to different conceptions of reality would be the prime focus of the Ethnoscientific or cognitive perspective (Oswalt, 1986: 68-69).

Situational logic is somewhat different in that its focus was primarily directed towards understanding how decision making in social systems works. Prattis contends that there are any number of rational choices that an individual could make in any given situation and that these choices are contextually specific.

Situational logic, defined as the intersection of life history with one's location in the social structure, is simply the framework for choice and therefore action that is given by the actor's position within any given social structure in terms of his access to, and control over, resources...the underlying assumption was that the particular location of an individual in social structure together with his prior experiences predicated the type of decisions he would tend to make (Prattis, 1987: 19-20).

The situational logic of Prattis and the concept of the event horizon are very similar in that they look at the context of interaction in which an individual operates. Where the two differ I feel, is that the event horizon concept provides a way to look at how individuals bring large scale transformations, like the emergence of the New Times, into their spheres of concern and action.

The framing of individual action and thought in a time space continuum is by no means new. Philosophers have long wrestled with the issues surrounding the boundaries of human consciousness and knowledge (Descartes, Hume, and Ryle for example).² On a more practical plane, Boniecki (1980: 161) suggests that in terms of social planning, successful programs must take into account individual time horizons, and that the success of a program is contingent on its congruency with these horizons. Similarly, White (1989), and Nelson (1983), suggest that individuals will actively construct a mental image or map of their surroundings based on their spatial and/or temporal perceptions of their environments.

² See Dagobert Rune's Treasury of Philosophy 1955.

Given that attention is limited and focused, there is also the possibility that it will be over - taxed by contextual demands. The concept of “overload” as articulated by Milgram (1970) is applicable here.

Overload refers to a system’s inability to process inputs from the environment because there are too many inputs for the system to cope with.... When overload is present, adaptations occur. The system must set priorities and make choices....The ultimate adaptation to an overloaded social environment is to totally disregard the needs, interests and demands of those whom one does not define as relevant to the satisfaction of personal needs (Milgram, 1970: 1462).

Milgram focuses primarily on social interaction and how individuals selectively attend to only what they see as being “relevant” to their needs. Overload, of course, applies to much more than direct social interaction. Studies in mass communication for example have identified overload or “saturation” as being one of the critical obstacles in the delivery of media messages. With individuals being constantly exposed to an ever increasing volume of communications media and messages, individuals are forced to “selectively attend” and “filter out” unwanted messages. Overcoming the selective attention exercised by individuals as a coping strategy is at the centre of most advertising campaigns as well as television and motion picture production (Wright, 1986; DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989).

In summary, my research design and thinking centred around finding out what people were attending to, or what they perceived and valued as being significant in relation to their economic lives. This line of inquiry and approach seemed especially relevant given the increasing permeability and susceptibility

of local economies to global influences. The concept of event horizon provided a preliminary framework for exploring the way individuals perceived the New Times and their own economic realities.

Larger Concerns

The field cannot well be seen from within the field.
-Ralph Waldo Emerson

One of the background issues that I was interested in exploring was developing a better understanding of how people cope with or produce change - more specifically how people *strategically* adapt to change. This seemed especially relevant in regards to many of the larger issues surrounding the New Times, specifically, an economic climate of rapid, discontinuous change and uncertainty.

The word strategy comes from the Greek word "*strategia*" meaning a general or generalship. In battle one of the things that generals do (if they are effective) is to look at the big picture, to consider events that go beyond the immediate disposition of the troops and the battle at hand. To act strategically in one sense of the word then, means to be able to look beyond what is immediately happening and consider a wider field of events and possibilities, and to choose the most promising course of action within this wider field. In order to be able to strategically adapt to a situation one must be able to see beyond the immediate and take in all the potentially relevant events and possibilities. One can not strategically adapt to something that is unseen,

ignored, or misapprehended.

To be able to act in a strategic manner, some would argue, is becoming an increasingly important skill in the world today, and it is something that is repeatedly expressed in most of the literature regarding finding a job in the New Economy. Paying attention to “what is going on”, identifying possible trends, watching the national and local news, and reading a variety of newspapers, are all ways in which many employment self-help books encourage people to broaden their view of the world and to think about possibilities that they may not have considered (A.A.E.C.D., 1996; Durcan & Oats, 1996; Davis & Botkin, 1994).

The concept of a strategic framework implies that if an individual desires to move beyond being situationally governed and merely reacting to change, then they will have to consider possibilities that go beyond their immediate spheres of interaction. This becomes especially important in a world where “. . .distant happenings on proximate events, and on intimacies of the self, [are becoming] more commonplace” (Giddens, 1991; 4).

It has been argued that people cannot afford to reactively adapt to the changes that are occurring, or that will occur in the future. “The challenge now confronting human learning is to shift from a mode of *unconscious adaptation* to one of *conscious anticipation*. . .from conventional *maintenance/shock learning* to *innovative learning*” (Botkin et al., 1979: 17).

Parsons (1966) touches on the issue of adaptation as being the driving force behind social change. Adaptation is “the capacity of a living system to

cope with its environment" (Parsons, 1964: 340). He alludes to the importance of strategic adaptation in the process of modernization, which he sees as being driven by differentiation by saying:

. . .if differentiation is to yield a balanced, more evolved system, each newly differentiated sub-structure. . . must have increased adaptive capacity for performing its primary function, as compared with the performance of that function in the previous, more diffuse structure.
(Parsons, 1966: 22)

Along a similar line, both Hawley (1986) and Steward (1968) focus on adaptation as a primary driving force behind cultural change. The cultural ecology of Steward, which recognises that significant differences between cultures may be caused by the particular adaptive processes that are unique to each culture, is particularly interesting to me. Unlike Steward, though, I was more interested in the responses of individuals as opposed to cultures as a whole.

Unfortunately most models of adaptation are reactive in that they are based on a "stimulus/response" mode of thinking - something happens and there is adaptation to it. The issue that I was interested in exploring was how people mix proactive and reactive responses and whether there was any evidence of strategic or anticipatory adaptation at the individual level.

Sampling

The objective of my sampling strategy was to find out what differences, if any, existed between people in various socioeconomic positions in respect to their own event horizon structures and strategic perspectives. To this end, I decided on a purposive/theoretical sampling (e.g. Goldenberg, 1992: 161; Bernard, 1994: 95) or judgmental sampling as defined by Honingman (1995).

Judgment sampling stresses the deliberateness by which subjects are chosen. Informants are selected by virtue of their status, experience, or special knowledge valued by the researcher. The primary basis for selection is the ethnographer's own knowledge of the world and what might presumably be useful in illuminating the issues at hand (Honingman, 1995:80). "In judgment sampling you decide the purpose you want an informant (or community) to serve and you go out to find one" (Bernard, 1994:95). To this end I identified the following populations:

- 1) Individuals associated with or working in high technology industries
- 2) High school and university students
- 3) "Blue collar" workers.
- 4) Individuals seeking employment
- 5) Young adults

These populations were chosen for their comparative value and illustrative potential.

The population first identified were those associated with or working in high technology industries. The rationale for choosing this population was that I

was interested in the event horizon structures that these people might be utilizing to strategically adapt and maintain competitiveness in their fields. In order to provide some contrast to this population I decided to look at people associated with “low-tech” or “blue collar” industries. The rest of the populations were chosen primarily for their illustrative potential.

Methodology

The data that I collected came from a combination of narratives, semi-structured interviewing, informal interviewing, and participant observation. In total I conducted 23 informal interviews and 37 semi-structured interviews in which a work history narrative was collected. My research began in June of 1996, and formally concluded in November 1996³. In conjunction with the narratives and interviews I collected data as a participant observer in two settings, the Calgary Council for Advanced Technology and the “Work Shop”- a small scale manufacturing complex.

The format for the semi-structured interviews was first to elicit a narrative in regards to a person’s employment and economic history and then to augment

³ Living in Calgary and with no discrete social or physical boundaries between myself and those that I wished to study, I found it difficult to disengage from the data collection process. While the bulk of my data was collected during this time frame, I did conduct several interviews after this. The last interview conducted was in March of 1997.

this with interview questions⁴. This process took anywhere from one to two hours. Whenever possible field notes were taken or the interview was recorded.

“Narrative relates to the telling of stories and the sharing of experience. To the extent that experience itself can be conceived of as the primary medium of education, stories are among the most useful means for sharing what one has experienced” (Eisner, 1997: 259). Through the process of unstructured interviewing and story telling, narrative analysis or reconstruction seeks to find out how and why people come to see themselves as being a certain way or in a certain situation (Williams, 1984: 268). “It is an analytic construct through which the respondent can be seen to situate a variety of causal connections as reference points within a narrative reconstruction of the changing relationship between the self and the world...” (Williams, 1984: 271).

In the narrative phase of my interviews I was seeking the story of people’s working lives and experiences. Along with this I was able to gather background information on a person’s education, career changes, and significant life turning points.

As with any research strategy, narrative analysis does have its limitations. A primary concern was the use of “logic in retrospect” or “. . .a tendency to under-specify causality in the processes they describe” (Sayer, 1992: 260). There is no easy way to escape this problem as it tends to be inherent in all discourse. The way I approached this problem was to be aware that

⁴ Listed in appendix

retrospective logic may be at work in the description of past events and was prepared to elicit further elaboration on the subject (e.g. by asking questions like “at the time how did you view “X”, or “why did you see things that way?”).

The linearity of a narrative has also been criticized in that “it leads to a tendency to neglect synchronic relations (or the configurational dimension) at the expense of temporal successions (the episodic dimension)” (Sayer, 1992: 260). I would tend however to agree with Ricoeur when he rejects this objection by saying that:

. . .the activity of narrating does not consist simply in adding episodes to one another; it also constructs meaningful totalities out of scattered events. . .The act of narrating, as well as the corresponding art of following a story, therefore require that we are able to extract a configuration from a succession (Ricoeur, 1982: 278).

I analyzed the narratives and interviews collected on two levels. The first level of analysis involved summarizing the narrative and/or interview by extracting quotes that dealt with what was most prominently expressed. I also looked for how individuals described and articulated what they saw as being important or influential in their economic situations, both past and present.

The second level of analysis involved a more detailed review of the interview. Here I was looking for specific descriptors loosely following a “thick descriptive” approach in that I was looking for the “experience near” terms that individuals themselves use to make sense of their own immediate surroundings (Geertz, 1973).

I should stress that I am making no claims as to the representativeness of the accounts given; they are rather illustrative of some of the issues at hand. I would agree with Burman (1988: 1) that taking an in-depth qualitative approach with a small sampling, rather than a more representative, though less detailed survey, can sometimes lead to a better understanding of the issues at hand.

It should be noted that I will be presenting only a small portion of the data collected. Given the heterogenous nature and small size of my sample trying to draw anything but the most general conclusions from my data as a whole would have questionable validity. In light of this I have opted to present data collected which best illustrates some of main themes in the New Times.

Personal Influences

At this point I would like to express how my own personal experiences influenced how I interacted with many of my informants. I have lived in Calgary all my life, and having seen and experienced first hand many of the situations discussed, I was able to establish a high degree of rapport with my informants. I know what it feels like to be “downsized”. I worked for a small business that was in financial trouble and where the deciding factor if I worked on a particular day or not was if there was a padlock on the door. I have been told that I was over qualified for a six dollar a hour job and not experienced enough for the \$25,000 dollar a year one. I know what it is like, as one informant said to me “to put your last five dollars [of gas] in your truck and hope that it makes it till payday”, knowing full well that it won't. I spoke with those trying to make it in the

workforce with educations and experience equal to, if not surpassing that of my own, listened to their stories of struggling to avoid the “McJob”, and wondered about my own future.

Maintaining a “detached” perspective at times was difficult, as was separating my personal life from my research. “Over-rapport” as discussed by Hammersley & Atkinson (1995: 110-112) was an issue at times, especially when talking with people that I shared a common experience or interest with.

There were naturally some situations that were completely alien to me and I was confronted with many of the classic fieldwork experiences of trying to figure out a new social setting. Simple things like how I dressed, and the kind of business card I did or did not have became of the utmost importance and I struggled to find that elusive “marginal native” position.

Chapter Three

Calgary

Introduction

In this chapter I will present some historical background on Calgary, its economic development, and will provide a perspective on the economic climate of the city. This is important as it serves to establish the general micro context in which my informants based their perceptions.

Economic History and Development

Calgary's economic development can be seen as being comprised of three main phases. Two are dated neatly as pre- and post-Second World War, the third is not so neatly dated as post-recession - late 1980's. The first two phases of Calgary's economic development are similar in that they were primarily resource driven and were subject to the classic cyclical patterns of "boom and bust". The third and most recent phase of Calgary's economic development can be seen as the outcome of some rather significant economic downturns in the early and mid 1980's. This new phase of Calgary's development represents an adjustment to some aspects of the New Economy, and a more "mature" approach to economic growth than had been exhibited in the past.

One thing that must be kept in mind when discussing Calgary and its economy is that it cannot be thought of as a discrete system or bounded unit unto itself. Calgary's economy is made up of numerous linkages and relationships, primarily with other areas in southern Alberta, but not exclusively. Calgary's main trading area extends into eastern British Columbia, western Saskatchewan, and the northern United States (C.E.D.A, 1995: 7). It is also important to bear in mind that Alberta is grossly divided into two main economic regions with only two major cities in each area. Edmonton is the main economic centre in the north (more properly central/north), and Calgary in the south. In discussing the southern part of the province it is commonplace to describe it as the "Calgary Southern Alberta region", again primarily because of the linkages and commonalties that Calgary has with other communities in that part of the province. It is important to keep these generalizations in mind because, as will be shown later, much of the economic activity in Calgary is related to activities not centralized within the confines of the city.

It is also important to keep in mind that in discussing Calgary's economy one is also, to a degree, discussing the Province's as well. The reverse is also true. The same generalisations with regards to the provincial economy as a whole can be applied to Calgary. Again this can be attributed to the linkages that Calgary has with other cities in the province and Calgary's position as a major redistributive and manufacturing centre within the province.

Phase One 1881-1947

From 1881 to 1947 the critical elements in Calgary's economic development were ranching, agriculture, and the CPR (Canadian Pacific Railway). The arrival of the railway in 1883 was critical in that it served to establish a heavy transport link with the rest of the country, and formed the basis for some long term growth and development. The CPR established major repair shops in Calgary and used the city as a staging area for rail lines extending North and South as well as for the continuation of the main line West through the Rocky Mountains. The CPR also served to help create the beginnings of a thriving tourist industry by establishing several elite vacation spots in the Rocky Mountains, in particular the Banff Springs Hotel and the Chateau Lake Louise (Stenson, 1994).

The cattle industry was also responsible for the creation of much of Calgary's early manufacturing base. Stockyards, slaughterhouses, meat packaging and processing plants, soap works, and a tannery were all created as a direct result of the cattle industry. It was also ranching money that financed the building of Calgary's first "real" buildings. These structures were typically made from sandstone, and were much more resilient to the elements and catastrophes, such as fire that wiped out half the town in 1886 (University of Calgary, 1994:17).

Ranching was very profitable in the last decade of the 19th century and was Calgary's first taste of an economic boom. Driven primarily by an increasing appetite for beef in England, "Alberta Beef" fuelled Calgary's first

taste of economic success, and failure (University of Calgary, 1994: 17). The cattle boom did not last much beyond 1910. Several severe winters in which some ranchers lost half their herds, changing land use patterns, and increased competition all took their toll on the industry. Cattle ranching would continue to be, and still is, an important element in Calgary's economy, but it would not be a major factor in urban growth past World War I (University of Calgary, 1994:19). The legacy of this time still remains however, in the Calgary Stampede⁵.

Along with ranching, the other industry to develop in the early 1900's was farming. Wheat was the main crop, followed by barley, oats, rape-seed, rye and flax. Between 1900 and 1910 wheat production increased by a factor of ten and oat production by a factor of five (University of Calgary, 1994: 21). As with ranching, the increase in farming activities around the Calgary area served to expand Calgary's manufacturing base. The city quickly became the regional headquarters for agricultural equipment dealers, and other industries began to emerge in response to the increasing needs and demands of the area's growing population. Lumber mills, banks, grain processing facilities, foundry goods, and a host of other petty commodity production facilities flourished. From 1900 to 1910 Calgary's manufacturing base increased by 1,500% (University of Calgary, 1994: 20).

The period from the late 19th century to around 1914 represents Calgary's first taste of "boom time" growth. Calgary's population increased from

⁵ To many natives of Calgary certain elements of the Stampede represent some of the less "mature" qualities of the city, with many of the costumes and customs having little to do with the past, and more to do with generating tourist dollars.

approximately 500 in 1883 to just under 4,000 in 1891, and by 1916 Calgary's population had reached 56,000 (C.E.D.A., 1995: 9). As would be expected with these kind of growth figures, the construction industry in Calgary flourished. Housing permits issued in the three years between 1909 and 1912 surpassed those issued in the fifteen years between 1915 and 1930. This kind of growth would not be replicated until after the Second World War (Foran & Foran, 1982: 120). A significant result of this growth pattern was the emergence of construction industry "heavily disproportionate in strength and size to the city's overall economy" (Foran & Foran, 1982: 120). In 1900, 44 percent of the labour force was employed in agriculture or some other primary resource activity, 28 percent were employed in construction or manufacturing and 28 percent were employed in trade, finance, and transportation (Peitchins, 1975: 1-2). By 1911 25 percent of the city's labour force was employed directly in the construction industry. There were over 200 listed building contractors, and more carpenters than workers in any other occupation (Foran & Foran, 1982: 120).

Calgary's growth started to slow around 1914, and would not pick up again until after WW II. The start of WW I effectively put an end to immigration to the area, and the depression after the war did little to encourage growth. Falling grain prices and a massive drought on the prairies during the 1930's, capped off with the start of WW II, all served to effectively limit Calgary's growth during this time.

There was however, one event in this period of slow growth in Calgary's history that would ultimately prove to be one of the most critical things to happen

in Calgary since the coming of the railroad. In 1914 oil was found in Turner valley, (located some 50 miles to the south west of Calgary). Once again WW I served to limit potential growth, this time by curbing the flow of investment capital into drilling operations. In 1918 there were only 10 wells in the Turner Valley area producing an average of 464 barrels a day, which was insignificant compared to Canada's annual consumption of 11 million barrels in the same year (Foran & Foran, 1982: 214). The critical importance of this discovery for Calgary was not in revenue generated from the find but from the formation of a corporate and technical infrastructure geared specifically towards oil exploration, extraction, and refining. Over the next thirty years Calgary slowly began to concentrate the bulk of Canadian oil expertise. This process would prove to be the single most important factor in Calgary's growth after WW II.

Phase Two

The second phase of Calgary's economic development can be, as stated earlier, neatly identified as beginning in 1947. Unlike Calgary's early economic development, "phase two" is an almost unilinear track ending in the mid 1980's.

1947 marks the discovery of a major oil reserve near Leduc, some 250 kilometres north of Calgary. The Leduc find tapped into the largest oil reserves in Western Canada and was significant enough to pique the interests of almost every major oil company in the United States. And so, on February 13, 1947 began Calgary's journey straight into the largest resource boom in Canadian history.

Here it is worth examining an interesting feature of Calgary's economic makeup, one that had it not been for the initial discovery of oil near Calgary, may not have evolved. Despite the fact that many of the oil reserves in Alberta rest much closer to Edmonton than Calgary, over 86% of oil companies operating in Canada base themselves in Calgary (C.E.D.A., 1995: 11). This is a direct result of oil companies putting down roots during the early 20th century, as a result of the Turner Valley find. There was a preexisting "ecology of oil" in Calgary that outweighed any benefits that could be gained from being closer to the source. This trend not only applies to oil, but to coal as well. Alberta is a major coal producer and true to the pattern almost none of the coal is mined within 200 km of Calgary, yet 64% of coal producers have their head offices in Calgary (C.E.D.A., 1995: 11).

From 1947 to 1981 Calgary enjoyed rapid and sustained growth. Between 1947 and 1955 Calgary's population doubled from 100,000 to 200,000, and by 1965 it had reached 350,000 (Stenson, 1994: 43).

The early seventies saw a combination of events that pushed the world price of oil up to record levels. This served to intensify foreign investment and growth in the oil industry, and for the next ten years Calgary would undergo a transformation that would ultimately place it in the number three position of business centres in Canada behind Toronto and Montreal.

Calgary's growth was intensified by the relatively stagnant Canadian economy at the time. This created a massive surge of immigration which at its peak would reach close to 3,000 new arrivals a week (Stensen, 1994: 48).

Calgary was growing faster than any other city in Canada with building permits exceeding one billion dollars annually from 1978 to 1981 (C.E.D.A. 1982). This was the first time that any municipality in Canada had achieved growth levels of this kind. Employment in the construction industry rose from 15,000 persons in 1971 to close to 40,000 in 1981 (C.E.D.A. 1982: 10). During the peak of the construction boom, Calgary had the same construction activity as Houston, a city six times the size of Calgary (Nikiforuk, 1996: 75)

The oil industry had a profound impact on Calgary's labour market. It was estimated that 50% of the labour force was derived from the needs of the oil industry and that there was a multiplier effect of seven unrelated jobs created for every one in the oil industry (Foran & Foran, 1982: 237). The implications of this overwhelming dependency on a single economic sector is very apparent. What happens when there is a downturn or recession?

Back in the 1970's and early 80's, you could make any deal you wanted in the oilpatch and count on inflation to save you. . .everyone was convinced that oil prices were going to keep climbing. . .There was no great amount of concern for budget allocation. The price of oil would always go up, and the money would always come in (The Calgary Herald, 1992: B7).

In 1980 one economic outlook predicted that oil would reach a price of \$104(CDN) per barrel in 1992; the actual price was \$23 (Calgary Herald, 1992: B7). The preceding remarks give a general idea as to the mind set that was operating at the height of the boom: few thought that it was going to end.

With the introduction of The National Energy Program (NEP) in 1982, Calgary's economy suffered a severe blow. The NEP was an initiative by the

Federal Government to restructure the nature of investment in the oil industry and how profits from the industry were shared amongst the provinces. Aside from creaming billions off the top of oil revenues, the NEP loaded the entire industry in favour of Canadian owned companies by imposing tighter taxation and investment restrictions on foreign companies. This caused many foreign oil companies to pull out their investments and go in search of less restrictive opportunities (Mansell & Percy, 1990: 35-37). This proved to be disastrous for the oil industry, which is heavily dependent on large sums of investment capital.

Still trying to recover from the effects of the NEP, the oil industry suffered another setback in 1986 when OPEC entered into a trade war with North Sea oil producers; the result was that oil prices plummeted and the entire oil industry in Alberta was sent into a state of paralysis. The problem was that much of the oil production in Alberta is only profitable if world oil prices are relatively high, as they were during the 1970's. As prices fell in the mid 1980's Alberta oil producers simply could not compete. "Restructuring" was the word used by many oil companies instead of "layoffs".

Given the central importance of the oil industry to Calgary's economy, many people lost their jobs as oil companies restructured. The interesting thing was that it was not just construction workers and service personnel that lost their jobs, but well educated white collar executives as well. Tales of the poor out of work executive abounded in the human interest pages of local papers reinforcing the point that this was not just a small down-turn in the economy.

When a "boom busts" it is usually the blue collar and service sectors that get hit the hardest; managers and executives usually find ways to save themselves. This was not the case in Calgary. People that normally were not supposed to lose their jobs, those in "secure" professional careers with good salaries, were suddenly finding themselves out of work. People with ten or fifteen years of experience and two or more degrees were losing their jobs, creating a deep sense of insecurity amongst many white collar workers. As the reality check set in, people began to realize that they had been living in a bubble, isolated from the harsh economic realities of the world by a precarious set of conditions that were bound to collapse sooner or later.

About this time a bumper sticker appeared saying "please God, let there be another oil boom- we promise not to piss this one away". However crude, this adequately summarised most people's feelings at the time: the boom was over and now it was time to live in the "real world".

Phase Three - Calgary Today

The general economy of Calgary today has, for the most part, recovered from the turbulent times of the 1980's. Restructuring and diversification have been the main themes, with many companies streamlining their operations, and expanding into market niches that allow them to be more competitive.

Culturally the city has matured a lot. The 1988 Winter Olympics was a major boost to the city, giving it some international status that went beyond some of the misperceptions created by the Stampede and its "Cowtown" image.

And in the years since, many of the perceptions that Calgary was a “cultural desert” have been changed (Nikiforuk, 1996: 2).

Probably the most significant element in Calgary’s economy today is that it is a head office city. 86% of oil and gas producers in Canada are headquartered in Calgary, and the city just recently ranked second in Canada in terms of head office concentration (C.E.D.A., 1997). This high concentration of head offices is significant in that it creates an economic base of spin off industries which all contribute to the economy. International and domestic banking facilities, accounting services, drafting and engineering firms, legal firms, temporary personnel agencies, reproduction and cleaning services, are just a few examples of the many elements needed to support the high concentration of large head offices. By having such a high concentration of head offices, a separate economy has been created, a “business services economy”. This phenomenon is not unique and is experienced by many capital cities that house high concentrations of governmental organizations, (e.g. Washington and Ottawa). What is unique about Calgary's situation is that, as mentioned earlier, an “ecology of oil” and now “ecology of big business” has been created encompassing many different support industries.

One example of how the oil industry created a “sub-industry” is with computers and data processing. In 1996 Calgary was the third largest centre in the world (behind London and Houston) in terms of “computer density” or amount of computing power being used (Nikiforuk, 1996). This was a direct result of the oil industry’s need for high speed analysis and transmission of

seismic data. The benefits of this are now just being fully realised as many computer engineers and programmers that have left the oil industry during its downturn are starting to apply their skills in other areas such as telecommunications, CAD, CAM (Computer aided design and manufacturing), and other high technology industries.

The second most important element in the Calgary economy today is agriculture. Agriculture is now the strongest sector of Alberta's economy in terms exports and while Calgary is not an agricultural producer, it does benefit from a number of agricultural industries. The processed food and beverage industry in Calgary for example employs the largest percentage of all manufacturing workers in the city, 18,3% (C.E.D.A., 1995: 12). Manufacturing in other areas has also become increasingly important to the Calgary economy, accounting for 60% of Alberta's annual exports. Ranked in terms of contribution to employment and value of shipments, the main manufacturing industries in Calgary are: 1) food and beverage, 2) printing publishing and allied industries, 3) fabricated metal products, and 4) electrical and electronic products (C.E.D.A., 1995: 13).

Tourism is the third significant single industry that contributes to the Calgary economy. This industry generates more than \$1.7 billion in revenue annually and supports 27,000 direct and indirect jobs (C.E.D.A., 1995: 24).

Chapter Summary

The most critical aspect of the general economic culture and climate of Calgary is that it has been very susceptible to global influences and has gone through many intense "boom and bust" cycles. These cycles can be seen as having inured the city to many of the uncertainties of the New Economy⁶.

Long conditioned by the vagaries of farm and oil prices, Calgary's ascent to diversified prosperity began with a descent into economic hell. When oil prices rocketed skyward in the 1970s, making Calgary and Houston⁷ the fastest-growing cities in North America, illusions of eternal glory dazzled the town. Global forces abruptly brought the city to its senses and introduced Calgarian's to the logic of "downsizing" and "restructuring" long before the rest of the country. The bust matured and bloodied the town. More than 10,000 servants of oil lost their jobs - that's a conservative estimate - while the banks foreclosed on more than 4,000 homes in 1985 alone (Nikiforuk, 1996: 75).

Calgary's economy today is one of the strongest in the country. With unemployment sitting at 6.5% compared to 9.7% nationally (Neimeth, 1997: 15). At the time of my research, Calgary was just beginning it's current economic upsurge. Housing permits for 1996 had for the first time since 1982 surpassed the one billion dollar mark (C.E.D.A., 1997). What was generally expressed to

⁶ That the city has to some degree become inured to the fluctuations in oil prices was illustrated by a recent (June 16, 1998) headline in the Calgary Herald; "Oil falls to \$11.56 US; no panic in patch". This was the largest single drop in oil prices since 1990 and the first time oil prices have fallen below \$12 a barrel since 1986. While there were concerns being expressed over what might happen should oil prices fail to rebound, "been there done that and survived" was another attitude expressed over this most recent downturn (Ewart, 1998: A1).

⁷ In a visit to this city in the fall of 1997 I noticed that there was a seemingly inordinate amount of road construction taking place. I was told that it had only been in the last few years that the city had recovered enough from its economic downturn to be able to afford to undertake long needed infrastructure repairs.

me was that "finding a job in Calgary is not a problem, finding a good job is the problem". This impression was corroborated by Barreth and Leard (1997), two local reporters who were assigned the task of "go get a job" by their editors. Both met with good success in the service and retail industries though neither managed to obtain a single interview in any other field. This was surprising since both were very "techno-literate", experienced, and presumably well educated.

I would like to conclude this chapter by presenting two brief accounts of how the general fortunes of the city have influenced individual expectations and perceptions.

Larry was 32 and had for the last 10 years been working as a skilled tradesperson in the construction industry. "It's been really tough the last ten years" he said, "a lot of hard work and little return". Things for Larry had finally started to go "really well". "I have been waiting for this for so long, I missed out on the last boom. . .guys in the business told me about it, that they actually made good money. . .I believed them but from my own experiences I just couldn't see how".

I asked Larry why he stuck with his trade even though at times it was financially difficult for him to do so. Larry's response was that his trade was "what he did best", it was what "he knew", and that having learned how to make it during the lean times, he was now going to "milk this puppy for all it was worth". "I knew things were going to get better, I have been waiting for this". Larry's plan was to capitalize on this opportunity as long as it lasted "get ahead

of the game” and to then look into some other possibilities.

The next account that I will present came from an industrial worker who, unlike Larry, had personally experienced good economic fortune in Calgary. “

Yea I can remember when guys used to go work on the rigs for three months, come back, by a brand new TA [Trans Am]⁸ and still have enough left over to party it up for a month before going back again. . .It was nuts. . . guys still do ok on the rigs, but not like that, though there is always the hope that things will go crazy and there will be the chance to make it big. . .it all comes and goes.

Finally I would like to present two quotes on how people saw Calgary.

“Calgary is like a big mushroom, big and hollow, something that has been fed too much fertilizer”. “It [Calgary] is like a frog in a pot. When oil prices go up it is like turning up the heat and it thrashes around.”

⁸ A Trans Am at the time was considered to be a “hot car” and status symbol for many young men.

Chapter Four

Networks

Introduction

The settings that I will be describing in this chapter are all very different from each other and there are many themes present which could be emphasised. A common theme through them all is how social networks are developed and used in an adaptive, or strategic manner.

It should be noted that the first setting I will be describing is where I began my research, and because of this I have included some commentary on the ethnographic process itself.

The CCAT

My research began in the fall of 1995 while attending the Calgary Council for Advanced Technology (CCAT) dinner and breakfast meetings as a participant observer. This was an attempt to gain access to individuals who were on the "cutting edge" of the economy. In total I attended six dinner meetings, and four breakfast meetings.

The CCAT was founded in 1983 as a non-profit organization geared towards "promoting an ecology of adaptive learning in the high technology environment". This mission to support Calgary's advanced technology community was facilitated by:

- 1) The promotion of business and organizational networks through monthly dinner/ breakfast meetings and presentations.
- 2) The publication of technical and business information
- 3) Provision of specialized training via conferences, seminars and workshops.
- 4) Tours of various production and research facilities in the Calgary area.

The prime activity of CCAT was to provide individuals with an opportunity to network with others that were involved in the technology sector. "The key benefit of this networking is that you will meet others who may be facing similar challenges with their businesses and you will be able to discuss with them the solutions they have found".

The CCAT's membership was comprised of members from various advanced technology sectors, educational institutions, and technology supporting institutions. This broad membership base contained within it a very wide range of individuals. At one end of the spectrum there were presidents and CEO's of large corporations, at the other there were small "one person" operations.

The basic structure of CCAT meetings was to arrange for individuals in the Calgary area to give presentations on their business ventures. Typically the presentation involved how a particular product, technology, or market niche was developed, what strategies were involved and some commentary on the process in general. Topics presented during the 95/96 season were:

- Entertainment technologies, interactive media and training technology
- Financing the High tech industry
- Multimedia: Tools, Techniques and Trends
- ISO 9000: Quality and Benchmarking
- Environmental Technologies
- Biotechnology: New Advances
- Virtual companies
- Telemedicine

The forum for these presentations were monthly breakfast and dinner meetings. A typical breakfast meeting would start at 7:30 am with a continental breakfast followed by one or two presenters and would conclude by 9:30. These meetings were held at the Crowchild Motor Inn and were attended by anywhere from twenty to forty people.

Dinner meetings would start at five with networking and drinks. Dinner would be served at six, followed by two or three presenters. Dinner meetings would have upwards of sixty people in attendance and were held at the Westin Hotel.

The kinds of people attending these meetings were typically business people working in some capacity with high technology. This of course could and does mean just about anyone in the business community. As one presenter put it "even garbage collection can be made high tech these days".

Typically though the people that attend were of four main types:

- 1) Middle and upper management types of various corporations, primarily oil/gas or computer related.
- 2) Engineers and computer hardware/software specialists.
- 3) Self employed "entrepreneurial types" mostly involved in software development.
- 4) Academics (MBA's, professors in engineering, computers and electronics).

Conducting research at the CCAT was a valuable experience not only in terms of the data collected but in terms of inducting me into some of the classic issues of anthropological fieldwork.

In conducting my research at the CCAT meetings I was confronted by several problems associated with my status. During the first meeting of the season I was asked to introduce myself and explain "why an anthropologist was there". At this time I fully disclosed the nature of my study and that I was there to meet and talk with individuals in the "high-tech" community. While my study was well received, because I was not a "player" I was initially treated with some indifference and in a few cases, caution. I also seriously underestimated the importance of presenting myself as a "professional" person, or at least being able to play the role of one. An example of this was the "card game" - the exchanging of business cards. During my first meeting I was confronted with the embarrassing situation of not having a business card to hand out. While not there to conduct business, I was there to meet and talk to people. This simple

oversight caused me to look “unprofessional” in the eyes of some.

Other issues related to how I presented myself. As Wolf (in Hammersly & Atkinson, 1995: 57-58) illustrates in his attempts to gain access to a motorcycle gang, if you want to hang out with bikers you have to look and act like a biker, if you want to hang out with business people then you have to look like a business person.

My original research objective in attending the CCAT meetings was to generate contacts in the CCAT community so that a snowball sampling profile would emerge. From here I was hoping to obtain individual interviews. This strategy turned out to not be viable for the following reasons:

- 1) Most of the people that I came in contact with were extremely busy. Talk of sixteen to eighteen hour days was not uncommon. While initially skeptical of some individual's claims that they simply didn't have time for an interview, it became apparent after listening to many talk about their schedules that this was really the case.
- 2) Many individuals that I spoke with were extremely goal driven and I was told politely that “I really had nothing to offer so it was unlikely that I would get interviews from anyone who was a player”.
- 3) While there was a prevailing atmosphere of co-operation and friendliness amongst the CCAT membership it was suggested to me that some people might be hesitant to talk with me for fear that I might actually be working as a “spy” trying to gain valuable market information. This was, as it turned out, not that unfounded. During one dinner I met an intelligence officer whose job it was to

“keep track of some things”. What exactly he was keeping track of was never disclosed, but I was told that many people attended CCAT meetings just to keep up with what the competition might be doing.

4) While not as pronounced in the CCAT community as others (construction workers for example) I found there was a general reluctance for people to acquiesce to being “studied”.

In light of these difficulties in obtaining individual interviews I adopted the position of participant observer, taking advantage of the built in networking that occurred at the meetings and the dinner time discussions.

CCAT Comments

Probably the most interesting thing that I discovered while attending these meetings was that there majority of people in attendance were “looking for something”. What they were looking for was of course dependent on their circumstance but at a general level people seemed to be interested in gaining information or meeting people that could be beneficial to their line of work.

Examples of this were:

- Market opportunities for a specific skill or product.
- Information on how to get into a specific market area.
- Contacts with others that might be utilised in a collaborative business venture.
- Contacts that might aid or enhance one's knowledge or skill.
- Knowledge or information regarding a specific skill or product.

Related to the above, and in my opinion, the most significant aspect of the CCAT, was the networking that occurred there. The advantages of networking and making social contacts has been very well documented and researched (e.g. Wilkinson, 1996; Miller et al., 1997; Carruthers, 1997; Smart & Smart, 1991; Meyerson, 1994; Granovetter, 1985). The development and maintenance of social capital means that the more people you know, the more possibilities, and the more potential resources that can be drawn upon. The CCAT was founded at a time (1983) when literally thousands of well educated, highly trained professionals were losing their jobs. It was a formalized network created during a time of very high instability and uncertainty. As will be shown throughout my data, networking, and social contacts proved to be a significant resource to draw on.

In regards to what people talked about as being most significant in their economic situations, two main themes emerged. The first was that there was a general fear of being "blindsided", of having something happen in the economy that might have a negative impact on one's particular economic niche. Working to solidify, and secure a market was also a primary concern, secondary to this was the development of a new technology or product.

A background theme ran through much of the talk, and this dealt with the highly competitive nature of most high technology industries. Competition was not necessarily unwelcome, and in fact in most cases it was seen as a positive challenge, but the intensity of the competition was often highlighted. "You really have to hoof it to make it these days", the idea being expressed was that you

have to work long and hard if you want to be successful and stay competitive.

Digital Technologies Incorporated

Calgary has many “cutting edge” companies that compete successfully in the global market, and as mentioned previously my research at the CCAT was an attempt to gain access to some of these companies. Through my association with the CCAT, I was able to access one such company. How this company maintained its competitiveness was of great interest.

In order to gain access to this setting I was required to sign a non-disclosure form and was asked not to reveal anything that I saw during my four hour visit to the facility. All the specifics that I present in this account have been changed in order to protect the integrity of this source.

DTI (Digital Technologies Incorporated), was truly on the frontier of technological development. The technology that it was developing, should it prove to be viable, would have a profound impact on people’s lives. DTI was not just another high-tech manufacturing firm competing locally or nationally. DTI was in direct competition with many Japanese and European manufacturers who were working on the same technology. At the time of my visit to the site, I was told that there were only three other companies in the world that had come close to achieving what DTI had done. Kurtis who was the president and founder of DTI, and my contact there, estimated that the size of his nearest competitors was one to two thousand times as large as his operation was. He employed only twelve people.

Located in an unassuming warehouse complex, the front office was very small, scarcely furnished and gave no hint of what was going on in the 5,000 square foot facility in the back. What first struck me were the security measures that one had to go through before actually entering the lab. Passing through the front office to the lab involved negotiating a series of increasingly sophisticated security doors, each requiring its own special authorization.

There is, as I learned through my experiences at the CCAT, always the concern about competitors finding out “what you are up to”, or more accurately finding out too much about what you are up to. Calgary, largely as a result of the oil industry, has its own subculture of industrial spying.⁹ While local “spies” were a concern for DTI, it was the international ones that DTI really worried about. Given the nature of the technology, and its potential value, I personally believed it not beyond the realm of possibility that DTI would be of interest to its larger competitors. I did spot some security that was geared towards defeating some kinds of listening devices. When I asked about it, Kurtis was impressed, and then a bit annoyed, and simply stated that it was in his best interests to not talk about it.

DTI made the news both locally and nationally when they moved from Eastern Canada to Calgary in 1992. This move was highlighted in a

⁹ It is a widely accepted practice in the oil industry to use spotters to count the number of drill stems coming out of a new oil well. This gives information as to the depth of the well, and its potential for production. Other kinds of vital information to competitors can be gained by simply observing the kind of equipment used on site and the general level of activity. On sensitive sites it is not uncommon to place vision barriers around the drilling rig, and to sequester the drilling crew on site.

promotional video which was shown to me once we had established some of the ground rules (i.e. no discussions about security or technological specifics).

This led to my first question.

“Why Calgary?” I asked, “you could have located anywhere”.

First of all we are a global company, we get parts from France, Germany, we have software designers in the States, our only restrictions on doing business are the time of day. . .Calgary has an airport and we have our own secure network, so yes you are right we could have located anywhere. . .We wanted to be where the growth was, where things were “happening” and I personally liked the lifestyle Calgary offered. I lost 60k on my house out East because things there have been so bad for so long, I saw Calgary as the place to be. . .Calgary has lots of venture capital. . .I could put up a sign and a hat saying “I am developing this technology” and people would just drop checks in it. Out East it was “OPM” other people’s money, people were not willing to invest themselves in anything. . .There is lots of fluid capital in Calgary.

We then began to discuss just how it was that such a small company was able to do something that large companies with millions of dollars in research funding couldn’t do. This, as it turned out, was a case of personal vision, some very specialized training, and most importantly, access to a highly sophisticated intelligence network.

After his formal technical training, Kurtis spent some time with a “high level government agency” in the United States . He did not specify which one, but from the nature of the technology I was assuming it was of a military nature. Here he worked on some technologies currently in use today, and more

importantly developed some “friends in high places”.

In the “high tech game” I was told, it is very much a matter of not only being competent in your own R&D capabilities, you also had to be aware of what was going on with your competitors. For a small company to succeed one can not afford to duplicate mistakes being made by others. This was one of the keys to DTI’s success. DTI spent a lot of time monitoring patents of its competitors; “who is patenting what is as important as who is not patenting”.

This point reinforces the notion that knowledge is closely linked to power and that information is one of the most important assets in today’s economy. “Movement of information is not subject to any trade agreements. Nothing will stop that. . . trade barriers will be negated” was Kurtis’s response to my question regarding how he felt about trade agreements, and how he saw them affecting his business.

DTI not only monitored patents but was also able to draw on some “other sources” of information. These were not disclosed, however it was revealed that “if things seem to be getting a little jumpy I have a few ‘crystal balls’ that I can look into to tell me what is going on”. What was referred to was that sometimes there are breakthroughs in a specific area that could influence his company’s R&D strategy. Reading between the lines I assumed that the “crystal balls” were individuals that either worked in key industries, or that somehow had access to information that was not publicly available. At this point I began to wonder about some legal issues, or if DTI’s success was based on its own espionage capabilities, so I took a big chance and gambled with a very probing

question.

It had been mentioned that DTI was in the process of going public, and that this was going to be announced in a month or so. I knew this, and by virtue of my interview I did possess “inside information”. So I asked where I would stand if I decided to buy-in on the opening date. The answer was thus:

Well you signed a non-disclosure form so you can't tell anyone about what we are doing, you know a little more about us than what we give in a presentation to interested investors, so what do you think? . . . I do not get information on how something is built or made. . . I get information on what people are doing with their technology. . . it is kind of like watching the performance of an experimental aircraft if you know what to look for you can see what technology is being used and if it is working or not. . . We don't steal secrets, we just have ways of finding out what other people are up to, how their planes are flying compared to ours. . . we are always checking for ripples in the pond. . . Does that answer your question?

“Information is king”, is how an investment advisor put it to me when talking about success in his field. DTI was a very small company competing at a global level. It used both a strategic approach to its R&D program, and combined it with “other sources” of information in order to be competitive. It is not simply a case of who you know, it is what you know and how you decide you use it.

Resentful Welders

To gain a perspective of how working class or blue collar workers viewed their situations I made a contact with an individual who worked in a large welding shop. What I gained most out of this setting was a very candid view on something I did not expect to find - resent over a network.

Building up a rapport with this population was initially difficult, but by drawing on some common experiences I was able to break down the barriers and get some useful information. All my initial attempts at obtaining interviews were met with a high degree of resistance. "You ain't studying me like a rat", or "I don't want you psycho-analyzing me" were two of the most outstanding rejection lines. Overcoming this apprehension involved two strategies. The first was to "go for beers" after work with "the boys", the second was to demonstrate that I was not simply some "scholar boy" and that I did in fact have "the hand" - the ability to weld¹⁰.

Having gained some marginal status as "one of the boys", individuals felt free to talk to me during "debriefing" - drinks after work. Requests for formal interviews were still denied, and I never was granted a formal interview. People did feel free to talk "about this making a living stuff" that I was interested in, and answered most of my questions as long as I didn't appear to be conducting an

¹⁰ When I was in high school I had completed my first year of a four year program as a welding apprentice, and at numerous points in my own work history have used these skills. Part of my motivation for choosing this setting was that I was familiar with the industry and felt confident in my abilities to converse knowledgeably with the people involved. I arranged to take the shop's standard welding test for prospective employees "just for fun", something that I knew I would not pass, but that I could do a "fake job" of. It would look good, but would not stand up to inspection.

interview (i.e. more than two or three questions in a row). The most interesting thing that came out of my research with this group was an apparent resentment for some of the ethnic minorities that worked as labourers in the shop.

“It is those damm “sand niggers”. . .why do they have to come here, they take our jobs, don’t pay taxes, live like rabbits. . .you know I saw one the other day stealing a roll from the can [washroom], they are so cheap”. Construction workers and labourers in general, can have strong prejudices or “red neck” attitudes and this did not surprise me though I was unfamiliar with the term “sand nigger” and who it was meant to refer to. Exploring this concept further, I found that the term referred to a small population of Lebanese and other workers of an unknown though presumably Middle Eastern origin.

The apparent resentment that was expressed towards this group went a little beyond what I would consider to be the typical “red neck” construction worker attitude. It is commonplace, regardless of who you are, to get “hassled” or teased on a job site or in a large shop. Italians for example are called “salami”, African Americans were called “homes”, and if you were not of a minority some sort of name would be given to you (in my instance “scholar boy”). What interested me was that the name calling went past what would could be considered “normal” for this setting. Why was there this apparent animosity towards these people? As it turned out it was the relative economic success that they enjoyed that caused both resentment and fear.

Comment: Amin. . .he drives a brand new car and he is a labourer, it drives me nuts. He drives a cab on weekends, and rents it out at night. I asked him once how much he made, but he wouldn't tell me. . .I am guessing close to \$1,200 a week. That little. . .

Question: So what is the problem with that?

Answer: Yea well you know what they do? They all shack up in one house, the whole family, Amin lives with his wife, mom and dad, his brother and sister, and I think an aunt or grandmother or something. I think there is six or seven of them living together. . .and they all work. Work like slaves they do, I have to give them that. And now I hear Amin is buying a house, just buying it, can you believe that? no mortgage or nothing. . .and he will invite more of his family and friends over here and they will just expand.

Question: So you are choked over the fact that they are able to get more things because they are willing to live together and pool their resources?

Answer: Yea, it just pisses me off. They come here take advantage of all that we give them, take our jobs and keep it all to themselves.

From talking to my main contact the general theme of utilizing a tight family and/or social network in order to maximize the resource base available held true. My contact told me of another individual who owned three houses, and who was only forty five. He worked as a labourer, made about 16 dollars an hour, but just saved and saved. He lived with his family (mother, father, and several others), and together they managed to amass quite a bit of capital.

By staying together, and combining resources, it appeared that these people were able to enjoy a level of financial success not attainable by individuals living on their own - those not living in an extended family setting.

Unfortunately, the political and social situation in this setting did not afford me the opportunity to speak directly with any of the ethnic minorities in question. It was very tempting to try and explore this situation further, though the tendency for immigrant, or ethnic minorities to be economically supportive within their own communities is well documented (e.g. Der - Martirosian, 1997; Yoon, 1995). Regardless of what was going on in terms of the social networks of the minorities in question, it was the perception that they were doing something that “we” didn’t do, and that this was giving them an economic advantage, that was important.

What I found to be very interesting in this situation was that there was an apparent resentment expressed for the social networks that the minorities in question seemed to be using to increase their economic success. It also seemed that there was some jealousy being expressed because “they” were able to combine capital in a way that “we” couldn’t. As my contact put it, “there is no way. . . I could ever live with my folks, someone would end up getting hurt, but those people seem to be able to do it, and it works for them. . . I guess if we could do it we would but we were not raised that way”.

Chapter Summary

Drawing upon the resources of a social network was a common theme that emerged throughout my research. Whether that network was a structured one like the CCAT, an informal one as in the case of DTI, or one based on kinship or ethnic ties, as in the above, social networks proved to be a major

element in the economic situations of many of my subjects.

What was being focused on was also interesting. DIT's president saw his competition coming from large technology companies, and spent some of his "attention budget" on protecting his company from the threat that they posed.

I suggest that in the case of the welders, they saw their "competition" in the form of the immigrant workers, who seemed to have advantages that could not be matched - hence the resentment.

Chapter Five

Work

Introduction

As mentioned in chapter one, many changes are occurring in the nature of work, and many of the expectations and traditional relationships between labour and capital are in a state of transition. In this chapter I will review some of the traditional understandings of work and discuss some of the issues that relate to my line of investigation.

Traditional Understandings

Defining “work” has proven to be an academic exercise unto itself (Pahl 1988) and there is “no consensus on its definition” (Rinehart, 1987: 7). For my purposes I would accept Giddens’ (1996) definition of work as “. . .the carrying out of tasks requiring the expenditure of mental and [or] physical effort, which has as its objective the production of goods and services that cater to human needs” (Giddens, 1996: 243).

Where things become problematic is in defining work as it relates to wage labour - work as an occupation or job .

An occupation is the social role performed by adult members of society that directly and/or indirectly yields financial consequences and that constitutes a major focus in the life of an adult (Hall, 1975:6).

Work is like the spine which structures the way people live, how they make contact with material and social reality, and how they achieve status and self esteem (Applebaum, 1992: ix).

An occupation also shapes one's identity and in the eyes of others, largely determines an individual's status or position in society (Krahn & Lowe, 1993: 1).

I suggest that the notion that an occupation or job "constitutes the major focus in the life of an adult", is too narrow a perspective, and likewise the idea that an occupation is the central defining feature in the life of an individual is also too narrow. I would not disagree that work is a source of social status, or that in many cases it does constitute the main focus in the life of an individual, however it seems to me that these notions need to be expanded.

The idea that people can be socially defined, or that they define themselves by the type of work they do, is quickly disappearing in some parts of the economy (Casey, 1995; Lerner, 1994):

The social, economic and technological changes that have occurred in advanced industrialized societies in recent decades have, among other things, called into question the meanings of work bequeathed from an earlier time and firmly established in modern society. The modern values of work and production and their considerable importance in the organization of modern social life and the formation of selfhood are becoming increasingly problematic in a world in which work, as it is conventionally understood, may never again be so widely available and universally valued (Casey, 1995: 26).

This, when coupled with the increasing scarcity of life-long employment, an increase in the tendency towards individuals having multiple careers, and an increase in non-standard work patterns, creates a situation in which one's occupation may no longer be the defining agent it once was.

The Instrumental Value of Work

"Work is undeniably one of the most essential of all human activities. For a start it is the basis for the survival of individuals - and society" (Krahn & Lowe, 1993: 1). On a basic level "we all have to buy food and pay rent", and the way that this is achieved by the vast majority of people is through work, specifically wage labour.

The most obvious function of work is an economic one. Throughout history, labour has been intimately linked with the provision of goods and services (and income) essential to the maintenance of human life. Today, one's occupation determines the extent to which life will be consumed by a struggle for maintenance (Rinehart, 1987: 7).

There is no denying the importance of the instrumental value of work. To a large degree, this is what is responsible for much of the anxiety that surrounds under- or unemployment and/or the threat of job loss. It is also, largely why such emphasis is placed on work as a defining feature in people's lives.

The availability of work and the differential economic rewards attached to occupations establish differential life chances and opportunities - to receive a decent education, to be healthy, to enjoy leisure activities, and in a general manner commensurate with acceptable community standards of living. Today, a substantial number of individuals are leaning towards an instrumental orientation to work. They feel that the basic reason for working is to maintain themselves and their families in order to do the things they "really enjoy". Life for these people begins when work ends (Rinehart, 1987: 7).

Work can be viewed on a continuum in terms of its meaning and significance in the life of an individual. At the first level there is subsistence, "working to live" as one informant put it, work that meets the basic subsistence needs of the individual. The second level matches the above description given by Rinehart. Work at this level is seen as a means to an end. Work to buy food and pay the rent - to buy and do the things you want. The third level is where work is the end, an individual's work is their life. This is where "...an individual's job structures much of his or her time and, one hopes, provides a source of personal fulfilment (Krahn & Lowe, 1993: 1).

Expectations

For many generations, there was the ingrained notion that you would "grow up to be something". I call this "Sesame Street" thinking. There was an expectation that one would "become" something; a fireman, a doctor, a mechanic, a nurse etc. There was an assumption of a linear and stable career path trajectory based on a specific occupational goal.

This thinking can be attributed as stemming from a time when there was, comparatively speaking, more stability in the labour market. One could reasonably expect to have one or two careers in a lifetime. This time is often referred to as the Fordist era, and has had a significant influence on how many people believe their economic lives should be.

Fordism only predominated for a very short time, from the 1950's to the early 1970's, but it has had a profound impact on people's expectations. The expectations and images of the "good old days" of Fordism are expressed in the following:

One of its hallmarks was an extremely high degree of career and life-chance predictability... The industrial worker and, for that matter, the routine clerical worker would know that significant upward or outward career mobility was unlikely over the life-course. On the other hand, he or she would face a future of good earnings, job and income stability, a package of fringe benefits and a welfare guarantees that allowed, in totem, a satisfactory degree of participation in the prevailing standards of living and consumption in society (Espin-Anderson quoted in Cameron, 1995:191).

Many of the expectations that we have about what our economic lives should be stem from the Fordist period. And indeed much of the way we live is predicated on a particular set of values that emerged during this time. Values and expectations that were based on certain assumptions about the labour market - specifically assumptions of stability.

The Theory of Work

Arguably, Weber's (1930) concept of rationalization is at the core of the development of much of the theoretical discussion surrounding work.

Rationalization implies a "depersonalization of social relationships, the refinement of techniques of calculation, the enhancement of the importance of specialized knowledge, and the extension of technically rational control over both natural and social process" (Brubaker, 1984:2). For Weber the driving force behind this, and the explanation for the differentiation between Western and other cultures (i.e. China & India) was the rise of the Protestant work ethic.

Weber showed that the convergence of the salvation "through works" theology of Protestantism, especially its Calvinistic form, encouraged the development of the "industrial worker". This worker, who was "called" to do "good works" and to perform the duties of his work as religiously as those called to the monastic religious life of Catholicism, required regular, modestly profitable work....The religious man and the economic man coincided into the sober bourgeois citizen who lived through his work and enabled the rise of industrial capitalism (Casey, 1995:28).

Once instituted, rationalised economic behaviour no longer needs religious sanction. "Instead it may operate within the general climate of secularised individualism oriented to the pursuit of instrumental or goal-directed rationality" (Holton, 1992: 201).

In many ways work has become increasingly rationalized as organizations adapt and restructure to meet new challenges. "The revolution in the '80's was toward just-in-time inventory. The revolution of the '90's is toward just-in-time employment. Companies will use people only as they need them"

(Hutchens quoted in Campbell, 1994: 17). The rationalized organization of the future will probably look something like this:

One leaf [of the organization] will be composed of "insiders" or well paid knowledge workers who are also the head office decision makers. The next level is made up of the specially trained workers and self employed professionals who are hired on contract for the length of a project and then get let go when their job is complete. The final leaf or hired help division comprises the "technopeasants" or just-in-time work force, a low skilled group that will experience short periods of employment and long periods of unemployment (Campbell 1994: 26).

The challenge facing many people today is how to fit into the increasingly rationalized world of work.

In the following chapters I will be presenting some accounts that are illustrative of some of the themes discussed above specifically, how people are framing work in relation to the rest of their lives.

Chapter Six

The Experiences of Work

Introduction

In this chapter I will present the accounts of individuals in various work situations. I begin with those looking for work, then move on to those who are working but are “caught” in their present situations. From there I will be presenting accounts of those who had been downsized. In most of the accounts I have included some of the background detail on the individual’s employment and educational history. This is to place the individual’s current perspective and/or situation in context with the rest of their lives. As with all the data that I present there are many recurring themes. Networking is one of these, and I will be highlighting some others as they emerge.

Looking for work

I obtained interviews with people who were looking for work by posting requests for interviews at two employment centres in the city. Here it is worth noting that everyone (N=6) that responded to my request had the desire to talk about their experiences and/or frustrations in trying to find employment. It felt at times like they just wanted to talk with someone about what they were going through. After thanking one informant after the interview she commented that she just wanted “someone to hear her story”.

As mentioned in chapter Two, at the time of my study finding work in Calgary was not that difficult, finding “good” work was. All of the individuals that I spoke with had some post-secondary education, and/or previous work experience and as a result were not looking for casual or part time work. All were intent on finding a “good” job.

Dan

Dan was 30, and had been living in Calgary for the last six years. He had a university degree in philosophy and some volunteer experience with the university paper.

Dan had originally started his post secondary education in Ontario at a community college studying outdoor recreation. “That didn’t work out very well, I spent all my time playing”. He then “floated around” for a year and came to the realization that he “needed a degree, . . . I was hearing from all around that this was what I needed to do”. While in school Dan “never really considered a career path” he wasn’t really sure what he was going to do with his degree, and at the time didn’t really seem too concerned about it. When asked “if you had it to do it all over again would you have still chosen philosophy”, Dan said:

Yes, I have no regrets about that, I just wish that I had perhaps thought about taking something a little more practical. . .computers are a big thing, but I hate math, so any sort of programming job would be out of the question. . .I don’t know I guess at the time I wasn’t really thinking about much other than getting a degree.

Dan moved to Calgary with his family in the spring of 1990. Upon moving here, and needing money for school, Dan “lucked out” and got a job with the City as a greens-keeper. This job according to Dan was “great. . .I got paid twice as much for doing half the work as other people in landscaping”. He worked at this job while finishing his degree and for two years afterwards. “I wasn’t really concerned about finding a real job at the time”. Dan would work at the golf course and then collected unemployment insurance for most of the winter. He admitted that “It was a pretty good lifestyle” and again expressed little concern over his future. Living with his parents Dan had little overhead, and seemed content in this existence. A transfer to a golf course across the city from where he lived plus “some personal conflicts” caused Dan to quit his job with the City in the summer of 1994.

This is where things really began to change for Dan. He wasn’t able to find work or more precisely “work that I wanted to do” for almost a year. During this time he did odd jobs for people and worked “under the table” for a friend. By the summer of 1995 Dan was feeling “hurt by the fact that I couldn’t find real work”. Dan was starting to feel like working at the golf course was not such a good idea “I went for money instead of experience. . .perhaps that wasn’t such a good idea”.

For the first time in his life Dan was not able to find work “I had always been able to find a job in the past, but now. . .I don’t know why, but I just can’t find anything”. In reflecting on his situation Dan said “I thought that an entry level position with some company was attainable”. When asked what such a

position might be, he said "well I do have a university degree, that should be good for something".

Dan finally took a job at a large supermarket in their photo department;"it was humiliating" he said. "I was way more qualified than anyone else there and I got treated like dirt". When his supervisor didn't schedule him in for a week he confronted her and the ensuing altercation lead to his resignation. After that Dan found a job in a liquor store and worked there until the spring of 1996. "The liquor store wasn't bad, but I wanted something more, it was not a career type job".

I asked Dan what he ideally would like to find. "I would like a job where I knew for sure that I would be making a set amount of money for a specific time....I would like to be able to earn enough to do the things I like to do". When asked if he would be happy with a guaranteed lifetime job Dan said "no, I don't think I would like that, I would prefer to work for say two years at a time, I don't think I could do anything for much longer. . . realistically I don't think that those kinds of jobs exist anymore". In terms of how Dan viewed the past in comparison with today's economic situation he had the following views:

In the past I think it was easier to find a "good" job, something that paid well and had some security, my father for example had worked for the airlines for close to thirty years, he doesn't a have great job but he makes a good living. . .now there are more people and fewer jobs. . .I think when we look back at this time the instability we see now will be the stability of the future. . . things are happening so quickly that people will look back at where we are now and think that this was stable.

Interestingly, the one thing that kept Dan from being "more motivated" in

looking for work was the fact that he was a competitive cyclist. He wanted to focus as much time and energy into his cycling as he could. "Yea I guess it is a case of not having my priorities straight I do devote too much time to it". On the positive side Dan had been able to land a few temporary jobs through his contacts in cycling. "I know I shouldn't spend as much time training as I do, but on the other hand if I keep asking around maybe something might turn up, I have had a few leads from the cycling community tossed my way so in a way it's good and in a way its bad".

I ran into Dan about six months after I had first interviewed him and took the opportunity to ask how he was doing. He had found a job working for the recreation department of one of the post - secondary institutions in the city. It involved not only cycling, but other outdoor activities as well, and he seemed quite happy about it. He told me the job was openly advertised, but he was recommended by someone that he trained with, so that is how he got it. What Dan seemed most happy about was that it was a "stable platform" for him to work from. The work itself he enjoyed, and he was given a fair amount of flexibility to train and pursue other interests.

Marie

Marie was 33, and had just finished a degree in the social sciences and was looking for "a real job". She had worked in the insurance industry for nine years and this was her only job after leaving high school. Her father was an insurance adjuster and was directly responsible for getting her started in the

industry.

She really didn't like the industry much but felt "trapped". She felt like she didn't have any transferable skills and with this being her only work experience she felt like any move out of here particular "niche" would be like "moving back to square one". Eventually she finally decided that a change was in order and had saved enough to finance a year of university.

"At the time I was torn between trying to pursue a career, which I had, and trying to find meaning in my life. . .it was a meaning vs. money thing". When asked if she had any particular plan in mind when she decided to go back to school she said "I couldn't predict the future but I was going to do it anyway"

She financed her way through school with some temporary insurance jobs and work in the service industries, primarily as a cashier. "Those were disposable jobs, I would work at them just to get enough money to get me by for a bit and then quit".

During Marie's current job search she felt "insulted and appalled" at what most employers were offering. She said that she felt like it was "exploitation" for many employers to be offering what they did. As with several other people I had spoken with, she felt that her education should be worth more to a prospective employer than what they were offering.

While in the last year of her degree Marie worked as a research assistant and has been able to work in this capacity on a temporary basis since graduating. This is what she really enjoyed and was in the process of applying to graduate school. In the mean-time she had resigned herself to trying to

obtain short term research contracts and had some success in this area.

Marie's general attitude was that she was going to put up with a lot of financial hardship to pursue what she wanted in life, which was to become a researcher. At one point in time Marie found herself in the position of having to apply for social assistance. Unable and/or unwilling to find work in the insurance industry and not wanting "to be trapped in a low wage job" she thought that this was her best option.

It was humiliating on several levels, I didn't have anyone to turn to for financial help, I absolutely could not stand the thought of working for five or six dollars an hour as a cashier, and above all they treated me like I was dirt. . . I never did follow through with my application. . . After that I realised I have to look after myself I am the only person who is going to do it.

Comments: Dan & Marie

Both Dan and Marie thought that their education should have enabled them to obtain better jobs than they had. They felt that their education "should be worth something". This is somewhat reflective of a time when having a university degree was seen as a gateway into a career - as one's "ticket" to economic independence. This is no longer assured in today's labour market. Dan did indicate that perhaps choosing a field with more of a market demand might have been a better choice. Interestingly Dan did not express any indications as to how he might apply his degree other than that he should be "qualified for something in an office".

Marie also felt the same way about her educational credentials though she was a little more resentful over the fact that having a degree did not lead to the employment she had hoped for. As with Dan, she had no specific employment objectives but felt that she should be able to get a job that paid more than what she was being offered.

The Subsistence Trap: James

James, 32, came from a family in which his father and his grandfather had spent their working lives serving in the military. For James his initial career path was clear, he would join the military and follow what had worked for his father. "It seemed like my path was set . . . I wanted to join the army . . . it seemed to serve my father well . . . why not?".

James joined the army when he was 19, spent two years as a basic infantryman, then got transferred to an artillery position. There he learned a lot and eventually worked his way up to being second in command of his artillery unit. This position afforded him the opportunity to acquire some fairly advanced mathematical skills as well as practical experience with state-of-the-art communications and computer equipment.

Artillery isn't just about launching shells. . .I can put six shells down in an almost perfect circle and have our position packed up and ready to move by the time the last one hits the ground. . .The calculations that you have to do in order to be able to do that are fairly complicated and you absolutely have to get them right.

A family crisis forced James to take a personal leave, and shortly after that he decided to leave the military as he “saw no future in it”. When asked why he felt there was no future in the military James replied:

Well I had gone about as far as I could, and I couldn't see myself going any further, the room for advancement was very tight and I just couldn't see myself doing this for the rest of my life. . .besides, I don't think there is much of a future in soldiering. . .there were lots of cutbacks going on when I left.

James came to Calgary thinking that his experiences in the military would enable him to get a job in the oil fields quite easily. James did in fact find some work as a labourer in the oil industry, though it was sporadic and very hard on him physically. “I made good money but the 14 to 16 hour days were killing me. . .I would work for three months and come back to town and all I would want to do was sit on the couch. . .money would start to get tight and I would go out and do it again”. Finally in 1994 James gave up trying to work in the oil fields, “I was making good money but I was going nowhere”. His plan was to try and go to school and build on his mathematical skills that he had acquired in the military. His problem was that he couldn't find a job that would allow him to support himself and save enough money for school.

James knew a lot about communications systems from his experiences in the military. Looking around he saw a lot of possible opportunities in the design, repair, and manufacture of consumer communications products. “Look at cell phones they took off like wild fire. . .and that's just the beginning”. Unfortunately James didn't have the specific technical knowledge to enter the

field without further training.

His dilemma was that he had identified a potential growth industry, but did not have the resources at his disposal to get the training needed. Unwilling to take on the debt of a student loan, "my father told me never to borrow", James was stuck in the position of knowing what he wanted to do but did not have the necessary resources to put his plan into action. "It is really frustrating, I know what I want to try and do, and I think I would be good at it but with my job right now I am just barely able to pay the rent, let alone school"

When asked about the possibility of working in the oil fields again in order to try and finance his plans for school James said:

Well I have thought about it, and the money is still pretty good there, but jobs are harder to find and they typically don't last for very long. . .three months tops. . .I guess it would be possible to make enough money for school if I could work solid for a year or two but those opportunities just aren't there anymore.

James was currently working as courier after about a year of working at various construction trades "I thought you could make money in construction. . .[laughs] was I ever wrong". James's current plan was to try to get work with a company that specialized in communication electronics.

I don't have a formal degree, so a lot of places won't even look at me....but perhaps I can get in somewhere and then show them what I can do....perhaps get some on the job training and then work my way into something that has some potential.....I just need to find the right situation...it's tough though, I work all day so I don't have a lot of time to look around.

There were some blank spots in James's work history, periods of time that he didn't account for when talking about his work history in Calgary. When questioned about this James became uncomfortable and eventually told me that:

Those were really bad times, I often found myself between jobs with no money. . . I don't have a lot of friends and no family to speak of . . . I imposed on people a lot, I was desperate and slept on a lot of couches. . . it was very humiliating to have to ask people you don't know very well if you can stay on their floor.

This would partly explain James's current situation. He was making enough to live, but that was it. He had no surplus capital, no savings, not much of a social network to rely on, but at least he was independent. "I have to do what I have to do to get by on my own".

The condition of being in a subsistence trap does not only apply to those in low-paying jobs, or who are underemployed. Several families that I spoke with, each with annual incomes of over \$40,000 a year were firmly stuck in this position. The following is an example of one such family.

Subsistence Trap: The Smiths

The "Smiths" had just purchased a new house with only 5% down. This meant that their mortgage payments were quite high. They had two children, aged 2 and 4. Mr. Smith worked as a machinist and had been at his current job for seven years. Mrs. Smith was an artist who worked out of her home, though with two children she didn't have the time to generate much income. By all

external appearances they lived a very comfortable life, a new home, with new furniture, a new van, a new computer, in fact everything in their home was new. Their problem was that they had taken on so much debt to purchase all their furnishings that they were behind on all their bills, had “maxed out” their credit cards, and Mr Smith was forced to work part time on top of his full time job in order to try and support his family. The trap was that he hated his job, and beyond that but there were some health risks associated with his work environment. He wanted to start his own business and find a way for his wife be able to devote more time to her’s. However their financial situation did not provide the flexibility for them to entertain any other possibilities. When asked what would happen if Mr Smith lost his job, or got hurt I was met with silence, and then “we would be devastated”.

The Smith's story is not unusual, there are probably thousands like them. Making a good living and then overextending themselves with credit the Smiths, like so many others, had become highly dependent on a particular employer for their economic survival. In order to maintain their current lifestyle Mr Smith is committed to his current employment situation and they have no margins to work with should anything go wrong.

Comments: James & the Smiths

Being in a situation where someone was making enough money to “live” but not enough to do anything else was a commonly expressed problem. This theme was most pronounced in the recent university graduates that I spoke

with. Most were not concerned about being able to find work, but were extremely concerned with having to take a job just for the sake of “paying the bills”. This would place them in a situation of having reduced time to look for more lucrative or fulfilling employment. What was most feared was that they would only be making enough money to meet their monthly expenses and would not be able to save to allow for the exploration of better employment opportunities. Living on a tight budget also means that if something goes wrong, or there are expenses that are unforeseen, an individual can be placed in a difficult position. While most people find ways out of these situations either by the use of credit or drawing on social ties, it is a significant cause of stress.

Downsizing

“They can’t fire me, I know things about this place that no one else does.”

A key feature of the New Times as experienced by individuals has been “downsizing”, “rightsizing”, or “restructuring”. Whatever label used, the result is job loss not directly attributable to an employee’s actions. The literature concerning the effects of being downsized and job loss is quite extensive (e.g. Lim, 1996; Houston, 1992; Brockner et al., 1992; du Pont, 1996; Swift, 1995; Drucan & Oats, 1996; Burman, 1988). Downsizing has become such a common phenomenon in the labour market that it even formed the basis for several episodes of popular television series in the 1996 season (Laabs 1996).

In the following I will present two accounts of people who had been

downsized. Personally these interviews were very difficult to process, as they were full of emotion. Anger, resentment and frustration were clearly expressed in both accounts. While the emotions expressed were compelling, what I found to be most significant in these accounts was the retrospective analysis that both subjects engaged in.

Deb

Deb was 34, single, and was currently in her second year of university working on a degree in the Social Sciences. She had worked for a large government agency for eight years, and in 1993 her job was "surplused". She had a lot of resentment for that term, which is what her downsizing was officially called. "Surplus, just what does that say about what I did?".

Deb recounted many of the classic symptoms of a workplace that was being downsized. Job performance went down, apathy and paranoia were rampant, "people wanted to find someone to blame", sick leaves rose, and there were lots of people off work with "stress related disorders". Deb said that some of these were very real, and others were simply cases of people trying to milk the system for all it was worth before they were surplus. Deb admitted to taking her share of sick leave, and when talking about it she seemed to be expressing that it was a way of taking revenge on her employer. She then expressed that she did feel very badly about that because it only made a difficult situation worse. "With sick leaves on the rise it only increased everyone else's work load, which increased stress and led to more legitimate sick leaves".

Deb's situation was especially difficult because the whole process of downsizing her position took almost two years.

People knew that it was coming but not for sure, some people got transferred, others with more experience or seniority got jobs in other departments. . .but it was not for sure. . .I personally didn't know that my job was gone for sure until about three months before hand.

The uncertainty of the situation created a work environment that by Deb's account was "a miserable situation to work in". She noted that people ". . . would try and build power bases by hoarding knowledge and/or information to try and make their positions seem more important". The situation was especially difficult because people couldn't just quit. The size of compensation packages offered were tied to employees finishing their terms of employment, as undetermined as they were. "Just leaving was an option, but what you would get in terms of your package wouldn't have made it worth it".

Deb had spent a lot of time reflecting on what happened to her and her co-workers. This, combined with some of what she had learned since her "surplussing", made her thoughts on the matter quite insightful.

She articulated that she now thought that there was a "learned helplessness thing" going on, that she and many of her co-workers had become dependent on their work situations. She indicated that a "good government job was supposed to be the ticket", and that a lot of people, herself included, wanted to cling to this. "People saw their jobs with the government as their only future".

Deb's experience of being surplusd "took its emotional toll. . .I took it as a challenge to my personal self-worth". However she had managed to put the whole experience into perspective by saying "you can either let it get you down and freak out about it or you can get on with it and not let it beat you". She also saw the pressure of a tough situation as being a good thing in that it had forced her to be more creative and innovative. She had developed an extensive repertoire of computer skills while working for the government, and she put these to use by starting a small home business, printing advertisements and doing graphics design. While not economically successful it give Deb "something to focus on".

Deb had also identified a potential growth industry through her experience of being downsized - counselling. "There are huge waiting lists to see psychiatrists these days" she said. This was where she was directing her current educational track.

Jim

Jim was 42, married with two children ages 6 & 10. In 1995 he had lost the job he had held for previous 14 years. As with Deb, Jim expressed many of the same feelings of resentment and dismay at his dismissal.

Jim had worked as a continuing education coordinator for one of the school boards in the city. In his words "It was a great job, I got to do what I loved, it provided me with a flexible schedule and a good income". His programs were some of the strongest and most profitable that continuing

education ran. He never imagined that his programs would be cut, despite a climate of widespread government cutbacks in funding. When Jim was initially let go he was very upset, so much so that he took the board to court over his severance package. "It was ridiculous I worked for them for 14 years and they were basically going to give me nothing". He did eventually receive an acceptable package and took a great deal of pride in the fact that his efforts allowed others to do the same.

Jim had managed to find contract work with one of the post-secondary institutions in town. He was very adamant about the importance of social contacts in getting this position. "Had it not been for the fact that I had a lot of friends in the art community I would have been in deep trouble". He "leaned" on a few of his friends at the university who "pulled a few strings" and got him his current position. "At my age social contacts are the most important thing you can have, going head to head in the "open" market at my age is just not a reality".

Jim was concerned about what he expressed as a big shift to the right in the political climate. He was worried that things may start to go the way of other countries in terms of a shrinking middle class, a growing lower class, and a few wealthy individuals controlling most of the wealth "I worry about the concentration of wealth and power". This especially concerned him with regards to his children's education "the system will provide for them now but I am not so sure about the future. . .it would seem by the way things are going if you want a good education you are going to have to be very wealthy to afford it".

As far as plans for the future and retirement Jim said "I will not allow my life to be dictated by those concerns. . .I have my art so I will never really retire, that concept is alien to me". As far as providing for his family Jim really couldn't see much beyond the next year or so but alluded to the fact that he would feel a lot better if he knew for sure that he had "something lined up". His wife was a teacher, so "that will always be there" but he did feel very strongly about not letting himself get into the position of having to depend solely on her income. "I like stability, and the board gave that to me, now I have to make my own". Jim then thought for a bit and then surmised that perhaps his long employment with the board had made him a bit "soft", and that while he did want stability he was enjoying some of the freedom to pursue some of his own interests and possible career directions.

Comments: Deb & Jim

Both of these individuals were fortunate in that they received severance packages that helped ease their transitions. Jim was especially fortunate in that while fighting for his severance pay his wife could provide for the family.

It was interesting that both felt that their careers had made them, as Jim put it, "soft". How they chose to deal with this was even more interesting. While telling his story Jim seemed quite positive about it, citing some of the benefits of contract work, and having the freedom to pursue other career interests. He did however mention that he also liked stability, and appeared to be struggling to find some security in his new economic circumstance. Jim had essentially

called in some favours, or was going to owe some favours to some people for getting him his current position. He felt that he needed to be working and did not want to rely on his wife's income. Part of this was probably due to some "male bread winner" thinking, but it may also be that Jim was not entirely confident or comfortable in working for himself, or on a contract basis, and was seeking to find or create a stable situation again.

Deb had decided to pursue an uncertain path, though she did have a reasonably sound plan. She could have pursued "more of the same" - another government job, or something equivalent, but chose not to. Instead she wanted to pursue what she thought would be personally rewarding with only the potential for financial success.

Chapter Seven

Work Is Not The End

Introduction

"In Canada everyone seems to live to work, In Chile we work only to live". This quote came from a Chilean bricklayer on a busy jobsite. What was being expressed was that life in Canada seemed to revolve around work. "Everyone work, work, work all the time". In Chile it was expressed that people worked only enough to support themselves, to acquire what was needed and that the most important things in life were family and friends. Work, in the eyes of this individual, was not the most important thing in life.

As mentioned in Chapter 5 on work, many traditional values and expectations towards work are changing. I have suggested that many of the traditional definitions of work as a source of identity, and work as the central focus in the life of an adult needed to be expanded. In this chapter I will present the accounts of an individual and two settings that illustrate how the traditional orientations towards work are absent or have changed.

Not What You Do But Who You Are

Zack was 38 and had spent the last two years working in a large retail store making eight dollars an hour as a sales clerk. When I first met Zack the first question that came to mind was why a 38 year old man would work for such meagre wages? He seemed intelligent, why was he working here?

Zack had spent eight years in the U.S. military before coming to Canada when he was 28. His entire time in the military was with the engineering corps, and while not formally accredited, he thought he had the equivalent of a civil engineering degree. After discussing Zack's experiences in the military, I became even more puzzled as to why he would work at such a low paying job with little or no possibility for advancement. He openly agreed that he probably could get a good job in the construction industry or the oil industry, and did express some discontent over his current wage. The following is an excerpt from our discussion on his current employment situation.

Question: So Zack, just why are you working here? You obviously have the skills to get a much better paying job.

Answer: Yea, well I have thought about that a lot. It is true it isn't a great job, though I do get to play with all the latest equipment, which I do like, and I do like some of the people that I deal with. I like helping people make decisions, and I like seeing them get excited about getting started in a new sport.

Question: But 8 dollars an hour isn't a lot of money to live off of is it?

Answer: Yes well, I do teach at a local gym part time, and that almost equals what I make here, when I teach I get close to 24 dollars an hour.

Question: So why don't you teach full time?

Answer: My knees can't handle it. They are both almost shot.

Question: Ok, but that still doesn't explain why you are working here. You could in all likelihood get a very good job as a supervisor, or an equipment operator, make more money and save your knees.

Answer: Well, I look at it this way, this is a big company, they have been in business for a long time, and I can't foresee them closing down in the near future. They give me steady hours, my checks don't bounce. . .it is safe.

Question: Safe? how is it safe?

Answer: It's a sure thing.

Question: You like the security of an eight dollar an hour job?

Answer: Well. . .it is a job ok? I like what I do, for the most part. . .no I am not rich, I am happy though. I teach, and wish to do so until I can't anymore.

Question: Have you thought about looking for another job?

Answer: Yes, I do look around from time to time.

Question: And what do you find?

Answer: There are better jobs out there, but I also have to ask if it would be worth it. I have seen many companies come and go, sure I could make twice even three times as much elsewhere, but how long would that last?

Question: What about your future? Do you plan to work at the same place forever?

I guess I am wondering about how you feel about your long term prospects?

Answer: I guess I will probably work here until I get fed up with it.

Question: And then what?

Answer: I will find something else to do.

Question: What about your retirement? Saving for the future

Answer: Oh I see. . .yea well I do have some money from an inheritance that I have stashed away, I do believe it or not manage to save some. . .I will make it somehow.

Question: So you feel confident about your future?

Answer: Well I have made it this far, I can and will always find something

My interview with Zack was very interesting because he did not seem to exhibit any of the expected concerns for his age. Conventional assumptions would suggest that he would not be very happy with his position, and would be striving for greater economic success and/or status. On one level I felt he was hiding something, that there was some unstated reason for this person to be working in the position he was. I kept returning to my original question - why

was this person working under these circumstances when they could quite reasonably be doing something else? After talking with Zack I did wonder if he was perhaps sensitive about the fact that he was only making 8 dollars an hour in what would generally be considered to be a less than prestigious position.

I had spoken with many people who were younger than Zack, but were in similar situations - working at low paying service jobs but doing other things "on the side". This was what Zack was doing, the only unusual thing about Zack was his age and that he did not have any solid plans to elevate his economic earnings.

Some people would tend to look down on Zack, and say that he either had no ambition, or was too lazy to find a better job, or that he had something "wrong" with him. Zack gave every indication of being reasonably happy in his current situation. While, he did express some discontent over how much money he was making as a sales clerk, he was not resentful over it. He was not working at his current position because he couldn't find anything else, or because the labour market was such that nothing better was available. What it came down to was that he had a secure job, he was happy, and that was all that really mattered to him. He was secure enough in his own abilities to find other work should he need to, and his prior work history certainly demonstrated this. Since coming to Calgary he had worked at four different jobs, none of which were very high paying, but were "interesting" as he put it.

Comments: Zack

Zack, as I found out in a subsequent visit to the store, was in the process of testing to achieve the second highest ranking possible in his sport (a martial art). This was something that would put him in an elite class and would be a significant personal achievement. While it was apparent that Zack enjoyed his sport, the level at which he was “playing the game” did not come through in the original interview. Finding this information out explained a lot, as in retrospect Zack exhibited a lot of humility when I spoke with him. This kind of humility seemed typical of someone who was very confident in who they were and what their focus in life was.

The House of Many People

The “house of many people” as it is referred to by its inhabitants, is a four bedroom dwelling that is occupied by as many as seven people at one time¹¹. The house was owned by a married couple, Rich and Cindy (30 & 31), who had been together for seven years and both had degrees in outdoor recreation. Rich was working in a group home, and Cindy was working at an outdoor clothing store and was trying for a spot on a National sports team.

In an attempt to generate some extra income to pay their mortgage they decided to rent out a room in their home to a friend who needed a place to stay and “things kind of snowballed from there”. Through word of mouth and the

¹¹ While this house only had four bedrooms, it did have a very large semi-developed basement which had been partitioned off to make several sleeping areas.

close ties that are kept in the outdoor recreation community, the number of residents in the house began to grow. "We never really set out to have a house full of people, friends or friends of friends would need a place to stay for a few months and it did help with the mortgage so we figured, why not?".

The interesting thing about this arrangement were the attitudes that were held by the people that lived there. Without exception everyone that lived in the house had some interest in outdoor recreation, either personally or professionally. A common theme among residents was that they all had a strong guiding force in their lives, mainly that they doing what they were personally interested in. Financial goals were secondary to this.

Ted was 33, had lived in the house on and off for three years and had a degree in physical education. He had worked at a wide variety of manual labour type jobs over the years and never had anything that he would describe as a career.

Ted was a kyaker. This is what he lived to do and he achieved a very high level of mastery in his sport. When I met Ted, he had just returned from a job as a model/stunt-person for a Japanese ad agency. "The Malborough man on water" was how one person in the house described the job. This was a "special" job that paid a lot, \$20,000 for three weeks of "dangerous but within his ability" paddling. To Ted it represented not only a very significant financial reward, but it was also seen as a reward for many years of hard work and perseverance with little or no financial gain.

How he got the job was interesting. There were some advertising executives in town scouting for talent, and because Ted had a reputation for being both daring, and very good, he was recommended as someone that they should talk to. It was a combination of luck, Ted's reputation and skill, and his position within a social network that got him the job.

Ted's feelings on his career path:

Well I could have tried to become a teacher or something, gotten a "real" job but that's not what I want. . . I want to play, I want to have fun, life is too short. . . I got lucky for sure with the ad contract, they pay extremely well. . . for the first time in my life I have money. . . I have put a lot of time money and effort in my paddling and it paid off for me, if I didn't, if I only pursued it as a "just" a hobby I wouldn't be in the position I am now, you need to get good before anyone will pay you as a guide, or instructor or "stunt person" and nobody is going to pay you to do that, but when you do get that good then it is possible to make a living. . .

Question: So what about the long term, you can't paddle for ever?

Answer: True, I don't know for sure, I will always try and find a way to do what I want, and it is tough as you get older, but things will work out.

While Ted certainly had the money to live on his own or in less crowded circumstances, he was happy to pay the \$145 a month for his space in the basement of the house. Ted had not yet formulated any plans for his future, though he expressed a lot of relief that he didn't have to work for a while, and that he now had a portfolio which could lead to future work.

Ted was the most successful of the people living in the house, but others had encountered similar, though less lucrative, situations. Sheila, 25 for example had just gotten back from a ten day "heli-hiking" tour. She made \$150

a day and got a \$200 tip from her clients. Sheila didn't really have any one particular sport she specialized in, instead she was well-rounded in many things. She didn't have any post-secondary education, deciding after high school to "ski, climb, and hike". She had worked at a local outdoor camp for kids for the last five years during the summers, as a lift operator then ski instructor for the last six winters.

She got her last job through a friend who heard about the opening at the tour company. One of their guides had hurt themselves and they needed someone right away. Sheila called the company, faxed them her references and was told that she could have the job if she could be in Canmore the next day for orientation.

I asked what her long term plan was and she responded "well for now I am just going to keep on doing what I am doing, I don't really have a plan". She did mention that she wanted to take some courses in the winter that would both expand her knowledge skills and increase her marketability, but beyond that seemed content with the direction her life was taking.

Comments: House Of Many People

The monthly expenses for these individuals were extremely low. This was critical for people who did not have regular employment, who worked on a contract basis, or as in the case of Cindy, needed time to train. This situation allowed people to work for short periods of time and have enough savings to carry them for several months without working. When not working people would be off "doing what they wanted to do". This was also a key element of this

situation.

Gaining experience is of the utmost importance in the outdoor recreation field and the only way to gain experience is to "get out there and do it".

Developing your skills to the point where they could be potentially marketable requires a substantial investment of time, energy and resources. Neither Ted nor Sheila would be in the positions they were in had they not spent the time developing their skills, going on trips, and "playing". Here, a positive feedback loop was created. The more one does, the more one can do, and the greater the potential for generating income. Once at the income generating stage, "getting paid to play", experience increases, and one becomes even more marketable.

The interesting thing about this situation was that making money at what they did was not the intent. Their main intent was to get better at what they did and to expand their recreational skill base. Ted did not imagine that he would be paid to paddle. He did teach now and again, but that had been the extent of the income generating potential of his sport. Sheila did what she did because she enjoyed it, and while she too was achieving some financial success, she also was not in it for the money.

Related to the above were the general skill sets and credentials that these people had. Sheila for example had a high level of first aid certification, certification in water rescue, and certification as a ski instructor. Ted was certified in fast water rescue, was proficient in high angle rescue techniques, and also had a high level of first aid training. None of these skills alone are very

marketable. When combined together with individual experience however, their market potential increases.

Again networking proved to be a critical element of this situation. There were many instances of people finding work through acquaintances and contacts made at the house. With so many people sharing similar interests the networking potential was extensive. Nobody I talked to at the house was particularly worried about not being able to find some kind of work when they needed it.

The Work Shop

The "Work Shop", or "the Shop" as it was commonly referred to, was a large, (approximately 10,000 square foot) warehouse, that had been divided up into individual work areas. These booths ranged in size from 175 to 650 square feet, and at the time of my study (August 1996 to November 1996), were rented out at the rate of \$.75 to \$1.25 per square foot.

As the name implies, the Work Shop was designed as a place where people could work on their hobbies - a place for the "handy person". This I was told, was how the Shop started. It was originally intended to be rental workshop space for those that didn't have it in their homes, or for those whose projects were too big or messy for the average residence.

The current situation at the Work Shop was that it was now a small manufacturing complex, with each little stall providing a service or producing something for sale. During the months that I visited the Shop I saw everything

from miniature suits of armour, to picture frames, to golf carts, to security bars, to snow sleds being produced. At the time of my research, none of the sixteen tenants that were there were utilizing the space strictly for non commercial purposes.

During my first visit to the Shop I remember continually asking my contact if it was really true that you could do anything you wanted to there. He assured me that there were very few restrictions and that as long as you were not being blatantly dangerous, almost any sort of manufacturing process was acceptable.

I conducted my research at the Work Shop as a participant observer, gaining access to the setting through a friend (Nick) who rented space there. Nick made designer furniture out of iron, and because of this he had some very specialized equipment and skills that made him popular at the Shop. Other tenants were continually dropping by his booth to ask if he could help them with various tasks that they could not do themselves because they lacked the tools or skills. The significance of this will be expanded on later, as the co-operative relationships between the tenants at the Shop were quite important. It was Nicks popularity at the shop that facilitated my introductions to other tenants. "Oh, you're Nick's friend, I have seen you around, sure we can talk".

I had not originally intended to conduct any research at the Shop and it was only after I was well into my research that I realised that this setting presented me with an excellent research opportunity. Because of my association with Nick, I was treated more or less like any other person that worked there. I had achieved a degree of "insider" status. Deciding that I

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Most of the people that I had become acquainted with at the Shop knew that I was a graduate student studying something "like sociology". In order to fully comply with the ethical standard of full disclosure, I decided to talk with all of the people I had met at the Shop telling them about my study, and asking

permission to write about them. Surprisingly, given the amount of apprehension I experienced with other “blue collar” workers, no one objected. Out of the sixteen tenants at the Shop, I managed to speak with nine of them over a period of roughly three months.

Everyone I talked to at the Shop and most others as far as I could tell, had a business licence, or had set themselves up as a business for tax purposes.¹² Two of the tenants at the Shop were long term, having business permits with the Shop listed as their address. One was engaged in the repair of electronic devices and had fully enclosed his booth in order to keep the omnipresent dust out. The other made security fencing and had fully enclosed his space with his product. These two tenants were also the only people who worked full-time at the Shop. All of the other tenants had either full or part-time work elsewhere. The one exception to this was a retired couple that “were comfortable” and thus had no need for supplementing their incomes. They were engaged in making a certain type of vending machine “just for the fun of it”.

As mentioned, all of the tenants at the Shop were producing something for sale or providing a service. With the exception of the retired couple, all of the tenants that I spoke with indicated that generating some income from their activities was important to them. Where things varied was in the focus and importance of generating income. For some their focus was simply on

¹² By setting oneself up as a business, individuals could deduct their rental fees. While the initial capital outlay for this ranged from six-hundred to one-thousand dollars, this was recovered in tax deductions.

generating enough to cover their rent at the Shop and anything made above that was “gravy” or “pocket” money. The focus was on doing something that they and enjoyed. Generating income, while important, was not the prime focus of their endeavors. The supplementation of their incomes was however critical for four of the individuals that I spoke with.

Nick for example, had a wife and two children to support. His wife who in the past had been able to supplement the family income, was no longer able to do so. “Making ends meet” on one pay-check was “just not happening” as Nick put it. For Nick the extra four-hundred to one-thousand dollars he made at the Shop was critical in supplementing the family income.

What I make at work [his full time job] is just enough to pay all the bills, the mortgage, insurance, all that stuff . . . the money I make here gives me enough for extra stuff to able to go out for dinner, out for a few beers with the boys . . .to buy the wife something nice once and a while.

For some of the other tenants, the work they did at the Shop was critical in providing both financial and mental security.

Hank was a cabinet maker by trade and worked outside the Shop for a large home builder. He saw his space at the Shop as an “escape hatch”. Hank, when, working full time made a “good living”. He did however say that the construction industry in Calgary fluctuates wildly and is very competitive. “Things in my business are always changing . . .you can be going crazy for three months, even six, but they always die down for a bit”. When asked about finding a more stable line of work Hank laughed at me.

I like what I do and sure if I invested some money I could work as an independent, but this way I have the best of both worlds. . . I can work for someone else . . .they have to deal with all the major headaches and I just go in and do my job . . .when things slow down or I need some extra cash I can usually hustle something up and work here [the Shop]. . .if I had to I could support myself just working out of this place.

The average monthly earnings of the tenants that I spoke with were between four and eight hundred dollars a month. For those that worked full time, it was anywhere from \$1,200 to \$3,000 a month. For Hank and several others, their endeavors at the Shop provided them with not only extra income, but a sense of security as well. This security was derived from having an independent source of income - not being entirely dependent on an employer for one's earnings.

Here I should emphasize that while generating some income was important, it was how that income was generated that seemed to be the most important thing for these people. For those like Nick and Hank, generating income in a manner that they enjoyed and that was flexible enough to fit in with the rest of their lives was important.

Nick was able to work when he wanted, which was very important to him. He did say that he could have gotten a "real" part time job, but that this would have meant spending more time away from his family. As it was, Nick could come home from his full time job, have dinner and spend some time with his family until his children went to bed. After this he would go to Shop and work as late as he wanted.

The Shop housed within it some specialized equipment that could be used by everyone. This equipment enabled many tenants of the Shop to engage in manufacturing processes that might normally be beyond their means if they tried to access them independently. This in many instances, meant that they could produce a product of very high quality while keeping their production costs down. It also made the difference between producing something that looked like it was “made in someone’s basement” and something that was made “professionally”.

As mentioned earlier in this account, the co-operation amongst the tenants of the Shop was an important dimension to their success. During my visits to the Shop I sensed a very high degree of community and solidarity. If someone was having a problem, or needed help, even with simple manual labour activities, assistance was always provided.

The co-operative relations at the Shop extended beyond help with projects. Individuals at the Shop frequently talked about opportunities that existed in the local economy. One individual who had landed a “sweet deal” with the producers of a television series being filmed in Calgary was responsible for getting two others at the Shop small contracts. He would also let people know when the producers of the series were needing extras, should they be interested. This kind of information sharing and referring each other to possible contracts was commonplace.

Chapter Summary

A common theme in all of the accounts in this chapter was that the individuals described all had strong personal interests in something, and that these interests lead to economic rewards. What was interesting was the economic rewards were, to varying degrees, incidental and/or secondary to these interests. "Getting paid to play", was an expression used at the house of many people and for them was the ideal employment situation. It could also be applied to Zack, and those at the work-shop. Zack got paid to do what he loved, and those at the work-shop were generating income from their "hobbies".

A trend emerging in the New Economy is a reorientation to what work is, and what one should gain from it. "Work is not about paying rent; it's about self-fulfilment. . . .Work is not work. It's a hobby you happen to get paid for (Munk, 1998: 65). To varying degrees, this is what the people above were achieving.

Chapter Eight

Living With The Times

Introduction

In this chapter I will present the thoughts of two individuals who had some very practical and strategic orientations towards what it takes to “make it” in the New Times.

Living With Uncertainty

In an attempt to gain a better understanding of how uncertainty is perceived and managed, I sought someone out who worked in a field that had a high degree of uncertainty associated with it. The stockmarket I reasoned, would be one such field.

Joe was a trader on the Alberta Stock exchange, and while he did work for a large brokerage firm, his base salary was not very high. How he “really made money” was by “playing” the market. For Joe, uncertainty was a way of life. “In the market there is no sure thing . . . anything can happen . . . that is how people make money . . . if every stock went up there would be no market, that is what the whole thing is based on, you never know for sure what is going to happen”.

Joe was 32, and had been married for six years. His wife did not work and they had no children, nor did they have plans to have any. They owned their home and had put a lot of effort into getting a mortgage with the lowest

monthly payments possible.

Because Joe's business revolved around uncertainty he had some very pragmatic views in regards to it.

We today don't have any more or less uncertainties than in the past . . .there has always been something going on, world wars, the depression for example. .
Uncertainty brings opportunities, you just have to be able to jump on them . . .there were more millionaires made during the depression than during any other time.

In regards to job security and uncertainty regarding his economic future, Joe had the following thoughts:

There is no security. If you want real security become a farmer that way at least you can grow your own food . . .I have seen so many people lose everything . . .some can rebuild some can't . . .it depends on how much they lost. . . .I can if I have to, live off of six hundred dollars a month. If for some reason it comes to that I know I will be ok.

Joe's case was interesting because he had made economic decisions based on the premise that security was non-existent. "There is no security". In exploring this further with Joe, he was very adamant that one can not expect to find a secure situation anywhere, and that security comes from what you can do yourself, e.g. become a farmer and grow your own food. Joe's attitude was perhaps a bit harsh, though given that he worked in a profession "where anything can happen", it was understandable.

Because Joe had a sense for what can happen when things go wrong, he had taken steps to guard against "the crash". For Joe and his wife this meant creating an economic situation where they could live on very little if need be.

The claim that he could live on six hundred dollars a month seems a bit exaggerated, although it indicated that he had thought about his “bottom line” and what it would take to meet it should that become an issue.

Being Flexible

Janice was 28, single, and had a teaching degree as well as two years of athletic therapy training. She was at the time looking to find a teaching job in a major city in Western Canada, with her ultimate goal being to get enough experience to allow her to work in Australia or New Zealand. Talking with Janice was interesting because she had developed a highly adaptive and flexible stance in regards to looking for work.

She was currently working part time as a receptionist, and lived with several other people in a small apartment under conditions that “most people wouldn’t endure”. This kept her monthly expenses quite low and she saw it as a necessity. She said that a lot of people these days are not willing to make the sacrifices in order to save the resources needed to be able to capitalize on opportunities. By this she meant having money in the bank to allow her to move to where the jobs were. She was, at the time I spoke with her, able to “pick up on a moment’s notice” if she had to.

Janice had consciously decided not to maintain any romantic relationships because of her perceived need to be “as flexible as possible”, in fact she didn’t seem to think that marriage was possible given her situation. One of the most striking things she said was that “growing roots” was not even a

real option. She felt that the current economic situation just didn't allow for that. She did however see a dichotomy between developing and maintaining social contacts and being able to maintain a flexible enough stance to capitalize on opportunities wherever they may occur. At this point I did ask about her family who lived in Eastern Canada. She did keep in regular contact with them, and they were important to her, she simply had accepted that if she was going to get to do what she wanted then she would have to be prepared to move around a lot.

As with many other people, Janice had a high level of formal education but was unable to find work in her area. She was however confident in her ability to find something if things in Calgary didn't work out for her. "If worst comes to worst I will teach in Korea or Japan if I have to". She knew for sure that she could get a job in Asia, but did not feel that these jobs would take her in the direction she wanted to go. Janice wanted to be able to teach anywhere in the Commonwealth, and was directing her energies towards that goal.

She had some interesting things to say about some of the people she knew who were in similar situations. "A lot of people think that just because they have a degree they are owed something . . .it doesn't work that way . . .your future is up to you, not the university". As far as finding stable economic opportunities went she felt that "those don't exist anymore". In regards to uncertainty she said that "uncertainty brings opportunity, you just have to be able to capitalize on it".

Janice knew what she wanted and had adopted a very flexible stance so as to maximize her chances of success. She didn't see anything as being imposed on her, and was not resentful that she had not yet found a teaching job (she had been looking for six months). Janice was doing what she thought she needed to do, and her perception of a lack of stability or security in the labour market was "just the way things are. . .deal with it".

Chapter Nine

Conclusions

Introduction

In this chapter I will present a summary of my findings and discuss some conclusions that can be drawn from them. Together with this I will offer some suggestions and possible hypotheses for further research.

Social Networks

In the accounts presented, and throughout the rest of my data, networking and the use of social contacts proved to be a significant element in the economic life of an individual, or as in the case of DTI (chapter Four), a business. The use of networking and social contacts was most commonly seen in how individuals found work. This finding was not surprising given that it is estimated that 75 to 90 percent of all jobs are filled without being advertised (Drake Beam Morin, 1991: 4).

Another form of the use of social contacts that was indirectly touched on in the accounts was how familial or kinship ties were used by individuals. This most commonly involved financial assistance with educational endeavors or assistance when an individual found themselves in financial difficulty. Calling on the “bank of mom” was an idiomatic expression used to describe this type of support.

There was one particularly notable case of a young married couple who had decided that they were going to start a family. This decision involved planning a move to a small town 150 kilometres North of Calgary where both their parents lived. The couple knew that this town did not offer as many economic opportunities as Calgary, but felt this was offset by what could be gained in terms of familial assistance with their new baby.

That the use and importance of social contacts and networking was such a prevalent theme in my data is not surprising. What was surprising were the variety of ways in which these themes presented themselves and the individual's views towards their social supports.

It was not very often that an individual *directly* expressed the fact that their social network was a significant factor in their economic lives. However the few times when it was directly expressed, there were clear statements of its significance. For example, Jim, the downsized program coordinator, explicitly stated that his network was important to him, and Janice, the teacher, indicated that making social contacts was important to her as well. In one case (not presented here), an individual mentioned that the most important thing to her in maintaining job security was her strong social network. This individual also indicated that she spent a lot of time cultivating her network. In most other cases networking was apparent, but not clearly presented as being a main focus. Dan the cyclist for example, saw his connection with the cycling community as a positive thing, but did not highlight or expand on the networking potential of that community. The same holds true for those in the "house of many people". This

was a situation in which a lot of networking occurred, however the importance of that network to the individuals was again not elaborated. People would state that they obtained job referrals from social contacts, but this was not expressed as being something that they cultivated as a specific strategy.

I suggest that the reason for this was that the economic networking for these recreationalists was embedded in something else, it came about as a result of shared interests or circumstances and was a by-product of these. Unlike the CCAT or DTI's network, which were economically structured and goal orientated, the networks of "the house of many people" and Dan's cycling community were informal and had no economic agendas.

I would hypothesise that as the labour market becomes increasingly competitive, we will see an increase in the importance of social contacts and networking. In addition to this we will see different kinds of social arrangements emerge.

These changing social arrangements have already been seen in the trend for youth to leave their parental homes later than in previous generations (Zhao et al. 1995). "Researchers agree that the main reason for young adults staying at home longer with parents in recent years is the economic recession" (Zhao et al. 1995: 47). I also suggest that we will see an increase in the number of semi-formalized networks being created. "Lending circles" as reported by Mohan & Faulder (1997: C1) are one example of this. Lending circles are semi-formal networks that are being created by low-income, budding entrepreneurs. These networks are a way to access capital that would not be accessible by

traditional means. The concept is simple. The members of the group apply for a loan together and if one person defaults or misses a payment the rest are responsible for making up the difference. What is interesting about these lending circles is that the people involved had little or no prior knowledge of each other. One member of a circle was quoted as saying that she was “scared” of taking a chance on people she didn’t know well, but felt that she had no choice since the banks would not loan her the small amount of money she needed due to a lack of collateral.

The existence of these new types of mutual support communities raises several questions. What other kinds of networks and/or social arrangements are being created and how are these presenting themselves? If present economic trends continue, will one’s access to social capital become as important to economic success as one’s own abilities? Having access to a network of individuals of higher-status has proven to be a positive influence on economic success (Boxman, et al. 1991; De Graaf & Flap, 1988). The relationship between social networks and labour market polarization might warrant further study. If labour markets continue to polarize between those that work in the information economy and those that do not, as Rifkin (1995) suggests, will we also see polarizations based on one’s access to social capital?

General Perspectives

In order to gain a better perspective on how people viewed their current economic situations, and in light of the general view that individuals today are facing greater economic challenges than in the past, I asked the following question: Do you think your parents (and/or previous generations) had it easier in terms of finding work and/or making a living?

The general response was that it was easier or “better” for people in the past, though there were some notable exceptions to this. Two people gave historical examples of how things were more difficult in the past, citing examples of how the depression of the 1930's and the two World Wars of this century would have made things more uncertain or difficult. The general idea they expressed was that in relative terms, “we don't have it that bad, look at where we have been [or what others have experienced].” The idea that the past may not have held as many opportunities for women was put forward by several female high school students I spoke with. They gave examples of their mother's lives, and how they thought they were “constrained” by some of the more traditional values regarding “women's work”. In general though the perception was that the past offered more stability and better access to good jobs.

Here I suggest two things. The first relates to the concept of event horizon. The second relates to the concept of “displaced meaning” as described by McCracken (1988).

I suggest that some people focussed some of their attention on the "good old days", looking back to times when they perceived greater stability and/or prosperity in the labour market. This historical perspective then provided a comparative framework for interpreting their present situations. Many polls indicate that the current generation feels that they will be worse off than the previous one (The Economist, 1994), a case of evaluating one's current position by the criteria of past performance. This may be an example of, "displaced meaning", a concept explained thus:

Confronted with the recognition that reality is impervious to cultural ideals, a community may displace these ideals. It will remove them from daily life and transport them to another cultural universe, there to be kept within reach but out of danger. The displaced meaning strategy allows a culture to remove its ideals from harm's way. But the strategy does more than shelter cultural ideals. It also helps to give them a sort of empirical dimension. When they are transported to a distant domain, ideals are made to seem practicable realities. What is otherwise unsubstantiated and potentially improbable in the present world is now validated, somehow "proven", by its existence in another, distant one. With ideals displaced, the gap between the real and the ideal can be put down to particular, local difficulties (McCracken 1988:106).

For many people the ideal of a stable, secure job is becoming an increasingly scarce reality. Looking back to "a time when" offers some hope for possibly achieving what had been done in the past.

Security & Insecurity

As mentioned in the introduction, security and insecurity were concepts that I wished to explore. One will have noted though, that these concepts have largely been absent through the accounts presented. This is largely because they were not a prominent part of the narratives, either directly or indirectly. I, unlike Swift (1995: 36), who found that “these day's working-class people in Windsor tend to repeat the words scared, afraid, or insecure in conversation”, did not find this. People certainly expressed concerns over the uncertainties in their lives, and these uncertainties did in some cases cause feelings of insecurity or anxiety. The tone of these expressions was however not as desperate or fearful as what has been reported by others in different settings (e.g., Dalgash, 1995; Eisler, 1996; Janigan, 1997).

This lack of a prevailing mood of insecurity was evidenced in my discussions with high school students. It has been suggested that there is “a youth employment crisis afoot” (The Economist, 1994: 27) and statistical studies would tend to support this claim. In Canada the average earnings of people aged 15-24 has been in decline since 1980, and the youth unemployment rate has steadily climbed (The Daily, 1988b).

Most high school students are largely unaware of the economic and demographic realities that they will face when they leave school. Few graduates realize that if present trends continue, they can expect to earn 25 percent less in lifetime income than students who graduated 15 years ago (Campbell 1994: xiv).

Not so many years ago high school was widely seen as the end of the educational road for most Canadians. It was all that was needed to get a good job. Now conventional wisdom asserts that it is next to impossible for secondary school students to find well-paid employment, if they can find employment at all (Crompton, 1995: 8).

The high school students that I spoke with (n=17) who were all graduating at the time, did not seem to express the anxiety or concern over their futures that might be expected. The concern that they were entering a labour market that offered little rewards and opportunities was largely absent.

The lack of concern might be attributed to having little labour market experience. Empson-Warner and Krahm (1992: 39) suggest that the views of recent graduates often change on "the discovery that a satisfying job, or any job is hard to find . . . and that competition for desired jobs is more intense than originally assumed". The interesting thing about the students that I spoke with was that most did have some work experience. While a lack of significant labour market experience could partially explain their lack of concern, I feel that it is not the only explanation. Since most of the students had plans to further their educations I would agree with Empson-Warner & Krahm (1992: 43) when they say that "continuing one's education may be a way of maintaining high aspirations, in spite of knowledge and experience of a difficult labour market". This would corroborate the data that indicates a positive relationship between one's education and earning potential (Crompton 1995), and that having a high school degree is "no longer enough" to assure a good job in today's labour

market.

It would also seem plausible that some desensitizing to the issues had taken place. Being over-exposed to media messages that portray a "mood of insecurity" in the labour market, headlines that emphasize downsizing and layoffs, and being told that they can look forward to a working life with multiple careers¹³ may also have been influencing factors.

Given the small size and nature of my sample I am very hesitant to speculate on why I did not find more expressions of insecurity. I would tentatively suggest that the general "mood" in Calgary was a factor, with "cautiously optimistic" being an apt description of it at the time. The overall impression given was that Calgary was a good place to be, even by those who were having difficulty finding work. I would also speculate that Calgary's economic history might have been a factor as well. Having a history of "boom-bust" instability, it would seem plausible that the economic culture of Calgary is not as alarmed by the issues of economic insecurity as might be in other cities. Investigating this speculation through a comparative study of cities with differing economic histories would be an interesting exercise

While not often directly articulated as descriptors of an individual's current situation, the concepts of security and insecurity were discussed at a

¹³ In a recent job interview I encountered some negative feelings towards this career attitude. "I am really upset with the instructors at S.A.I.T. for telling their students that they will have 15-20 careers in their lifetime. . . At our company we don't just offer jobs we offer careers". This manager was upset because his company made it a policy to offer stable long term employment and that the transient, low commitment attitudes that he encountered did not fit well with his organizations' corporate identity.

generalized or conceptual level. For some, primarily those who were currently employed and had established what for them was a comfortable lifestyle, security meant that they would be able to continue in their current occupations without any interruptions. They wanted to be able to rely on their employers to provide them with guaranteed continuous employment for as long as it was needed. When asked “would you be happy if you knew you had lifetime employment?” most people said yes, in principle they would. For these people stability was closely tied to the uninterrupted flow of income. As one informant put it, “knowing that I will be getting a pay-check every two weeks makes me feel warm and fuzzy inside”. A stable source of income was seen by some as being the most critical element in their economic lives.

For some people the concept of stability was somewhat foreign to them. Stability in an economic sense was seen as the ability to find work when they needed it and to be able to meet their needs one way or another. For these people work was primarily a means to an end, a way of satisfying their immediate needs, or goals. Stability was closely linked to a temporal framework, “well for now I am making enough money to pay the rent, and who knows what I will be doing in six months”.

Uncertainty

There were two main views expressed regarding this concept. The first was that uncertainty was something to be guarded against and was seen as unwelcome or threatening. The second was that uncertainty was inherent in the

labour market, and life in general, and that it often brings new opportunities.

I suggest that there were two main approaches to dealing with uncertainty in an individual's economic life. Certainty can be sought after, or it can be created. The first approach is based on the traditional view of work, and what it takes to get a good job. In the traditional approach security and certainty are provided for the individual by the employer, and the way to attain that is reasonably clear. This kind of thinking was prominent in several of the narratives and was a background theme in many others. The accounts of Dan and Marie who both had university degrees, and thought that these credentials should "be good for something" in regards to accessing a good job, exemplify this way of thinking about uncertainty. They were both following a "formula", one that was successful in the past, and still has some validity today. Most graduates, according to a recent study by Fischer and O'Heron (1998) do find work, though perhaps not as quickly as they would like. The study indicates that it takes up to five years after graduating and often involves a series of short-term jobs before one finds permanent full time work (Fisher & O'Heron, 1998: 4).

A problem with this approach is that it can place one in a position of being dependent on an institution, and/or employer. Thinking that a university degree will get you a job, or that once you have a job that it will be there as long as needed, can lead to situations where an individual becomes dependent on one skill-set or employer. What happens if those skills are not needed, or if that employer, for whatever reason, can no longer provided employment?

Here I would say that this condition of being dependent on, a single external source for certainty or security is somewhat like a case of "garbage bear" adaptation. Garbage bears become dependent on one source of food and how to get it. After a while they lose their ability to find food any other way. If that food source is removed, or if barriers are put in the way, the bears become desperate. While people are more adaptable than bears, I would say that in both the cases that I presented about being downsized, there was some of this narrowing of adaptive potential taking place. Both Jim, and Deb had become passively dependant on their employers to some degrees, they had become as Jim put it "soft" - not able to "hunt" for themselves. This leads to the second view on uncertainty and security.

In the second approach, certainty and security are created by the individual instead of relying on others to do it for you. This view was clearly expressed by Janice who said ". . . your future is up to you not the university". This can involve many strategies, pursuing personal goals, networking, being self-directed and motivated. This, to a large degree, is what being self-employed is based on, and could possibly explain why self-employment is the fastest growing form of employment in the labour market today, accounting for 9.8 percent of the labour force (The Daily, 1998a: 1). People are choosing to create stability and security for themselves. "We've broken the whole mummy and daddy syndrome. Nobody is responsible for your happiness. You have to see yourself as a business. That's your job" (Morin quoted in Campbell, 1994: 347). The earnings in being self-employed may not be as stable as in a paid

job, however “when self-employed it is no longer a case of being employed or unemployed but of having temporary cash-flow crises” (Nelson quoted in Corbett, 1994: 26).

Security, I would suggest, goes beyond one’s employment situation. Few of the individuals in the “house of many people” for example, had very certain futures in an economic sense. However they were certain about what they wanted to do. This either offset any economic uncertainties, or led to situations where some economic success and security was achieved. The same could be said for Dan, the competitive cyclist. By pursuing his personal interest in cycling he maintained a connection with a social network that proved to be valuable in his finding a good job. Zack, who had a stable, but not very financially rewarding job, was secure in what he wanted to do as well, and those at the Work Shop were all pursuing something that they had a personal interest in.

Pursuing personal interests is not only a way of creating a sense of certainty and security, it is also seen as an important aspect of surviving in the New Economy. “Building work around something that excites you is not just a creative way of earning a living. In the new economy, such commitment is increasingly crucial to survival. In a competitive world, folks have to have enough passion to be really good at what they do” (Nelson quoted in Corbett, 1994: 26). This point leads me to some of the original questions I entered this project with.

Review of Objectives

I began this thesis by stating that I wanted to find out what people were attending to, or what they perceived and valued as being significant in relation to their economic lives. These questions were couched within the framework of the event horizon. While I did find out a lot about what people were attending to specifically, this did not support easy generalizations. Remembering that the event horizon represents the contextually specific boundaries of attention, and given the heterogeneous nature of my sample, extrapolating a pattern and drawing any meaningful conclusions from this proved to be unworkable.

However, I can say something about what people expressed as being significant in relation to their economic lives - namely their drives and life interests. Above generating enough income to “buy food and pay the rent” or “pay the bills”, what people primarily focused on was pursuing an economic life that had some meaning to it, or pursuing something that was meaningful to them personally, irrespective of its economic potential. For some this meant having a job that they enjoyed working at, for others it meant having something outside their jobs that was important to them, and for some it simply meant doing what they wanted to do. The largest and most common concern was about being trapped in an otherwise meaningless subsistence situation, having to work at something just for the sake of “making ends meet”.

I can also say that most people seemed to be rather tightly focused on their immediate circumstances, looking only at the immediate economic context - Calgary. There were some exceptions to this however, illustrating two

extremes. One family that I spoke with actively sought to limit their exposure to certain media sources. They did not read any form of news media, save for “a cruise through “The Sun” over coffee”, and they did not watch the news on T.V. at all. “That is too depressing, and who cares anyway”. They did not in fact even let their children watch the news, giving examples of how sometimes news reports can be “too graphic” and saying that “we don’t want our kids seeing how messed up the world is”. Towards the other extreme there was one individual who cited examples of how globalization was “all around us”. “Why do you think Wall Mart is here?” “Why do you think new cars are cheaper now than they ever have been?” This relates to another objective that I had - that of exploring how people mix proactive and reactive responses to change, and whether there was any evidence of strategic or anticipatory adaptation at an individual level.

The Role of Strategy

I found that the strategic identification of possible opportunities and influences *by itself* did not play a very significant role in people's economic lives. Where some strategic identification was present, as in the case of James, who saw communications technologies as a growth area, and Deb, who saw counselling as a growth area, it was personal interest or experience that was behind the strategic identification process. Most people when discussing the possible opportunities present in the economy, indicated an awareness of where some of the best opportunities might be. Most people did know for

example, that computers, and information technologies were major growth areas. This by itself however was not a significant factor in determining the direction an individual's economic life took, as was illustrated by Dan, who said “. . .computers are a big thing, but I hate math. . .”, identifying a possible opportunity is of little use if one has no interest in pursuing it. I would expand on this by saying that strategically identifying an opportunity or influence is of little use if it can not be acted on. This would possibly explain why most of the people I spoke with were fairly parochial in their views of their economic situations. While most people could expand on what they thought could be possible influences on their economic lives, in most cases there was little that could be done to control them, so they were not focused on, or incorporated into their economic plans.

Closing Remarks

One of the key issues explored, and something that has always been of interest to social anthropology is how people adapt to their situations - environmental, political and economic. In light of the changes that are occurring, and that will continue to occur, gaining a better understanding of how people cope with and produce change will become increasingly essential. I would agree with Barth (1997: 242) when he states that we “. . .must work on developing models of culture and economy that will allow us to analyze the interdependence of human lives, social relations and macro-systems of economy and politics.” I would also agree with him in that the starting point for

this effort is to describe individual lives. The strength in anthropology is “. . .our familiarity with the specifics of the lives and conditions of real people in the world” (Barth, 1997: 233). It is that strength that I have attempted to draw on in this exploration of the New Times.

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Appendix

The following questions were used to guide both the semi-structured and informal interviews conducted. In the semi-structured interviews where a narrative was being collected, attempts were made to obtain answers to the following questions while the individual was still recalling their work history or discussing their current situation. All of the questions were answered either indirectly or directly in the 37 interviews in which a narrative was collected.

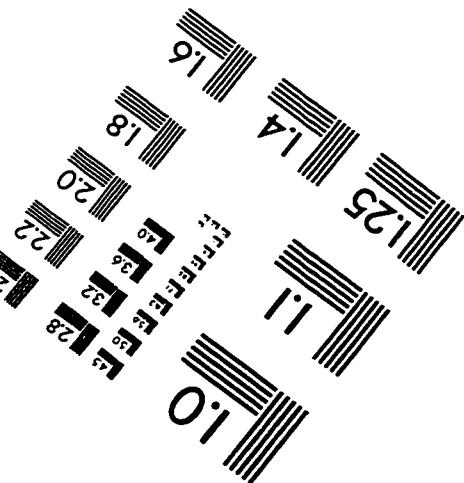
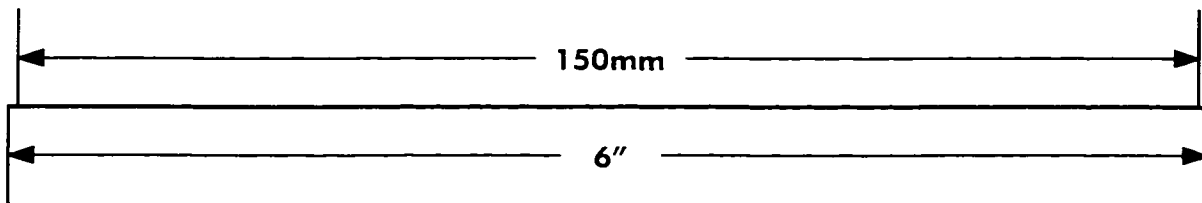
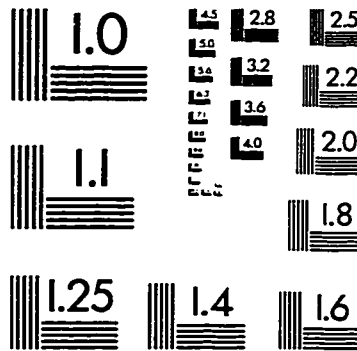
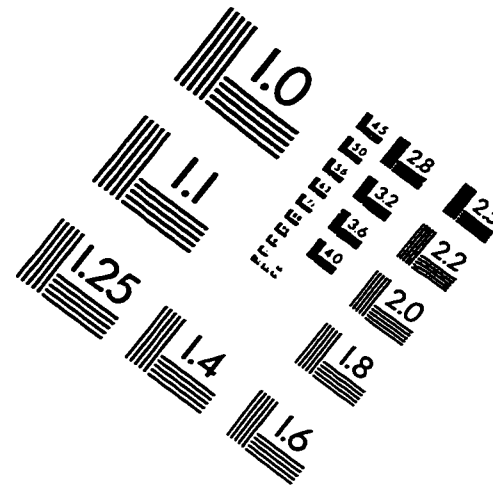
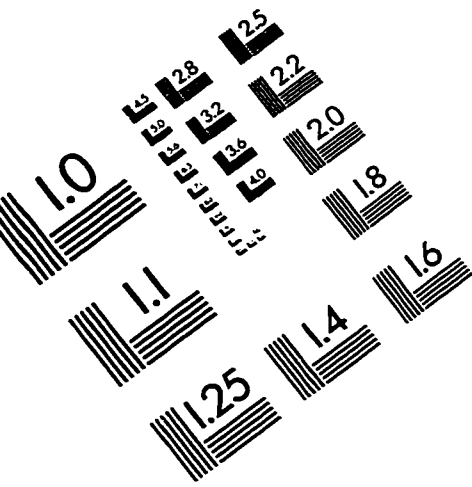
In the 23 informal interviews conducted I would use the questions as a guide, attempting to elicit answers to most of them but also being prepared to explore other issues as they were brought up by an individual.

Questions:

- 1) How did you get your current/ and or previous jobs?
- 2) Do you think it was easier for your parents and/or previous generations in terms of finding work?
- 3) Do you think your parents and/or previous generations had it easier in general? Why or why not?
- 4) Would you like to have lifetime employment?
- 5) In considering today's economic conditions, what kinds of knowledge and/or skills would you consider to be the most advantageous to have?
- 6) How well do you think your education has prepared you for the future?
- 7) What concerns you the most about your future?

- 8) What kinds of challenges do you see in your future?
- 9) What kinds of opportunities do you see available to you in your future?
- 10) How do you feel about your current/future prospects?
- 11) How would you describe Calgary's economy?
- 13) What changes have you seen in Calgary's economy?
- 14) To what degree do you think Calgary's economy is influenced by global events?

IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



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