

AAG 2011: Seattle

Working With Risk: Comparing the employment experiences of individuals who work in different sectors, industries, occupations and locations

Organizer and Chair: Brian J. Hrats - University of Toronto

As a group, geographers have contributed greatly to understanding the relationship between economic restructuring and employment risk. In particular, geographers have explored the rise of flexibilization and the ways in which specific governance structures, market dynamics and spatial organizations influence how individuals experience and mediate employment risk. To date, however, much of the community and its research output remains segregated by sub-discipline, theoretical framework, method of analysis, location, and scale. In addition, case studies are often segregated by sector, with scholars focussing on occupations and conditions associated with either manufacturing, service or creative work. As a result, there have been few opportunities for geographers to share and learn from each other and to investigate, for example, the intersections between employment in the service and cultural industries. To bridge this gap, this session aims to bring together geographers engaged in a wide range of labor-related research. The primary objective will be to jointly revisit employment risk by combining the lessons and perspectives gleaned from manufacturing, service, and creative work. Ideally, the participants will be able to identify commonalities and differences across different types of work and generate new research agendas.

Labour's response to manufactured vulnerabilities in the hospitality sector

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The hospitality sector is heralded as a growth sector generating employment in post-industrial economies. Historically structured around flexible labour markets, employment policy in the sector is largely focussed on increasing the overall supply of labour (e.g., through immigration, training initiatives) and 'manufacturing vulnerability' in the industry. The hospitality sector is vulnerable to crises and repeatedly undergoes processes of 'creative destruction' where large numbers of workers can be dislocated even in the midst of overall growth. For example, when aging hotel properties are closed, unemployed older workers do find it difficult to re-enter the labour market. This paper examines the labour market adjustment of a group of workers following the closure of a landmark hotel in Toronto in early 2005. A survey of 55 workers traced the experiences in the labour market one year after the hotel's closure and a focus group was held 5 years later a group of the workers. The findings of the research disrupt the myth that labour market adjustment (LMA) in services is fluid and painless for workers, yet there are variations in the LMA experience ranging from poverty and stress to more expedient adjustment for some workers. Older hospitality workers are especially challenged when they attempt to remain employed in the industry. The paper concludes that organized labour and the state will play an important role in countering manufactured vulnerabilities in the labour market. We conclude, however, that present state policies and even some union actions are reproducing vulnerable labour markets in the sector.

Precarious Vancouver: A comparative case-study of employment relations in the post-industrial city

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This paper will present initial findings from research on precarious employment in Vancouver, Canada. A growing and impressive body of literature has emerged over the past decade which has characterized work conditions and labour market experiences in the 'new economy' as increasingly precarious (Neilson and Rossiter, 2005; Ross, 2008; Vosko, 2000, 2006; Waite, 2009). There are two general shortcomings in this literature that this research seeks to overcome: first, the literature has employed a rather under-developed concept of 'space'; and second, the literature has tended to focus on low-end workers at the expense of exploring how precariousness has 'leaked' into higher-end professional and knowledge sectors and occupations. Through a comparison of four occupational segments in the Vancouver economy, this paper seeks to uncover how precarious employment relationships develop in different localized labour market and geographical settings and the ways in which different kinds of workers experience (and combat) precarious employment. Further, this research is interested in the different forms of labour market intermediation which shape how precarious employment relationships are established and instituted (Benner, 2003; Peck et al., 2005; Coe et al., 2010). This research, then, aims to produce a more complete picture of precarious employment at the city-regional scale and its consequences for workers of different class, gender and ethnic backgrounds.

Risky Careers: Critical reflections on talent, knowledge production and reward structures

Melanie Fasche - HafenCity University

This paper sheds light on the logics of career building in the knowledge economy by critically re-examining the notions of talent and knowledge production in terms of a reward structure. A heuristic framework is presented by drawing on research on the validation process and career building in the market of visual art. It is argued that although visual art is special in many ways, its logics of career and canon building are not so different from those of other professional worlds.

The focus is on labor markets in which a small number of individuals at the top is very well rewarded and made extremely visible to all those below. Although this reward structure is known from entertainment and professional sports, it has recently expanded into other professional worlds such as consulting, journalism, corporate management, fashion and academia. Despite rising inequalities in rewards and growing competition, occupation choices remain based on self-interest and the willingness to make costly investments – in other words: to incur considerable risks.

This paper explores strategies of mediating these risks and building careers. Here, career building and knowledge production are conceptualized as interrelated social processes around reputation building governed by institutions and a reward structure producing the kind of knowledge that specific professional worlds are noted for. Thus, the conceptualization of talent in terms of creativity and technical skill is broadened to behavioral and relational properties. Furthermore, attention is paid to the underlying politics of the production of knowledge that may ultimately be integrated into respective canons.

Revisiting Reflexivity: Exploring the common experience of employment risk among 'low skill' service and 'high skill' creative workers

Brian J. Hracz - University of Toronto

Building on Beck's 'Risk Society' (1992), Allen and Henry (1997) argue that labor market flexibilization produces 'reflexivity winners and losers.' Individuals with 'tradable skills,' including creative professionals, are said to benefit from greater autonomy and income while individuals without 'tradable skills,' including cleaners and security guards in the service sector, are condemned to risk and uncertainty. To date, however, the existence of this binary and the assumption that skills and education insulate individuals from risk remains up for debate. In fact, a growing number of studies suggest that the employment structures of so-called 'creatives' feature similar instances of contractual, spatial and temporal forms of fragmentation and risk commonly associated with low-skill/low-wage service work. Indeed, despite 'sexy' job titles, intrinsic rewards and the perception of greater autonomy, workers in cultural industries such as music, film and fashion share much in common with their counterparts in the service sector. To document some of these commonalities, this presentation draws on interviews with independent musicians and retail workers in Toronto. In particular, I explore the shared engagement with risk producing processes such as income uncertainty, individualization, performativity, multi-skilling and neoliberal modes of governmentality.