

The New World of Work and Employment: Fitness workers and what they want from the employment relationship

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an empirically based study of the Queensland (Australia) health and fitness industry over 15 years (1993-2008). This study traces the development of the new occupation of fitness instructor in a service industry which has evolved since the 1980s and is embedded in values of consumption and individualism. It is the new world of work.

The data from the 1993 study was historically significant, capturing the conditions of employment in an unregulated setting prior to the introduction of the first industrial award in that industry in 1994. Fitness workers bargained directly with employers over all aspects of the employment relationship without the constraints of industrial regulation or the presence of trade unions. The substantive outcomes of the employment relationship were a direct reflection of managerial prerogative and worker orientation and preference, and did not reflect the rewards and outcomes traditionally found in Australian workplaces. While the focus of the 1993 research was on exploring the employment relationship in a deregulated environment, an unusual phenomenon was identified: fitness workers happily trading-off what would be considered standard working conditions for the opportunity to work ('take the stage').

Since then, several streams of literature have evolved providing a new context for understanding this phenomenon in the fitness industry, including: the sociology of the body (Shilling 1993; Turner 1996); emotional (Hochschild 1984) and aesthetic labour (Warhurst et al 2000); the social relations of production and space (Lefebvre 1991; Moss 1995); body history (Helps 2007); the sociology of consumption (Saunders 1988; Baudrillard 1998; Ritzer 2004); and work identity (Du Gay 1996; Strangleman 2004). The 2008 survey instrument replicated the 1993 study but was additionally informed by the new literature. Surveys were sent to 310 commercial fitness centres and 4,800 fitness workers across Queensland.

Worker orientation appears unchanged, and industry working conditions still seem atypical despite regulation since 1994. We argue that for many fitness workers the goal is to gain access to the fitness centre economy. For this they are willing to trade-off standard conditions of employment, and exchange traditional employment rewards for more intrinsic psycho-social rewards gained through exposure of their physical capital (Bourdieu 1984) or bodily prowess to the adoration of their gazing clients. Building on the tradition of emotional labour and aesthetic labour, this study introduces the concept of **ocularcentric labour**: a state in which labour's quest for the psycho-social rewards gained from their own body image shapes the employment relationship. With ocularcentric labour the psycho-social rewards have greater value for the worker than 'hard', core conditions of employment, and are a significant factor in bargaining and outcomes, often substituting for direct earnings. The workforce profile (young, female, casual) and their expectations (psycho-social rewards of adoration and celebrity) challenge traditional trade unions in terms of what they can deliver, given the fitness workers' willingness to trade-off minimum conditions, hard-won by unions.

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the findings of surveys of the Queensland (Australia) health and fitness industry over 15 years (1993-2008). During this period, the key occupational groups of aerobics instructors, fitness counsellors, gym supervisors and exercise

physiologists were “hidden” from official sight until their incorporation in the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (ASCO) in 2003 which permitted data collection in the 2006 census. This service industry has evolved since the 1980s and is embedded in values of consumption and individualism. It is the new world of work, and the employment relationship is significantly different to that traditionally considered in industrial relations. Using literature from diverse disciplines has allowed the survey findings to be analysed from a new perspective, and to more fully explore the industrially atypical behaviour of the fitness industry.

We argue that in this new service industry employment practices respond to markets, not institutions. It is a world in which psychological dimensions of the employment relationship gain equal significance to the traditional industrial relations focus of wages and working conditions. These practices are accepted by both management and workforce without the active presence of trade unions, without industrial disputation and without real bargaining between the parties. What workers want is distinction, bringing with it psycho-social rewards of self-image, self-esteem and adoration by others, perhaps even the status of celebrity. However, this desire is dependent on gaining access to the space of the fitness centre workplace which allows them to pursue the ‘self belief in their occupation’ to effect change in people’s lives. We introduce the concept of ocularcentric labour to explain how the quest for distinction and psycho-social rewards shapes the employment relationship. The motivation and rewards for workers have shifted from production to earn wages to sustain consumption outside the workplace, to the workplace as the site of direct consumption. In such a situation trade unions are unlikely to be able to provide what fitness instructors want from their employment relationship. To explore these issues, the paper briefly outlines the methodology used and the industry context and background, before detailing our argument relating to ocularcentric labour observed in this industry and its implications for institutional industrial relations.

METHOD

The 1993 study involved two state-wide mail-out surveys. One was sent to 269 industry employers identified by various methods (see Sappey & Maconachie 2008 for details), with a response rate of 24%, while the second was sent to the total membership (500) of the Queensland Fitness and Health Association, the fitness workers’ professional association. This resulted in a response rate of 33%. Additionally, 16 interviews were conducted with fitness professionals, trade union officials, and employers’ association representatives. The two surveys were designed to cross validate employer and worker responses on the structure of the industry workforce (age, gender, qualifications, permanent full-time, part-time or casual status); standard working conditions (hours, rosters, frequency of employment, pay, other benefits, leave entitlements); standard employment practices in the industry (formal grievance procedures, performance management, disciplinary procedures, turnover rates, standards of occupational health and safety, incidence of worker injury and worker injury payments by employers). The data captured a snapshot of the industry prior to regulation in 1994.

In 2008, after preliminary interviews with industry representatives and fitness workers, the survey component of the 1993 study was replicated, incorporating additional questions to determine the primary attraction of workers to the industry and the significance of physical capital as a factor in bargaining and outcomes. The state-wide employer survey was mailed to 310 fitness centres, the total listed in the Yellow Pages Business Directory. A 16% response rate was achieved. The worker survey comprised the 4,872 total Queensland membership of Fitness Australia, and resulted in an 11% response rate. Data analysis was carried out using SPSS statistical software.

BACKGROUND AND INDUSTRY CONTEXT

Consistent with national trends, the Queensland commercial health and fitness industry has grown exponentially since the mid 1970s. Comparing 1993 and 2008 survey results provide some general characteristics of the industry showing:

- high business failure rates in a competitive industry with 65% (1993) and 74% (2008) of businesses less than 10 years old;
- the rise of a strong franchise business model with franchise respondents representing 52% (2008) of centres compared with an estimated 5% (1993). Respondents in 2008 identified this as changing their primary focus of industry regulation from government determinations to franchise obligations;
- a shortage of good staff, cited by managers as their biggest problem with 53% (2008) of the workforce with less than 5 years experience, 22% (2008) entering the industry specifically to take up a career, and only 41% (2008) of worker respondents perceiving the industry as offering a long term career;
- fitness instructors typically have multiple employers in the industry on a weekly basis (32% 2008), and their fitness industry work is secondary employment;
- an estimated annual industry labour turnover rate of 26% (2008), with the actual figure probably much higher but masked by the 65% casual labour force;
- the industrial award as the dominant tool for wage setting, albeit that employers appear to “cherry pick” conditions;
- trade union membership density of 1% (2008) while national averages are around 19% (Hannan 2008:1, 6), with only one shop steward identified (1993 and 2008), no reported forms of industrial action in 2007-08, and a shared perception by employers and workers that industrial action was unlikely;
- declining inspection rates with 16% (2008) reporting visits by a government industrial inspector in 2007-08;
- a strong core/periphery workforce model upheld by the 2006 census. The inclusion of fitness instructors in the national census for the first time in 2006 shows 2703 fitness instructors in Queensland (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006). However, 4872 are registered with Fitness Queensland indicating many fitness workers have primary employment in other industries/occupations, and thus do not record fitness employment as their “occupation” in census collection.
- a notable change since 1993 is the greater use of independent, self-employed contractors, not covered by award conditions. In 1993 the data identified the workforce as comprising a core of 17% full-time employees with a periphery of 79% casual and 3% permanent part-timers. In 2008 the workforce comprises a core of 15% full-time employees with a periphery of 68% casual, 3% permanent part-time and 14% contractors.

The implications of the industry’s growth and structure for the employment relationship are strong managerial prerogative, part-time hours and a lack of job security. A career path of sorts is available for those willing to start their own business as a contractor.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

It is significant that only 29% (1993) and 32% (2008) of employer respondents and only 3% (1993) and 5% (2008) of fitness worker respondents were attracted to the industry for financial rewards. Conversely, 40% (1993) and 34% (2008) of employer respondents and 60% (1993) and 42% (2008) of fitness worker respondents indicated that they had taken up work as a fitness centre manager or fitness instructor because they had been “*a gym user and the job appealed to them*”.

Strong managerial prerogative is evident in the industry, and extrinsic rewards and direct earnings are generally not reflective of the effort, time and cost involved in fitness instructor work. Allowances and penalties apply under the award and 25% (1993) and 73% (2008) of employers claim to pay them, but only 3% (1993) and 10% (2008) of worker respondents received allowances or penalties in their previous pay packet, and 85% (2008) of worker respondents had received no allowances in the previous 12 months. Workers are sometimes required to perform unpaid work, and 71% (1993) of worker respondents and 31% (2008) report this occurrence. While this may be

appropriate in a professional workforce, it is atypical in an industry with high casual labour levels (68% in 2008), custom and practice of multiple employers offering as little as one hour's employment per week, and a large peripheral casual workforce clearly identifying that it did not have a career with their employer. Training is an area where payment is problematic, with 43% (2008) of worker respondents indicating that attendance at training was *always compulsory*, and 75% (2008) never receiving payment for their attendance. For those workers for whom attendance was *always compulsory* 82% were casuals.

In 2008, 58% of worker respondents advised that they spent more than \$1,000 per annum on costs associated with their job (excluding training) on items such as music licences, professional indemnity insurance, music tapes, sports clothing and footwear. Additionally, 24% (2008) identified that they spent in excess of \$1,000 per annum on training costs. It was exceptional to receive any reimbursement from an employer. As one instructor stated: *"No way am I doing it for a living .. too many outgoings.. luckily I have a husband to support me otherwise I couldn't afford to live on the wages. Another stated "I love getting paid to stay fit, even though I pay out more for that privilege. Dumb hey!!"*

The physical workplace environment may be glamorous but still hazardous to workers, in two regards. First, while 93% (1993) and 98% (2008) of employers described the physical working conditions at their premises as *very good* or *good*, workers reported a range of occupational health and safety issues such as hard floors in exercise areas which could cause injury, conducting exercise classes while they were medically unfit, unsafe and/or unhygienic floor coverings and dilapidated exercise equipment which could cause injury. 21% (1993) and 30% (2008) of fitness instructor respondents identified that they had suffered an injury in the previous 12 months. One of the difficulties for fitness instructors is that many have multiple employers who are reluctant to accept responsibility for long term repetitive strain injuries, leaving the worker without Worker's Compensation benefits. Second, the fitness instructor's work environment is such that they are scantily clad, engaged in physical activity and work in a business which has as a major reason for its existence, client desire for sexual attractiveness. Fitness workers experience high rates of sexual harassment, with 63% (1993) and 26% (2008) of respondents reporting unwanted and persistent sexual advances from their employer, clients or colleagues.

It is clear that *"certainly the \$\$ is not financially rewarding"* and yet there is a large pool of labour attracted to the work. While the industry's growth could be attributed to the increased awareness amongst Australians for the need to regularly participate in physical activity prompted by public health campaigns, perhaps the greatest impetus has been the need to convey an image of "looking fit" (Australian Consumers Association 1988:8). This is consistent with the emergent literature and the fundamental premise that the body is a cultural product and not a natural phenomenon. The body's nature (shape, size and functions) are defined and shaped by the social forces and images of the popular culture in which that body exists (Gray 2005:56). With the rise of consumerism in which the body is a site for display and consumption (Budgeon 2003), exchange takes place at multiple layers within the fitness centre space based on a body valued not for its functional capabilities but its physical appearance. In the broad context of the decline in institutions, particularly religion, as a means of providing meaning (Giddens 1991), the search for meaning and control in our lives has elevated the body to the prime constituent of personal and social identity (Gray 2005:58-59; Synnott 1993:1-3; Frew & McGillivray 2005:163). Accordingly, the body is increasingly a pathway to life chances and is linked to sexual, social and employment opportunities and success (Warhurst *et al* 2000). As one instructor commented, a great body makes clients *"feel good about themselves inside and outside."*

In the workplace of the fitness centre, a positional economy is created based on the consumption patterns of those who occupy that space. Within the space of the centre, physical capital is accumulated from the fitness worker's idealized body form, and is

constructed and celebrated through ocular consumption (gazing) (Featherstone 1991). For fitness instructors, the focus of the labour process is on the generation of physical capital (both for themselves and the client) with the legitimate currency being the idealised body form. It is pursued with evangelical commitment and missionary zeal. The instructor's body becomes a walking billboard for the employer's product with ocular consumption (gazing and adoration) as the medium of exchange. As the single currency of legitimation in the fitness centre space, physical capital (Bourdieu 1984) comes to dominate the spheres of consumption (Frew & McGillivray 2005) and work (Sappey and Maconachie 2008), influencing fitness centre managements' employment practices as well as the employment needs, expectations and demands of the workforce. The distinction of physical capital can earn the worker adoration, even celebrity status, as well as sexual, social and employment opportunities and success (Warhurst et al 2000 & 2009). It also becomes a mainstream commodity and a tradable asset (Lee 1993) within the employment relationship itself, between fitness worker and employer. However, for fitness workers to transform their physical capital into psycho-social rewards they must have access to the fitness centre economy, to the stage (the fitness centre workplace) which is a production space controlled by the employer.

In 2008, workers' top two responses indicated that they were drawn to the job because it was *"not like work – it's just fun"* (39%), and because it *"makes me feel good about myself"*. Employer respondents considered their employees were drawn to the work because *"it's just fun"* (47%), followed by the benefits of flexible working hours (30%) and the feel-good factor (23%). Other significant qualitative responses from workers expressed an almost evangelical fervour and *"self-belief in the occupation"* of *"helping clients make changes in their bodies"*. A strong theme emerged of former industry clients, having worked to accumulate physical capital, then taking to "the stage" as the instructor to share their success, admired by those still aspiring and struggling to achieve the idealised body form. As one respondent put it *"I was once obese and it was through the local gym that I lost 36 kg and feel GREAT! I thought it would be a great career."* Others noted *"I'm motivated to help others feel as great as I do ... and make them smile"*, *"It has taught me how to stand up in front of people confidently and given me a positive self esteem."* The motivational theme was strong with comments such as *"I enjoy being a healthy role model and inspiring people"* and *"Every time I step on stage I feel passionate about motivating and inspiring positive change in my classes."*

The commercial fitness centre is the body's cathedral. As both the point of production and consumption it creates a positional economy offering customers with disposable income a time efficient method of exercise to generate the idealised form and foster a positive self-image. At the same time this workplace offers workers a production space in which they attract psycho-social rewards beyond their established conditions of employment. As one fitness instructor said: *"It doesn't really feel like 'work' – I have so much fun."* It is reasonable to assume that the primary attraction of the job is an individualised, intrinsic reward of a positive emotional self image gained from the ocular consumption of their body image by an admiring clientele and stimulated by chemically induced exhilaration during exercise. As one aerobics instructor stated: *"I get personal satisfaction physically and mentally after instructing I love the music."* Others stated *"I really enjoy the buzz that you get"*, *"I love watching people enjoy my classes"*, *"The music and moves makes me feel good"* and *"It's my release."* Exhibitionism, genuine commitment to the higher ideal of health and well being, plus endorphins provide a heady cocktail of motivations to work. Being an instructor in this *"fun industry"* is their *"goal and dream"*. *"It's an extension of myself."*

They *"just love it"* – and are *"fitness fanatic(s)"*, *"addicted to exercise and fitness"*. In keeping with the "fun" and "feel good" culture of the fitness centre workplace, employers and workers (1993 and 2008) identified that they offered/received free gym membership for employees, and in some instances also for their families, cash bonuses based on performance, free clothing/sporting goods (other than uniforms), social functions such as dinners, free workplace childcare, and holiday weekends away for the employee and their partner at beachside resorts. For the most part, these are

rewards grounded in and reinforcing a “fun” and “feel good” lifestyle. It fits in with their attraction to the industry to “*make friends and have fun*” in a “*fun environment with positive people.*”

In seeking to understand the employment relationship in the commercial health and fitness industry in Queensland, we argue that a new type of labour has been created. Building on the tradition of emotional labour and aesthetic labour, this study introduces the concept of **ocularcentric labour** - a state in which labour's quest for the psycho-social rewards gained from their own body image as reflected in the gazing adoration of employers and clients (physical capital), shapes the employment relationship. The psycho-social rewards have greater value for the worker than 'hard', core conditions of employment, often substituting for direct earnings. As one worker said “*You don't do this for money.*” Both emotional and aesthetic labour are associated with employer strategies to appropriate employee attributes for organisational profit. With emotional labour, the employer seeks to appropriate employees' feelings to affect customers (Warhurst et al 2009:132) creating an outpouring of suitably crafted emotions from the worker, while with aesthetic labour employers attempt to organize and control employees' corporeality, so they become the “physical embodiment of the corporate image and ‘personality,’” (Warhurst et al 2009:133) This corporeal control requires an outpouring of suitably crafted emotions and appearance. While sharing elements with emotional and aesthetic labour, ocularcentric labour differs from them in several significant ways: the worker wholeheartedly engages in the commercial use of their attributes; the exchange between workers and customers is two-way in nature rather than solely an outpouring from the worker, who gains intrinsically; the workplace is also the direct site of consumption. Ocularcentric labour goes beyond emotional and aesthetic labour concepts. It is characterised by: (a) a workplace culture with strong, pervasive values of consumption, individualism and lifestyle which generate a perception of work as ‘fun’; (b) an orientation to work based on missionary-like zeal and a self-belief in the occupation; and (c) labour's elevation of psycho-social rewards as the outcome sought from employment rather than traditional trade union goals of improved working conditions.

The implications of ocularcentric labour for institutional IR are significant. In redefining what they want from work, fitness instructors challenge the purpose of trade unions, and question their ability to deliver meaningful outcomes to them. They do not seek the traditional rewards of high wages, career path, job security and good working conditions that have traditionally been the focus of trade unions. In the postional economy of the fitness centre, physical capital and psycho-social rewards lead to differentiation not social solidarity (Baudrillard 1998). The workforce profile (young, female, casual) and their expectations (psycho-social rewards of adoration and celebrity) create difficulties for unions: not only may they be unable to deliver what is wanted, but they may be unwilling to provide what these workers want, given workers' willingness to trade-off minimum conditions, hard-won by unions.

With the conceptual framework now available to us from Bourdieu (1984), the fitness instructors' stated motivations can be interpreted as indicators of the significant value of physical capital, as a substitute for direct earnings. The quest for physical capital and the intrinsic psycho-social rewards ensuing override instructors' concerns for equity in employment outcomes. We have called this phenomenon ocularcentric labour. While the business of fitness occurs within an institutional industrial relations framework, the phenomenon of ocularcentric labour side-steps the traditional focus of the IR system on working conditions as the basis of reward. The traditional industrial relations actors (Queensland Industrial Relations Commission, employer associations, trade unions, the State) are still present, but the focus of fitness centre employers is on new, flexible employment practices which support their business strategies in a competitive marketplace. The focus of fitness instructors is on the psycho-social dimensions of work from which they will gain status and self-esteem. Together, they act in unison to create a new dimension in the world of work. We do not claim that this orientation to

work is the exemplar, rather, that it stands as an anomaly which current theory cannot explain. The significance of the anomaly is that its exploration adds value to existing theory rather than rejecting theory outright. Only time will tell if the anomaly becomes the exemplar. At this time it simply provides a snapshot into one possible dimension of the new world of work.

It is a world in which new service industries arise and shape themselves and their employment practices in response to markets, not institutions. It is a world in which there is less employment security, limited long term career prospects, and strong managerial prerogative which structures the industry according to its business strategies rather than regulatory frameworks. It is a world in which psychological dimensions enter the employment relationship with significance equal to the traditional institutional IR focus on pay and working conditions. These practices are accepted by management and workforce without the active presence of trade unions, without industrial dispute and without real bargaining between the parties. What management wants is strong managerial prerogative to create new, flexible employment practices. What workers want is distinction, bringing with it psycho-social rewards of self-image, self-esteem and the adoration of others, perhaps even to the status of celebrity. However, physical capital only has currency in the positional economy of the fitness centre space. Its value to the individual is dependent on the common values and the consumption patterns of those who share that space. What workers want is access to the space that is the fitness centre workplace, a space in which their greatest asset, physical capital, has greatest value and in which they can pursue the "self belief in their occupation" to effect change in people's lives. What fitness instructors want from work, trade unions cannot provide. This study suggests that in some occupations, work rather than pay and conditions are at the core of industrial relations. In the employment exchange, the motivation and rewards for workers have shifted from production to earn wages to sustain indirect consumption outside the workplace, to the workplace as the site of direct consumption. It is the new world of work.

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