

Bauman's "sensation gatherers" and the Significance of Work Today: Three Australian Case Studies

Dr Sara James

La Trobe University

s.james@latrobe.edu.au

(03) 9479 2294

Keywords: Work, meaning, vocation, consumption, career fragmentation

Word count (including abstract and references): 2996

Abstract

In the context of increased rationalization, the fragmentation of careers, work intensification and precarious employment, it has been argued that work is becoming less significant in the lives of contemporary individuals. Zygmunt Bauman suggests that work today is something we consume. He describes workers as "sensation gatherers" who will leave a job once it is no longer exciting. Using three case studies of contemporary workers this paper explores whether Bauman's description is accurate. It argues that while he may be correct about an increased willingness to change jobs, it is not the case that contemporary individuals judge their work purely on its ability to deliver novel sensations. The case studies are drawn from a qualitative study of Australian workers conducted in Melbourne between 2007 and 2009.

Bauman's "sensation gatherers" and the Significance of Work Today: Three Australian Case Studies

Introduction

This paper explores Zygmunt Bauman's argument that in a context of precarious employment and fragmented careers, work today is simply something we consume. Using three case studies drawn from in-depth interviews with Australian workers, it considers whether these individuals fit Bauman's description of the "post modern sensation gatherers" who pursue novel stimulation and will leave a job as soon as it is no longer exciting.

Bauman on Contemporary Work and Consumption

In Australia in the twentieth century, many factors transformed working lives: new technology, increased rationalization, the entry of women en masse into the workforce, the end of the breadwinner wage, the introduction of Sunday trading, the casualization of jobs and the fragmentation of careers. Changes like these, part of the broader shift to a rationalized, global and consumer-driven economy have altered the way contemporary individuals live and work. Such transformations have prompted arguments that work may not be as central as it once was and that individuals may be looking to other areas of life to provide fulfilment and a sense of purpose.

Zygmunt Bauman suggests that in the contemporary West the role of work in the lives of individuals has become less significant and that consumption has become the central defining activity. He compares the contemporary worker of post-industrial, late modernity to the individual at work in the classic era of modern industrial society. In contrast to today's "consumer society," where an individual's significance is dependent largely on his or her

purchasing power, in this earlier period, for men at least, society placed the most emphasis on a person's role as a worker (Bauman 1998: 23). What the individual did for a living was their primary identification, not their purchasing power. The type of work a person pursued was "the decisive, pivotal classification from which everything else relevant to living among others followed" (Bauman 1998: 17). Occupation was the main factor in determining an individual's social placement, expected standard of living, leisure activities and social life. Work was also the key factor in self-assessment; value and success were measured against career achievements. With a career plotted out, the individual had a secure "orientation point" (Bauman 1998: 17) from which other life pursuits could be predictably planned and ordered. Men knew who they were and where they were going. Work gave "shape to the formless and duration to the transient" (Bauman 2000: 136). Secure in their role as the family breadwinner, for the men of this era work was absolutely central to identity (Bauman 1998: 17).

Much of this security, Bauman suggests, has been broken down, replaced by "flexibility" (Bauman 1998: 27). Instead of settling into a position and over the next forty years slowly progressing up the ladder, the norm nowadays is to have many different jobs, with a variety of companies, in a range of fields. In this climate, "the prospect of constructing a lifelong identity on the foundation of work is for the great majority of people ... dead and buried" (Bauman 1998: 27). Instead of planning ahead, the contemporary worker is now urged to remain open, "constantly on alert, permanently capable of appreciating the chance when it comes and doing whatever is needed to make the best of it" (Bauman 1998: 32). Ossification becomes a danger; it is unwise for the individual to become too attached to any position. Instead, each role should be assumed to be temporary. Individuals today, Bauman argues, have a short-term rather than a long-term mentality: for "In a life ruled by the precept of flexibility, life strategies and plans can be but short-term" (Bauman 2000:137-138). Marriages of the "till death do us part" type have become rare, replaced by "until further

notice” arrangements (Bauman 2001: 23). When working life becomes “saturated by uncertainty” in this way, the individual may not identify strongly with their job (Bauman 2001: 24). It may simply become a temporary role rather than a central component of one’s sense of self. When work can no longer provide a “secure axis around which to wrap and fix self-definitions, identities and life-projects”, individuals may look to other areas for definition, in particular to consumption (Bauman 2000: 39).

According to Bauman, individuals in a consumer society are best described as “experience-collectors” (Bauman 1998: 34). They become caught up in a constant search for stimulation: since, “The excitement of the new and the unprecedented sensation is the name of the consumer game” (Bauman 1998: 25). Work is judged by its ability to fulfil this desire, to provide novel and exciting experiences. If a job does not deliver the necessary stimulation, individuals will move on in an attempt to satisfy their “greed for ever new experience, always stronger and deeper than before” (Bauman 2001: 225). As Max Weber put it, modern man is easily caught up in this “ubiquitous chase for ‘experience’” (Weber 1991: 149). Po Bronson, interviewing Americans in the early 2000s about their search for meaningful work, was stuck by the prominence of this desire for novel sensation. Many of the people he interviewed were looking for work that would provide a “quick rush”; they were trying to find a “twenty-four-hour-a-day high” (2002: 46).

Today’s ideal, Bauman argues, is for the dividing line between work and leisure to be broken down, for work itself to become entertainment. Workaholics, he suggests, those who find their occupation so enthralling that it is the central component of their life, are not seen as slaves: they are the lucky ones: “*Vocation* has become the privilege of the few ... a way of life the rest may watch in awe, admire and contemplate from a distance.” (Bauman 1998: 34).

For the majority, Bauman warns, vocation should only be admired not emulated, since “the flexible labour market’ neither offers nor permits commitment and dedication to any currently performed occupation” (Bauman 1998: 34). In today’s uncertainty “embracing one’s work as a vocation carries enormous risks and is a recipe for psychological and emotional disaster” (Bauman 1998: 35). Vocation in the consumer society, Bauman concludes, can no longer be a lifetime commitment to a calling. It cannot be long-term, but just another “experience in the life of post-modern sensation gatherers, an episode” (Bauman 1998: 36).

Three Case Studies

The following discussion uses three case studies to explore Bauman’s portrait of the contemporary worker. The case studies are drawn from a qualitative study of Australian workers in a range of occupations. The study focused on the question of whether work is becoming less significant in the lives of individuals in the contemporary West? It was largely based on in-depth interviews with twenty-two individuals in Melbourne between 2007 and 2009. Participants were recruited via social networks and snowball sampling. The three interviewees described here are those that fit best with Bauman’s idea of the “experience collector”, however there were a number of others who exhibited similar traits. All three are tertiary educated men in their late twenties to early thirties. Thus, it is important to emphasise that these case studies only explore one very particular type of worker. While it is tempting to make claims about patterns related to class, gender, and age, the evidence is not sufficient to support it since unskilled workers, women and older people in the study also expressed similar sentiments (including a 42 year-old mother of three working in retail). Nevertheless, it is fair to say that it was the younger males who most strongly echoed Bauman’s descriptions.

On the surface, these three interviewees seem to exemplify Bauman's postmodern "sensation gatherer". It was important to each of them that their work excite them and although they currently enjoyed their jobs, if this enthusiasm waned they would move onto something else. Shane, a twenty-nine year old real estate agent, found a thrill in chasing sales. Phillip, a thirty year-old research manager, got a "buzz" from working to tight deadlines. And Luke, a twenty-eight year old paramedic, lived for the "spark" he felt when responding to emergencies.

It would be easy to dismiss Shane, Luke and Phillip as mere adrenaline junkies. Each worked in a job that required them to work quickly and to perform under pressure. Their skills were frequently put to the test. Instead of causing anxiety, this gave them a "buzz": a combination of the surge of adrenaline experienced when faced with a challenge and the high that followed when it was met. It was crucial that the tasks they were set seem urgent, since it was this sense of exigency that kept the "buzz" alive. Shane was "inspired" by being constantly busy and found quiet periods "flattening". Phillip "thrived" on deadlines being pushed forward and Luke eagerly anticipated attending an emergency.

For Shane and Luke it was important that they encounter drama in their work, that they could feel "ups and downs". They were attracted to what they both called "passion" and contrasted their own work with the perceived banality of other occupations. At the time of the interviews, Shane's job was providing him with the required amount of stimulation but he did not rule out the prospect of a new venture, which would be something "exciting and vibrant." Luke was starting to become bored with his work and was already looking toward a career change, hoping to find new challenges that would keep him "fresh". And although Phillip was content in his role as a research manager, once he was no longer learning new things, he would be ready to move on. For each of these interviewees, their commitment to their work would only last as long as it was generating novel and stimulating experiences. As Shane put

it, if you were not “getting excited” what was the point? This would seem to offer support to Bauman’s argument that contemporary individuals judge work, like any other consumer object, primarily by its “capacity to generate pleasurable experiences” (1998: 32).

However, as the interviewees spoke in more depth of the importance of work in their life, it became clear that it was not just the pleasure of experiencing new sensations that made their jobs fulfilling. For instance, although Shane claimed that his job was “all about fun” it actually provided him with much more than entertainment. He had discovered in his youth, while working in a pub, that “partying” was not enough to sustain him. The problem with being a “playboy” was that it did not allow him to accomplish anything significant. Working as a real estate agent however allowed him, as he put it, to be a “hero”. This was an arena where he could use his particular talents to achieve success, where others would have failed. Sales came “naturally” to Shane, unlike other work he had tried it was “actually” him. His job was his chance to find glory, to have his picture in the paper, to collect a “Bible of testimonials”: to do something that he would be remembered for.

There were moments when he was pitching a sale that Shane felt something inside him “ignite”. When he was “on fire” he could pre-empt a buyer’s every question and was ready with the perfect answer knowing he had them in the palm of his hand. As Shane explained, this was the real estate equivalent of hitting a home run. Similarly, as Phillip began to “master” his job he had moments when he was “in the zone”. When the outcome of a call was crucial, Phillip knew that he could “manipulate” the conversation, that he could “push” just enough to get the person to agree to interview. Like a player in form, Phillip felt himself “relax”; he forgot the rules and let himself work intuitively, operating on “auto-pilot”. As John Carroll argues, work and sport are “closely allied” in the cultural forms of the modern West. Both work and sport provide individuals with the opportunity to reach a transcendent state, where they “lose themselves” to the rhythms of the task or the play (2008: 38 - 42).

Similarly, James Knight, who interviewed Australian emergency services workers, found that a number of them discussed being “in the zone” and described how at these times their actions become “automatic” (Knight 2006: 48 - 62). For instance, a fire-fighter compared putting out a big fire to playing in a football final. In these decisive moments, the individual can reach another level, whether it be on the sporting ground or in the office.

For Phillip, success at work had been a great “booster” to his self-esteem. Like Shane, it was important that he received recognition for his efforts. He felt that his contribution to the company was vital; he was responsible for his team members, and took pride in the fact that he was “noticeably missed” if he was absent. His work also provided an important source of social inclusion and Phillip thought that it would be difficult to leave the many “friends” he had made in his job. In colloquial terms, it seemed as though Phillip’s work had been “the making of him.” After high school he had been lost, drifting from travel to study with no real goal, but working as a research manager had given him both a sense of purpose and a feeling of belonging. It was not surprising, since it was what made him “happy” that Phillip had made work his main priority in life.

Luke’s position was different. While his work had once been his great “passion” it was starting lose its significance. Unlike Shane and Phillip, Luke was not looking for recognition; he was not concerned that he was rarely commended by his superiors and had begun to find the attention that his uniform inspired annoying. He felt disingenuous accepting praise from the public, since they did not have an accurate understanding of what his job involved. Luke had initially been disappointed that the job was not all “lights and sirens” but he also saw the importance of providing patient care even if it was not exciting. His dissatisfaction was not simply a case of the novelty wearing off. The real problem was that changes to the ambulance service meant Luke spent more time on what, to him, was meaningless work: filling in paperwork, trying to improve response times and playing taxi to patients who had sore

throats. While Shane and Phillip still believed that their work mattered, Luke was no longer convinced, and this, he had found, was killing his “buzz”.

Conclusion

While each of these three interviewees described their work in a way that fits very well with Bauman’s depiction of “sensation gatherers”, it is also clearly not the case that they judge the significance of their work only by its capacity to provide novelty and excitement. For Shane, it was the recognition his work in real-estate brought him that was important, along with the opportunity to create something he would be remembered for. For Phillip, it was the social inclusion he experienced at work that made it a significant part of his life, since, in his job as a research manager, he was a valued member of the team. And for Luke, the paramedic, it was doing something that mattered (saving lives) that brought him satisfaction, without this the lights and sirens meant nothing.

These three individuals were fortunate enough to have who found meaningful work, which as Bauman points out, is increasingly difficult in an era characterised by flexibility and uncertainty. It is because they are able to make a contribution, to do something they think is important, that they enjoy their work so much, not just that it delivers stimulating experiences. However, this only became evident after lengthy discussion. Initially, the language they used to describe their work and the fact that they would leave the job if it was no longer enjoyable, made it appear that what they were merely pursuing pleasurable experiences. Conforming to the norms of hegemonic Australian masculinity, when asked what they liked about their work they responded by stressing that it was exciting, difficult, fast-paced and addictive, and often used sporting metaphors. They gave answers that they deemed culturally appropriate and in doing so described themselves as avid “sensation gatherers.”

Thus, it seems that Bauman's portrait of the contemporary worker as "experience collector" does not necessarily describe the actual experience of individuals, but is an accurate reading of an ideal type of post modern consumer culture. However, as much as we might try to approach work as an object of consumption, for many it still plays too significant part in creating a meaningful life for it to be taken so lightly.

References

- Bauman, Z. (1998) *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Bauman, Z. (2000) *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bauman, Z. (2001) *The Individualized Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bronson, P. (2002) *What Should I Do With My Life?* New York: Random House.
- Carroll, J. (2008) *Ego and Soul: The Modern West in Search of Meaning*. Carlton: Scribe.
- Knight, J. (2006) *Just Doing My Job- Cops, Firies and Ambos: Everyday Australians with Extraordinary Stories*. Sydney: Hachette.
- Weber, M. (1991) 'Science as a Vocation', pp. 129 – 156 in H.Gerth and C Mills (eds) *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*. London: Routledge.