The Lived Experience of Job Loss: Consequences for Health and Well-being and Implications for Social Policy

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Summary

This thesis is a case study of job loss in an Australian state with historical dependence on manufacturing industry. The overall aim is to describe and explain the consequences of job loss for the health and well-being of South Australian automotive workers who were retrenched as part of industry restructuring. The job loss occurred as a result of the downsizing and partial closure of Mitsubishi Motors' South Australian plant in 2004 and 2005 when over 1000 workers lost their employment. The study situates workers' experiences within the historical context of the broader Australian policy environment, and uses its findings to identify implications for Australian social policy in the 21st century.

This thesis adopts a critical theoretical approach, with an agency and structure perspective informed by the revival of interest in human agency in social policy and welfare research in recent decades. The study comprises two stages. The first stage includes two waves of 33 in-depth semi-structured interviews which capture the personal accounts of retrenched workers. The second stage utilises policy and other documents to present the values, views, and policy intentions of several key policy actors in the Howard Coalition Federal Government in a thematic analysis of welfare conditionality. A key finding from the first research stage was the severe consequences of job loss for workers' mental health. Another key finding was that formal supports were constrained by the structures of a neoliberal policy environment; in particular welfare-to-work policy. Other findings include a more precarious employment environment than the Mitsubishi workplace, with reduced income, poorer working conditions, and heightened insecurity. Main findings from the second research stage were that the neoliberal values informing policy actors' intentions underpinned welfare-to-work policies that were arguably harsh and judgemental. These reflected negative assumptions concerning welfare dependency and welfare recipients' motivation and agency; assumptions that contrast with the agency and resilience often displayed by the retrenched workers. Study findings reveal a dichotomy between the needs of retrenched workers and the values and intentions underpinning neoliberal policy. Theorising this dichotomy highlighted policy implications, with a range of enabling values and concepts outlined to inform more protective Australian social policy for the 21st century.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Julia Anaf

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