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The Professionalisation of Computing Work in New Zealand, 1960 to 2010: A Feminist Analysis

Alison Adele Hunter

Abstract

This thesis examines professionalisation activities within New Zealand’s computing industry over the period 1960 to 2010, and argues that these constitute a professional project involving a range of neo-Weberian occupational closure strategies. It also considers gender issues in the industry and women’s exclusion from the professional project.

The thesis first offers a contingent model which characterises the industry and locates the professionalising body, the New Zealand Computer Society. It then proceeds diachronically, presenting qualitative data sourced from 44 interviews with computing practitioners and other key stakeholders (altogether 17 female and 27 male participants) and from a range of archival records. An autobiographical preface and two personal vignettes reveal the personal lens which underpins my research.

The thesis identifies and refutes the two main arguments used to support professional claims; that professionalism will (1) engender the trustworthiness required of the computing industry, and (2) reduce the shortage of practitioners by raising the status of computing work. In contrast I argue that the claims comprise a professionalisation project which, by incorporating a range of dual closure activities, will reduce the number of practitioners and fail to ensure trustworthiness.

I conclude that the professional claims will not be easily legitimated in any of the stakeholder arenas, due to a lack of interest in professionalisation amongst most computing workers, the impersonal nature of computing work, and government reluctance to legislate for a computing profession. I argue that control of computing work, another prerequisite for successful professionalisation, will also not be achieved due to inhibiting factors such as uncertainty surrounding the body of knowledge, the diversity of computing education, amateurism within the industry, and globalisation of computing work.

The data concerning the experiences of women working in computing careers in New Zealand reveal significant horizontal and vertical gender segregation in computing occupations and marked discriminatory practices within the industry. Women are rarely involved in the activities of the professional body. I conclude that women participate in the industry in an “outsider-within social location”, and that this marginalisation extends to the professionalisation project. Women cope with their marginalisation by various mechanisms but very few openly resist their situation or seek to bring about change.
Acknowledgements

I am most grateful to my supervisors Dr Bruce Curtis and Dr Steve Matthewman for their part in awakening my “sociological imagination”. Thank you for enriching my world in this manner. And not least, thank you for the personal encouragement and academic support provided with such good humour throughout my PhD journey.

Thank you also to the University of Auckland for the financial support which made this research possible and which allowed me to present some of my research findings at conferences in New Zealand and Portugal.

Special thanks to Beryl for showing me the way and demonstrating that women are indeed superb at multitasking. As this research has shown, your successes in a male dominated field are truly admirable. Your constant encouragement and interest in my work was much appreciated.

Thank you to the Manukau Institute of Technology for allowing me time release from teaching to pursue this research and to present papers at SAANZ conferences in 2007, 2008, and 2009. I also wish to acknowledge the support of my colleagues during my PhD study, in particular Dr Daud Ahmed, Jim Cater, Mike Lopez, and Abdul Ali.

I also wish to thank my research participants for their time and willingness to share their thoughts and experiences with me. Fitting my requests into your busy work schedules was most generous. Staff at the Alexander Turnbull Library were also most helpful and generous with their time.

To my special people, Ian, Adrien, and Francis, thank you for your acceptance of my ambition to undertake this research and your unwavering confidence in me. Thank you for allowing me space, even when it caused considerable inconvenience to yourselves. Ian, you inspired me in so many ways. He tangata kaha, ki te manaaki ia ahau i nga wa katoa, tino arohanui.
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