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**AT THE COALFACE:
IDENTITY IMPLICATIONS OF PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL
AT AN UNDERGROUND COAL MINE**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

PETER McLEAN, BA, B BUS (MGMT), M COMM (HRM)

SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING

OCTOBER 2008

Thesis Certification

CERTIFICATION

I, Peter McLean, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the School of Management and Marketing, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Peter McLean

24 October 2008

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Publications in support of this thesis

McLean, P. D. (2005). 'It's not grading – it's degrading!' Employee responses to an orthodox HRM intervention at an Illawarra coal mine. *Higher Degree Research Student Conference*, University of Wollongong, 29 September 2005, p. 65. [Faculty of Commerce Best Paper Award]

McLean, P. D. and Reveley, J. (2005). HRM at the coalface: Employee responses to performance appraisal at an underground coalmine, in D. Davies, G. Fisher & R. Hughes (Eds), *Proceedings of the 19th ANZAM Conference: Engaging the Multiple Contexts of Management: convergence and divergence of management theory and practice*, Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management (ANZAM), Canberra, Australia, pp. 1-13.

McLean, P. D. (2006). Performance rating: From insulted dignity to resistance and retaliation. *Higher Degree Student Research Conference*, University of Wollongong, 27 September 2006, p.56. [Faculty of Commerce Best Paper Award]

McLean, P. D. (2006). The insulted worker thesis: Seven 'deadly diseases' of performance rating, in J. Kennedy & L. Di Milia (eds), *Proceedings of the 20th Annual Conference of the Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management: Management, Pragmatism, Philosophy, Priorities*, ANZAM, Lindfield, NSW, pp. 51.

McLean, P. D. and Reveley, J. (2006). 'That's insulting!' Coal miners' dissonance tropes in response to performance appraisal. In A. Beverungen, N. Ellis, T. Keenoy, C. Oswick, I. Sabelis & S. Ybema (eds), *The 7th International Conference on Organizational Discourse: Identity, Ideology and Idiosyncrasy*, KMCP, Leicester, UK, pp. 1-25.

McLean, P. D. (2008). Transgressing coal miners' identities: Power effects of appraisal as a workplace transformation strategy. In T. Keenoy, C. Oswick, I. Sabelis & S. Ybema (Eds), *The 8th International Conference on Organizational Discourse: Translations, Transformations and Transgressions*, KMCP, Leicester, UK, pp 1-33.

McLean, P. D. and Reveley, J. (2008). Upsetting coal miners: managerial concepts of performance appraisal as a strategy for changing miners' work practices. *Paper presented at the 24th Colloquium of the European Group for Organization Studies Conference*, Vrije University, Amsterdam. [Nominated from Sub-theme 37 for EGOS Best Student Paper Award].

Reveley, J. and McLean, P. D. (2004). Rhetorics of division: Miners' narrative sense of 'self' and 'other' during performance appraisal at an underground coalmine, *Proceedings of Standing 22nd Conference on Organizational Symbolism, SCOOS*, Halifax, Nova Scotia, pp. 2-44.

Reveley, J. and McLean, P. D. (2008). Rating Tales: An Evaluation of Divergent Views of Occupational Identification, *Management and Organizational History*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 127-145.

Abstract

At the Coalface:

Identity implications of performance appraisal at an underground coal mine

This thesis examines the reasons for negative employee responses to performance appraisal at an underground coal mine in Australia. Through analysis of processes of identity construction and defence among coal miners, the thesis advances understanding of how blue-collar employees react to receiving comparative performance ratings. Using an extended case study method over a five year period, the fieldwork investigated the discursive resources that miners used to make sense of this orthodox human resource management practice. By combining insights from critical discourse analysis and critical management studies approaches, the thesis analyses the effects of appraisal upon miners' occupational identity and provides empirical evidence of the inventive powers of such workers to prise open spaces for workplace resistance through identity (re)construction processes. A synthesis of conceptual frameworks pertaining to performance appraisal, discursive concepts, subjects and objects, and identity regulation and identity work, provides a more comprehensive understanding of employee responses to managerial initiatives such as performance appraisal. Miners used a palette of discursive resources, including storytelling and dissonance tropes to make sense of, and subvert, the negative effects of individuating performance appraisals on their occupational identity. The thesis questions the power neutral assumptions of mainstream human resource management practice, and suggests that managers who ignore the subjective effects of disciplining technologies such as appraisal may experience unintended consequences as workers resist identity disruptions in the workplace.