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Looking through the Haze of Discontent: Smokers as a Data Source

(Published in K. Townsend and J. Burgess, *Method in the Madness: Research stories you won't read in a textbook*, Chandos Publishing.

Introduction

In the case of industrial relations research, particularly that which sets out to examine practices within workplaces, the best way to study this real-life context is to work for the organisation. Studies conducted by researchers working within the organisation comprise some of the (broad) field's classic research (cf. Roy, 1954; Burawoy, 1979).

Participant and non-participant ethnographic research provides an opportunity to investigate workplace behaviour beyond the scope of workplace questionnaires and interviews. However, we suggest that the data collected outside a workplace can be just as important as the data collected inside the organisation's walls. In recent years, the introduction of anti-smoking legislation in Australia has meant that people who smoke cigarettes are no longer allowed to do so inside buildings. This means that smokers are forced outside to engage in their habit. Not only are smokers forced outside, but they are forced to smoke prescribed distances from doorways, or in some workplaces outside the property line. This paper considers the importance of cigarette smoking employees in ethnographic research. Through data collected across three separate research projects, this paper argues that smokers, as social outcasts in the workplace, can provide a wealth of important research data.

We suggest that smokers also appear more likely to provide stories that contradict the 'management' or 'organisational' position. Thus within the haze of smoke, researchers can also uncover a level of discontent with the 'corporate line' presented inside the workplace. There are several aspects to the increased propensity of smokers to provide a contradictory or discontented story. It may be that the researcher is better able to establish a rapport with smokers as there is a removal of the artificial wall a researcher presents as an outsider. It may also be that a research location physically outside the boundaries of the organisation provides workers with the freedom to express this discontent. The authors of this paper offer no definitive answers. This paper is intended to extend our knowledge of workplace research through highlighting the methodological value in using smokers as research subjects.

We present the experience of three separate case studies where interactions with cigarette smokers have either, provided important organisational data, or alternatively, provided a means of entering what Cunnison (1966) referred to as the 'gossip circle'. The final section of the paper draws on the evidence to demonstrate how the community of smokers, as social outcasts, are valuable in investigating workplace issues. For researchers and practitioners, these social outcasts may very well prove to be an important barometer of employee attitudes; attitudes that may be unable to be measured through traditional staff surveys.

The Ethnographic Case Study

Conducting research, as a participant observer within an organisation raises a series of practical and ethical problems for the researcher. The cost of this method in researcher time needed to prepare and undertake the study is of greater import in recent years as funding constraints in higher education have acted to constrain the time taken for research along with tightening ethical requirements (see chapter by Sappey; Sutcliffe, 1999).

Hence, non-participant observation is more common than 'going native'. Yet this leaves the problem of being an 'outsider' and the research subjects modifying their behaviours accordingly. This is particularly important if the researcher is trying to unearth material at variance with the corporate position, as was the case in the case studies discussed in this chapter. Methods need to be found that enable researchers to 'break the ice', establish trust and rapport with research subjects, and find those 'unexpected stories' (Behar, 2003: 16).

Many researchers would be well aware that entry into workplaces is largely dependent on the goodwill of managers. While an ethnographer attempts to remain objective and independent of influence, maintaining a good relationship with management of the organisation is critical. Unfortunately, this can lead to a perception by employees that the researcher is present as little more than a 'management informer', creating a potentially impenetrable barrier to quality data collection, especially if you are investigating employee resistance. A large part of the problem is the formal setting in which organisational research is conducted. Within organisations, and particularly in confined workspaces, employees are often loath to voice opinions that contradict the management position.

Anthropologists often choose to admit to personal flaws, addictions or idiosyncrasies in order to get research subjects to speak about matters that are otherwise taboo (Sherif, 2001). Knapp (1997) suggests that shared agenda setting is the most ethical means of providing an exchange of information with research subjects, and also the means by which many issues that the researcher had not thought to ask are likely to be uncovered. This article suggests that smokers are a valuable group of research subjects because they are more forthcoming with information likely to conflict with the management view of the firm. The authors do not believe that smokers are inherently more critical of management, although this is an untested proposition; rather, it is the location of smokers away from the workplace that delivers them the freedom to speak freely.

Smoking in the Workplace – Hiding your Butts.

The first 'anti-smoking' legislation, the *Tobacco and Other Smoking Products Act* was introduced in Queensland in 1998. This legislation was designed to protect members of the public from the health dangers of smoking and also to reduce the uptake of smoking within the community, especially amongst children. As a result of this legislation it is generally unlawful for persons to smoke in enclosed spaces in Queensland (s.26R(1)). Smokers, therefore, are legally required to smoke outdoors. From 1 January 2005, legislation was tightened to preclude smoking in any sports facilities or within four metres of all building entrances. Many workplaces have developed their own smoking policies which stipulate that smokers are only allowed to do so in designated areas or outside the employer's property line. Consequently, there are often large numbers of employees standing around outside buildings having a cigarette.

For the researcher, standing outside talking to smokers also clearly increases their exposure to smoke. While we recognise the dangers inherent in passive smoking and certainly do not advocate taking up smoking as an aid to research, the following case studies highlight the

value of smokers as a means of gaining an additional view of the organisation and its practices.

The Three Case Studies

The data for these case studies was drawn from research conducted across a number of disparate projects in industries as diverse as call centres, food retailing and food processing. In each case, the researcher wanted information from research subjects, and in each case this was made difficult by the nature of the work that the research subjects were engaged in and the pace at which work was undertaken. In two of the firms, the attitudes of firm-level management towards the presence of researchers also made gaining access to research subjects difficult. These cases all highlight the practical value of smokers as research subjects, both for building research relationships and for providing a divergent perspective that is often missed by formal interviews or surveys within the confines of the firm.

Retail Foods

This case study organisation was a large retailer of low margin, high volume foodstuffs. In this instance, obtaining research access to the organisation took over six months of negotiation with senior management. The organisation granted permission for interviews with management and staff and a staff survey, and ethical clearance was obtained from the university to cover this research approach. It was then left up to individual store managers to determine the extent to which they were prepared to become involved in the research. Across the stores investigated, store and department managers were prepared to submit to individual interviews, but only one store manager was prepared to permit interview access to employees, and then only on the employee's time. In this store, it was stipulated that employees were not allowed to stop work to be interviewed, but talking to workers on the job proved problematic and gaining access to off-duty employees was also problematic.

This food retailer used industrial engineers and sophisticated software to ensure that labour was used productively every minute of the day. As a result, the degree of employee performance monitoring was extensive; budgetary targets for staffing levels were in place and religiously adhered to. These workers were so busy that it was hard to find opportunities to speak with them, and when the researcher did so, it was very apparent that the workers were being interrupted. Additionally, in store 'musak' meant that recording conversations was also not a viable option. Initially, the researcher talked to employees while working with them. This meant stacking bags of potatoes while talking to the vegetable department employees and squashing cartons flat while talking to nightfill workers. While it was not possible to take notes while working, it was possible to sit down immediately afterwards and write up research notes.

Another difficulty was that staff were often involved serving customers, or within earshot of customers, and this constrained the type of questions that it was possible to ask, and clearly also constrained the type of response the worker felt able to give. This was particularly the case for checkout operators, who represented nearly fifty per cent of the store's workforce. While the researcher made a point of regularly grocery shopping within the stores being researched and talking to checkout operators while doing so, this was not only expensive, but also constrained the range of topics suitable for conversation. This was where the employee survey became valuable (see chapter by Felstead et al).

These surveys were undertaken in the tea rooms of the respective stores. By sitting and chatting to people about the surveys, we were able to establish discuss issues with the employees that we had not previously been able to. This was particularly the case in two stores where the store manager used the tearoom to make coffee and made a point of chatting with the researcher and the staff sitting there. The store manager's recognition of the researcher helped to break the ice with workers, but it did not overcome the problem of resistance created by the research environment, as workers were often hesitant to speak freely in a tearoom with their colleagues, and often their supervisor, in attendance.

As the researcher was consciously trying to achieve a representative sample of staff across departments and employment classifications and was therefore tallying types of employees, they became aware that they had not seen any of the meat department employees in the tearoom. When the researcher asked why, they were told that the meat department workers were smokers and took their lunch breaks outside. The next step was asking the employees where you were allowed to smoke in the shopping centre. In two of the three stores, the management of the shopping centre had designated smoking areas. At the time this research was conducted one of the authors was a smoker, and a native to the smoking outcast group. The original intention was to use this opportunity to survey those workers who smoked and did not use the tearoom, as well as getting a nicotine fix. Instead, the researcher discovered that the employees who were outside smoking and having their lunch were happy to talk quite freely about their experiences within the organisation. Not only that, but their views were often far more critical than those expressed within the walls of the organisation.

Indeed, quite fortuitously, the researcher discovered one particularly valuable smoker. This worker, a service supervisor on his final day of employment with the organisation, was quite prepared to disclose the ways in which the computerised staff scheduling system could be circumvented. This contradicted the previous responses in management interviews that 'the computer rosters staff' so they had 'no control and could not play favourites'. Clearly, the software had a series of protocols but the industrial engineer in charge of the system was not prepared to disclose these. This disgruntled smoker, while standing outside the store, felt free to disclose favouritism in staff scheduling. 'You can chop and change and manipulate it to suit, however you want'. As a researcher, finding such an informant was invaluable and enabled us to present both sides of the staff scheduling story within this organisation. Other smokers provided similarly valuable insights that would not have been captured by either the formal interviews or the survey instrument. Since the researcher did not take a participant consent form outside for a cigarette, but did take a copy of the survey, the informant's consent was provided verbally.

Call Centre

At the Call Centre employees face a high degree of monitoring and performance measurement, high levels of pressure and high levels of turnover. This is not unusual for call centres. The research process at the Call Centre was based around informal discussions with employees about aspects of being organised into teams in an organisation with such individualised work processes. Part of this included attempting to uncover individual and collaborative acts of covert resistance. However, employees initially seemed to hold a degree of reticence in discussing issues of covert resistance with outsiders (Townsend, 2004). Part of this was associated with this style of methodology in such a research setting.

Call centres are sometimes referred to as ‘an assembly line in the head’ (Taylor and Bain, 1999) due to the similarities between traditional Fordist regimes in terms of mass production of product (or service in the case of call centres), and short job cycles. The work of Call Centre employees is tightly monitored through electronic surveillance, as well as having some scripting of calls, and low levels of task discretion (Townsend, 2005). The incoming calls to the centre are placed in a queue, and distributed automatically to Customer Service Representatives (CSRs) through an automated call distribution system (ACD). This system also provides the Rostering and Planning officer with a range of information that is used to determine appropriate levels of staffing. Importantly, staff levels are measured to ensure there is always a queue, hence when CSRs are finished with one caller there will always be more calls waiting for them to attend to.

Employees work in an open-plan office space with each CSR sitting in a partitioned cubicle. While sitting in the workstation the cubicles are slightly above head-height for an average sized adult, limiting the potential visual distraction from surrounding employees. Each cubicle is equipped with a networked computer, a telephone and headset and minimal and ever-decreasing number of hard-copy manuals. Although employees have only a semi-permanent partition separating them physically from the adjoining CSR, the overarching requirement to be on the telephone for approximately 85 percent of their working day, limits worker interaction. Each individual CSR is expected to take approximately 90 calls per day. Talk times average between 108 and 126 seconds. In addition, a 90 second post-call wrap period in which follow-up clerical work is completed are measured and included as some of the targets that contribute towards an employee’s performance bonus. It is within this context that the informal conversations remained short and problematic for data collection. Consequently, much of the data was collected from employees while away from workstations.

Commonly, employees would relax in what was known as ‘the breakout room’ while on breaks. The room was rather small with a fridge, a television, a table and four chairs along with four lounge chairs. Importantly, this was a non-smoking area; hence, all the smokers would quickly grab their lunch from the fridge and congregate outside the building. For the purpose of this research, when the researcher managed to talk to an employee on a weekend without anyone around, he mentioned his reticence to talk openly in the breakout room because of concerns for who may overhear our discussion. The employee’s reticence to discuss issues of resistance did not change immediately once time was spent with the smokers. This was evident through a number of occasions when employees would begin a sentence and then stop, often after glancing in the researcher’s direction. However, over time employees appeared to become more comfortable with researcher presence and return to their everyday conversations.

The time spent with the smokers opened a number of gateways to rich data. Employees spoke about political alliances and disputes within the organisation between particular team leaders and managers or general employees. Such political relationships can be essential contextual information for the ethnographic researcher. As time progressed, employees began to open up and tell of some of their fiddles. The role of “gossip” in the workplace has been highlighted by Michelson and Mouly (2002), and it highlights that “gossip” is potentially rich source of additional information regarding many aspects of the workplace. Importantly, in each of the organisations presented within this paper, the information collected from the smokers was not to be taken as gospel. Rather, there were two uses for this data. It could be used as signposts or clues to piece together other data collected from within the organisation, or alternatively, information that can be used to progress the collection of data within the workplace. Hence, the ‘smoker’s word’ could be used as a glue to stick together already collected data; or as a wedge to pry open areas for further investigation.

FoodWorks

The FoodWorks plant was a greenfield plant where the managerial team dedicated a great deal of time and resources to the development of a particular managerial culture, aimed to avoid unionisation and promote cooperation and commitment from employees. The investment of time is important when researching topics that may appear as 'deviant' by the organisational hierarchy and indeed by many workers so when little resistance was uncovered in initial weeks it was not of concern to the researcher. However, when the employees presented an image of cooperative, committed people the researcher did begin to wonder what to do.

Commonly operators were asked about their relationships with managers and team leaders. One operator commented: 'The team leader is good, really friendly, that might be to do with the test we take when we start. Almost everyone here is very friendly.' Months later the same operator had just completed a conversation with a team leader when the researcher had entered the workspace. When we approached the operator, without any coaxing the operator provided a decidedly unhappy expression and exclaimed: 'He's a wanker. He's a pain-in-the-arse, fucking wanker.'

The researcher was taken aback, however, this proved to be an opportunity to delve further. Conversation progressed and it was asked of the operator: 'So, you lot have been telling me for months that this is such a happy place, and 'we all get treated so well here' but that's not really the truth. Why have people been telling me that?' The operator's response was forthright and only partially surprising given what we know about researching deviancy. The reply:

'They've all been lying to you, of course. This is a shithole of a place and I'm tired of lying about it. If you want to really know what people think of this place, I'm about to have morning tea, come out with me and spend some time with the 'gutter scum'.

Patience allowed the continuation of the research when it seemed pointless, and a little luck allowed the opportunity to uncover these two significant events that may not seem overly significant to the management or the employees. However, when searching for dissatisfaction that manifests as resistance and misbehaviour, these two events proved crucial.

As it transpires, the 'gutter scum' is a term of endearment that many of the smokers use to describe themselves. The reason for this is the worksite is non-smoking and the employees must leave the worksite altogether for a cigarette. Throughout the day there is a procession of employees heading out to a street beside the plant, sit in the gutter smoking cigarettes, drinking caffeine in a variety of forms (coffee, tea, and a range of colas) and, most importantly for the research, complaining about management and the organisation. Interestingly, not all members of the 'gutter scum' were as trusting as the operator who had extended the invitation to join them. Nevertheless, entry had been allowed to the inner circle of discontent and this presented a wealth of data in its own right. Similar to the 'gossip-circle' described by Cunnison (1966: 163), within the protected confines of the like-minded gutter-scum employees spoke freely about conflicts with team leaders and co-workers, long tea breaks, hiding instead of working and other activities that were central to this research.

It was after the initial entry to the 'gutter scum' that more data that was central to the research problem came to light. While it was not necessarily the 'gutter scum' who provided this data, it was the recognition and knowledge of dissatisfaction that had previously been hidden that allowed issues to be discussed with other staff members. Importantly, discussions about

conflict, misbehaviour and resistance could be addressed with the knowledge that it occurred and without threatening the employee's fear of being the person to initiate such conversation.

Finding a Place for the Social Outcast

The legitimacy of ethnography as a research method is beyond question; however, the question of the best means to gather data remains. This chapter presents a practical tool for the ethnographic researcher to gather quality data that may not be accessible within the confines of the research site. In discussions during the preparation of this chapter, our views were confirmed by a public service manager who noted,

'If you want to know anything that goes on in the public service you've got to stand with the smokers. More than that, smoking is really the great leveller. Your youngest, inexperienced clerk will be standing beside your DG (Director-General) if they both want a smoke, and that's not going to happen at any other time' (LC, Conversation 23 July 2004).

Since the regulation of workplace smoking has led to the segregation of smokers in the workplace, or more correctly outside the workplace, there has been a changing social dynamic in workplaces. Changing community values and legislation has turned smokers into social outcasts. A social outcast is a social outcast, regardless of their rank of employment. Furthermore, the researcher is able to position themselves within the 'haze of smoke and discontent' to gather a range of data that may not be able through more formal means. In part, this appears to be a direct result of getting outside the physical boundaries of the organisation and out on the gutter, or in the designated smoking area. Research subjects feel much less constrained to offer the company line when they are not within the workplace. Similarly, smokers share a common addiction, widely regarded a socially unacceptable, therefore camaraderie exists amongst smokers. For a researcher, this camaraderie enables the barriers between the researcher and the research subject to evaporate, even apparently if the researcher is not a smoker, but is prepared to congregate with the smokers. We readily acknowledge that these informants may represent a very biased and unreliable source of information, but they provide the opportunity to obtain a story that deviates from the management line. The authors are not advocating that mingling with a group of smokers is the best method to collect research data. Rather, it is *a method* that can open up further areas of investigation or confirm data already collected. In the three case studies described in this paper, interactions with cigarette smokers, away from the confines of the organisation, provided a wealth of data that was previously inaccessible. We acknowledge also, that the use of smokers as a data source raises ethical issues. While each of the organisations discussed in this chapter consented to researcher access and individual staff were aware of the researcher's role within the organisation, written consent was not obtained from respondents. We note that workers who smoke during tea breaks are doing so on their employer's time, whereas smokers on a lunch break are on their own time. Deciding what level of ethical clearance is required therefore presents an issue for ethics committees.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the benefits of ethnography as a research method, as well as the practical difficulties. It was argued that it was particularly difficult for researchers to break the ice and establish a level of acceptance within the workplace so that workers felt able to speak openly about their workplace experiences. The second section of the paper outlined the anti-smoking legislation that has forced workers who smoke to congregate outside buildings in

order to partake in their habit. The third section uses data from three cases studies in which smokers have proved invaluable for enabling researchers to establish rapport with research subjects and to obtain viewpoints at variance with those of the organisation. The final section reflects on how this was achieved. It suggests that by getting outside the boundaries of the firm, and also by shared social outcast status, researchers are able to break through the barriers and establish insider status with research subjects. Importantly though, the use of a particular group of informants, such as smokers, cannot be the sole source of data. Rather, it is one source that can be valuable in particular circumstances.