Where there's smoke, there's fire: The targeted selection of informants within organisational research

Keith Townsend and Dr Robin Price*
Griffith Business School, Queensland University of Technology*

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the difficulties encountered by researchers while trying to acquire an 'emic' or insider's view of an organisation. It argues that smokers, because of their social outcast status, and their need to step outside for a cigarette, provide researchers with the opportunity to gain valuable insights into the operations of the firm. It is well-established that participant and non-participant ethnographic research provides an opportunity to investigate workplaces beyond the scope of workplace questionnaires and interviews. Through data collected across three separate research projects, this paper argues that smokers, as social outcasts in the workplace, present an opportunity to collect a wealth of important research data.

Introduction

In recent years, the introduction of anti-smoking legislation in Queensland has meant that employees who smoke cigarettes are no longer allowed to do so at their desk, workstation or staff canteen. Commonly, employees who smoke are forced outside the boundaries of their workplace to partake in their habit. This paper considers the importance of cigarette smoking employees in ethnographic research. It is well-established that participant and non-participant ethnographic research provides an opportunity to investigate workplaces beyond the scope of workplace questionnaires and interviews. Through data collected across three separate research projects, this paper argues that smokers, as social outcasts in the workplace, present an opportunity to collect a wealth of important research data.

This paper divides into four main sections. The first section provides a background into the ethnographic case study method. This is followed by a consideration of research tools that have been considered within the literature on conducting ethnographic research. Section two provides a brief consideration of anti-smoking policies and legislation within Queensland. The third section presents 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'. This section adopts the first person approach. The authors recognise that first person prose is uncommon in industrial relations research; however, for the purposes of this paper it is appropriate because it is, in part, a journey of discovery. 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

Qualitative research is mainly concerned with the properties, the state and the character of phenomena (Labuschagne 2003). The emphasis lies on processes and meanings that are examined, but not measured in terms of quantity or frequency. Qualitative research approaches are often preferred when the main research objective is to improve our understanding of a phenomenon and its context (Audet and d'Amboise 2001). Such methods commonly produce detailed data (through direct quotation and careful description of situations, events, interactions and observed behaviours) about a small number of cases (Labuschagne 2003).

Industrial relations research in Australia has traditionally been dominated by qualitative case studies. This is due to the fact that the case study is an excellent means of explaining how and why particular events or actions have taken place (Kitay and Callus 1998; Gardner 1999; Sutcliffe 1999). However, it must be noted that within the broad family of 'case study' methods, there are a range of sub-methods.

There are many strengths associated with in-depth, qualitative studies of organisations. Such methods allow researchers to investigate perspectives and issues that are often out of the reach of quantitative research methods. For example, researchers are able to 'get under the skin' of an organisation to find out what really happens, as the 'informal reality' can only be perceived from the inside (Gillham 2000: 11). Case studies provide the opportunity to draw a range of data collection methods together, in an attempt to develop a rich and detailed analysis of a particular organisation. One aspect of data collection is ethnography.

There is a significant body of literature that argues convincingly that ethnographic research allows a researcher to find a 'truth' that is different to the picture presented on the surface of the workplace (see for example: Friedmann and McDaniel 1998; Neumann 2000). Ethnography is not unusual in the fields of industrial relations/ industrial sociology. Indeed, some of the 'classics' appear as a result of ethnographic research (see for examples: Roy 1952; Cunnison 1966; Burawoy 1979; Kunda 1992; Barker 1993; Scott 1994). Ethnography is a:

> …family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents, and of richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, representing and at least partly in its own terms, the irreducibility of human experience. Ethnography is the disciplined and deliberate witness-cum-recording of human events (Willis and Trondman 2000: 5).

By selecting a case study method and utilising the 'closeness' allowed through ethnography, a rich level of detail can be achieved. The most widely articulated objective of ethnographic research is to:

> …discern, grasp, and understand the world at hand from the standpoint of its members or practitioners; to acquire an insider's view so that, in the words of Geertz (1973: 6), one can distinguish between a wink and a twitch (Snow, Morrill *et al.*, 2003: 183).

One of the primary research methods used by ethnographers is participant observation. By mingling with the research subjects, and participating in their daily work life, knowledge of the research organisation and its cultural and behavioural patterns is enhanced. The aim of ethnographic research is to acquire an 'emic' or insider's view, as opposed to an 'etic' or outsider's view (Hall 2004). In order to achieve this 'emic' view, it is necessary to actively participate in the research subject's daily routine, while observing their behaviour in a non-subjective manner. However, this type of methodology presents practical difficulties. Sutcliffe (1999) highlights the cost of this method in terms of researcher time. Most industrial relations researchers therefore adopt the role of non-participant observers (Sutcliffe 1999). One of the primary problems with non-participant observation is that an awareness of researcher presence amongst research subjects is likely to modify the behaviour of informants (Sutcliffe 1999). This is of particular import if the researcher is trying to unearth material at variance with the corporate position. 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).

Entry and acceptance into an organisation is critical in designing a research project (Bryman 1988), and largely dependent on the goodwill of managers. Indeed, Sutcliffe (1999: 143) suggests that researchers must be introduced as 'separate' from management. 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, particularly if you are investigating 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.

The data presented within this paper is drawn from two separate research projects that were investigating unrelated topics. One project was investigating covert resistance within work teams, while the other project was investigating labour utilisation in a retail chain. As such, this is an example of a cross-case pattern that became apparent in a serendipitous fashion such as Eisenhardt (1989; 1999) suggests. Within the context of each individual study other research methods were utilised. For example, the teams research project included 31 interviews with company personnel. The retail project included 45 interviews with 34 individual research subjects,

management and employees, and 272 self-administered questionnaires. In the case of the retail project only two formal interviews were conducted with 'smokers', most discussions were informal in nature. However, what was realised throughout both research projects is that smokers, when forced outside the workplace, become a valuable source of information, particularly if the data sought is of a sensitive nature. As such, these smokers are a valid means of triangulating data, confirming hunches and uncovering another side of the story. The following section of this paper considers the changes in smoking legislation that have provided researchers with a group of social outcasts, and an informal setting, from which to draw research subjects.

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. Many workplaces have developed their own smoking policies which stipulate that smokers must not smoke within prescribed distances from doorways and windows. Consequently, there are often large numbers of employees standing around outside buildings having a 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 establishing rapport with research subjects, as well as gaining an 'emic' 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 needed to establish rapport with the 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 and establishing this rapport 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.

CALL CENTRE: The Call Centre was a relatively new organisation, and while it has been well established that call centres are not homogonous (Batt 2000; Hutchison, Purcell *et al.*, 2000; Taylor, Mulvey *et al.*, 2002; Taylor, Baldry *et al.*, 2003) there is nothing atypical about this call centre. Employees face a high degree of monitoring and performance measurement, high levels of pressure and high levels of turnover. 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, as I have noted elsewhere, employees initially seemed to hold a degree of reticence in discussing issues of covert resistance with me, an outsider (Townsend 2004). Part of this was associated with this style of methodology in such a research setting.

Taylor and Bain (1999: 109) refer to call centres as 'an assembly line in the head' 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 in terms of electronic surveillance, as well as having some scripting of calls, and low levels of task discretion. The incoming calls to the centre are placed in a queue, and distributed automatically to 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, I was able to collect much of the data from employees while away from the employee's 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, as this was a non-smoking area, hence, all the smokers would quickly grab their lunch from the fridge and congregate outside the building in two main areas. For the purpose of this research, when I 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 with me did not change immediately once I began to spend time with the smokers. This was evident through a number of occasions when employees would begin a sentence and then stop, often after glancing in my direction. However, over time employees appeared to become more comfortable with my 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. 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.

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. It was then left up to individual store managers to determine the level to which they were prepared to become involved in the research. While individual store and department managers were prepared to submit to individual interviews, only one store manager was prepared to permit access to employees and it was stipulated that employees were not allowed to stop work to be interviewed. Even this proved problematic.

Food retailers use industrial engineers to ensure that labour is used productively every minute of the day. Sophisticated software is used to calculate precisely how many staff are required at any given point of the day, based on calculations of expected workload. As a result, like call centres, the degree of employee performance monitoring is extensive; budgetary targets for staffing levels are in place and religiously adhered to. These workers are so busy that it is hard to find time to speak to them. Additionally, in store 'musak' meant that taping conversations was also not a viable option. Initially, I helped stack bags of potatoes while talking to the fresh foods employees and squashed cartons flat while talking to nightfill workers. While this made it difficult to take notes, 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 limited the type of questions that it was possible to ask. This was particularly the case for checkout operators, who represented nearly fifty percent of the store's workforce. While I made a point of doing my regular grocery shopping within the stores being researched and talking to checkout operators while I did so, this was not only expensive, but also constrained the range

of topics suitable for conversation. The organisation was amenable though, to allowing me to undertake an employee survey.

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

Conscious that I was limited in my capacity to access employees that did not use the tearoom, I asked 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. My original intention was to use this opportunity to survey those workers who did not use the tearoom, but instead I discovered that employees who were outside smoking were happy to talk freely about their experiences within the organisation. Their views were often far more critical than those expressed within the walls of the organisation. Indeed, quite fortuitously, I 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.

On the surface, the scheduling system appears as an omnipotent force, allocating staff to shifts free of management intervention or prejudices. I had previously been told by one Store Services Manager that 'the computer rosters staff' so she had 'no control and could not play favourites' (10 July 2001). Clearly, the software had a series of protocols but the industrial engineer in charge of the system was not prepared to disclose these (12 December 2001). 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' (6 June 2003). As a researcher, finding such an informant was invaluable and enabled me 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.

FOODWORKS: The FoodWorks plant was a greenfield plant, opened in 2001. 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 research for this organisation took place over an eight month period throughout 2003. Primarily, participant and non-participant job observation was deemed an appropriate methodology as the focus of the study was workplace resistance. It is acknowledged that the investment of time is important when researching topics that may appear as 'deviant' by the organisational hierarchy and indeed by many workers (Friedmann and McDaniel 1998; Neumann 2000). Hence, 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 I did begin to wonder what to do.

I would commonly ask operators 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 I had entered the workspace. When I 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.'

I 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'' (23 April 2003).

Again, 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 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. Progressively through 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 Cunnision (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 are 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 and 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. Issues uncovered include: conflict between operators and a team leader that escalated to threatened mass resignations; disputes about the exclusion of the union as a bargaining agent; and team leaders and operators hiding when they are supposed to be working.

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 paper 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 paper, our views were further verified 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. Legislation has made 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 if the researcher is not a smoker. 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. However, the authors are suggesting that in the three cases studies mentioned in this paper, interactions with cigarette smokers, away from the confines of the organisation, provided them with a wealth of data that was previously inaccessible.

Conclusion

This paper has briefly examined the literature on the ethnographic case study method and highlighted the benefits of the 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 fell 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, the use of a particular group of informants cannot be the sole source of data. Rather, it is one source, and one method that can be valuable in particular circumstances.

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