2008

Men of Steel or Plastic Cops: The use of Ethnography as a Transformative Agent

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ABSTRACT

The Perth urban rail system, like many other rail systems in Australia and overseas, is subject to crime and anti-social behaviour around the railway environs from a small minority of the travelling public. The transit officers, who form part of the security section of the Public Transport Authority, are the people employed to deal with these incidents, which can result in transit officers being injured. To fully understand the violence and antisocial behaviour that they deal with on a regular basis and develop strategies to reduce this risk of injury, it was necessary to enter their world.

The researcher in this paper explores the use of ethnography as an effective tool to access the transit officers' space, allowing them to speak for themselves by their own words and actions, uncovering what normally they would take for granted; and the efficacy of this method of research as a transformative agent to guide interventions to reduce the transit officers' risk of injury.

INTRODUCTION

Like many other rail environments in Australia and overseas, the Western Australian Perth urban rail system is subject to crime and anti-social behaviour ranging from bad language to severe violence from a small proportion of the travelling public. Transit officers whose core functions are passenger safety and customer service are the frontline of deterrence against this anti-social behaviour. 'Plastic Cop', 'Wanna Be Cop', 'Failed Cop', 'Transit Pig' and worse, were all titles the researcher heard attributed to transit officers from this small minority of the travelling public. However, the researcher also witnessed the 'steely resolve' that the transit officers displayed in dealing with this anti-social behaviour as they ensured the safety and comfort of the travelling public.

The transit officers form part of the security section of the Transperth Train Operations (TTO) which is a division of the Public Transport Authority (PTA). The PTA is the government department responsible for the public train, ferry services, bus and school bus services in Western Australia. In spite of the many initiatives PTA have taken to deal with anti-social behaviour and improve safety on the rail system such as the installation of ticket barriers on

many stations; a comprehensive closed circuit television (CCTV) monitoring system on all stations; and a strong presence of highly trained and equipped transit officers, working predominantly at night to avoid or defuse anti-social behaviour; incidents and injuries still occur.

In the past, transit officers had often said that anybody wanting to understand the provocation and violence that they have to deal with on a regular basis would need to work alongside them. This research responds to that statement with the aim of developing strategies to reduce their risk of injury. The researcher became a participant observer with the transit officers to gain an understanding of their safety culture and everyday work experience that the transit officers encounter. Bernard (2000, p. 319) describes participant observations as 'stalking culture in the wild – establishing rapport and learning to act so that people go about their business as usual when you show up'. Whilst organisational elements are relatively easy to discern, using this ethnographic protocol enabled the researcher to additionally uncover those values and assumptions that the transit officers hold, which normally remain hidden and not discoverable to outsiders. Researchers such as Pidgeon (1991), advance the argument that achieving an understanding of these can lead to injury reduction. Therefore, using this method of qualitative research will enable the researcher to view how the transit officers' values and assumptions are rooted in the group's work practices. Should any unsafe work practices be identified, new procedures can be developed and safer work practices introduced. This can result in a reduced injury rate for transit officers.

Participant observation

> More often those in the setting welcome the researcher as someone who can
> provide them with an audience and a voice (Lee, 1995, p. 15).

A number of researchers are now advocating using an ethnographic method of research for safety culture in organisations (Glendon & Stanton, 2000; Guldenmund, 2000; Hodson, 2004; Hopkins, 2006). They argue that the results of a popular alternative, safety surveys, undertaken either on their own or in combination with safety audits, do not necessarily coincide with what 'actually gets done' rather the results reflect people's perceptions of 'how things are done'. Additionally, other researchers such as Orr (2006), believe that organisational studies in the past have focused more on managers and the systems of the organisation rather than the employees.

Ethnographic research originates in the discipline of anthropology where the researcher studied the people in their natural surroundings and captured detailed qualitative descriptions of what they had observed. Geertz (1973, p. 10) refers to this as 'thick description'. Thick description not only enables us to understand the flow of social discourse but enables us to understand, appreciate and think concretely about concepts, but also to 'work creatively and imaginatively with them' (Geertz, 1973, p. 23). Historically, participant observation has been the main form of ethnographic research (Johnson, Avenarius, & Weatherford, 2006) however, not all ethnographic research is participant observation; rather it can be divided into 3 categories -

complete participant (covert) where the person joins a group without disclosing his or her background, participant observation and thirdly, direct observation which just involves the researcher following people around and recording their direct observations (Bernard, 2000).

A number of authors in their analysis of Julian Orr's book *Talking about Machines: An Ethnography of a Modern Job (1996),* recognized the benefits of participant observation in qualitative research (Bechky, 2006; Contu & Willmott, 2006; Yanow, 2006). In this book Orr developed a complete, rich picture of knowledge workers and machines, which provided an excellent understanding of the complex relationship in organisations between work practices, workers and organisations. As Orr himself states 'the appropriate course for studying work is to go see how it is actually done' (Orr, 2006, p.1805) rather than accepting how management says it is done. The role the researcher decides to adopt in the organization will normally dictate the type and amount of data that the researcher will be able to collect (Johnson et al., 2006; Tope, Chamberlain, Crowley, & Hodson, 2005). The researcher in this instance chose to work alongside the transit officers using a participative observation technique to uncover what may have remained hidden to the players, in order to improve safety. Participant observation is particularly invaluable for achieving "insider status" as somebody who is trustworthy (Tope et al., 2005). Like other researchers in the past who had undertaken the relative occupational training prior to immersing themselves as a participant observer in an organisation, such as Orr (1996) with photo-copy technicians and Vam Maanen (1973) with police, the researcher completed the transit officer twelve week training program. This gave the researcher access to information and observations that other researchers would have found very difficult to obtain, enabling the researcher to gain "deep insider" acceptance by transit officers as a researcher who really did want to understand their world and let their voices be heard.

Hodson (2004, p. 32) refers to ethnographers as having the 'power to inscribe the world as a lens through which to perceive patterns of regularities in organisational life'. Whereas Bernard (2000, p. 319), refers to participant observation as 'a craft' where you 'immerse yourself in a culture, intellectualize what you've seen and heard, put it into perspective, and write about it convincingly'. Therefore studying the transit officers in their natural surroundings captured the uniqueness of the work group and enabled the researcher using this technique to examine the dynamic processes working in the organisation and how the organisation actually solved their problems. The conversations with the transit officers were informal and unscripted occurring either on the job or during the breaks. The information gathered during the field work informed the questions for the interviews that were undertaken later.

During the field work and writing of the text, the researcher referred to Golden Biddle and Locke's (1993) three main points that they considered critical for ethnographic texts. They must be authentic, which means they must convey that they understood the members construct of their world and the uniqueness and vitality of life in the work setting; it must be plausible to the reader so that they can make sense of it; and thirdly it must actively probe people to think about their own assumptions about their work.

Culture

Schein (2004, p. 17) defines the culture of a group

> as a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems

or as Schein (1992, p. 8) has previously stated 'the way we do things around here'. Whilst it may not be the correct way of doing things, it becomes the culture of collective practices which originate from a group's shared assumptions and values (Hopkins, 2005). It is not until members have been accepted in to the innermost heart of the group, that group secrets will be shared (Schein, 2004). As Fine (1993, p. 281) advocates 'The degree to which one is an "active member" affects the extent to which this sympathetic understanding is possible, and this is a function of one's social location'. This highlights the importance of the chosen method of research, participant observation. This method enables the researcher to be accepted as an "insider" in the group and gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions, feelings and assumptions that the group share. In contrast, new members initially only learn the surface cultural elements of the group (Schein, 2004).

The visible evidence of a group's culture is denoted by the physical environment; the group's style which includes the group's language, clothing, and emotional displays; the myths and stories told by the group relating to the organisation and the ceremonies and observable rituals that the group hold as important. Additionally, visible evidence of the culture also includes the published list of values adopted by the group relating to the strategies, goals and philosophies that the group adopts (Schein, 1992).

Hopkins (2005, p. 50), when discussing railway organisations made an observation that

> It is clear that the culture of an organisation will be powerfully shaped by the needs of external stakeholders such as passengers or, in other contexts, shareholders. Where stakeholder interest is championed by the press and politicians, as it is in the case of railway commuters, it becomes an irresistible force moulding the organisational culture

Becoming a participant observer enabled the researcher to experience that culture. On railway property, the transit officers have very similar powers to police, such as the powers of arrest or to issue a summons for an offence committed on railway property. Chan (1996, p. 111) in her examination of police culture, noted that 'in an occupation considered to be dangerous, unpredictable and alienating' the culture was in fact not primarily negative. Chan goes on further to say 'The bond of solidarity between officers offers its members reassurance that the other officers will "pull their weight" in police work, that they will defend, back up and assist their colleagues when confronted by external threats …'. Using participative observation enables the

researcher to examine whether the same kind of solidarity existed amongst the transit officers, and what impact, if any, this may have on their risk exposure, or whether like high risk organisations (HRO's) they demonstrate "collective mindfulness" of danger (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001).

Safety culture

> A pervasive myth, encouraged by the mass media (and the police themselves), is that the police spend the majority of their time investigating crimes. In fact, the police spend most of their time resolving conflicts, maintaining and restoring order, and providing social services. (Reuss-Ianni, 1983, p. 19)

Transit officers are in many ways similar to police, with their powers limited to dealing with anti-social behaviour on railway property. It is well known that for some railway employees violence is a daily occurrence (Dickinson & Bevan, 2005). The Health and Safety Executive (2002a, p. 1) defines violence as 'any incident in which an employee is abused, threatened or assaulted by a member of the public in circumstances related to their work'. Many violent issues stem from fare evasion, over-crowding or to customers exhibiting more demanding behaviours due to 'alcohol, drugs, mental health or anti-social behaviour' (Dickinson & Bevan, 2005, p. 41). The researcher also found that frustration with ticket vending machines out of order, or change machines out of change can also lead to incidents of violence from the travelling public. These incidents of violence can lead to transit officers being injured as they deal with the offenders. As Stan, one of the experienced transit officers said

> If you've got someone who has got nothing to lose, they've got nothing to lose and they know it, they just keep going. A lot of the ones that are really at rock bottom, they have nothing to lose are quite happy to get locked up and go to jail because they'll be given three square meals a day, they'll be given a lot of care. And in a lot of cases I know, I think I've come across two from memory, situations, they wanted to get locked up to go and visit their relatives in jail for Christmas".

Reuss-Ianni (1983, p. 67) posits the observation that police learn their view of policing and the culture that surrounds it from their own street experience and 'as an apprentice to officers already on the job', not from the police academy. Reuss-Ianni further states (1983, p. 67) that 'these lessons are constantly being reinforced by the "war stories" and experiences of other officers and through the traditions of police practice which developed in these networks'. However, these may not be the correct or safest way of dealing with incidents, rather it is a way they have witnessed other officers' deal with a situation. As Tony, one of the transit officers with eighteen months experience told me;

> I think just at the beginning it's just a matter of knowing what to say and watching your partner, listening to your partner deal with them. That's what I sort of did at the start, was just have a look at what everyone else is doing and get an idea of how they're dealing with the customers, especially the difficult ones. I mean it's easy enough to talk to somebody and explain how things are and once they start getting a

little bit too difficult, that's something you build over time. I mean you can't come in knowing that. Every scenario is different

Bayley and Bittner (1984, p. 35) during their research with police also identified a gap between the operational world of the police and the classroom and stated that 'progress in police training will come by focusing on the particularities of police work as it is experienced by serving officers'.

Weick and Sutcliffe (2001, p. 126) advance the view that 'the concept of safety culture illuminates what it means to create a culture of mindfulness'. Over the years there has been a growing interest in organisational safety culture particularly in high risk industries. This has arisen as a result of large scale accident investigations where the culture of the organization was identified as significantly contributing to the occurrence of events. Previously, simple worker error might have been found to be the cause (Hopkins, 2000). Weick and Sutcliffe (2001) believe the term 'safety culture' rose to prominence following the Chernobyl nuclear power plant explosion and spread to other industries. Their interest arises primarily from three main points 'their value as a way to illustrate the nature of corporate culture in general, second, from their concern with mindfulness, and third, from the fact that lapses in safe practice generate errors that produce unexpected events' (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001, p. 128). A number of definitions of safety culture can be found in the literature; however a common one originates from the Advisory Committee on the Safety of Nuclear Installations (ACSNI) and subsequently adopted by the British Health and Safety Executive.

> The safety culture of an organisation is the product of individual and group values, attitudes, perceptions, competencies and patterns of behaviour that determine the commitment to, and the style and proficiency of, an organisation's health and safety management. Organisations with a positive safety culture are characterized by communications founded on mutual trust, by shared perceptions of the importance of safety and by confidence in the efficacy of preventive measures (Health and Safety Executive, 2005, p. 3; Health and Safety Laboratory, 2002, p. 2; Reason, 1997, p. 194)

Researchers have highlighted the necessity for organisations to develop effective safety culture enhancing practices to reduce risk and minimize accidents (Cooper, 2000; Glendon & Stanton, 2000; Guldenmund, 2000; O'Toole, 2002; Pidgeon, 1991; Reason, 1998). Reason (1997) advances the view that there are five important components of a safety culture namely, an informed culture; a reporting culture; a just culture; a flexible culture and a learning culture (Reason, 1997). Whilst other researchers may have different names for the various concepts of a safety culture, the underlying processes remain similar. An informed culture is one where information about important signs of the condition of the safety system, including information of various incidents and near misses are collected and disseminated; additionally the organisation maintains a state of wariness (Reason, 1998). Secondly, in a reporting culture people feel valued enough to report all incidents, near misses and mistakes and lessons are learnt from the

information gained from those events. Thirdly, in a just culture, there is an atmosphere of trust where people are not afraid to report mistakes, however, that does not rule out disciplinary action being taken against a person if a rule is blatantly violated (Reason, 1997). A flexible culture has the ability to adapt to the changing demands of the job; and finally a learning culture is a culture that is able to draw the right conclusion from the information it receives, enabling it to make the necessary adjustments to its safety system (Reason, 1997).

CONCLUSION

Transit officers are the frontline of deterrence, against anti-social behaviour on the rail system which can give rise to transit officers sustaining injuries from the violence that they must deal with. Their employer's conventional methods of risk reduction have failed to reduce significantly the frequency or severity of the injury rate.

Studying the transit officers in their natural surroundings has proven effective in capturing the uniqueness of the group and enabling the researcher to examine the dynamic processes which come into play when trouble occurs. The chosen method of research, participant observation, has proven to have application in the study of safety culture among urban transit officers. This method of research has enabled the researcher to understand what is taken for granted and remains unseen by the players, identifying and exposing the basic assumptions that the transit officers hold, which can lead to interventions to reduce the rate and severity of transit officer injuries. Using participant observation has demonstrated the ability of this method of research to be a "transformative agent".

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