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### Abstract

Underground coal mining has long been perceived - both by the public and the people who do the work - as a unique occupation. Since Orwell's day, mining has been reshaped by the introduction of mechanised coal extraction and the ongoing incorporation of this occupation into large organisations within multinational corporations. To date, neither development has alleviated the perennial personnel problem in the mines - how to control the activities of people who work underground, far from the gaze of managers.

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**Rhetorics of Division: Miners' Narrative Sense of 'Self' and 'Other' During  
Performance Appraisal at an Underground Coalmine**

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## INTRODUCTION

Watching coal-miners at work, you realize momentarily what different universes different people inhabit.

George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*

Underground coal mining has long been perceived – both by the public and the people who do the work – as a unique occupation. Since Orwell's day, mining has been reshaped by the introduction of mechanised coal extraction and the ongoing incorporation of this occupation into large organisations within multinational corporations. To date, neither development has alleviated the perennial personnel problem in the mines – how to control the activities of people who work underground, far from the gaze of managers. One recent managerial reaction is to apply contemporary human resource management techniques to the members of this distinctive occupational group. In line with this development, this paper focuses on the introduction of a performance appraisal system at an underground coalmine – Slade Colliery – in an Australian east coast state. Although miners of all types have long been studied through the 'objectivising' disciplinary lenses of labour economics and industrial relations, critical discursive approaches are less common (see Eveline and Booth, 2002). By analysing the responses of the miners to being rated, in terms of occupational identity disruptions occasioning narrative identity work, our paper contributes to the organisation studies literature on subjectivity and performance appraisal.

While performance management and electronic performance monitoring are garnering increasing attention from critical management scholars (Sewell, 1998; Ball and Wilson, 2000), less research has been done specifically on performance *appraisal* (see Grey, 1994; Covalleski et al., 1998). At Slade, the appraisal system is based on a behaviourally anchored rating scale (BARS). There have been few critical studies of this type of appraisal system – or others like it – in heavy industries, which are distinguished from much of the service sector by dangerous working conditions (see Collinson, 1999). In these industries strong and distinctive occupational affiliations are commonplace (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984), which result in appraised persons being resistant to the subsumption of subjectivity by managerial discourse. Miners at Slade Colliery are a classic example. We focus on the groups who regard themselves

as performing the most ‘dangerous’ and ‘difficult’ jobs – those who operate the longwall equipment that cuts coal from the face, and those who use heavy machinery to prepare and develop the longwall ‘panels’ for cutting.

Building on earlier research (Ezzamel and Willmott, 1998; Ezzamel et al., 2001), we show how ‘the investments individuals may have in certain self-conceptions’ (McNay, 2000: 19) result in them being negatively disposed to having their performance rated. The introduction of the BARS system at Slade provoked a hostile response from these key groups of miners despite there being no formal consequences of the ratings they received. We argue that the Slade appraisal system was experienced as an incursion that cut to the heart of the miners’ occupational identity – and thus as a particular form of managerial control – which heightened their reactions to being rated. Furthermore, we demonstrate that the process of being rated occasioned narrative identity work in which miners actively drew on a range of narrative resources to shore up their collective self-image.

With regard to the critical analysis of performance appraisal, this paper both rectifies the relative neglect of heavy industries and inserts further theoretical refinement into the field. Specifically, it challenges the dominance of Foucault-inspired studies by drawing on theories of narrative identity formation that emphasise agency. We base our theoretical approach primarily on the work of feminist author Lois McNay who explicitly contrasts poststructuralist with narrative conceptions of identity formation, arguing that the latter provides an expanded conception of human agency and a more ‘centred’ view of identity (McNay, 2000). This is precisely what is needed given the interpretations of Foucault that are pressed into service in critical studies of performance appraisal. We recast the longstanding concept of occupational identity within a narrative framework, and link this concept to recent language-sensitive treatments of identity work in the critical management literature (Alvesson, 1994; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2001; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

## **TOWARDS A NEW CRITICAL APPROACH TO APPRAISAL**

Labour process and Foucauldian approaches have been identified as key alternatives for researchers to choose between when seeking to analyse critically the effects of

performance appraisal (Newton and Findlay, 1996). Although these are not entirely separate (see Austrin, 1994), the Foucauldian framework has gained the upper hand through the work of authors who have applied it to organisational instances of formal performance appraisal (Grey, 1994; Covalski et al., 1998; Ball and Wilson, 2000). These studies build on earlier work by Barbara Townley (1992; 1993) who demonstrated the ‘relevance’ of Foucault to performance appraisal. There are two reasons for our decision to break with this approach, which is becoming the orthodox treatment of appraisal by critical management writers. The first concerns the specific features of the Slade performance appraisal system and how the miners reacted to it.

At Slade Colliery there was no attempt – avowed or otherwise – to ‘managerialise’ worker subjectivity (Newton and Findlay, 1996: 47) by creating newly corporately acculturated or self-disciplined subjects, in the manner of service industries to which the application of Foucault’s work has proved felicitous. In the view of many line managers’ the appraisal system was a knee-jerk discrete intervention driven by profit-conscious corporate managers. This system was part of no broader process of attitudinal or culture change, there were no immediate consequences for achieving a good or bad rating, no links to promotion, compensation or redundancy, nor were results made public to socially ‘shame’ miners. Nonetheless, performance appraisal elicited an overwhelmingly negative response from the miners. In the words of the local union president, spoken at an appraisal system review meeting with Slade managers, ‘A vast majority of the workers are pissed off’ (taped proceedings). The hostility towards the rating process was so intense that one of the key reasons given by a senior personnel manager for ‘the mismatch between improved performance ratings...and improved operational performance’, between the first and second rounds of appraisal, was that assessors ‘were under pressure to give higher scores...[t]o minimise employee complaints’ (Slade Document, *Performance Management: Critique and Proposal*).

Recent studies have shown how worker attachment to a particular identity accounts for the vehemence of resistance to management initiatives in circumstances where jobs are not at risk (Ezzamel and Willmott, 1998; Ezzamel et al., 2001). By the same token, we argue that the reactions of key groups of miners is explicable in that the act of being rated by managers disturbed the meanings by which they make sense of their

work. Although the BARS system was not as an overt attempt at ‘identity regulation’, it had considerable identity-related implications (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). To address these implications, which were experienced similarly by longwall and panel development miners, we use conceptions of the narrative formation of occupational identities that are elaborated in the next section.

The second reason for our decision to break with the Foucauldian orthodoxy is our desire to afford primacy to agency, with respect to the interplay between individuals *qua* subjects and discursive practices. As with the application of Foucault to management more generally (Newton, 1998), a lack of attention to human agency has been noted in the performance appraisal literature (Newton and Findlay, 1996; Findlay and Newton, 1998; Collinson, 1999). Even studies that purport to allow for human agency in a modified Foucauldian approach (e.g. Ball and Wilson, 2000) retain what can be described as ‘a primarily negative paradigm of identity formation – of subjectification as subjection’ (McNay, 2000: 2). Thus we shift from the Foucauldian preoccupation with how the subject is (re)constituted by a normalising discourse of performance appraisal (Newton and Findlay, 1996), to attending to the circumstances in which certain types of narrative (i.e. discursive) resources are employed by miners in response to the particular challenges that performance appraisal poses for them as wilful actors.

We eschew a ‘muscular’ conception of discourse (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000), as culturally superimposed or managerially sponsored lexical formulations that envelop the subject – despite or even through acts of resistance. Instead we regard miners as actors with considerable ‘inventive powers’ (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 628), who selectively draw on a palette of narrative resources from their ‘cultural toolkit’ (Fine, 1996: 113), in response to challenges to their occupational self-conception. In the reproduction of work-based identities, as we have sought to demonstrate elsewhere (see Down and Reveley, 2004), ‘what is “good to think with” is a locally contingent issue’ (Parker, 1997: 118). While this process undoubtedly is constrained by existing societal formations of power that shape prior experiences (Thomas and Linstead, 2002; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002), from the standpoint of narrative identity there is fundamentally an element of agential choice in the appropriation of narrative resources that are found to be locally ‘useful’ (Hardy et al., 2000: 1232).

As Foley and Faircloth (2003: 168) put it, the ‘practical use of discourse...is an occasioned happening based on the interpretive wants and needs’ of individuals. Language-sensitive studies that explicitly or implicitly employ an expanded narrative conception of agency have shown how individuals actively draw on culturally available ‘representations and stories’ (Somers and Gibson, 1994: 73) to bolster a distinctive occupational identity. This process involves narrative identity work, which entails ‘repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness’ (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003: 1165). The challenge that elicits the narrative identity work may be an inherent feature of an occupation, like the ambivalent public perception of cooks (Fine, 1996), the pace and location of the work of journalists (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2001), and the contradictory demands managers face in attempting to influence others (Watson, 1997). Alternatively, the challenge may come from a particular event or contingent development, such as moves by medical professionals requiring midwives to legitimate their work (Foley and Faircloth, 2003), or – as in our case – a specific managerial intervention in the form of an attempt to appraise and compare the performance of a group of workers.

In the critical analysis of performance appraisal there is a need to complement the view that ‘people are spoken *through* or *by* discourses’ (Edley and Wetherell, 1997: 205), with greater agent-centred emphasis on ‘how in thought and practice, people accept, resist and play with discursive practices’ (Newton, 1998: 434). Arguably narrative theorists of identity work afford this activeness, contra poststructuralists, as the subject is regarded as being neither fragmentarily ‘dispersed’ – beyond existential and ethnographic recovery – nor overdetermined by discursive formations (see McNay, 1999). Rather, through specific acts of narration individuals seek stability ‘through the assertion of identity in the face of the antagonistic nature of social experience’ (ibid.: 326). This idea encapsulates the narrative identity work of the miners who sought to hold onto relationships central to their meaningful experience of work, relationships that were disturbed by the ‘dividing practices’ (Townley, 1994) of appraisal. The next section provides the conceptual foundations of our narrative approach to occupational identity.



## NARRATING OCCUPATIONAL IDENTITIES

An occupational identity is typically regarded as an outcome of the collective experience of work, borne of individuals interacting in similar social and technical settings, and coming to define their work and themselves in similar sorts of ways (Fine, 1996). Thus it is fundamentally a collective or ‘socially shared identity’ (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2001: 61), which ‘manifests as a tendency to come up with certain interpretations, to engage in certain actions, to make certain choices, to value certain experiences’ (Wenger, 1998: 153). No one set of occupational self-images defines all members of an occupation, even at a single site of work. That is not least because the range of tasks performed, and the associated social and technical conditions of work, vary considerably for members of the same occupation (see Fine, 1996). Occupational members, and their attendant identity projects, also differ along lines such as gender (Guerrier and Adib, 2004) and sexual orientation (Miller et al., 2003).

To the extent that ‘each “occupation” is divided terrain...doctors, lawyers, cooks, farmers, or miners do not see their work as identical to that of their colleagues’ (Fine, 1996: 111). Coal mining is a classic example. At Slade Colliery, the division of labour produced informal status hierarchies – most notably between the miners who say that they risk their lives underground, and those who work in coal clearance above the mine. Among the underground miners finer – but no less significant – distinctions exist between those who operate heavy machinery at the coalface, on whom we focus in this paper, and the miners who ‘service’ these groups through the provision of materials. An occupational identity thus is neither static nor universal across firms and industries (Darr and Scarselletta, 2002), but rather is a fundamentally ‘situated’ phenomenon (Fine, 1996), constructed in specific locales of work between particular groups of workers.

Rather than pressing into service social identity theory (Ashforth and Mael, 1989), which has a conventional social psychological focus that downplays the narrative dimensions of intersubjectivity, we take the view that narrative is ‘central to the construction of *social* and individual identity’ alike (McNay, 2000: 85, emphasis added). This focus is consonant with the ongoing re-conceptualisation of social

identity (Alvesson, 2000), and also of occupational affiliations. Recent theories of occupational identity (see Fine, 1996) have moved away from the traditional life-course developmental considerations of socialisation (Haas and Shaffir, 1982) and careers (Barley, 1989), to look at the process of 'interactive co-construction of a shared identity within a work community' at particular sites (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2001: 64). In accordance with narrative views of self-identity (Somers and Gibson, 1994), an occupational identity can be viewed as a localised accomplishment, rather than a culturally reproduced entity that spans organisations, locations and generations (see Van Maanen and Barley, 1984).

In its early conceptual formulations, occupational identities are regarded as fundamental 'social selves' that emerge from work contexts characterised by danger, explicit or tacit skill, and claimed responsibility for others (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984). It is worthwhile to draw attention to the three contextual features, as miners work in just such conditions. However under the weight of recent theorising about the narrative features of self-identity, the attribution of a fundamental self-element reproduced by a process of workgroup socialisation seems less tenable. Following McNay, narrative identity provides a middle course between the stability of identity posited in the occupational identity literature and the poststructuralist conception of social identity as sheer contingency and instability: 'Identity is neither completely in flux nor static; it has the dynamic unity of narrative configuration' (2000: 89). In conventional studies, narrative tends to be equated with folklore-type 'stories' that express and reproduce 'underlying' shared identities (e.g. see Carroll, 1995). By contrast, in the narrative identity view narrative has ontological rather than mere representational status (McNay, 1999).

An occupational identity is evidenced, most fundamentally, in the propensity of persons to provide similar narrative accounts of themselves and their work, accounts in which they aver similarity with others, and by which they relate what is important to them in terms of their 'sense of being' in a 'particular time and place' (Somers and Gibson, 1994: 67). Philosophically this view is underpinned by the work of Paul Ricoeur (1992), for whom the ontological status of narrative is given in 'the "pre-narrative capacity" of life understood as a "being-demanded-to-be-said" inherent to the structure of human action and experience' (McNay, 1999: 319). Ricoeur

conceptualises identity is a combination of two different aspects – idem identity and ipse identity. The idem aspect concerns ‘embodied identity’, whereas the ipse aspect concerns ‘selfhood where sameness is understood as continuity through time’ (McNay, 2003: 8). The latter implies an element of envisaging ‘futuraity’, such as in one’s relationships with others (McNay, 1999: 320).

The notion of an occupational identity, in its original formulation, suggests that personal self-identity is overwritten by occupational identity – which is ‘exported’ to one’s life outside of the work situation. Such a view implies that the principal site of identity maintenance is in ‘a person’s daily interactions’ (Van Maanen and Barley, 1984: 341) at work, which reaffirm a fundamental self-image in the reactions of other people. The focus on face-to-face interaction – which occurs in situations of bodily ‘co-presence’ (Giddens, 1984: 64) – as the key form of identity work means that the traditional occupational identity theorists are preoccupied with ‘idem or corporeal identity’ (McNay, 2000: 110). From a narrative standpoint however, this is complemented by a process of ‘analogical apperception’ that ‘establishes the self as another like myself’, which involves acts of imagination to such a degree that ‘the imagination plays a fundamental role in the institution of analogical or intersubjective relations’ (McNay, 2000: 102). To the extent that ipseity is fundamental to identity as an existential concern, it is at the forefront of narrative identity work, which can thus be understood as involving the imagination of a ‘relational future’ (Gergen, 1994: 209) in the face of identity disruptions.

Persons may come to regard themselves as ‘alike’ because of their embodied location in similar ‘relational settings’ (Somers and Gibson, 1994: 67). However, continuing to regard themselves this way after a collective identity disruption – such as that caused by comparative ratings – involves imaginative apperceptive acts of reidentification with others in a process of individual identity work performed narratively. This is as much an imaginative dialogue with oneself as it is an actual dialogue with others (see Garrety et al., 2003). Such ‘monologic’ self-narratives, whereby individuals make reference to micro-social groupings whose characteristics they see themselves as sharing or not sharing, are a key input into the wider interaction-based ‘dialogue’ that reproduces collective identifications (Gergen, 1994: 207). This is how we interpret the identity maintenance efforts evident in the talk of the Slade miners.

## OCCUPATIONAL IDENTITIES AT SLADE COLLIERY

Distinctive occupational identities emerge as the work experiences of individuals are shaped by 'the relationships in which they are embedded and by the stories with which they identify' (Somers and Gibson, 1994: 67). To be sure, this process is shaped by prior managerial decisions and actions that influence these relational settings. For example, as we note below, the longwall and panel development miners' status claims were based, in part, on a longstanding collective incentive scheme. Although managers might indirectly 'organise' meaning for workers (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 621) through the construction of work roles, specification of tasks, provision of equipment, and determining the location of worksites, workers imbue these 'settings, interactions, and things' (Weber, 2001) with meaning 'beyond what is institutionally scripted' (Hodson, 2001: 16). Taking a narrative approach to identity formation thus does not imply that one should be inattentive to context (see Foley and Faircloth, 2003), but rather that one should be attentive to the intertwining of contexts and narratives (Giddens, 1991). This section documents the social and technical context of work that provides the relational setting that shapes the occupational identity of the Slade longwall and panel development miners. To retain sensitivity to context, miners' accounts of work are supplemented by, and interwoven with, our own observations of work in the mines and discussions with mine-site line managers, personnel managers and supervisors.

Work conditions at Slade Colliery are not pleasant. Entry to the mine involves riding on an electric train that descends for two kilometres. One longwall miner described being uncomfortable from the moment he stepped on the train: 'The train ride is terrible and you have got to walk around and work in mud and slop in your boots. It's easy to get the shits' (interview). More specifically, three features of the work context that stand out in the miners' accounts of work can be regarded as central to the social formation of the miners' occupational self-image. The features are as follows: the experience of working skilfully with heavy machinery in a physically uncomfortable and potentially dangerous environment, in autonomous small groups, where a premium is placed on 'getting on' with one's workmates and being able to trust them.

A key reason longwall and development panel miners gave for resenting being rated was that they knew best how to do their jobs. During the underground mine visits it became readily apparent that the miners work together with little direct supervision, an arrangement to which they attach considerable symbolic significance. This feature of mine work was expressed in Trist and Bamforth's (1951: 6) original notion of 'responsible autonomy'.<sup>i</sup> Such autonomy cannot be assumed to exist because it depends on the underground 'system of supervision' (Thurley and Wiridenius, 1973), which varies between mines. The Slade system comprises three levels. Each group of longwall and panel development miners has one supervisor, locally known as the 'deputy'. Deputies, who belong to the same trade union as the miners, work as much in a service capacity – ensuring materials are supplied, breakdowns are fixed, and filling in when miners go off work for toilet or lunch breaks – as they do in a 'person management' capacity. The next level comprises 'undermanagers' who spend much of their working day underground, travelling between the different groups of miners. The 'coordinators' of particular functions, like longwall operations, venture underground less frequently.

Within this system, miners are left to exercise their autonomy at work. Undermanagers will typically try to decide how to begin cutting a development panel, and then return later to check up. In the dark and cloistered confines of the mine, it can be difficult to see what has been accomplished. During the fieldwork one undermanager spent several minutes intently scrutinising a dirty piece of paper, with some scrawled diagrams on it, before ejaculating: 'ahh, you've done fucking nothing!' The same manager later referred to his approach, of necessity, as 'getting them to do things without really telling them' (fieldnotes). Other fieldwork observations and interviews with deputies suggest the dominance of 'informal' supervisory strategies (Fortado, 1994), rather than direct or formalised control.

As Fine notes, 'Most occupations incorporate diverse tasks that have more or less creativity, autonomy, boredom, and goal-directedness. Each task or set of tasks conveys self-images and implications for identity' (1996: 112). The tasks carried out by longwall and panel development miners entail work with heavy equipment in the most dangerous, cloistered and uncomfortable of mine circumstances. As a longwall operator put it, 'sucking dust and fumes, it's not fun' (interview). The longwall and

panel development miners operate some of the largest self-propelling machines in existence. The longwall alone typically stretches for 250 metres. It comprises an interconnected series of large hydraulic rams that push up large metal plates (or 'chocks') to support the roof as coal is cut from the face by the lateral movements of a set of interconnected blades, called a 'shearer'. Panel development miners operate a tunnelling machine, which they refer to (after its make) as the 'ABM'.

Despite the physical discomforts of work the miners evince a sense of expertise at operating their machines, which influences their view of themselves as workers who have considerable 'insider knowledge' (Hodson, 2001: 156). They stress the importance of understanding the subtle interplay between their machines and the coal seam. An ABM operator spoke about:

when you are doing the developments, it's like working with timber. When you're working with the grain, it's fine. When you work across the grain, when you're doing cut-throughs, or when you're doing the longwall install blocks, right at the top, and widening out, you get problems with breaking away'. (Interview)

Longwall miners similarly refer to the many types of shear that they can make with the shearer, which vary by depth and blade angle. They talk of obtaining a strong sense of satisfaction from using their judgement to set up the longwall to cut coal from the face, a process that one miner described as 'Getting everything running smoothly...I know [my workmate] Robert is the same. He wants to get performance out of it, getting everything running right' (interview). Some miners develop a quasi-aesthetic appreciation for their ability to coordinate their machines: 'It's quite awesome to see the [longwall] machine work together. There are so many parts to synchronise'. This miner likened his job, at times, to that of a technician: 'a lot of ours is technical [work] with electronic movement of the chocks' (longwall operator, interview).

In their accounts of work, miners depict themselves as 'the experts' within their own 'downstairs' realm. They take considerable pride in being able to deploy their insider knowledge, as in an instance when one of the researchers stood too close to an

outcrop on the edge of a development panel – he was quickly told ‘that’s waiting to fall on you’ (fieldnotes). In the words of one longwall operator:

Everybody thinks they can come down here now – stone dust bags are ten kilos lighter, there’s no steels and no props, no heavy work....[They think] this is pretty easy. But...they always seem to get into trouble. They think they know and they think it is easy, but they’re not looking for that obvious thing that will come out and bite them. (Interview)

Miners thus mobilise insider knowledge in narratives of exclusion and inclusion, to differentiate themselves from neophytes and ‘outsiders’.

Longwall and panel development work is characterised by a low level of analysability – frequently there are no formal procedures to follow when problems are encountered. Miners instead rely on informal judgement and tacit skill. This was reinforced at a visit underground – albeit to a different mine site – when coal extraction at the longwall ceased because ‘a mistake’ had been made. It seemed that the initial sweeping ‘shear’ had been at the wrong pitch. The undermanager with whom we were travelling echoed this by saying ‘we probably made a mistake a while back’ (fieldnotes), but when questioned he was unable to articulate to us the precise nature of the mistake.

Irrespective of the level of productivity that results, miners emphasise that cooperation is needed just to operate the multi-functional heavy equipment at the coalface. An ABM operator describes how the two miners on the back of the machine have to work together in preparing to cut a path through the coal:

He has to have his fingers on the buttons at the same time, left- and right-hand side – it’s interlocked – or else it won’t come down. Once the canopy does come down, and everything is ready to move forward, unless you press the correct button on both sides according to a certain procedure, the miner driver can’t move the machine...[I]f you wanted to go down there and have a bitch of a day, you could stuff everybody up...You’ve got three operators

and if any one of them didn't want to play the game or cut coal, he could stuff the other two around quite easily. (Interview)

The metaphor that the miners use to convey the need to cooperate in uncomfortable and potentially dangerous circumstances is one of working in 'a crew'. Five miners work in a panel development crew – the three ABM operators, a shuttle car driver (who removes cut coal to extraction conveyors) and an assistant who supplies materials such as roof bolts and diesel. All are interdependent: 'if the shuttle car driver doesn't come back, the whole show stops. If the miner driver stops the machine, the whole show stops. Anybody can stuff the process up' (interview). A similar level of cooperation is required in operating the longwall. 'You've got to know what's going on. You haven't got time to ask how to do this, or how to do that' (longwall operator, interview).

Miners also stress their self-reliance. A 'good miner' is described as someone who knows how to operate their machine without hurting those with whom they work, as someone who 'gets on' with his crewmates while not letting them down. As an ABM operator put it,

In a sense, you are relying on everybody to watch your back to make sure the roof doesn't come down on top of you...[T]here's a real possibility of injuring somebody else through either your actions or non-actions. If you don't do something, the consequence is that somebody else could get hurt...unless you are on the ball one hundred percent of the time...[Y]ou have to slow down with the rest of the crew, you have to pick up with the rest of the crew'. (Interview)

Given the dangerous working conditions, and the attendant fact that the members of the longwall and development panel crews feel that they rely on each other, these miners profess intimate knowledge of each other's strengths and weaknesses. They claim to self-organise to compensate for crewmates' 'off-days', and provide mutual support.



If a guy comes in with a hangover or he hasn't had enough sleep, we put him on a job where he's not required to work at peak performance. Ninety percent of the time we are set in our jobs [within the crew], because we know them that well, we stay in those positions. Like Terry is an excellent miner driver. Kevin and me [are] excellent operators – roof bolt operators – and our shuttle car driver, you couldn't ask for a better shuttle car driver...[W]e can all interchange on different jobs, although we might not like them as much as the job that we prefer, but we still do them...We're put together as a team and over the years you just bond with one another. (Interview, panel development miner)

Miners thus have respect for technical proficiency. However, a premium also is placed on 'getting on' with one's crewmates, and the miners actively work at sustaining this sociability. A development panel miner said that

You really notice it when you take one member of a crew out and replace it with somebody else. You have to accommodate to his way of thinking...If one of our crew is off, you need somebody who's in there that not only understands the machinery and the job, but also understands the workings of the crew that you are working with. It's not good having some bloke who's come in from outbye, from delivering materials, and probably damn good at doing that, or driving the train up and down, he knows all the safety procedures for doing that. You take him off that job and put him in there [panel development], he becomes an inherent risk – even though he can do the job – because he hasn't been there as long as we have...[I]t's that time that makes it dangerous for everybody. (Interview)

In the same way that miners routinely swap positions within crews, they have their own techniques for dealing with individuals who are not liked. The 'fuckwits', 'slack-arses', and 'lazy bastards' are subject to the informal discipline of the workgroup – when men do not 'fit in' with a crew they are sometimes pushed out. To 'dob in' a crewmate to an undermanager was described by one longwall operator as 'against the culture', but the miners contrive with the deputies to have men removed.

[Y]ou can't control who comes into your team. The only control you've got is if you get a real slack person, then the team can put pressure on [the deputy] and say 'we don't want him here'. And the team can get rid of the character. The deputy can say we're not cutting coal because we've got that particular guy on the team. But by the same token, if that guy sort of gets on well with the guys but doesn't pull his weight doing the work, then they'll just put up with it. (Longwall operator, interview)

More direct tactics are sometimes used. At Slade one longwall 'chocker' transferred to another section of the miner after his crewmates continually collapsed the roof – a normal procedure in longwall mining – while he was still under the chocks.<sup>ii</sup> These examples give credence to a piquant observation offered in casual conversation by a former undermanager (now a risk manager): 'If he's a fuckwit, you want to fuck him off out of the team' (fieldnotes). However, worker evaluations of character and competence differ from those of managers.

Informal discipline extends to other groups on whom the longwall and panel development miners depend, as a result of sequential interdependence.

They come in here to do a job. If they don't do that job, they get criticised...It's not the manager who will let him know, it's the blokes on the ground floor. If the train driver is not doing his job, getting us in or out on time, or not bringing in materials, or not doing his job safely, or causes an accident, it's the blokes on the ground floor who will tell him, 'Hey, you've stuffed up! Can you pick your game up?' Same happens with us in the workplace. If you let one end of the vent tube go when you're putting it up [others would say] 'Come on, mate! What are you bunging on? Are you with us today or what? (Interview, panel development miner)

This quotation also captures the panel development miners' view of being responsible workers who are 'served' by other groups of miners. Similarly, one longwall miner gave the following description of himself: 'I work hard. I work...on the longwall', contrasting himself with those involved in what he described as 'secondary support work'. An ABM operator talked about

when you have had a bad day....Materials are not brought in, or there are insufficient supplies. It just slows the process down. So you're sitting on the machine...but there's nothing more you can do because the process outbye [mine services] has let you down.

Both the longwall and development panel miners see themselves as sitting at the apex of an informal status hierarchy that roughly descends from the coalface miners to the maintenance men (like electricians) and outbye workers who provide materials, down to those who engage in the important but 'dirty work' (Hughes, 1994) of methane gas drainage. A miner from this area confirmed this view: 'we're seen...as the arseholes who just drain gas' (fieldnotes). There is kudos associated with having the perceived qualities needed to work at the coalface. As another longwall miner said: 'we have cave-ins or falls or things go wrong on the longwall, and some guys don't want to do it because it's a dangerous or difficult job, and other guys just get in and do it' (interview).

The conferral of status is influenced by the operation of a collective incentive scheme that is based both on metres of coal cut in panel development and on tonnes of clean coal produced from longwall cutting. All miners throughout the colliery receive the same level of incentive payment. The perception of the longwall and panel development miners as the key 'earners' of the incentive enters into their own self-definition as avowedly 'responsible' workers: 'Where I work in the longwall...a lot of people don't want to work on the longwall; the longwall guys, they're already motivated guys anyway, because that's where the tonnes are' (interview).

The Slade longwall and panel development miners view themselves as self-reliant, locally prestigious workers with considerable insider knowledge, who are able to build and sustain relationships of trust, and who are competent to judge – and to criticise – the ability and character of their crewmates. The process of working together without direct supervision, and the attendant need to handle heavy machinery safely in an environment where communication is difficult, results in a shared narrative conception of what is a 'good miner' – which they work to sustain within their crews.<sup>iii</sup> Of equal importance to technical competence is the notion of 'fitting in'

with the crew. A technically ‘good miner’ will be supported by his crewmates when he comes to work drunk; a ‘lazy bastard’ may be tolerated as long as he ‘fits in’ with the crew; one who does not ‘fit in’ may be pushed out of the crew irrespective of his abilities. The miners felt it was their right to make these judgements of competence and character – to determine who is a ‘good miner’, who is a ‘deadhead’, who will be tolerated, and who will be ostracised. Consequently, as the following discussion shows, the miners experienced performance appraisal as an attempt to ‘impinge on their claimed expertise’ (Fine, 1996: 111).

### **PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL AT SLADE COLLIERY**

Attempts by senior managers to decrease the costs of extracting coal for export from Crown Minerals’ east coast coalmines formed the backdrop to the introduction of performance appraisal at Slade Colliery midway through 2000. Through an ongoing process of restructuring and cost cutting – as one senior personnel manager remarked – they had ‘squeezed the lemon pretty hard’, but felt there was room to squeeze it further by targeting individual performance (interview). A human resource manager who had been experimenting with a performance appraisal initiative at another of the Crown Minerals mines was co-opted by the top management team to design and implement a performance appraisal system across all the collieries in the east coast division. He copied a system from a steelworks owned by a different company, and got approval from divisional managers to introduce the system at Crown Minerals Collieries. Through this isomorphic process, a pre-existing system was superimposed onto the mines. At Slade Colliery there were no plans to reduce the workforce, so appraisal was not a pretext for redundancy but rather to increase labour productivity. The explicit intention was to compare miners, as indicated by the following comment by a senior personnel manager to a deputy who expressed qualms about the BARS system at a management meeting:

I’d use the example of an 80-year-old bricklayer who can only lay 100 bricks a day. He may be working to his full capacity, but I can’t wait 50 years for my house to be built so I’ll find someone else. I have to rate the bricklayer against the pace of others if I want my house finished in reasonable time.’ (Process Review Meeting, taped proceedings)

However, no formal links were made to other human resource functions, such as remuneration, training or promotion. The immediate concern was to ensure that the union acceded to its introduction, which took six separate visits to the Industrial Relations Commission (an arbitral employment court).

The appraisal system comprised 13 performance criteria grouped into four areas: safety, quality and environment; attendance and time management; teamwork; and performance on the job. Each criterion began with a descriptor, followed by a behaviourally anchored rating scale ranging from '1' (unsatisfactory) to '5' (meets all expectations). Each mine general manager had discretion to choose who would do the rating. At Slade Colliery, the rating was done on a functional basis by the coordinators. The original round of reviews, termed the benchmarking review, was intended to familiarise miners with the system, and to provide a basis for discussion about how performance could be improved. However, the miners were intensely hostile towards the benchmarking process. Many raters drew arrows left or right above the score they had given, trying to modify the rating's 'feel' of absolute and final pronouncement on the worthiness of a miner.

Once raters had completed their initial ratings, 'calibration meetings' were held during which distributions of scores were compared across departments. Under pressure from Crown's CEO to get the benchmark round completed, the performance reviews with the miners were launched, followed by process review meetings where the general manager, the coordinators, the shift undermanagers, human resource officials and union officials reflected on the performance review process. Many of the line managers were themselves critical of the appraisal system: 'We used to say that someone was a lazy bugger, now we say he's a D. I guess we've just formalised it' (taped proceedings, undermanager).

Although the review process was supposed to occur annually, the next round at Slade did not begin until early 2002. The rating scales were changed from '1 to 5' to 'A to E' ratings, in an (unsuccessful) attempt to prevent miners from aggregating the scores and making comparisons on this basis. Also, the second round was rated and reviewed by the undermanagers – rather than the coordinators – of the longwall and panel

development miners. At this writing (April 2004), the third appraisal reviews had not begun at Slade because appeals by three miners against their ratings from the second round had been overlooked. One longwall operator, who continually delayed his appeal hearing, further held up the process. Even the senior personnel officer, who seemed enthusiastic in his earlier bricklayer comparisons, was by this time despondent:

I don't have very positive thoughts about [Slade]. Whatever we do there will not be pretty. No matter how we do it, we'll receive flack. Most of the supervisors are pretty unenthusiastic about the whole process, and the men don't like it. So we'll go through the process, but I don't feel optimistic about any positive outcomes. (Personal communication, March 2004)

### **OCCUPATIONAL IDENTITY DISRUPTIONS**

To the extent that an occupational identity is emergent in local contexts, a 'disruption' to that identity can occur – whether deliberately or unintentionally – through a specific managerial intervention (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 632). This phenomenon was the net effect of the introduction of performance appraisal at Slade Colliery. Miners' reactions to being appraised were reinforced during survey distribution when a miner, after observing many of his workmates filling out our survey, remarked of the appraisal system: 'Whenever a bunch of coalminers come up and show interest [in what researchers are doing], you know they think its fuckin' shit' (fieldnotes). Between the two key groups of miners on whom we focus, the reaction was overwhelmingly negative. 'When I was first told about all this, it was met with disgust across the whole workforce, myself included' (ABM operator, interview). In written survey responses, development panel operators variously described the appraisal process as 'very demeaning', the ratings as 'bullshit', and review meetings as 'belittling'; one longwall operator captures the disruptive effects of the appraisal system in his exhortation to mine managers to 'stop fucking about with my life'. Even those who received good ratings were unhappy. As one such miner observes: 'We're totally against this whole system and it's not because we got a bad rating – we got a bloody good rating' (fieldnotes).

The following fragment of text provides a useful reference point in interpreting such reactions. A development panel operator, who doubles as the Slade local union secretary, wrote it for distribution among his workmates.

[T]his power wielding exercise...does little but create low self esteem[,] spite and negative responses to other workers [k]nowing full well the importance of team work [and] friendship...[I]n the coal mining game the trust to watch out for each others [sic] back has been betrayed by the slotting of these employees into these so called egyptian pyramids.

Miners claim the right and expertise to judge ability, and that they know how to relate to others in building crew sociability and trust in a dangerous working environment. These relationships were described as being a key feature of their experience of work in the mines. Appraisal was regarded as contravening this right and disrupting these relationships.

Being rated challenged the miners' views of themselves as the best judges of each other's abilities. The 1 to 5 rating scale on a set of 13 criteria led miners to aggregate and compare their scores. Many of the commonly regarded 'good miners' got mediocre ratings, and some of the 'lazy bastards' got high ratings. In the words of the union branch president, 'The scores are fucked. Some reviewers said all positives, and still gave the miner a three' (performance review meeting, taped proceedings). Some were concerned about particularistic evaluations: 'If your face fits, you get a good review; if not, you get shit' (fieldnotes). Strong feelings arose when those in the same work group were rated differently. The following comment by one of panel development miners typifies this problem:

There were guys in our crew who got knocked down [i.e. low ratings]. And they were very resentful of the fact that we were working in a crew...that blokes that they were working beside...got a higher grade. He's got a C and I've got an A, and I'm standing right beside him. He's doing the same work as I am, as a crew, and we're all working together. We should all be the same. (Interview)

A union official gave a similar account of the unsettling effect that resulted from rating differentials:

You've had people doing exactly the same job, in particular two drillers, who have worked together doing exactly the same job for a number of years...exactly the same qualifications, but because one guy got on the phone at the end of the shift and gave the report to whoever, he was seen as being as being the driver or controller of the group, and was rated something like eight points higher than the other chap. Neither of the two could believe the difference in the ratings. They both knew exactly what each one done. (Interview)

The miners, who profess intimate knowledge of their crewmates' strengths and weaknesses, and the capacity to informally praise and rebuke them, were disturbed at being rated by 'outsiders'. As one development panel operator puts it, 'How can this cunt review me. I have not worked with him and do not know him' (survey response). Specific tasks were of particular concern to some miners. An ABM operator was assessed by an undermanager on his skill at dyna-bolting the mine roof, but 'he wouldn't have a fuckin' clue how to do that. So he doesn't know how to rate [you]...he rates you as a C' (fieldnotes).

The appraisal criteria differed substantially from the miners' own tacit sense of what makes a good miner. A longwall operator spoke of a miner with whom he had worked, and for whom he had considerable respect, due to the support he provided:

[T]here's one guy in particular – he's been here a long time, and he's probably one of the best miners around...but he didn't get an 'A' because his personal skills are lacking. But in our industry, does that really matter?...If you were in the trenches with him, he'd probably be the first one there beside you in a team sense, and take it on. But if you were the manager or the undermanager, he'd take you on. (Interview)

Comparative ratings breached collectiveness within the crews. One of the researchers had just witnessed the aboveground address by the undermanager at the start of the



shift – referred to colloquially as the ‘karaoke’ meeting – shortly before interviewing the following longwall miner:

You seen it at that meeting there. People give a lot of people a hard time. So if we found that someone had a C, and most guys come out and say, ‘how did it go’, and they say, ‘I got a C’...and [later when] they do something wrong, there’d be ‘No wonder you’re a C’er’. You know what I mean? You don’t want to be a bloody C! (Interview)

Some of this ribbing was described as just friendly banter, but miners who were rated lower than their crewmates sometimes took it badly. In turn, low scoring team members mocked high scorers. The preceding miner, who actually received an ‘A’, continued:

You’re ‘teacher’s pet’ or ‘crawler’ or this or that....[I]t does hurt, but you learn to develop a thick skin to it. It’s something you don’t need in your life, but it’s something you just learn to put up with. (Interview)

More extreme comments recorded in fieldnotes and survey responses included ‘it’s broken up teams’, and ‘these ratings have set men against each other’.

Longwall and development panel miners initiated more than half of the formal appeals of ratings. As is evident in the following comment by a union official, himself a longwall operator, a range of sense-making rationalisations of these appeals were given.

Some people will accept their rating and will not bother appealing anything at all, even though they don’t believe it is right. They’ll just take it. Because they treat it with contempt...Other people, because of strong personalities, get very agitated. (Interview)

Although there was nothing ‘material’ or tangible at stake, for some miners an appeal was seen as a way of restoring their position within their crew. Moreover, some miners used these appeals to hold up the appraisal process. As noted above, one

longwall miner delayed his appraisal hearing for many weeks by claiming to be ‘too busy’, resulting in third round of appraisals for the entire mine site not commencing on time.

The vehemence of the miners’ reactions to being rated and their willingness to dispute the rating they received, when there were no formal rewards or punishments associated with ratings, stemmed from the degree to which the appraisal system impinged upon their occupational identity. The longwall and panel development miners are used to working together in crews, where fellow crewmates make informal judgements about the strengths and weaknesses of their crewmates, and for whom the latter are the key reference group for matters of ‘performance’. Performance appraisal disrupted the self-positioning and self-organisation of the miners in their crews, thus challenging their occupational self-image as a group of knowledgeable workers who are capable of making their decisions about their work and their relationships with their peers – a group who their supervisors and other miners are regarded as servicing. Using a metaphor from Darr and Scarselletta (2002: 66), the performance appraisal mirror held up to miners by managers does not ‘reflect the image’ that the miners ‘hold of themselves’. The occupational identity work occasioned by disruption to this collective self-conception is examined in the next section.

### **MINERS’ NARRATIVE IDENTITY WORK**

While identity work is ongoing, as Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003: 1165) note, ‘specific events, encounters, transitions and surprises’ can ‘compel more concentrated identity work.’ The introduction of performance appraisal at Slade Colliery qualifies as one event that compelled such work, by which the miners reinforced self-belief in their distinctiveness. As a narrative construct, an occupational identity is principally given in ‘the capacity to keep a particular narrative going’ (Giddens, 1991: 54). Identity work is apparent in the talk of the miners, captured in interviews and written survey responses. This talk is not ‘separate’ from the collective identity forged ‘in practice’ through workplace interaction (**Wenger, xxx**), but rather through a process of ‘analogical apperception’ by which ongoing relationships with others are ‘imagined’, it recursively instantiates, bolsters and reproduces that identity in a specific narrative configuration. Below we identify four sets of narrative resources

that miners press into service in their occupational identity work, which is central to the reproduction of shared occupational identities.

*'Mateship'*

Some miners draw on a narrative of mateship to reinforce a sense of crew collectivism and trust in the face of the perceived divisions caused by appraisal. One of the development panel miners remarks:

Everybody has been working here for donkey's ages so they know what jobs they are good at, they know their tolerances, they know their [peers'] family history. They know if they are upset, if they've got a problem at home, they look after one another in that respect...If someone had an accident at home, or their wife or the children were sick, they feel a bit run down in themselves because they hadn't had a good night's sleep – we'd compensate for that. The camaraderie is still there to look after one another. That's still there, even with this [PA] mechanism. I don't think you'd ever get rid of that. That camaraderie will never go away....[Y]ou still got that camaraderie and everybody is still looking after their mates.

As the start of this quotation implies, mateship is also used to evoke a sense of shared history. At Slade Colliery there was gas explosion in the late 1970s in which several miners were killed. For this miner, talk of ratings being unable to breach strong ties of mateship led him to emote:

[H]aving come into the industry, fresh 22 years ago, working through numerous strikes, they've had fires, they've had – the place blew up, for Christ's sake! – you get all these emotions coming through. And I dunno whether I've ever come across such a group of people...You've always got someone looking out for you. (Interview)

As noted above, a key aspect of the occupational identity of miners is pride felt in the ability not only to withstand difficult working conditions, but also to self-organise. For another longwall operator, the notion of mateship was used to evoke this sense of miners continuing to exhibit modesty and staunchness in the face of adversity:

There's another individual who was upgraded about six or seven marks, from his benchmark review to his first round review... but [he] just took it with a grain of salt...And the perception of everyone around him was, he had not changed. They still thought he was the same bloke....You don't hear people bragging about 'I'm an A', or this. They don't take it with any great pride. If they are a high B or an A grader, that's just what's handed out to them and they accept it. (Interview)

Masculinist narratives of mateship have particular cultural 'strength' in the Australian milieu (Mewett, 1999). They are employed to bolster the miners' belief in their ability to sustain crew solidarity – a key aspect of the occupational identity of the miners – in the face of divisions wrought by seemingly arbitrary rating differentials.

#### *'Maturity'*

Identity work consequent upon occupational image-violation caused by rating also is evident in the miners' use of the social archetype of parent-child relationships, and the associated narratives of 'infantilism' and 'maturity'. These themes are strongly evident in comments by the following longwall miner:

I think this whole PMS [performance management system] thing erodes our dignity. It makes us feel that we are being treated like kids. We're grown men! That's no way to treat adults...I think it boils down to respect. The reviews tell the men that management doesn't respect their motives, their experience, and their years of service to the company. (Interview)

A miner who depicted himself and his crewmates as 'mature' workers, who responsibly deploy their many years of experience, echoed this sentiment:

[W]hen it comes to performance reviews, the bottom line is how much money...[Slade] Mine makes at the end of the year. What tonnes are cut. And that's how the mine should be judged. Like I said, you've got a mature workforce. (Interview)

Or, as another miner put it, rating is ‘divisive, immature [and]...unnecessary given the experience and age of the workforce’ (survey response). This resonated with comments by other miners about not requiring child-like ‘punishments’, such as ‘We don’t need the big stick’ (interview). Miners present themselves as ‘mature’ workers who know how to ‘cut coal’, if they are appropriately supported in their efforts.

Management should listen to the workers. Show them some respect for their many, many years of experience. They know their jobs. Management should listen to their requests, and suggestions, and follow up what they say they will do with some action. (Interview)

[Managers should] stop being so cri[ti]cal on the workforce. It is a work place not a school Everyone knows what they have to do. Not being told every little thing. It’s degrading. (Survey response, development panel operator)

An ABM operator gave the following answer to a question about whether the performance appraisal made any difference to how he did his job:

No! In that regard, it doesn’t. Because we are on the coalface, working on the ABM in the development panel. If you go in there and everything is running right, your work can’t deteriorate. I mean, that’s what you do, you drive the machine. (Interview)

Another operator similarly emphasised that the review process is an unwarranted intrusion on his working life:

I keep a low profile at work...I accept tasks given, work with anyone [and] accept their idiocincracies [sic]...do my work and go home [and] take very little time off. I think I am a good employee...But to some these days it does not seem enough. (Survey response)

Through these ‘maturity’ narratives the miners’ stress their sense of themselves as responsible workers, for whom appraisal is unnecessary.

*'Mismanagement'*

Evident in the miners talk also are narratives of 'mismanagement', a subtext of which is managerial incompetence (Hodson, 2001). Public conceptions of a managers' job, or notions of the proper 'character' of a manager (MacIntyre, 1981), are lenses through which the actions of managers at the Slade site are refracted.

I...think there's something wrong with the mentality of management around here...What is this thing called 'performance'?!...Every year they cut the labour force, and expect more and more. Why should we be forever screwed in our working lives to produce more and more, with less and less? I mean – we're not fucking machines! (Interview, development panel operator)

In a survey response, another operator observed that a proper course of action would be to

Sack the present management because all they are interested in is screwing the workforce not managing the coalmine as a viable responsible business. They only seem to employ deadwood not a proper responsible management team.

Managers are not only incompetent; they are not to be trusted because they are not 'straight' with the workforce when appraising their performance. Elicited in the context of talking about rating interviews, one miner cast aspersions on the character of the mine manager:

The manager we have now has absolutely no personal skills at all. He comes across as being arrogant. If he is confronted with something that he is not prepared for, he brushes it off, almost with contempt...Management has this ego problem. They have to be right. They have to be in control. When we go into a performance review, their egos are on the line, so they don't listen. (Interview, longwall operator)

The notion of mismanagement was repeatedly expressed, by a range of longwall and panel development miners, through comments specifically about a lack of maintenance:

They know everything has to run, but there is no foresight here. Like if you own a car, or even your household maintenance, you have so much for you household budget, and you maintain things. If your jug blows a fuse, you go and buy a new one. But everything just seems to be let go, or to lapse. They get to a stage where they say, we'll do this vehicle but we won't do the other ones. Every piece of machinery in this place is an absolute must. (Interview, development panel operator)

I think they waste a lot of money in a lot of areas where I really don't feel they need to spend the money – because if they spent the money in a lot of places that need it, they would get a lot more coal out a lot easier. (Interview, development panel operator)

The general manager, you know, he can only see what he wants you to hear....[Regarding] longwall 401 [he says] 'I know the roads are a problem fellows, but by the time we get to 402 we will have a handle on it'. We are just about finished [longwall] 404...405 is ready and they haven't improved...[I]f you cut fifteen minutes off the travelling time...you would cut a lot more coal....[R]oads aren't brought up in your review! (Interview, longwall operator)

This mismanagement was seen to extend to the appraisal system itself, as further evidence of incompetence, and of wasted resources:

For them to bring in a system that rates them [fellow miners], and a system that rates them poorly, when the system itself is poor, as the majority of people see it, has just a total negative effect on everybody...[I]t's a waste of energy; it's a waste of money. All the effort that is put into it could be much better put into other areas. (Interview, longwall operator)

A development panel miner reaffirmed this point, as follows:

People get pissed off. They don't want to be downgraded. Really, they don't want to be praised [either]...They go down there, they do their job to the best of their ability, they don't come here to get hurt, and they don't come here to have shit put on them' (Interview, panel development operator)

Narratives of mismanagement thus were invoked to sustain a key facet of the miners' occupational identity. As the following two comments by panel development operators illustrate, mismanagement serves as a 'contrast device' (Foley and Faircloth, 2003: 165) with which they sustain their view of themselves as experienced and responsible workers who do not need to be performance appraised, and who could 'cut more coal' if only they had better systems.

You'd have to ask them [the managers] what do they want out of the workforce that they aren't already getting? In my opinion, I think they are just justifying their existence...I mean, you've got an excellent workforce down there now. At this stage of the game, going through all the ups and downs and the troubles we've been through, I honestly don't think the company deserves the workforce they've got. I think we deserve a better management system than the one we've got. (Interview)

[Managers should] show more appreciation for what is done and leave me alone to do what I do. This colliery has broken every record available recently – we know what to do! Conversely management incompetence has been extremely high. Practice what you preach. (Survey response)

### *'Judgement rights'*

The fourth type of narrative resource drawn upon by the miners, in their identity work, is based on talk of who has knowledge of the work process. This is akin to the 'notion of unrecognized worker knowledge' used in the discursive resistance efforts of service workers studied by Ball and Wilson (2000: 561). This notion is evident in the following comment by a longwall operator who, in criticising the rating system, claimed to be cautious in judging the work of others:



What I classify as someone slack is someone not doing what I can do. I'm setting a high benchmark there. There are people here better qualified in the areas they have trained for that I consider slack. I consider the bathroom attendant [to be] a lazy arsehole. But to do his job, I couldn't do it because I don't understand it....I don't know what's required of me, and I'd just be at a loss until I got up to speed with it. (Interview)

The idea that miners possess insider knowledge is likewise apparent in comments from interviews such as: 'Some guys say [about their rating] 'fuck, I don't care. I know what I do all right'; 'I believe that most guys underground know their jobs' – the implication being that managers do not, as shown by the following excerpts.

A boss who has been here five minutes will come down and ask you something. You will tell them but they take absolutely no notice, walk away and do what they want to do anyway, even though we have been working on the job for 20 years. (Interview, longwall operator)

I could go down there today and the machinery is not working, and work harder. I could go down there and everything is going well, and cut 6,000 tonnes and the manager thinks I've had a good day, and work easier. No sweat. (Interview, panel development operator)

In the case of the miners, the notion of insider knowledge is linked to discussion of who is competent to judge their expertise and effort – and thus to deployment of a narrative that we have termed 'judgement rights'.

A lot of the people who are making the judgements, as in coordinators, are rarely underground. They don't see the hard yards being done over a long period of time. That's their snapshot of it...but they don't see the day-to-day grind. (Interview, longwall operator)

Ratings don't tell the true story of what's happening in the production process...[Y]ou can't beat experience. They're not measuring that. The

performance appraisals aren't technically based. They're subjective. They're based on your face. Whether the manager likes you or not. (Interview, development panel operator)

Talk of judgement rights reaffirms the perceived expertise and right of the miners themselves to judge and discipline within the context of their crews. This is illustrated in the following comment about an undermanager who used to be a longwall miner, in his efforts to rate miners in the second round of appraisals:

[Name omitted] was the laziest fucking fed [front-line miner] on the job. He went away and did some courses, and now he wants to tell me how to do my job. No way! I give it straight back to him and tell him to fuck off – he has no idea of how hard we work. (fieldnotes)

### *Summary*

While the discourse of 'judgement rights' is similar to the 'power-through-experience repertoire' identified by Ball and Wilson (2000: 599), it just one of a number of narrative resources that were drawn on by the Slade Colliery miners. Whereas the latter authors argue that its use – albeit by performance monitored office workers – was the outcome of an authoritarian 'normalizing managerial discourse' (ibid.: 560-1), we argue that these resources were invoked by miners because they were practically useful in response to a particular event: an identity disruption. These are not merely differences in interpretation or the result of contextual variations (e.g. studying blue-collar rather than white-collar workers), but rather stem from our contrasting views in regards to the role of discourse in the constitution of the appraised person.

Important to the reproduction of collective identities are individual acts of narration by which persons reaffirm their attachment to enduring relationships with others, as a source of meaning. In the act of talking about the performance appraisal system, miners drew on a number of (culturally derived) narrative resources, like mateship, that had resonance with the local work context. These resources were used to 'provisionally create occupational meanings' (Fine, 1996: 111) with which they reinforced their likeness to some and difference from others. The 'mateship' and

‘maturity’ narratives were used to aver a sense of ‘sameness’ – among the longwall and panel development miners, and also with other groups of miners who at various points in our research were cast as ‘others’ who ‘served’ them. Equally, a key aspect of identification is through differentiation whereby ‘we define ourselves *negatively*, in terms of being different from somebody else. Those who are not “us” define who “we” are’ (Edley and Wetherell, 1997: 208, emphasis in original). Through narratives of ‘mismanagement’ and ‘judgement rights’ miners reaffirmed their fundamental difference from managers, thus reinforcing their own collective identity.

## CONCLUSION

This study has two sets of implications for analysing critically the reactions of persons who are subjected to appraisal. The first concerns sensitivity to industry context and timing. Studies of organisations in the service sector imply that performance appraisal elicits a proliferation of subject positions (Ball and Wilson, 2000; Austrin, 1994). By contrast, we argue that performance appraisal at Slade Colliery did not constitute new identities through managerial discourse, but rather challenged an already existing and enduring (occupational) identity that emerged in the work process. In heavy industries, where occupational affiliations are particularly strong, it is just as likely that appraisal is not productive of new positions (Austrin, 1994), but rather disruptive of existing ones. Moreover, through narrative identity work, these positions may be trenchantly defended as frameworks that give structure and meaning to the appraised person’s experience of work. This type of effect is more likely to be detected using the longitudinal approach we have opted for, rather than in the snapshot studies that characterise much of the critical management literature on appraisal.

There is also a need for greater sensitivity to occupational divisions, in the analysis of processes by which appraisal is resisted. Despite efforts to create artificial corporate cultures that displace occupations as the basis of social solidarity (Casey, 1995), occupations remain an enduring part of organisational life. At the very least, this is by virtue of the phenomenological attachment of members to ‘occupational thinking’ – particularly in industries such as coal mining. Equally, it cannot be assumed that appraisal affects in the same way all workers in a putatively similar ‘occupation’ in a single organisation, as identifications differ. The labour process view that appraisal

gives rise to horizontal divisions amongst workers (see Newton and Findlay, 1996: 47), misses the point that workers are already divided, not least along occupational lines. Greater attention must be given to subtler processes by which appraisal exacerbates or sublimates existing divisions.

The second set of implications concern developing conceptual frameworks that give a greater role to agency in the construction of the appraised person's identity. Our approach, which in its view of identity work is based on the notion of narrative identity rather than poststructuralist (in particular, Foucauldian) conceptions of identity as a function of discursive systems (McNay, 1999), has particular merit in studying an industry where occupational identities are distinctive and strong. However we believe that this approach merits broader application – irrespective of context.

With regard to resistance, Newton argues that 'within a Foucauldian framework it is hard to gain a sense of how active agential selves "make a difference" through "playing" with discursive practices' – resulting in a 'Catch-22' whereby discourses are regarded as being affirmed even while they are being actively opposed or rejected (1998: 425-6). This effect is evident in Ball and Wilson's poststructuralist study of appraised office workers, in which even the construction of 'resistant positions' is regarded as having stemmed from a 'process of subjectification to...institutional discourses' – where the latter is construed as a 'discursive system' (2000: 561). In contrast, the miners we studied are not captives of organisational or institutional discourses of 'performance', which they reproduce even in their opposition to the rating system (the 'Catch-22' scenario). Rather, performance appraisal resulted in miners creatively drawing on a range of narratives that are 'appropriated as a resource for the purpose at hand' (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 2000: 41), namely to reinforce a collective self-conception that is subject to perceived threat. To the extent that miners imaginatively *use* language in their identity work rather than being *used by* language, appraised persons can be regarded as intrinsically deploying a measure of agency in their opposition to being rated. This is not merely (nor even primarily) a contextual claim, but rather one that stems from the view of identity and language that researchers adopt in the first place.

While contemporary HRM performance appraisal techniques that stress monitoring and classification are well suited to demonstrating the utility of Foucauldian approaches, the time has come to insert even greater theoretical pluralism into the critical analysis of appraisal. It is our view that a narrative view of occupations and identities is a good place to start.

## **APPENDIX: METHODS**

The authors conducted the research for this paper over a period of three years. Ongoing access to the multiple stakeholders in this longitudinal study provided the opportunity to explore the miners' reactions to two formal rounds of the appraisal process at Slade. Altogether approximately 60 hours of fieldwork was carried out. The fieldwork included attendance at management and union meetings where calibration of ratings and reviews of the appraisal process were conducted. Underground observation of the work routines firsthand during mine-site tours was accompanied by informal discussions with the personnel involved at the locations visited, including miners who perform tasks other than longwall or panel development work. One of the researchers (PM) attended a six-hour training session for raters; he was also permitted to attend and tape the proceedings of two process review meetings, where managers met to discuss and critique the appraisal process at Slade Colliery. The fieldwork also involved attending numerous so-called 'karaoke meetings', where undermanagers provide instructions to the miners prior to them entering the mine, and informally chatting with miners at the train terminus.

At the request of the senior personnel manager who originally vouchsafed our research access, an anonymous non-representative survey was designed to gauge the reactions of miners to the rating process after the second round of appraisal interviews. The survey provided the opportunity for further fieldwork, and was designed in an open-ended manner so that miners could write textual accounts of how rating had affected them. In total, 55 useable surveys were returned. In the process of distributing and retrieving the surveys, two eighteen-hour days were spent at the colliery, informally chatting with miners in the muster room.

A total of 35 formal (taped and transcribed) interviews, lasting on average approximately 90 minutes each, were conducted. Thirteen of the interviews were with longwall and panel development operators who work at Slade Colliery. In addition, there have been several phone interviews with miners in the two key groups, some with operators who initiated the calls to the researchers and wished to remain anonymous. Two Slade deputies (supervisors, that is) were formally interviewed. Three miners who are not members of the longwall or panel development crews were

interviewed, for comparative purposes. The remaining interviews are with personnel managers, general mine managers, accountants, training officers, health and safety officers, coordinators, and undermanagers – not all of whom worked at Slade Colliery. The researchers also gained wide-ranging access to organizational documents relating to the performance management process.

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<sup>i</sup> Labour process scholars later appropriated this concept (see Friedman, 1977); it has recently resurfaced in the management literature on identity (see Ezzamel et al., 2001: 1073). Unlike its use in the latter study, where responsible autonomy is equated with informal practices that are part of an indulgency pattern, this concept is used in our paper in line with its original meaning. It denotes the active capacity for self-regulation, exercised in carrying out work in situations of task interdependency.

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<sup>ii</sup> A senior human resources manager provided an account of this incident, which occurred approximately two years before the research started. The miners' experiences of this practice came to light only after he had moved on from the longwall.

<sup>iii</sup> In their study of technicians, Darr and Scarselletta draw attention to a similar attribution (2002: 71).