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Working at the coalface: being a miner in times of change

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Abstract

A case study analysis of the introduction of a new system for appraising worker performance in an Australian coal mine is used to explore the related concepts of identity and culture that are central to explaining individual and group behaviour in organizational context (Irrmann, 2002: 164). The change initiative was initiated by management following a search and evaluation of the general business environment to see what other organizations were doing to improve their operations. There was no prior consultation with employees, nor were any attempts made to involve mine workers before implementing what management described as a more 'scientific' and 'transparent' system of employee performance management. As it turned out, this change disrupted operations, introduced new procedures that were scorned and fiercely resisted by miners, and served to increase levels of discontent and hostility among employees. One of the major threats that this new initiative posed for employees centred on the issue of identity. Violations to the norms and expectations of miners undermined the culture of the workplace and disrupted the social environment within which work took place. This resulted in heightened sensitivity, the generation of stories to make sense of what was going on and a series of reactions by employees to these identity threats. We examine these processes in our analyses of new empirical data and in so doing draw attention to the importance of workplace culture and the identity of miners in explaining employee behaviour in response to a managerially imposed change. We commence with a brief discussion of our key concepts, which is followed by an outline of our research strategy and methodology prior to presenting the main body of our argument.

Keywords

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WORKING AT THE COALFACE: BEING A MINER IN TIMES OF CHANGE

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WORKING AT THE COALFACE: BEING A MINER IN TIMES OF CHANGE

Introduction

A case study analysis of the introduction of a new system for appraising worker performance in an Australian coal mine is used to explore the related concepts of identity and culture that are central to explaining individual and group behaviour in organizational context (Irrmann, 2002: 164). The change initiative was initiated by management following a search and evaluation of the general business environment to see what other organizations were doing to improve their operations. There was no prior consultation with employees, nor were any attempts made to involve mine workers before implementing what management described as a more 'scientific' and 'transparent' system of employee performance management. As it turned out, this change disrupted operations, introduced new procedures that were scorned and fiercely resisted by miners, and served to increase levels of discontent and hostility among employees. One of the major threats that this new initiative posed for employees centred on the issue of identity. Violations to the norms and expectations of miners undermined the culture of the workplace and disrupted the social environment within which work took place. This resulted in heightened sensitivity, the generation of stories to make sense of what was going on and a series of reactions by employees to these identity threats. We examine these processes in our analyses of new empirical data and in so doing draw attention to the importance of workplace culture and the identity of miners in explaining employee behaviour in response to a managerially imposed change. We commence with a brief discussion of our key concepts, which is followed by an outline of our research strategy and methodology prior to presenting the main body of our argument.

Identity and culture at work

There is a large literature that tackles the difficult concepts of identity (see, for example, Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000; Alvesson, 2000; Grant & Shields, 2006; Watson, 2008) and culture (Schein, 1985; Smircich & Calas, 1987) and as such, we have necessarily been selective in developing our own position that is taken up later in our case analyses of change in a mining colliery in Australia. These two concepts are closely related (see Ashcraft, 2005; Deal & Kennedy, 2000; Irrmann, 2002); for example, the early discussions by Salaman (1974) and Blauner (1960) highlight how occupational communities arise where communal identity is fostered and developed in work environments. These occupational communities

are especially prevalent in dangerous work settings where individuals depend on each other for safety, in cases where employees regularly work together on the same shiftwork rosters, and among workers who operate in spatial isolation (for example, logging communities or oil workers stationed on off-shore platforms). These factors encourage the development of occupational communities characterised by a strong sense of *common identity* which is relayed and reinforced through the *shared experiences* at work. These relationships often extend outside of the workplace in, for example, employees socialising more with fellow workers during their non-work hours than with people who work in other occupations. As Watson (1987:164) explains: ‘The essence of community is an integrated set of social relationships, a system which provides its members with a sense of common identity and a shared values system.’ These notions of identity, sharedness and the development of close relationships in and outside of the work environment is echoed by the conceptualisation of Van Maanen and Barley (1984:287) who define an occupational community as:

a group of people who consider themselves to be engaged in the same sort of work, whose identity is drawn from their work; who share with one another a set of values, norms, and perspectives that apply but extend beyond work related matters, and whose social relationships meld work and leisure.

If we apply these criteria to miners, then we can identify common elements across mining communities, for example, in having to work in dangerous underground environments where strong social bonds are built in relying on and working closely with fellow workers, in the sharing of these and other work related experiences, in the stories that emerge and are developed, in engaging in social activities outside of work; as well as more local factors that shape workplace cultures. In this regard, we can identify a close association and overlap with the concept of organizational culture ‘the way we do things around here’ (Deal & Kennedy, 2000:4) with the latter being more broadly defined and with the former based more firmly within the context of the work environment. Whilst we recognise that organizational culture is a controversial concept that does not lend itself to a single definition (Ott, 1989:69), we emphasize the *discursive interplay of individuals* with the *sharedness of meanings* and understandings within identifiable groups. Or to put it another way, the way culture is maintained at the level of the group and acts to enable, constrain and guide action at the level of the individual (Barley, 1983). We utilize the definition of organizational culture forwarded by Bloor and Dawson (1994: 276) as:

a patterned system of perceptions, meanings and beliefs about the organization which facilitates sense-making amongst a group of people sharing common experiences and guides individual behaviour at work.

The link between individual sense-making and group-level phenomena is the ‘sharedness’ of meanings that are often articulated in the development of agreed stories of events and understandings that emerge and develop over time. In order to make sense of an ambiguous or changed environment that challenges perceptions, individuals seek out a shared sense of social reality to make sense of current and subsequent events. The process of sense-making is partial and ongoing at individual and group level, and what is perceived as ‘real’ is contingent upon the constantly shifting relationship between individual members of a group, their relations with others and the organizational environment within which they reside (Mumby, 1988). Occupational communities and workplace cultures provide the context within which identities are formed, developed and revised and as such, our intention is to examine individual sense-making processes and the place of stories as a vehicle for individuals and groups to make sense of and give sense to changes in organizational life. Furthermore, the extent to which groups get their values and goals accepted as legitimate or the processes by which they are de-legitimized reflect political processes that come into stark relief when conflicts occur, especially when a dominant group imposes new ways of doing things on a group further down in the formal organizational ‘pecking order’. As we shall see, these changes challenged the culture and identity of what it means to be a miner as new ways of evaluating work performance were imposed by management.

In moving between workplace cultures and the broader occupational community of being a miner, we are concerned with the process of identity formation in being a miner at the colliery under study (henceforth referred to as Dover Colliery). These processes include, for example, dealing with Dover management or particular individuals or groups at the mine, in the local interactions that occur at work and form part of daily work routines, as well as the shared experiences through dealing with or being a part of unanticipated events (such as, unforeseen technical and human contingencies). These elements combine in dynamic configurations and reconfigurations of miners’ identities (they are open to change) whilst also providing robust sharedness of meaning and temporal interconnectedness (they support continuity of fundamental elements of what it means to be a miner) and are shaped both by broader identities (occupational communities) of what it means to be a miner whilst also

being grounded within a particular local culture (the sub-culture of miners working in the context of the Dover Colliery).

We conceptualise identities as: *multidimensional dynamic entities that are co-created in relationships with others, that are shaped by individual and groups experiences and that develop and evolve over time and in context.* In other words, they involve dynamic self-reflexive processes shaped by the beliefs and values that are socially constructed and mediated by experiences (past, present and future) and through interactions with others. Each of us accommodates a range of social identities that allow us to behave in ‘appropriate’ ways in a range of different groups that we are members of (Collier, 1994). As Ashcraft (2005:71-72) states: ‘identities are neither given nor fixed; they take shape, entangle and evolve through discourse’. Stories, rites and rituals are all part of the identity process and thus from our perspective, the occupational identity of being a miner is associated with a number of stable elements reflected in the histories, traditions and stories shared by miners as well as evolving elements linked with broader patterns of change and more local developments. We therefore contend that there is a wide range of working and other relationships, experiences and activities that shape and reshape identities in context and over time. A central element to making sense of these processes and giving sense to individual and group experiences are the stories that capture past events and traditions as well as those that emerge and are revised and re-storied in the context of new developments and ongoing change. In this, there is continuity and change and as such, we utilize our dynamic conceptualisation of identity that operates at a number of different levels from the occupational identity of being a miner or a nurse (as in the notion of an occupational community), to being a particular type of miner (for example, working on the longwall), or nurse (for example, specialising in the nursing of geriatrics), through to more localised workplace identities in which common agreements and individual differences can be discerned (working on an intensive care ward in a particular hospital). It is important to restate that whilst we are concerned with the shared experiences of Dover Colliery miners to an imposed change, the identities of miners can vary between individuals and that this ‘localised miner identity’ represents only one of a range of identities that constitute an overall identity of those who work at the colliery.

In our case, we are concerned with miner identities at an Australian colliery and how a programme of change was viewed as an attack on the dignity of miners through breaking normative expectations and delegitimizing existing working relationships. The prerogative of

management to manage was called into play in the implementation of a performance management system that challenged the shared identity of being a miner and was subsequently opposed. Interestingly, from the perspective of management, this response was not anticipated and there was a certain degree of bewilderment among managers over the consequences of their actions. However, before embarking on analyses of these data, we first present an overview of the research strategy and methodology employed in our study.

Research strategy and methodology

A longitudinal qualitative research study was made of a mining community in regional Australia. Data collection was spread over a five year period that commenced just after the introduction in 2000 of the performance appraisal scheme that met with fierce resistance from the workers. The research, in the form of an extended case study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007), listened to the actual ‘voices’ of miners in order to understand the unintended consequences of this managerially imposed change initiative. The study provided opportunity for employees to share their experiences of the change initiative and to reflect on their responses to it. While data collection occurred at a number of underground coal mines owned by a multinational mining company, this paper focuses its analyses on data from just one colliery (Dover).

The initial data collection began with semi-structured interviews seeking understanding of employees’ experiences of the rating process, listening with a ‘big ear’ (Glaser, 2001) as individuals described significant incidents and experiences connected to the implementation of the appraisal process. 58 interviews and meetings with mine managers, HR officers, union officials, and miners working at the coalface were recorded. Each interview lasted, on average, about 90 minutes. As interview tapes were transcribed, themes began to emerge (Charmaz, 2003) which were explored in greater depth in more structured interviews with miners after each round of performance review. Interviews were supplemented with a nine question survey which all miners at Dover Colliery were invited to complete (with a response rate of about 30%). Extensive observations in order to understand the context of employee experiences (Glover & Noon, 2005) occurred through some 60 hours of attendance at mine management and union meetings, plus underground mine visits and two eighteen hour days back to back spent at the colliery when surveys were offered to miners at the start of each shift on those two consecutive days. Informal chats with miners in the muster room provided further insights. Interviews with miners were conducted on site, and also at the local pub or in

their homes, where partners also shared insights into the impact of this HR practice on extended family members. Company records were made available to the researcher, as were minutes of various mine review meetings (some of which the researcher attended) where the impact of the appraisal process was evaluated by mine managers, functional coordinators, undermanagers, deputies and union representatives.

It became apparent that miners, even though intensely angry over the rating system, either did not possess the vocabulary to articulate the reasons for the acrimony, or were not prepared in the culture of a mining organization to explore deep emotional issues in public. Questions about emotion were deflected. To keep the interviews going, the interviewer adopted the stance advocated by Gabriel (2000:136) as a 'fellow-traveller', someone keen to hear the stories miners had to tell, enjoying and sharing the pleasure in the storytelling process, rather than sitting dispassionately as a non-participant researcher. While a disadvantage in eliciting stories is the risk that the researcher may, through their questions, influence the interviewees' views as to what is significant, meaningful or important, in this case these stories occurred in their natural state and were only later reflexively decoded into themes and categories.

The introduction of a performance appraisal system at Dover Colliery

We now turn our attention to the presentation of empirical data on the impact of this change initiative, namely the introduction of a performance appraisal system at Dover Colliery. The change was initiated by the chief executive officer who decided, without consultation with locally situated stakeholders, that a performance management system would be introduced for all underground coal miners and gave directions to middle managers to implement this initiative. A senior HR manager at one of the collieries was co-opted to direct the implementation of the project throughout the division and was given the rather grand title of Performance Management Superintendent. He canvassed the views of mine managers on the topic and then conducted a search in other industries for a performance management system which he could appropriate for service at the coal mines within his jurisdiction. An appraisal system in use in a steel works in another city in Australia became the template from which he selected rating categories and descriptors for use at all the multinational's collieries, including Dover. In essence, what was implemented was not a complete performance management system but rather a simple appraisal rating scheme without any direct links to pay, performance, or other HRM related outcomes.

Unexpectedly vehement resistance from coal miners occurred even before the first round of appraisals. Miners refused to participate in the appraisal process until forced to do so by the Industrial Relations Commission, which ruled that performance appraisal was a legitimate managerial prerogative. Miners then insisted on their right to have a union official accompany them during their performance review meetings. Management responded by insisting that a HR manager accompany the reviewer at these meetings. Review meetings averaged over two hours in length as miners argued over their scores on each of the performance criteria. There were massive resource implications, and disruptions to shift crews and productivity in general, in having four men tied up in every single protracted review. The introduction of comparative performance ratings was followed by shock waves after the first round of performance reviews. Workforce morale plummeted and performance slumped. Relationships among all of the parties involved in the appraisal process were severely strained. Above-ground managers over time came to realize that they were fighting a battle in which performance was the loser, but they could not understand why an orthodox HRM practice should cause such difficulties.

Miners fought against each stage of the implementation process. For example, the impasse between managers and miners occasioned some ten appearances before the Industrial Relations Commission, where the parties needed outside legal intervention over even the minutia of the wording of the performance review categories. The company was faced with a dilemma. Why, in the absence of the traditional HR levers of positive or punitive consequences, were miners so passionately opposed to performance reviews? What forces – historical, contextual, political or otherwise – were driving such resistance? Why did employee morale deteriorate after the intervention? The apparent ‘irrationality’ of blue-collar worker response to appraisal clearly raised questions about what managers believed was a legitimate HRM intervention strategy.

Essentially, the new performance management system assigned ratings that were at odds with individual and group expectations and demonstrated little understanding of the occupational culture and shared work practices of miners. Miners were offended at being brought into a review meeting where pre-set scores were placed before them. Raters had received instructions that they were not to negotiate over scores and as a result, heated arguments broke out over the ratings, but at the end of the day the miner was excluded from influencing the final score. This they deeply resented, as the following miner comments illustrate:

The problem I had with it [the rating process] was that before you went into that room they had already worked out what you were [your score]. That's the biggest issue I had with it. You were rated before you go in there and no matter what you say, they are not changing your rating!

[Longwall operator #3]

The present format they've got is a waste of time. It's not done correctly. If 25 guys are Bs and there is one A and one C, then so be it. This is how they rate us. But they have to fit them in to this [bell shaped curve]. Not very good. It almost makes it like, let's just get through it, it's pointless. But we're going to be employed by that later, so we have to take notice of it. And then someone like me got a bit emotional about it. Hang on a minute, this is my job here, you treat me like that, because of stupid clerical – it should not have been, but it turned out to be – opinion or errors. They're toying with my future!

[Longwall electrician #7]

Miners' 'war stories' on identity attacks and injustice

Miners' tales often simplified cause and effect, and gave rise to *attribution of motive* (Gabriel, 2000) to the perpetrator of the perceived injustice. One of the miners described this sense of injustice (laced with comic and ironic elements) in the following story:

The engineer would get his ratings from the leading hands. They all sit around and say, 'I'd rate him a C, or a B, or whatever.' ...But guess who gets the top scores?

The three leading hands - and one of them is *the laziest man in the pit!*

So now I'm following his example. I'm not trying as hard...

Matthew Clark - he got a C score and he was really ticked off. He really kicked up a fuss about his score, and eventually they upped his score to a B.

[Interviewer] *So what do you think about the review process? How does it help performance?*

It's a morale *buster* rather than a morale *booster*. Everyone thinks they are an A, and they get ticked off when they get a B or a C.

[Interview 22, coal clearance electrician 1]

In this interview, the miner tells a short story with five characters: an engineer, three leading hands, and another miner. Matthew Clark gets a low score while the laziest man in the pit, because he gave input into the scores, got a top score. The storyteller implies a clear case of injustice. There is an element of heroic success in the story in that Matthew Clark through making ‘a fuss’ gets his score upgraded to a B. There are elements of *attribution of unity* in the story (‘everyone thinks they are an A’). The storyteller ends with the moral of his story, based on simple cause and effect logic: ‘It’s a morale *buster* rather than a morale *booster!*’ Identity (‘I’m an A’) is ‘burst’ when a miner is told he is a B or a C. The miner suffers trauma as a consequence (he’s ‘really ticked off’). This is one of many tragic tales told about the appraisal process: a non-deserving victim suffers injustice at the hands of a villain, with hints of injustice and attribution of motive in the process.

Another miner, who also acted as a workplace union official, confirmed the profound emotional turmoil which appraisal ratings caused for some miners. Note the admission that miners do not express their feelings easily, hence their use of story forms rather than more self-revealing emotional descriptors:

Because of the culture of what we are in the coal mines, a lot of guys don’t express their real feelings all that much. I’ve only come across it occasionally because of the role I have [as a union official]. One guy – the guy who it [appraisal] had the biggest effect on of all the guys I’ve come across – it really did *disturb* him. I don’t know a lot of his personal problems, if he has any outside of work – whether this thing has compounded an already fragile state of mind – so you have guys express anger at their rating and also at the appeals system.

[Interview 36, longwall miner 11]

One discursive resource used by this, and other miners, to undermine the effects of the appraisal process, evident in the continuance of his story below, is the *attribution of fixed (negative) qualities* (Gabriel, 2000:38). Here, the miner assertively labels the whole appeals system as unjust and ‘not worthwhile’. The escalation in emotional intensity is expressed in the change in language in the second paragraph:

They [miners] feel the appeal system is still not worthwhile. They feel like they don’t get justice out of it. The fact that even when you do go in to do your review, what is

set in front of you is virtually set in concrete until you go through the appeals review. So you have to sit there and listen to the judgment day expecting to be criticized and knowing that you can't change any of those criticisms until you go through an appeals process. So they feel frustrated by that exercise in itself.

They [miners] make an initial statement: 'This is fucking bullshit!' or whatever. And that will be it, until the next time comes around. 'Oh, not these fucking things again! I've got to go in there and listen to this sort of shit!'

[Interview 36, longwall miner 11]

The union official above uses a story with the simple plot of a miner being profoundly disturbed and angered by his review. The metaphor of being 'set in concrete' aptly captures the sense of frustration at being utterly powerless to negotiate on 'judgment day' – another interesting metaphor to describe the dominant power relations fostered by appraisal. There is a palpable sense of injustice, and of attack on the dignity and identity of being a miner, with having been made to sit and listen to their judgment while reviewers refuse to listen in return. The story – fragmented as it is – provides a small window on a victimised soul. The resignation at knowing in advance that they will be judged and criticized hardly motivates performance improvement. Rather, it sets the course for a protracted appeals process. In an extreme case, one miner's appeal stretched over three years.

Other stories positioned miners as the victims of a long history of managerial injustice. One such example from an old-timer demonstrates this mode of storytelling. Here, the miner bemoans the erosion of working conditions which they had fought so hard to win, yet claims the real problem is managerial lack of respect for their workers.

I think the coal mining industry, compared to what we used to have, has been *bloody wrecked*. We fought and went on strike to get the conditions we have now – hours, conditions and so on. [Now] they're taking it all back [from us].

I've looked at industrial systems around the world, and unfortunately we follow the American industrial relations systems where workers are kicked up the arse and picked up and put down like a dirty rag. I think two of the biggest industrialised

countries in the world – Japan and Germany – are the opposite. They treat their workers with respect. They appreciate their employees.

[Interview 44, longwall miner 12]

The violation miners describe is not just that conditions are being eroded. More importantly, in the context of this interview, miners feel the appraisal process confirms their fears that they are being used and abused. They position themselves as the ‘dirty rags’ of management, rather than as dignified miners who are respected and appreciated. In this account, considerable identity work is being performed to redress what they see as the undermining of their worth by the appraisal process.

Not only did miners feel that their pay and benefits were being eroded. Some miners expressed concerns that ratings rewarded workers who cut corners with safety. Recounting stories of rating injustices involving safety breaches was an effective discursive device in garnering workmate and union support for different identity elements to be privileged, rather than the production at all costs imperative:

We got some blokes – we got one fella there – you got no idea how he works, but he’s downright dangerous! They’re saying, ‘Hey, look at all the work he’s doing’, but hey, how he hasn’t killed himself, let alone anyone else, that’s a miracle! He cuts all the corners and they love him!

You’ll be cutting coal and he’ll be in the dust working. And they’re saying, ‘Look at the work this bloke’s done!’ So they are not fair dinkum. If they were fair dinkum the supervisor would be there saying, ‘Hey! You can’t work in the dust. You’ve got to come out of there!’ But they don’t do that.

[Interview 47, longwall miner 11]

The appeal to safety concerns in this account also serves as a legitimating device, again demonstrating the hybrid nature of stories. These ‘war stories’ told by miners served a number of purposes: they positioned miners as undeserving victims; they helped make sense of what, to miners, was an intrinsically flawed system; and they apportioned blame away from themselves towards a (sometimes) malevolent management. They also highlight the

injustice of judgments by those deemed as ‘outside’ of the occupational community of miners who work together in the mine.

If the face fits tick the box: undermining trust in judgmental management

The miners at Dover Colliery ascribed inappropriate assessments with mismanagement, favouritism and bad political practices that were perceived to be blatantly against the interests of mine workers. Their responses, captured in the stories that they told, accord with some of the findings in a study by Grint on appraisal that showed how employees:

shared the common assumption that appraisals are ‘political’ in nature; that is, they are ‘mechanisms’ for justifying decisions already taken and without regard to individual merit. Those appraised tend to believe that the appraisers, like their schemes, are often less than honest and potentially untrustworthy. (Grint, 1995:74)

A frequently recurring theme among miners was that appraisal was all about your ‘face’ (their term). ‘If your face doesn’t fit’ you get ‘marked down’ was a common comment; the flip side of this statement implied that managers had their favourites who were given favourable scores not because of performance but because of ‘personality’.

This notion that scores were pre-determined, based on likeability and not performance, had considerable resonance among miners. A miner storied his experience of the appraisal process as follows:

The only real problem I had with it [appraisal] was that before you went into that room they had already worked out what you were...You were rated before you go in there and no matter what you say, they are not changing your rating...They say, ‘OK, your absenteeism, say, OK you have, you were off work 5 times this year.’
And you will say, ‘OK, I was in hospital 5 times this year.’
‘Well, that doesn’t matter.’

[Interview 8, development panel miner 1]

This story articulates the miner’s offence that his manager did not seem to know that he had been in hospital, and did not seem to care (‘that doesn’t matter’), the manager’s response being interpreted as evidence that the rating score was more important than the miner or the

reason behind his absenteeism. His story was used as a discursive device for conveying his sense of frustration at the inability to negotiate scores during the appraisal review. Framing the story around the context of a manager not listening to the reason for the absenteeism cast that manager in a negative light while recasting the miner as a suffering and unappreciated victim of managerial legalism and indifference. Such stories justified miners' refusals to accept the ratings imposed upon them from above. This story itself is a form of resistance.

Another longwall miner was more pointed in his disparaging remarks about managers and performance reviews. One of his strategies for coping with wounded pride was turning the spotlight back onto poorly informed and judgmental (mis)management.

Oh, there's this performance review. But that was more of a *personality* review. I was unsure of what to expect because I never really understood what they were going on about, but they wanted to get it through so they just pushed it through. My performance was done by a shift undermanager who I didn't get on with - James Clements - 'Fifi' I call him. That's short for 'fucking idiot, fucking idiot'. He's twice as stupid as any other bastard I've met.

They called me in, and they said, 'This is it; this is it [going down a list]'. You can agree or disagree with it. Jimmy read, 'You never finish jobs off. You always have an excuse for not doing this or doing that'.

To expand on that, my job was looking after pumps to manage waste water in the pit. And the pit was 5 kilometres by 5 kilometres square. They say, 'Set up a pump here'. Sometimes I'd have to get a ton and a half of equipment – hoses and pumps – and I used to go out [above-ground] and get them, load them with a forklift on a pallet, put them on the train, load them on the car, go and do it. And they didn't like me going outside. So wouldn't let me manage it myself. I used to repair pumps, get the old ones out, go up the surface, flush them out, clean them out, save them \$1,500 every time they send one away. But they didn't like me going outside, so I had to stay underground.

I used to tell them if I went out, I said, 'Look, I'm not pissing off. I'll be here at the end of the shift. I'm just going to do this'. But they didn't like that because they

didn't like me. So they hampered me in doing my job. So the performance review was [that] I never finished my jobs. And they never helped me one iota along the way. And that's why I say it's a personality thing. It's not a performance [review].

[Interview 45, longwall miner 13]

This miner disparages managers who fail to trust him enough to allow him to go to the surface to fix a pump which can thereby save the company \$1,500. He turns the appraisal story back on them. They do not appreciate his contribution. They do not help him do his job 'one iota' so poor performance is their problem, not his. Through attribution of blame (Gabriel, 2000:38) responsibility is shifted to managers. Through blaming others the miner is expressing agency. His story readjusts power relations in the face of a negative appraisal. His language in use is also indicative of his level of indignation. As Sims (2005:1625) points out, a term like 'bastard' (as used for the manager above) refers to a much stronger sense of indignation than mild irritation at people behaving differently; 'bastard' conveys a sense of outrage towards someone who is seen as behaving in a completely unacceptable manner.

In the following account of managerial mismanagement, the miner portrays managers as self-serving – from the disorganised functional coordinators to the senior managers who squandered money on rewarding these same coordinators despite their incompetence. These same managers, according to the miner's story below, were not even able to organize inexpensive reward stickers for miners' helmets.

I'm not going to go through the review process because it's a load of shit anyway, as far as I am concerned. It is a personality review. Because it's like anything. Management at Dover ruin the place – there's too many personalities and not enough practicalities. There's too many bosses up there. There's a longwall coordinator, a longwall engineer, and a – what do they all bloody-well do? They couldn't even get bolts to bolt the drums on the shearer! 'Oh, do we need them, do we?' [Head to the left] 'Didn't you get them?' [Head to the left] 'Didn't you get them?' And the whole process is a sequence of events to get the job done. This longwall has been the same process for about the last 10 years. All they've got to do is look at the last one, this is what we want. How do *they* get rated? Who rates them? If I done something like that and we lost production, they'd be down on me.

[Interview 45, longwall miner 13]

The miner then segues from the above story blaming managers for the mine's poor performance to one which shows their poor stewardship of the company's resources, in addition to their hypocritical rewards for the incompetent raters of the miners' performances:

[W]e just broke the tonnage records and management took the select few up to the State of Origin [a major rugby league football interstate competition], in the corporate box. The select few - that's the coordinators who fucking don't go underground, and try and hamstring us at every turn. And we might get a sticker! They couldn't even organise them [stickers]...

I can't get spare parts for the miners [tunnelling machines] we're working on now. We can't get hoses. We haven't got any. The longwall - the 'dog bones' that connect the face pans up - we haven't got any. Yet they can spend fifty grand taking them [the 'select' few] up to the State of Origin. It doesn't make sense!

[Interview 45, longwall miner 13]

One of the miners with considerable pleasure told the story of how he had argued with his manager about his appraisal and demanded an increase in his appraisal score. He felt quite heroic when his assertion was rewarded:

They printed me this score, and the first time I saw it, I threw it across the table at my boss and said, 'You're completely out of touch! This is not correct. This is wrong here what you've got here. You contradict yourself. You say one thing here; [now] look at this [points to document] two pages later.'

I said, 'You owe me five points here...He listened to about three of them and he said, 'Stop! Stop! I'll give you two.'

And he liquid papered two in front of me...and he changed them and said, 'Is that OK?'

And I said, 'That will do.'

I felt like it was a game - the liquid paper thing - 'OK, I'll make you a B.' It's bullshit. It's not a proper evaluation. Not by a long shot!

[Interview 24, coal clearance electrician 2]

The majority of tales at Dover Colliery were in the context of men risking their lives for each other in the difficult conditions underground. Qualities of courage, loyalty and mateship are what gave meaning to their working lives. These qualities were essential elements in their shared identities as miners. Anger was generated against those who challenged these heroic qualities, especially when the source was a misinformed ‘tea-sipping management’ whose members rarely ventured underground.

Reconfiguring performance: miners’ reactive adjustments to change

[This performance appraisal thing] is an arse-kicking exercise. It’s not an incentive for you to improve! I think it’s the opposite. I see a lot of guys coming out of those meetings, and they say, ‘*Fuck them!* If that’s what they think of me, I’ll get *worse!*’

[Interview 44, longwall miner 12]

Consistently, miners at Dover interpreted appraisal as a critical, judgmental message from dominant coalitions of accountants and managerial ‘others’ that they needed to ‘lift their game’. They conversed among themselves about the negatives of the appraisal messages; managers often commented about how miners completely missed the positives in their messages and just dwelt on the negatives. Given the breaches of identity occasioned by the appraisal message, miners employed ‘war stories’ of appraisals as a form of subversion and resistance. One form of resistance was to point out how appraisal led to *worse* performance. Miners traded stories of appraisals having deleterious effects on worker morale, and on discretionary effort. One electrician, for example, told the following story about himself:

I hate to say this – it’s probably being very negative – but I looked at the chaps that scored higher than me [and thought], if that’s what they want, I will be more like them, and I have – believe it or not – don’t put my name to this – but *I have slackened off* because I realize that’s what they want and they want you to work ‘smarter not harder’ so, OK, I will play their little game.

I used to do six jobs during the day and finish five and the last one wasn’t quite finished. What they used to focus on was the one that I didn’t finish, not the five that I got through. So now I will do four jobs and do them well and the other two, well, bad luck! So that’s the way I am ‘motivated’.

[Interview 7, coal clearance electrician 1]

This electrician stories himself as the victim of negative appraisal, an undeserving recipient of criticism for exerting extra effort to get more work done. By simple cause and effect logic, he now constructs himself in a defensive position as one not caring about the work ('bad luck!'), but at the same time he justifies this approach, as revealed by his preamble to the story ('I hate to say this...' and 'believe it or not...' and having to 'play their little game').

On another occasion a miner recounted how he had been 'marked down' because he had taken time off twice during the last year due to illness. He was particularly galled because previously he hadn't taken a day off in four years yet his previous track record was disregarded. The first time he was sick, he took two days off work, namely a Monday and a Tuesday. Later, a second illness caused him to take a Wednesday and a Thursday off work. So they put a note in his file that he takes long weekends. He was really upset about this.

I mean, I work a four-day week, so if I take a day off when I'm sick, it's got a good chance of being next to the weekend. I went to Nobby [the supervisor] and told him I had been sick, and had produced a doctor's note on both occasions, and he pulled out my file, and said, 'Oh, yes, the doctor's notes are in here', but I still got the mark against my name for attendance.

[Interview 22, coal clearance electrician 1]

The miner was, of course, upset with the way his attendance record had been handled:

What are they saying? 'We don't care how hard you work, or whether you perform, just show up?' I don't think half my performance [an exaggeration for effect] should be judged on my attendance. The message I'm getting is that it doesn't matter how you work, just turn up.

[Interviewer] So how has the performance review affected your performance?

I'll be brutally frank with you. This last time when I was sick, I took a longer time off. I said to myself, if I take two days off, they'll say that I'm taking a long

weekend, so I took the whole week off. It counts as one absence whether I take one day or one week.

[Interview 22, coal clearance electrician 1]

This story draws attention to one of the most frequently recurring criticisms of the performance criteria. Such stories revealed a perception among miners that managers did not listen to their reasons for absences; they were judged and marked down unreasonably. Rather than improving performance, the system was subverted by miners in their quest to regain control over their work practices in ways that fitted this new regime but ultimately resulted in reduced worker effort. Thus, miners turned the tables on management, reasserted their control over work and bolstered their own identities.

Worker resistance to the bureaucratic controls of management

In our analyses of miners' stories what is interesting is how what was seen as a fairly orthodox change resulted in unexpected reactions from miners. Managers failed to understand the importance of work practices and culture in creating and sustaining miner identities and the legitimation of existing relations between managers and workers. This shift in expectations and methods of appraisal undermined established norms and values spotlighting the unequal power relationship between managers and workers. The prerogative of managers to manage was used to legitimate managerial action and through endorsement by the Industrial Relations Commission, further isolated miners and generated distrust and resentment. Miners viewed this imposition as an assault on their dignity and an affront to their identities as miners. In their eyes, this formal legitimation of management had broken normative expectations and delegitimized existing working relationships. A clear divide was articulated between 'us' and 'them' and the legitimacy of above-ground managers to rate accomplishments underground was questioned. In other words, whilst the legitimacy of management was formally endorsed it was no longer accepted by miners who questioned their competency and viewed managerial evaluations as subjective, discriminatory, lacking substance (being based on limited understanding of what work individuals actually did) and reeking of favouritism. For example, a panel development worker described how two miners on the tunnel drilling machine have to work together in preparing to cut a path through the coal:

They both have to have their fingers on the buttons at the same time, left and right hand side – it's interlocked – or else it [the canopy supporting the roof] 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...

[Development panel miner #3]

Given, then, the essential nature of team-based synchronization of work effort to progress the drilling machine forward, the following comment by one of the panel development miners typifies this problem of favouritism:

There were guys in our crew who got knocked down [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 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.

[Development panel miner #3]

Miners saw the absurdity of individual ratings in what is essentially an integrated team operation. To provide some members of a crew with good ratings while excluding other members of the same crew performing the same work seemed insane.

You got the methane drainage blokes – two of them sat on the drilling rig year after year. One done [sic] the driving, the next day the other bloke done the driving, the other bloke done the drilling. And this bloke got an A and he got a C. It was just insane!

[Development panel miner #4]

A union official, in a meeting with company officials to assess the effectiveness of the appraisal process, summed up the feelings of miners this way: 'The scores are fucked. Some reviewers said all positives, and still gave the miner a 3 [C grade]!' A union secretary in a memo to miners wrote about the inconsistencies of ratings (emphasis in original) as follows:

...I have come to my conclusion that this blatant system of injustice put together by wellpaid [sic] HR personnel is a system that does not reflect on the actual performance of the majority of employees and in my opinion is unaustralian [sic]. I say most due to the fact faces and or personality has the 'A' brand and not necessarily the PERFORMANCE...The weekend warriors [an affectionate term for weekend shift workers] were told that through an exhausting interviewing process these guys were the 'best of the best' but not one in their latest interviews scored an A...I have no doubt that [managers] are plucking out of thin air [the rating scores based on] INDUENDOS [sic] PERSUMPTIONS [sic] PERCEPTIONS and HEARSAY.

Another miner colourfully described the favouritism this way:

As I've always said, working at Dover Colliery is like smoking marijuana. The harder you suck, the higher you go. And it is, mate. It is unbelievable.

[Longwall operator #13]

Insulted by the stance of management, miners became very emotive, using strong language and being highly critical of 'tea drinkers' (managers) who they argued failed to do their side of the job in ensuring sufficient supplies, and yet it was the miners who got blamed when there was a production stoppage. Essentially, miners at the coalface resented the individuating process of performance rating which disrupted their highly valued culture of 'watching each other's backs' in the dangerous conditions of underground mining. Any new process that 'pits mate against mate' was seen to be particularly irksome. For an outsider (such as an above-ground manager) to disrupt the informal performance management processes that existed in teams was particularly offensive to miner identity. At the coalface, employees wanted to be appreciated and respected, not degraded by a system which reduced their considerable efforts to a number or a category.

Their frustration at the injustice of the imposed system that attacked miner identity and commitment promoted counter-stories about the lack of commitment and apathy of management. As the following story highlights, when something major occurred management were conveyed as being too lazy to even bother to find out the situation by going to the colliery for a site inspection:

There's been a list, since he's been manager, of things he's buggered up. Some of these he's inherited; some he's created himself. And yet, he says it doesn't matter: 'You do your job and I'll do mine.' I was talking to Rusty last night. Do you know him? He's on his way up, but he's still a unionist, and he was a check inspector. When the tailgate flooded last year on the longwall, he was at home. At two o'clock in the morning, he gets a phone call from Wally Broadfoot [the general manager]. He tells him that the deputy, Peter Hayes, has put the wall down [stopped the longwall operation] because there's flooding in the tailgate. The water's up to chest high. That's your second means of egress if there's a fire in the main gate. You've got to get out the tailgate...So he [Peter Hayes] stopped the job. Rusty said [to the manager], 'Well, he's done the right thing and I back him one hundred percent.'

And Wally said, 'Well, what are you going to do about it?'

And Rusty said, 'Well, nothing. I'll make sure that day shift doesn't go in until it's fixed. Good night, I'm going back to bed.'

[Wally] didn't even bother to go to the pit. That would have been Monday afternoon. I don't think they went back to work for three shifts. Yet he didn't even bother to go to the pit!

[Interview 44, longwall miner 12]

This inappropriate behaviour of management is recounted as an illustration of the 'problems' the miners faced in addressing managements' attack that – in their view – had no foundation in fact. Management was characterised as not interested in what actually occurred in the practice of mining as carried out by groups of miners, but only in outcomes, performance targets, and the signing off of regulatory worksheets. Their focus was seen to be centred on the bureaucratic paper trail of mining activities rather than the accuracy of the information on individual performance documents. This disjunction between the recording of performance data with miner's own perception and understanding of daily work practices lies at the heart of worker resistance to management's bureaucratic attack on their self-evaluation of what it means to be a miner.

Conclusion: being a miner in times of change

The identities of miners are formed, developed and revised within a broader community context of what it means to be a miner (occupational communities) as well as within local work environments (the workplace culture associated with mining activities at Dover Colliery). We have sought to demonstrate how new change initiatives, even those accepted as part of orthodox change, can have seriously negative consequences on employees when applied without a careful consideration of the historical, political and social contexts in which employees develop their sense of worth in the workplace. These managerially imposed performance ratings severely violated miners' pre-existing occupational identity. Whether intentional or not, these appraisals threatened to accomplish what Knights (1990:311) terms the individualization of the worker. Transgressions against miners' identities set off a complex set of reactions in which miners' stories of the appraisal process provide insight into their emotional states and the coping mechanisms they brought into service to defend their identities from the unwelcome interventions of management. We illustrate how an analysis of miners' stories sheds light on how stories were used as a way of channelling discontent into defiance. Spaces for resistance to identity regulation were prised open through these emergent strategies which miners employed to combat attempts to manage the culture of the Dover Colliery. For example, some of the stories which miners told, especially those highlighting managerial incompetence, provided a key source of resistance. Perpetrators of identity violations received their comeuppance as miners appropriated their methods to turn the tables back on them. Indeed, much of the rough talk and masculine humour observed during mine visits was at the expense of above-ground managers. Miners' masculine humour was strategically employed against managers in the ongoing struggle over appraisal. As Mumby (2004:244, emphasis in original) observes, 'organizational storytelling is a discursive site *par excellence* for the critical analysis of the dialectic of control and resistance', and as our analyses highlights, stories were used to resist and reconstitute identities in legitimation battles between managers and workers.

The existence of cultural differences between managers and miners is illustrated in the failure of managers to understand or empathise with the views of miners. For management, the initiative was not interested in this issue of miner identity, nor was it concerned with imposing new methods of work organization. It centred on a new system of bureaucratic control for regulating and monitoring the performance of employees with the ultimate aim of identifying ways to improve the operational performance of the colliery. However, management failed to recognise that the identity of miners is drawn from their work and

working together, they share a common set of values, norms and perspectives that create strong bonds of a common identity (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). Thus, the lack of cultural sensitivity and misunderstanding of workplace activities by those engaged in the task of rating miners fuelled bitter resentment among miners who felt that their sense of individual self-worth and their shared identity of being a miner were being threatened and undermined.

The many and varied responses of miners were captured in the stories that they recounted and shared with each other both at work and in non-work settings. A discursive interplay of their experiences and interpretations of events served to reinforce the sharedness of meanings and guide the reactions of individual miners (Bloor & Dawson, 1994). In a threatening workplace culture, miners responded as individual members of a group in supporting and reinforcing common perceptions and interpretations of how to counter these threats and reinforce their own feelings of self-worth. For example, new ways of working that would meet the new performance requirements whilst reducing commitment and effort were identified, as well as actions that openly demonstrated their disquiet and anger at the new initiative. Stories were central to this process both in making sense of what was occurring and giving sense to the identity of being a miner. This community sharedness among miners was relayed in the many stories told and retold in work and non-work settings. It spotlights the importance of identity, the way stories are used to reassert, evaluate and redefine shared identities, and the close association of workplace cultures with miners' identities. As we indicated earlier, identity is a multidimensional and dynamic concept as individuals take on and develop different identities to service the different groups and activities in which they participate. In the case of the identity of miners at Dover Colliery, these reflected influences from the broader occupational community of being a miner through to the more localised elements arising from the interactions and practices experienced at work, as well as the stories told, developed and re-storied in work and non-work settings that enabled miners to give sense and make sense of who they were in relation to their identity as a miner.

In examining notions of occupational community and organizational culture (and local sub-cultures) we identified the close association and overlap between these concepts and our concern with identity. Key elements that link these notions are for us centred around processes of sense-making and sense-giving within a temporal (past, present and future) contextual environment (local context to broader community, business and societal context) within which processes of identity formation are ongoing at a number of levels (the

individual, group, community) and reflect the dynamic changing relationships between individuals and others (fellow workers, management, family) that provide both continuity (robustness of who we are and what we believe in as an individual and as a member of a group) and change (continual adaptation and revision – the dynamic temporal nature of identity). We would also, adapting Mumby (2004), argue that organizational storytelling is a discursive site *par excellence* for a critical examination of identity processes in workplace settings. Although we hope to have gone some way in opening up a discussion on the relationship and value of these concepts for analysing identities, this remains for us an important area that could usefully benefit from further conceptual development and clarification.

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