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Peter McLean  
University of Wollongong

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**AT THE COALFACE:  
IDENTITY IMPLICATIONS OF PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL  
AT AN UNDERGROUND COAL MINE**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the award of the degree

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**from**

**UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG**

**by**

**PETER McLEAN, BA, B BUS (MGMT), M COMM (HRM)**

**SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT AND MARKETING**

**OCTOBER 2008**

## **Thesis Certification**

### **CERTIFICATION**

I, Peter McLean, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the School of Management and Marketing, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Peter McLean

24 October 2008

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## **Publications in support of this thesis**

McLean, P. D. (2005). 'It's not grading – it's degrading!' Employee responses to an orthodox HRM intervention at an Illawarra coal mine. *Higher Degree Research Student Conference*, University of Wollongong, 29 September 2005, p. 65. [Faculty of Commerce Best Paper Award]

McLean, P. D. and Reveley, J. (2005). HRM at the coalface: Employee responses to performance appraisal at an underground coalmine, in D. Davies, G. Fisher & R. Hughes (Eds), *Proceedings of the 19th ANZAM Conference: Engaging the Multiple Contexts of Management: convergence and divergence of management theory and practice*, Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management (ANZAM), Canberra, Australia, pp. 1-13.

McLean, P. D. (2006). Performance rating: From insulted dignity to resistance and retaliation. *Higher Degree Student Research Conference*, University of Wollongong, 27 September 2006, p.56. [Faculty of Commerce Best Paper Award]

McLean, P. D. (2006). The insulted worker thesis: Seven 'deadly diseases' of performance rating, in J. Kennedy & L. Di Milia (eds), *Proceedings of the 20th Annual Conference of the Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management: Management, Pragmatism, Philosophy, Priorities*, ANZAM, Lindfield, NSW, pp. 51.

McLean, P. D. and Reveley, J. (2006). 'That's insulting!' Coal miners' dissonance tropes in response to performance appraisal. In A. Beverungen, N. Ellis, T. Keenoy, C. Oswick, I. Sabelis & S. Ybema (eds), *The 7th International Conference on Organizational Discourse: Identity, Ideology and Idiosyncrasy*, KMCP, Leicester, UK, pp. 1-25.

McLean, P. D. (2008). Transgressing coal miners' identities: Power effects of appraisal as a workplace transformation strategy. In T. Keenoy, C. Oswick, I. Sabelis & S. Ybema (Eds), *The 8<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Organizational Discourse: Translations, Transformations and Transgressions*, KMCP, Leicester, UK, pp 1-33.

McLean, P. D. and Reveley, J. (2008). Upsetting coal miners: managerial concepts of performance appraisal as a strategy for changing miners' work practices. *Paper presented at the 24<sup>th</sup> Colloquium of the European Group for Organization Studies Conference*, Vrije University, Amsterdam. [Nominated from Sub-theme 37 for EGOS Best Student Paper Award].

Reveley, J. and McLean, P. D. (2004). Rhetorics of division: Miners' narrative sense of 'self' and 'other' during performance appraisal at an underground coalmine, *Proceedings of Standing 22nd Conference on Organizational Symbolism, SCOOS*, Halifax, Nova Scotia, pp. 2-44.

Reveley, J. and McLean, P. D. (2008). Rating Tales: An Evaluation of Divergent Views of Occupational Identification, *Management and Organizational History*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 127-145.

## **Abstract**

### **At the Coalface:**

#### **Identity implications of performance appraisal at an underground coal mine**

This thesis examines the reasons for negative employee responses to performance appraisal at an underground coal mine in Australia. Through analysis of processes of identity construction and defence among coal miners, the thesis advances understanding of how blue-collar employees react to receiving comparative performance ratings. Using an extended case study method over a five year period, the fieldwork investigated the discursive resources that miners used to make sense of this orthodox human resource management practice. By combining insights from critical discourse analysis and critical management studies approaches, the thesis analyses the effects of appraisal upon miners' occupational identity and provides empirical evidence of the inventive powers of such workers to prise open spaces for workplace resistance through identity (re)construction processes. A synthesis of conceptual frameworks pertaining to performance appraisal, discursive concepts, subjects and objects, and identity regulation and identity work, provides a more comprehensive understanding of employee responses to managerial initiatives such as performance appraisal. Miners used a palette of discursive resources, including storytelling and dissonance tropes to make sense of, and subvert, the negative effects of individuating performance appraisals on their occupational identity. The thesis questions the power neutral assumptions of mainstream human resource management practice, and suggests that managers who ignore the subjective effects of disciplining technologies such as appraisal may experience unintended consequences as workers resist identity disruptions in the workplace.

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

George Orwell ([1937] 1959:34), *The Road to Wigan Pier*



## PART 1 EXISTING LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

### Chapter 1 Introduction

*It is somewhat ironic that although human resource management (HRM) relates to the effective management of employees, we know remarkably little about how employees, as the subjects of HRM, react to its practice.*

(Grant and Shields 2002:313)

#### 1.1 Employee experiences of HRM

This thesis investigates how coal miners responded to the introduction of a performance appraisal system at an underground mine in Australia. The investigation was prompted by a request from a senior human resource manager of a multinational mining company for assistance from the School of Management and Marketing at the University of Wollongong in understanding the unintended consequences of their appraisal system. Why, he asked, were miners reacting so negatively to what was considered to be an orthodox human resource management initiative?

The need to understand more clearly *employee* experiences of human resource management (HRM) initiatives is acknowledged, not only by senior HR practitioners, but also by a growing number of researchers (for example, Thompson and Ackroyd 1995; Guest 1999; Deery 2002; Glover and Noon 2005; Grant and Shields 2006; Garrety 2007). Far too little is known, not only about *how* and *why* employees respond to human resource management initiatives but also exactly *what* it is that they are responding to (Deery 2002:459; Grant and Shields 2002:328). There is thus a need to theorize workers' experiences beyond the 'managerialist paradigm' (Bacon 1999:1180), to understand what sense workers themselves make of HRM practices. Even in the critical stream of literature, few scholars 'have bothered to document *real* employees' reactions to such [HRM] projects' (Grant and Shields 2006:299, emphasis in original). While worker identity is the new 'contested

terrain' in mainstream and critical management writing, the focus is on the extent to which the 'inner self' of the worker can be constructed to replace external rewards and motivations in the quest for performance improvement (Grant and Shields 2006:287). However, employee identity is generally considered from the perspective of how to extract more effort from these resource-objects; employees' perspectives of the impacts of HRM practices on self and identity are not generally perceived to be matters of managerial concern. Indeed, such issues would take managers and managerial theorists alike into murky waters. Gergen (1999:16) goes so far as to suggest, rather graphically: 'Meddle with the self and all the bones of tradition begin to rattle'.

In both the prescriptive and the critical HRM literature, as discussed in Chapter 2, the employee tends to be viewed in instrumental terms, as a means to organizational ends (Grant and Shields 2002). While a substantial body of literature deals with employee responses to survey questions which are typically derived from *managerially* defined performance criteria such as communications, commitment and appraisal congruency (Bacon 1999:1182; Whiting et al. 2008:223), these measures do not represent the sum total of employee experiences at work. HRM as a discipline tends to ignore the effects of its practices on the worker's identity. That is, HRM has been part of a managerialist agenda that neglects workers' concerns (Guest 1999:5). While writers such as Legge (2005) have provided powerful critiques of both the promise and the practice – or the rhetoric and the reality – of HRM, there is still scant research on workers' concerns and workers' reactions to human resource management techniques and interventions. As Guest (1999:9) puts it, 'we simply do not have good evidence about how workers react to HRM'. Since Guest made this comment, only modest progress has been made on this score. Employee reaction to performance appraisal feedback, for example, is still regarded as a neglected area of research (Jawahar 2006:213). Indeed, while HRM originally claimed to provide maps or models whose outcomes would be measured in terms of worker commitment, competence, cost effectiveness and goal congruence (Beer et al. 1984), very little empirical evidence can be drawn upon to theorize the *mechanisms* of worker responses to HRM strategies. This thesis adduces such evidence in relation to workers' responses to performance appraisal. Through

listening to the actual voices of miners, it seeks to produce ‘a genuinely *employee-centred* understanding of worker identity’ (Grant and Shields 2006:301, emphasis in original).

## **1.2 The research question**

The thesis seeks to understand the impact of one human resource management practice, namely performance appraisal, on a group of underground coal miners. Through research at an underground coal mine – Dover Colliery, a pseudonym – this thesis draws on five years of data collection that occurred after a performance appraisal scheme for miners was introduced in the face of fierce resistance from these workers. The research, in the form of an extended case study (Creswell and Plano Clark 2007), listens to the actual ‘voices’ of miners in order to understand the unintended consequences of this managerially imposed human resource management technique. The study provides opportunity for employees to tell their own stories of their experiences of the performance appraisal process, from which it is possible to identify the strategies they used for dealing with the effects of appraisal.

When human resource managers at Dover Colliery introduced performance appraisals for underground coal miners, they made no attempt to link the performance rating and review process to other HR practices such as pay, or promotion, or redundancies. Such a stand-alone intervention provides a unique opportunity for examining the effects of a single HRM practice (performance appraisal) while other HRM practices remained constant. No material consequences (positive or negative) were contingent upon the performance ratings that coal miners received. Thus, in the absence of such consequences, the central question this thesis addresses is:

*Why did the coal miners at Dover Colliery react so negatively to the implementation of a performance appraisal system?*

To answer this research question, the thesis investigates the effects of performance appraisals on these employees, seeking to understand what it is that they were reacting to, how they were making sense of the appraisal process, and what discursive resources they were employing to resist the performance appraisal scheme.

### **1.3 Aims of the thesis**

Focusing on the research question posed above, the thesis aims to develop a theoretical framework through which to improve our understanding of the effects of one HRM practice, namely performance appraisal, upon employees. The thesis aims to develop theoretically and make sense of empirically the construction and maintenance of occupational identities (Parker 1997:128), in the context of challenges to these identities by comparative performance ratings. In addition, the thesis seeks to explore the discursive resources employed to defend and repair collective identity by investigating the responses of a group of workers whose identities have been disrupted by the individuating practice of performance appraisal.

A further theoretical contribution of this thesis will be its drawing together of strands of identity theory from a variety of disciplinary areas including sociology, social psychology, and critical management studies to enrich understanding of the subjective effects of performance appraisal in the HRM discipline. The extended period of the empirical investigation aims to provide a richness of insight into narratives of identity not available through surveys or snapshot studies. The data collected will also add to the understanding of collective identities as plurivocal (Dawson and Buchanan 2005), social constructions (Brown and Humphreys 2006), and sites of 'hegemonic struggle' (Brown 2006:733), that unfold over time and are in a perpetual state of *becoming* (Parker 1997).

In pursuing these aims, my thesis makes a contribution to knowledge by empirical application of a model of 'concepts, objects and subject positions' proposed by Phillips and Hardy (1997:167) in their study of identity among refugees, a model

subsequently applied by Grant and Shields (2002) to HRM. Differentiation between three kinds of entities constructed in discourse (subjects, objects and concepts) is found in earlier work by, for example, Foucault (1972:31-39), Fairclough (1992:64), and Parker (1992:8-12). However, for the purpose of this thesis the discursive analysis of interviewees' responses will be referred to as the Grant and Shields' model because of their application of the Phillips and Hardy model to HRM. The thesis also expands and widens the scope of Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) model of the relationship between identity regulation, identity work and self-identity.

#### **1.4 Background to the study**

The origin of this research is itself an illustration of Grant and Shield's (2002:313) observation that we know 'remarkably little' about the impact of HRM on employees and how they react to its practice. The chief executive officer of a large multinational mining company (hereafter referred to as MNC Coal, a pseudonym) decided, without consultation with locally situated stakeholders, that a performance management system would be introduced for underground coal miners and gave directions to middle managers to implement the initiative. A senior HR manager at one of the collieries was co-opted to direct the implementation of this 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 MNC Coal'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 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 HRM 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 struggled vehemently at 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 was employee behaviour and morale *worse* in most cases (by miners' and managers' own accounts) after the interventions than before? The apparent 'irrationality' of blue-collar worker response to appraisal clearly raised questions about what managers believed was a conventional HRM intervention strategy. Because managers at MNC Coal were mystified by the surprisingly savage reaction of miners to their 'performance management system', the Performance Management Superintendent sought assistance from researchers at the University of Wollongong.

I volunteered to investigate the research question raised by MNC Coal, on the understanding that the project would take place over an extended period of time

(initially three years), rather than a quick snapshot approach which might miss key historical or socio-political factors. The Performance Management Superintendent agreed to the research project knowing that it would form the basis of my thesis. While empirical research covered several underground coal mines in Australia, for reasons of focus, structure and parsimony, the thesis reports on data from one coal mine, namely Dover Colliery. All names have been changed to respect the request for anonymity from the Performance Management Superintendent, and to protect the confidentiality of the miners who so willingly (and openly) talked to me over a five year period.

### **1.5 Significance of the study**

The implications of considering the identity effects for workers of HRM intervention strategies are profound. If people are purely means to instrumental ends, then the division of labour will most likely continue to result in the ‘labour of division’ (Parker 1997:115), with all its attendant conflict, controversy and contested identities for organizational members. Because of the ‘legitimacy’ of their privileged discourses, managers may be unaware of the impact of their systems and structures on organizational members whose voices are marginalized or silenced. Indeed, HRM interventions may be informed by agendas which even those making the decisions do not fully understand. Decisions may perpetuate power and privilege without those in HR positions being consciously aware of the reasons for the decisions, nor the consequences for those being managed. Gallos and Ramsey’s comment below on the difficulty faced by dominant groups in understanding the effects of their decisions on the marginalized could apply equally to the design of a performance appraisal system:

Institutional, structural and systemic issues are very difficult for members of dominant groups to understand. Systems are most often designed by dominant group members to meet their own needs. It is then difficult to see the ways in which our institutions and structures systematically exclude others who are not ‘like us.’ It is hard to see and question what we have always taken for granted and painful to confront personal complicity in

maintaining the status quo. Privilege enables us to remain unaware of institutional and social forces and their impact. (Gallos and Ramsey 1997:404-405)

HRM practices such as performance appraisal are not power neutral. The critical management literature, which draws attention to power relations in organizations, sees appraisal as privileging the power of people who articulate the dominant discourse (for example, Townley 1999). In this literature, appraisals are seen as instruments of both normative and ‘insidious’ control (Garrety 2007:220) . It is even suggested that managers who use such practices may be ‘playing God’ (Newton and Findlay 1996:42). A discourse analytic approach to employee responses to appraisal opens up explanatory possibilities for studying the effects of such systems upon employees. According to Clegg et al., a discourse analytic approach,

remains one of the most interesting developments in terms of understanding power in organizations, although much work remains to be done both in terms of developing the methodology and in terms of extending the empirical topics on which it has been applied. (Clegg et al. 2006:317)

In this thesis, a discourse analytic approach provides a lens through which to understand how the asymmetrical power relationships between miners and managers were exacerbated by performance appraisals and how relationships between miners were also disrupted by the imposition of performance appraisals by mine managers. My thesis examines the effects of appraisal on the social world of Dover Colliery miners and pays particular attention to the ways in which appraisals were subverted by miners in their discursive struggles against the destructive effects of appraisals on their occupational identities.

## **1.6 Organization of the thesis**

The thesis is divided into two parts. Part 1 grounds the research question within the existing HRM literature and develops a theoretical framework drawing upon critical



management and identity frameworks and perspectives. Part 2 presents an analysis of the empirical data using the theoretical framework emerging from the literature review in Part 1. Through this process, Part 2 gives ‘voice’ to workers and provides a deeper understanding of the discursive processes through which employees defend their occupational identities in the face of perceived violation by comparative performance ratings.

Chapter 2 presents an overview of salient work in the extant HRM literature on performance appraisal, drawing particular attention to the managerialist assumptions underpinning much of the mainstream literature and noting the need for more critical, employee-centric studies to counterbalance the assumptions of unitarist HRM approaches. Both the prescriptive and the critical streams of literature have a propensity to deprive the employee of agency. The need to ‘develop more nuanced and employee-centred constructs for understanding such [employee] reactions’ (Grant and Shields 2002:329) to HRM techniques provides the rationale for this thesis.

Chapter 3 explores the link between performance appraisal and worker identity. It examines theories of self and identity and argues for a focus, not on identity as a product, essence or *being*, but rather as an ongoing process of *becoming* (Alvesson 2003:23). Attention is drawn to the role of narrative in making sense of the lived experiences of the individual, and thus the processual nature of identity construction (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003). The chapter then examines literature on the nature of occupational identities and develops a theoretical framework through which to understand identity regulation and identity work among workplace collectives (Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Reveley and McLean 2008). This framework is integrated with the discursive framework of analysis suggested by Grant and Shields (2002; 2006) to create a model which is used in Part 2 to analyse the data from the fieldwork.

Chapter 4 explains the methodological approach chosen to address the research question. After positioning my methodology within the critical discourse and critical management traditions, my methods of data collection and analysis are discussed.

An extended case study approach provides opportunity to explore emergent employee reactions from multiple data sources such as on-site and off-site interviews (taped and transcribed into verbatim written texts), field observations during underground visits to the coalface, informal chats to miners and managers at shift change-over times, documentary data, field-notes and minutes of management and union meetings, and responses from a survey of miners. The last section of Chapter 4 discusses how discourse analysis was employed to make sense of the research data. Chapter 4 thus provides a rationale for the discursive analytic approach that was chosen. As will be demonstrated, analytical leverage is gained by combining the discursive framework of concepts, objects and subjects (see, for example, Fairclough 1992; Grant and Shields 2002; Grant et al. 2003; Ainsworth and Hardy 2004; Hardy and Phillips 2004; Grant and Shields 2006) with notions of identity regulation and collective identity work (Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Reveley and McLean 2008).

Part 2 of the thesis presents an analysis of the data collected during my fieldwork. It covers the introduction, implementation and consequences of several rounds of performance review for miners at Dover Colliery. Chapter 5 uses a discourse-analytic approach to understand managers' concepts of performance, appraisals, and 'ideal' miners. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 focus on data collected from miners and their views of themselves as subjects before, during and after appraisal ratings and reviews.

Chapter 5 questions *what* and *how* managers were thinking about appraisal, using objects such as the appraisal documents to discover 'traces' (Ainsworth and Hall 2006:270) of the concepts which underpinned the appraisal project from MNC Coal's managerial perspective. A key theme in this chapter is the interdiscursivity of HRM concepts (Hardy et al. 2000:1245); that is, ideas borrowed from elsewhere are shown to inform managerial thinking about appraisal at Dover Colliery. Mine managers' concepts of measurement, appraisal, and 'ideal' worker informed their HRM practices in performance ratings and reviews.

Chapter 6 examines the discursive resources used by miners to construct and maintain their occupational identities. By examining what miners say about themselves, this chapter explores salient elements of their identities and then notes how appraisal ratings breached highly valued and mutually constitutive pre-existing identity elements. I argue that miners reacted negatively to performance appraisal because they were responding to transgression of their occupational identities.

Violation of miners' occupational identities leads to processes of identity defence, which are analysed in Chapter 7. Miners' stories confirm the contingent nature of identity work and demonstrate the effective use of discursive resources such as storytelling in order to prise open spaces in which to resist the identity-breaching effects of appraisal. Various genres of miners' stories are identified, and the processes through which these stories subvert the appraisal discourse draw attention not only to the ambiguity of identity construction (Knights and Willmott 1989), but also to how stories privilege the voice of the storyteller in the defence of occupational identities.

Chapter 8 presents a closer analysis of miners' negative responses to appraisal through the lens of insults. Here, the nexus of shame and identity is explored, followed by an analysis of how victims (that is, miners) use discursive resources to redress the shame inflicted by the perceived perpetrators (that is, mine managers) of the offence. In particular, three types of dissonance tropes, namely irony, parody and sarcasm, are identified in miners' talk about appraisal. As a form of resistance, miners appropriated the appraisal discourse and inverted the power relationship by becoming the appraisers of 'management'. This appropriation demonstrates their capacity to respond in an agential manner. Dissonance tropes allowed for emotional release, and a means by which they could bolster and defend their identities in the face of what were interpreted as insulting practices of a misinformed and incompetent management.

Finally, Chapter 9 draws together answers to the research question addressed in this thesis and discusses some of the theoretical and practical implications of these findings. The chapter reiterates the findings that miners' negative responses to the

discourse of appraisal were part of their struggle against identity regulation, and a reassertion of their socially shared identities within the existing power structures at Dover Colliery. The chapter suggests a way forward for understanding employee experiences of HRM, extending the application of the conceptual models of identity developed in this thesis. The chapter suggests possibilities for future empirical research to provide richer understandings of the impact of HRM practices on employees.

## **Chapter 2     Re-centring the employee in the performance appraisal literature**

*Appraisal is a compulsively fascinating subject, full of paradoxes and love-hate relationships. And appraisal schemes are really controversial. Companies carry out a major overhaul of their policies and practices in this area about every third year on average. Some schemes are popular, with overtones of evangelical fervour, while others are at least as equally detested and derided as ‘the annual rain dance’, ‘the end of term report’, etc.*

(Holdsworth 1991:65)

### **2.1     Introduction**

Chapter 1 identified the key research question of the thesis as the quest to understand why coal miners were reacting with such hostility and anger to the implementation of a performance appraisal system at their colliery. Their impassioned resistance occurred despite the fact that, according to the Performance Management Superintendent, there were no direct links to pay, promotion, or redundancies. Given that the primary research question has been identified, this chapter now delineates some fields of study relevant to the research question. The specific purpose of the chapter is to review existing literature on the nature and purposes of performance appraisal and its effects on employees. Since it would be impractical to review the thousands of articles which have been written about performance appraisal, aspects of the existing literature relevant to the research question will be chosen. Emerging from the literature review process is a natural history of the development of sets of ideas with respect to performance appraisal. However, the primary purpose of the chapter is to develop a critical perspective on the appraisal literature. To this end, aspects of the extant literature will be used to ‘frame’ this thesis as it investigates key implications of performance appraisal on employees at Dover Colliery.

A recent review of HRM literature (of which appraisal is a subset) indicates that a great deal of the academic literature remains ‘prescriptive, functionalist and uncritical’ (Watson 2004:447). Much of the appraisal literature continues to focus on design and implementation issues from a managerialist perspective. While there have been employee surveys of satisfaction with appraisals and appraisers (for example, Boswell and Boudreau 2000), very little research has focused on *theorizing* employee reactions to appraisal in a sociologically informed or critical manner (Thompson and Ackroyd 1995; Bacon 1999; Fournier and Grey 2000; Watson 2004). Legge (2005) argues for analysis of HRM in its broad *socio-political context*, and this thesis heeds that call in its contribution to a ‘critical and theoretically sophisticated social scientific study of employment-related managerial practices’ (Watson 2004:447). This is accomplished through its theorizing of employee responses to the managerially imposed practice of appraisal, in such a way that ‘full weight is given to both human/managerial *agency* and to structural circumstances’ (Watson 2004:450, emphasis in original). What the extant literature says about these themes will be addressed in this chapter and the next, and will provide a framework to guide the empirical research that follows.

This chapter is structured on the following basis. First, I introduce a framework which divides relevant literature into four quadrants based on prescriptive and critical streams of literature. Analysis of the prescriptive stream starts by examining typical definitions of appraisal (Section 2.3.1) highlighting some of the key assumptions implicit in these definitions. Section 2.3.2 reviews studies that have investigated employee responses from the functionalist or prescriptive perspective. Section 2.3.3 examines research perspectives in the critical management literature on appraisal and its theorization of power and control. Section 2.3.4 reviews issues raised in the employee-centred literature. The view that performance appraisal inevitably ‘subjugates’ employees is contested by a small but growing body of critical literature which seeks to ‘re-centre’ the employee (for example, Grant and Shields 2002; Grant and Shields 2006). This literature is reviewed, and a framework created which the thesis uses as a basis for analyzing the empirical data collected throughout the research period. Section 2.4 concludes the chapter with a summary of the existing literature and proposes a way forward using a more critical and

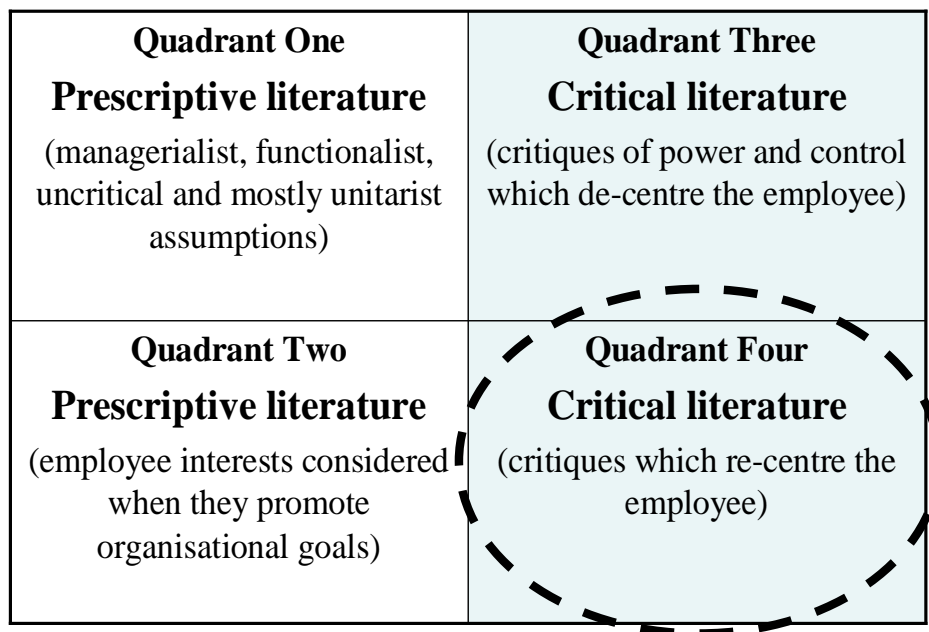
theoretically informed approach to studying employee responses to performance appraisal.

## **2.2 ‘Appraising’ the literature: A framework for classifying studies of appraisal**

Employing the broad classification scheme used by Watson (2004:447) in his critique of the HRM literature, we can identify two broad streams of appraisal literature, namely the ‘prescriptive, functionalist, uncritical’ stream, and the ‘non-prescriptive and critical’ stream. The prescriptive approach is often described as managerialist or unitarist (see, for example, Hollinshead and Leat 1995; Doolin 2003). The managerialist frame of reference is characterized by an approach that prescribes ways in which employees, as the objects of ‘good’ HRM practice, *should* be managed to achieve organizational goals. This approach assumes that it is possible to achieve outcomes that are mutually beneficial to employers and employees, typically without the intervention of third parties such as unions or industrial tribunals (Shields 2007:9). Managerialist approaches are often deterministic in that they assume a straightforward causal link between the decisions of managers and desired organizational outcomes (Doolin 2003:753). Harley and Hardy (2004:380) use different terminology but likewise differentiate between the ‘critical’ and ‘mainstream’ positions in debates about HRM. Legge (2001), writing from a critical perspective, refers to the mainstream position as modernist, normative and positivist. On the other hand, the critical stream of appraisal literature has been strengthened by the growing interest in critical management studies, which draws upon a plurality of intellectual traditions (Alvesson and Willmott 2003:15) and is ‘a political project in the sense that it aims to unmask the power relations around which social and organizational life are woven’ (Fournier and Grey 2000:19).

These two broad streams of appraisal literature are each further divided into sub themes, distinguished on the basis of employee-centred and employee de-centred approaches. De-centred approaches rarely move beyond ‘considering workers (discursively) as resource-objects’ (Grant and Shields 2006:294). Employee-centred approaches, on the other hand, ‘recognize and respect [workers] as whole subjects’ and seek ‘to understand them on their own terms’ (Grant and Shields 2006:302,

299). These categories are represented conceptually in Figure 2.1 Performance Appraisal: Perspectives in Research (below). The model captures the two dimensions mentioned above: the extent to which the literature is prescriptive, functional and managerialist, or critical, and the extent to which the literature is employee-centred or employee de-centred. While the boundaries of the prescriptive and critical categories (and their subcategories) are not fixed and absolute – in some cases it is difficult to fit a particular study into a particular ‘box’ – for analytical purposes these divisions provide a useful classificatory framework. This thesis is firmly positioned in Quadrant Four, where critiques of appraisal re-centre employees and establish their subjective experiences of appraisal as the area of research.



**Figure 2.1 Performance Appraisal: Perspectives in Research**

### 2.3 The literature framework

Quadrant One, the prescriptive, managerialist approach, is where the majority of appraisal literature is located. Here, appraisal is viewed in instrumental terms as a managerial tool to achieve organizational goals. Little, if any, genuine attempt is made to understand the impact of appraisal on employees’ working lives. There may



be discussion of the ‘gap’ between words and deeds with respect to appraisal, but the literature displays scant awareness of developments in critical management studies that are relevant to appraisal. Years ago, Legge (1978:16), for example, noted how ‘the prescriptive intention of these [HRM] books’ had succumbed to ‘stilted generalizations that neglect both the complexities and dynamism of real organizations’. Storey’s assertion that ‘HRM is [still] an amalgam of description, prescription, and logical deduction’ (Storey 2001:6) well describes the approach of the HRM literature in Quadrant One, and demonstrates that this category of literature has not really responded to Legge’s (1978) earlier criticisms regarding the need for awareness of the micro-social dynamics of organizations. The employee is de-centred in this category of literature.

Quadrant Two also houses prescriptive literature, but unlike Quadrant One, here the employee is considered, but as an object to be managed for the sake of competitive advantage – as a human ‘resource’ or as human ‘capital’. Contributions to this stream are not focused on employee needs *per se*, nor on promoting employee well-being, nor on producing a fairer or more congenial working environment (Deery 2002). Rather, employee development, appraisal, employee assistance programs and other like initiatives are viewed in instrumental terms when they can be argued to provide unmistakable competitive advantage for the firm. The research, in Quadrant Two, has more to do with cutting labour costs or increasing labour productivity than understanding the needs of, or enriching the lived work experience of, workers - except insofar as they provide the basis for competitive advantage. The resource-based HRM literature (Wright et al. 2001) is an exemplar of this type of approach.

Studies in Quadrants One and Two largely ignore power as a phenomenon or an analytical construct. Where power is a factor as, for example, in the work of Frenkel et al. (1998), it is conceptualized as the property of management who seemingly are in a position to manipulate ‘variables’ so as to elicit job satisfaction, or employee commitment, or higher levels of discretionary effort. On the other hand, Quadrants Three and Four represent critical studies wherein power and control in organizational contexts are central themes. In these quadrants, following the work of Michel Foucault (1980; 1982), power is generally conceptualized as a relationship,

not a property of persons or groups. Quadrant Three includes the majority of the critical literature which identifies and explores power issues. However, the subject is conceptually de-centred in this critical approach (Grant and Shields 2002). This is due to the influence of Foucault, who claimed that ‘the subject is *socially produced* by the system of power which surrounds it’ (Hardy and Leiba-O’Sullivan 1998:459, emphasis added). Foucault was deeply critical of the conception of the subject as an individual endowed with consciousness, or individual entity with independent choice. Foucault, according to Hardy and Leiba-O’Sullivan, viewed the subject as produced within discourse:

The individual is not a distinct, autonomous actor, a fixed, objective entity or a stable constellation of essential characteristics. Instead, the individual is a socially constituted, socially recognized, category of analysis who has multiple fragmented identities which are salient only insofar as they are socially recognized. (Hardy and Leiba-O’Sullivan 1998:459)

The subject is thus displaced from a privileged position in relation to the production of meaning. It is discourse, not the subjects who speak it, which produces systems of meaning (Foucault 1972). Discourse, for Foucault, ‘is enmeshed with power, but it is not necessary to find “the subject” – the king, the ruling class, the bourgeoisie, the state, etc. – for *power/knowledge* to operate’ (Hall 2001:79, emphasis in original). In this sense, the subject is de-centred; the subject must be subjected to the rules and conventions of discourse, and its dispositions of power/knowledge.

One has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that’s to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework. (Foucault 1982:115)

Quadrant Four, the critical and employee-centred literature, is the most relevant to the current research question of why employees were reacting so negatively to the introduction of an ‘orthodox’ performance appraisal system. It is in Quadrant Four where this thesis will make its contribution to the existing literature. The view that

performance appraisal ‘subjugates’ employees is contested by a small but growing body of critical literature which seeks to ‘re-centre’ the employee (Grant and Shields, 2002: 309). This literature is reviewed, and an identity-focused framework is developed which this thesis then puts into service for its analysis of the original data collected throughout the research period. Critically *theorizing* employee reactions to appraisal, supported by empirical research, will add to our understanding of the subjective effects of managerial practices in the workplace. Furthermore, the resulting conceptual framework developed in this thesis can be applied to a range of management practices in a variety of organizations, especially those in other heavy industries akin to underground coal mining.

### **2.3.1 Prescriptive literature: Uncritical, managerialist perspectives (Quadrant One)**

Performance appraisal has its roots in classical theories of organization which firmly locate power and control in the hands of management (Reed 1992). The origins of the annual performance appraisal reflect the assumptions of the age of scientific management, where the focus was on identifying the skills and knowledge of workers and using this information for the benefit of the organization. Frederick Winslow Taylor, widely considered to be the founding father of scientific management, based his work on the pursuit of efficiency (Procter et al. 2004). While inefficiency on the side of management could be attributed to incompetence, of key importance on the workers’ side was the phenomenon of ‘soldiering’. According to Taylor (1947:19), soldiering could take two forms. The first was what Taylor called the natural instinct or tendency of workers to take it easy, which he thus called natural soldiering. The second form occurred when workers colluded to restrict their output, which Taylor called systematic soldiering (Collinson and Ackroyd 2005:307). According to writers in the prescriptive management stream, both forms of soldiering could be managed by, among other things, performance appraisal. Appraisal, therefore, has historically carried connotations of distrust of workers and a process whereby labour can be ‘squeezed’ to wring extra effort (and hopefully extra output) from an otherwise lazy or colluding workforce. Appraisal under scientific management principles thus was an attempt to overcome problems

stemming from the *lack* of control over the labour process. With few exceptions, Taylor's emphasis on the individual as the focus for standardizing and formalizing work tasks became (and continues to be) the bedrock of performance appraisal templates.

Between 1950 and 1980 appraisal research was primarily directed towards designing and improving the 'instruments' of assessment (Arvey and Murphy 1998). Thus, there were dozens of studies on the advantages and disadvantages of different types of rating scales, of rating versus ranking, and of ways of rating that would provide the most 'objective' measures of performance. Appraisal was a formalized assessment and reporting system, based on a backward looking time-frame – usually the past 12 months. The focus was on evaluation of workers, on managerial control and worker accountability to superiors. Any consideration of employee response was purely at the behavioural level – how to get employees to be more efficient for the sake of the company.

Coens and Jenkins (2000:14, emphasis in original) believe that five features are present when appraisal is used in its conventional form to judge individual performance in organizational settings. These five features are contained in their definition of appraisal as follows:

The practice of *performance appraisal* is a mandated process in which, for a specified period of time, all or a group of employees' work performance, behaviors, or traits are individually rated, judged, or described by a person other than the rated employee and the results are kept by the organization.

Their definition reveals conceptual assumptions of traditional appraisal as a judgmental process reflecting the rater's capacity to judge validly and reliably the quality of work performed. The process is a mandatory evaluation of the success or failure of an employee's efforts, and assigns judgment rights to 'others' in an organizational hierarchy. Coens and Jenkins (2000:13), interestingly, assert that a tool in which the *employee* is the sole judge would be a developmental tool rather than a performance appraisal. Their definition also positions appraisal as a *formal*

feedback process, not the informal chats about work processes and practices which may take place throughout the year as part of social interaction in the workplace. Interestingly, the emphasis above on procedural issues reinforces Holdsworth's (1991:66) criticism that appraisals often over-emphasize procedure at the expense of analysis of outcomes. Employee responses are not considered in the above definition.

Not surprisingly, most definitions of performance appraisal stemming from the prescriptive literature converge around themes of formal assessment of employee performance, for organizational purposes. The following definition by Härtel et al. (2007:342) is typical of those in the mainstream literature:

Performance appraisal is another SHRM [strategic human resource management] tool which is used to fill performance gaps and is defined as a formal and mutually agreed upon system of planning and reviewing employee performance (e.g. skills, abilities, knowledge and attitudes).

This definition is significant in that its focus is on filling performance *gaps*, hence positioning appraisal as a deficit model of performance management. This focus on measuring inadequacies assumes that if an employee is informed about performance deficiencies, somehow that message will, of itself, elicit performance improvement. Under the prescriptive view, performance appraisal is a process whereby an organization assigns a *score* or some form of *rating hierarchy* to indicate the level of performance of a target person or group. It is assumed that an assigned score will somehow improve subsequent performance. This stream of literature is blind to the impact of appraisal on the subjective experiences of employees. It mostly ignores employee reactions to appraisal, or where this is not possible, it considers negative employee reactions to be dysfunctional and a problem to be 'fixed' by fine-tuning the appraisal instrument, or by providing better appraisal training for the rater or the employee.

Härtel et al.'s (2007) definition above, like most of the appraisal definitions in Quadrant One, is expressed from a *managerialist* perspective. No mention is made

of what appraisal does *to* employees. It is assumed that employees will ‘mutually agree’ with management plans and goals; furthermore, it is assumed that employees will ‘mutually agree’ with management’s ‘review’ of employee performance. When an employee’s future job security, financial security and promotional prospects depend on reaching agreement with management, this supposed ‘agreement’ reached in a formal interview setting where one party has the power to shower or withhold blessings - what Newton and Findlay (1996:50) have called ‘monarchic discipline’ - is somewhat problematic.

Härtel et al. (2007:342) continue their description of appraisal by noting that:

A performance appraisal is an accurate measure of key aspects of employee performance, which is a crucial aspect of the performance management process if the company wants to improve overall organizational performance and achieve a competitive advantage.

Somewhat disconcerting is the assertion that ‘appraisal is an *accurate* measure of key aspects of employee performance’ (2007:342, emphasis added). The so-called ‘accuracy’ of performance appraisal has been a topic of much research. Latham, Sulsky and MacDonald (2007), for example, show that rating errors are virtually inevitable. In reality, the outcome of performance appraisal is frequently a decrease rather than an increase in performance because employees do not believe that appraisals are accurate. Rather, they believe that they are being evaluated on the wrong things by the wrong people and the whole process is ‘not fair’ (Latham et al. 2005:77). Continuing disappointments with performance appraisal outcomes have generated a focus on the validity and reliability of measures, and attempts to negate bias in the rating process. However, this focus on the instrument and the rater has tended to marginalize research into causes of negative employee reactions to appraisal. That is, research agendas in this prescriptive approach are so focused on trying to arrive at ‘scientific’ measures of performance that they miss the impact of such measurement processes on the ‘objects’ of their assessments.

Wood and Marshall (2008:295) recently explored factors that influence rating accuracy, and defined appraisal accuracy as ‘the primary criterion of appraisal effectiveness’. The fact that appraisers’ self-reports of appraisal effectiveness were not positively correlated with appraisee perceived effectiveness in their study was dismissed in a single sentence without critical reflection on the significance of this finding. Typical of this prescriptive stream, the assumption appears to be that as long as appraisers could have ‘self-efficacy’, their ratings would more closely approximate the ‘true scores’ obtained from expert ratings, and that could then be defined as appraisal effectiveness.

Iles (2001:144) notes that some supervisors prefer to inflate ratings because they perceive that ‘negative ratings lead to negative events such as resentment, deteriorating working relationships, appeals, grievances, and legal and industrial actions’. However, the focus of this literature is on encouraging raters to report ‘true’ performance, rather than on seriously investigating why employees react negatively to low ratings – or whether ratings should be used at all. The ‘psychometric model’ (Iles 2001:152), with its relentless pursuit of accuracy through more scientifically valid and reliable measures of individual performance, is in contrast to assumptions of the ‘political’ model of assessment (Murphy and Cleveland 1995), where it is recognized managers have goals of their own which may not include accurate appraisals. For example, appraisal ratings may be used to punish a person perceived as a threat, or to delay the promotion of a disliked colleague. However, both the psychometric and the political models tend to ignore employee reactions to appraisal.

Writers in Quadrant One, despite their tendency to ignore employee responses, do admit that some employees approach appraisals with animosity (Härtel et al. 2007); in other cases with high levels of stress (Carter and Delahaye 2005). Writers in Quadrant One, viewing employees from a managerialist perspective, acknowledge that appraisees are likely to filter the information which they volunteer in performance reviews to ensure favourable administrative decisions (Delahaye 2005). Employees may be more concerned about maximizing their rewards than learning from their failures during the previous period. However, while writers in the

prescriptive stream admit that there are problems with performance measurement and performance appraisals, the bulk of the research appears to be fixated on the assumption that these problems will be ‘solved through the introduction of more sophisticated performance measurement methodologies and techniques, standards and indicators’ (Vakkuri and Meklin 2006:235).

The prescriptive, performance-focused literature admits obvious difficulties with appraisal, but persists in trying to find solutions, rather than questioning the wisdom of appraisal *per se*. Much of the prescriptive HRM literature (including appraisal literature) assumes congruence between organizational and employee goals and hence a unitary view of power (Hollinshead and Leat 1995). These unitarist assumptions, when combined with a psychological ‘science’ approach to perfecting measures of performance, explain why this literature persists in its quest to find solutions to appraisal problems. The concern of writers in this stream appears to be the need to demonstrate links between HRM and organizational performance, and the data are obtained from a range of *management* sources (interviews, management questionnaires and the like). Employees are left disenfranchised. In this prescriptive stream, their verdict is ignored (Grant and Shields 2002), except that negative employee reactions are problems to be ‘fixed’. In this prescriptive stream, notions of management of performance are inextricably linked with notions of assumed employee acceptance of mutual trust, mutual respect, and command and control from above (Linstead et al. 2004). In summary, then, much of the research linking performance appraisal to organizational performance treats the worker as an object of production. Workers’ voices are rarely heard in this stream of research and their needs are certainly not regarded as central (Legge 2005). The prescriptive literature, even when it attempts to be critical of appraisal, addresses criticisms by reviewing the impact of appraisals on managers or organizational performance rather than through giving effective ‘voice’ to workers.

### **2.3.2 Prescriptive literature: Employee interests considered (Quadrant Two)**

The prescriptive performance appraisal literature that focuses on linking appraisal to enhanced organizational performance largely ignores employees’ interests.



However, employees may be elevated from ‘commodity’ status to ‘resource’ status, and hence their interests may be considered, if such consideration promotes organizational goals. Employees’ subjective experiences and needs as people are considered to some degree by the neo-human relations approach as epitomized by McGregor (1957). He maintained that conventional performance appraisal was practically identical with a program for product inspection. Reflecting on his unwillingness to treat human beings like physical objects, McGregor concluded that on this basis employee resistance was ‘eminently sound’ (1957:91).

McGregor (1972) proposed a change in appraisal ‘technology’ through a management-by-objectives (MBO) approach which he claimed would shift the emphasis from appraisal to analysis, emphasizing performance in the *future* and making the subordinate the helper in the goal-setting process. However, MBO still adopted a unitarist perspective (Hollinshead et al. 2003), of fine-tuning the *instrument* to gain employee buy-in to organizational goals and objectives. MBO may adopt the rhetoric of mutual goals, but the objectives are more to do with meeting production targets than enriching the working lives of employees (Deery 2002). Holding isolated individuals accountable for outcomes in interdependent production systems misreads the work context. Employee reactions, again, are not the primary focus of investigations, although there are reports of the intensification of work and perceived injustices under the MBO system (Green and McIntosh 1998). Levinson’s (1970:125, emphasis in original) question nicely captures the lack of employee-centred focus in MBO, despite the rhetoric: ‘Management by *whose* objectives?’

A growing dissatisfaction with the failure of MBO to deliver clearly demonstrable improved organizational performance, given the inevitable clash between organizational and personal goals (Keenoy and Kelly 2001), and especially given the neglect of systems factors which influence performance, led to a movement against performance appraisal. More than two decades ago Deming (1986), one of the key figures in the total quality management (TQM) movement, listed the annual evaluation of performance or merit rating as one of the seven ‘deadly diseases’ of management. Rather than management by objectives, he contended, it was

management by fear. The effects of an annual rating from a superior, as articulated by Deming (1986:102), sound remarkably familiar to reports from workers today:

It nourishes short-term performance, annihilates long-term planning, builds fear, demolishes team-work, nourishes rivalry and politics. It leaves people bitter, crushed, bruised, battered, desolate, despondent, dejected, feeling inferior, some even depressed, unfit for work for weeks after receipt of rating, unable to comprehend why they are inferior. It is unfair, as it ascribes to the people in a group differences that may be caused totally by the system that they work in.

While Deming flagged the issue of the subjective impact of appraisal on workers ('leaves people...feeling inferior'), few writers seriously continued in this line of enquiry until a recent resurgence in interest in emotions in the workplace (Ashkanasy et al. 2000; Fineman 2003). Deming's writings, while against the performance of appraisals, fit into Quadrant Two in that they reveal part of the natural history of the development of appraisal ideas, and also because they appeal to managers to consider the impact of appraisal upon workers. Deming's approach, while systems focused, raises the question of the (unintended) consequences of appraisal on employees, a key feature of literature in Quadrant Two. His criticisms of appraisal form a helpful bridge to the critical stream of literature which will be examined in Quadrants Three and Four.

Proponents of TQM allege that appraisal, with its focus on blaming the worker rather than addressing the context of work, focuses on individual (worker) components rather than focusing on the *leadership* required to manage organizational *systems* (Jones 1995; Storey 2001). Appraisal becomes management of defects. Workers and organizations are both losers in the process. The performance review, no matter how well designed the format, is a one-way street. Someone who the employee did not select performs a very personal 'internal inspection'. Employees, however, quickly spot the flaws in appraisal. According to Crosby (1995:16):

The reviews, which are supposed to give information to management about employees, do the reverse. The employees quickly realize that management has no way of knowing who is the fairest of them all, except through luck and instinct.

The little empirical research that has been done in the prescriptive, but employee-focused, literature (that is, Quadrant Two) thus far has examined employee reactions in services or staff positions, for example Brown and Benson (2003), Guest (1999), and Taylor and Pierce (1999). Surveys regarding appraisal have also been conducted on managers and students attending MBA courses (Carson et al. 1991). Lynch et al. (1999) surveyed retail employees regarding perceived organizational support; employees considered how much the organization valued their contributions and cared about their well-being, on the basis of appraisal experiences. One of the more significant findings of a meta-analytic study of performance appraisal (Cawley et al. 1998: 615) was that employees were more positive towards ‘participation for the sake of having one’s “voice” heard’ than ‘participation for the purpose of influencing the end result’ (1998:615). In another study attempting to assess HRM functions from an employee perspective, Gibb (2001) found that performance appraisal rated *lowest* of 14 items when employees were asked to rate the effectiveness of HR practices.

In summary, then, Quadrant Two literature – what Legge (2001) considers to be positivist, modernist and employee focused – shares common, unitarist assumptions about employees being ‘resources’ to be developed for the effective attainment of organizational goals. A common thread of neo-human relations, MBO, and TQM approaches is the attainment of high performance through employee commitment to company goals. In the first two of these movements, performance appraisal is seen as a ‘tool’ in the managerial ‘toolkit’ towards productivity ends, while in the TQM approach, appraisal is seen as a ‘disease’ in the system to be abolished because of its negative effects on employee morale.

The literature represented in Quadrants One and Two – the prescriptive, functionalist and uncritical literature – suggests that appraisals have become part of

the ‘received doctrine’ (Carson et al. 1991) of an auditing culture (Bach 2000). Despite the deficiencies of performance appraisal, literature in Quadrants One and Two view performance appraisal as a power-neutral technique. However, since individuals may lack control over their work environments and other factors influencing performance, appraisals may appear (especially to employees) to be arbitrary and unfair (Iles 2001). The emphasis and assumptions of performance appraisal mirror past trends in management, especially the Taylorist approach to division of labour and measurement of the *individual’s* performance. The prescriptive stream continues to the present day in texts where discussions of rater error (such as halo effect, leniency, central tendency and so forth) and instrument type (behaviourally anchored rating scales, behaviour observation scales, 360 degree appraisals, peer evaluations, MBO and so on) continue to dominate the discussion of how to improve the effectiveness of appraisal. While writers in this stream may display a passing interest in employee responses to HRM initiatives, the focus is on increasing labour productivity, not on appraisal’s subjective impact on employees.

### **2.3.3 Critical literature: De-centred employee perspectives (Quadrant Three)**

An alternative perspective to the managerialist approach of the prescriptive literature, stemming from critical theory and sociology (Iles 2001), identifies the controlling and potentially subjugating effects of appraisal on appraisees. An argument for taking a critical analytical approach to management activities, as opposed to a prescriptive, functionalist and normative one, was advanced by Legge (1978) many years ago. Critical theory in organization studies has developed from a number of philosophical and sociological approaches (Böhm 2007), and there is a danger in attempting to press writers with their own distinctive positions into various ‘schools’. However, two broad categories are generally described in the literature. The first, usually described as Marxist or neo-Marxist and influenced by Frankfurt School scholars such as Adorno (1973), Fromm (1994) and Horkheimer (1979), and later by Habermas (1984), emphasizes the ‘antagonisms of society’ (Böhm 2007:109). These scholars see power as embedded in specific societal and political structures. Critical approaches, in this tradition, ‘provide systematic critiques of capitalist forms of exploitation and the various economic, political and cultural

processes through which the ideas of the ruling class are produced and reproduced' (Mumby 2004:237). Labour process theory draws some of its intellectual roots from this tradition (Thompson 1990).

The second approach, following Foucault, moves away from views of power as something possessed, as 'property by persons, a dominant class, a sovereign or a state' (Knights and Willmott 1989:553). Rather, 'forms of power are exercised through subjecting individuals to their own identity or subjectivity, and are not therefore mechanisms directly derived from the forces of production, class struggle or ideological structures' (Knights and Willmott 1989:553). This second approach has been referred to as post-structuralist. While these two approaches have often been characterized as ideologically separate, a number of writers (see, for example, Mumby 2004:239) see the boundaries at times as 'porous'. Böhm (2007:109) takes exception to the general framework which distinguishes between the Frankfurt School scholars and those who follow Foucault's conceptions of power relations and struggles, contending that:

[P]erhaps there are not so many dividing boundaries between Frankfurt and Paris, between 'CT' [Critical Theory] and 'PS' [post-structuralism]. If [scholars] would look beyond their acronyms for critical theory and post-structuralism, that is, if they would read the multiple and diverse texts produced by scholars associated with these philosophical categories, they would notice that there are many connecting lines between these German and French philosophical traditions.

There has been a growing interest in the coalescence of various critical approaches under the banner of 'critical management studies' (Fournier and Grey 2000; Alvesson and Willmott 2003). Critical management studies (CMS), drawing on disparate political, institutional and epistemological trends, is 'unified by an anti-performative stance, and a commitment to (some form of) denaturalization and reflexivity' (Fournier and Grey 2000:7). That is, writers in the critical management studies tradition are concerned with 'performativity' only insofar as it uncovers power, control and inequality issues being done in the name of performance. In the

CMS approach, appraisal in any of its forms is viewed as yet another managerial device through which to gain greater control over, and therefore extract greater effort from, workers (Elvira and Town 2001; Coates 2004). Newton and Findlay (1996), for example, see little point in analysing appraisal outside the context in which it operates and without reference to power relations *within* the organization (for example, workforce composition) and *without* (for example, sectoral and ownership factors). For them, appraisal schemes are predominantly concerned with surveillance, accountability and control, and legitimating management roles in the organizational hierarchy:

Appraisal appears to have less to do with performance management *per se* and more to do with legitimizing management decision making aided and abetted by its seeming fairness and objectivity. (Newton and Findlay 1996:47)

Critical studies of appraisal have drawn heavily on the work of Foucault. Appraisal, in this tradition, has been re-examined in the light of Foucault's ideas on disciplinary practices or 'techniques to manage people en masse' (Legge 2005:343). Foucault identified three ways in which individuals could be located conceptually in time and space: enclosure, partitioning and ranking (Foucault 1977). While all three of these processes are involved in appraisal, ranking - the hierarchical ordering of individuals, done through processes of examination - acts most obviously as a disciplinary device and is most pertinent to the notion of appraisal:

[T]he distribution according to ranks or grades has a double role: it marks the gaps, hierarchises qualities, skills and aptitudes but it also punishes and rewards. (Foucault 1977:181)

Knights has identified three periods in Foucault's work, of which the 'middle phase' is most directly relevant to appraisal (2002:581). During this time, Foucault focused on power and discipline within organizations such as schools, prisons and factories. Foucault (1980; 1982) claims that modern regimes of power/knowledge transform individuals into subjects who turn in on themselves and become self-regarding, self-

governing, and self-disciplining. Foucault's conceptualizations of power and knowledge (or power/knowledge), especially his depiction of the examination which *constitutes* the individual as an object of knowledge through scientific study and confession, has direct relevance to performance appraisal. Foucault (1977) contends that organizations are engaged in defining individuals, and such definitions are not power-neutral. Categorizations such as performance appraisal entail a discourse of 'knowing' the individual, and as such they exercise power over the individual. Power, in this sense, is constitutive in that it creates individuals as known objects (Foucault 1982) and renders them manageable, rewardable, and punishable (Du Gay 1997). Foucault's best known example of the examination is Jeremy Bentham's panopticon penitentiary (Foucault 1977), where prisoners were enclosed and partitioned in such a way that their constant sense of being watched by unseen eyes meant that their only rational option was continuous obedience. Foucault observed that the panopticon led to a situation where the prisoners' constant sense of being watched by the warder led to a state where prisoners *disciplined themselves*. The concept of panopticon-like surveillance raises obvious parallels with appraisal as a form of managerial discipline and control where performance measures, appraisal observations, and rewards and punishment for observed behaviour act as a constant source of power/knowledge aimed at influencing employee conduct.

In addition to the notion of examination, Foucault (1981) sees the confessional as a process through which the person is constituted as a subject. Performance appraisal can be seen as a confessional process in which workers must articulate their strengths, weaknesses and failures to a 'priest-like' master and accept the 'truths' of the 'priest' who judges and defines the subject in return. The confessional – the individual's acknowledgement of his or her thoughts or actions – 'yields further knowledge to assist in the process of governance' (Legge 2005:345).

The truth did not reside solely in the subject who by confessing, would reveal it wholly formed. It was constituted in two stages: present but incomplete, blind to itself, in the one who spoke, it could only reach completion in the one who assimilated and recorded it...The one who listened...was the master of truth...With regard to the confession, his power

was not only to demand it before it was made, or decide what was to follow after it, but also to constitute a discourse of truth on the basis of its decipherment. (Foucault 1981:87)

Drawing on the work of Foucault, critical/postmodernist scholars, (for example Townley 1989; Townley 1993; 1994; Townley 1997; Townley 1999), question the conceptualization of appraisal found in the prescriptive literature. Appraisal, from the critical perspective, is part of a discourse which ‘serves to render organizations and their participants calculable arenas, offering, through a variety of technologies [including appraisal], the means by which activities and individuals become knowable and governable’ (Townley 1993:526). Scholars in this tradition see an essential contradiction between HRM practices such as appraisal, supposedly designed to create high commitment but at the same time strengthening managerial prerogative. Truss et al. (1997) argue that even if the rhetoric of HRM is ‘soft’ [the humanistic Harvard emphasis in managing people (Beer et al. 1985)], the reality is almost always ‘hard’ [the Michigan emphasis (Tichy et al. 1982) on business values and the calculative using of employees as tools through which to achieve organizational ends], with the interests of management prevailing over those of the individual. Watson (2004:455) goes further. He discredits the ‘hard-soft’ dichotomy. Not only does it ignore the political-economic context of managerial practices, but it also naively implies that a ‘soft-soft’ approach (applying developmental and indirect controls to serve employee interests) is possible in practice, which, he says, it is not. There may be irreconcilable differences between the espoused values of management and the lived experiences of workers. In the critical tradition, performance appraisal is seen as something *done to* workers; not something *done for* them.

Rose captures a central theme of Foucauldian writers who view HRM practices as a new set of disciplinary techniques. The twentieth century, according to Rose (1990:95) witnessed the psychologisation of work, providing managers with ‘a vocabulary and a technology for rendering the labour of the worker visible, calculable, and manageable.’ In the confessional (Townley 1994), the subject is compelled to disclose fine and intimate details of their personal and interpersonal



(relationships-with-others) selves, thus being subjected to surveillance and scrutiny, normative evaluation and correction. This view of appraisal as a means of getting employees to confess and to persuade them to identify with their organization rests on the argument that appraisal is a means of involving individuals in their own subordination (Coates, 2004). Management attempts to create a new identity – the compliant, committed worker – through the confessional. Here, workers ‘by their own means or with the help of others, acted on their own bodies, souls, thoughts, conduct and the way of being in order to transform themselves’ (Martin et al. 1988:4). This transformation creates a new worker-as-object, or a subjugated employee. Together, the processes of examination and confessional can give rise to the individual acting out a self-disciplining and ‘socially constructed performance’ (Legge 2005:345).

Appraisal, in the critical literature, is not primarily concerned with measuring performance, but rather with conveying management’s performance expectations so that workers will *internalize* the controls (Townley 1989). Townley (1999) sees appraisals being used to privilege the power of those who articulate the dominant discourse, that discourse being used to manipulate and construct others. While non-Foucauldian writers, such as Hancock and Tyler (2001) and Strangleman (2002), view appraisal as a means to *persuade* employees to identify with their organizations, Foucauldian writers see appraisal as a means of *involving employees* in their own subordination (Coates 2004).

What is largely missing from the Foucauldian critical literature, however, is a strong sense of worker agency. While management may attempt to ‘construct’ the worker, the scope and depth of management control can be seriously overstated. The ‘selective appropriation’ (Knights 2002:582) of Foucault by some critical management researchers results in a de-centring of the subject (who, they say, is constituted by discourse) and ‘ironising’ accounts of what workers say. For example, Ball and Wilson (2000) take snippets of text, in which workers are talking about their attitudes to appraisal (even when they are criticizing it) and argue that such worker opposition merely shows their subordination to the discourse of ‘empowerment’ or ‘legitimate authority’:

Individuals positioned themselves in the ‘empowerment’ and ‘legitimate authority’ repertoires because of their own process of subjectification to these and other institutional discourses. (Ball and Wilson 2000:561)

Thus, even as they criticize the manager’s competence to rate their performance, workers (according to Ball and Wilson) are actually confirming their ‘subjectification’ to this discourse. This apparent conundrum is what Newton refers to as a ‘Catch-22’ (Newton 1998:424) in the argument by some Foucauldians that the salience and power of particular discourses is revealed as much by their denial, resistance or non-acceptance as by their acceptance. Similar arguments ascribe ‘false consciousness’ to workers who think they have the freedom to resist the subjugating discourses of management. Indeed, a frequent theme in the critical literature is that employees through resistance can potentially reproduce the very power relations they seek to escape (Fleming and Spicer 2003).

The assumption that workers are subjugated by managerial discourses has led, as Thompson and Ackroyd (1995:625) point out, to an almost complete absence of *actual accounts of resistance* in Foucauldian studies – a shift in theoretical focus from concern with labour to a concern with identity/security needs to the extent that ‘the labour process is just part of the scenery’ (1995:627). The ‘decentring from labour’ (1995:628) means that collective resistance is also severely downplayed. Indeed Thompson and Ackroyd describe the marginalization in Foucauldian studies of the possibility of workplace resistance as ‘the disappearing resistance trick’ (1995:622). Elsewhere, Newton (1998) has criticized Foucauldian writers such as Knights, Willmott and Townley for the way in which their work represses the subject. Human agency gets marginalized (or is framed in images of passivity) in their constitution of the subject through discourse. ‘The subject is “done to”; she does not appear to do much doing’ (Newton 1998:428). The Foucauldian idea of the (self) disciplined, docile worker, who wants ‘on his or her own what the corporation wants’ (Deetz 1992:42) has led to a de-centring of the employee in Foucauldian-inspired critical management studies (Carter et al. 2002). As McKinlay and Taylor assert:

So seductive is Foucault's panopticon metaphor, however, that if simply transposed on to the labour process perspective it can seriously overestimate the scope and depth of management control...The image in these accounts is a form of self-subordination so complete, so seamless that it stifles any dissent, however innocuous. (McKinlay and Taylor 1996:282)

By contrast, this thesis seeks to avoid a totalizing position of discourse-domination of the subject. Rather it seeks to 're-centre' the 'missing' subject (Grant and Shields 2002:313), and will take seriously what miners say about performance appraisal *inter alia* through fine-grained narrative analysis. The thesis will investigate to what degree miners find avenues of resistance. How and why resistance strategies are brought into play will be acknowledged and investigated.

In the Foucauldian studies of appraisal (for example, Townley, 1994; 1999) workers lack a clear sense of agency. Most Foucauldian writers take a similar view of appraisal but Austrin (1994:205) provides an exception in noting that workers in his study were able to resist by developing different positions from which to speak. Collinson (1994:52) argues, 'a common problem with a great deal of the current critical literature on employee behaviour is its failure to address adequately the way in which power relations are *subjectively* experienced' [emphasis in original]. It is to this small but significant body of literature, which serves as the basis for this thesis, that we now turn in Quadrant Four.

#### **2.3.4 Critical literature: Employee-centred perspectives (Quadrant Four)**

Legge (2005:41) argues that 'the submerged voice of those who experience HRM initiatives needs to be given more prominence, not only for ethical reasons, but also to counteract the managerialist agendas that are implicit in much HRM and performance research'. Rosenthal (2004:602, emphasis in original) expresses a similar view:

What is largely missing in contemporary critical analyses...are thoroughgoing, workplace level accounts of how employees experience and

evaluate regulation in relation to their self-defined interests – research, in other words, that takes more account of *employee experience* of workplace dynamics and does not so quickly de-centre or dismiss this experience in terms such as discursive colonization, false consciousness or obsessional neurosis.

This thesis takes the view, in agreement with Alvesson and Willmott (2002:621), that ‘organizational members are not reducible to passive consumers of managerially designed and designated identities’. This is an important notion, given the de-centring of the subject in Foucault’s earlier work, one that will be explored in more detail in the next chapter. Newton argues convincingly that some Foucauldian studies have neglected to explain ‘*active agential* subjects who manoeuvre and “play” with discourse and practice in the context of power relations which are asymmetrical in character’ (1998:428, emphasis in original). It is Newton’s contention that unless we understand *how* people agentially ‘play’ with, resist, ignore, or subvert discursive practices, we will merely see persons in terms of their ‘constitution’ as subjects of power/knowledge discourses in local power relations, rather than as agential actors. Following in this vein, Gabriel (1999) challenges what he sees as the tendency to overplay the uniformity and totality of control in Foucault-inspired research in organizations and calls for the rediscovery of *human agency* in critical research. He contests the magnitude and totality of constitutive control suggested in the earlier writings of Foucault and suggests that ‘human agency can be rediscovered as a struggling, feeling, thinking, suffering subject’ (Gabriel 1999:179).

A small but growing body of employee-centred HRM literature attempts to ‘re-centre’ the worker, not as a managerial object, but as a discursive subject capable of agency through the creation of more-or-less stable narrative identities, and their defence through discursive resistance. However, these freedoms are not limitless; to a significant extent structural constraints still exist – there must be room both for structure and social agency (Rosenthal 2004). What ‘discursive resources’ (Watson 1995:14) the subject brings into service to resist employer attempts at subjugation is

an important field of investigation, one that will be explored more fully in later chapters of this thesis.

Numerous academics have been calling for more empirical research to understand how employees as active agents react to management practices in different contexts (for example, Truss 2001; Brown and Benson 2003; Watson 2004). Jermier et al., (1994:xv) observe that ‘both oppressive and subtly dominating practices at work can be met with powerful countervailing powers,’ and then they point to the necessity of ‘examining both subtle and subterranean forms of subversion and sabotage as well as the more overt forms of defiance and protest.’ They also make it clear that the interpretations provided by theorists and researchers will be more informed when they take account of the ‘*meanings that those who resist give to their own practices*’ [emphasis added]. This thesis is firmly positioned in Quadrant Four where the employee *qua* agential subject is re-centred as the focus of investigation.

How employees make sense of appraisal, and maintain their ‘selves’ in the face of a practice which targets self-identity through attempts at self-discipline or internal control, is a neglected but important topic. This thesis will build upon an emerging body of employee-centred literature on the effects of appraisal. For example, McKinlay and Taylor (1996) explored employee resistance strategies to the imposition of team-based peer performance ratings on production lines on a factory floor. Their work demonstrates that the power of HRM techniques to nullify or prevent employee resistance has been greatly exaggerated. They demonstrate how employees were able to turn a tight self-policing internal regime into one through which to protect the team from external (managerial) intrusions. Evidence of inventive agency in the McKinlay and Taylor study indicates that shop-floor workers were able to use key elements of the team-working ideology and the practices of management while at the same time rendering the disciplinary effects of team-based appraisal inoperable. McKinlay and Taylor (1996:282) thus contend that Foucauldian images of self-subordination so complete, and the control function so effectively dispersed, that ‘the only expression of workers’ collectivity is to intensify their levels of mutual subjugation’ seriously overestimate the scope and depth of managerial control.

An employee-centred perspective is also evident in work by Glover and Noon (2005) who explored how quality management initiatives (not HRM practices *per se*) directly affect shop-floor workers. Through analysis of employee experiences of TQM initiatives in two case-study organizations, they stress the importance of understanding the social *context* in which employee responses emerge. While they conclude that worker experiences tend to be locally situated, they also note the social agency of their subjects and accept the actors' own definitions of the situations in which they are engaged. Edwards et al. (1998) also focus on employee accounts of TQM, with results indicating a simultaneous mix of gains, losses and tensions for employees. The same employee-centred approach to strategy and TQM practices that we see in Glover and Noon's (2005) work, and the work of Edwards et al. (1998), for example, can be applied to performance appraisal. However, unlike the aforementioned studies, this thesis takes an approach that uses identity theory to privilege the worker as an active, agential social being.

Another noteworthy exception to the general neglect of employee-centred approaches to organizational studies is work by Ackroyd and Thompson whose focus is on 'what ordinary employees do at work' (1999:2). Their work questions the notion of employee subjugation in the workplace; indeed, their work highlights the role of human agency in generating resistance and 'misbehaviour' based on the extent to which employees identify (or dis-identify) with their work and their employers. Other examples of employee-centred research include Collinson's (1992) study of resistance on the shop-floor in two factories in the UK, and Ackroyd and Crowdy's (1990) study of worker resistance strategies in an English slaughterhouse. In all of these cases, empirical evidence refutes totalizing concepts of worker subjugation. Workers find ways to prise open spaces for identity restoring practices even in the most controlled working environments.

In another noteworthy exception to the exclusion of worker concerns, Grant et al. (2003) explored assumptions of performance appraisal in the Australian Public Service, using a discursive framework of analysis. Their framework will be developed in the next chapter. However, what is noteworthy about their research project as it relates to the Quadrant Four literature is their investigation of the

responses of employees affected by appraisal, notably its effects on staff self-image, commitment and motivation. A key finding is that individuals participating in a discourse such as appraisal do so, not as passive receptacles but as 'active social agents with their own interests and subjectivities who are seeking to establish what their social and power relations are with the designated discursive objects' (Grant et al. 2003:249).

To summarize, the employee-centred critical literature claims that we know relatively little about the impact of HRM initiatives on workers' individual and collective experience, expectations and aspirations (Grant and Shields 2002). There is a paucity of research that takes seriously (in a non-ironising way) worker responses to being performance rated. One strand of the emerging body of employee-centred literature harks back to the occupational sociology of Everett Hughes who asserted that an employee's work is one of the things by which he or she is judged, and certainly one of the more significant things by which he or she judges him or her self (Hughes 1994:57). Responding to Hughes' (1994:61) call to 'penetrate more deeply into the personal and social drama of work, to understand the social and social-psychological arrangements and devices by which men [sic] make their work tolerable, or even make it glorious to themselves and others', this thesis undertakes a focused investigation of the reactions of miners to performance appraisal by listening to *their* explanations, rather than having managers speak on employees' behalf. Conceptually, appraisal of the individual (a highly individuating process) cuts deeply across what Hughes calls the 'social-psychological arrangements' of established and entrenched work relationships, especially where the job requires a high degree of interpersonal cooperation, communication and trust in each other's competences in dangerous or even life-threatening conditions. Drawing together these strands from the literature, this thesis maintains that the individuating practice of appraisal clashes with the social order of work relationships in underground coal mining.

Given the paucity of research into employee responses in both the prescriptive and the critical literature, this investigation into employee reactions in a coal mine recognizes the need for a critical social scientific approach. This thesis therefore

uses conceptual contributions from a range of critical management studies, and the conceptual models developed in the next chapter. One of the contributions of this thesis is its willingness to investigate frameworks from different disciplinary traditions of the social sciences and integrate them to enrich conceptual understandings of performance appraisal's effects. In this process, the emerging understanding of employees as they are impacted by, react to, and impact upon HRM processes and functions will better inform theory refinement and development. Specifically, as will now be developed in Chapter 3, the thesis seeks to understand what the literature says about how worker identity is constructed, disrupted by managerial practices, and subsequently repaired.

## **2.4 Conclusion: The subjective effects of appraisal**

This chapter has reviewed two key streams of literature (subdivided into four quadrants) which represent differing perspectives and assumptions with respect to the appraisal of worker performance. The prescriptive appraisal literature pays scant attention to workers' wants and needs, adopting a managerialist, normative and utilitarian approach towards maximizing efficiency, holding employees accountable to various targets typically set by management, although these targets are often assumed (by management) to be 'mutually agreed'. The critical stream identifies power and control issues ignored by much of the managerialist literature, but puts more emphasis on the subjugating effects of appraisal on the worker rather than on the capacity of the worker to resist or to use appraisal for his or her own purposes. Both the prescriptive and the critical streams, therefore, have a propensity to deprive the employee of agency. A critical social science approach, as depicted in Quadrant Four above, offers the potential for useful insights into how employees respond to being performance appraised. This approach seeks to re-centre the employee as an actor in this process. This thesis recognizes that we need to 'develop more nuanced and employee-centred constructs for understanding [employee] reactions' to HRM techniques like appraisal (Grant and Shields 2002:329). To achieve this understanding, this thesis focuses on occupational identity disruption and repair thereby making a significant contribution to understanding the effects of appraisal on employee subjectivity. In particular, it contributes towards an analysis of how



employees' negative reactions to appraisal stem from their 'historically and culturally conditioned sense of self-identity' (Ezzamel and Willmott 1998:365). How identity theory provides the theoretical foundations for a deeper understanding of employee reactions to managerial interventions is the subject of the next chapter.

### **Chapter 3    Performance appraisal and identity: Discursive concepts, objects and subjects**

*Given the accomplished and sometimes precarious nature of contemporary identity, much, if not all activity involves active identity work: people are continuously engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and distinctiveness.*

(Alvesson and Willmott 2002:626, emphasis in original)

#### **3.1    Introduction**

The previous chapter concluded with an acknowledgment that the workplace dynamics of identity formation, disruption and repair need to be better understood. The purpose of this chapter is, firstly, to consider relevant literature on worker identity in organizational contexts and, secondly, to examine the link between performance appraisal discourse and identity work. There is considerable interest in recent literature in the nature and salience of identity at work. Exploring workplace identity holds significant promise as a means of extending our understanding of employee reactions to HRM interventions in general, and performance appraisal in particular. It allows us to explore in depth the processes through which people manoeuvre in relation to discursive practices such as appraisal (Steyaert and Janssens 1999). Identity confirmations, challenges, disruptions, and the subsequent identity work occasioned by appraisal processes remain fruitful avenues for research.

This chapter develops a conceptual framework for exploring employee identity at work, based on a synthesis of models proposed by Phillips and Hardy (1997), Grant and Shields (2002) and Alvesson and Willmott (2002). This framework will be used to analyse coal miners' responses to performance appraisal. In doing so, it further advances employee-centred research from a theoretically informed critical perspective. This chapter also acknowledges the need for on-going critical re-

evaluation of what Gabriel (1999:179) calls the ‘control-resistance-identity triangle,’ overviews relevant perspectives in the power-subjectivity-agency debate, and identifies themes in the extant literature regarding identity work being accomplished using a range of ‘discursive resources’ (Watson 1995:14). In subsequent chapters, this theoretical framework is brought into play to meet the challenge of ‘shaping and applying to some “actual” strategic HRM practices a style of critical and theoretically robust social scientific analysis’ (Watson 2004:448). The chapter therefore develops a theoretical framework through which to understand miner responses to performance appraisal.

### **3.2 The meanings of identity**

The term ‘identity’ gives rise to substantial definitional problems because of its varied use in different disciplinary fields. The literature on identity within social theory, for example, is vast (Jenkins 1996). Writers from a variety of theoretical traditions have examined ‘the complex ways that individuals seek to construct subjective meaning for their actions, relationships and identities’ (Collinson 2003:529). While there are significant points of difference in the approaches of various disciplines, many of them share an emphasis on human self-consciousness. Collinson (2003:529) notes the capacity of ‘reflexively monitoring and purposive creatures’ to reflect upon the self and ‘to see ourselves as separate from the natural and social world around us’. Ashforth et al. (2008:327) conceptualize identity as ‘a self-referential description that provides contextually appropriate answers to the question “Who am I?” or “Who are we?”’ Smith (2002:231), along with Giddens (1991:53), also notes the reflexive nature of the term *self*, emphasizing the self-referential aspect of being human. However, these authors make it clear that they are not talking about an entity which is distinguishable from the person. Descriptors such as the ‘divided’ self (Laing 1965; Gergen 1991), the ‘mutable’ self (Zurcher 1977), the ‘empty’ self (Cushman 1990), the ‘saturated’ self (Gergen 1991), the ‘idealized’ self (Giddens 1991), and the ‘minimal’ self (Larsch 1984) are metaphors. Care must be taken not to reify *self* or *identity*.

Identity is often conceptualised as the characteristics, the coherence, and the distinctiveness of a person, group or organization (Albert and Whetten 1985). Snow and Anderson (1987:1338) see identity as being a kind of 'interface' or 'conceptual bridge' between the individual and society. This distinction between the self and the social is helpful in developing the notion of identity as being the outward manifestation of complex psychological processes occurring within the person in responding to and making sense of relationships with others. In this approach, identity is a distinct 'face' of, but not the sum total of, the self-concept. Watson (2008:121), in developing and refining the concept of identity, makes a clear analytical distinction between 'inward facing' personal or self-identities and 'outward facing' social-identities. More explicit recognition that the concept of identity has both outward and inward facing components provides more analytic power to the concept of identity. In researching identity issues with coal miners, both 'internal' aspects of personal identity and 'external' aspects of social identity will be explored.

Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003:1168) explore the partial overlap between the terms identity and self. They use the term 'self-identity' to refer to something 'deeper', more personal and 'non-accessible' than outward facing identity. For them, (outward facing) identity relates more to the conscious struggle to answer the question 'Who am I?' and is more social in nature. Thus, identity could be conceived of as a bridge to and from the outside world, while self (inward facing or personal identity) is more focused on the world inside (Gergen 1999). Identity is thus a relational concept (Kärreman and Alvesson 2001). Wenger (2000:239) also views identity as a bridge connecting the self with the outside world. For him, identity has social or relational aspects. In Wenger's words (2000:239):

An identity is not an abstract idea or a label, such as a title, an ethnic category, or a personality trait. It is a lived experience of belonging (or not belonging). A strong identity involves deep connections with others through shared histories and experiences, reciprocity, affection, and mutual commitments.

To summarize, identity is accomplished by defining and revising who one is, or who we are as a group. In the context of this thesis, self-identity is a key element of a person's subjective reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966:194) while social identity refers to an individual's capacity to appropriate or construct, maintain and present a sense of definition, coherence, and meaning in relation to significant others. Before addressing the concept of identity at work, the next section presents a brief overview of various theoretical perspectives on identity.

### **3.2.1 Self and identity: Personal and social**

Various disciplines have focused on different psychological, social, economic, cultural and institutional aspects of self-identity formation or construction. In spite of variations in emphasis and focus, what is clear is that the story of self has changed dramatically from earlier notions of the transcendental self articulated during the European enlightenment of the eighteenth century. The transcendental self was viewed as 'an idealized, abstract platform from which concepts and judgments emanated, the self transcended society, standing prior to, apart from, and philosophically above the everyday hub-bub of life' (Holstein and Gubrium 2000:4). Early twentieth century writers challenged this notion of a stable, unitary, transcendental self. Cooley (1922) for example, described the 'looking-glass self', seeing the self as a reflection of social participation. Mead (1934) contended that individuals develop a sense of self from how others respond to them; *individual* selves arise out of *social* interaction. Indeed, for Mead, 'it is impossible to conceive of a self arising outside of social experience' (1934:140). This socially produced self is an emergent 'empirical' self, not a fixed unitary self existing transcendently above daily experience. The self is a social structure, as Mead puts it, arising out of a process of social interaction. Holstein and Gubrium (2000:10), assert that these early twentieth century notions of a social self describe a rather *passive* self at the mercy of the social environment, a self that is constructed (or perhaps burdened, or even crushed) under the weight of others' expectations.

Drawing on Mead's work, writers such as Blumer (1969) and Silverman (1970) view self-identity not as residing in humans as social objects themselves but as

arising from symbolic *interaction* with others, the notion being that individuals create and modify meanings in the process of thinking through issues and interacting with other individuals. Conceptually, then, self and identity remain empirically grounded, but they are social *constructions* that are assembled and lived out as individuals take up or resist the demands of everyday life (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Thus, from the middle of the twentieth century theories of the self emphasized its *agential* capacities. This symbolic interactionist approach concentrates on the intersubjective meanings which actors bring to or extract from episodes of organizational life.

Symbolic interactionist approaches (for example, Blumer 1969) offer insights into how employees as social actors select from competing sources of information and feedback from others, and creatively interpret and manipulate this information about themselves. Meanings arise and are modified out of social interaction (Heracleous 2004:181). Agents attach subjective meanings to situations and modify meanings (and hence actions) through ongoing interactions with others. Moreover, individuals, according to symbolic interactionist perspectives, have a need to present a relatively consistent self to themselves and others (Holstein and Gubrium 2000). Traditionally self and identity have been viewed in psychological and social psychological disciplines as somewhat fixed and stable, and likely to change only gradually over time (Kärreman and Alvesson 2001:62). Recent developments suggest that identity can be more productively viewed not as some naturally occurring entity or essence or substance but rather as a social accomplishment (Potter and Wetherell 1987; Somers 1994; Ainsworth and Hardy 2004; Kärreman and Alvesson 2004). Knights and McCabe observe, ‘the source of our very individuality is *social*, not individual’ (2003:1594, emphasis in original).

Interest in this notion that identity has both a self-referential and a collective or social orientation has been re-energized in recent times by the ‘linguistic turn’ (Watson 1997; Alvesson and Kärreman 2000; Heracleous 2004), which sees identity as a discursive accomplishment. Thus, in this discursive perspective identity has a symbolic and collective orientation. Individuals are able to use interpretive practice upon social inputs to construct themselves *as active subjects* as well as objects

(Taylor 1989). A consequence of this interpretive practice is said to be the capacity for individuals to construct myriad self-identities, in response to and influenced by local understandings and circumstances (Gergen 1991). These self constructions that emerge in various settings have led to suggestions of an ‘embattled’ self, at risk of becoming infinitely plastic, fragmented, or overwhelmed by the multitude of life situations and circumstances. A number of writers, however, warn against ‘overly voluntaristic accounts of subjectivity that exaggerate autonomy and under-emphasize the significance of its conditions, processes and consequences’ (Collinson 2003:529). Identities are, indeed, framed and constrained by the very processes of interaction that constitute them.

### **3.2.2 Storying the self: Narrative identity theory**

In contrast to social cognitive perspectives of the self (Ashforth and Mael 1989), there has recently emerged a body of work which recognizes narrative as a constitutive feature of identities (Boje 2001; Gabriel 2004; Mumby 2004). Hermans (2002), for example, views the self as consisting of stories that are constructed in interaction with multiple others, and woven into diverse, sometimes consistent and sometimes inconsistent, narratively structured streams of thoughts. Giddens asserts that the self is not a passive entity, determined by external influences; there is an ‘inner core’ of self-identity which is ‘the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of his or her biography’ (1991:53). For Giddens, self-identity maintains continuity across time and space – but this self-identity is a continuity as interpreted reflexively by the agent. The self, from Giddens’ perspective, is not something ‘given’ or ‘constructed’ in reaction to others but rather based on what individuals *say about themselves*.

A person’s identity is not to be found in behaviour, or – important though this is – in the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*. (Giddens 1991:54, emphasis in original)

By contrast, Layder (2004:128-129) contends that self-identity is a continuously realized *emergent narrative* rather than a ‘reflexive project’ (Giddens 1991:5), the

latter assuming far too much mastery and self-transformative capabilities to individuals. That is, according to Layder (2004), agency and circumstance interact with each other to produce an emergent self-identity. However, the unfolding storyline of self as it emerges from a person's lived experiences needs to be distinguished from fictive accounts springing from the 'human tendency towards self-deception and idealization' (Layder 2004:129).

This emergent narrative of the self, the '(re)storying of the self we live by' (Holstein and Gubrium 2000:3), provides a theoretical basis for applying discourse analytic methods to investigations of the formation and maintenance of identity. Narratives are a discursive resource (Gergen 1994; Watson 1995) used to make sense of experience (Reissman 1993; Mumby 2004), including the meaning of who we are and our relationships with others. Narratives are constructed to explain events, excuse failures, promote particular points of view, and justify emotions and behaviours (Ainsworth and Hardy 2004). As a consequence, identities are therefore constructed in the stories people tell about themselves and others (Lieblich et al. 1998). Indeed, identities are 'constituted, negotiated, reproduced, and threatened in social interaction, in the form of narratives' (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007:712-713). Self-identity, according to narrative identity theory, is constituted as actors attempt to construct a coherent, continuous biography where their life-story is the sensible result of a series of related events or cohesive themes (Gergen 1994). Narratives are negotiated *in situ* (Gubrium and Holstein 1999). However, while studies of narratives often highlight human agency and creativity, choices in the construction of narratives (such as the relevance of events, representation of self and other in the plots) are indeed constrained by situational contexts and cultural conventions (Somers 1994).

One is not free to have simply any form of personal history. Narrative conventions do not...command identity, but they do invite certain actions and discourage others. (Gergen 1994:255)



Self-identity, according to this conceptualisation, thus has a key *narrative* dimension. By implication, narratives of identity also have relevance in understanding the relationships among employees in organizations.

According to narrative identity theory, narratives of the self play a vital role in the forming, maintenance and reforming of identity. Stories are not merely ‘a way of telling someone about one’s life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned’ (Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992:1). Narrative identity is strengthened by the development of intimacy with others; indeed, for Giddens, sharing biographically based stories with others helps create ‘shared histories of a kind potentially more tightly bound than those characteristic of individuals who share experiences by virtue of a common social position’ (Giddens 1991:97). However, in this project of the self, the narrative of self-identity is inherently fragile. Multiple and sometimes conflicting narratives of the experiences of life produce a ‘collage effect’ (Giddens 1991:188), leading to dilemmas which have to be resolved in order to preserve a coherent narrative. Given this potential for fragmentation, any externally imposed ascription of a person’s worth or standing, such as a performance rating which is not in harmony with their narrative or life-story may disrupt his or her ‘ontological security’ (Giddens 1991:36, 55; Brown 2000:61).

While identity is a relational concept, narrative identity theory incorporates temporality as well. Ezzy states that ‘a narrative identity provides a subjective sense of *self-continuity* as it symbolically integrates the events of lived experience in the plot of the story a person tells about his or her life’ (1998:239, emphasis added). Through narrative, the past (from which the story of the self emerges) is symbolically reconstructed in the present. It follows that narrative identities ‘are necessarily processual because they describe lived time, which is ongoing’ (Ezzy 1998:247). Narrative identity theory highlights not only the social sources of the self-concept, but more importantly the role of narrative in *making sense of* the lived experiences of the individual.

Plot is the organizing theme of a narrative (Ricoeur 1991; Ezzy 1998), weaving together complex sets of discordant events into a single concordant story, endowing

the experiences of time with meaning. For Ricoeur (1992), the self is discovered in its own narrational acts. The term ‘narrative identity’ as Ricoeur (1991:32) uses it suggests that ‘what we call subjectivity is neither an incoherent series of events nor an immutable substantiality, impervious to evolution’. For Ezzy:

Narrative identity is coherent but fluid and changeable, historically grounded but “fictively” reinterpreted, constructed by an individual but constructed in interaction and dialogue with other people. (Ezzy 1998:246)

According to Ezzy, the story of the self is not infinitely flexible. It is constrained by the past and by relationships with others, and by key reference points or continuities. In summary then, narrative identity, ‘captures the middle ground between a sovereign self that is invulnerable and impermeable to the influence of others and, on the other hand, a deconstructed self that emphasizes the linguistic sources of the self and the influence of context “to the point where it engulfs, if not annihilates, the self”’ (Ezzy 1998:246, citing Dunne 1995:140).

Ezzy’s work on narrative identity is not without its critics. Newton (1999), for example, cites the work of Norbert Elias (1970; 1991) who argues that human identity should be seen as spanning generations. Elias writes of ‘the civilizing process to which each young person, as a result of the social civilizing process over many centuries, is automatically subjected from earliest childhood’ (Elias 1994:xiii). Elias argues that ‘the psychogenesis of the adult make-up [or identity] in civilized society cannot, therefore, be understood if considered independently of the sociogenesis of our “civilization”’ (Elias 1994:xiii). Newton uses these assertions from Elias to point to what he sees as limitations in Ezzy’s analysis of identity and subjectivity:

Ezzy’s ahistorical, and somewhat humanistic, account cannot easily examine the interrelation of such development with the broader sociogenesis of socio-political relations, even though the latter strongly condition child and adult development. In sum, we have approaches such as labour process theory which produce an account of the history of socio-economic structures

without a convincing theory of subjectivity, and we have approaches such as Ezzy's narrativial analysis which produce an account of subjectivity without a corresponding analysis of socio-political relations. (Newton 1999:419)

While Newton's criticisms may be valid with respect to Ezzy's work, narrative analysis *per se* is not doomed to perpetuate ahistorical, asocial or apolitical perspectives. Indeed, organizational histories and socio-cultural predispositions (Roberts 2006:629) are often embedded in plots which arise in the workplace. When employees feel free and safe to talk about their reactions to managerial practices, organizational stories as 'poetic elaborations on actual events...and as expressions of deeper organizational and personal realities' (Gabriel 2000:241) provide rich accounts of power, politics and resistance *par excellence*. Narrative analysis as a new genre of research in management studies (O'Connor 2000; Boje 2001; Jabri 2006) provides considerable analytical purchase in understanding how people construct identities for themselves in the workplace. Narratives of identity thus provide an effective conceptual framework through which to investigate the reactions of employees to performance appraisal.

### **3.2.3 Shared social identities**

Having briefly reviewed a number of theoretical perspectives on self and identity, and especially having drawn attention to narrative perspectives, we now move specifically to the development of ideas about identity, and identity construction, in *workplace* contexts. Indeed, Miller and Rose assert that the workplace is 'a principal site for the formation of identity' (1995:427). In this thesis, the primary interest is in workplace-related and socially shared identities, occupational identities in particular, and how they form and reform (Kärreman and Alvesson 2001).

Socially shared identity 'refers to the group category that the individual identifies with: company, division, occupation, gender, nationality, ethnicity, age' (Alvesson 2000:1105). Socially shared identity is a narrational accomplishment (Brown 2006; Reveley and McLean 2008). From a discursive perspective, a shared or collective identity exists as 'a linguistically produced object embodied in talk and other forms

of text, rather than as a set of beliefs held in members' minds' (Hardy et al. 2005:62). Kärreman and Alvesson (2001) note that social identities are knit together by the stories people tell each other about shared events in their working lives. Shared *histories* (that is, stories of the past) unite people in tightly bound identities or 'communities' (Giddens 1991:97). Nevertheless, social identities must have personal meanings for the individual – there must be some emotional and value significance attached to group membership (Kärreman and Alvesson 2004). The managerial imposition of performance ratings or other classifications, however, may dislocate social identities previously established in salient work groups or subunits.

Socially shared identity raises the paradoxical nature of collective identity, since it denotes both *sameness* and *distinctiveness* (Kärreman and Alvesson 2001:62). While collective identity says something about a shared category held in common by members of that community, it also says what makes the community distinct or separate from other groups or communities, at least according to the claims or beliefs of that collective. The concept of collective identity simultaneously admitting both sameness and difference suggests a potential problem with in-group identification: 'us versus them', or, as Smith (2002:240) colourfully puts it: 'virtuous Us and diabolical Them'.

A focus on socially shared identity is particularly relevant in research seeking to understand how employees *subjectively* experience managerial interventions such as performance appraisal. Appraisal processes have the potential to influence employees' self-constructions in terms of identity within their formal and informal workgroups. The complexities, paradoxes and ambiguities of organizations make the struggle for securing a collective sense of identity a continuing, as well as self-conscious, activity (Alvesson and Willmott 2002:623). Counter-narratives of cynicism, dissent, and 'critical narcissism' (Collinson 1992), whereby public criticism of others elevates the self through the negation of others, may well flourish as discursive resources to keep the narrative of social identity going (Giddens, 1994).

The practices and asymmetries of power in organizations impact on the subjective experiences of organizational members (Manki 2003). Given the dynamic nature of organizational life (and hence organizational relationships), and their asymmetries of power, identity is a negotiated and emerging process, involving what Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003:1164) conceptualize as ‘identity work’. Identity work consists of on-going struggles to create a sense of self in relation to others through providing temporary answers to the questions ‘who am I?’ (or ‘who are we?’), ‘what do I (we) stand for?’ and by implication, ‘how should I (we) act?’ Collinson (1992:2) highlights the ‘contradictory and ambiguous nature of identities, relations and practices’ in the workplace and notes how the social construction of ‘subjectivities and identities [are] a primary medium and outcome of organizational practices of control, resistance, compliance and consent.’ These asymmetries of power and the inter-subjective processes of control and resistance, mediated through the identity work of the participants, trigger a complex range of worker responses. While some researchers focus on structural or institutional forces and see identity as something shaped by these powerful forces (see, for example, Wicks 2002), others take a less deterministic view and see identity as being far more agential (Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Symon 2005). This view informs my analysis of miner reactions to appraisal.

### **3.2.4 Occupational identity**

While, for some, occupational identity is viewed as a concept to describe distinctive skill-sets which transcend organizational boundaries (Kitay and Wright 2007), this thesis is based on the view that occupational identity is constituted by the rhetoric of members of a group in specific locations (Fine 1996). This view differs from the classic Van Maanen and Barley (1984) account of occupational subcultures in the workplace in which physical and social conditions promote *socialization* into the workgroup community. This socialization model is built largely on a sociological view of self as formed in reaction to others and hence is akin to notions of self espoused by Mead (1934), and Berger and Luckmann (1966). According to Van Maanen and Barley (1984), occupational identity is based on doing common work, and sharing a set of norms, perspectives and values which often extend beyond

work-related matters. However, a fundamental problem with this view is its assumption of an 'unambiguous work world' (Fine 1996:91). Fine argues that most occupations are segmented in terms of divisions of work tasks, worker characteristics and location specific work practices and identities. Rather than emphasizing the common features of occupations, Fine argues for conceptualizing occupational identities as fragmented and variable in that conditions of work vary from site to site and motivations of workers also vary from group to group (1996:92). Fine's notion of *situated* differentiation draws attention to the diverse ways in which individuals may construct identity while engaging in similar work roles (Musson and Duberley 2007:147). Each workplace operates within a context in which 'local features of interaction influence how employees conceptualize their workplace self' (Fine 2006:1).

Fine's work in restaurant kitchens and meteorology offices demonstrates that workers, as members of distinct occupations, are not passive objects who are subjugated by managerial interventions. Workers as active agents use a range of discursive resources to construct contingent occupational identities. The rhetorics associated with chefs in restaurant kitchens are just one kind of discursive resource. Workplace narratives are also discursive resources through which workers define themselves; workers' accounts and narratives also 'provide a structure by which they define their competence...and address the central question, as far as one's work role is concerned, of *what kind of person am I?*' (Fine 1996:90, emphasis in original). A re-reading of Fine's work from a narrative construction of identity viewpoint indicates the commensurability of Fine's position with narrative identity theory in the use of discursive resources through which workers define their work and their identity(s).

A major contribution of Fine's studies of 'shopfloor cultures' (Fine 1996; Fine 2006) is his focus on the small group level of analysis in order to understand how workers define themselves, how workplace cultures differ, and how the effects of these differences shape the employee experience of work. Careful attention to such 'local features' as the rhetoric, metaphors and figures of speech in use, group traditions and the social control mechanisms that direct group actions provide rich

insights into the ways workers structure identity, knowledge and choices in the workplace (Fine 2006:16). Thus, in order to understand workers' responses to HRM interventions such as performance appraisal, a research framework attending to the discursive practices of 'shopfloor cultures' as they share meanings and action is a productive place to begin.

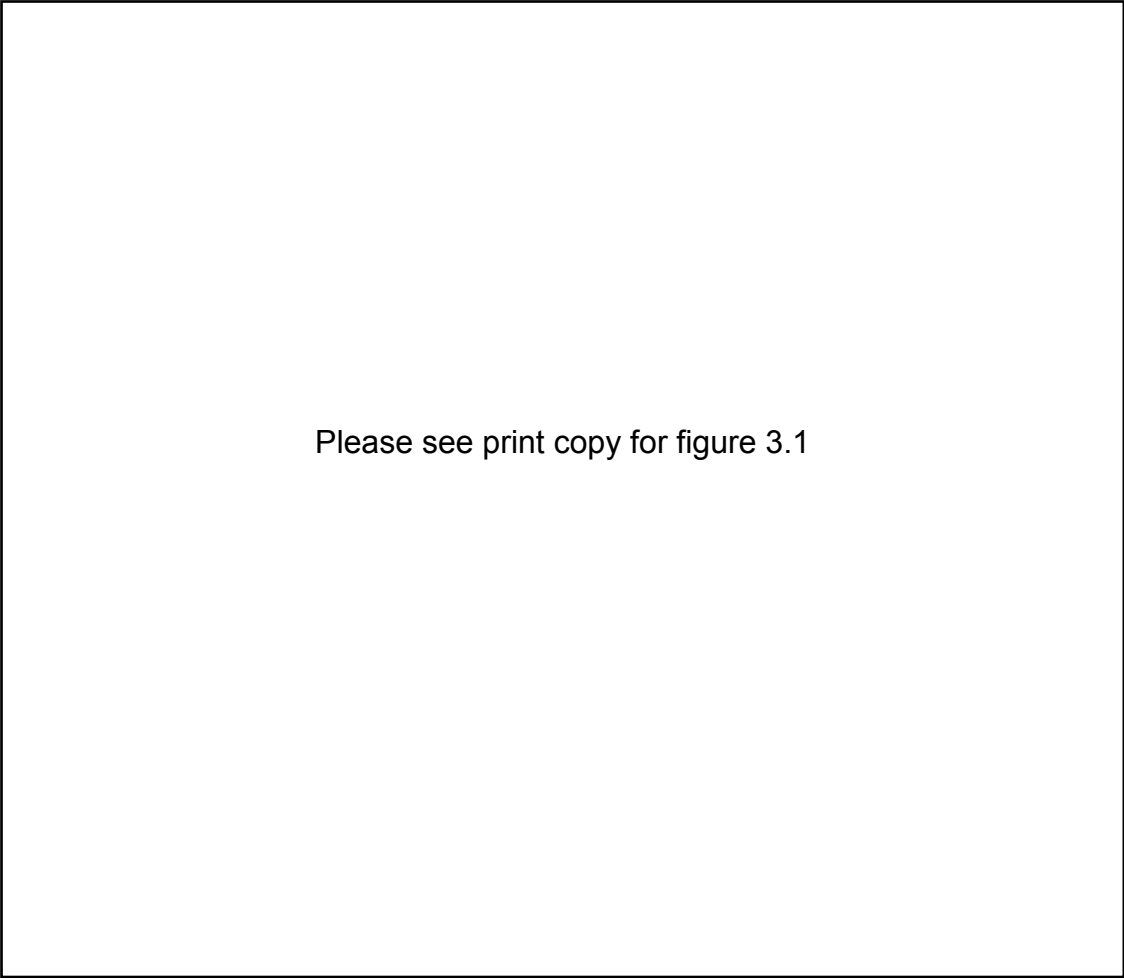
Occupational identities are enabled by appropriating certain discourses and rejecting others. They are almost always relational, and produced within specific contexts. They are also 'partly a temporary outcome of the powers and regulations that the subject encounters' (Kärreman and Alvesson 2001:63). Identity at work also contains a historical perspective in that workers rely on what has happened in the past to interpret present and future events. Thus, 'identities are not only embedded in the present, but are constructed in terms of the conjunction of past and future, as an explanation of previous events as episodes in an unfolding narrative in a way that positions the constructor of the account advantageously for future episodes' (Thomas and Linstead 2002:72).

Given, then, the different organizational experiences and histories of individuals, tensions exist between varying accounts of workplace 'selves' and groups, sometimes leading to ambiguities and insecurities. Ongoing 'identity work' attempts to maintain a coherent narrative identity in the face of organizational events and circumstances. This identity at work is situation specific. Parker (2000:1) describes the contingent nature of solidarity among workers as 'fragmented unities' such that 'members identify themselves as collective at some times and divided at others.' Tensions and ambiguities exist in occupational identities, not only because of internal (to the organization) inconsistencies but also from external 'competing bases of identification' (Knights and McCabe 2003:1589) such as family and recreational groups. Thus, narrative 'identity work' is continually needed to shore up occupational identities.

### **3.3 Identity regulation, disruption and repair**

One of the recent developments in organizational processes has been a shift from technocratic modes of managerial control to socio-ideological control (Kärreman and Alvesson 2004:152). That is, the locus of control has moved from the outside of the worker to the inside, from coercion to consensus through regulated social identities. According to Tompkins and Cheney (1985), identity regulation provides a less obtrusive and potentially more effective means of organizational control than methods that rely on external surveillance. Control through the ‘manufacture’ of identity of workers is a pervasive and increasingly intentional managerial approach (Alvesson and Willmott 2002:622). Alvesson and Willmott’s (2002:627) model of the relationship between identity regulation, identity work and self-identity, summarized in Figure 3.1 below, provides a convenient departure point for a critical reflection on identity work and the narratives of resistance that can occur when worker identity is disrupted. Performance appraisal, whether designed with these intentions or not, is an identity targeting technique. Workers may not articulate their grievances with appraisal in these terms. However, as we shall see, their critical stories of appraisal design, delivery and effects confirm the utility of the Alvesson and Willmott framework as a lens through which to understand employee responses to appraisal, and other HRM performance management interventions, in the workplace.





Please see print copy for figure 3.1

**Figure 3.1 Identity regulation, identity work and self-identity**  
(Source: Alvesson and Willmott, 2002:627)

Identity regulation occurs through the actions of managers (and others) to introduce, promote, influence or legitimize particular discourses of control. Identity regulation is pervasive in managerial discourses that affirm the ‘ideal’ worker through pay and promotion schemes, performance appraisal, definitions of ‘excellent’ behaviour, and so on, that seek to foster internalised control of employees.

Self-identity is ‘invariably related to self-esteem as aspired-for identity is attributed a positive social meaning’ (Alvesson and Willmott 2002:625). Where organizational discourses generate and confirm positive messages about employees’ sense of self-worth, identity is maintained. However, when identity regulation creates a sense of contradiction, dissonance or confusion, intensive remedial ‘identity work’ is called for. This concept of ‘identity work’ is central to my thesis. Sveningsson and Alvesson define ‘identity work’ as follows:

The concept *identity work* refers to people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness. (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003:1165, emphasis in original)

Watson (2008) suggests that, in order to cover both the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ aspects of ‘identity work’ and to make a clear analytical distinction between ‘inward facing’ and ‘outward facing’ identity work, it be conceptualized as follows:

Identity work involves the mutually constitutive processes whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity and struggle to come to terms with and, within limits, to influence the various social-identities which pertain to them in the various milieux in which they live their lives. (2008:129)

Alvesson and Willmott’s (2002) model of the relationships between self-identity, identity work and identity regulation (Figure 3.1) indicates how self-identity may be sustained in the face of identity challenges or disruptions, through the deployment of a repertoire of identity-affirming discursive resources. This model can be expanded to include occupational (that is, socially shared) identity. Occupational identities are constructed by communities of workers in light of the responses of others and workplace interaction (Colomy and Brown 1995). Workers draw upon bundles of shared discursive resources to mutually strengthen their position in defence of their sense of collective identity. As indicated by the adaptation of Alvesson and Willmott’s model (Figure 3.2) below, conceptions of occupational identity mediate the impacts of identity regulation upon the individual. Shared socio-economic, political, historical and contextual work factors combine to generate strong occupational identities. The shared experiences of groups or categories of workers mutually reinforce ‘the interdependence of individuality and shared, collective identity’ (Turner and Oakes 1989:270); solidarity with the ‘in’ group provides oppositional strength against the ‘outside’ reference group.

Workers are actors with considerable ‘inventive powers’ (Alvesson and Willmott 2002:628) and selectively draw on a palette of narrative resources from their ‘cultural toolkit’ (Fine 1996:113) in response to challenges that management initiatives pose to their self-conceptions, both as individuals and as members of occupational groupings. Recent approaches to collective identity note the benefits of taking a discursive approach, noting that situating collective identity in the language in use among its members ‘shifts attention from the intentions and attitudes of individuals to their observable linguistic practices and the effects of those practices on social relationships and action’ (Ainsworth and Hardy 2004:155). Moreover, ‘[a] narrative approach suggests that collective identities are constituted by the narratives that their participants author about them’ (Brown 2006:743). Narratives of occupational groups are exchanged, embellished, resisted and challenged. The choice of narratives to support collective identity privileges certain interests over others, with the potential of liberating the agent from objectification or domination by other powerful interest groups (Brown 2006:737). The narratives of a community or an occupational group exhibit a form of ‘closure’ which provides the grounds for a community’s identity (Robichaud et al. 2004:620). Closure occurs both in attempts at resolution of some troubling situation, and also in the sense of boundary-marking, fencing off or closing a community’s ranks. When a threat to, or a breach of, occupational identity occurs, group issues become more salient and are reinforced by the identity work of group members.

Figure 3.2 below adds this dimension of occupational identities to Alvesson and Willmott’s (2002) model, indicating the potentially powerful influence of occupational workgroups to suppress or amplify the effects of identity regulation upon individuals. Where identity regulation accords with shared occupational identity, processes of ‘embracement’ by the group may reinforce individual acceptance of self-regulation processes (Snow and Anderson 1987:1354). Where managerial attempts at identity regulation are discordant with group identity, spaces of resistance may be opened up by mutually constitutive narratives that ‘distance’ the group from these managerial discourses (Snow and Anderson 1987:1348).

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**Figure 3.2 Identity regulation, identity work and occupational identities**  
(Source: Modified from Alvesson and Willmott, 2002:627)

### 3.4 Appraisal and identity regulation: A discursive framework

In contrast to the advocacy of supposedly power-neutral prescriptions found in managerialist HRM (as discussed in Chapter 2), the critical management approach sees appraisal as a discursive technology aimed at controlling workers from the inside through the (re)construction of worker identity (Townley 1997; Coates 2004). Chapter 2 noted the call in the literature for a more concerted focus on how employees are actively involved in constructing their own identities (Albert et al. 2000; Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003; Rosenthal 2004). Previous work on appraisal has noted negative employee responses to appraisal without adequately theorizing the connection between appraisal and identity work.

In a number of the disciplines from which critical management studies and organization theory draw theoretical concepts, such as sociology (Atkinson 1992), social psychology (Potter and Wetherell 1987), communication theory (Mumby and Stohl 1991) and cultural anthropology (Geertz 1997), researchers claim that identities, social institutions, societies, and even cultures may be viewed as ‘discursively constructed ensembles of texts’ (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000:137). Discourse acts ‘as a powerful ordering force’ in organizations (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000:1127). Discourses shape organizing processes, and organizational reality is shaped by the constitutive and constructive effects of language in organizational settings. Thus it can be said that ‘discourse’ and ‘organization’ are both producer and product (Broadfoot et al. 2004:194). What is of particular interest in this thesis is how discursive practices frame workers’ shared sense of identity in organizations (Grant et al. 2004). As Mumby and Clair state:

Organizations exist only in so far as their members create them through discourse. This is not to claim that organizations are ‘nothing but’ discourse, but rather that discourse is the principal means by which organization members create a coherent social reality that *frames their sense of who they are*. (Mumby and Clair 1997:181, emphasis added)

Studying discourse, then, provides a powerful way to explore processes of organizing, identity construction and sense making in organizational life and highlights the fragility of, and struggles within, organizational contexts (Hardy et al. 2000:1232). In this sense, that discourse creates a sense of social reality or socially shared identity in organizational life, there is commensurability with the narrative approach to identity, discussed earlier in this chapter. But what, then, is the relationship between discourse and narrative? While, predictably, there are subtle shades of meaning associated with so extensively used a term as *discourse*, Legge's definition articulates some of the central ideas surrounding the notion of discourse in its widest usage:

'Discourse' refers to the way in which things are discussed and the argumentation and rhetoric used to support what is said. It also refers to 'reading between the lines' – what remains unspoken or taken-for-granted, such as assumptions or evasions. Crucially, discourse analysis deals with issues of representation. That is, it starts with the premise that words do not merely reflect what is being talked about, but they actually construct and even constitute what is being talked about.' (Legge 2005:354)

The term 'discourse' has such widespread currency that it risks becoming a 'catch-all' covering too much and meaning too little (Alvesson 2004:327). Alvesson and Kärreman (2000:1130) differentiate between 'muscular' and 'transient' discourse, the former suggesting a deterministic approach, the latter suggesting a rather loose coupling between discourse and meaning. Watson (1994:113 emphasis added), moves away from more muscular versions of discourse and views it as 'a connected set of statements, concepts, terms and expressions which constitutes a way of talking and writing about a particular issue, thus *framing* the way people understand and act with respect to that issue'. Gabriel (2004:63) observes that, as the 'linguistic turn' has been played out in different disciplinary fields of study, the meanings of four key terms, namely *text*, *narrative*, *story*, and *discourse*, 'have multiplied, merged and demerged, overlapped and fragmented.' However, he notes that one of the qualities of the linguistic turn has been a move away from what he calls 'adjudication by definition' (2004:63) to an approach that sees terms and concepts

not as immutable essences but as elements of language in use. While disavowing the role of semantic policing, Gabriel (2004) does differentiate between these four key terms and, since narrative is central to this thesis, it is appropriate to explicate some of the nuances embedded in each key term.

*Discourse*, as defined by Legge (2005) above, refers to the ways in which things are talked about or constructed through language and social practice. Organizational discourse refers to patterns of communication, both spoken and written, and constructions both real or imagined, which bring organizationally related objects into being (Grant et al. 2004:3). *Texts* are manifestations of discourse and are ‘discursive units’ (Chalaby 1996), comprising collections of written or verbal forms of communication (oral, print or electronic). Exactly what constitutes a text is a matter of some debate (Hardy et al. 2000:1231), although written statements and language in use are generally regarded as texts. *Narratives* are a specific form of text, approached as symbolic and rhetorical devices (Grant et al. 2004:5), which ‘involve temporal *chains* of interrelated events or actions, undertaken by characters’ (Gabriel 2004:63, emphasis in original). The sequencing of events, rather than snapshot images, is a key feature of narrative. *Stories* are a specific type of narrative; stories contain *plots* which creatively and imaginatively weave together characters and events while seeking to uncover a deeper meaning in these events. Thus, this thesis follows the convention proposed by Gabriel (2004) in seeing narrative as a subset of discourse, and storytelling as a specific type of narrative. These categories are not pure and are for analytic purposes only. In practice, there is considerable slippage in the usage of these terms in the literature.

Discourses, of course, do not arise in a vacuum. They exist within social, historical and political contexts, and are moulded and shaped by contact with other discourses. An organizational discourse, for example, must compete with other discourses, both within and without the organization, and is modified in the translation process to ‘comply with “local” discourses and practices’ (Fairclough and Thomas 2004:391). Fairclough (1992:60) argues that discursive practices are necessarily ‘constrained by the fact that they inevitably take place within a constituted material reality, with pre-constituted objects and pre-constituted social subjects’. Despite this, discourse

provides the means through which we can make sense of, or ‘know’, about these realities.

Spoken and written ‘texts’ and the narratives of employees in particular provide rich resources for understanding nuances of identity in organizations. Indeed, studying discourse in all its forms provides a ‘powerful way to explore processes of organizing and, particularly, the fragility of, and struggles within, organizational life’ (Hardy et al. 2000:1232). An understanding of the frames of reference of the actors in the employment relationship with respect to their identities at work requires us to pay attention to the way language is used to shape or reflect actors’ representations of reality (Heracleous 2004). The frameworks developed in this chapter, therefore, are ‘listening devices’ through which to organise and understand employee ‘talk’ in the fieldwork data analysed in the following chapters. Listening to the voices of workers, and analysing those voices in a way that minimizes analytical irony (that is, the gap between *in situ* meaning associated with naturally occurring talk and interaction, on the one hand, and scholarly interpretation on the other), re-centres the employee as the focus of investigation. By studying both the ‘social text (talk and written text in its social action contexts)’ and also ‘the shaping of social “reality” through language’ (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000:1126), this thesis helps to fill some of the gaps in the employee centred literature identified in Chapter 2.

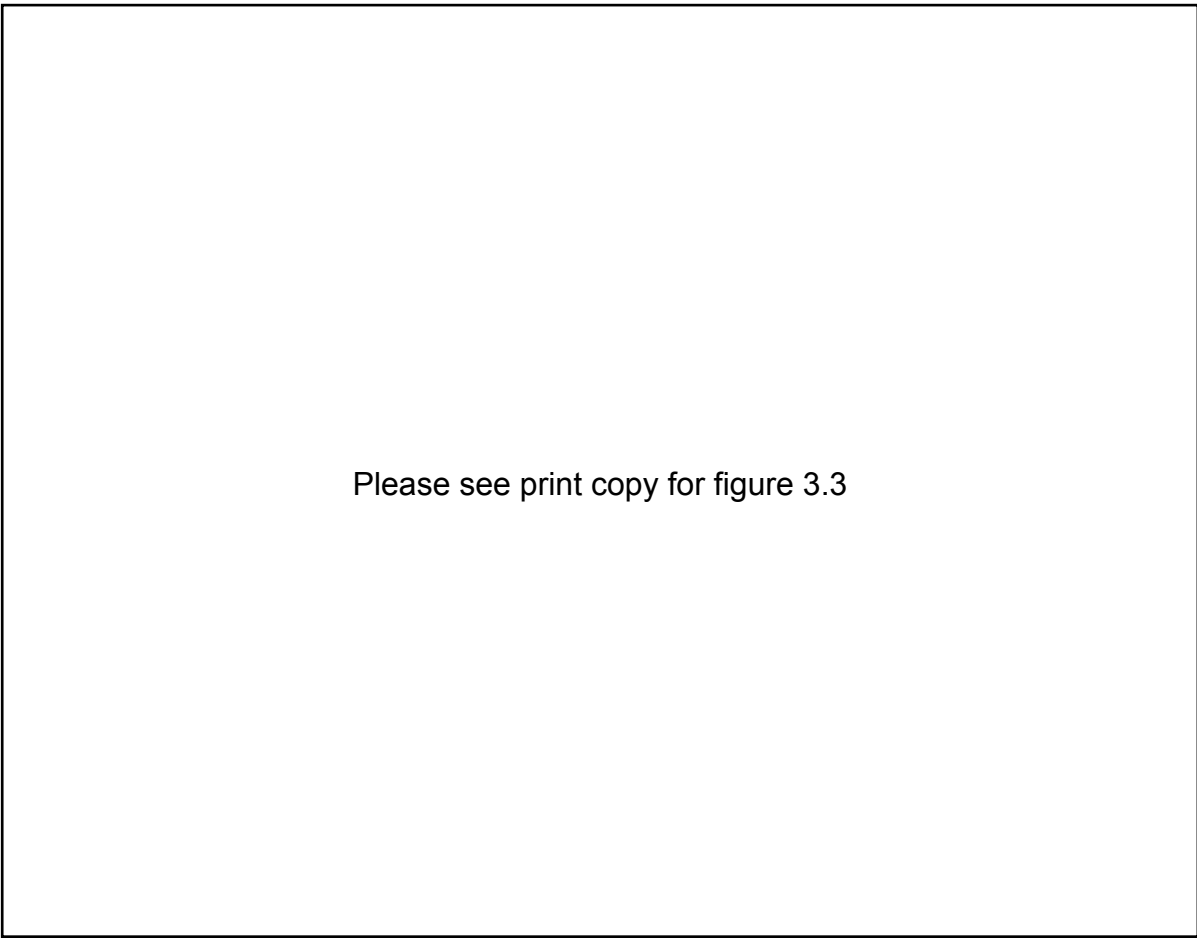
Discursive resources are used by employees (as well as managers) in (re)constructing or assembling personal and social identities. According to Davies and Harré (1990), these discursive resources include the positions that people produce and take in the stories through which they make sense of their own and others’ lives. Such discursive practices provide insights into ways in which identities are constructed, defended, violated and restored. Already existing identities can be violated by performance appraisal discourses inconsistent with existing identities. In such cases, appraisees seek to defend or repair their identities through identity work (Alvesson and Willmott 2002:627; Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003:1165). This thesis will use the framework proposed by Grant and Shields (2002) to explore how



miners' identities were breached by performance appraisal, then subsequently defended and repaired. The next section presents this framework.

### **3.4.1 Discursive concepts**

Phillips and Hardy's (1997) work on the identity of refugees proposes a model of discursive concept, object and subject as a framework of analysis. To facilitate research on employee reactions to HRM practices, Grant and Shields (2002) propose drawing upon this model, distinguishing between discursive concepts (for example, HRM ideas such as appraisal), discursive objects (for example, idealised human resources) and discursive subjects (such as thinking and acting employees on whom HRM is practised). These categories provide a heuristic device that enables us to 'see' the interplay between HRM practices and identity processes. Figure 3.3 schematises the Phillips and Hardy (1997)/Grant and Shields (2002) framework, and adds Gergen's (1999) notion regarding the world of ideas as they impact on the material world, thus suggesting the discursive nature of the relationship between subjectivity ('in here') or self-identity and social or outward identity (what is projected 'out there'). The arrows in the model indicate that concepts, objects and subjects are mutually constitutive. Identity, for example, in this framework is theorised not as a homogenous, static concept but one which develops and changes as subjects challenge, resist and reconfigure organizational discourses. Details of this model will now be briefly outlined.



Please see print copy for figure 3.3

**Figure 3.3 A discursive framework of analysis**

Source: Adapted from Phillips and Hardy (1997:159) and Grant and Shields (2002:314)

Discursive concepts are the ‘ideas, categories, relationships, and theories through which we understand the world and relate to one another’ (Hardy and Phillips 1999:3). Concepts reside at the highest level of abstraction. That is, they are part of what Gergen (1999:8) calls the world of ideas, the world ‘in here’ – they are not discrete ‘things’ in the material world. The ‘cloud’ is used in Figure 3.3 as a visual device to represent the idea that concepts do not have discrete boundaries or ‘territory’. Concepts refer to what is going on inside ‘people’s heads and hearts’ (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000:1132). It follows that *concepts* are not directly accessible as material objects. Hence they are not open to discourse analysis except in a speculative manner. However, ‘traces’ of ideas can be inferred from discursive practices such as spoken or written texts (Ainsworth and Hall 2006:270). Moreover:

[Concepts] exist solely in the realm of ideas, are more or less contested and are culturally and historically situated. Implicit in the production of discursive concepts are ideas of 'rightness'.... In other words, concepts carry with them a moral evaluation that is part of the ongoing discursive accomplishment of the concept. (Hardy et al. 2000:1234)

Concepts are 'abstract systems' through which narratives of identity are filtered (Giddens 1991:5). Concepts have consequences when they are articulated in verbal, written or behavioural form. Indeed, the 'linguistic turn' in the social scientific study of human activity recognizes the role of language in the social *construction* of reality (Condor and Antaki 1997). For example, a discursive approach to organizational phenomena highlights the ways in which language '*constructs* organizational reality, rather than simply reflects it' (Hardy et al. 2005:60, emphasis in original). Realities about workplaces are socially constructed by engaging in discussions about concepts (Watson 1995:7). Using language about 'performance' or 'appraisal', for example, engages the speaker in 'reality-defining action in their organizations' (Watson 1995:8). Socially shared or intersubjective conceptions of 'performance' influence what is expected, observed, appreciated or resisted in organizational behaviour. As Grant et al. (2003:248) observe, 'participation in the formulation of concepts via discourse is in itself a political act since the concept may well define and transform the world to which it is applied.' Concepts form culturally and historically situated frames of thinking for understanding social reality (Harré 1979, cited in Hardy and Phillips, 2004:301).

Discursive concepts can act as a 'powerful ordering force' (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000:1127) during the construction of meaning for HRM practices. This construction process involves the implicit and explicit negotiation of meaning among various discursive concepts, usually with the emergence of a dominant discursive repertoire as alternative discursive concepts are subverted or marginalized. Kamoche (1995:4) contends that 'the reality of HRM is seen to exist in the first instance in the minds of organizational actors, who subsequently objectify their subjective experience through language and ritual.' This interplay between discursive concepts ('in the minds of organizational actors') and discursive

objects, and their interplay with the ‘subjective experiences’ of protagonists, are part of a reality construction process continually occurring in organizations. Both managers and employees are engaged in this mutually constitutive process (Collinson, 1992).

Performance appraisal is a prime example of this kind of HRM discursive concept. The notion of appraisal, for example, consists of a package of abstract claims and assumptions. It conceptually assumes the right to judge the contribution of others, with associated assumptions that judgment can be done fairly and accurately. The abstract concept of appraisal of workers assumes that the exercise of power and authority by those who do the judging is legitimate, and it assumes that employees will accept such an exercise of power. The concept of appraisal also assumes some type of relationship between appraisal and performance. Appraisal discursively constructs the ‘ideal’ worker through notions of performance expectations. Acceptable or expected job behaviours are further aspects of the discursive concept, as are notions of greater efficiency and/or continuous improvement. The notion that appraisal will motivate workers is another (albeit contested) assumption. How performance is conceptualised, and how performance will be evaluated from snapshots of observed behaviours in comparison with ‘ideal’ standards or ‘ideal’ others, are further examples of the way that abstractions shape ‘realities’ in organizations.

### **3.4.2 Discursive objects**

Discursive objects are closely connected to discursive concepts. ‘When a concept is used to make some aspect of material reality meaningful, an object is constituted’ (Hardy and Phillips 2004:302). A key distinction is drawn between discursive concepts and discursive objects:

[C]oncepts exist only in the expressive order; they exist in the realm of ideas. Objects on the other hand, are part of the practical order; they are real in the sense of existing in the material world. (Phillips and Hardy 1997:168)

People can be treated discursively as objects. As has been acknowledged in Chapter 2, much of the literature on performance appraisal is written from a managerialist perspective where workers are, in effect, treated as objects of managerial technologies. Townley (1994:109), for example, highlights how performance appraisal as a ritual of ‘confession’ treats the individual as an object of power and knowledge. Appraisal assumes that, as a human object, the ‘truth’ about an individual can be accessed through the methods of positivistic social science. Changing the concept changes the way the object is socially related to, acknowledged or treated (Grant et al. 2003). For example, employees may be seen in conceptual terms as resources of the firm (Storey 2001). Such a discursive concept of employees-as-resources affects the way employees are treated – as *objects* of value, with HRM practices of training and development and employee wellbeing programs likely. However, if the employees were to be discursively recast as mere factors of production whose cost must be minimised, those same employees may be treated as objects to whom are applied strict behavioural controls and pressure to perform at ever greater levels of productivity (for example, through an appraisal system which claims to measure outputs per workers). They may even be retrenched or sacked to ‘get the numbers right’.

The performance appraisal document is another example of a discursive object. Such a form expresses in material terms the assumptions of the discursive concept. For example, if management considered appraisal to be evaluative, the appraisal form will most likely have rating or ranking scales. If management sees the review as developmental rather than evaluative, the appraisal form (the discursive object) would more likely be termed ‘career development’, and contain prompts to facilitate ‘construction’ of a growing, developing employee. The employees, themselves, are likely be treated in appraisal reviews as objects to be measured and calibrated (evaluative concept) or seen as ‘plants’ to be watered and nourished (developmental concept). In the latter reviews, appraisers would recast themselves as coaches or mentors; in the former, terms like superior or supervisor are more likely to be used. Even orthodox HRM indicates that ‘the structure of such [appraisal] forms interacts with the processes of categorization, storage, recall, and integration to partially determine the assessment response made’ by the rater (Feldman 1981:139).

Reframing this point in the discursive framework of this thesis, the discursive object (the appraisal form) affects the assessment of employees who are objectified as 'things' to be rated by the appraisal process.

Language in use affects the way we acknowledge or relate to a person *qua* object (Grant et al. 2003). For example, managers who say that the purpose of appraisal is to 'squeeze the lemon' even harder, to get more effort out of labour, reveal an instrumentalist approach towards workers. The term 'labour' rather than 'colleagues' or 'staff' or 'employees' likewise, in some workplace contexts, discursively signifies workers as being regarded as mere factors of production. In summary, then, the language used by managers reveals whether they view workers as objects in the labour process or as thinking, feeling, unique individuals.

Paradoxically, some of the work carried out under the rubric of critical management studies also replicates this way of regarding workers, to the extent that it decentres workers, thereby treating them as objects. Grant and Shields (2002) maintain that worker expectations and perceptions should be acknowledged and interrogated, and not ignored or pre-judged as is so often done by both managerialist and critical management proponents.

The critical stream goes no further than considering workers as objects. Employees are portrayed as passive and unquestioning receptacles for management ideas, incapable of thinking for themselves, or [of] resisting and even subverting management initiatives...too little effort is made to engage with, let alone understand, employees as subjects. (Grant and Shields 2002:322)

It is to this need to engage with and understand employees as discursive subjects that we now turn.

### **3.4.3 Discursive subjects**

Individuals who are subjected to the application of patronising discursive concepts, and thus treated as *objects* of management theories, approaches, strategies, or ‘visions’, may not passively accept their place in the discourse (Thompson and Ackroyd 1995; Gabriel 1999; Garrety et al. 2003). There is a growing body of literature which posits workers as active social agents, with their own interests and subjectivities, who seek to establish their own preferred roles or positions in the social and power relations of the organization (Phillips and Hardy 1997:170; Grant et al. 2003:249). In this stream of literature, employees are seen as active agents in their own right, as people who are subjected to organizational practices but who interpret the meanings of those practices in line with their own subjective realities (Berger and Luckmann 1966). A key aspect of this ‘reality’ is one’s self-identity, which Giddens (1991:52) defines in terms of our capacity for reflexive awareness – what it is that we are conscious of in the term ‘self-consciousness’. In other words, self-identity is not something that is just given, but rather it is ‘the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his own biography’ (Giddens 1991:53). Discursive subjects, as reflexive agents, do not just passively allow their identities to be recast by managerial ‘Others’. Workers employ their own discursive resources (Watson 1995) to construct workplace identities for themselves and their workgroups. The narratives that workers employ to describe their lived experiences at work are examples of discourse being used by workers to position themselves as subjects, rather than objects, in the workplace.

### **3.5 An integrating model: Identity and discourse**

As discussed above, recent developments in narrative identity theory have conceptualised identity as discursively constructed. One effect of the linguistic turn in identity theory has been a conceptualization of identity not as a stable, essential characteristic of the individual, but as ‘fragmented, fluid and ambiguous as well as situated in time and space’ (Clegg et al. 2006:311). Identity, from a discursive perspective, is theorized as a situated accomplishment that depends on time, place and circumstances. This connection between identity and narrative (which is a type

of discourse) suggests that Grant and Shield's (2002) framework for analysis can expand our understanding of identity regulation, identity work, and self-identity. By including the expanded model (as depicted in Figure 3.2), which includes occupational or shared workgroup identities, we can merge these concepts (see Figure 3.4). Identity regulation emerges from managerial assumptions regarding power and control in the workplace, the nature of the employment relationship, and, indeed, conceptualizations of the subjectivity of workers. As such, identity regulation is a product of managers' discursive concepts of the nature of the employee. HRM practices such as performance appraisal flow from these concepts, with workers being treated discursively as objects within the production process. There is complementarity, therefore, between identity regulation in Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) model, and Grant and Shield's (2002) framework of discursive concepts, objects and subjects for understanding worker reactions to identity targeting techniques like appraisal.

When people engage in identity work, they actively reproduce and transform their identities through discursive processes. As such, they are discursive subjects. Through discursively sharing experiences, narratives and story fragments in the workplace, socially shared identities emerge in local situations (Fine 1996; Fine 2006). Thus, discursive subjects construct, repair and maintain occupationally shared identities. Figure 3.4 presents this synthesis of identity and discursive frameworks. This integrated framework will be used to analyse the findings of the research reported in Part 2 of this thesis.



Please see print copy for figure 3.4

**Figure 3.4 Identity regulation and identity work of discursive subjects**

Source: Modified from Alvesson and Willmott (2002:627), Phillips and Hardy (1997: 159) and Grant and Shields (2002:314)

### 3.6 Conclusion

The relationships among identity, power, knowledge, control and resistance continue to be the focus of debate. Likewise, relationships among subjectivity, self and identity are contested within and among various research traditions. Chapter 2 noted what Thompson (1990:114) significantly referred to as the problem of the ‘missing subject’ in labour process theory. Accounts of HRM practices such as appraisal need to consider the subjective aspects of employee responses to managerial initiatives. Rather than integrating and organizing work, HRM practices aimed at identity regulation are theorized to create an ‘iron cage of subjectivity’ (Kärreman and Alvesson 2004:149). These practices interact with other forms of normative control in producing powerful consequences for individual and occupational identities (Kärreman and Alvesson 2004:151). Workers, however, find ways to escape the strictures of such iron cages. Their discursive practices, especially their narratives of resistance (Symon 2005), provide a rich vein of data which can be mined for a deeper understanding their reactions to HRM interventions.

To the extent that this chapter has linked performance appraisal and worker identity, it provides the foundation for the subsequent analysis in Part 2 of this thesis. HRM practices such as performance appraisal seek to control the individual from the inside as well as from the outside. However, there are still places in organizations where ‘recalcitrant identities can be fashioned outside of or in opposition to organizational controls’ (Gabriel 1999:183). How employees ‘prise open’ spaces for resistance to the subjugating effects of individuating managerial techniques is a key concern of this thesis. In the investigation which follows I shall be guided by Gabriel’s argument that:

It is time to allow agency back into discourses of power at the workplace, not as a coherent transcendental subject, but as a struggling, interacting, feeling, thinking and suffering subject, one capable of obeying and disobeying, controlling and being controlled, losing control and escaping control, defining and redefining control for itself and for others. (Gabriel 1999:199)

While the fragility and vulnerability of subjects to the discourses through and within which they are constituted should not be overly exaggerated (Newton 1998), challenges to identity can have significant impacts on workers. As conceptualised in Figure 3.5 above, in order to understand what employees are reacting to, and why they react the way(s) they do, we need to allow their voices to be heard, as they narrate their subjective experiencing of being ‘managed’. The Grant and Shields framework of discursive concepts, discursive objects and discursive subjects, as developed from the earlier work of Phillips and Hardy, will be used in the remainder of this thesis to analyse how and to what effect coal miners employ discursive resources, and narratives in particular, to construct, repair and maintain their occupational identity.

## **Chapter 4    Research Methodology**

*[I]dentity lacks sufficient substance and discreteness to be captured in questionnaires or single interviews and to be measured and counted.*

(Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003:1165)

### **4.1    Introduction: Background, methodology, design and methods**

This chapter explains where, when and with whom the research was carried out, and then details the research methods used. As briefly outlined in Chapter 1, the fieldwork was carried out at Dover Colliery, an underground coal mine in Australia owned by MNC Coal, over a five year period, from April 2001 until May 2006. For reasons of focus and parsimony, the thesis concentrates on longwall and panel development miners rather than all functional areas of the mine, since these two areas are quite literally at the coalface and are critical operational areas. Research was also conducted at two sister collieries in order to provide a larger comparative context in which to locate the research problem, but to achieve depth of analysis this thesis focuses on Dover Colliery alone. The chapter explains the research methods which were employed and explains why these methods were appropriate to the research context at Dover Colliery.

Following Creswell and Plano Clark's (2007:4) definitions of key terms in the research process, the term 'methodology' is used to refer to the philosophical assumptions which have framed my approach to the research process. The term 'design' is used to describe the process through which philosophical frameworks and assumptions were linked to specific data collection methods. Ethnography, action learning, grounded theory and case study approaches, for example, require different research designs. In this chapter, the term 'methods' refers to the specific techniques of data collection and analysis employed. The nature of the research question, namely seeking to understand why employees were reacting so negatively to the imposition of a performance appraisal scheme despite there being no pay or other material consequences of a good or poor rating, was the primary driver in the

selection of the appropriate research design. From this design flowed the choice of methods which were employed to gather the data to answer this question. In addition, the chapter also explains the methods of data analysis which were employed once the data had been collected.

Methodology is influenced by the researcher's world view (Creswell and Plano Clark 2007:3). In talking to coal miners about their experience of performance ratings, it became clear that they were making sense of the appraisal process by using a specific vocabulary and set of discursive practices. Since the focus of this research is on the ways in which miners view their workplace 'reality' and how this was affected by appraisal, an interpretive approach was adopted as the overarching theoretical perspective (Heracleous 2004:175).

Social constructionism provided the broad philosophical framework within which my work is situated. A subset of the interpretive perspective, social constructionism places 'the primary emphasis...on discourse as the vehicle through which self and the world are articulated, and the way in which such discourse functions within social relationships' (Gergen 1999:60). The research focus is on the *discursive* construction, dissemination and consumption of texts. Social constructionism differs from social constructivism which places more emphasis on the way in which the *mind* constructs reality, while still acknowledging that mental processes are 'significantly informed by influences from social relationships' (Gergen 1999:60).

The research question also suggests a critical examination of power, control and resistance in organizations, so my work is also informed by a *critical* discursive perspective. However, I use the term critical discourse analysis without capitalisation to avoid being 'boxed' into all the tenets of CDA as espoused, for example, by Fairclough (2005).

To the key question, then, why did miners react in the way they did, this research project responds with: 'Why not ask them?' (Harré and Secord 1972:101). This response is not meant to be trite; it is an acknowledgement that too often research into human resource management practices is conducted from a managerialist

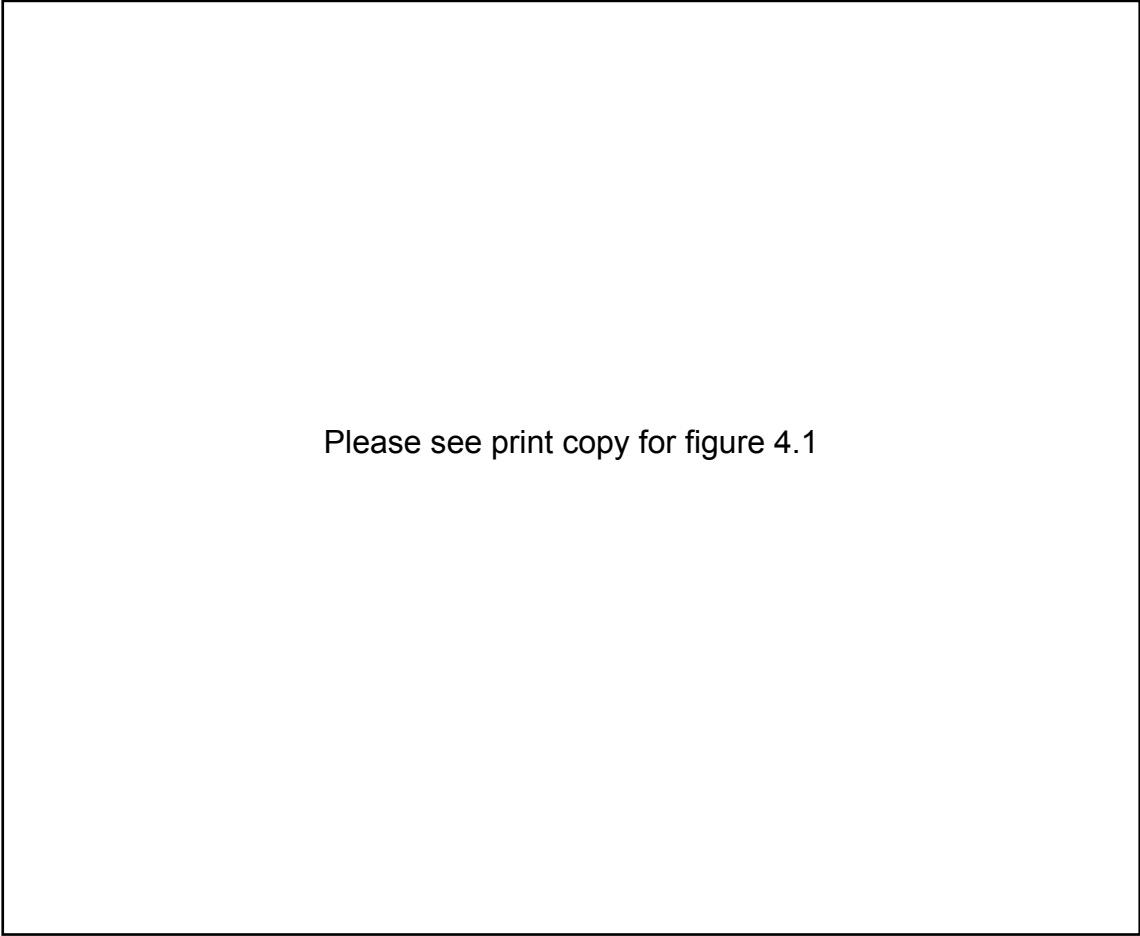
perspective. The idea of asking participants to talk about their experiences is, of course, not new. There is a long tradition of ethnographic research within sociology, a key exemplar of which is the work of Howard S. Becker (1963) who asked similar questions of people ranging from jazz musicians, to marijuana users and homosexuals. The research design for this project intentionally emphasizes giving ‘voice’ (Atkinson 2001; Van Dyne et al. 2003; Dundon et al. 2004) to workers, in order to understand their reactions to an HRM initiative. However, asking workers is not meant to imply that people have ‘perfect’ understanding of their own motives, or that they would be able to explain them in a clear, uncomplicated manner. As the seminal work of C. Wright Mills (1940:904) suggests, ‘the differing reasons men [sic] give for their actions are not themselves without reasons’. Rather, Mills (1940:913) claims that ‘vocabularies of motives’ are located in ‘historic epochs and specific situations’. That is, the reasons people give for their actions are socially situated. Thus, part of the research objective is to understand the micro-social context that informs miners’ responses at Dover Colliery.

Intersubjectivity lay at the heart of the current research activity. As I talked with, and listened to, coal miners they constructed accounts of themselves, of their colleagues, of management practices and of their responses to those management practices. Their narratives and story fragments were part of their sensemaking (Weick 1995) told retrospectively to the researcher. According to social constructionist perspectives (Gergen 1999), miners’ talk did not just describe things; it had persuasive effects. Firstly, perhaps miners were trying to influence, please or impress the researcher. Secondly, it helped them depict managers in ways that gave them ex post facto justification for their behavioural choices.

## **4.2 Qualitative versus quantitative methods**

Quantitative data collection usually includes information aggregated through some process of standardised measurement. Since the voices of participants are not usually *directly* heard in quantitative research (Creswell and Plano Clark 2007:9), a qualitative approach where the ‘generative properties of richness’ (Weick 2007:14) could be elicited, provided a framework more consistent with my research

objectives. Qualitative methods were chosen because they provided better tools for *explaining* and *understanding* existing phenomena (Cavana et al. 2001:134). However, in order to vouchsafe access to the research site, on the request of the Performance Management Superintendent (on whom I was dependent for continued access), I agreed to design and conduct a quantitative survey offered to all underground miners at Dover Colliery. This quantitative component was embedded in the overall qualitative design such that the open-ended survey questions provided further qualitative data. In this sense, my research design could be referred to as ‘mixed methods research’ (Creswell and Plano Clark 2007:7). Mixed methods research, defined as ‘the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques into a single study’ (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004:17), is premised on the notion that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches in combination may provide a clearer understanding of the research situation than either approach alone. Indeed, using mixed methods within a single study can simultaneously broaden and strengthen the study (Yin 2006:41). Mixing data sets can occur in three ways (see Figure 4.1). My approach is represented by the third mode: embed the data. In the original model, Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) suggest a method where qualitative data is embedded into a larger dataset of quantitative data as a way of explaining some of the findings of standardised surveys, for example. I have inverted this approach since I have used a dataset derived from an employee survey to supplement the major sources of data which were qualitative in origin.



Please see print copy for figure 4.1

**Figure 4.1 Three Ways of Mixing Quantitative and Qualitative Data**

Source: Adapted from Creswell and Plano Clark (2007:7)

Qualitative methods were chosen as the primary source of data since they are more appropriate for unpacking the identity issues which were being raised by miners. Identity as a discursive concept lacks the ‘substance and discreteness’ to be captured by surveys or structured interviews; identity is not readily counted or measured (Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003:1165). Qualitative data gathering can be undertaken using a range of research methods. Of particular relevance to the research question in the context of Dover Colliery is the case study approach, defined by Yin (1994: 11) as:

an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.



An extended case study design was selected as the most suitable approach to the research question. An extended case study (over a five year period) allowed me to investigate the realities of people's experiences as they happened, rather than relying on post hoc explanations such as, for example, through an after-the-event survey. It also allowed multiple sources of data collection, and multiple entry points. It was also important to seek an understanding of miners' experiences within the employment context in which they occurred (Glover and Noon, 2005). Extended case study design also engages 'the nested and interconnected nature of discursive moments, resources and procedures, vocabularies, strategies and techniques that are used by institutions and individuals to construct and sustain a coherent, stable representation' of what is happening in the organization (Broadfoot et al. 2004:199).

Underground access was restricted due to occupational health and safety regulations – I was not able to go underground without being accompanied by a safety officer, or other suitably qualified management official. Even on the surface, I was not free to walk around at will because of safety concerns. As a result, access to participants was not as frequent or as ongoing as in an 'ideal' case study (Perry 1998). This access limitation was offset by interviews both on and off-site and also by extending the study over a protracted period of time so that the cumulative effect could compensate for the intensity common in a more condensed burst of unrestricted research activity. The extended case study design also enabled emergent and on-going relationship-building with participants. Given the breakdown of trust between managers and miners, such a period of time was needed for the miners to accept me as legitimately independent and not a 'management stooge'.

In quantitative surveys, the data are typically collected at one point in time using a single survey instrument. While it is common in American studies of human resource management practices to involve large-scale postal surveys of 'single respondents answering quick questions' (Purcell 1999:28), such an approach is inherently problematic. Can one senior manager possibly answer on behalf of everyone in the firm? Do hard-to-measure items get excluded from such surveys? Can 'reliance on a design of questions that encourages the respondent to tick a box and not go to the file to find the answer' (Purcell 1999:28) provide discerning

answers to complex issues? Even employee surveys are problematic. For example, Geddes and Konrad (2003:1506) conducted a written survey of employees' reactions to performance feedback from managers of similar or different demographic backgrounds. Such a snapshot approach may lead to a number of problems (for example, participants may have responded differently at a different point in time). An extended case study allows collection of data that more faithfully represent the diversity of views in an organization, including their changeability and variation. This is especially so when data are collected across all echelons from senior executives to the shopfloor (as opposed to a single respondent per organization), and when repeat interviews are possible. However, in general, qualitative studies have likewise suffered from a snapshot approach:

Critical studies of the impact of HRM techniques have been hampered by a lack of longitudinal empirical research. With few exceptions, existing studies of worker reactions to HRM are snapshots, report *managerial* perceptions of changes in employee commitment, or are based on extremely limited qualitative research. (McKinlay and Taylor 1996:279, emphasis in original)

This thesis quite intentionally focuses on employees, over an extended period of time, to redress this imbalance in the literature. Indeed, the *employee* experience of appraisal, as opposed to managerial reports about employee responses, is one of the central contributions of this thesis. What managers say is done in their firms 'might not bear any relationship to what actually occurs' (Macky and Boxall 2007:543). How employees feel about what is done in their firms is not something that can be answered for them by a single managerial informant.

To summarize this section on the choice of qualitative or quantitative methods, there are several reasons why a qualitative study (with an embedded quantitative component) was deemed to be more appropriate. I was influenced by Alvesson and Kärreman's (2000:155) call for 'the employment of fieldwork practices that capture the delicacies of language use in organizational settings and thereby better our knowledge of organizational realities.' Such a call could be answered more fully

through attention to language use *in situ* offered by qualitative methods of data collection.

### **4.3 Procedures used to collect data: A mixed methods approach**

A mixed methods approach was adopted, in that four complementary methods were used as the primary means by which to understand employee perspectives of performance appraisal: extensive interviews, non-participant observation, a survey, and analysis of organizational documents. In addition, over 60 hours of on-site attendance at muster room meetings and informal chats with miners as they waited to catch the train underground at the start of their shifts, plus underground visits to the longwall and the panel development coalface enriched my understanding of what it meant to these men to be coal miners at Dover Colliery. Ethics approval was sought and granted by the University of Wollongong's Human Research Ethics Committee, and the usual information and consent forms were prepared in advance of the next stage of the research process. Examples of the research information sheet given to each participant, and the consent form which they signed, are included in Appendix C and D respectively.

#### **4.3.1 Interviewing**

In order to understand why miners were reacting so negatively to performance appraisal, it was clear that interviews with them would be a primary feature of my research design. However, interviews are problematic for several reasons. Practically, there is the question of how many interviews are needed to explore the diverse range of feelings and experiences which exist in a given workplace community. And these experiences and emotions inevitably change over time. More importantly from a theoretical perspective, given Alvesson's (2003) contention that language constructs rather than mirrors phenomena, the very process of asking questions may construct responses which are at least partially influenced by the researcher's line of questioning. In other words, we may simply get what we are looking for. The interview situation is indeed 'a socially and linguistically complex situation' calling for reflexive pragmatism which avoids naively assuming that data

reveal reality, while at the same time not losing the potential richness of meaning by too quickly taking interview data to a higher level of abstraction (Alvesson 2003:14). Interviews involve a complex blend of social, political, psychological and discursive processes. Even the physical location of the interview situation may influence the accounts which emerge in the interview process. Varying the scene of the interview may change the emphasis in the interviewee's account. This possibility was tested by conducting some interviews on site at Dover Colliery while others were conducted in the local sports club, at the local pub, and several were conducted in miners' homes with their wives present at various stages throughout the interviews.

In view of the ambiguity and complexity of the interview process, face-to-face formal interviews were tape recorded (with the permission of participants) and later transcribed. In this way I was able to focus attention on managing the interview process, while also actively listening to each interviewee instead of being distracted by excessive note taking. Analysis of such issues as the particular language in use by the interviewee was left to later reflection during the transcription process. Primary questions were pre-scripted to be as open as possible to allow interviewees the widest scope for constructing their own versions of the appraisal process (Delahaye 2005). Since my objective was to understand the interviewee's own themes, meanings, issues and understandings of the performance appraisal process, primary questions were as non-directive as possible. A typical starter, once rapport building had been accomplished, was to make the following remark:

*I'm doing some research on performance reviews, and I'd be really interested to hear your views about the performance review process taking place here at Dover Colliery. What has been happening with performance appraisals here at Dover?*

Secondary questions were used as prompts when the interviewee appeared to stall in his account, or as a way of expressing my engagement with his lived experience in the workplace. 'Tell me a bit more about how managers explained appraisals to the miners' was normally sufficient to get the miners talking, since miners could then

choose to remove themselves from the story process and talk about others. This gave most interviewees a sense of psychological safety. Once their stories about what others had done or said had been well received, most miners segued into stories which included themselves in the plots. Leading questions were avoided since my purpose was to understand how each miner experienced the HRM intervention rather than hear answers which my questions suggested I wanted to hear. This approach, of trying to discover the interviewee's *own* meanings and experiences, and only raising my research issues as probes towards the end of the interview, is in line with Perry's (1998) recommendations regarding the approach to take in exploratory research.

**Table 4.1 Summary of types of interviews**

Location	Individual interviews	Group interviews
<b>On site at Dover Colliery</b>	20	6
<b>Off site</b>		
In-home	1	3
UOW office	12	2
UOW by phone	12	-
Pub/sports club	2	-
<b>Total</b>	47	11

Fifty-eight in-depth interviews were conducted with miners, miners' wives, managers, union officials, and other stakeholders at Dover Colliery. Forty-seven of these interviews were conducted with a single interviewee, while eleven were conducted with two or more at the one time, the largest group consisting of five miners who were interviewed together. In all of my interviews I employed the listening with a 'big ear' approach advocated by Glaser (2001:175). I began with several face-to-face interviews with the Performance Management Superintendent, who had initially raised the research question. These were unstructured interviews in that I simply asked him to tell me what was happening with the appraisal process, what were his intentions in introducing it, and what outcomes was he currently

experiencing. At the initial meeting I also negotiated mutual expectations and boundaries to the research project, one of them being the approval to use the data from the process as a basis for my thesis on the condition that I did not mention the company by name. For this reason, all company, place and personal names in this thesis are pseudonyms. We also agreed that I would provide informal feedback to the Performance Management Superintendent about what was emerging from the data, but that I would not reveal the identities of individual miners in the process. This agreement was honoured throughout the entire research period.

After initial interviews with the Performance Management Superintendent, I talked to the mine manager at Dover Colliery to ascertain his expectations of the research project and to gain his goodwill, since some of the miners would be interviewed on company time. I then asked for and was granted permission to talk to key union officials at the mine sites. Not only was their cooperation essential to gain access to the 'rank and file' miner, but these individuals were highly articulate, colourful, and passionate about what HRM practices were doing to the working lives of their members. They were also able to provide rich socio-political and historical context to miners' interview narratives. Newton and Findlay (1996), for example, note that such contextualization is often missing from snapshot accounts. Mutual respect quickly developed, and these union officials became invaluable colleagues in the research process by endorsing my research and encouraging their members to talk to me.

There was no ideal time for coalface miner interviews. Miners worked long hours and were unwilling to come in early for interviews before the start of their shifts. Start times, depending on shift, were normally 6:30 am, 2:30 pm or 10:30 pm. Interviewing miners during shift time was quite disruptive to the production process. I was not allowed for occupational health and safety reasons to conduct interviews underground. It would have been too noisy and too dark anyway. To release a miner from the longwall to come to the surface for an interview required someone to take his place on 'the wall'. It also entailed the miner in up to half an hour's journey by shuttle car from 'the face' to the means of egress, then a 20 minute train ride up a steep incline to the surface. After the interview, the miner would have to wait for the

next train underground, and then repeat the long, noisy and bumpy journey back to the coalface by shuttle car. Team operations were interrupted for up to four hours for every miner interviewed while on duty. For this reason, very few interviews took place during standard working hours. Most occurred by catching up with individuals as they emerged from the pit. However, by the time miners had finished their shifts, most were exhausted and only too keen to shower and go home. Most began the interviews with comments to the effect that they had just come off a long shift and could only talk 'for about 20 minutes maximum'. Yet, once they got talking about their work and their experiences of the appraisal process with a sympathetic and willing listener, the whole process seemed cathartic to them. Many did not seem to want to stop and talked for up to two hours.

Interviews with coal miners began with two individuals who the union officials said would be keen to talk to me about their experiences. Thereafter, by a snowball effect, interviewees recommended others I 'should talk to', or others contacted me once they heard from already-interviewed miners that I was not a management informant. Most of these interviews took place above-ground at the mine site, either in a vacant office, or in the training room. All interviewees consented to the interviews being tape recorded, and all face-to-face interviewees willingly signed ethics forms granting consent for the interviews. Somewhat surprisingly, no one wanted to see copies of the finished transcripts. They were just happy to talk about 'those bloody performance reviews' and all of those interviewed said they were happy to talk to me again about the appraisal process if need be. Some of those interviewed have taken the initiative and continue to send me emails to this present day to keep me up to date with mining issues which they think I might be interested in. I still get the occasional phone call from miners keeping me informed about the latest news regarding performance reviews. There were a few interviews conducted by phone, when miners initiated the phone contact to 'volunteer' information, where the signing of interview consent forms was not possible. Phone interviews were not taped, but notes were made of the conversation during these calls and typed immediately afterwards.

There were a few miners who did not want 'management' to know that they were talking to me. Typically, they phoned me and we arranged off-site interviews in local pubs and clubs. These were valuable interviews because in these off-site locations men were able to reflect the depth of emotion that they were not prepared to allow to surface in the masculine, aggressive workplace environment. The in-home interviews were particularly noteworthy for the passionate interjections of miners' wives concerning the disruptive effects of performance appraisal on their husbands and how this process had affected emotions and relationships in the home.

Towards the end of the data collection process, groups of miners were interviewed. In one case a manager had arranged for five longwall miners to be interviewed one after the other at the end of their shift (on overtime pay). This appeared to be poor management planning because even if the interviews were truncated to 30 minutes each, this would mean that the last of the five miners would have to wait around for two hours or so to get his turn. The group decided that they were not going to wait. They gave me a choice. Either I interviewed them all together, or the interviews would not happen at all. It was most interesting to notice the group dynamics throughout this group interview. The miners seemed to feed off each others' comments; there was clearly an occupational identity dynamic in operation throughout this interview which single one-on-one interviews had failed to capture adequately. This group exchange also generated rich layers of emotion, primarily humorous teasing towards each other and sarcasm towards 'management'.

Most interviews with coal miners lasted between one and two hours. I took care to allow interviewees whatever time they needed to tell their stories. Once miners had negotiated the initial interview protocols and the rapport zone had been reached (Delahaye 2005), most miners appeared to relish an opportunity to tell their side of the story to someone who would listen empathetically. Clearly they were passionate about their jobs, with its inherent risks and dangers. Once defensive barriers had been lowered, the interviewees typically became so immersed in their stories that it became difficult to remain aloof to their situations and predicaments. At these points I was reminded of Gabriel's (2004:76) thesis that 'researchers may become fellow-travellers on stories and narratives, suspending disbelief or forensic tendencies and



concentrating on symbolism and meaning.’ Being a fellow-traveller with miners was an unforgettably rich and rewarding journey and the richness of the data improved immeasurably by this response, compared to what would have been the case had I attempted to remain aloof and ‘objective’ in moments when miners reflected on the impact of managerial practices on their working lives. At these moments, when miners engaged in talk about their feelings, it became clear that the interview process itself affects the verbal construction of identity (Larson and Pepper 2003:537). ‘The telling of one’s own story, particularly at points when an identity is challenged from the ‘outside,’ becomes an important contributor to identity itself” (Christensen and Cheney 1994:229).

While the interview sample with coal miners was non-random – miners either volunteered to be interviewed, or were approached by the Performance Management Superintendent and asked if they would be willing to talk to the researcher – the range of views of those interviewed were consistently reaffirmed by those to whom the researcher spoke informally in the muster room, or at the local pub or club. I am therefore confident that the identity issues addressed, and the coping mechanisms described by miners, would be authentic representations of those of most of the workforce. The survey (to be discussed in Section 4.4 below) provided an opportunity to check if I had missed any key themes or perspectives in not being able to interview every miner, or a random sample of miners.

**Table 4.2 Summary of interviews with managerial personnel**

Management Level	Number
Performance Management Superintendent	10
Mine manager	2
Functional coordinators	5
HRM officials	15
Financial officer	1
Total	33

As shown in Table 4.2 above, face-to face interviews were also conducted with key corporate, divisional and operational managers at critical moments in the mine's implementation of successive rounds of the performance appraisal process. These interviews were typically much shorter, more 'factual' and reflected the outcomes based nature of their business. The same 'big ear' approach employed in miners' interviews was employed in interviews with these above-ground managers. The interviews with managers were in the main unstructured, seeking understanding of managerial perspectives on the performance management implementation process, while also exploring what outcomes managers expected from the appraisal process. Some of the interviews were undertaken to maintain goodwill and vouchsafe access to the mine site. Interviews were analysed using the same discursive framework of analysis employed in the analysis of miners' interviews, as explained in Section 4.4 below. What became abundantly clear was that managers understood performance appraisal very differently to miners, as will be shown in Part II of this thesis.

#### **4.3.2 Non-participant observation**

Fieldwork over a five year period through attendance at management and union meetings, and also by extensive periods of time spent in and around the muster room at shift changeover time, provided rich sources of data. Every visit to the mine site to interview miners or managers enriched my understanding of the workplace context, and how the appraisal discourse conflicted with that context. During these visits I was able to observe naturally occurring conversations and events unfolding in their natural settings, unrehearsed and unscripted, free from respondent bias. Fieldnotes based on these spontaneous *in situ* conversations and observations were recorded to accompany interview transcripts. Two trips underground to observe the actual working conditions in the development panels and at the longwall gave a deeper appreciation of the miners' coalface environment, and afforded me the opportunity to 'get dirty with the data' (Dawson 1997:389) – quite literally. It was not practical to become a participant observer in the sense of working alongside miners underground because of the training and certification necessary to conduct work in such dangerous conditions, not to mention the ongoing demands of my full-time job.

The many hours of informal contact with miners included attendance at several ‘karaoke meetings’ at shift changeover times. The ‘karaoke meeting’ was originally a somewhat derogatory term used by miners to refer to the verbal communications made in the muster room at the start of a shift, where managers ‘sing’ to the men an unpleasant stream of announcements, directions and safety warnings for the coming shift. These meetings provided a rich source of data on the power relations between miners and managers, and the language in use between the two groups.

I was invited to attend numerous mine management meetings where performance appraisals were discussed. I also attended a three hour training course for deputies, conducted by a HR manager, in how to give performance appraisals. At these meetings I tried to keep out of the discussions so that I did not influence the processes I was trying to observe. However, in most meetings I was called upon to make comments, either by managers or union officials, at which times I tried to comment on the processes which I was observing, rather than wading into debates over the content issues of the day.

I took extensive notes at all the meetings I attended. After some of these meetings I was forwarded a complete set of notes transcribed by the secretary in attendance at the meeting. The fieldnotes from these meetings, the official minutes of the meetings, and in some cases the tape transcriptions became part of my dataset which was extremely useful in the data analysis stage (see Section 4.5 below). Observations of the physical conditions of mining, of the relationships between miners and managers, and of those between miners and other miners became essential background material in making sense of what miners were saying in their interviews and in survey responses.

Non-participant observation can provide rich contextual clues in explanatory research. As Dawson (1997:404) notes:

The combination of observation with in-depth interviewing enables both cross-validation of data, and the integration of contextual and temporal

observations with the more perceptual and attitudinal data gathered from interviews.

The importance of being able to cross-validate data was highlighted when talking to managers, hearing their espoused theories about the way things should be done, or the way things were being done, and then talking to workers, hearing their descriptions of the way things were being done. The way managers described appraisal reviews, for example, generally did not match the reports of how coal miners experienced their appraisal meetings. In explanatory research, such variations in the lived reality of the various participants provide important insights into understanding workplace behaviours.

Observation runs the risk of perceptual selection bias (Cavana et al. 2001:161). With so many things to pay attention to, especially in a strange environment, we inevitably make choices regarding which clues to attend to. The extended case study design went some way to addressing this challenge. I picked up different clues on different visits to the mine sites. I was, for example, initially quite surprised by the aggressive language in use by some union officials towards managers in joint union-management meetings. However, in individual conversations with the same managers, these officials were perfect gentlemen. There is a certain gamesmanship attached to some of these organizational events which an outsider may misinterpret in a snapshot approach to research. In extended periods of observation, *processes* become more apparent. One of the benefits of processual approaches to research is that fine-grained contextual accounts can more easily accommodate the diversity of ‘outlier’, ‘outsider’ or deviant observations, since the focus is not so much on refining the data ‘to strengthen the generalisability of the findings, but rather to provide narrative accounts of the continuously developing and complex dynamic of people in organizations’ (Dawson 1997:404).

### 4.3.3 Documentary data

Since the purpose of my research was to understand *employees'* responses to performance appraisal, organizational documents which were invariably written from a managerial perspective were of less importance than would be the case in other studies. However, these documents did provide data to assist in understanding managers' concepts of appraisal, and were a source of analysis of discursive objects such as the appraisal rating categories and criteria. Documents are written in a specific context for consumption by a particular audience, and must be understood in that context. However, managers generously gave me access to organizational documents relevant to the performance management process, transcripts of various management-union meetings, and also access to transcripts from management-union appearances before the Industrial Relations Commission for hearings on conflict over the appraisal process. The company kept meticulous records of the statistics of the review processes, especially documenting the percentage of miners who scored As, Bs, Cs, Ds and Es, broken down by mine site and functional areas. These statistics became key benchmarks and drivers of the scoring calibration process in subsequent rounds of reviews. The Performance Management Superintendent copied me in numerous email discussions about the questions and difficulties arising from managerial involvement in appraisal reviews and subsequent appeals from miners.

One of the HR managers at Dover had conducted his own mini-survey of managers' and deputies' views on the effectiveness of performance appraisals at Dover, and he gave me copies of their handwritten responses. I was also given access to the PowerPoint slides used by HR managers in various training programs for appraisal reviewers. These slides constituted a text which revealed much about managerial assumptions underpinning their performance management process. These documents provided a valuable source of contextual data for the analysis of managerial concepts about appraisal that is presented in Chapter 5.

Newspaper articles regarding various issues impacting on the coal mining industry in Australia were collected as useful background material to the case study. Of particular interest were the newspaper articles which drew attention to the cost

pressures facing the mining industry at the start of the research period. Several mining tragedies, particularly in China, throughout the research period, drew attention to the dangers inherent in underground mining. The Beaconsfield (Tasmania) gold mine crisis, where one miner was killed in a cave-in and two miners were trapped underground for 14 days, also reminded the researcher – and miners at Dover – how dangerous underground mining operations can be.

#### **4.3.4 Survey of miners**

Although my research methods were primarily qualitative in design, the Performance Management Superintendent asked me to conduct a survey of all miners regarding the performance appraisal process. One reason for the survey was that he wanted a document which he could present to his superiors to garner more organizational support for the appraisal process. From my perspective a miner survey was useful to verify and ‘flesh out’ some of the recurring themes which were emerging in the 20 or so interviews which I had conducted by that point in time. A carefully constructed survey might also indicate whether there were other salient themes which had not yet emerged in the interview process.

Based on themes which had emerged in the initial round of miner interviews, I constructed a nine-question survey. It included items on miners’ impressions of the rating accuracy of the performance scale, their opinions regarding the helpfulness of the feedback they received on their performance review, their opinions about the tone of the appraisal meeting, and then questions about the impact of the appraisal meeting on their subsequent work behaviour, their feelings about themselves, and what changes had occurred in their level of productivity as a result of being performance reviewed. Each question provided opportunities for open responses if the respondent wished to explain why they had chosen a particular category of response. A final question provided an opportunity for them to share their perspective on performance and productivity issues by inviting them to indicate how they felt performance in their area of work could be improved.

There was a logical progression in the sequence of the questions starting with issues regarding the rating categories (which were designed *before* the appraisal interviews), through questions as to what they felt *during* the interviews, to how they responded *after* the interviews. For each question, miners were offered choices of responses to circle, or they could write their own unique response in the space provided. The choices in each question were based on the comments from those already interviewed. The survey was pre-tested on five of the miners, and minor adjustments were made to the wording as a result of ambiguity contained in one of the questions. The full set of the survey questions, and an abbreviated version of my report to MNC Coal based on the survey responses, are contained in Appendix A and B respectively. However, as examples, Question 5 regarding subsequent work behaviour (after having attended a performance review), and Question 9, regarding performance improvement, are reproduced below:

**After** the last review meeting, I:

- 1. Changed my work behaviour – I worked harder to meet management expectations
- 2. Worked harder for a while then slipped back to my normal working habits
- 3. Decided to do only what was required of me
- 4. Didn't work as hard because I was de-motivated
- 5. There was nothing that needed changing so it made no difference to me
- 6. None of the above – my response was

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

As another example, **Question 9**, the last question on the survey, read as follows:

Complete the following sentence. ‘**The best way to improve performance in my work area would be to...**’

.....  
.....

I was told by a number of the managers at Dover that I was wasting my time doing a survey, because miners do not participate in such activities. Since the aim was to receive qualitative answers on the survey, and since there was an organizational history of resistance to surveys, I enlarged the printed version of the survey onto a large poster board measuring approximately 1.5 metres high and 1 metre wide. I was given permission to hang this poster example of the survey in the muster room for several days before the designated survey date, so that miners had time to think about whether or not they wished to participate in the survey.

Because of miner absenteeism and rostering issues, it was decided to offer the survey over two consecutive days. On the designated dates, I spent two very long days standing at the miners' entrance to the change rooms handing out copies of the survey as miners arrived to start work. That is, I was at the mine site at 5:30 am to catch those arriving for the 6:30 am start to the morning shift, 1:30 pm to catch those arriving for the 2:30 pm start to the afternoon shift, and again at 9:30 pm to catch those arriving for the 10:30 pm night shift. I used these occasions to chat informally to quite a large number of the workers; I also caught up with many of the men pouring out of the mine on the changeover from the previous shift. Regrettably, the survey was not offered to the shifts of 'weekend warriors' because I was not informed of their existence until after the survey had been administered.

Of the approximately 120 miners to whom the survey was offered, 55 completed the survey. While the number returned is relatively low, the response rate is relatively high, especially when compared to poor response rates on company-initiated surveys in the past. Most of the miners took the time and effort to make written responses in the open sections of the questionnaire. It appeared that they had strong opinions, and *feelings* about, their performance appraisal experience. Miners' responses on the survey were cross-referenced with themes emerging from interviews. The responses on each question confirmed the relevance, salience and commonality of the themes arising in earlier interviews with miners.



#### 4.4 Analysis of the data

All formal interviews were transcribed. The tape transcription process, tedious as it was especially with the background noises in a coal mine hindering transcription, yielded a surprisingly rich source of information some of which had been missed in my fieldnotes. For example, during the transcription of one of the interviews the noise of the siren which goes off five minutes before the miner transport train departs underground could be heard in the background. The siren wails like the harbinger of an impending air raid; it is not a beautiful noise. It reminded me of the complex institutional effects of such forms of time control. At other times, I was surprised that I had missed significant metaphors or subtle changes in the language in use as various emotional states were encountered. Fieldnotes which had been compiled throughout the research period were referred to as the tapes were transcribed, and documentary data were assembled for analysis. The framework of analysis developed in Chapter 3, namely a synthesis models derived from Grant and Shields (2002) and Alvesson and Willmott (2002), was used as an overarching model to order the data and proceed with data analysis. Primary analysis consisted of carefully reading the texts (interview transcripts, organizational documents, emails and fieldnotes) seeking answers to three key questions, which were based on the model suggested by Grant and Shields (2002), as explained in Chapter 3. Those questions used to analyse the data were:

1. What discursive *concepts* are implicit in this text?
2. How does the author of this text position themselves as *subject* in this text?
3. What does this text say about the *objects* brought into being by the text?

Data analysis was an iterative process. More fine-grained scrutiny of the language in use was often employed as a secondary analytical process, as was the examination of various storytelling devices such as heroic and tragic tales (Gabriel 2000; Gabriel 2004). Key themes were identified in an iterative reading of the transcribed texts and ‘multiple layers of meanings’ emerged (Charmaz 1995:35). As themes began to emerge, these were explored in more depth in subsequent interviews over the five years of fieldwork. The above three questions formed the basis of analysis for all of

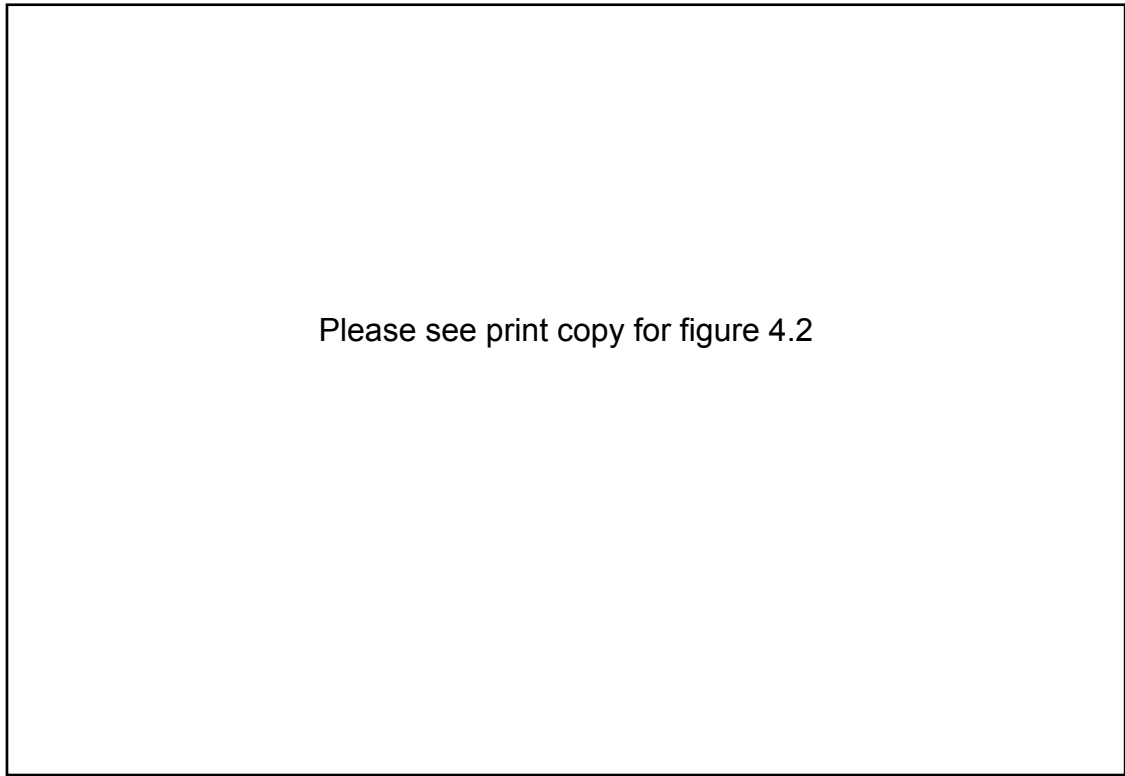
my interviews, including those interviews with above-ground managers. Chapter 5, for example, explores the various concepts managers held with respect to miners, performance, and measurement and notes how their discourses objectified miners in ways which clashed with miners' subject positions.

In answer to the second question above, how does the author of this text position themselves as *subject*, it became clear early in the data analysis process that miners were refusing to be objectified by the appraisal mechanisms, and a considerable amount of identity work was taking place in these interviews. Thus, Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) model of the relationship between identity regulation, identity work and self-identity was also brought into play and, since miners were talking about themselves as members of a collectivity, the model was developed and expanded to include the notion of occupational identity.

There are various theoretical approaches within the interpretive tradition, yet they are unified by a 'focus on achieving a *meaningful understanding* of the actors' frame of reference' through attention to discourse as constructive of social reality (Heracleous 2004:175, emphasis in original). Yet, because of the sometimes competing and sometimes contradictory nature of organizational discourses, Broadfoot et al (2004: 193) call for 'multi-levelled, multi-method approaches' to the analysis of the data. Thus, this thesis has intentionally adopted several methods of analysis, exploring discursive concepts, objects and subjects, and also identifying the discursive resources miners and managers used as part of their ongoing identity work. In particular, miners' discursive defensive strategies were examined (Chapter 6) through the language they used and the stories they told of the appraisal process (Chapter 7). Dissonance tropes were also identified in miners' responses to managerial 'texts' surrounding the appraisal process (Chapter 8).

As interviews progressed, it became apparent that some miners were unable to articulate the depth and intensity of their feelings at being appraised and rated. Anger appeared to be the only allowable emotion in the masculine context of a blue-collar, all-male underground workforce. When pressed to describe their feelings about performance appraisal, the majority response was a taciturn: 'It's bullshit!' At

this point the value of storytelling as a vehicle for expressing emotion was revisited. Through the work of Boje (1995), Brown et al. (2005), Gabriel (1999; 2000; 2004), and others, it became apparent that what miners may *not* have been saying in prosaic description, they may have been communicating through the genre of storytelling. Transcripts were revisited; stories were mined reflexively from the data. This process yielded rich insights into how performance rating breached miners' occupational identity and how they responded through various dissonance tropes. Data analysis was also undertaken from a critical perspective, in that attention was paid to the relationship between power and discourse. Following Mumby (2004:237), the case study was approached as a political site where 'various organizational actors and groups struggle to "fix" meaning in ways that will serve their particular interests'. Appraisal as a discursive concept produced subjects and objects. How employees, as recipients of that discourse reacted to its implementation was articulated in their stories surrounding the appraisal process, but was made clearer by considering Hardy and Phillips' (2004:300) model of the mutually constitutive relationship between discourse and power, as depicted in Figure 4.2 below.



Please see print copy for figure 4.2

**Figure 4.2 The mutually constitutive relationship between discourse and power**

Source: Adapted from Hardy and Phillips (2004:300) and Clegg et al. (2006:317)

The relationship between discourse and power, as shown in Figure 4.2 is complex and fluid. As Clegg et al. (2006:317) state:

The distribution of power fundamentally shapes the way texts are produced and disseminated; who can produce what texts in what way is conditioned by patterns of resources, legitimacy and the like.

In spite of the asymmetries of power relations this model suggests that workers are able to resist hegemonic domination by use of a number of discursive resources. These discursive resources are identified in Part II of this thesis.

Analysis of the data was also influenced by two implications of discursive approaches in organizational studies raised by Alvesson and Kärreman (2000:147). The first implication relates to what they call the level of fieldwork, namely that talk is central to qualitative studies. As such, I paid particular attention to the language in use by agents in the research project, the micro level of organizational discourse. References to the collective group ('we' rather than 'I'), and the intensification of expression through an increased rate of swearing, for example, were indicative of collective and emotional states respectively. The second implication relates to what they call the level of analysis of the data. Alvesson and Kärreman (2000:149) state:

In research practice, this means remaining reflective and sceptical, but not categorical, about the discursive level of research. In this respect it is important to:

- a) carefully think through to what extent an account may be treated as an indication of phenomena such as behaviours, relations, events, values, emotions, and intentions;
- b) indicate why there are good reasons to treat the account in this way; and
- c) be explicit about the speculative element involved.

Given the above ambiguities, complexities and challenges in analysing the data, another researcher, especially one with a different socio-historical or political perspective, or one who developed a different relationship with miners and managers, may produce a different narrative to that which emerges in Part II of this thesis. I have spent several years reading, thinking about, sifting, selecting and interpreting data according to the frameworks mentioned above. With the best intentions of objectivity, it is acknowledged that this thesis is not *the* story about the way it *really* happened. Rather, it is one of many legitimate constructions based on a rational and informed attempt to draw together compelling stories from multiple voices in order to understand meaningfully the political, social and intersubjective processes at work when identity in the workplace is transgressed, whether intentionally or not, by managerial practices.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has explained the qualitative approach which guided the research design and data collection methods for this thesis. Data analysis was undertaken from a critical perspective, questioning not just what the texts said, but how those texts constructed, challenged or maintained miner identities at Dover Colliery. While data collection in qualitative studies is never complete because identities are discursively constructed, challenged and rescripted in an ongoing process, this thesis accomplishes a deeper understanding of issues surrounding the research question. The chapter has also acknowledged that, despite the best efforts of the researcher to eliminate subjectivity and bias, qualitative research is influenced by the relationship between the researcher and the subjects and objects of research. Finally, the chapter has also identified the extended case study as being particularly appropriate to this research project, given the research question, as it facilitates locating of the various discourses in their specific contexts as they developed over time. Part 2 now presents the findings generated from the data analysis and uses them to address the research question.

## **PART 2      ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS**

### **Chapter 5      Performance appraisal from the perspective of mine managers: Discursive concepts and objects**

*Mike Massingham [the previous mine manager] had a strange view of performance management. He saw it as...improving the workforce, but he saw that the real proof of the pudding was 'taking a few people out.' 'If you're not fair dinkum enough to take out a bad player, then the whole process is suspect. You're not fair dinkum.' So that was his philosophy. That was his litmus test as to whether the whole process was genuine or not. Otherwise, to him, you're just playing with words and making everyone feel warm and fuzzy and giving someone a slap on the wrist occasionally. But if you're really going to be serious, then you have to be prepared to do the hard stuff as well...It was a hostage type philosophy. You only had to take a couple of hostages, and the rest would take attention!*

[Interview 1, Performance Management Superintendent]

#### **5.1      Introduction: Discursive concepts and objects**

As an orthodox intervention strategy, performance appraisal is part of much broader discourses of management-labour relations, sedimented as those relationships are in cultural assumptions and societal values. In labour process theory, appraisal is conceptualized as a struggle over who controls the labour process (McKinlay and Taylor 1996). In Foucauldian terms, appraisal is an instrument of bureaucratic control that 'constructs and legitimizes managerial prerogatives in terms of a rational, goal directed image of organizational effectiveness' (Townley 1993:227). To what extent have these divergent concepts of appraisal permeated managerial thinking? This chapter uses a discourse analytic approach to understand actions by senior managers at Dover Colliery to transform the work practices of coal miners by use of performance appraisals. The chapter provides a deeper appreciation of the

underlying assumptions shaping the decisions of managers in implementing appraisals.

Using the discursive framework of analysis suggested by Grant and Shields (2002; 2006), namely discursive concepts, objects and subjects, this chapter examines ‘traces’ (Ainsworth and Hardy 2004:234) of managers’ concepts of appraisal found in the texts that surround the production, circulation and use of their appraisal system for underground miners. The chapter examines, both from the larger discourse of the ‘performance imperative’ in the mining industry and also from its locally situated context, discursive units of texts (Chalaby 1996) that reveal managerial beliefs about the purposes and effects of appraisal. Given the struggle which surrounded the appraisal discourse, the unintended consequences in an upset and resistant workforce, and the disruption to existing circuits of power (Clegg et al. 2006), the question needs to be asked, *What were managers thinking?* The chapter examines objects of the appraisal concept brought into being through discourse (Grant and Hardy 2003), namely the ways in which HRM practices such as appraisal and people-as-objects (Shields and Grant 2002) were constructed by texts which emerged from managerial ideas, concepts and assumptions regarding performance appraisal. Thus, the focus of this chapter is on identifying managerial concepts of appraisal, how these concepts informed the construction of the appraisal instrument, and how miners were discursively objectified by the appraisal process. The chapter analyses the projection of these concepts as discursive objects upon Dover miners.

In keeping with the critical stream of literature which regards appraisal as a system of surveillance, and ‘an example of the operation of power/knowledge, rendering aspects of experience thinkable, calculable, and thus manageable’ (Townley 1993:236), the approach in this chapter places a particular premium on language – ‘the vocabularies of programmes through which power operates and the legitimacy of government is established’ (Townley 1993:225). While colliery managers did not articulate their beliefs about appraisal in the terminology of identity regulation and control (Alvesson and Willmott 2002), their language in use revealed ‘traces’ of their assumptions regarding the legitimacy of managerial prerogative to control miners’ work behaviour through HRM practices such as appraisal. Managerial

voices in this chapter demonstrate how the performance discourse in this specific context was both an emergent and locally constructed phenomenon (Alvesson and Kärreman 2000). Table 5.1 summarizes the findings of this chapter.

**Table 5.1 The managerial discourse of appraisal: concepts and objects**

<b>Discursive concepts</b>	<b>Examples of the ‘traces’ of texts from which the concepts are inferred</b>
‘Performance’ metaphor	Managerial definition of the performance criteria; performance as acts to be observed, measured, judged.
‘Management’	MNC Coal documents espousing appraisal as a fundamental measure of a supervisor’s ability to lead people; a conflation of the concepts of measurement and management.
Appraisal purposes	Inferred from managerial texts such as ‘squeeze the lemon’, ‘incompetent workers’, and ‘break union power’.
Managerial prerogative	Managerial avowals privileging their ‘voice’ over that of miners; managerial appeals to the Industrial Relations Commission to force the unions to participate in the appraisal process.
Categorical thinking	Managers’ statements that appraising people means measuring people; assertions that what can be measured can be managed.
<b>Discursive objects</b>	<b>Evidence of the object brought into being by the discursive concept</b>
Miners as instruments of production	Spartan conditions; electronic screen displaying production in real time; expectations of ‘hot-seat’ changeovers; expectations of overtime on demand.
Appraisal technology	Managers’ references to the need to control work practices; a technology of mistrust; privileges the power of the rater over the ratee.
The rating instrument	An object through which to measure, calibrate and construct a productive worker.
Miners as statistics	Managers conflating scoring and rating to objectify the ‘ideal’ miner.



## 5.2 Performance appraisal: Discursive concepts

Discursive concepts refer to the ‘ideas, categories, relationships, and theories through which we understand the world and relate to one another’ (Hardy and Phillips 1999:3). It follows that *concepts* are not directly accessible as material objects. ‘Traces’ of particular concepts (Ainsworth and Hardy 2004:236) are found in the texts and the socio-cultural structures that surround their production, circulation and use. What managers were thinking when they decided to implement a performance appraisal system must be inferred from the ‘texts’ (both verbal and written) that constitute and are constituted by their behaviour, their actions and their words throughout the appraisal process.

Implicit in discursive concepts are ideas of ‘rightness’ (Phillips and Hardy 1997:167); in other words, concepts carry with them a moral evaluation, a notion of what *should be*. Such notions of rightness are, of course, open to ambiguity and contest; the end result is that discursive concepts are part of a political struggle over conflicting ideas and ideals among multiple stakeholders (Grant and Shields 2006:289). Proponents of a concept may believe that it is morally correct and thus right to seek to use it to change social structures and relationships.

Discursive concepts can be identified and analysed at various levels (Broadfoot et al. 2004). Concepts associated with performance at Dover Colliery, at the macro-level, were influenced by the capital-intensive nature of mining which operates within broad global and industry-based contexts that necessitate competitive advantage, productivity, and return on investment to shareholders. In addition to these macro-level discourses of performance imperatives, there were also regional and mine-specific ‘texts’, not to mention individual variations thereof, which intermingled with managerial expectations to constitute more site-specific concepts of HRM practices. What, then, were some of the discursive concepts surrounding appraisal located in the texts of mine managers at Dover Colliery?

### 5.2.1 Site-specific context of appraisal

Concepts surrounding performance management at Dover Colliery did not, of course, spontaneously come into being in a vacuum. Managers were influenced by appraisal practices in other industries, and the conceptualisations of appraisal in academic literature and trade journals. Managerial concepts at Dover owe much to macro-level discourses embedded over time in managers' frames of reference. In order to understand the dynamics of this particular intervention, it is necessary to consider the social and political circumstances that gave rise to it. How to manage miner performance has been part of a much larger discourse of labour relations in the coal mining industry in different geographical locations over a long period of time. Thus, concepts of performance management at Dover were imported into the specific local context from the much broader discourses of management-labour relations, embedded as these relationships are in cultural assumptions and societal value systems.

Coal mining, for example, has long been characterised by an adversarial relationship between above-ground and underground workers (Barry et al. 1998). Historically, coal mining has been a heavily unionised industry; it is estimated that 90% of full-time coal miners (not contractors) in Australia are members of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) (Barry and Waring 2006:40). Collectively determined patterns of labour regulation have been the norm in the coal mining industry (Barry and Waring 2006:37). HRM practices were often constrained by union rights. Until recently, mining companies in the region where Dover Colliery is situated were not able to hire labour directly through their own recruiting processes. When vacancies arose, these companies had to apply to the regional union office and miners would be supplied by the union. When retrenchments were necessary, companies could not choose whom to retrench. Unions had won a strict last on, first off policy.

Only after the radical workplace relations reforms of the late 1990s, under the Australian Federal Government's *Workplace Relations Act 1996* (Cwlth) have such

rights been eroded. The emphasis shifted to individual bargaining between employers and employees at the level of the workplace and a reduced role for unions (Nankervis et al. 2008:106). Thus, concepts of performance management and appraisal at Dover Colliery were heavily influenced by the much broader discourse of the necessity of reforms of work practices in order for Australia to remain competitive in the global economy.

More specifically, the appraisal implementation process at Dover commenced in mid-2000 amidst rising costs of coal extraction, and low coal prices on the world market. According to the Performance Management Superintendent of MNC Coal, financial imperatives underpinned the performance management initiative. Whatever ‘spin’ HRM managers, coordinators, supervisors or deputies put on the process, the pressure from above was to ‘squeeze the lemon’ to get more productivity from miners [Performance Management Superintendent, Interview 1]. Thus, at the macro-level, ‘performance’ was seen as part of a larger Discourse (with a capital D) of global competitiveness through people (Alvesson 2004). Numerous organizational documents at Dover supported the proposition that people were the source of competitive advantage, and that performance management was about optimising that resource ‘object’.

### **5.2.2 Discursive concept: The ‘performance’ metaphor**

Why did mine managers conceptualise work as ‘performance’? In the HRM literature, work behaviour has become organised around a specific metaphor (as many discourses are; see Potter and Wetherell, 1987:149) – that of *performance*. There are other expressions available to describe work projects, such as competence and contribution for work behaviours, goal attainment, task completion, or even ‘mission accomplished’ for work outcomes. *Performance* as a metaphor has close kinship with the stage. Performance in the theatre entails acting out scripts, doing things front-stage which sometimes differ from what goes on behind the curtain, backstage (Goffman 1959). The performance metaphor also reminds that work is visible, seen, watched and evaluated. The prevalence of the performance metaphor demonstrates the pervasiveness of the idea of working to accomplish what an

observer expects; the concept is of acting out one's behaviour according to the expectations of some significant Other (Mead 1934) – and also raises the spectre of impression management (Goffman 1959). 'Performance' provides a convenient discursive resource which managers use to legitimize particular management strategies (Musson and Duberley 2007:146). They write the 'approved' scripts.

Conceptually, 'traces' of behavioural control mechanisms are implicit in managers' assumptions that they write the performance criteria. Use of the term *performance* in the workplace also privileges public (workplace) actions over other events occurring backstage, such as acts of goodwill or service which are not performed in the limelight and are not measured. The performance metaphor also marginalizes backstage issues such as feelings, emotions, family issues, personal distress, health issues, reservations and resistance, and so forth. In this sense, the discourse of performance defines the context and content of work for many people, and its use can be seen as an attempt to 'frame' behaviour in the workplace in a way that mobilizes meaning in the interests of certain powerful groups over those of other less powerful groups, and that makes it visible and subject to evaluation (Townley 1999; Kellie 2007:133).

Apart from the metaphor of *performance*, there are other ways of talking about the purposes, behaviours and outcomes of the contributions (another metaphor) of organizational members. While *performance* to a mine manager may mean measurable outcomes, to a miner it may mean a form of impression management, or a type of behaviour to be acted out while the boss is watching. The metaphors that constructed managerial versions of social reality were used by others to construct different versions of reality. Miners' inversions of the performance discourse will be examined in Chapters 7 and 8.

### **5.2.3 Discursive concept: Performance *management***

'Performance management' is a discursive concept, not a social entity. It is a term used by senior mine managers to represent *their* expectations of the behaviours of those who manage and those who are managed in the workplace. What, in senior

managers' thinking, constituted acceptable performance? How would effective performance for underground coal miners be observed and measured? Should performance of miners be controlled? If so, *how* could performance be controlled? Answers to these questions from appraisal documents at Dover provide 'traces' (Ainsworth and Hall 2006:270) of the individual, social and shared managerial concepts through which appraisals at Dover Colliery were constituted.

'Performance management' has currency in a broad range of management texts and contexts. At Dover Colliery, the term was imposed by the CEO of MNC Coal to symbolize the bureaucratic processes being instigated throughout all divisions to drive increased efficiency. The concept 'performance management' was mobilised at Dover as a strategic resource to create particular objects (Hardy et al. 2000), namely more productive workers.

The way the senior management team talked about 'performance management' had strong micro-political implications. Talk of performance management served to reproduce hierarchical relations. Note, for example, the tenor of the following General Mine Manager's report to his senior management team at the commencement of the third round of appraisals:

Performance management will continue to be a critical part of our business' success and for our supervisors it will be a fundamental measure of their ability to lead our people.

[MNC Coal Report, May 2003, ii]

By this statement, the Mine Manager asserted his right to use 'performance management', however defined, as some type of 'fundamental' [and presumably unproblematic] 'measure' of the leadership worth of his key supervisors. His report continued:

This is the third cycle of the performance management system. During this performance review year, Coordinators [managers of the various mine departments] will take responsibility for reviewing individual's performance.

This is where the responsibility for performance management rightfully belongs. A Coordinator is the front-line leader responsible for implementing and executing the business plan. This can only be achieved through their personal leadership of which performance management is a basic part. I will not accept poor leadership that impacts upon our teams, nor will I tolerate department leaders that accept poor leadership or performance within their departments. Poor leadership, at any level, affects us all and is simply not the standard we require at Dover Colliery.

Performance management, in this MNC Coal report, is conceptualised as a managerial right, through which to hold leaders personally responsible to ‘execute’ the business plan. Anything less than successful attainment of the business plan is conceptualised as the result of poor leadership, which the writer assumes he has the power and the resources not to tolerate (the metaphor of ‘execution’ lingers menacingly from the manager’s previous sentence). The language in use in this memo reveals a conceptualisation of performance as a function of authority, deviation from the business plan as evidence of poor leadership, and leadership as something that is ‘tolerate[d]’ or not on the basis of an *intolerant* higher authority whose judgments have both moral and political finality.

It is also interesting to note that ‘management’ was conceptualised in MNC Coal documents as something ‘done to’ others (Newton 1998:440). Consideration of the impact of performance management activity on *relationships* was noticeably absent from MNC Coal documents. This is risky, because as Townley (1993:223, emphasis in original) observes ‘management operates *through* people, rather than being a disembodied practice’.

#### **5.2.4 Discursive concept: Purposes of appraisal**

Performance appraisal is not a power neutral device. Appraisal is usually conceptualised as a managerial activity: ‘the provision of data designed to ensure that resources are used efficiently in accomplishing organizational objectives’ (Townley 1993:226). Examination of Townley’s definition raises a number of

questions. Who has the power or knowledge to construct the language of appraisal? How are data obtained? What will be done with the data thereafter? What are the resources to be measured? By what process does the measurement of data somehow dictate greater efficiency? There is also the assumption that efficiency is paramount. Appraisal embraces the assumption that information is power neutral; issues of selection bias, criterion contamination, and criterion deficiency (Shields 2007), for example, may be marginalised or ignored. Given that ‘the outcomes of appraisal may be affected by the way in which individual managers approach it’ (Newton and Findlay 1996:53), analysis of conceptual assumptions behind appraisal provides a crucial role in understanding this HRM process.

#### **5.2.4.1 ‘Squeeze the lemon’**

At Dover Colliery, appraisal was conceptualised by the Performance Management Superintendent as a managerial instrument to ‘squeeze the lemon’. The intent was to use appraisal to define performance at the upper end of the scale, and then increase surveillance of employee behaviours, so that managers could ‘squeeze the last drop’ of value out of their labour (Newton and Findlay 1996:49). Such metaphors as ‘squeezing’ and ‘lemons’ construct and reinforce managerial perspectives on power and control – and serve to objectify the workforce as ‘lemons’ with whatever (mostly negative) characteristics are suggested by comparing them with a fruit. In Australia, for example, a ‘lemon’ is commonly used as an informal term for someone or something that is considered as unsatisfactory, worthless or a ‘dud’. Squeezing also implies the use of force, and emptying-out the contents.

A key in-house critique of the performance management process after the second round of appraisals (MNC Coal Company Report, 2002, page 2), cited MNC Coal’s charter as reason enough for implementing appraisal:

To prosper and achieve growth, we must...continue to drive towards a high performance organization in which every individual accepts responsibility and is rewarded for results.

Performance management was then listed as one of nine areas identified as ways through which individuals would be held accountable for high performance outcomes, along with others such as ‘values/mission and vision’, ‘metrics and reporting’, ‘leadership and alignment’, and ‘knowledge sharing and innovation’. The corporate notion of prosperity and growth, interestingly, was at odds with the more pragmatic approach of some miners. For example, at one of the mine sites someone had written in chalk above the mine entrance: *Another day’s delay is another day’s pay*.

Coal mines have a limited lifespan. When the coal runs out, the mine closes. Historically, there has been a clash of performance objectives in the coal mining industry. While the focus of mine managers has been on improving productivity, miners have sometimes been more concerned with extending the life of the mine, and hence their income stream. Performance management was seen by HR managers at Dover, and at other collieries in the corporate cluster, as a way to change this culture of ‘more delay equals more pay’.

Managers had won a key concession on performance management from unions in the terms of the Certified Agreement [a legal employment contract between the employer and employees, negotiated between managers and the union on behalf of its members] at Dover Colliery (2001-2004) as follows:

To ensure employees receive feedback on their performance, fully understand their job goals and have access to necessary training programmes, each employee will be required to participate in the Dover Colliery Performance Management Process.

Note the tenor of the language in the above Certified Agreement. The ‘voice’ of management is privileged; the ‘voice’ of workers is not heard. Exactly how employees’ job goals would be set is not specified. For example, why should employees accept individual responsibility for goals which had been set by a managerial Other? Or why should employees be held *individually* responsible for work processes which are *team based* and sequentially interdependent? Who would



give feedback on the employee's performance? On what basis? Against which benchmarks? Set by whom? How would it be known if employees 'fully understand' their (imposed) job goals? Who would define what is 'necessary training'? Who would ensure that appropriate and timely training had occurred? How would training be linked to appraisal? How would it be determined that poor job performance was a training issue?

It comes as no surprise that company documents were written from a managerial perspective, and as such served to construct and codify power relations in the workplace. Data obtained from organizational documents on appraisal at Dover Colliery revealed as much about the concepts which these managers used to relate to their world and to their workers as it did to the workers themselves.

#### **5.2.4.2 *Incompetent workers***

A training manual prepared for mining officials who would be conducting the miners' performance reviews contained a heading: 'Why do we need performance management?' The answer reveals the approach to appraisal taken by the writer of the document, an approach which may have influenced the views of appraisal held by the users of this guide. The writer of this manual, to answer the above question, quoted Ian Gow, then CEO of Ten Network [television], as follows:

You don't do anybody any favours by tolerating failure or incompetence. All you really do is put a lot of other people's jobs at risk.

['Performance Management', Supervisors' Training Manual, MNC Coal, 2003, page 1]

Language such as that used in the MNC Coal training manual above constructs a certain view of workers. Worker 'failure' and 'incompetence' are anticipated. In a similar mindset, one mine manager instructed a meeting of senior managers:

*It's time to kick butts!* I want this system [Performance Management System] to be getting rid of 'dead heads' within six months!

Despite the explicit disavowal of the Performance Management Superintendent and others that the appraisal rating system would be used to retrench people, the mine manager's contrary statement reminds us that concepts are not easily 'governable' in the minds of others. Indeed, in spite of the best efforts of the Performance Management Superintendent, and several functional coordinators who had also accepted the notion of appraisal as a *developmental* tool, many in the senior management team made comments at review meetings which indicated that they conceptualised appraisal as a form of surveillance, the first step in a concerted program to regain greater control over the workplace behaviours of incompetent or slothful miners.

In managerial meetings to discuss and review the various rounds of appraisals at Dover Colliery, much of the discussion concerned measurement issues and the need to put more 'notes' in miners' files in order to justify ratings in subsequent rounds of the appraisal process. The nature of the linkage between measures and subsequent behaviours was rarely explored; to loosely paraphrase Jacques (1996:69), appraisal was a 'text' written *for* managers *about* miners, who were simply the objects of managerial judgment.

#### **5.2.4.3 'Break union power'**

There were, of course, variations in the ways in which the purposes of appraisal were conceptualised and articulated by different managers. One of the longest-serving HR managers framed its purpose as:

Performance management is all about breaking the collective bargaining into single bargaining units; *it's all about breaking the union power*. For the union, all performance is viewed as a collective, so you're only as good or as weak as your weakest member. As compared to saying, 'you're doing a good job' and 'you're not doing a good job,' and making a difference – and that's what performance management is all about.

This HR manager conceptualised performance appraisal as a tool in a much larger change management process; changing the culture of the enterprise from a union-dominated collective to an individualistic, performance based culture. His concept of individual appraisal was its use as a tool to reinforce this culture of individualism. The desired change from a collectivist to an individualist culture entailed a massive shift from union solidarity to individual manager-worker relationships. As such, appraisal was conceptualised as a means towards this end.

### **5.2.5 Discursive concept: Managerial prerogative**

The construction of a univocal account, such as an imposed appraisal scheme, ‘cannot be divorced from the exercise of power’ (Oswick et al. 2000:891). The senior management team at Dover Colliery claimed ‘managerial prerogative’ in order to legitimate their appraisal of underground miners. While appraisal had been used for above-ground staff, a formal performance appraisal system had never before been used on blue-collar workers at MNC Coal. The process of attaining discursive legitimacy can be understood as a struggle to keep ‘dominant meanings in place’ (Hardy and Phillips 2004:307). Indeed, the Company appealed to the Industrial Relations Commission ‘five or six times,’ according to the PM Superintendent, in order to ‘force’ the unions to cooperate with the appraisal process. The appraisal instrument thus functioned as a disciplinary tool for maintaining the dominant position of managers over workers (Motion and Doolin 2007:65).

Managerial prerogative is itself a discursive concept. It provided the rationale and context for doing ‘things’ to miners which neither party (reviewers and miners) enjoyed. To conceptualise appraisal as a legitimate managerial prerogative is a political act, since the intention was to redefine and transform the world of the worker to which it was applied. ‘Proponents of a concept will believe that it is morally correct and valid and will seek to use it to change social structures and relationships’ (Grant and Shields 2006:289). The discursive concept of performance

management was a subset of this higher-order assumption of the moral right to manage. Concepts of managerial prerogative to manage production through appraisal were justified by the claim that ‘if you can’t measure it, you can’t manage it’ [Dover rating calibration meeting, 14.03.02], even in the face of evidence of negative consequences of appraisal on miner behaviour.

Senior managers used the notion of managerial prerogative to legitimate the production and dissemination of a range of privileging texts. For example, the appraisal discourse assumed managerial competence in assessing the worth of underground work behaviours of men far removed from panoptic surveillance. The idea of managerial prerogative legitimated the definition of key tasks and task behaviours by an above-ground senior management team. The 13 key attributes of the ‘preferred/ideal worker’, as captured by the 13 categories on the performance appraisal behaviourally anchored rating scale (discussed in the next section), were written not by miners who worked at the coalface but by an above-ground human resource manager, with input from mine managers and coordinators of the various mining departments at each colliery. What is of interest here is not just what was included and what was excluded in the appraisal criteria, but also the fact that management deemed it important that they ‘own’ the project and that it be accepted by the workforce as a managerial prerogative.

#### **5.2.6 Discursive concept: Categorical thinking**

To classify is human (Bowker and Star 1999:1). We make sense of our worlds by sorting things into categories and classifications. These categories are discursively accomplished; they are not ‘real’ entities. Some of this sorting is done almost unconsciously, such as in processing colours, shapes and sizes; some of it is done explicitly as, for example, when we sort dirty dishes from clean. Some of the sorting is comprised of ad hoc classifications, such as the desktop files on our home computers. Other classifications are more formal and structured, such as in tax forms, job applications, and building specifications. Bowker and Star (1999:285) assert that ‘assigning things, people, or their actions to categories is a ubiquitous part of work in the modern, bureaucratic state’, noting that classification systems stem

from historical and political forces which are very much a part of Western bureaucracy. However, categorical thinking also generates hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion. People or things are constituted, and treated, according to the category to which they are assigned. Classifications of human beings are disciplinary technologies 'for the purpose of taming the social meaning of categories' (Townley 1994:31).

Managers at Dover Colliery in their appraisal classification system demonstrated empirically what Bowker and Star (1999:287) stated theoretically, namely 'that categories are historically situated...[and] are learned as part of membership in communities of practice.' There existed at Dover Colliery an almost universal assumption among managers, firstly, that appraising people meant *measuring* people and, secondly, that people could (and thus *should*) be measured accurately and in fine detail. Managers' language in use demonstrated widespread uncritical acceptance of the notion that miners could be neatly boxed in categories on each of the rating scales. Managerial talk indicated belief that miners' complex sets of behaviours and skills could be reduced to a measurable *number*. Mining, grounded as it is in an engineering context, relies heavily on accurate calculations. It seemed natural to engineers-turned-managers that attributes of miners should likewise fall within normal distribution curves and that miner inputs (for example, attendance), processes (such as team working, safety practices, and execution of tasks) and outputs (such as tonnes per man hour) should be measured and 'calibrated' across functional areas and mine sites. An assumption of the possibility (and hence the desirability) of perfect measurability permeated those managerial meetings which the researcher attended where appraisal was discussed. No manager seriously questioned this assumption. Much time and effort was invested in attempting to fine tune the rating instrument, for example, rather than questioning the validity of the rating criteria or their capacity to measure tacit knowledge. No manager questioned whether appraisal invalidated non-measured employee contributions.

The concept of categorising people is, of course, not unique to managers at Dover Colliery. Quantification of people emerges conceptually from a much larger historical, social and political *milieu*. Guttman (2007:1) makes the interesting

observation that we live in a world of numbers; men and women are ‘the subjects of endless measurements’. Using sports statistics from the Munich Olympic Games, where swimming races, for example, were timed to the *thousandth* of a second, he demonstrates what he calls ‘this mania for quantification’ (Guttmann 2007:2) which capitalism ‘begets’ into all human relationships and all sectors of social life (Guttmann 1978:67). This same ‘mania for quantification’ plays out in endless rounds of numerics in business, including the incessant measurement of people. *The balanced HR scorecard* is a popular practitioner version of this workforce scoring process (Becker et al. 2001; Huselid et al. 2005). Given this larger discourse of classification and quantification, it is perhaps not surprising that quantification of miners on the grounds of performance criteria emerged as one of the elements through which managing people was conceptualised at Dover Colliery.

Managerial discussions at Dover provided ‘traces’ (Ainsworth and Hall 2006:270) of another assumption regarding measurement, namely that the performance numerics for each miner could be determined endogenously. That is, miner performance was conceived of as originating within the body of the miner, without direct or apparent external cause. It was assumed that a miner’s scores could be determined on the basis of single person, single object, single membership (Bowker and Star 1999:286). Whereas, conversely, mining operations are team-based and sequentially interdependent, and productivity figures are heavily influenced by exogenous factors such as infrastructure support, machinery suitability and reliability, and geological factors in the coal seams. Assumptions from the larger discourse of an audit culture which individualised performance (McGivern and Ferlie 2007) appear to have influenced managerial concepts in the specific context at Dover.

In summary, mainstream HRM literature conceptualises appraisal as an essential tool for managing people, and originates at least in part from this ‘mania for quantification’ endemic in Western bureaucratic traditions. The numerical ratings of appraisals ‘creates the illusion of its being a technicist science’ and therefore ‘objective’ (Townley 1994:73). The ‘audit culture’ (Tyler and Wright 2004:430) of classification and measurement of people is borne out in the ‘traces’ of the ideas of

managers at Dover Colliery which were apparent in their interview comments, company reports, and discussions at company meetings on the topic of performance appraisal. However, classification is not purely mental and conceptual; it has material effects in the real world. It is to the objects ‘produced’ by the expression of these concepts that we now turn.

### **5.3 Discursive objects**

When appraisal as a discursive concept is applied to people through specific rating instruments and techniques, it becomes an *object* that constructs certain social positions and statuses – those who act and those who judge the actors – actions which are intimately tied up with the identity of performer and rater (Burr 1995:55), or ‘producer’ and ‘receiver’ (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007:719). The appraisal texts, in particular the appraisal criteria, objectified managerial concepts of the ‘ideal’ miner against whose perfect behaviour ‘real’ miners would be contrasted and constructed as deficient objects. Managerial talk about miners’ ratings and behaviours thus provided texts which objectified miners. These ‘texts’ (both spoken and written) provided evidence of the range of theories managers drew upon to achieve their ends. Their language in use allows us to examine practices which they used to constitute their employees (Townley 1999).

#### **5.3.1 Discursive objects: Miners as instruments of production**

There are few, if any, adornments in a colliery. The material objects that exist do so to support production. The austere, utilitarian facilities of the on-site administrative offices, the washrooms and the muster room, the cramped, noisy and uncomfortable underground transportation vehicles and the spartan conditions underground, are all made sense of discursively (Mumby 2004:246). These conditions reflect and maintain the managerial discourse which privileges production over all other issues.

The management focus at Dover Colliery is production focussed, ‘getting the tonnes out’ being the operative expression. An electronic screen fixed prominently in the muster room in the above-ground administration complex constantly displayed the

tonnes of coal being produced in real time on each shift. Through this electronic surveillance process managers, even though far removed from the coalface, could immediately see whenever there were stoppages underground. Since every miner passed through the muster room at the start of each shift, there was a constant reminder that the central concern of the ‘business’ was to get the tonnes out, and that their performance outcomes were under constant scrutiny.

A prime example of senior managers’ views of miners as instruments of production, akin to capital or technology, was their wish for staggered crib breaks and a ‘hot-seat changeover’ at the longwall. Staggered crib breaks meant that a longwall should be operational throughout the entire eight hours of a shift. There would be no time throughout the shift when the miners could stop and ‘have a chat’. Miners were expected to work continuously throughout the shift, with the exception of their ‘crib’ breaks, which they were to stagger so that the machines were kept running. This edict of continuous operations ran counter to the long-standing tradition of underground coal mining whereby miners gathered around their lunch boxes as a team mid-way through their shifts.

Crib is their lunch and the crib room is where they eat their lunch. I think it’s a Welsh term...They all carry their metal tins – steel lunch boxes. It protects from rats. Rather than split for crib, two go for crib while two keep the place running, on a skeleton staff, they stop, have an hour for lunch. We know they do it. We know they don’t do hot-seat changeovers... It is technically feasible to keep the machine running during crib, no doubt about it.

[Performance Management Superintendent, Interview 3]

Crib-time was part of a deeply embedded collectivist culture in the coal mines, so the researcher asked the Performance Management Superintendent how he planned to change this culture. ‘With a stick!’ he replied, with a subtle smile to indicate that he was (in part) joking.

A ‘hot-seat changeover’ means that the longwall crew should remain working at the coalface until the longwall crew on the next shift relieved them *in situ*. Thus,



theoretically, the longwall operation would never cease. In practice, however, hot-seat changeovers rarely happened. Managers used the non-occurrence of hot-seat changeovers as evidence of miner inefficiency (or worse). There were numerous reasons for the infrequency of hot-seat changeovers, not the least being the travel time between the coalface and the surface. If a longwall crew worked at the coalface until relieved by the next shift, they would then have to travel for half an hour or so to reach the drift (the means of egress) and then wait for the next train to the surface, having missed the train which brought in the relief shift. Thus, they would be up to an hour late in leaving the mine after their shifts. Managers saw this issue through a control lens; miners saw the same issue as evidence of managerial impracticality in planning rosters.

Some senior managers, however, were troubled by the implementation of a performance management system which expected more and more from an ageing workforce. One manager had the courage to raise his reservations at a management meeting:

I have serious reservations with the performance of individuals being cross-calibrated against the A grader. Individuals should be reaching their *own* potential; not reaching *someone else's* potential. Some of them are excellent workers at their level of ability. Therefore, put them where they best fit the business, given their capabilities. I liken it to a heart specialist and a brain surgeon. You don't want a brain surgeon to do heart surgery. You let him do what he is good at. We should let the blokes do what they're good at, not expect them to all be A graders where we put them. Also, I still think there's a perception that you can't have all A's, so management deliberately marks them down.

[Management-union review meeting, Dover Colliery, 15.10.02, page 2]

The Performance Management Superintendent's response to this comment was indicative of the company's concept of appraisal as a way to 'squeeze the lemon' at the level of individual workers:

I wouldn't use the brain surgeon, heart surgeon analogy here. I'd use the example of an 80 year old bricklayer who can only lay 100 bricks a day. He may be working at 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.

[Management-union review meeting, Dover Colliery, 15.10.02]

Miners were thus seen as instruments of production. If they couldn't maintain the pace, it was time to get rid of them and replace them with younger workers. The metaphor of miner as brain surgeon is an entirely different concept than the metaphor of miner as an 80 year old bricklayer. The metaphor draws on a wider occupational status hierarchy (Fine 1996; Fine 2006) to construct the 'reality' of what constitutes a miner in the eyes of managers, and thus what type of respect should be afforded to the brain surgeon or bricklayer, and what sort of performance would be expected from the 'surgeon' or the 'bricklayer' miner.

### **5.3.2 Discursive objects: Appraisal as a technology of mistrust**

Appraisal at Dover was based on the assumption that miners who were quite autonomous while underground would not use their autonomy responsibly (Trist and Bamforth 1951). Indeed, appraisal can be seen as a technology of mistrust (Tyler and Wright 2004). Miners were occasionally referred to in various meetings and informal conversations by some - but by no means all - managerial staff as 'lazy bastards', 'slack arses' and 'dead heads'. The use of such terms in justifying the need for appraisal revealed traces of the 'virtuous us versus diabolical them' syndrome (Kashima and Foddy 2002:240) which was typical of the antagonistic relations in the coal mining industry in Australia throughout much of the twentieth century. Such language constructed miners as workers whose labour practices were unacceptable and thus needed to be controlled through external surveillance and sanctions.

At a three hour meeting of senior management and union officials to review the impact of the second round of appraisals on 'the business', the mine manager made

the interesting observation that some of the miners felt that they had been ‘branded’ by the rating system. One of the coordinators responded:

Branding has always been there. We used to say someone was a lazy bugger, now we say he’s a D. I guess we’ve just formalized it.

[Management/union meeting, Dover Colliery, 15.10.02]

### 5.3.3 Discursive objects: The rating instrument

The performance appraisal yardstick for miners comprised 13 items, each set on a behaviourally anchored rating scale (BARS). Figure 5.1 below depicts the 13 criteria on the rating instrument used by MNC Coal for all underground coal miners at their various mine sites.

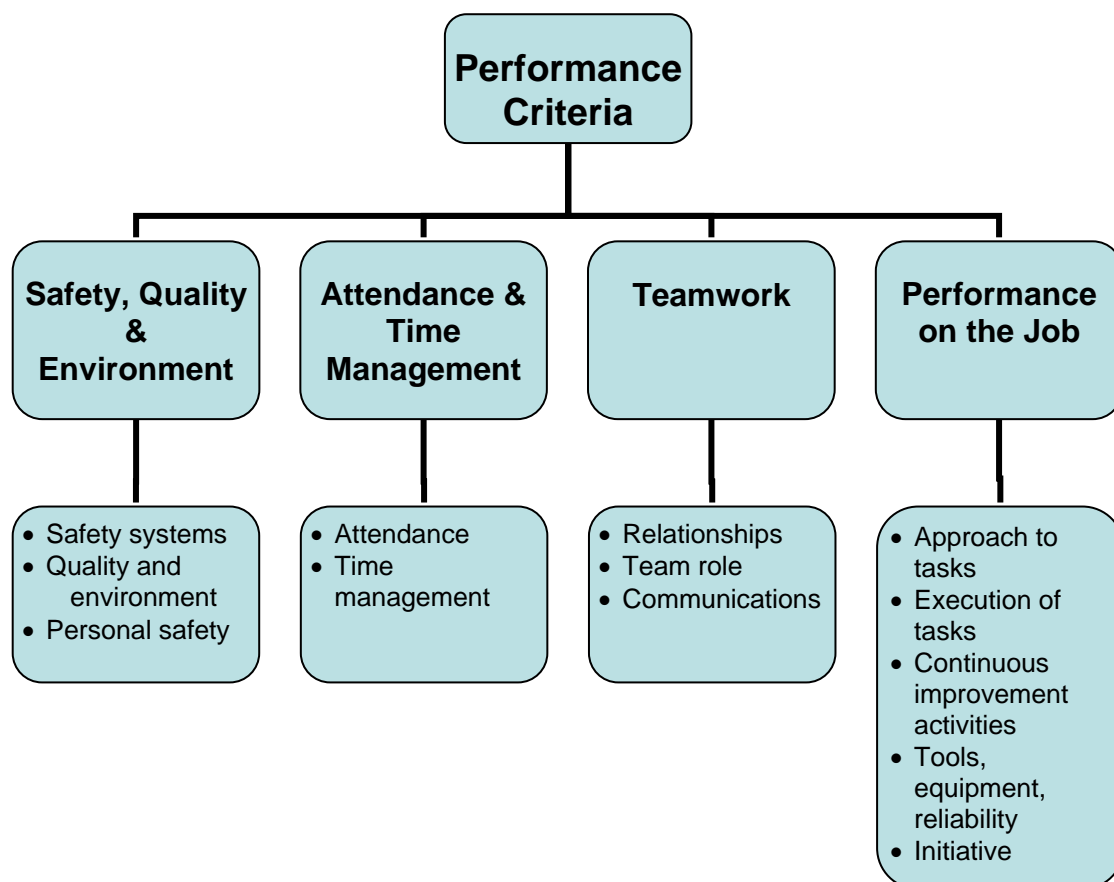


Figure 5.1 Performance Criteria at Dover Colliery

The descriptors for each category of behaviour had been crafted by the Performance Management Superintendent, with assistance from functional coordinators, and after much disputation with union leaders and a number of appeals to the Industrial Relations Commission over the wording of the category descriptors. These descriptors privileged the ideas of managers over those of miners who disputed what constituted 'ideal' behaviour. As Bowker and Star (1999:287) observe, categories are not only historically situated artefacts; they are also politically driven by those in privileged positions. Miners argued that what managers conceptualised as key performance missed the essential (tacit) knowledge possessed by each miner – the ability to 'know' when something is not 'right' underground, long before a crisis eventuates. For example, the number of roof bolts per metre to support the development panel roof must be judged by the grain of the coal, the hardness of the coal, and other factors learned over years of experience. The more roof bolts needed, the slower is the forward progress. But such situational variables were allegedly not factored into the performance measures.

A ratings regime which required constantly improving outputs on each of the 13 criteria every year made sense to managers engaged in 'squeezing the lemon'. In order to make meaningful comparisons with other workers, appraisal was against a conceptual norm, not the reality of each specific job context. Such idealised concepts of human performance risk missing unique contributions of creatively thinking adults. The discursive concept (ideal performance) constructs the measures against which the person-object's behaviour is appraised; a concept whose measures are transformed in this way is in danger of slipping into circularity (Potter and Wetherell 1987:11).

#### **5.3.4 Discursive objects: Miners as statistics**

The ascendance of statistics in the nineteenth century was an integral aspect of the creation of new categories of classification (Ainsworth and Hardy 2004:237). Statistics provide new avenues for the classification not only of objects but also of people. Mine sites with their sophisticated engineering capabilities are prime sites for statistics and classification schemes. The operation of a longwall and the

associated development panels are engineering masterpieces. Tunnelling precision using laser technology is impressive. Precise calculations and scrutiny of numbers was a fundamental part of the engineering culture at this underground coal mine. Metrics were endemic: gas measurement, tonnes produced per shift, metres cut per shift, cost per tonne (free on board ship at the coal terminal), run of mine tonnes per employee, development metres per employee, lost time due to injury, all frequency injury rate, absenteeism rates, and so on.

When performance management was introduced into this mining culture, where ‘*measurement*’ was already being interpreted as the epitome of good ‘*management*’, much of the appraisal process focussed on measurement of miner attributes. Rating and ‘calibration’ of ratings between miners became the *sine qua non* of performance management to managers. HR managers, under-managers, functional coordinators and deputies spent many hours in weekend retreats and other venues arguing over the distributions of scores among functional areas, and also in comparisons of scores between the various collieries in the corporate structure. At the meetings I attended, so much time was spent debating the validity and reliability of the ratings and the consistency of ratings between raters that virtually no time was spent discussing exactly *how* ratings would improve performance. The discursive concept was that if miners could be measured, they could be managed; if they weren’t measured, they would thus be unmanaged (and possibly unmanageable). The concept of measurement thus led to categorisation of miners as objects without the means or motivation to manage themselves. Privileging the concept of measurement, then, functioned as a silencing device (Gergen 1999:92) suppressing exploration of other forms of performance improvement, such as enhancing the ways in which miners as interdependent members of teams had organised themselves for decades.

As evidence of the numerical focus of the appraisal process, it was interesting to read the definitions of *scoring* and *rating* in a performance review training manual prepared for distribution in 2003. In this manual:

**Scoring** refers to the numerical score given to each one of the 13 performance elements. It is a numerical score of between 1 and 5. *It cannot*

*be fractional* [emphasis added]. A score of ‘3’ indicates an employee that meets the standard of that particular element. A score of ‘1’ indicates an employee with a significant gap between their performance and the expected standard. A score of ‘5’ indicates an employee who has significantly and consistently exceeded expectations in that particular element. [‘Performance Management’, Supervisors’ Training Manual, MNC Coal, 2003, p.12]

One of the HR managers explained that a score of ‘3’ represented that the miner meets our ‘reasonable expectation’ – not that the miner was ‘average’. In practice, there was much grief among raters over the disallowance of fractional scores. Raters had difficulty making the scores ‘stick’ when they tried to justify the numbers to miners. After much wrangling and protesting, marks and arrows were notated above or below the scores to indicate directionality of the score even though such notations were officially disapproved – for example, a ‘3’ moving towards a ‘4’.

The next definition following ‘scoring’ in the training manual provides an interesting paradox, reflecting the desire to determine mathematically ‘non-numerical’ values:

**Rating** refers to a *non-numerical value* used to summarise an individual’s overall performance. This value is *determined mathematically* from the sum of the scores.

[‘Performance Management’, Supervisors’ Training Manual, MNC Coal, 2003, p.12, emphasis added]

I attended a company meeting of the senior management team where the first two rounds of the performance management process were critiqued and reviewed. It was ironic that the meeting began with a call by the Performance Management Superintendent for ‘a reduced emphasis on scores and an increased emphasis on the improvement message’ (MNC Coal Company Report, 8.10.2002). Thereafter, much of the meeting was spent comparing rating scores between the various collieries, and trend analysis based on figures from the first two rounds of appraisals. Table 5.2 below summarizes one chart discussed in this meeting:

**Table 5.2 Distribution of overall ratings scores for miners: Rounds 1 & 2**

	A's %	B's %	C's %	D's %	E's %
<b>Round 1</b> (527 employees)	9.7	44.1	39.4	6.8	0
<b>Round 2</b> (565 employees)	13.6	50.8	32.9	2.7	0

The managers discussed at some length the increase from 53.8 percent (Round 1) to 64.4 percent (Round 2) of those miners assessed to be in the A and B ratings overall. Over the two rounds of reviews, there was a roughly 20 percent increase in the number of miners who were rated in the top two categories. However, the mine's performance, as measured by run-of-mine tonnes per employee, development metres per employee, cost per tonne (free-on-board), absenteeism, and safety performance (all injury frequency rate), did not improve in proportion to the improvement in the scores and ratings. Rating drift became a contested domain over time; employees expected rising scores as they conformed to management's measurement criteria while managers expected overall ratings to be tied to mine statistics. In Round Three, senior managers put considerable pressure on raters to claw back the statistical gains in overall scores from the previous rounds by 'marking down' each miner's score. In effect, the communication to miners was that their behaviour had not changed for the worse, but the value of that behaviour to the company had diminished. Such practices discursively constructed miners as statistical objects in the numerical board game of performance management.

There was a perception among a large number of assessors that they were being pressured by senior managers to deliver a bell-shaped distribution of ratings. Such a curve assumes a normal distribution of talent, which is itself a social construction, not an objective measurement (Grint 1995:80). Some felt that they were trapped between a system that 'set the bar too low' and therefore made it easy to score well,

and pressure to artificially limit the number of A's and B's. Rating had become the dominant meaning and purpose of appraisal for most managers. Even when supervisors and assessors saw little or no improvement in performance indicators, in spite of the huge investment of time and emotional labour in the process, management persisted with the process.

It is somewhat ironic that so much time and effort was put into getting the numbers right, with respect to rating, scoring and calibration across functions, between mine sites, and by comparison with the scores in previous rounds of reviews, that the managers 'ran out of time' to implement any of the training needs established during the appraisal processes [personal communication with the Performance Management Superintendent]. Getting the statistics right had become an object in its own right; enhancement of the skill levels of miners and enrichment of the manager-miner relationship had become buried in the hugely time-consuming overburden of ratings and calibrations. Being overly focused on the numbers had practical ramifications in the appraisal process. The Performance Management Superintendent made the following observation about the consequences of being numbers driven:

A great difficulty is that most of our managers are technical process managers, not people managers. They just don't have the skills to deal with people as coaches. In the performance reviews, *we end up negotiating numbers, not behaviours.*

[Interview 23, Performance Management Superintendent]

It is interesting to note in the context of numerical ratings Gergen's (1999:56) observation that 'the use of numbers suggests precision, astute attention to detail, and clear differences upon which to base one's count', whereas numbers can actually be used as a 'rhetorical device' to accord high status to the user's view of the world while silencing other voices. Converting observations to numerals may appear to be more precise than other forms of narrative, and may appear to 'represent the most neutral language of description' (Gergen 1999:92), yet in the context of people, numerical measurements are a social construction rather than objective 'reality'. Statistical language is an expert language; those without this



expertise are left voiceless. Performance scores can thus be employed by managers as a legitimating mechanism and a silencing device while giving the appearance of neutrality.

## 5.4 Conclusion

This chapter has offered some insights into how the analytical framework of discursive concepts and discursive objects can be mobilized to examine the ideas, theories-in-use and behaviours of managers in their administration of performance appraisal in an underground coal mine. Managers at Dover Colliery were probably unaware of their assumptions about appraisal, their approaches merely reflecting the dominant discourse of traditional HRM philosophy with its managerialist agendas. Miners were thus constructed as means to organizational ends, objects of measurement and objects to be squeezed like lemons in order to extract the last drop of available labour in the pursuit of competitive advantage. The language of appraisal at Dover Colliery confirmed Townley's (1993:227) judgment that appraisal functions as the rhetoric of bureaucratic control: 'highly expressive language that constructs and legitimizes managerial prerogatives in terms of a rational, goal directed image of organizational effectiveness'.

This chapter has also drawn attention to the ways that concepts constitute objects. From this perspective, it is suggested that HRM be reconceptualised '*from* a system of structures and practices leading to effective people processing through techniques *to* a set of meanings and symbols that organizational members draw on in producing a particular view of the organization as well as themselves' (Alvesson and Kärreman 2007:721).

However, while appraisal was used as an instrument of control, the process of control was not an easy one. A managerial report critiquing performance management at MNC Coal concluded, among other things, that:

The process was still seen as a time-consuming and a confrontational burden by assessors and as such (in the main) was seen as a compliance issue. There were

very few follow-up reviews (except for Dover Colliery) and little effort to improve employees' performance.

[Performance Management: Critique and Proposal, MNC Coal, 08.10.2002]

The discourse of performance management by means of being rated and found wanting was not appreciated by miners, who in many cases refused to be 'constructed' according to this magisterial decree. How miners resisted this identity regulation, through the subject positions they constructed in response to appraisal, will be the focus of the next three chapters.

## **Chapter 6 Coal miners as discursive subjects: Occupational identity elements and identity breaches**

*[W]orkers are self-conscious beings who are (more or less) concerned about the ways in which their working practices confirm, enhance, or impugn, their sense of self-identity.*

O'Doherty and Willmott (2001:115)

### **6.1 Introduction: Discursive subjects**

The previous chapter examined how mine managers' imposed *their* version of a performance rating and review system on coal miners at Dover Colliery. This chapter examines the subject-positioning responses of coalface miners to the appraisal system. Miners were asked to explain what they thought about the appraisal system. In response, they told *their* stories of the effects of appraisal on their working lives. In off-site interviews, sometimes they went further and talked about the flow-on effects on their personal and family lives. Miners' discursive responses both articulated and constructed their 'reality' concerning the ways in which performance appraisals affected their views of themselves. Appraisal also challenged their views of their jobs, their workmates, and their relationships with managers. This chapter presents miners' 'voices' in order to 'produce a genuinely *employee-centred* understanding of worker identity' (Grant and Shields 2006:301, emphasis in original) in the context of performance rating and review.

This chapter begins by exploring some of the main elements of the miners' occupational identity at Dover Colliery that developed in the context of team-based work in dangerous and unpleasant working conditions. The chapter then explains how ratings imposed by above-ground managers breached that identity. In line with the discursive/narrative perspective, emphasis is placed on miners' accounts *per se*. Listening to the voices of workers is important because 'identities are expressed through language' (Larson and Pepper 2003:529). Various identity breaches emerged as miners responded to appraisals. They drew upon a number of discursive

strategies to contest the legitimacy of the appraisal process. Resistance through the production of ‘counter-texts’ (Hardy and Phillips 2004:307) was evidence of the struggle over who had the right to speak on matters of performance in the organization, and of their struggle to maintain an identity consistent with their notion of what it meant to be a coal miner. Table 6.1 summarizes how miners positioned themselves as subjects, and also the main identity breaches identified at Dover Colliery.

**Table 6.1 Miners’ subject positioning: Occupational identity elements and identity breaches**

Occupational identity element	Occupational identity breach
Coping with the material conditions of mining (dirty, difficult and dangerous)	Being unjustly blamed for productivity issues
Mates united – solidarity of the ‘crews’	Mates divided – rating pitting mate against mate
Professional pride	Wounded pride
Avowed judgment rights	(Mis)appropriated judgment rights
Negative reference points – managerial ‘others’	Imposed reference points – ‘splitting’ the subjects

## **6.2 Miners’ identities: Pre-existing occupational identity elements**

The unitarist approach extant in much of the prescriptive mainstream human resource management literature assumes that performance appraisal occurs in a social vacuum. Appraisal, as a discourse and a practice, takes place in site-specific workplace contexts. Coal miners at Dover were not ‘blank slates’ awaiting managerially derived identity inscription. Rather, a number of *pre-existing*

occupational identity ‘elements’ (Alvesson and Willmott 2002:624; Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003:1169) featured regularly in the way miners talked about themselves and their jobs. Alvesson and Willmott (2002:639) explain that their term ‘element’ is ‘not deployed...to indicate a fixed psychological trait, but to convey the presence of qualities that link together life history and everyday experiences in distinctive complexes of feeling, valuing, thinking and fantasizing’. These elements stand in dynamic relationships to each other as they are mobilized in on-going identity work.

The subsections below examine the main ways in which miners at Dover, in the course of talking about their work, created and maintained their occupational identities. The following occupational identity elements emerged through themes which were both recurrent and salient in miners’ talk about what it meant (to them) to work on the coalface at Dover Colliery.

### **6.2.1 Identity element 1: Coping with the material conditions of mining**

As the opening quote by George Orwell ([1937] 1959) at the beginning of this thesis implies, coal miners inhabit a different world from other people. They work in an environment far removed from that of their corporate superiors. While captains of industry assemble in sun-lit high-rise towers in attractive locations, coal miners labour in dust, darkness, grime and slush buried in the bowels of the earth. Mine sites are not plush places. The muster room where the Dover miners assemble at the start of each shift, with its bare concrete floor, concrete walls, wooden benches, dim lights, and rows of helmets, headlamps, heavy batteries and self-rescuers (emergency breathing apparatus), is hardly a cheery place at six in the morning as the day shift arrives. It appears to be even bleaker late in the evening in the dead of winter when the night shift assembles. The wail of a siren, five minutes before the departure of the train underground, is an unsettling noise to the novice [fieldnotes, 15.10.03]. A siren is impersonal and is itself a discourse of hierarchical control. Dirty, difficult, dangerous working conditions provide the crucible in which miners’ occupational identities are forged (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999; Kreiner et al. 2006). When asked about their jobs, miners invariably made reference to the location of

their work; how miners shared understandings of ‘place’ informed their identity accounts (Brown and Humphreys 2006:231). More specifically, their identity was inextricably linked to their labour in perilous contexts.

It’s not the most user-friendly environment. It is honestly the sort of place where you’re only there because you have to be. You put in extra effort *because you just want to see daylight again*.

[Interview 5, longwall miner 1]

In spite of the dangerous conditions, miners positioned themselves as a collective of experts who ‘just knew’ if something was ‘out of whack’. They often talked about the implicit trust between mates for safety and survival.

I’m working in a very dangerous position. But because you’ve worked there so long and you know the job - I’ve worked there 26 years - only one near miss, so I can’t complain. Everyone looks out for everybody. Everybody knows what’s going on. If something is out of whack *you know*, because I’m there every day, and *that’s my job*.

[Interview 47, longwall miner 14]

In interviews, miners often made reference to the dangers of gas explosions, underground fires and cave-ins. They frequently mentioned lists of injuries which they had accumulated over the years; some also made reference to breathing problems and hearing loss occasioned by working with noisy, heavy machinery in confined dusty, soggy spaces over protracted periods. They positioned themselves as men who risked their lives on a daily basis for the company, and believed that their physical exertion and courage should be both acknowledged and respected by managers.

Let me tell you, mate, I’ve had some horrific injuries... [Friends outside the mine] say, ‘Ah, you’re a wealthy coal miner!’ They see the money side...But what they should look at is this: I’m not working in the park. I’ve got a bomb behind me [methane gas]. I’ve got coal in front of me that could fall on me.

The roof could fall on me. I could get hit by a machine. Everything's moving. I could get squashed by a roof support. I'm working in a very dangerous position.

[Interview 47, longwall miner 14]

Occupational identity is formed *in situ* (Fine 1996; Fine 2006). The conditions underground are arduous. Shared discomfort combined with risk, common to underground miners, becomes part of the discursive repertoire of miner identity. Miners positioned themselves in their descriptions of their working conditions as suffering, discomforted, sometimes injured (but uncomplaining) workers. Representing their work in terms of difficult, uncomfortable and hazardous working conditions, divorced from the outside world, constructed a powerful identity of the miner as a hero worthy of praise, not criticism:

People get irritated just by travelling in [to the coalface]. So it [attitude towards the difficulties of the job] starts here at the drift [inclined access from the surface to the coal seam]. The train ride is terrible, and you've got to walk around and work in mud and slop in your boots. It's easy to get the shits. It's hard walking around in wet gear. And a lot of blokes carry a lot of injuries just for the sake of the job...injuries are not reported, because if they are, they are held against you.

[Interview 8, longwall miner 3]

Spatial separation from others deep underground provides a material context for miners' sense of who they are and what they do. Dirty, difficult, hazardous conditions 'are made sense of discursively' (Newton 1998:422; Mumby 2004:246). Or, as Shields puts it, 'discourse makes materiality meaningful' (2007:13). Those who share dirty, dangerous physical conditions mutually reinforce each other's positive identities (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999). Moreover, strong occupational identities are more likely to be realized under conditions of 'collective socialization, high task interdependencies and physical proximity between individuals, clear physical boundaries and isolation, and group longevity' (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999:5). Such conditions aptly describe Dover Colliery. The centrality of 'dirt' to

occupational identity (that is, the proportion of work that is dirty) and the intensity of the dirtiness (the extent to which the worker is directly involved in the 'dirt') confirm that miners are indeed 'tainted' with dirty work (Kreiner et al. 2006:621). The very location and situation, thus, become 'texts' in the construction of miner identity. One miner described his daily experience in one section of the mine as follows:

I was almost up to my crutch in sludge every day. The splash, the mud was continually caked on. You couldn't even dream about wearing the same clothes the second day. You just couldn't do it. Each day you had to put on a clean pair of clothes. And not only that, because of the hot, humid conditions you just stunk. Your own body stench was phenomenal. You couldn't stand your own smell at the end of it because you were working hard...The undermanager would say, 'Did you get one or two metres today?' [A sarcastic question because the expected daily norm was 6 metres]. And some days, you'd only get 3 metres and to have got 3 metres of coal was an absolute dogfight because you're losing the roof – you had to support the roof without hurting anybody, you had to keep the miner [machine] out of the water, so you were forever monitoring the pumping and the gas because of where we were [in a difficult stretch of the mine].

[Interview 57, longwall miner 18]

Miners' talk regarding what made the material conditions of the job so onerous was both a shared coping mechanism and a source of solidarity among one's peers. One miner put it tersely: 'Sucking dust and fumes - it's not fun' (fieldnotes). Yet these difficult and dangerous conditions were potent identity elements at Dover Colliery.

### **6.2.2 Identity element 2: Mates united – solidarity of the 'crew'**

Most miners at Dover Colliery had worked in the industry for the majority (if not all) of their working lives. Stories of their lives in the collieries were deeply embedded with accounts of shared work experiences with their workmates. Such 'shared repertoires' of 'mutual engagement' in a 'joint enterprise' are the basis of



what Wenger (1998:72-73, 82) calls a community of practice. Gaining and maintaining membership in such groups is a complex process (Bowker and Star 1999:294). While people live along a trajectory (or continuum) of membership, in the case of Dover miners they had long ago moved from what Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to as legitimate peripheral participation to full membership in the community of practice. Indeed, collective experiences of shared dangers and disasters in the pit cemented a keen sense of dependence on, and appreciation for, each other underground. In this 'subculture of danger' (Trice 1993:31), one of the first lessons new miners learn is to protect other miners underground – to 'watch each other's backs'. One of the development panel miners who drill the tunnels for the longwall machines spoke about mateship in the context of a gas explosion in the late 1970s in which several Dover Colliery miners were killed.

Having come into the industry, fresh twenty-two 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.

When I first started working here, we were working under unsupported roofs...sometimes you'd be putting a roof bolt up so you could put the strap up...while you're drilling a hole there, a chunk of rock could fall - or the whole lot could fall down! You always had an offsider. When I first started here, there was many a time when that bloke grabbed me and physically dragged me out of the way, and I've done it myself with other blokes.

[Interview 34, panel development miner 3]

Stories of such shared experiences, especially those involving danger and rescue, frequently led miners to nostalgic talk of camaraderie, mateship, and mutual respect among their 'crew'. Nostalgic talk provided a discursive resource to reconfirm a

shared occupational identity (Gabriel 2000; Strangleman 2002) in the face of managerial interventions:

Everybody has been working here for donkey's ages so they know what jobs their mates are good at, they know their tolerances, they know their 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'd 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 [performance appraisal] mechanism. I don't think you'd ever get rid of that. That camaraderie will never go away. You are relying on everybody to watch your back to make sure the roof doesn't come down on top of you. ... You've still got that camaraderie and everybody is still looking after their mates.

[Interview 34, panel development miner 3]

Mutual engagement also extends to the material practices of the work itself. Coal miners undergo a remarkable transformation as they arrive for work. They arrive as individuals, but by the time they assemble in the muster room, fully kitted in their regulation overalls, helmets, headlamps, battery packs, safety glasses, ear muffs, emergency breathing apparatus, boots, and hip-belt laden with tools of the trade, ready for the next nine hours underground, they disappear through the pit portal as crucial members of a 'crew'. At Dover Colliery, when the siren sounds, crews board the train, each crew to its habitually chosen carriage, and the train rumbles down the steep decline into the mine. During the twenty-minute descent, 'crews' sit together in cramped little compartments. Some 'crews' habitually play cards on the top of a lunch box, some sleep, while others discuss work plans for the shift ahead [fieldnotes, 13.12.01]. Others teasingly swap news of the victories or defeats of their favourite sports teams. These habitual activities are all part of the daily ritual to move from 'I' to 'we' (Terrion and Ashforth 2002) in preparation for the shift ahead. This daily routine is but the beginning of a shared underground journey. The strongest imperative once in

the tunnels ‘downstairs’ is the need to ‘watch each other’s backs’. In inky blackness, amid the roar of heavy machinery, and the fall of walls of coal, each individual has a ‘buddy’ whose job it is to look out for his safety. Mutual dependence in the midst of such immediate personal danger cements resilient bonds of mateship.

Mining work also requires high levels of cooperation. Mutual engagement in this context literally means working in unison. ABM tunnelling machines have dual controls; it is not possible to advance the ABM, for example, unless two individuals simultaneously push buttons on both sides of the machine, thus ensuring that both miners are safely out of harm’s way as the ABM advances. Likewise, on the longwall, entire ‘crews’ of miners must act in unison in order for the longwall machine to advance efficiently. ‘Crew’ members become dependent on the contributions of each individual member, and the member’s personal self-identity becomes subordinated to the collective identity of the crew. Sequentially interdependent, team-based work becomes a source of identification with others on whom one is reliant for outcomes. Like mutual dependence in situations of danger, task interdependence likewise solidifies bonds of mateship, forging the solid attachments from which mateship talk develops as a key identity element.

The level of closeness involved in mining mateship is demonstrated by a practice unique to the coal mining industry:

At the end of their shift, miners emerge covered in black coal grime from head to foot, with coal dust not only in the fibre of their clothes but in their hair, their eyes, their ears, their nose, their mouth and in the pores of their skin. In the washroom, there is a buddy system whereby *miners scrub the coal dust off their mate’s back* in the showers.

[Interview 49, miner’s wife 2, emphasis added]

Miners whose social lives were fractured by the demands of shift work tended to develop deep and lasting friendships on the job, and they maintained those friendships in social activities after working hours. Historically, crews drank in the same pubs together (while managers drank in a different set of pubs to avoid

drinking with their subordinates). Miners frequently invited their workmates to weekend barbeques. A sense of kinship was also strengthened among miners by the fact that many of their extended family also worked in the pits – brothers, fathers, uncles, cousins. To summarise this section, at Dover Colliery group categorisation and affiliation, supported by a buddy system underground and in the washroom, developed over time into strong bonds of mateship, talk of which was a powerful identity element.

### **6.2.3 Identity element 3: Professional pride**

Miners at Dover Colliery positioned themselves as capable, competent professionals who had no need for above-ground supervisors telling them how to do their jobs. Their avowal of specialist knowledge and skills was a key resource for the construction of identity, since ‘knowledge defines the knower: what one is capable of doing (or expected to be able to do) frames who one ‘is’’ (Alvesson and Willmott 2002:630). For example, operation of a longwall some 255 metres long, comprising a series of interconnected hydraulic rams or ‘chocks’ that support the roof as coal is cut from the ‘face’ by the lateral movement of a set of rotating blades called the ‘shearer’, requires the expertise of up to seven miners acting in concentrated union. Panel development miners likewise require specialist knowledge of their machines and navigation skills to develop the tunnels for longwall operations which in some cases are several kilometres underground. They also develop tacit knowledge regarding the nature of coal seams; they pride themselves on their ‘insider knowledge’ (Hodson 2001:156). An ABM miner described one aspect of his expertise as follows:

The only time you really get into trouble is when you are working across the grain. When you are doing the developments [tunnels], 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 the 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 34, panel development miner 3]

Given miners' specialist knowledge of their jobs, and their geographical separation from above-ground management, control of the work process has historically been a contested but robust source of identity construction for coal miners. Miners attached considerable significance to their ability to 'get the tonnes out' without interference from managers. This theme of 'responsible autonomy' is certainly not new: Trist and Bamforth (1951:6) noted this feature of mine work more than half a century ago. While mining methods have changed substantially over the years, miners' pride in their capacity to manage their own work remains a central feature or 'element' of their occupational identity.

The [coal miner] doesn't need to be managed. All [he] needs to be told is, 'Go here, go there' and he'll just do whatever is expected of him...individuals work in smaller groups where they run their own race.

[Interview 10, longwall miner 4]

A recurrent feature of the identities miners avowed during interviews was that they 'worked hard' and that they did 'have a go'. Their confidence and pride in their own abilities as professional miners is exemplified by the following comment from a miner who had worked on the longwall for over 14 years:

I've always said this to management, time and time again. 'You give us the means and we'll get the tonnes out. We will do it. We've always done it.' And if they say, 'We need X amount of metres in this amount of time,' we say, 'You make the machines available and give us the men to do it and we'll do it!' And we do it! It's only when things aren't available to us that we can't. It's the most frustrating place on earth to work!

[Interview 17, panel development miner 2]

Another longwall miner reinforced this theme of miner identity forged through pride in competency, common purpose and responsible autonomy:

To get me motivated, just give me some decent machinery, give us a plan of where we're going...if they say, this is where we're going, [then] give us the machinery and let us go! We don't need all that much management! You keep the infrastructure up to us. Keep the materials up to us. *We mine! That's what we do!*

We don't need all this management [that] they've got. We don't. What has changed? You cut the coal out. You support the roof. You need infrastructure behind you. You need chemicals. You need rib bolts. As long as they are supplied to us, what is so hard [why can't management keep the supplies up]? [I say to management] 'Fuck off and leave me alone!'

[Interview 45, longwall miner 10]

Longwall and panel development miners work skilfully with heavy machinery in confined spaces. Miners spoke in glowing terms of the 'sheer joy' of getting a longwall 'humming'. Others spoke of the 'buzz' they got from driving heavy machinery. 'It's a blokey thing', they explained. For some miners, technical proficiency was thus a source of considerable pride – and identity.

#### **6.2.4 Identity element 4: Avowed judgment rights**

Linked with the preceding identity 'elements' is the notion of who had the right to assess 'good' or 'bad' performance underground. At Dover Colliery, there was an entrenched, informal process of mutual support between miners – and mutual assessment of performance. Miners made allowances for each others' 'off days', when miners from time to time brought personal crises (such as concerns over the sickness of a family member, financial worries, or even a hangover) into the workplace. A related element of miner identity was their contention that it was the responsibility of mates rather than managers to manage performance issues underground.

The group of blokes I normally work with, we are a good close-knit team. We all fight. We all get on. We all look after each other's backs. Sometimes

when they are doing it hard, you give them a hand. You don't have to be asked. He usually yells first, and then you stand there and look around just to stir them up a bit. But we work well together. We can achieve some good metres. We can achieve some good outcomes if they [management] leave us alone!

[Interview 45, longwall miner 10]

Miners explained that, if a work mate was not pulling his weight on the team, they (rather than managers) were the ones who should (and would) tell him to 'lift his game'.

You're in a crew. You know if someone is not 'having a go' and usually we talk to them [and say], 'Lift your game.' You know yourself; some days you just don't feel like doing anything...you just don't want to be there. If you're having a go, you don't need some guy from the surface.

[Interview 5, longwall miner 1]

The deputy of a longwall crew described the informal management process that exists underground among the crews. His language is a reminder of the masculine context of underground identity work:

The deadwood is all gone. Do you think that if I put a bloke in a crew and he just sat on his arse and did nothing, how do you think the other five would react? They won't work with him. They would piss him off. I'll tell you that right now.

*[PM] How would they do it?*

Well, I've had Luke pull blokes aside and say, 'This is how it is, mate. Fucking when you see us bloody stop the bloody machine to put a sheet of mesh off, get off the fucking car and get your arse up there and fucking give us a hand! Or I'll fucking kick your arse right out of here!'

[Interview 57, longwall deputy 3]

Miners positioned themselves as *de facto* managers of their own supplies, the inference being that they could not rely on appointed managers to have the essential materials available. Miners argued that if managers could not provide the requisite supplies in time, then they had no right to sit in judgment of miners' work outcomes which had been adversely affected by their managerial incompetence.

...part of the reason why the mine still survives [is] because a lot of the [material supplies] sort of stuff is left to the guys on the ground. They're given some control over what they do. They know the job best. They know what has to come in. So I think if it was all left up to the people who are on the surface, we'd fall in a heap!

[Interview 36, longwall miner 8]

Miners claimed that managers did not have the right to tell them how to do their jobs, because miners possessed vast underground experience compared to managers. This distancing of miners from managers at Dover was one of the reasons for the development of an informal hierarchy of control underground. A common theme of the miners' occupational identity thus was a dismissal of managerial judgment rights based on managers' lack of expertise. When the discourses of managers are discordant with the collective identities of workers, distancing from the discourses of management is one of the strategies employed by these workers (Snow and Anderson 1987). One set of discursive resources that miners at Dover used to distance themselves from managers was the superiority of their knowledge of underground processes to those of inexperienced managers:

I'm very critical of bosses. Superiors! So-called 'superiors'! People who have a quarter – or a third – or less of my experience are trying to tell me something I know will work or won't work. I don't mind being told to do something. *I don't like being told how to do something.* After all the years I've been doing it. I was doing it before they even started school, half of them! And I'm still alive, and I've still got all my fingers!

[Interview 44, longwall miner 9]



### **6.2.5 Identity element 5: Negative reference points – managerial ‘others’**

Miners’ identity talk of toil in a world apart, fraught with discomfort and danger, easily segued into a criticism of ‘management’ (their term), who didn’t seem to understand the nature of their work. Identity is discursively constructed not only by what we have in common but also by what separates us (Snow and Anderson 1987; Kärreman and Alvesson 2001). Identity – for an individual or for a group – rests on a tension between self and other. ‘Othering’ is commonly used in all forms of identity work (Ainsworth and Hardy 2004; Hardy et al. 2005). De Vries and Balazs (1997:33) refer to the defence mechanism of ‘splitting’ (dividing objects into ‘good’ and ‘bad’) through which an us-versus-them mentality is created. People thus use splitting as a form of identity maintenance. The self/other dichotomy is played out in coal mines most explicitly by the sharp divide between those ‘upstairs’ and those ‘downstairs’. Miners who worked the coalface positioned themselves as the ‘backbone’ of the pit. They found ways to poke fun at those ‘up there’ (managers), as a way of reinforcing their own identities through comparison with odious managerial others. Miners typically made comments about managers such as:

You see them [managers] every now and again. You see them walking around, apparently not doing much at all. That is the perception. There is a perception that they just sort of walk around on top. We are the ones getting the coal out. We’re the ones underground. We are the backbone of the pit. Those guys up there just push buttons.

[Interview 5, longwall miner 1]

There was a common view among miners that the mine was top heavy; there were too many managers and too few miners. Miners frequently mused about what managers could possibly be doing all day. They defined themselves as hard workers, in contradistinction to managers who, in their view, were out of touch with the harsh realities of underground mining.

The guys up top don’t get dirty and they’ve got their own little tea rooms...This hostility starts with just watching these guys walking around

the yard [the above ground marshalling area] and having their cup of coffee. There is this appearance that they don't do a real lot. So if anything happens underground that stops the mining, it is blamed on the miner. The manager gets all the guys [miners] out, he doesn't get the [above ground] staff out. He gets all the workers and sits them down and says 'Listen here, we need 20 metres a shift, you know! Man, you're going to get your arse kicked, bla, bla, bla.' How about telling the managers to get the gear to us? I mean, we are the ones always copping the kick and these guys don't realize that. We know we can get the tonnes out. We have done it before.

[Interview 5, longwall miner 1]

Another longwall miner, with considerable emphasis and annoyance, demonstrated this identity element through negative reference points in his comment about supervision at the pit:

Some of the supervision we have is downright *insulting*. Because it is. For example, we have an under-manager who comes in and leads you by the hand to do a job you've been doing for the last thirty years. He's got no mechanical expertise, but he tells you how to do it. It is *insulting!* Again, fuck off! Give me the gear and let me do it. But some management, that's just the way they are.

[Interview 45, longwall miner 10]

These comments from miners demonstrate not only the ways in which they subjectively positioned themselves as miners, but also the interactive and processual nature of occupational identity formation and reformation. Occupational identity was discursively constructed by reference to other (less admirable or desirable) individuals or groups. Implicit in miners' criticisms of managers was their distancing of themselves from managers (Snow and Anderson 1987); it was a long-standing tradition at Dover that miners defined themselves as not-like-managers.

### **6.3 Appraisal as occupational identity breach: Reactions of discursive subjects**

Although managers at Dover Colliery did not necessarily conceptualise their imposition of a performance appraisal system on miners in terms of identity regulation, this system most certainly had unintended identity consequences. This section will analyse what miners said about the appraisal system. It will become evident that the majority of miners did, indeed, experience appraisal as a violation of their established identities as coal miners. When miners were asked to describe how the performance management system was introduced, most described it in terms that demonstrated a breach or transgression of their pre-existing occupational identity elements.

Breaches of identity occur when different stakeholders express views incompatible with, or expose gaps in, the dominant or preferred identity construct. At such points, there is cognitive dissonance and exposed contradiction which social actors seek to alleviate through ‘face-work’ (Goffman 1967:12). Face-work assumes a defensive orientation; actors invoke discursive ‘face saving’ strategies (Golden-Biddle and Rao 2004:316). In the sub-sections below, in parallel with the identity elements described in Section 6.2 above, representative quotes illustrate how miners articulated these breaches of their occupational identity by performance ratings. Chapter 7 will then examine discursive strategies employed by miners to resist or repair their collective identities.

Fundamental to identity breach was the different starting points from which miners and managers approached ratings. Miners considered themselves to be ‘professionals’. On a five point scale, where a score of one represented ‘poor performance in most areas’, and a score of five represented an ‘excellent employee in most areas’ (Dover appraisal document, n.d.), most miners rated themselves a six! Miners almost invariably spoke about being ‘marked down’ or ‘down-graded’ when they received their scores. Thus, they construed the appraisal event as a process of loss – something had been taken away from their sense of who they were as professional miners. Managers, on the other hand, started with a score of three as

their mid-point and worked their way higher or lower by asking: ‘Does this miner not meet (lower score), meet (three), or exceed (higher score) our expectations?’ These fundamentally different approaches to appraisal scores occasioned much conflict in the performance review meetings. Miners hotly debated scores which they saw as debasing them; managers fought to hold their ground in order to maintain the normal distribution curves which had been agreed upon at calibration meetings. Thus, breach is a relative term, depending on whose perspective is being considered. In the context of this chapter seeking to understand employee reactions to performance ratings, breach is seen as any assessment which violates miners’ established occupational identity elements.

### **6.3.1 Identity breach 1: Being unjustly blamed for productivity issues**

Since the difficult and dangerous conditions under which miners worked were potent identity elements at Dover Colliery, miners’ responses to appraisal indicated profound offence that, instead of being thanked for risking their lives for the company (given the material conditions of their work), they were being ‘marked down’ for what they saw as factors beyond their control. Likewise, miners were offended that, instead of being provided with better equipment to do the job more effectively and safely, *they* were being blamed for productivity issues.

I think attitude is number one. If they encourage us, and show appreciation, we’re willing to ‘have a go’ [work hard]. If they are picky and negative [as in low performance ratings], we think, if that’s what they think about us, that’s how we’ll behave in the future. What they think they got from us in the past is what they’ll get from us in the future.

[Interview 8, longwall miner 3]

One of the longwall miners succinctly captured the effects of this ‘blaming’ on the collective occupational identity of miners in his criticism of having to work with run-down, poorly maintained mining equipment:

I'm not saying that things are sabotaged or anything. It's just - I don't know - attitude has a lot to do with it. And *management* attitude has a lot to do with it. If they don't give a damn, well, the blokes don't give a damn. And a lot of that happens here. Things run down, maintenance wise, and the blokes just think, '*Oh, well, they don't care – why should we?*' And I'm not talking about Victor and me; I'm talking about the workforce in general.

[Interview 8, longwall miner 2]

There were miners whose talk of performance appraisal positioned managers as putting production outcomes above safety. This they saw as a profound breach of their identity as professional miners, but also as a threat to their value as individuals whose lives should be preserved at whatever cost. Miners complained about having to use second hand mining equipment, brought in from other coal mines. They expressed personal degradation at being blamed for poor productivity outcomes when they were not consulted in the purchase of inappropriate mining equipment, which then had to be modified to fit the tunnels in which it would be working at Dover. Miners complained about being expected to work in unsafe conditions; they resented, for example, being asked to work too close to underground streams or dams which had the potential to burst through and drown them all.

A frequent discursive resource after appraisal was to blame poor infrastructure for limiting production outcomes. For example, roads at a sister colliery were likened to a 'bloody highway' compared to the 'goat-tracks' underground at Dover. If miners lost an hour a day in travel time to and from the coalface, they argued that this loss was management's fault, not theirs. Appraisal appeared to send the message that miners were to blame for the mine's lack of competitiveness. Miners were profoundly affronted by this suggestion; they saw themselves as professionals whose integrity was being questioned by the real culprits of poor performance. 'Fix the mine and we'll fix production' was their response to appraisal criticisms. Miners expressed intense irritation that managers were 'too proud' to admit that they didn't know what they were doing, but had the gall to use appraisal to pin the blame on workers. As one longwall miner explained it:

High Noon's roads [a sister colliery] are a lot better than here. Northcliffe's roads [another colliery in the group] are unbelievable - and that's just across the main road from us! What I've found in the past is that [managers] are too proud to admit that they don't know what they are doing. And they won't give somebody here that *does* know what they are doing with a bit of expertise in that area to show them. Like even if they put them on a short-term contract. Because they spend money on things here that's just a joke...

[Interview 8, longwall miner 2]

### **6.3.2 Identity breach 2: Mates divided – rating pitting mate against mate**

Given the strong bonds of mateship that developed through shared histories of mutual engagement, any HRM practice which divided the individual from his 'mates' was bound to create identity breaches. A union official who worked in panel development (tunnelling access for the longwall) wrote a memo to his fellow unionists in which he described the performance management system at Dover Colliery as a 'blatant system of injustice...a system that does not reflect on the actual performance of the majority of employees.' He judged the appraisal system to be a 'power-wielding exercise that *pits mate against mate*...[and] does little but create low self esteem, spite and *negative responses to other workers*' (union secretary's memo, 2002, emphasis added). Individual ratings were also described in this memo as betraying the time-honoured system of trust to 'watch each other's back.' This fracturing of mateship and team-based identities was a recurrent theme in miners' responses to the individual rating system. How could two individuals working side by side for years on the same machinery get different ratings? 'It's insane!' was a frequent comment. Yet, miners felt that the system was treating *them* as the problem.

One longwall miner described how receiving different ratings breached the mateship aspect of 'socially shared identity' (Kärreman and Alvesson 2001:61) that had for so long been part of the miners' community of practice, especially for those who were 'marked down':

Getting a C is a joke. What do you do with that? I'll give you an example. There [is] this deputy at Dover Colliery. He just turned 59 last week, still works underground at Dover, underground every day shift. Everyone calls him Pop. He is the hardest worker. Been in the pit all his life...He got a C grade on one of his reports and that *broke his heart*. People would call him, 'Oh, C-Grade-Pop.' He is a big man. He was ready to biff someone, you know. I remember his wife saying, 'Don't worry about it. Who cares what grade you got?' He has been on the job now for 30 or 40 years...I mean, what does a grade mean? Fair dinkum!

And it really *hurt him*, to think that they put a grade on his head when he has been such a good deputy all his years. Some snotty-nosed little kid straight out of university [did it]!

You can't give these decent guys C grades! They don't want to hear a B or a C!

[Interview 5, longwall miner 1]

Rating was seen, as noted above, as a mark upon the miner's 'head' – an attempt at imposing a managerial estimation of worth upon the individual. In the masculine context of coal mines, it was inevitable that some men would taunt each other about their grades. Such scorn was hardly conducive to continued team-based cooperation.

We had people going out [of the review meetings] showing people what their mark was. In the [review] room, it was all hush-hush, but if they wanted to go outside and tell people what their mark was, that was their own prerogative. But when some of the guys know that they are better workers than other guys – they know it, we all do, we all do – and we turn around and we say, 'This guy gets a B, and this other guy, who is a better worker, does more on the job, gets a C' – certainly some of them said – I heard them say it to their coordinators: 'Well, next time you want this dirty, stinking job done you go and ask your B to do it. Don't come and ask me to do it, because I'm

not going to do it. You go and ask that B. You obviously think he's a better worker than me, so you get *him* to do it!

[Interview 10, longwall miner 3]

What this longwall miner described was a common refrain among miners. The ratings were 'fucked' according to most miners; and ratings just drove a wedge between those who scored well (who were seen as 'teachers' pets') and those who were 'marked down'. Appraisal was seen as something that destroyed mateship through the individuating practice of rating:

Do away with these things [performance reviews]! This just causes animosity between workers – As, Bs, and Cs. People get *pissed off*! They don't want to be downgraded! Really, they don't want to be praised, either. They just want to be paid for the job they've been doing...They go down there [the pit], 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 34, panel development miner 3]

Individual ratings thus disrupted the sense of shared expertise among 'mates' in the same crew. A recurrent theme in miners' talk was this term 'knocked down' as cited by the miner below. Similar language-in-use such as 'downgraded' or 'marked down' indicated that performance rating scores devalued workers' conceptions of what constituted a reasonable estimation of their worth.

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, as a crew, that blokes that they were working beside, or standing from you to me away from each other, he 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, we're all working together. We should all be the same!'

[Interview 34, panel development miner 3]



### 6.3.3 Identity breach 3: Wounded pride

Most of the miners interviewed were seething with a sense of injustice, a sense of violation of the respect they believed they were due, after having received ratings below what they felt they deserved. Even those who received the top scores were dismissive of appraisal; miners considered performance rating as an attempt to impinge on their ‘claimed expertise’ (Fine 1996:111). It was a source of considerable pride to miners that they could, and indeed did, ‘get the tonnes out’ and don’t need to be told what to do. Appraisal impinged on that pride by assuming that these ‘professionals’ needed someone above ground to assess their work (and their worth). A union official remarked:

These men have a lot of pride. 99.9 percent are doing their jobs well and care about their reputation. Teams sort out the point-one percent who need to be weeded out. You don’t need a [manager’s name] or a [another manager’s name] to run some fucking system to create another bureaucracy to tell you how to run the show. Their attention would be better focused on going back to the bigger performance measures [supplies, equipment and training the workforce].

[Interview 17, union official 2]

Miners were offended that an above-ground manager could attempt to measure their wealth of expertise and tacit knowledge in a set of behaviourally anchored rating scales. The scales were dismissed as ‘bullshit’, or, if the miner was more than slightly peeved, ‘*bloody* bullshit!’ They saw a rating scale as a particularly demeaning form of managerial control, as if they were being reduced from professional miner status to that of a child. Many made comments similar to the following miner’s remark:

It should be an informal discussion – rather than a formal fucking thing that says right, today I’m going to mark you like a school kid!

[Interview 17, panel development miner 2]

The sense of breach was noticeable in the hardening of the language used by a miner to describe getting a lower than top score:

We're A-class miners, right. And we fucking protect that pretty hard, you know. We've got a bit of pride, all right. And, to tell them, 'You're a B-grader!' You know, if I want to go to another mine, I've got to give you a bit of paper to say that I'm a B-grader. And mate, our outfit is the best cutting fucking coal crew getting around! Yeah, *we're pissed off* at that bullshit bit of paper!

[Interview 53, longwall miner 15]

As Ashforth and Kreiner (1999:413) note, 'identity research indicates that people typically seek to see themselves in a positive light', and this positive sense of self was violated by anything less than the top score. Miners resented appraisal as a process which pointed out what was *wrong* with them. For them, the discursive object (appraisal) was constructed as a punishment, not as a performance enhancer. They took it very personally, and in some cases quite emotionally – the reasons for which will be explored in more detail in Chapter 8. An electrician summarised his wounded pride thus:

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

[Interview 22, coal clearance electrician 1]

Since pride in mining expertise and competence were central identity elements for miners at Dover (see Section 6.2.3 above), it was a source of substantial irritation to them when an above-ground manager indicated to them through an appraisal meeting *how* to do their jobs. Especially since most of the managers were younger than the underground miners, this conduct by managers violated miners' self-conceptions as competent and mature professionals:

You get the guy who comes out of university. He's read x, y, z in the books. He's passed his exams and he wants to come down here on the job and tell

the blokes how to cut coal. Yet they've been cutting coal for twenty-five years! We see it all the time. It's just a farce!

[Interview 10, longwall miner 3]

Miners discursively reframed the appraisal object: 'It wasn't a performance review. It was a personality review' [Interview 53, longwall miner 13]. In many instances, the sense of wounded pride was so deep that it was almost palpable in their tone of voice and facial expressions during interviews. Most miners at Dover did not passively accept their appraisals. Rather, as discursive subjects, they positioned themselves as professionals who had been grossly violated by the appraisal process.

#### **6.3.4 Identity breach 4: (Mis)appropriated judgment rights**

The power to control their work environment was jealously guarded by miners who agreed with the union official who described appraisal as a 'power-wielding exercise' (union secretary's memo, 2002). Miners disputed the legitimacy of above-ground managers to judge their workplace behaviour. One miner explained his sense of anger at being performance rated by an 'office' manager as follows:

The people that write that [the performance criteria] think it's a fucking Woolies' [grocery store] car park! They've got no idea on what really goes on down there. They haven't. They're not switched on. They've either got a shiny arse in a big fucking office somewhere, you know. And that's as far as their mine knowledge extends. They've read it out of a book!

[Interview 53, longwall miner 13]

According to Goffman, whenever someone makes a claim to be a person of a particular kind, he or she 'automatically exerts a moral demand upon the others, obliging them to value and treat him [or her] in the manner that persons of his [or her] kind have a right to expect' (1959:11). Miner avowal of their professional competence thus implicitly led to a moral expectation that they would be left alone to manage their own affairs underground. Consequently, it was not only a source of considerable annoyance to be judged by appraisal, but it was also felt to be a breach

of their rights. Miner impatience with the rating scales hinged on who had the right to determine performance criteria:

...each criteria [sic], in my eyes, was a load of bullshit. If you are a coal miner who had any idea, you wouldn't be writing that crap, as in them questions!

[Interview 53, longwall miner 16]

Ratings challenged miners' views of themselves as the best judges of each other's abilities. There were frequent complaints that managers' ratings were 'fucked' (see below). One miner wrote on his survey: 'How can this cunt review me? I have not worked with him and do not know him.' Rating differentials fuelled howls of protest from aggrieved miners whose 'talk' framed scores as based on misperceptions rather than unbiased judgments of their work:

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 the driver or the 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 [had] done...so it's perception!

[Interview 36, longwall miner 8]

The illegitimacy of managerial ratings was demonstrated by accounts of men who were regarded by their peers as 'good' miners receiving mediocre scores while 'lazy bastards' got higher ratings. Poor ratings were cited as evidence of ill-informed managers who had their judgment standards out of kilter:

There'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. And he ends up with a lesser mark because of that.

[Interview 33, longwall miner 7]

Survey responses (described in Chapter 4) to questions about the appraisal system confirmed that these themes were shared across the workforce. Miners on open-ended survey questions described the appraisal process as 'very demeaning', the ratings as 'bullshit', and the review meetings as 'belittling' and 'a waste of time'. One longwall miner captured his frustration with the disruptive effects of appraisal by his terse but telling survey comment: 'Stop fucking with my life!'

The words of a union official nicely encapsulated this identity breach concerning contested judgment rights and the inconsistent message which allegedly ill-informed reviewers conveyed. At a performance review meeting with managers and union representatives [15.10.2002], he said bluntly:

The scores are fucked. Some reviewers said all positives, and still gave the miner a three [an average score].

To summarise, the general consensus among miners was that:

That bit of paper [performance review form] has no purpose in a coal mine for an underground worker. I'll tell you now. Guys don't want to see that. Guys know themselves how they are going at work. You are part of a crew. You can tell. The deputy knows. Your mates know. You don't need that bit of paper there!

[Interview 5, longwall miner 1]

### **6.3.5 Identity breach 5: Imposed reference points – 'splitting' the subjects**

Appraisal of underground miners cut across the pre-existing divide between managers and miners at Dover Colliery. Previously the workplace cleavage was unambiguously 'us downstairs' versus 'them upstairs'. This 'splitting' mechanism

(de Vries and Balazs 1997:33) was a coarse but convenient sense-making partition and was an unambiguous source of worker identity – a stable reference point. However, appraisal ‘pitt[ed] mate against mate’ (union secretary’s memo to Dover miners, 2002). Miner performance (and hence worth to the company) was now being measured not through informal team-based dynamics, but through ‘calibration’ by above-ground managers, with their externally imposed scores playing off one miner against another. There was an infamous event when managers at a calibration meeting decided to rank order the miners from best to worst, as a way of getting ranking (and thus rating) agreement among senior managers. This list was generated on a white board. Someone copied this list and circulated it to the miners. The unions were upset, miners felt betrayed, and those towards the high and low ends of the list were subjected to much sledging by their workmates. This list, in essence, challenged and re-defined the informal status hierarchy that existed in the colliery. The new reference points, imposed from above rather than negotiated among workmates, became a disruptive source of miner-to-miner comparison – and caused considerable irritation to miners in the process.

Those at the bottom of the list were obviously upset at being so devalued by managers. What was surprising was that miners who scored highly were also upset by their scores. Firstly, they resented being subjected to rating by someone who they claimed didn’t really see their contributions on a daily basis. And secondly, they took no pleasure in the hazing received from fellow workmates. ‘I didn’t come to work to get shit laid on me’ was a common response. Either way, appraisal breached occupational identity that was well established and socially embedded at Dover Colliery. Appraisal ratings were viewed as a ‘foreign’ management-imposed tool which threatened to disrupt miners’ sense of who they were as workers in their familiar occupational groupings. Miners’ responses confirmed Wenger’s (1998:153) observations that membership in a community of practice provides resources for identity based on relating to the world as a mix of the familiar and the foreign:

We experience and manifest our selves by what we recognize and what we don’t, what we grasp immediately and what we can’t interpret, what we can appropriate and what alienates us, what we can press into service and what

remains out of reach. In practice, we know who we are by what is familiar, understandable, usable, negotiable; we know who we are not by what is foreign, opaque, unwieldy, unproductive.

Appraisals imposed from outside the workgroup disrupted carefully balanced relationships between miners. It was especially galling to conscientious miners when someone who rated low on the informal hierarchy of what it meant to be a 'good' worker was scored highly on the managerially imposed scale. For those individuals who made an attempt to curry favour at court (Newton and Findlay 1996:50) in order to improve their ratings on subsequent appraisals, there was the added sense of self-violation. A number of miners confessed to engaging in work practices which they felt would gain them extra marks or 'brownie points' on their next assessments, yet which violated their sense of professionalism. Appraisal thus led to shame and embarrassment as well as transgression of their sense of collective identity.

*Question [PM]: So how has the review affected the way you work?*

I'll be honest with you, you're going to hate me, the laziest guy in the pit got the highest score, so if that's what they want, I'm trying to model myself on him. In the past, I used to do one job, finish it, and move on to the next, and I would get (say) five jobs complete, finished, and I'd move on to the sixth job. I'd be half way through the job at knock-off time, and I would leave it for the next shift to finish.

I got criticized for leaving jobs to the next shift, so now I don't work as hard, and don't do as many jobs, and don't even try to do a job if I won't get finished before the end of the shift. I've eased off. I do less work.

[Interview 22, coal clearance electrician 1]

In summary, performance appraisal scores were imposed, non-negotiable, fixed and disruptive of established informal status hierarchies between miners. As for Collinson's (1992) shopfloor workers, identity work was necessary because of miners' perceived treatment as 'second class' citizens who were easily disposable

and who had little decision making power over their working lives. These 'subjective scars' of relative inferiority to those who have a university education and do the 'mental work' of management heightened the sense of 'we/they' or 'us/them' at Dover.

#### **6.4 Conclusion**

This chapter examined the effects of performance appraisal upon Dover coal miners by listening to the actual voices of the miners themselves. The chapter demonstrates how transmission of an appraisal discourse was 'filtered' by miners through the socio-political context in which they lived and worked. Their responses expressed profound violation at being subjected to a formal rating system which ran counter to the key elements of their occupational identity. Being rated and found wanting was not appreciated by miners, who prided themselves on their performance in dirty, difficult and dangerous conditions. Contrary to the 'prescriptive, functionalist and uncritical' (Watson 2004:447) assumptions of much of the unitarist HRM literature, appraisal is not performed on a *tabula rasa*. Through length of service, the context and nature of their work, and their enacted workplace behaviours, Dover miners had developed a strong socially shared collective identity (Fine 2006). Rather than conceptualizing appraisal as something 'done to' miners (Newton 1998:428), the responses of miners in this chapter reveal that it is important to listen to their active, agential 'voices' in order to understand the consequences of HRM interventions. As Grant and Shields (2006:302) note, 'identity-making is best regarded as a multifaceted work in progress'.

The next chapter examines how Dover miners defended and (re)negotiated their identities following various iterations of the appraisal process. Their stories confirm the contingent nature of identity work and illustrate how workers use discursive strategies to prise open spaces for narrative resistance (Symon 2005) to managerialist discourses of appraisal.



## **Chapter 7    Transgressed identities: Identity defence through storytelling**

*Stories are narratives with plots and characters, generating emotion in narrator and audience, through a poetic elaboration of symbolic material. This material may be a product of fantasy or experience, including an experience of earlier narratives. Story plots entail conflicts, predicaments, trials, coincidences, and crises that call for choices, decisions, actions, and interactions, whose actual outcomes are often at odds with the characters' intentions and purposes.*

(Gabriel 2000:239)

### **7.1    Introduction**

The previous chapter examined discursive resources through which miners made sense of who they were and what they did at work. Managerially imposed performance ratings severely violated miners' pre-existing occupational identity. Whether intentionally or not, appraisal threatened to accomplish what Knights (1990:311) terms the individualization of the worker. Transgressions against miners' identities set off a complex set of reactions. How miners responded through narratives of resistance is the focus of this chapter. In particular, miners' stories of the appraisal process provide insights into their emotional states and the coping mechanisms they brought into service to defend their identities from unwelcome managerial interventions. Discursive 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 the discursive strategies which miners employed.

The chapter begins with a brief review of the instrumental and symbolic value of storytelling in organizations, and then examines various themes which emerged from miners' narratives of resistance at Dover Colliery. As Gabriel states:

The importance of stories and narratives in organizations lies precisely in their ability to create symbolic spaces where the hegemony of facts,

information and technical rationality can be challenged or side-stepped. This is the domain which I refer to as the *unmanaged organization*, that dimension of organizational life where fantasies and emotions can find expressions in often irrational symbolic constructions. Emotional truths, half-truths and wishful fantasies inhabit this domain, which evades or side-steps organizational controls, and allows individuals and groups to seek pleasure and meaning in stories, gossip, jokes, graffiti, cartoons and so on. (Gabriel 2004:71, emphasis in original)

Some of the stories which miners told, especially those highlighting managerial incompetence, did indeed appear to give the storyteller much pleasure. Perpetrators of identity violations received their comeuppance as miners appropriated their methods to turn the tables back on them. 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'.

## **7.2 Identity transgressions: Storytelling as identity work**

As I noted in Chapter 3, there is growing interest in narrative perspectives concerning socially shared identities. Organizational identities, for example, are now theorized as discursive constructs assembled from the 'multiple identity-relevant narratives that their participants author about them' (Brown 2006:731). Occupational identities can be understood in a similar way. Rather than miner occupational identity being a stable self reproduced through a process of workgroup socialization (Van Maanen and Barley 1984), miner responses to appraisal at Dover Colliery suggest that they created their identities through a 'bricolage of identity work' (Fine 1996:112). While Fine's restaurant workers reproduced identities through analogies, coal miners were more likely to use the 'poetic tropes' of storytelling (Gabriel 2000:36) to perform their identity work.

In this approach 'a person's social identity is understood as something to be continuously worked on; something to edit, if need be' (Kärreman and Alvesson 2001:65). Brown (2006:732, emphasis in original) contends that:

[N]arrative identities [are] complexes of in-progress stories and story-fragments, which are in a perpetual state of *becoming*, and suffused with power.

The type of identity work on which this chapter focuses involves what Gabriel (2000:35) calls 'story-work', namely, miners' use of stories to buttress their sense of 'what is central, distinctive and enduring about them as a group' (Brown and Humphreys 2002:142).

Organizations are emotional arenas (Ashkanasy et al. 2000; Strangleman 2002; Fineman 2003; Bolton 2005). Stories have a unique capability to relate to things that involve emotion. Indeed, '[s]tories are emotionally and symbolically charged narratives' (Gabriel 2000:135). Stories told in organizational settings 'may be realist, they may be fictive, sometimes they are mythic, but they are always profoundly symbolic' (Kostera 2002:730). In interviews, miners were either unwilling or unable to articulate in purely descriptive terms what their emotional states were during the performance review events. They deflected direct questions asking them to describe their feelings about appraisal with taciturn comments such as 'it's bullshit' or if pressed to elaborate, they would typically say, 'well, it's *bloody* bullshit!' However, when asked to describe the appraisal process, miners waxed indignant about the way they had been subjected to appraisal in storied accounts, and, by a simple cause and effect logic, about the 'stupidity' of managers ('how could they get it so wrong!'). The most common defence against the identity transgressing effects of appraisal appeared to be a passionate denunciation of the perpetrators, often in the form of resistance narratives.

### **7.3 Miners' stories: Narrative resistance to appraisal**

Miners were well aware that through appraisal managers could divide the workforce and increase their control (Gergen 1999:121). Miners, for example, described individual ratings as 'pitting mate against mate'. Miners shared stories with one another of their negative appraisal experiences as a form of discursive resistance to what they saw as managerial attempts to divide them. Storytelling thus was instrumental in miners' maintenance of their occupational identities (Reveley and McLean 2008) - a reaffirmation of solidarity in the face of identity breaches.

The majority of stories which emerged during the course of interviews with miners were critical of managers, hardly surprising given their sense of annoyance at being rated and found wanting. Stories served as a defensive strategy to counter the identity challenges incited by the comparative rating system. Indeed, resistance tales peppered miners' interview comments. They framed stories around themselves as heroes and managers as villains. Managers were satirized and lampooned, whereas miners presented themselves in tragic mini-stories as suffering victims or as clever agents who subverted managerial powers. Stories of suffering and oppression enabled the subjects to recover a voice, turning shame and sorrow into defiance and pride – the acknowledgement of victimhood became a celebration of survival (Gabriel 2004:27). Thus, the stories told by miners can be understood as a form of resistance, and an expression of agency. As Gabriel (2000:90) has elegantly expressed it:

Stories are polysemic, resonating in different ways with different people but also entailing diverse and even contradictory meanings for a single person. While capable of generating cohesion and commitment, they can also function as the basis of resistance and oppression. This is especially but not exclusively true of stories describing injustice, oppression, and trauma.

Gabriel (2000:84) identifies a number of different types of stories told in organizations. His taxonomy is not intended to be rigid but rather a heuristic device

by which stories can be compared across organizational settings. Not all organizational stories are complete. Some are story fragments (Boje 2001; Brown and Humphreys 2003; Motion and Doolin 2007) or ‘proto-stories’ (Gabriel 2000:60). That is, they contain the seed of a story without the narrative complexity or resolution of plot which would be typical of a complete story. Some stories also combine elements of different poetic modes to become hybrids or secondary types of stories such as gripes (personal injustices), traumas (deeper psychic injuries where protagonists claim to be ‘scarred for life’), and practical jokes (often accompanied by disparagement towards the victim). Story categories are not ‘pure’. Often subtle discursive devices are woven into the main story category. For example, tragic tales occasionally were laced with irony, and disparaging tales often invoked safety as a legitimating device to reinforce the sense of injustice inherent in tragic tales. Nevertheless, Table 7.1 below identifies the four main types of organizational stories collected, using Gabriel’s taxonomy. The four types of miner stories about their experiences of performance appraisal at Dover Colliery have been listed in descending order of their frequency. It is to the most frequent of these genres of stories – tragic stories of injustice, oppression and trauma – that we turn first.

**Table 7.1 Types of stories in organizations**

Please see print copy for table 7.1

Source: Adapted from Gabriel (2000:84)

### 7.3.1 Tragic tales: Miners' 'war stories'

Tragic tales refer to those stories in which the miner positioned himself as a victim of some transgression at work. A senior manager aptly referred to such miner accounts as 'war stories' which, he alleged, miners loved to tell [Interview 61, HR Manager 2]. Most of these war stories contained themes of perceived injustice with poetic tropes of *attribution of unity* towards miners and *attribution of blame* towards managers. *Attribution of unity* refers to the poetic trope where an entire class of people are treated as an undifferentiated entity or category, each of them equally responsible (Gabriel 2000:38). They often positioned themselves as a unified category as evidenced, for example, in a miner's comment, 'We're miners. We work hard.' However, miners frequently talked about 'management' as a united entity in this respect, too. Miners positioned themselves as being on the receiving end of wrongdoing or injustice, mostly as a result of managerial incompetence ('what were they thinking?' was a common miner refrain) or wilful neglect. However, in some cases, the tragic tales also detailed the unintended consequences of the actions of fellow workers after appraisals. A key feature of the tragic tale, according to Gabriel (2000:69), is that punishment 'far from restoring justice, seems to reinforce injustice by being entirely incommensurable with the magnitude of the offence.' Of course, in the tragic tales told by miners, they rarely positioned themselves as guilty of the offence. This made the tale the more injurious; they were being punished ('marked down') for offences of which they were innocent. To miners, their ratings were a mistake. The raters had got it all wrong. Or worse, the raters were intentionally malevolent. It is not surprising, therefore, that miners' tragic tales often simplified cause and effect, and gave rise to *attribution of motive* 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 fragment:

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.

[PM] *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 the interview above, 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.

Tragic tales, where protagonists portray themselves as undeserving victims of situations created by villains, generate substantial negative emotion, typically anger, grief, guilt, fear, self-pity and pain (Gabriel 2000:69). Such stories have a tendency to 'drain agency from the undeserving victim and place it squarely on the villain' (Gabriel 2000:72). More importantly, those who tell tragic stories use them as a basis of their identity maintenance and defence, their identities being based momentarily on the injustices done to them (rather than on their achievements and accomplishments). Tragic tales, where the focus is on injustices, have the effect of turning identity defence into employee resistance through a 'culture of cynicism'



with 'a highly cynical employee orientation to management and work' (Collinson and Ackroyd 2005:318). Tragic stories invite collective identification among those who share the tragedy. Tragic stories invite sorrow, pity, anger and emotional support from the listeners. The retelling of 'war stories' about appraisal injustices was a discursive device to garner support for the wounded against managerial perpetrators. Tragic stories at Dover had recurrent themes of continual mine mismanagement and intractable neglect (*attribution of blame*), in which the performance rating system was but the latest instalment in a long history of managerial incompetence.

There's been a list, since he's been manager, of things he's bugged 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]

A mining electrician, the majority of whose working life has been spent underground keeping conveyor belts running to take the coal from the longwall to the surface, was highly offended by what he considered to be an unjust and misinformed performance review:

You know, I felt like a school kid! *I was so pissed off!* I'll tell you, I went in to my engineer and I said to him, 'You know, Ivan,' I said. 'It's wrong that you treat people this way.' I said, 'I work hard.' I said, 'I don't have to tell you, I don't even have to write stuff down...' - that was one of my criticisms, the fact that I don't write enough. 'I don't have time to write, I've got work to do, you know!' I was that pissed off! I said, 'If half the blokes in this place worked as hard as I do, you'd sack the other half, mate.' I said, 'You wouldn't need half of them, because I work with them.'

And he [Ivan] never said nothing, you know. I just wanted my two bob's worth, and then I walked out!

[Interview 24, longwall electrician 2]

In the above story the electrician constructs himself as victim of grievous errors in his performance ratings. Identity defence is apparent in that he describes himself as a hard worker. He (wisely in his own eyes) chooses not to write down a lot of 'stuff' because he constructs himself as a responsible worker who knows his priorities (better than Ivan the engineer does). He keeps the belts running. If the belts stop, the men on the longwall can't cut coal. But there's a deeper theme to this story. He is the victim of injustice. He works harder than half of the men in the pit, yet nobody seems to appreciate his extra effort. He is expecting praise, yet receives criticism. Even when he puts the record straight, his boss 'never said nothing'. Praise is denied. He is a victim. Yet, atypical of tragic stories, his story ends heroically with a mini-victory for employee 'voice'. He had his say (reconstructed his identity as a hard worker, in spite of the errors of appraisal), and then affirmed his resistance by walking out - at a timing of *his* choosing.

A union official recounted a story about one miner who refused to accept his rating in the first round of performance reviews. There appears to be poetic licence taken in recounting the time taken for this review, but this amplifies the absurdity conveyed in the account:

We had one [performance review] take four shifts! Unbelievable! And it was just that the individual - they were focusing on, rather than saying, 'Yeah, OK, you do do that wrong but you could do it better,' and giving them a couple of instances where they could do it better - I really don't believe, first time round, I don't believe the person who was doing the feedback did their homework properly. Didn't go right into it. They could have done it a lot better. They were coming into it saying, 'This guy said you did that.'

He did it. But it was four or five years ago! I mean, that's *bloody stupid*! When they really nailed him down, he said, 'I don't really know. They just told me that you did it.'

'Well, let's get that bloke in here and find out what he's talking about.'

'Oh, yeah, well, he did it five years ago.'

Well, to me, that's *bloody bullshit*! You can't do that!

[Interview 10, longwall miner 3]

Such stories were used to resist the subjugating effects of managerial imposed ratings. There is a heroic twist in this tragic tale; the individual arguing the score resisted for 'four shifts' until managers were made to look 'bloody stupid'. This story also served to bolster the 'us' against 'them' source of occupational identity. In the tragic story above, as the miner gets to the cause-effect connection, his language intensifies, 'bloody stupid' and 'bloody bullshit' indicating the process of storytelling being used as a vehicle for expression of emotional vexation.

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

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 proto-story with the simple plot of a miner being profoundly disturbed and angered by his review. The metaphor of 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 with having been made to sit and listen to the 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.

A subset of tragic tales involved the use of a shared history to position the miner as the victim 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 tragedy in this account 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 human beings 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 the tragic tale above also serves as a legitimating device, again demonstrating the hybrid nature of story categories. Tragic tales as told by miners, then, served a number of purposes. They positioned miners as undeserving victims; they helped make sense of what, to miners, was an intrinsically flawed system. They apportioned blame away from themselves towards a (sometimes) malevolent management. Tragic tales were a source of unity, with victims being portrayed as noble, decent, worthy and good while the villains were portrayed as mean-spirited, misinformed and more interested in money than in the well-being of the workforce.

### **7.3.2 Disparaging tales**

Disparaging tales are milder versions of the tragic tale, more concerned with disparaging the perpetrator than describing in great detail the outcome for the victim. Gabriel (2000) makes them a separate story category; here, they are treated as a

subset of tragic tales because both types of stories involve an undeserving victim. Similar to the earlier findings of Grint, miners at Dover Colliery:

shared the common assumption that appraisals [were] ‘political’ in nature; that is, they [were] ‘mechanisms’ for justifying decisions already taken and without regard to individual merit. Those appraised tend[ed] to believe that the appraisers, like their schemes, [were] 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. The storying of his first review reveals that one of his strategies for coping with wounded pride is 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 square kilometres. 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 do not 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 by this short story. 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.

Built into the appraisal system was an assumption by managers that performance would improve with appraisals. However, miners’ stories imply that a negative appraisal led to *worse* performance, not better, as miners felt resentment towards their appraisers and engaged in disparaging practices to decrease the significance of their alleged failures. One such source of disparagement was contained in miner accounts of managers who did not respect the length of time most miners had worked underground.

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 whatever they want to do anyway, even though we have been working on the job for 20 years.

The story-fragment above positions the miner as injured by an ill-informed manager who fails to listen to well-intentioned advice which is based on a wealth of on-the-job experience. In such a circumstance, the miner is now justified in not listening to the appraisal 'voice' of his manager. His identity has been bolstered by virtue of the fact that the incident defines a manager as one who will not listen. It follows that the manager's performance ratings will be poorly informed. Such disparaging stories helped channel negativity into defiance. Appraisal both constructed and confirmed their distrust of managers and reinforced the pre-existing antagonistic relations in the mine.

Miners made frequent disparaging remarks about the absurdity of being 'rated' and 'marked down' for performance glitches that they attributed to 'management' (while, conversely, managers attributed blame to workers). A frequent source of injustice and psychic injury for miners was the managerial criticism that they were lazy (a grievous breach of the element of their occupational identity that positioned them as hard workers), when their output was constrained by managerial incompetence.

In regards to production, I really feel most of the crews there - it has been proven - they have some pretty good scores up [tonnages]. If everything goes well, the guys will 'have a go' and most of them are hard workers. I don't think it is the guys feeling 'I'm not going to have a go today'. The general consensus is we are there to do a job...But a lot of things happen that are out of your control as a worker...

We had a scenario there a few years ago, I forget his name. He came and just reduced all the stock out of the store, probably practising just-in-time...and all of a sudden, we've got no gear! We ring up [phone], 'Where is the part for this, it's not here?' Trying to save on capital! So then again that was a stuff-up there, but now I mean the undermanager can't rule it all off. Getting on the blower [phone] and saying, 'Hey! Listen! What's happening? We've

got no gear!’ It is the guys on the surface really, who, if they got their act together...but they don’t want to admit it!

[Interview 5, longwall miner 1]

The above story-fragment represents a recurrent theme in numerous miner interviews. Embedded in each account was a sense of frustration at the injustice of being held accountable for outcomes which were beyond their control. Miners attributed blame to managers for the ‘stuff-ups’ that occurred in the mine. They found it offensive to be ‘down-graded’ by the very people who, in their view, were responsible for production delays. As one miner said, ‘it’s not grading, it’s degrading’ [Interview 29, coal clearance electrician 1]. Stories of supply blockages illustrated the power of such accounts to simplify cause-effect relationships and defend the narrator’s identity in the face of perceived unwarranted and ill-informed attack. Each counter-story was employed as a discursive device to restore the collective sense of self that existed before the identity breach.

The same longwall miner noted the irony in a performance appraisal system supposed to be motivational, while being ‘managed by a culture of fear’. His story fragment below indicates how his perception of the system undermines the managerial assumption that appraisal would somehow elicit extra effort from miners:

For someone to be motivated there has to be a light at the end of the tunnel - but in a coal mine there is no light at the end, just a wall of coal. You are there [entombed in a black tunnel]. This is where you are for the rest of your [working] life...Where is the motivation? What makes you motivated to go an extra metre, really? Is it [appraisal] going to help you, because you’re going to get a wage regardless? You’re still going to get the kick in the arse the same as every other month. Regardless of how well you go. You can only go so well because like we said, the planning lets you down. It stops you getting the extra tonnes...it is really hard to motivate the guys.

[Interview 5, longwall miner 1]

This longwall miner positions himself as a victim of managerial ‘arse kicking’; he uses appraisal as evidence of this punitive approach. By simple cause and effect logic, he argues that appraisal therefore cannot be a positive motivational tool when the ‘extra tonnes’ are denied them by the poor planning of the same managers who accuse *them* of poor work. The story illustrates the miner’s contention that appraisal is *irrelevant* to performance. Competent planning by those above ground would make the performance difference.

Miners used accounts of managerial incompetence as a way to reassert their identities as professional miners in the face of negative reviews. They used attributions of blame as a sub-theme to position themselves as competent while casting their accusers in the role of poor stewards of the organization’s resources. 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. Gabriel (2000:38) describes this subset of storytelling as ‘attribution of unity’ where a whole class of people – managers – are treated as undifferentiated and equally responsible. 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 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 chosen few] up to the State of Origin. It doesn't make sense!

[Interview 45, longwall miner 13]

### **7.3.3 Epic tales: Miners as heroes**

The epic story is about a hero who achieves success and noble victory (Kostera 2002:731). The listener is invited into the nostalgic mood of the tale, feeling pride or admiration for the hero. In the following story, for example, the miner defends himself by storying his 'success' in using rough language to his boss's face, and by impressing his boss with skills not commensurate with his 'average' performance review score.

I don't think of myself as a [C-grader]. Do you know Gordon Down [the former manager]? I got picked to do a maintenance review of electrical engineers and mechanical engineers and an undermanager...it was about a three-day thing, and we were doing all the stuff on a white board out in the

office. Gordon Down came out and he was standing listening while I was doing my stuff.

‘Gee, that was pretty good!’

I said, ‘Yeah. Not bad for a C-grader, it is?’

He said, ‘What do you mean by that?’

I said, ‘Well, that’s how I’m classified. I’m a C-grader.’

He said, ‘Well, there’s nothing wrong with a C grade.’ He said, ‘That means you’re doing your job.’

I said, ‘Yeah, but if we got sacked tomorrow and I was looking to get re-hired, would I get another job?’

And he said, ‘Yes, you would.’

I said, ‘Bullshit, Gordon! The guys that had anything less than an A or a B+ didn’t get a start.’

‘Oh,’ he says, ‘we learned from our mistakes.’

[Interview 44, longwall miner 12]

In this story, the miner positions himself as a competent miner whose presentation skills and knowledge of the workforce earn him the approbation of the mine’s general manager. His achievement is heroic for a C-grader. So is his courage in standing his ground and belligerently challenging the manager’s interpretation of the rating scores (‘Bullshit, Gordon!’). However, his success is somewhat soured by the inability of the manager to acknowledge the inadequacy of the grading system.

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 heroic tales at Dover Colliery were in the context of men risking their lives for each other in the difficult conditions underground. *Fixed qualities* of courage, loyalty and mateship are what gave meaning to their working lives. These qualities, as discussed in Chapter 6, were essential elements in their 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.

Another heroic story entails a miner training a workmate in how to drive the shearer (the machine which runs across the face of the longwall), even after a coordinator who had done the miner's performance review said that he couldn't be trained to operate the shearer:

He [the coordinator] done a couple of [performance] reviews. Marked a bloke down because he didn't like him, and the fella asked him at the time, he said, 'I've been trying to learn to drive the shearer.' And he [the coordinator] goes, 'Why's that?' And he [the coordinator] goes, 'The bloke that's teaching you says that you shouldn't be on a machine.'

And that bloke came and saw me because I was the teacher. [I said] 'No, that's not right. I've been driving it for a long time. I can teach anybody. It's up to them whether they want you to drive it or not, that's got nothing to do with me. I can teach you to drive it.' I was teaching him to drive it. We sort of went over this other bloke's head and we taught him.

[Interview 47, longwall miner 11]

Such stories of open defiance positioned miners as more competent than managers to decide who can be trained to operate the more difficult machinery. Through stories such as this, they reclaimed judgment rights over their work practices.

#### **7.3.4 Romantic stories: Organizational nostalgia**

Gabriel (2000:80) has identified a body of organizational stories which are characterised by an emotional tone: 'a gentle, tender feeling, at times bordering on sentimentality, occasionally pity (or self-pity) but without its tragic companion, fear; some of these stories had a nostalgic quality.' His use of the term 'romantic' for this type of story may be a misnomer in the rough and tumble masculine environment of coal mines but, nevertheless, stories with tender emotional tones did surface from time to time during interviews at Dover Colliery. Some miners' stories told of appraisal as being the most recent in a long list of managerial changes that had taken the heart and soul out of the pit.

Some of the older miners talked wistfully about the good old days and how the mateship and the camaraderie were being eroded by modern performance imperatives. There was a palpable sense of loss, nostalgia for a bygone era of mining. For example, the following snippets from an interview with a panel development miner built up to a point where the interview had to be temporarily suspended when the miner choked up and could not continue talking. Such behaviour by a miner is highly unusual. His is a 'romantic' story of affection and caring for his mates (Gabriel 2000:80):

Tommy's boisterous and he's... deep down he is quite a soft sort of person but he is just a bit of a culture [a 'lad']. He has been a miner for 30 years. You know - have a bit of a stir, a bit of a larrikin but, by God, he is a good miner! In other words he can put timber up nicely and clean and straight. He has got good ideas. You know - any of the hard jobs, dangerous jobs, Tommy would be in there and he would do a top job...



I like a lot of blokes in the pit and I have worked with a lot of these blokes for many, many years - [and] there is a lot I don't like. Don't get me wrong. There's a lot that is not on my barbeque on a Sunday [list]. And yet, I respect them for who they are and I respect their character...

There is still mateship there. There are still a lot of blokes who have been in the same crews for long periods. But it has changed a lot. I think it has changed a lot through lots of different reasons. God, you know, blokes used to bond together through lots of different reasons. Gee whiz, sorry...  
*[Chokes up]*.

[Interview 37, development panel miner 4]

After regaining his composure, the miner continued his story by describing how much 'teamship [sic], friendship and morale' there used to be in the mines, and how much they worked together in dangerous conditions to watch each others' backs. He recounted how they used to play cards together in the crib more than they do now, and reflected on the fact that there does not seem to be as much humour in the pit as there used to be. He nostalgically remembers a past which has been expunged by the appraisal system.

It is not as united as it used to be, that is for sure. I think there seems to be a lot more pressure on the blokes - the hours are getting longer... Well, there doesn't seem to be the humour that there used to be - you know, that has gone out of it. Mate! And it is coming from the top. It is so serious now. Everything is so serious! You know what I mean? As I say, there used to be a little bit of a chuckle and that doesn't seem to happen any more. The characters just seem to be... you know? Probably even myself! I used to be always sort of funny and now I'm sort of a bit too serious myself. But now I know Jimmy [his performance rater] is going to be turning around trying to nit pick [through this appraisal process].

[Interview 37, panel development miner 4]

### 7.3.5 Comic stories: Managers as ‘deserving fools’

Comic stories, where the main character is lampooned as a fool or a victim who deserves their comeuppance, were less frequent at Dover Colliery than tragic stories, perhaps because of the gravity of the topic under discussion – appraisals – at most of the interviews. I have no comic stories complete with plots, actors and outcomes told by a miner about a manager in my transcribed data of formal interviews. More frequently, miners used nicknames to lampoon managers. Names such as ‘rattle head’ (because there’s only a pea-sized brain inside), ‘wombat’ (for a manager who was short, thick and dense), ‘singlet’ (because he was never off their backs), and ‘mirror’ (because he was always going to ‘look into something’) were a common form of mirth at managers’ expense. However, from time to time, miners made reference to funny incidents during informal conversations. They got great pleasure out of poking fun at managers. One story theme worth citing refers to a group of managers who flew to America to buy an expensive piece of mining equipment. When it arrived at the mine, it was found to be too wide for the tunnels – it wouldn’t fit underground. But the miners were told to take it underground and make it work. Miners had to cut bits off the machine to get it through the tunnels – a job made much more difficult because they had to do the cutting *in situ* underground because the managers would not wait for the machine to be modified on the surface. So the mine ended up with a machine that could not do what it was supposed to do because the important bits had been chopped off to get it through the tunnels.

### 7.4 Subversion and inversion: Justifying performance

[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.

*[PM] 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 shore up their damaged identities. Turning the tables back

on managers and making disparaging appraisals of *their* performance bolstered their own identities by reference to the non-performing managerial 'other'.

## 7.5 Conclusion

Both individually and as a collective community, miners saw appraisal as an attack on their occupational identity as coal miners, and a challenge to their right to manage their work practices. As such, appraisal reviews were a site of 'hegemonic struggle' (Brown 2006:733). In their aftermath, tragic, disparaging and heroic stories were mobilized as discursive resources to repair fractured identities and as a form of employee 'voice' against the dominant discourse of pit managers. Stories, like other forms of conversation, produce discursive resources which 'create a collective identity and translate it into effective collaboration' (Hardy et al. 2005:58). While identity-bolstering resistance occurs in various 'modalities' (Fleming and Sewell 2002:857), organizational storytelling surrounding these appraisal events became a primary resource for identity defence. Indeed, the stories of Dover miners confirm the assertion that a narrational activity like storytelling has the potential to be '*an act of power* that privileges the agent' (Brown 2006:737, emphasis added). Miners' stories also suggest that human resource practitioners who do not consider the impacts of their interventions upon the shared identities of workers may experience considerable resistance from those whose identities are violated.

## **Chapter 8    The insulted worker: Intersubjective emotion and dissonance tropes of insulted workers**

*There are three forms of belittlement: contempt, spite and insult...Insult is belittlement. For an insult consists of doing or saying such things as involve shame for the victim, not for some advantage to oneself other than these have been done, but for the fun of it.*

Aristotle, *Rhetoric* (Book 2 Chapter 2)

### **8.1    Introduction**

Chapter 7 examined miners' use of narratives, especially stories and story-fragments, as discursive devices to preserve, maintain, and rebuild identity in the face of a performance appraisal system that transgressed (or breached) their sense of occupational identity. This chapter takes a deeper look at the intense anger and other negative emotions expressed by miners throughout this intervention process. It examines the emotional strategies and devices used by miners in order to counter the effects of performance appraisal. These strategies are summarized in Table 8.1 below.

The study of emotions in organizations has enjoyed a resurgence of interest in recent years (Fineman and Gabriel 1996: 49; Ashkanasy et al. 2000; Poulson II 2000; Fineman 2003; Garrety et al. 2003). However, with the exception of the work by Gabriel (2000) and Poulson II (2000), there have been few discursive studies of the causes or consequences of shame and insults in the workplace. This chapter draws evidence from the talk of miners to suggest that one of the reasons for their intense anger is that the breach of their identity caused loss of face and a concomitant sense of belittlement, shame and insult. Discursive analysis in sociology and psychology has provided valuable insight into how emotions are relevant to the social construction of identity. Just as worker identity is understood to be socially constructed through discursive processes (Ainsworth and Hardy 2004), so too is shame the 'premier *social* emotion' (Scheff 2003:239, emphasis added). Shame is an

emotion that is constructed intersubjectively, that is, through reflexive reference to what we think others are thinking of our worth and competence (Stryker and Burke 2000). Intersubjectivity is an essential feature in the generation of shame and insult, just as it is in the construction of occupational identity.

In the study of emotion in the workplace, it is important to note that there is an affinity between shame and anger (Lewis 1971; Scheff 2003); one way of hiding shame is to become angry. This relationship has implications for understanding why miners were so angry at having their performance rated. They were angry because performance ratings violated their estimation of their worth, pointed out their defects, and led them to feel shame in failing to meet their own (and others') expectations.

**Table 8.1 Miners' emotional strategies and devices to counter the insulting effects of performance appraisal**

Insulting effects of appraisal	Discursive devices for coping
Exclusion	Irony: stories of...
Favouritism, discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managerial incompetence</li> </ul>
Negative stereotyping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Production hindrances</li> </ul>
Ingratitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Decreased</i> performance</li> </ul>
Infantilism: being treated like children	Parody
Scapegoating and blame	Sarcasm
Broken promises	

## 8.2 The insulted worker: Identity violation

Performance rating has significant identity implications as performance 'templates' are discursively imposed on workers-as-objects to be measured, calibrated and

valued or devalued. However, workers are not passive objects. They are social actors whose identities are formed or constructed in intersubjective relationships with multiple others (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Cast et al. 1999; Hogg and Terry 2001; Pratt 2001). Performance rating, like psychological testing or other forms of examinations in the workplace, has the potential to violate a worker's sense of self or identity (ten Bos 2006). Rating attempts to regulate an individual's work-based identity; the individual's worth to the organization is rendered visible by the rating. When the individual does not pass the 'test' (ten Bos 2006:301), that person feels unmasked and painfully visible. In Goffman's (1967) terms, they have lost face and suffered embarrassment, which for Goffman is the key emotion in social interaction. It leaves the victim feeling stupid (Ronell 2005). However, even when the individual passes the 'test', he or she may still feel that his/her sense of identity has been violated or spoiled by being put on public display (Goffman 1963). The 'test' (or performance rating) incites shame, because the individual's self has been unmasked publicly (ten Bos 2006). An individual's performance rating thus is a symbolic token of how an individual's efforts have been seen or ignored, how they are classified and ranked, and what significant details of their behaviour are appreciated – or overlooked. An individual's place in the status hierarchy is publicly announced – and received as ritual humiliation or stigmatisation by the losers. Identity disruption is magnified by rating systems which are comparative in nature (A, B, C, D, E or 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, for example) and even more pernicious when there is a 'forced distribution' element to the rating scheme.

Performance rating, based on the HR discursive concept of the ideal worker, is especially prone among the bundle of HR practices (McDuffie 1995) to being experienced as insulting. Rating reduces the complex mental, physical and emotional contributions of an employee to a number, a letter or a category. Rating, in order to fit organizational constructs, necessarily ignores, marginalizes or sanitizes the significant achievements, contributions and efforts of workers and privileges the accomplishments of some over those of others.



### 8.2.1 Shame and identity

The emotional aspects of how performance rating disrupts identity bears further investigation. Scheff (2003), drawing upon the work of Cooley (1922), Mead (1934), and Goffman (1963), notes that the self is a *social* phenomenon, or in organizational discourse terminology ‘socially constructed’. Cooley’s (1922) concept of ‘the looking-glass self’, which implies the social nature of the self, describes ‘self-monitoring’ or intersubjective connectedness occurring in three steps:

A self-idea of this sort seems to have three principal elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his [sic] judgment of that appearance, and some sort of self-feeling, such as pride or mortification. (Cooley 1922:184)

For Cooley (1922) and Scheff (2000), both shame and pride arise from seeing oneself from the point of view of the other. This concept of the ‘looking-glass self’ – that our identity is discursively formed by what we think about *ourselves* when we imagine what *others* are thinking about us – has profound implications in the context of performance appraisal. Performance rating can be a brutal ‘looking-glass’ in that it makes explicit what others are thinking about us. In Cooley’s (1922) words:

The thing that moves us to *pride or shame* is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but *an imputed sentiment*, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another’s mind. This is evident from the fact that the character and weight of that other, in whose mind we see ourselves, makes all the difference with our feeling....We always imagine, and in imagining share, the judgments of the other mind. A man will boast to one person of an action – say some sharp transaction in trade – which he would be *ashamed* to own to another. (Cooley 1922:184-185, emphasis added)

The ‘imputed sentiment’, or imagined judgment which flows from the ‘looking-glass’ becomes explicit when delivered through performance rating. Since rating is

based on a deficit model of evaluation (not everyone can be ‘above average’ on a normal distribution curve, by definition), pride and shame are invoked by the process. Seeing one’s self negatively in the eyes of others is the origin of shame and embarrassment (Goffman 1959). Goffman (1967) reiterates the key point that embarrassment arises out of slights, real, anticipated, or just imagined, no matter how trivial they might appear to the outside observer.

Shweder’s (2003) comprehensive definition of shame sheds light on the negative effects of the judgmental nature of performance appraisals, especially where miners felt that their highly prized professional status was at stake:

[S]hame is the deeply felt and highly motivating experience of the fear of being judged defective. It is the anxious experience of either the real or anticipated loss of status, affection or self-regard that results from knowing that one is vulnerable to the disapproving gaze of negative judgments of others. It is a terror that touches the mind, the body, and the soul precisely because one is aware that one might be seen to have come up short in relationship to some shared and uncontested ideal that defines what it means to be a good, worthy, admirable, attractive, or competent person, given one's status or position in society.

(Shweder 2003:1115)

To summarise, then, shame arises from imagining that others are seeing our worth or our competence negatively. That is, ‘shame cannot be understood within an individualistic, asocial framework’ (Scheff 2003:245).

### **8.2.2 Perpetrator and victim**

Interestingly, Scheff (2003) asserts that shame, in its sense of an inner feeling of being ashamed about shame (Kaufman 1989), is a taboo word in the English language. A more acceptable term is insult, a term which shifts the blame or cause of shame outwards onto a perpetrator. Insult is defined by O’Neill (1999:146) as ‘a communicative act whose meaning is that the sender intends the act to seriously

diminish the receiver's face' where 'face' refers to an individual's expectation about how others will treat the individual. The intention of the sender, of course, is not always expressly stated, but is (rightly or wrongly) inferred by the receiver. Indeed, the intention to insult is not a necessary feature of insults, as some insults are unintentional (Gabriel 1998:1329). The term insult, therefore, represents the receiver's version of relationship events that belittle. I use the term 'the insulted worker', then, because it has social and political implications more explicit of a constructed relationship than the term *shame*. Insult focuses on the 'behaviour or discourse, oral or written, which is perceived, experienced, constructed, and at times intended as slighting, humiliating, or offensive' (Gabriel 2000:216). Insult, therefore, focuses on the behaviour, actions or talk of the perpetrator. However, since the insult is taken personally by the victim, insult cannot be understood outside of intersubjectivity – the dynamic between perpetrator and victim.

Belittlement and shame are at the heart of insult. Aristotle made this point in *Rhetoric* (translation by Cooper 1960:94, emphasis in original):

Finally, *hubris* [wanton insult, outrage, insolence] is a form of slight. *Hubris* consists in doing or saying things that cause shame to the victim, not in order that anything may happen to you, nor because anything has happened to you, but merely for your own gratification. *Hubris* is not the requital of past injuries; this is revenge. As for the pleasure in *hubris*, its cause is this: men think that by ill-treating others they make their own superiority the greater.

Not all insults are intended, and certainly not all managerial insults are 'just for the fun of it' or merely for managers' own gratification. Nevertheless, insults do occur when employees feel belittled, shamed, neglected, ignored or treated as inferior. And when such insult occurs, employees do ascribe motives to the perpetrator of the insult and do suspect that management gets vicarious pleasure out of ill-treating others to make their own superiority the greater (Gabriel 2000).

Insult occurs when a victim experiences belittlement or shame. Shame arises from seeing one's self negatively from the point of view of the other (Scheff 2003;

Shweder 2003). Shame in the context of the insulted worker is understood as the disruption to the sense of worth or identity experienced by the recipient of the insult, occasioned by the discursive practices or actions of another. Shame is experienced as painful emotion caused by consciousness of guilt, shortcoming, failure or disgrace. To experience shame is to experience painful inadequacy, inferiority or impotency against the power of an assailant. Tomkins (1963), recognizing the central role that shame plays in identity, argued that shame, embarrassment and guilt should be recognized as members of a single affect family. Shame is indicated at different levels of intensity and duration by the terms 'embarrassment' (weak and transient), 'shame' (stronger and more durable), and 'humiliation' (powerful and of long duration). All three terms signal threat to the social bond (Scheff 2003). All of these emotional responses were indicated by miners in their conversations with the researcher with respect to being performance rated; some miners directly linked these emotions with threats to their 'social bonds' with complaints that ratings 'pit men against men'.

What I call the insulted worker effect, then, is that any managerial discourse or action that causes shame, belittlement or embarrassment to a worker insults the worker. Moreover, insult will lead to various expressions of resentment, resistance and retaliation against the perceived perpetrator of the insult. Workers who pride themselves on their professional competence and contribution in the workplace feel insulted by being rated by others. It is especially insulting to workers when they suspect that the insults are perpetrated by people who are incompetent and doing the insulting in order to maintain power and superiority over them.

Kapuscinski (1983:83) contends that one source of rebellion and resistance is 'insulted dignity'. Insulted dignity is, of course, but one type of identity challenge faced by workers in organizations. But since identity is socially constructed, whenever a worker is treated in an undignified manner, or not treated with the deference that the worker thinks he or she deserves, the insulted worker effect contends that negative emotions will be generated by the interaction (or lack thereof, in the case of ignoring behaviour).

Scheff (2003) also emphasises the intersubjective nature of the causes of shame. Ironically, receiving more deference than we expect can generate the embarrassment of heightened self-consciousness; too much deference is a threat to our sense of being connected to the other, just as receiving too little deference threatens that connection. Even praise can be experienced as a lack of ‘attunement’ between individuals or groups. As Scheff (2003) notes:

Given our extraordinary sensitivity to even minute differences between the deference we get and what we expect, *every* social situation is rife with Shame, either actual or anticipated. The ubiquity of Shame in social life obtains not only between individuals but also between groups. Not only duels, but also wars are usually fought over perceived slights to our individual or collective sense of self. (Scheff 2003: 256)

Given the above sensitivity to slight, it is not surprising that when one group of individuals (for example, managers) attempts to judge the behaviour, worth or contribution of another group of individuals (for example, coalface miners), the situation is fraught with potential for failing to give the expected level of deference. Closely related to this expectation of appropriate deference between groups, rating is also insulting because of its implied status differential (Sennett and Cobb 1972) – that the ones being rated are of a lower ‘class’ or category than those doing the rating.

### **8.2.3 Insults at Dover Colliery**

Insults require a perpetrator and a target (Gabriel 2000). Establishing the intent of a perpetrator is notoriously difficult; indeed the intention of the assailant is often not fully understood even by the person themselves. The victim, however, almost invariably assigns motive of intent to insult to the perpetrator, along with ascription of motive in inflicting hurt for vicarious pleasure. Following Gabriel (2000), who preferred to define insults in terms of the victim rather than the perpetrator, this chapter likewise examines insults in Dover Colliery from the perspective of employees rather than attempting to unravel the motives of managers.

At Dover Colliery, men who considered themselves to be an elite squad of professional, skilled and effective workers were publicly shamed by receiving performance ratings. They were insulted by terminology such as ‘average’ which belittled their perceived contribution to the company. They complained that being given ratings treated them like children. They were equally upset by their powerlessness to influence their ratings, which were pre-set and announced to them at their performance review meetings. Insult, then, for these miners lay at the nexus of power and politics in their organizational relationships; miners did, indeed, ascribe motives (Gabriel 2000) to management and did suspect that ratings were a power and control issue to remind workers ‘who’s the boss.’

At Dover Colliery, the rating scores were initially on a 1 to 5 Likert Scale; these scores on 13 criteria were quickly aggregated – by both miners and managers alike – to a ‘total score’ out of a possible 65. While this aggregation was never the intent of the designers of the rating system it became a shorthand reference point in comparisons among miners. At management meetings to ‘calibrate’ scores and cross-reference scoring patterns between functional coordinators, and across collieries, pressure was brought to bear (mostly by mine managers) for scores to conform to normal distribution curves. When knowledge of this forced distribution regime reached the miners, as it invariably did, they were ‘doubly insulted’ – not only were they being subjected to scoring *per se* but also they were being forced into categories to fit some predetermined pattern rather than having their performance acknowledged for what it was. In subsequent rounds of performance appraisal, rating scores were changed from numbers (1 to 5) to letters (A, B, C, D, E) and then to ‘exceeds expectations, meets expectations, doesn’t meet expectations’) in a futile attempt to prevent this aggregation process. But the damage had been done and the fiddling with the terminology did nothing to mollify miners’ emotional responses that ranged from irritation to outright anger with the whole process of being rated.

### **8.3 Categories of insults**

The following seven categories do not represent an exhaustive taxonomy of insults. They do, however, capture major themes of insults identified by miners at Dover

Colliery. This section extends and develops Gabriel's (2000) taxonomy of insults by examining what miners interpret as insulting behaviour in their workplace.

### **8.3.1 *Exclusion***

Insult caused by the imposition of an appraisal system must be understood in the historical context of mining operations at Dover Colliery. Miners were particularly sensitive to exclusion. An 'us-versus-them' hostility had existed in the pit for many years. The Performance Management Superintendent gave an example of how a social event had caused offence:

It's funny how little things offend - before my time they used to have collective Christmas parties where everybody chipped in and everybody came, staff and miners alike. They don't do that anymore. Staff have their own bash on the lawns [of the colliery] in a marquee. Miners have to organize their own. It seems that if you ever give anything, if you ever take it back, there'll be trouble!

[Interview 39, Performance Management Superintendent]

Above-ground managers assumed that they could and should write the performance indicators for the behaviourally anchored rating scales to distinguish superior from poor underground performance. No input on definition of performance effectiveness was sought from underground workers. Rating by above-ground managers was profoundly insulting to miners who felt that such managers did not fully appreciate the difficult, dirty, dangerous conditions underground. They were insulted by a system that rated them without including them in the rating process, and did not take into account the extremely difficult conditions under which they were labouring.

One of the miners contended that appraisal had made the men 'feel small and feel like kids'. At a deeper level, he was protesting the exclusion that comes with the lack of 'personalization' in large institutions:

We are talking about grown men here and MNC Coal has always blown me out over the years for not treating people like adults. You know, like grown men! We're bloody grown men, mate. Like, we were happy to get out of school, most of us, and it wasn't a disciplinary thing. It was just, you know, we just like to be treated like adults.

*[PM] And you don't feel that this system does that?*

Mate! First week I started at MNC Coal I knew that - you know, it was in between Long Bay Jail and the Army. You know what I mean?

Their mentality, to me, is just... [Shakes his head]. It has scarred me over the years. It has scarred me, these guys here. But I said to them, I said '*Your* culture needs changing. *Your* culture is still the same. You guys are the ones with the big sticks sitting there hating the union'. You know what I'm saying? But their mentality, their culture - big companies, mate, you know, it is not like you are working for a bloke down here in the workshop, and there are six of you working for him, and you do the right thing, he knows you are doing a good job, and he says hey - 'I'll give you a little bit of a bonus for Christmas'.

Here, it's just too big. There is a new manager every 2 minutes. There are people jumping into positions. They've got the fire underneath their arse so they have got to perform. So they start from the top and start *smashing down* and *smashing down* and it comes down to us, and you know... [Long wistful pause]

[Interview 37, panel development miner 4]

Miners were also offended at being brought into a review meeting where pre-set non-negotiable scores were placed before them. Reviewers had received instructions that they were not to negotiate over scores and announced their assessments on this basis to each miner. In the interview situation, as the men were told their ratings on each of the 13 BARS indicators, heated arguments broke out over the scores, but at



the end of the day the miner was excluded from influencing the final score. This they deeply resented.

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!

[Interview 8, longwall miner 2]

A sense of powerlessness at work can add to an employee's sense of shame (Poulson II 2000:261). Being forced to fit on a ratings distribution curve led to some spirited exchanges to prevent shameful exclusion:

The present format they've got is a waste of time. It's not done correctly. If 25 guys are B's 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 [makes a bell-shaped curve with his hand gesture]. 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 [score] 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!*

[Interview 24, coal clearance electrician 2]

This miner – and others like him – had a mistrust of the managerial intentions behind the appraisal rating system. He suspected that the system would be used to exclude people in the future. 'Toying' with his future was insulting to him. His future wasn't a game.

### **8.3.2 Favouritism, discrimination**

Miners recounted stories of how two men could be working on the one machine, both being needed to progress the work forward. One rated highly while his

workmate rated lowly. This, to them, was absurd. It was interpreted as a classic case of favouritism, insulting to the one whose score was diminished, and also insulting to the one with the higher score because it still underlined their subservient status as relying on the favouritism of those in power for the 'spoils' of that power. In their terminology, 'If your face doesn't fit, you're screwed!' Another miner put it this way, 'If your face fits, you get a good review; if not, you get shit!'

Grey's (1994:489) analysis of performance appraisal is particularly germane here, noting as he does the 'courtly behaviour' required in the process. While Grey believes that appraisal can be constructed as a benevolent aid to career development, Newton and Findlay (1996) seize upon Grey's 'royal court' metaphor to demonstrate how such a process can be re-interpreted as a world where those at lower levels of the hierarchy are continually begging favour from those at the top of the hierarchy (Elias 1978). Appraisal may lead some to curry favour at court, with strong connotations of a sense of patronage and attaining grace through civil and courtly behaviour (Elias 1978). Appraisal thus is seen as a control device, and because employers possess the right to punish and reward, the coercive possibilities of appraisal are relevant to 'the way in which people toe the line, [and] how they try to please and placate their superiors so that they may one day be granted favours just as kings and queens once rewarded their courtiers' (Newton and Findlay 1996:50). Workers thus learn to play the game of impression management to gain advantage. Newton and Findlay ask rhetorically whether acceptance of the discourse and practice of performance appraisal is not something more resembling monarchic discipline:

Or is it through a socialization in a much older kind of discipline, which comes about not so much through the government of the soul within modern discourse, as through the good old-fashioned selling of the soul in the hope of both gaining traditional favours and rewards and avoiding the 'murderous splendour' of our employers who may, in many instances, still be able to terminate our economic life? (Newton and Findlay 1996:51)

A longwall miner colourfully described the 'game' of currying favour 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. Some blokes walk around with sore ankles because they are so far up the boss's arse, every time he sits down he breaks them.

[Interview 45, longwall miner 10]

A panel development worker described how two miners on the back of the tunnel drilling machine they call an ABM have to work together in preparing to cut a path through the coal:

You've got to be a team otherwise nothing is compatible [the machine won't work]. You can't lower the canopy without having teamwork between the two blokes. 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. It's another interlocking system.

[Interview 34, panel development miner 3]

Given, then, the essential nature of team-based synchronization of work effort to progress the drilling machine forward, a frequent refrain among miners was the assumption of favouritism associated with differing scores for the same work. If different miners on the same machine got a range of scores, this was cited as evidence of special favour based on whether your 'face fits' with 'management'.

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 wrote a memo to miners about the injustices, discrimination and inconsistencies of the ratings as follows (his emphasis, spelling and punctuation preserved from his original document):

...I have come to my conclusion that this blatant system of injustice put together by wellpaid HR personnel is a system that does not reflect on the actual performance of the majority of employees and in my opinion is unaustralian. 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 PERSUMPTIONS PERSEPTIONS and HEARSAY.

### 8.3.3 *Stereotyping*

Stereotypes assume the power of insult when the targets find themselves trapped by the perpetrator's biased perception, where their every action can be skewed to reinforce the stereotype (Gabriel 2000:223). Stereotyping adds to feelings of powerlessness and shame by reducing self-esteem to a name, number or category. One of my lasting impressions of Dover Colliery was the harshness of language in use. Name calling and labelling commonly reduced people to stereotypical categories. Managers who call workers 'lazy bastards', 'fuckwits', or 'slack-arses' reinforce these stereotypes. The performance rating system led to an aggregation of thirteen criteria into a global score, which then became a shorthand form of stereotype for that category of miner. To be labelled a 'C-grader' (average) was considered the 'kiss of death' by most miners. It meant in their eyes they were not viewed by management as exceptional miners. This cut deeply; men who had worked underground for over 30 years were now 'in the pits' by being told they were 'average.'

[The 'bloke' who gets a bad rating] He's totally lost it. 'Why should I bother? Fucking worked me fucking guts out; these pigs don't have a clue what I'm doing'. They go the opposite way. In saying that, it has come back full circle because when they [the scores] first come out the blokes who got less than what they thought they would were *worse!* They [managers] really,

really kicked them in the arse, you know, and it wasn't good for morale. Morale of the place, I suppose, for the 3 month period when it [reviews] finished was at an all-time low.

[Interview 17, panel development driver 2]

Grades became stereotypical labels to describe particular types of miners. Again, those who scored average (C) were not happy with their belittlement in the eyes of managers and their mates.

If we found that someone had a C, and most guys come out and [we] say, 'How did it go?' and they say, 'I got a C. I'm gunna appeal it! I'm going to do something about this!' And [later] when they do something wrong, there'd be: 'No wonder you're a C'er!' [Laughter]. You know what I mean? You don't want to be a bloody C!

[Interview 33, longwall miner 7]

Some of this stereotyping was just friendly banter, but miners who were rated lower than their crewmates sometimes took it very badly. One miner's wife told of how it broke her husband's heart to be called a 'C'er' after being a proud miner all his life. Even those who rated well were not immune from the hurt. A miner who scored in the A category ('exceeds expectations') put it this way:

You're called 'teacher's pet' or 'crawler' or this or that. Yeah. It 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 33, longwall miner 7]

The language of the following comment indicates the intensity of anger felt by those who believed that their efforts had been devalued by their rating:

If they think I'm a C, I'll fucking act like a C! Next time you want a fucking dirty job done, you can get your fucking A-grader to do that fucking job!

[Fieldnotes]

### 8.3.4 *Ingratitude*

If performance labels perceived as denigrating hurt, so too does the failure of management to notice significant effort and contribution. On a survey of miners' attitudes towards the rating system, the most frequent response to the open question framed '*I would be more productive on my job if... [Fill in the blank]*' was: 'if management showed me more appreciation.' Miners were insulted when management either failed to see how hard they worked or failed to express that appreciation in ways meaningful to workers. A handwritten survey response confirmed their hunger to be 'told on the job every now and then a simple "Well done!"'

On my job I do 'have a go'. I give my effort. I was feeling happy with my score. I came in 56 or 57 out of 65. That's pretty fair, I must admit. And then I heard what [another miner] scored. I couldn't believe it! Someone lazy got a higher score than me! And one of the other guys, who I reckon is a real goer, got one of the low scores. It really destroys me. It really destroys me.

Dave [this other miner] was real down. He was surprised that no one saw his effort. I did. I knew what he was like and I'm just surprised that no one else saw it as such. I still can't understand what Paul [his manager] saw that I didn't see. I could see the effort Dave put in the jobs that he tackled. At the end of the day, I thought he deserved a lot higher score, but I say he was pretty upset.

[Interview 7, coal clearance electrician 2]

This miner was 'destroyed' because one of his workmates who worked really hard was scored low. Such managerial blindness to the efforts of miners was most upsetting, not just to the recipients of the low scores, but also to their colleagues. Low scores were interpreted by miners as lack of managerial appreciation for worker efforts. Miners at Dover were insulted because they felt they deserved better appreciation and better scores. Higher and higher expectations without commensurate appreciation, they felt, eroded their human dignity. Another miner

captured this feeling that managers were never thankful with the efforts miners were expending on the Company's behalf as follows:

What is this thing called 'performance'? Every year they expect more and more! 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!* Management numbers continue to grow while more and more 'feds' [miners] are being made redundant. Something's wrong! Why can't they say, 'Good job, well done' rather than saying we've got to get more tonnes next time. Work isn't meant to be like rats on a treadmill!

[Interview 37, panel development miner 4]

#### **8.3.5 *Infantilism: Treating adults like children***

The darker side of managerial ingratitude was the negative feedback delivered to miners during appraisal reviews. Here the insult was not only a failure to notice the good, but a perceived active search by managers to find the shortcomings, weaknesses and failures of the employee in order to justify less than exceptional ratings. Indeed, in training meetings for the performance reviewers, managers admonished the reviewers to put notes on miners' files so that they could justify their ratings at the annual review meetings. Ratings thus were received in the coal mines as treating grown men like schoolchildren, and were a particularly common theme as a cause of insulted dignity.

One longwall miner explained the infantilism involved in the review process as follows:

The review is only there to point out your bad points. Very rarely do they say, 'Oh, Tony did this good'. I brought one of those reviews home and I gave it to my wife to look at. 'Tony didn't do this. Tony didn't do this. Tony didn't do that.' And she said, 'It's like a school report from Year 3 or something!'

[Interview 44, longwall miner 9]

This same miner, who had worked underground for over twenty years, found it particularly galling to be treated like a schoolchild - being told *how* to do something when he considered himself sufficiently mature to be able to do it independent of parent-child supervision.

I don't mind being told to do something. I don't like being told *how* to do something. After all the years I've been doing it – I was doing it before they even started school, half of them!

[Interview 44, longwall miner 9]

He also resented ratings because they reminded him of the way he had been treated as a child. This finding accords with Poulson's (2000:261) proposition that, just as failure to fulfil parental expectations is a great source of shame in children, failing to meet expectations in the workplace can likewise trigger shame experiences.

He said he came out of the review meeting with the following thoughts and feelings:

I felt like I was a dunce at school. Like I'd been smacked on the bum and told to go and stand in the corner. Hang my head in the corner. I was a D!

I don't think of myself as a dope, by any means. But I came out of that meeting thinking, these people think I'm a dope!

I listened to them. And then I said to Jimmy [the undermanager], I said, 'I've got about 2 or 3 years to go [until retirement], so I don't really give a fuck about this!'

[Interview 44, longwall miner 9]

The reviews thus generated fierce verbal resistance from grown men who hated being treated like school children. Rather than having their identities constituted or constructed by the appraisal discourse, they resisted the rhetoric and resented the infantilism of the appraisal process. One of the more colourful characters at Dover Colliery was more forthcoming with his 'appraisal' of the appraisal system:



I think the system stinks. It's not fair. It's demeaning. It's wrong. I think it is insulting the way the system works. This whole PMS [performance management system] erodes our dignity. It makes us feel that we are being treated like kids. We're grown men! This is no way to treat adults! ...There's no recognition of how long we've been here. There's no sense of caring for the workforce!

[Interview 37, panel development miner 4]

### 8.3.6 *Scapegoating and blame*

Particularly offensive was an apparent inability of raters to differentiate between systems factors and personal factors in performance variance. Ratings based on factors outside a miner's individual control were deeply resented as unfair, unjust, subjective and wrong. Managers and miners also differed in their analysis of causes of performance. Managers consistently blamed miners for poor performance; miners consistently blamed poor performance (when it occurred) on factors beyond their control, including mismanagement of supplies and maintenance by above-ground staff. Miners thus felt that a low rating for poor performance was unjustified, wrong and insulting. This *attribution of blame* was borne out in interviews in the current study.

They [managers] don't get dirty and they've got their own little tearooms. They're sipping their tea when they should be providing our supplies. For sure! So when there's a breakdown, it is *their fault*.

[Interview 5, longwall miner 1]

Miners complained that managers blamed the miners for poor performance when the cause was poor supply chain management. They thus experienced the performance rating system as a nefarious form of managerial control rather than something to enhance or develop their performance.

If they [miners] run out of something, they can't cut coal, and that's when the blokes get very, very frustrated. 'It's not our bloody fault', the blokes

will say, but management will try and turn it around and say, ‘Well it is your fault; you’re not getting the coal’.

‘But how can we get the coal when we haven’t got the gear?’ It’s an endless cycle of resentment against the guys up top, and accusations against the blokes in the pit.

[Interview 10, longwall miner 3]

### **8.3.7 *Broken promises***

Performance ratings were supposed to be delivered in a meeting where the context was ostensibly about improving performance. As part of the dialogue in such meetings, lip service was given to listening to the concerns of workers, seeking their input on how their work could contribute to organizational effectiveness. A common theme was the fact that above-ground managers failed to implement any of the processes they promised they would as part of the performance review process. By holding miners accountable for performance targets while failing to deliver on promises of training opportunities made during earlier review meetings, managers were seen as insulting the intelligence and the efforts of these underground workers.

Promises of training and educational visits to other mine sites had been made, but according to miners such training never eventuated. Promises of upgrades to equipment were made, but never happened. The performance management superintendent admitted this shortcoming, acknowledging that so much effort was invested in getting the ratings right, through multiple raters, calibration meetings and standardizing scores across functional areas and between collieries that management ‘ran out of time’ to implement any of the ideas or suggestions of miners, and failed to set in place a process to follow up on agreed training requests.

## **8.4 Miner reactions to insults: Discursive strategies**

The discursive means by which miners reacted to a sense of shame and denigration will now be examined. From the outset, it was clear that there was no single way to describe miners’ responses. Several reactions were clearly evident. Some miners

withdrew their discretionary effort, feeling a profound sense of injustice at being blamed for factors outside their control. 'Insulted dignity' (Kapuscinski 1983:83) led others to retaliate, trading insult for insult which led not only to an escalation in resistance strategies (Gabriel 1999), but more frequently to the authoring of counter-narratives that attributed incompetence to the perpetrator and attributions of blame towards managers for performance-limiting practices and policies.

While the social context of mining made the expression of any emotion other than anger problematic, coal miners were able to express their feelings through narratives, stories, and figures of speech in which thoughts were expressed in non-literal ways. Attention to miners' figures of speech provided a useful framework for a deeper understanding of the impact of performance ratings on miners, and some of the strategies they used to redress their sense of public shame at being rated (ten Bos, 2006). Oswick et al. (2004:105) identify four 'master tropes' – metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. All four trope categories were used by miners when talking about performance ratings. Of the dissonance tropes, those figures of speech which draw attention to the incongruities of organizational life, and undermine prevailing views or challenge conventional knowledge, irony was the most common among miners. Irony includes paradox, sarcasm, parody, satire, anomaly and understatement (Oswick et al. 2004:116). Irony is a powerful and complex trope functioning through the humorous, the dramatic and the critical to challenge the orientation of dominant organizational discourses.

Irony is a linguistic device of 'saying one thing but meaning the opposite' (Booth 1974:34). As such, awareness of the context of the situation and an understanding of the source and the target are required to fully appreciate irony's 'real' meaning. Much of ironic reference is rooted in contradictions between the texts and subtexts of what a situation purports to be (Putnam 1986). Irony may be used intentionally by organizational members to reinforce prevailing power structures. For example, irony can be used by managers to throw cold water on ideas or suggestions from the rank-and-file, or by managers to distance themselves from impending organizational changes (Hatch 1997). On the other hand, irony may be used in reaction to the contradictions or unexpected results of a situation. Such situational irony creates dissonance through comparing events to the logic or illogic of the situation (Oswick

et al. 2004). This reflective situation, in which irony is used to highlight the contradictions of a situation, incites resistance to the dominant discourse of those wishing to champion a particular viewpoint or strategy.

Figure 8.1 (below) provides a framework for understanding four approaches to the analysis of tropes-in-use in organizational settings. Tropes such as metaphors are widely used (imposed) in a positive orientation in order to bring about resonance with projected cultural change in organizations. The upper left quadrant is the realm of many of the discursive concepts projected by managers onto the organization, especially when conveyed in metaphors. Discourse that seeks to project (or protect!) a particular view or strategy uses imposed tropes or intentional irony as part of sense making around a change strategy. These tropes assist in generating resonance among organizational members towards the change (imposed tropes) or dissonance towards the status quo (intentional irony). On the other hand, the bottom right quadrant represents ironic dissonance employed to resist colonising attempts of managerial discourse and practices.

Please see print copy for figure 8.1

**Figure 8.1 Situational irony as a dissonance trope**

Source: Adapted from Oswick et al. (2004:120)

#### **8.4.1 *Dissonance tropes***

Miners' responses to insulted dignity was most evident through localised narratives of resistance (Hardy and Phillips 2004). The discursive concept of the 'ideal miner' as exemplified in the performance appraisal descriptors led to counter-texts of resistance in the form of storytelling (Gabriel, 2000), a common genre being dissonance tropes (Oswick et al. 2004), especially in recurring themes suggesting the irony of an incompetent management attempting to judge the competence of professional miners. As forms of subversion (Hutcheon 1994), irony, parody, sarcasm and satire peppered the miners' narratives.

### 8.4.2 Irony

Social texts in organizations do not simply reflect, mirror or describe events. 'Rather, they actively *construct* a version of those things. They do not just describe things; they *do* things' (Potter and Wetherell 1987:6, emphasis in original). Miners' tales of managerial incompetence were not just descriptions. Rather, through this process miners were dealing with insults to their sense of worth and dignity by separating themselves from those who had sought to impose their judgments on them. Ironic narratives that drew attention to the incongruity between actual circumstances and managerial rhetoric were part of this separation process. Their ironic discourse also had social and political implications in redressing the shame, embarrassment and sense of loss engendered by ratings.

#### 8.4.2.1 Irony: Managerial incompetence

Miners saw the absurdity of individual ratings in what is essentially an integrated production system. To provide some members of a crew with good ratings while excluding other members of the same crew performing the same work seemed wrong. Miners claimed that it reeked of favouritism for certain miners at the expense of others. An angry miner said:

I think these performance reviews have *shattered* a lot of blokes. You've got that - 'how come he is on the other side of the miner [tunnelling machine] and I'm on this side of the miner, and he got a B and I got a C?' Then you got the methane drainage blokes – two of them sat on the drilling rig year after year. One did 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!* Absolutely insane!

[Interview 37, panel development miner 4]

There were many miner narratives of illogical, inconsistent and unprofessional ratings. Miners were quick to point out the irony of ratings where the behaviour they saw actually occurring was the opposite of that described by the rating system.

Now the irony of my last review was that I got a D on communication, which was the second lowest score. So I said that's stunning – I'm the one who goes out and raises all the shit in the meetings!

'Yeah, but I don't hear you fucking ringing up control on the radio very often.'

'Because I don't have a radio, mate.'

'Oh!'

That's how ad hoc it was. The whole thing was very, very unprofessional.

[Interview 17, panel development miner 2]

Miners felt degraded by the incompetence of management to rate individuals correctly. The following story was told in different versions by various individuals, suggesting it had become part of the resistance folklore:

Now a good example – there was one bloke they marked him a D for safety, right? And I asked the question, 'Why did you do that?' because I didn't think he had a problem with safety. They said, 'We never see him wearing safety glasses.' I started laughing because they paid for his prescription safety glasses, and he is blind without them. Never takes them off!

'Oh! Geez, we fucked up there, didn't we!' And they started on other things that they thought he didn't do and he had a fucking document at the end of the day that said he wasn't fit to be a bloody pastry cook, let alone a coal miner! It was all dead wrong. And that was only one case!

[Interview 17, development panel miner 2]

Managerial incompetence in presenting their ratings scores led to miners missing anything positive and only hearing the negative remarks of managers. One of the union officials pointed out:

First time round I don't think the people doing the feedback did their homework properly... The supervisors got bogged down on little minor issues. They were major issues to the blokes. But if the supervisor had handled it better - they could have - rather than telling the bloke, 'Yeah, you're going all right but we want you to do this better, and that better. But you're doing this really well and that really well. And if you get it all together you'll be a B'.

Well they didn't do that. The blokes tended to focus on what the supervisor said he was doing wrong, and the supervisor let it get out of control. And rather than only taking like an hour or two hours, some of them ended up taking two or three shifts!

[Interview 10, union official 1]

#### **8.4.2.2 Irony: Productivity hindrances**

Miners resented a rating system that treated them as objects of production; they saw the irony of pressure on them to perform while managers, in their eyes, consistently failed to keep the supplies up to them to allow production to continue unhindered. In response to a question on what makes the biggest difference to productivity, a common theme was to blame managers for loss of production.

If you put the blokes down there and here's coal, they'll just keep cutting it all the shift. They won't worry. But if they go down there, and there is no gear there that they need, or this is missing or that is missing, they can't cut coal and that's when the blokes get very, very frustrated. 'It's not our bloody fault' the blokes will say, but management will try and turn it around and say, 'Well, it is your fault; you're not getting the coal out.'

'But how can we get the coal out when we haven't got the gear?' It's an endless cycle of resentment against the guys up top, and accusations against the blokes in the pit.

[Interview 10, longwall miner 3]



Miners also saw the irony in being rated on performance issues when they saw managers as being inefficient, inconsistent and disorganised in their ‘performance’ with miners. One longwall miner described the confusion resulting from various levels of management working at cross purposes. Irony morphs into considerable irritation, as shown by his crude language as he gets to the end of his story.

They [managers] have three or four meetings a week. They tell you what to do on the surface [in the muster room]. Half way down [on] the train, they change their minds. You get to pit bottom; they’ve changed their minds again. You get to the panel; they’ve changed their minds. But unfortunately, the people who are giving you the orders haven’t been at the meeting. They’ve walked out of the meeting and said, ‘I’m mechanical [engineering]. We’ll do this.’ ‘I’m electrical. We’ll do that.’ At the end of the day, you come out of the pit and they say, ‘Why haven’t you done it?’

‘Fuck off and leave me alone!’

[Interview 45, longwall miner 10]

#### **8.4.2.3 Irony: Decreased performance**

Another ironic theme was the incongruity of a system that was supposed to manage performance, and yet by all accounts performance was actually worse after appraisals than before!

We’ve had a couple of guys who thought they were very good, who were marked down, and they have dropped the ball. Yeah, that certainly has happened.

[Interview 10, longwall miner 3, page 14]

There are a certain number of blokes that have been affected by this. They say, ‘Never again!’ and they sit on their hands. You do that to one guy - productivity rate goes way down. And he gets into that [frame of mind] - I don’t care about this any more. There is a certain element that says, ‘Nah, I’ll do it later.’ Damage! Because the guys can’t take it.

[Interview 24, coal clearance electrician 2]

Miners were quick to point out the incongruence of different scores for the same workplace behaviour. They saw scores as matters of perception, not a real estimation of workplace worth. It was ironic to miners that managers could not differentiate between similar and different work outputs yet put so much time and effort into designing a system incapable of confirming what every miner knew from the informal pecking order in the workplace. They thought it was ironic that a manager who did not see their work would attempt to make formal pronouncements about their work through appraisals.

People are keen to forget it [appraisal] and hope it's like one of these TQC [total quality circle] things - [where management say] 'We're not going to do it again' and move on...The irony of it is that the perceived high performers and the perceived low performers were never any different in the first place!

You're never going to get rid of that perception thing whilst ever you've got an outside party - such as a mine manager - that only sees a bloke for, well, if he sees him once a week, if that! The manager might go underground and walk past him for 15 minutes on a shift. That's all he's seen him for a week - or a month. How can he fucking rate him on his fucking job if that's all he sees him?

[Interview 17, panel development miner 2]

#### **8.4.3 Parody**

Parody, a trope where miners used the performance appraisal system in mimicry as a tool to audit the performance of management (a turning of the tables, so to speak), was another common dissonance theme:

They [managers] have these talks at the start of a shift – we call them 'karaoke meetings'. They go on about lost time and get so upset about how much time we lose on sick leave, worker's compensation, training, and so

on. And someone pipes up and asks, 'How many hours have we lost with all these performance review meetings? What is the point? You tell us all the time that we waste time – what about all the time you waste in performance reviews?'

[Interview 30, longwall miner 6]

Miners used parody to challenge the legitimacy of the rating system by suggesting it be used likewise to rate their managers:

I just like to get on with my job and do what I'm told. But I do wonder whether they could cope with us turning the tables on them and telling them what we think of their performance – 'You're an A, you're a C, you're a D!' Sure, I don't like it. I feel bad. I could get violent. But I talk about it a lot and get over it. It's so unfair. It gets you down. But what's the use? I won't let it change my work ethic...

I do what I'm told; I go where you send me, even though this time of year it's freezing cold, heavy wet, dirty. There are people who object and refuse to do some of the things I'm asked to do. So they get better jobs. It's so unfair...I think I'm as good an employee as those who get the best jobs... I'm flexible, I cooperate, I have a work ethic.

[Interview 30, longwall miner 6]

In the interview above, the miner positions himself as a responsible miner who is willing to obey orders and work wherever he is sent in the pit, while others who refuse to obey what does not suit them are rewarded with better jobs and higher scores. This, to him, is evidence of poor management. The miner skilfully appropriates the language of appraisal to turn the tables on managers. They would score poorly based on their own standards. The miner would be better off if miners scored managers rather than vice versa.

Miners also used their ratings in a parodic sense to resist the classifications of managers. For example, miners who were rated as a 'C' (average) turned the rating system back on managers by refused to do certain dirty work in future:

This guy gets a B, and this other guy, who is a better worker, does more on the job, gets a C. Certainly some of them said – I heard them say it to their coordinators, ‘Well, next time you want this dirty, stinking job done, you go and ask your B to do it. Don’t come and ask me to do it, because I’m not going to do it. You go and ask that B. You obviously think he’s a better worker than me, so you get him to do it.’

[Interview 10, union official 2]

One of the lasting outcomes of insulted dignity was the damage done to relationships among miners. Those who scored ‘C’ [average] were given a hard time by higher scorers. Whenever they did something wrong, their mates would tease them: ‘*No wonder you’re a C-er!*’ But the converse was also true. Those who scored A’s were ribbed by their workmates for being ‘teacher’s pet’ or castigated for ‘sucking up to management’. Friendly as the banter sounded, it damaged interpersonal relationships underground.

#### **8.4.4 *Sarcasm***

The account mentioned above where a union official recounted the story of how one manager tried to defend his rating of a miner’s safety record, even after it had been pointed out to him that he was factually in error for downgrading the miner for not wearing his safety glasses illustrates the use of sarcasm as a subset of irony. Indeed, the union official observed that when management was finished describing the deficiencies of the miner he ‘*wasn’t fit to be a bloody pastry cook!*’ Such a sarcastic contrast between someone doing ‘soft’ work with his hands as a pastry cook compared to someone doing ‘dirty work’ underground carried with it passionate refutation of the capacity of managers to judge the worthiness of miner skills and capabilities.

The following story contains a simple plot of a miner being offended by the rating score dumped on him by a perpetrator who, ironically, is anything but a ‘mate’. The miner uses sarcasm to deflect the indignity of being rated as ‘average’. There is an obvious barb in the response, as evidenced by the crude language, indicating

displeasure at being treated like a schoolchild. But there is also a hint of triumph in turning the tables on the relative worth of the score and laughing at the perpetrator.

I'll give you another example - of a bloke who got a C. A certain deputy said: Oh, you've got a C this year mate.'

And he said, 'Fucking great. I never scored that well at school. Beauty!'  
[Laughter]

[Interview 53, longwall miner 15]

A material artefact hanging above the union office door at Dover Colliery also symbolised the sarcasm of workers towards managers. Someone had hung a clown's mask replete with wiry black hair and enlarged red nose above the union door. Beneath the mask, the sign read: 'The Mine Manager'. The thickness of the coal dust which had settled on the mask indicated that the mask had hung there for a considerable period of time; the fact that it remained above the union door, on the Dover Colliery premises, for such a long period of time was a symbol of ongoing miner resistance.

## **8.5 Discussion**

This chapter has explored in detail how managerial classification schemes such as performance ratings are discursively understood and resisted by employees. A common miner response to the insult of a poor rating was 'if that's what you think I am, that's what [behaviour] you'll get from now on'. Some chose to continue to perform their work well out of a sense of pride in their work, and a sense of responsibility to their team mates, but chose not to expend discretionary effort for the company. Miners' indignation at being rated, which they saw as a humiliating affront to their identities as professional miners, fuelled resistance to the 'imposed tropes' (Oswick et al. 2004) of managers, specifically the pressures of conformity to their concept of 'ideal miner'. Appraisal can be a double-edged sword; the same rhetoric used by managers to demonize workers can be used by workers to demonize managers.

Miners at the coalface deeply resented the individuating process of performance rating. It disrupted their highly valued culture of solidarity expressed in their oft-repeated phrase '*watching each other's backs*' in the dangerous conditions of mining. Any HRM process that 'pits mate against mate' was seen to be particularly irksome. For an outsider (such as an above-ground supervisor) to breach the informal performance management processes that existed in the mining teams was particularly insulting and disruptive to miner occupational identity. The present chapter demonstrates that HR practices can have seriously negative consequences of employees' sense of worth in the workplace. 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.

To the Dover miners, performance rating operated on a deficit model of assessment, reducing complex employee behaviours to categories or numbers. Especially when these numbers are forced onto a normal distribution curve, the majority of workers are clearly losers – and virtually all workers rate less than the conceptual 'ideal' worker. Yet, even those few who 'win' the top scores feel shamed by the implications of being publicly rated by another, who by definition must be more powerful, or more knowledgeable than they are. Such shame incites feelings of belittlement and insult, which generates discursive forms of resistance, one such practice being dissonance tropes-in-use as a counter-discourse highlighting the contradictions and hypocrisies of a less-than-perfect management.

Simply stated, performance ratings caused considerable disruption to miners' identities, resulting in negative emotions of shame, embarrassment and anger. Shame, it will be recalled, is an intersubjectively generated emotion and results in profoundly intense sentiment projected outwardly through a sense of insult and attribution of motive towards the real or perceived perpetrator. Dissonance tropes allowed for emotional release in powerfully cathartic ways; dissonance tropes-in-use were a way to bolster and defend miner identity in the face of ratings that were interpreted as management insults. One of the ways miners responded to being insulted was by recounting stories of managerial incompetence. Not only did such stories help them recover a sense of their own collective identity by tarnishing that

of managerial ‘others’, but it also gave them a sense of vicarious pleasure to ‘rate’ their bosses. As Sims (2005:1637-1638) has observed:

Indignation can feel good. It is a very certain emotion, an emotion in which we know who we are, and know that we are right...There is a warm glow to be had in knowing that someone can be looked down on as a bastard...the joy and guilt of demonizing are one, and together form a piquant sauce which organizational members are not likely to give up.

## **Chapter 9     Summary and discussion**

### **9.1     Introduction**

This thesis draws attention to the need to understand more clearly employee responses to human resource management practices. Through qualitative research at an underground coal mine over a five year period, this study examined the sense that miners made of a managerially imposed performance appraisal system. After reviewing relevant performance appraisal issues in the traditional and critical streams of HRM literature, a model was developed in Chapter 3 through which to analyse miners' responses to HRM interventions. In drawing attention to the discursive responses of miners to being appraised, and the subsequent identity work occasioned by the appraisal process, this model was employed to analyse the research material and reach conclusions regarding the reasons for miners' negative responses to appraisal, as reported in detail in Chapters 5 to 8 of this thesis. This final chapter summarises those findings, comments on the significance of the thesis for HRM academics and practitioners, and suggests areas for further research.

### **9.2     Summary of the findings**

Why did miners at Dover Colliery react so negatively to the imposition of a performance appraisal system, in the absence of any formal links to pay, promotion or other material outcomes? In short, appraisal is not a power neutral device. Appraisal ratings breached a number of long-established and highly valued identity elements of miners. These breaches of identity elements were, in effect, managerial transgressions against the miners' occupational identity. Miners, who felt insulted and offended by comparative performance ratings, responded to the disciplinary effects of appraisals in a number of ways to appropriate, subvert and invert the appraisal discourse. In so doing, they repaired and restored their occupational identity in the face of perceived attack from managerial 'outsiders'. This thesis demonstrates the incommensurability of evaluative appraisal at Dover Colliery with the managerial rhetoric of performance improvement. Divisive HR techniques do



not increase discretionary effort. At Dover, they instead produced bitter and angry responses from miners who experienced the existential angst of all people whose identities are challenged. This study indicates that evaluating individual performance in work settings that are essentially team based creates unnecessary division between workers, a sense of loss of professional pride, and a sense of shame which turns into anger particularly among those whose efforts are constructed as ‘average’ or worse.

### **9.3 Theoretical contributions of the thesis**

This thesis makes a number of theoretical contributions to knowledge in the field of HRM. First, it develops a framework through which to make sense of the vast literature on performance appraisal. In both the mainstream or prescriptive approach on the one hand, and the critical stream of literature on the other, the employee is generally seen in instrumental terms as a means to managerial ends. HRM is something *done to* the employee (Newton 1998). However, both streams have sub-themes where attempts are made to consider employee perspectives. In the mainstream literature, employees’ attitudes are investigated for instrumental and managerialist purposes, to extract extra effort from labour. In the critical stream there are some employee-centric studies seeking to understand the lived experiences of workers. However, few of these consider the impact of HRM initiatives on employees’ occupational identities.

Second, the thesis develops and extends Alvesson and Willmott’s (2002) model of identity regulation to include occupational identity, a concept that explains the Dover miners’ reactions to appraisal. When combined with Grant and Shields’ (2002) framework, a model results through which to analyse the qualitative data collected at Dover Colliery. This framework allows the discursive responses of miners to appraisal to emerge from the analysis of the various ‘texts’ that miners produced during the research period. The thesis demonstrates the analytical leverage gained by using the constructs of discursive concepts, objects and subjects as a method through which to sort qualitative data into relevant and salient themes.

Third, the thesis also draws together stands of identity theory from a number of disciplines including psychology, sociology, and social psychology to enrich our understanding of the effects of HRM practices on worker identity. The research at Dover Colliery confirms recent assertions that peoples' identities are not as precarious as some earlier studies may have supposed (for example, Knights and Willmott 1989). Occupational identities emerge at Dover Colliery as 'continuously-created construals of the social world' that allow miners the flexibility of 'improvisation in their responses to concrete situations and experimentation in the attitudes which they take up' (Armstrong 2008:27). Research at Dover indicates that miners struggled with the identity-effects of appraisal but refused to be subjugated by the ascriptions contained in their performance ratings.

### **9.3.1 Occupational identity: A neglected aspect of HRM**

While there is a vast conceptual literature on identity, very little of it has found its way into the HRM field. This neglect has both theoretical and practical implications for HRM. While HRM studies often see the worker in instrumental terms as *individuals* to be managed as resources, workers actually develop shared occupational identities through relationships in the workplace. These identities can serve as the basis for resistance to HRM interventions, of which performance appraisal is a prime example.

The study of coalface miners highlights the notion that identity is a relational concept; identity is forged in interaction with other people through awareness of the self-other dialectic, but also in conjunction with the environment. The dirty work (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999) and danger at Dover Colliery were, for example, often raised as part of miners' stories of who they were and what they did. Occupational identity is seen in the discourse of miners to be constituted through various 'elements' (Reveley and McLean 2008:134), each of which was more or less salient to individual miners. Because identity is a relational concept, elements of identity varied in salience at different points in time based on the nature of the ongoing relationship with the 'other', and also based on factors such as the perceived threats or transgressions of the moment. Thus, occupational identity is seen as a continual

work-in-progress rather than some finished product. The data suggest that occupational identity is in a constant state of *becoming* – contested and defended in ongoing workplace interactions, including those with managerial ‘others’.

Kitay and Wright (2007:1635) argue that the structural features of work ‘influence the patterns of identity construction that members of particular occupations present about themselves and their work’. Their contention is supported by this thesis. Features of the workplace such as the danger, the isolation underground, the expertise needed to manipulate massive machinery in confined spaces, and the need to work in ‘crews’ all feature prominently in miners’ sensemaking regarding their occupational identities. This is not to say that structure determines identity. A central feature of coal miners’ responses at Dover Colliery were the discursive resources they brought into play to resist being classified into categories by appraisal raters.

The findings of this thesis relate directly to occupational identity – appraisal fractured pre-existing occupational identity elements. It was the transgression of these identities that precipitated much of the negative reaction to performance appraisal. Rather than workers being subjugated by appraisal, evidence from Dover Colliery suggests that miners responded as active agential selves to subvert and invert the appraisal discourse.

The thesis augments and extends Alvesson and Willmott’s (2002) model of identity regulation, identity work and self-identity. Miners saw themselves as an elite group of workers who had developed their own view of the social order and saw themselves as an occupational collective. They talked in terms of ‘we miners...’ and defined themselves discursively as separate from the ‘other’ group which they termed ‘management’. While occupational identity, for some, is a concept used to describe distinctive skills and expertise which transcend the boundaries of a single organization (for example, Ashforth et al. 2008), in this thesis occupational identity has followed the work of Fine (1996; 2006) who sees it not as a fixed entity but as malleable within a range of shared meanings developed through the rhetoric of occupational members *in situ*. Miners responded to appraisal as a long-standing site specific group; for example, they rejected their individual rating scores for what was

essentially a group process as ‘bullshit’ and ‘insane’. This thesis therefore contributes to and extends Fine’s concept of occupational identity by providing evidence from the voices of miners in an industrial setting very different from those that Fine studied.

### **9.3.2 Identity defence through storytelling**

This thesis demonstrates the analytic potential of storytelling in finding out workers’ feelings, and thus in gaining access to the ‘micro-world of emotions and relationships’ (Scheff 2006:viii). Miners used various storytelling devices to frame their experiences of appraisal, weaving together themes, plots and accounts of appraisal experiences through which they painted themselves as both victims and heroes, at the same time portraying managers as the villains. Most miners were reticent to talk openly about their innermost feelings. For example, when a miner was asked ‘How did you *feel* after being appraised?’ he responded, ‘If you’ve got *feelings* you’re in the wrong fucking industry!’ A harsh and dangerous physical environment, austere facilities, and an impersonal management style were the contextual backdrop against which miners felt that they were being treated like objects of production rather than human beings with feelings and complex emotional needs. Yet, when offered the opportunity to talk about what happened when appraisals were introduced, these same miners seemed quite comfortable storying their experiences of people and events in the workplace. Miners’ stories provided eloquent testimony to the insult and offence occasioned by the rating process. Miners’ stories, usually with simple plots, and truncated themes of cause and effect, revealed much about their feelings, emotions and defence mechanisms.

Storytelling as both a sense-making device and a resistance strategy functioned as a powerful discursive resource for miners. Their views of the social world of work emerged through their storied exchanges with friends, immediate colleagues and others encountered in the course of their work (Armstrong 2008) – and then shared with me as a trusted ‘outsider’ because of the journey I had shared with them over a five year period. The Dover case study has confirmed Timming’s (2007:261) assertion that there is not one organizational reality but a series of intersubjective

interpretations of it. In listening to the actual stories of miners it became apparent that their stories differed from prevailing managerial interpretations of the same events. The above-ground world of managers was a universe apart from the underground domain of coalface miners.

Knights and Willmott (1989) argue that there is an irreducible ambiguity at the heart of identity construction, characterized as it is by a dual experience of self as both subject (active agent in the world) and object (reflecting on the way others see the self). This ambiguity is managed by attempts to secure a stable identity. Miners at Dover struggled with the complexities and contradictions of being both subjects and objects by sharing stories to position themselves variously as stoic heroes or tragic objects of undeserved trauma. Stories were infused with power based on notions of inclusion and exclusion – what was presented as legitimate, right and proper and what was excluded. Anger and indignation were prevalent emotions in miners' stories. Miners obviously derived a certain pleasure – and a temporary sense of resolution to their identity ambiguity – through indignantly sharing stories about the experiences which they had 'endured' during the various rounds of appraisals. The research confirms Hardy and Phillips' (2004:306) proposition that actors use texts as 'weapons'; miners used stories as political acts to create meanings compatible with their interests. The Dover case confirms that, despite the asymmetries of power in the employment relationship, spaces for resistances are found or 'prised open' by injured subjects when they are treated as HRM objects.

Miners contested the appraisal discourse by refusing to accept the legitimacy of managers to assess accurately their work underground. Through a restatement of their narrative identities as competent, professional miners they, in effect, challenged the power relations assumed by the dominant coalition, refusing to be treated as objects of appraisal.

#### **9.4 Implications for human resource practitioners**

The employee experience, rather than managerial reports of employee attitudes or behaviour, can greatly help our understanding of the impact of HRM techniques

(McKinlay and Taylor 1996:279). The qualitative nature of the study allowed multiple voices to be heard. Deviant or outlier comments were not excluded from the study. The study extends our understanding of employee identification processes in the workplace, drawing attention to situated identification in collectives, teams and roles. It also draws attention to cognitive, evaluative and emotional investments in identities in the workplace (Ashforth et al. 2008:328) and demonstrates how robust occupational identities may undermine HRM interventions.

The Dover Colliery case study indicates that HR practitioners who ignore identity issues do so at their peril. Mainstream unitarist HRM privileges managerial prerogative to the virtual exclusion of employee voice. Performance appraisal ratings, at least as practiced at Dover, were constructed on a deficit model of individual performance. Employees saw themselves as being ‘marked down’ by appraisal. Appraisal objectified employees as problems to be solved. There were negative identity implications even for those whose scores were at the top end of the normal distribution curve. Just as Arthur Miller’s (1949) iconic ‘Death of a Salesman’ describes the painful mental and emotional collapse of Willy Loman as his sales performance starts to decline in the latter years of his working life (‘you’re only as good as your last sale’), so too successive rounds of performance appraisal threatened the occupational identity of miners with the message that they were only as good as their last appraisal. Such a message was offensive to miners who risked their lives on a daily basis for the company. Thus, appraisal had the unintended consequence of identity threat. This thesis shows that applying a generic HR performance management model can have serious unintended consequences. As demonstrated at Dover, workers are not passive recipients of managerial initiatives. Miners brought into play discursive resources to undermine a system which to them was fatally flawed, thereby taking an even more negative view of mine managers than was the case before the appraisal system was introduced.

Orthodox performance appraisal, as practised at Dover Colliery, dwelt on measuring past behaviour, whereas strategic HRM calls for a focus on what could enhance *future* performance. If indeed enhanced performance is the organizational objective, then Wenger’s (2000) work on communities of practice and social learning systems

offers some possibilities for a more effective and sustainable approach. Continuous improvement through learning, rather than through management by fear (Deming 1986) offers more employee-centric possibilities. Wenger calls for a *social* approach to learning, in contradistinction to performance appraisal which was seen at Dover Colliery to be an individuating divide-and-rule practice. Given the socially constructed nature of identity, the active engagement of communities of practitioners in social learning experiences may energise a mutually reinforcing focus towards constructive pursuits. Wenger proposes that 'if knowing is an act of belonging, then our identities are a key structuring element of how we know' (2000:238). Rather than appraisal which transgresses identities, a form of social learning which supports and celebrates identity elements may be a way forward.

Identity is crucial to social learning systems in a number of ways. Past experience and a sense of competence guides decisions regarding who we trust and with whom we share what we understand. Secondly, our sense of identity gives us the openness to explore and engage with other practices and ways of being in the world (as opposed to miners who, when confronted with an identity threat tended to defend the self rather than be open to possibilities). Thirdly, our sense of belonging to multiple communities enables us to construct bridges across and between these communities, in the process cross-pollinating the learning systems of those multiple communities. Therefore, if a mining company, for example, wished to enhance performance through the continuous learning and development of its workforce, it would benefit from exposing its members to other mining communities, where the sharing of tacit and explicit knowledge would benefit all. One of the surprising findings of the present study was the paucity of formal contact between miners at the various collieries, even while working for the same multinational company. While a number of the miners were able to comment about different technologies being used at different mine sites by virtue of the fact that various family members worked in different mines, there were no formal channels for sharing productivity gains through innovation at one mine with workers at another mine site. Thus, rather than appraisal which targets individual identity, and blames individuals for productivity problems, avenues such as knowledge sharing and celebrating group

accomplishments, no matter how small, may offer greater opportunities for performance improvement.

Coal miners demonstrate Wenger's assertion that '[a] strong identity involves deep connections with others through shared histories and experiences, reciprocity, affection, and mutual commitments' (2000:239). Mine managers could do more to shore up the opportunities for miners to share work experiences through more informal chats, crib room discussions and visits to other mine sites for fact finding and information sharing. These suggestions are not new; these possibilities were raised by miners themselves in response to my survey question asking how productivity could be improved at their mine site. Miners recognize that productivity gains are more a feature of technological improvement than individual effort alone.

This thesis challenges orthodox assumptions in the performance management literature regarding the efficacy of appraisals. Even with the most perfectly designed performance appraisal systems – even if the performance criteria were clear, discrete and perfectly measurable – any system which confronts or challenges an individual's sense of self will be resisted. Where a sense of occupational identity or community develops in the workplace – and there is sound evidence that such identities are to be encouraged because they enhance social learning systems, organizational learning and organizational effectiveness (Wenger 2000) – resistance in the face of such occupational identity disruption is intensified by the mutual support of colleagues. Further, rating systems which grade an individual do not fit in contexts where work is team based or sequentially interdependent. Rating focuses on the individual whereas productivity is often affected by systems factors outside the individual's control.

The Performance Management Superintendent at Dover Colliery eventually concluded that the ratings system must be scrapped, and contended that a process encouraging the development rather than the evaluation of miners be introduced. However, many of the managers at Dover were not equipped to be developers. They had survived in their management positions in the aggressive, male dominated mining industry, with its historic divisions of labour, by being blunt, decisive, and



dictatorial. They held neither the skills nor the attributes necessary for a developmental model of performance management. Such a coaching system did not fit the workplace context or culture. This thesis, therefore, questions the power neutral, ahistorical and acontextual assumptions of the orthodox performance management literature regarding the efficacy of performance appraisals.

## **9.5 Suggestions for further research**

Our understanding of employee reactions to HRM practices would be improved if similar studies were conducted in other mature, heavy industries. The theoretical framework developed in this thesis is eminently suited to studying the introduction of HRM practices in similar industries such as ports, shipping and meat processing, where workers evince strong occupational identities. Because of factors already addressed in this thesis, such as the inherent dangers in their work, and the close bonds of solidarity with workmates who must ‘watch each other’s backs’ for survival, such workers probably experience a more tightly knit occupational community than most employees would, and probably are more vocal regarding managerial transgressions of their workplace identities. While similar results are likely to be found in other heavy industries, especially where there are elements of danger and ‘dirty work’, it is possible that occupational identity breaches may also be experienced by people (for example, call centre operators) who work in close proximity to one another.

Employee responses to performance ratings may differ in a workplace with both male and female employees. Miners at Dover Colliery provide a masculinist example of responses because they are spurred on by the support they give and receive from each other in an all-male environment. Work by Geddes and Konrad (2003) suggests that males are more likely than females to react negatively to negative feedback. It remains to be investigated whether employee reactions might be muted in a workforce where females are in the majority.

Mainstream HRM literature assumes that performance appraisal will improve employee behaviour. That assumption is not supported in the present case. Some

miners admitted temporarily ‘lifting of their game’ for impression management purposes (Goffman 1959). Some claimed that they ‘did their job’ exactly the same after the ratings because they were ‘bullshit’ and ‘a bloody waste of time’. Others admitted being discouraged and saying ‘if that’s what they think of me, that’s how I’ll behave.’ In other words, there were multiple and varying accounts of the behavioural impacts of appraisal. A number of the deputies (underground crew supervisors) stated that performance was *worse* after appraisal than before. On the survey which I conducted at Dover, the highest response from miners on the question ‘I would be more productive in my job if...’ was: ‘If management would show me more appreciation’. Work could be done to investigate the transformative effects of more appreciative work relationships on subsequent performance, in line with miners’ responses on my Dover Colliery survey. Cooperrider et al. (2000) have done work on appreciative enquiry, especially on the sharing of positive stories as a basis for mutual generation of future plans and aspirations, which could be investigated in light of HRM practices. However, such an approach usually seeks a ‘univocal outcome’ at the price of some voices being silenced or marginalized while other voices are privileged (Oswick et al. 2000:899). On the other hand, processes of genuine dialogue, while generating polyphonic perspectives, may create spaces where employees find new and more satisfying ways of knowledge generation and capacity for action (Argyris and Schon 1978).

## 9.6 Conclusion

Despite the premise of the individuating tendencies of much of contemporary HRM practice (individual recruitment, individual selection, individual appraisal, individual pay, individual promotion), this process did not, at Dover Colliery, lead to competition between workers to beat each other to the highest scores. Rather, it turned miners *as a group* against managers. This study concurs with Armstrong’s (2008:24-25) suggestion that:

A more constructive approach to the ‘missing subject’ of the labour process requires a return to – and updating of – an earlier and more reflexive tradition, in which workers are treated, not as the disoriented victims of some

hypostasised individualization, but as industrial sociologists in their own right, with their own theories of the social order and of the potentials attached to their own place within it.

This thesis used discursive analytic methods to listen to the actual voices of miners to hear how they made sense of the experiences enacted upon them by the appraisal process. Coal miners may have been disoriented by receiving ratings less than they felt they deserved, but they quickly mobilized discursive resources to contest, confute, malign and invert the appraisal texts for their own purposes. Spurred on by the mutual exchange of stories of managerial incompetence and ineptitude, miners found ways to resist and defeat the troublesome transgressions of their occupational identities. Far from being subjugated, miners devised tactics of delay, resistance and appeals against the appraisal ratings to slow the appraisal process down until it ground to a feeble halt. Rather than managers 'squeezing the lemon' through the appraisals to extract more discretionary effort from miners, empirical evidence suggests that miners developed their own discursive strategies to choke the life out of the appraisal process, thus restoring their occupational identities and workplace dignity.

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## What do you think about the Performance Review Process at Dover Colliery?

On the attached survey, please **circle** the responses that best describe your experience of the performance review process here at Dover Colliery. **You may circle more than one response** if necessary. If your opinion is different to the listed responses, you are welcome to add your own comments.

When you have completed the survey, please drop it in the box provided in the Muster Room.

This research survey is conducted by Peter McLean, School of Management and Marketing, University of Wollongong, NSW 2522.

The purpose is to investigate the impact of performance reviews on your working life. While some of the comments you make might be fed back to management, your identity will remain strictly confidential.

If you don't want to do the survey today, please take it home and complete it later. Please bring it back any time this week, and put it in the survey box in the Muster Room. Or you can mail it to the following address:

Peter McLean  
School of Management and Marketing  
University of Wollongong  
NSW 2522.

Thank you for your responses. If you'd like to chat in more detail about how these reviews affect your working life, you are welcome to telephone me at the University of Wollongong.

My direct line is (02) 4221 3647. Thanks for your help!  
Peter McLean

**What do you think about the Performance Review Process at Dover Colliery?**

Please **circle** below whatever responses best describe your experience of the performance review process here at Dover Colliery. **You may circle more than one response** if necessary. If your opinion is different to the listed responses, please add your own comments.

Rating accuracy

- 7. I think that in my last performance review:
  - a. My assessments were very accurate
  - b. My assessments were mostly accurate
  - c. My assessments weren't very accurate
  - d. The assessors got it all wrong
  - e. What I think about the rating system is... (tell us, please)

.....

.....

.....

Feedback

- 8. I think that in my last performance review:
  - a. I got very useful feedback on how I can be more effective in my job
  - b. I got just a few ideas about how to improve
  - c. Feedback was not very helpful in improving my effectiveness
  - d. Improvement wasn't even mentioned
  - e. The whole review was a waste of time
  - f. My opinion of my last review is...

.....

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.....

Review meeting

- 9. My last review meeting:
  - a. Was filled with praise for my work
  - b. There was some praise for my work
  - c. Was somewhat critical of my work
  - d. Was filled with negative remarks about my work
  - e. I'd describe my reviewer's comments as ...

.....

.....

.....

## My feelings about myself

10. **After** the last review meeting, I felt:

- a. Highly motivated
- b. Somewhat motivated
- c. Not very well motivated
- d. De-motivated
- e. Angry and upset
- f. What I felt was...

.....

.....

.....

## My work behaviour

11. **After** the last review meeting, I:

- a. Changed my work behaviour – I worked harder to meet management expectations
- b. Worked harder for a while then slipped back to my normal working habits
- c. Decided to do only what was required of me
- d. Didn't work as hard because I was de-motivated
- e. There was nothing that needed changing so it made no difference to me
- f. None of the above – my response was...

.....

.....

.....

## My job satisfaction

12. **After** the last review meeting, I:

- a. Had a much stronger feeling of job satisfaction
- b. Felt somewhat more positive about my job
- c. Felt somewhat dissatisfied about my job
- d. Had strong feelings of job dissatisfaction
- e. I'd describe my feelings towards my job as...

.....

.....

.....

## My productivity

13. In my opinion, I would be more productive on my job if:

- a. Management would leave me alone
- b. I was paid more
- c. I was trained more
- d. I had better equipment
- e. I had more support from workmates
- f. Management would show me more appreciation
- g. I'd be more productive if

.....  
.....  
.....

14. Imagine there was an **overall** rating system of performance, from A to E where A = excellent, C = acceptable and E = poor. Circle where you think you'd be scored (based on how you read the present situation in the company)

Overall, I think the **Company** (Undermanager and above) would rate my work performance as:

A      B      C      D      E

Overall, I think **my immediate supervisor** would rate my work performance as:

A      B      C      D      E

Overall, I would rate **my own** work performance as:

A      B      C      D      E

A = Excellent

C = Acceptable    E = poor performance

15. Complete the following sentence. **‘The best way to improve performance in my work area would be to...’**

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

For analytical purposes, please could you circle your work area below?

CC - Coal Clearance  
LW - Longwall  
D -- Development

ES – Engineering Services  
GD – Gas Drainage  
MS – Mine Services

When you’ve completed the survey, please drop it in the box in the Muster Room.

Thank you!

Peter McLean, University of Wollongong (02) 4221 3647





## Report to MNC Coal: A summary of survey results of the Performance Review Processes at Dover Colliery

Attached is a compilation of miner responses to a nine question survey conducted on 24 & 25 June 2003. The researcher offered surveys to miners at the start of morning, afternoon and evening shifts on two consecutive days.

55 useable surveys were returned.

The following pages tabulate their responses, and summarize trends identified.

The purpose of the survey was to investigate the impact of the performance review process on employees. Tracking employee responses to the performance reviews would help identify improvements and gains being made in the MNC Coal's performance management process.

Further discussion on this research would be welcomed. The researcher's contact details are:

Peter McLean  
School of Management and Marketing  
University of Wollongong  
NSW 2522

Office: (02) 4221 3647

## **Appendix B Report to MNC Coal on Results of Miner Survey at Dover Colliery**

### **The Survey:**

Miners were asked a series of 9 questions about the performance review process at Dover Colliery. The questions were constructed from earlier responses in face-to-face interviews with a number of workers from various sections of the workforce at Dover Colliery.

Miners were asked to circle whatever responses described their thoughts and feelings. They could circle more than one response, and there was space after each question to record other responses to the question.

Each question is listed in the report, followed by a graphic representation of response frequency, and then a tabulation of other written comments. Not all employees responded to each question, and some employees circled more than one response to a question, so the figures don't add to a 100% total for any one category.

The report concludes with a section that reflects on some of the issues that cannot be captured by raw statistical data, but are obvious in reading the surveys.

You are welcome to contact me if you would like to discuss any of the issues raised in this report in more detail.

Peter McLean  
University of Wollongong  
(02) 4221 3647

25 September 2003

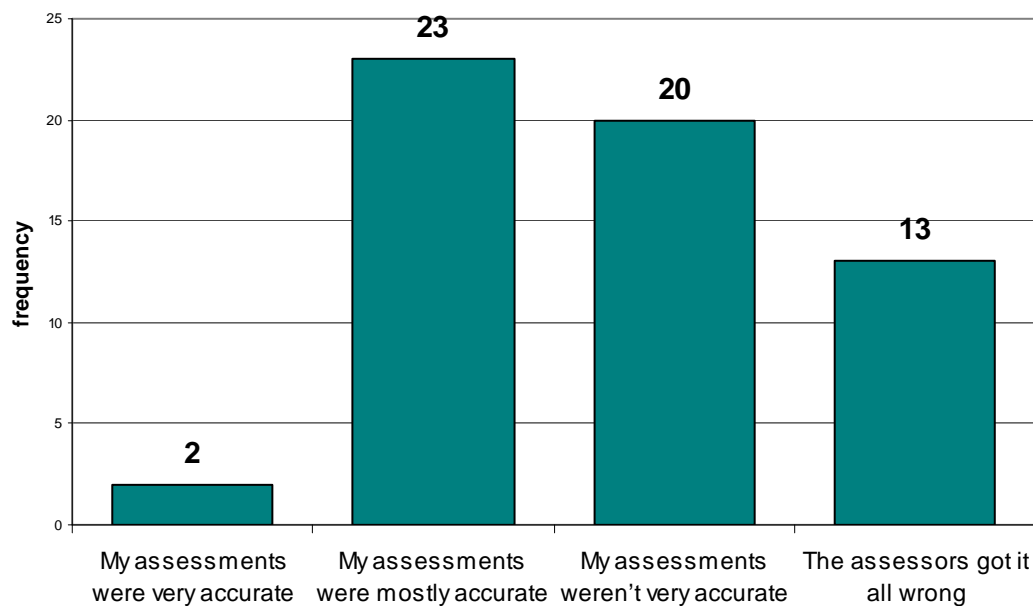
## Rating accuracy

1. I think that in my last performance review:
  - a. My assessments were very accurate
  - b. My assessments were mostly accurate
  - c. My assessments weren't very accurate
  - d. The assessors got it all wrong
  - e. What I think about the rating system is... (Tell us, please!)

*Purpose of the question:*

*MNC Coal's managers have laboured over the identification and description of performance management criteria. Expensive management time has also been spent on the calibration process. This question is designed to identify the degree of miner acceptance of the assessment criteria, and the rating process. This is referred to as procedural justice, the extent to which there is perceived fairness of the procedures used to make rating decisions.*

**I think that in my last performance review ....**



Hand written comments in response to this question:

- Basically they cannot have all A's or B's, so if your face don't fit, you're a C, D, or E.
- It's divisive, immature, unnecessary given the experience and age of the workforce.

## **Appendix B Report to MNC Coal on Results of Miner Survey at Dover Colliery**

- Assessments made by people who are largely incompetent themselves.
- Very demeaning – wrong to pit workmates against each other – one person's perceptions and personality should not come into it, but it does.
- Causes animosity in workplace and resentment. Assessors don't have a true rating of people in the workplace.
- Character assassination.
- Lot of rubbish.
- Not all management know what people do.
- It is not performance based but personality based.
- It is prone to personality conflict.
- It is totally biased.
- I found my score was dependant on other people's [scores] – that is how many A's, B's or C's.
- It's discrimination with a capital 'D'!
- I think the assessors don't always know what the person actually does in his job.
- If the undermanager doesn't like you, he marks you right down.
- Not enough emphasis on attendance. They want 'bums on seats'. Base it on attendance 80%; 20% the rest - safety. The rest is bullshit and repeat themselves anyway.
- Not impartial, personalities come into the assessment.
- Bullshit!
- The assessor that assessed me only saw me for about 5 minutes each day.
- Too much personal opinion of people goes into assessment.
- [My assessments were] satisfactory.
- The assessments were only based on what the undermanager saw and not on my whole work contribution. It was clear that the review was more a personality review than a performance review. The ratings clearly weren't consistent across the workforce.
- Based on personality and not on performance.
- Waste of time.
- Should be assessed himself [assessor].
- It appeared that I and others were pre-assessed on the rating system.

## **Appendix B Report to MNC Coal on Results of Miner Survey at Dover Colliery**

### **Summary:**

A surprisingly large number of workers accepted that their assessments were ‘mostly accurate’. This indicates that, whether the worker agrees with the worth of the review or not, at least they can see a relationship between the criteria and their scores. However, there is room for improvement because the majority still believes that the process is neither a valid nor a reliable way to measure their contribution to the company. Of major concern are statements to the effect that the ratings are seen as degrading, demeaning, biased and attacking their character. These perceptions will diminish the power of the process to bring about performance improvement.

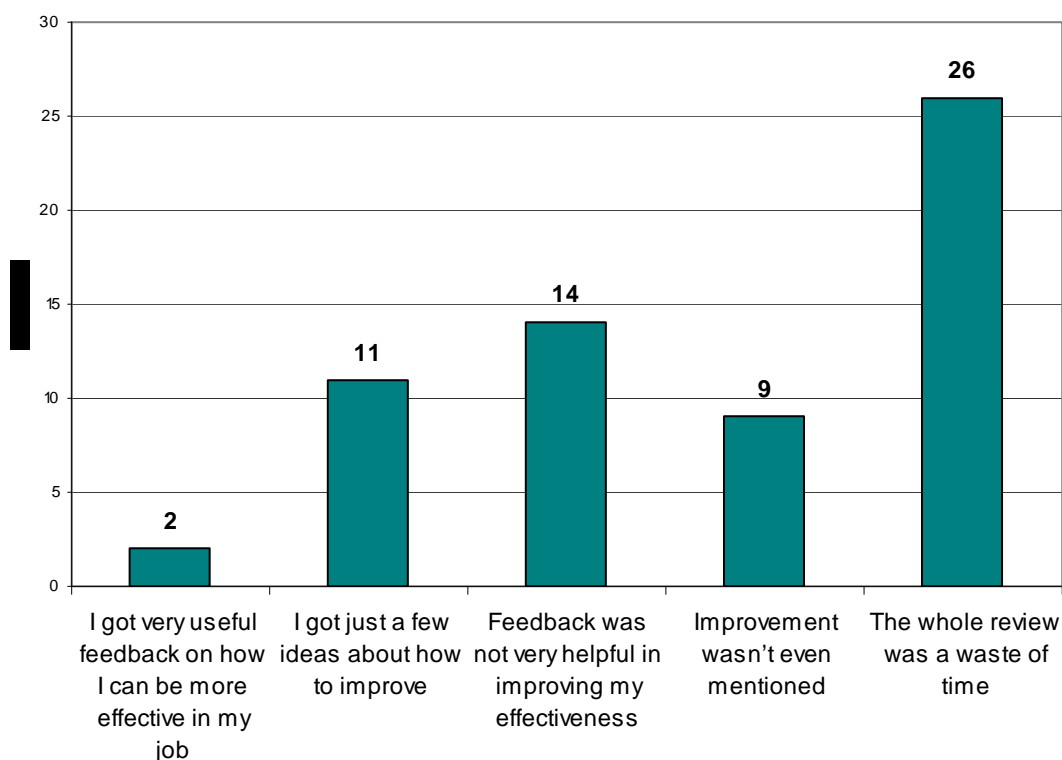
# Feedback

2. I think that in my last performance review:
  - a. I got very useful feedback on how I can be more effective in my job
  - b. I got just a few ideas about how to improve
  - c. Feedback was not very helpful in improving my effectiveness
  - d. Improvement wasn't even mentioned
  - e. The whole review was a waste of time
  - f. My opinion of my last review is...

*Purpose of the question:*

*MNC Coal has spent a considerable amount of time training assessors in the feedback process. Tracking responses to this question may indicate the effectiveness of assessor training, or may indicate the need for a change of focus to be more forward looking towards performance **enhancement** in the next review period.*

I think in my last performance review ...



Handwritten comments in response to this question:

- It is very easy for the assessor to make it a personal like or dislike towards the employee
- The same as the previous one – been in the job/know my job and do it.

## **Appendix B Report to MNC Coal on Results of Miner Survey at Dover Colliery**

- People doing the review have very little to do with me, yet they do the assessment.
- Totally out of whack.
- Bullshit!
- Said I was doing fine, then gave me a low ranking.
- The whole review was a waste of time because it was personal. If this certain undermanager doesn't like you, you've had it.
- Shit.
- They must have got the wrong person!
- Too high a turnover of in-charge people.
- Now hoard resentment towards people doing assessments.
- Had no logical explanations on their rating systems.
- I was told to gain some more skill which would require training. I've heard nothing since!

### **Summary:**

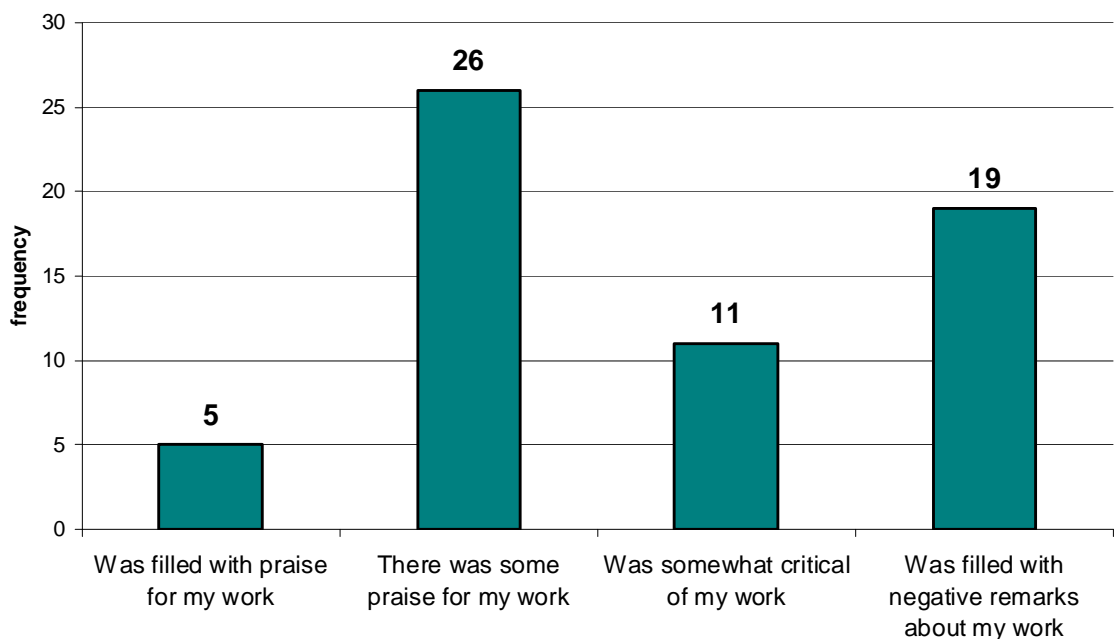
A small number of workers felt that they received some useful ideas in their review meetings. However, the majority felt that the review process was fatally flawed, with no useful outcomes. Some felt there was no real focus on the future. Others received mixed messages, receiving praise for their work, then receiving what to them was a low score. Perhaps more emphasis on alternative positive behaviours could add a more constructive focus to the review discussions.

## Review meeting

3. My last review meeting:
- Was filled with praise for my work
  - There was some praise for my work
  - Was somewhat critical of my work
  - Was filled with negative remarks about my work
  - I'd describe my reviewer's comments as ...

*The purpose of this question was to estimate the perception of positive or negative feedback in the review process. Behaviour change is more associated with positive feedback than negative or critical comments. While reviewers might dispute these figures, it is the **perception** of criticism that impacts the employee more powerfully than the reality.*

### My last review meeting...



### Handwritten comments in response to this question:

- It's strange to sit and listen that you haven't done this or that, but people who got a higher grade than you do basically the same work and output.
- Again, assessors will not listen to your side.



## **Appendix B Report to MNC Coal on Results of Miner Survey at Dover Colliery**

- Ill informed – baseless.
- Totally wrong. And not fully understanding what was going on in the workforce.
- Biased and uninformed opinions.
- Pay me more money.
- Brainwashed and childish.
- Irrelevant.
- For 20 years, I catch fish – never once do I hear ‘There goes Aldo, the fisherman.’ For 25 years, I play golf – never once do I hear ‘There does Aldo, the golfer.’ Once, just once, I make love to a goat!
- Lacking sincerity.
- Rude and inaccurate.
  - They tend to direct everything towards your bad points, not your good points.
- Reflecting the work I do.
- Even undermanager says waste of time.
- MNC Coal shit our USA shit [perceived as an American fad?]
- [Too] personal.

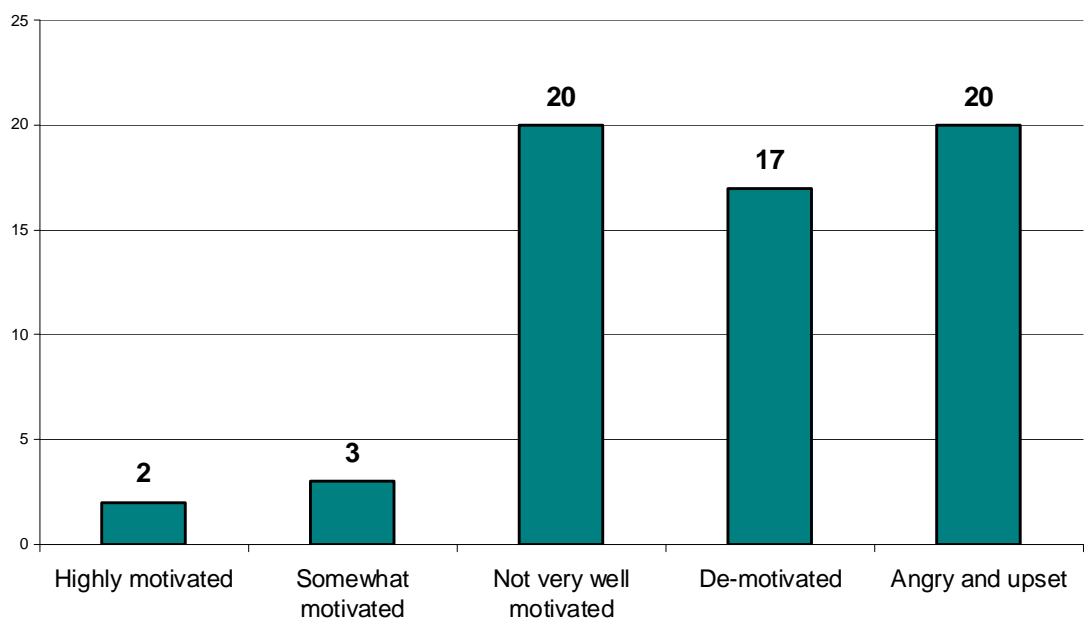
### **Summary:**

Given the emotional tone of most of the surveys, it was somewhat encouraging to read the number of positive responses to ‘There was some praise for my work.’ This indicates a genuine desire on the part of the reviewers to ‘get it right.’ However, it is problematic that workers tend to dwell on the negative points raised, and to compare their results to those of their workmates. One negative remark can undo much good.

4. **After** the last review meeting, I felt:
- Highly motivated
  - Somewhat motivated
  - Not very well motivated
  - De-motivated
  - Angry and upset
  - What I felt was...

My feelings  
about myself

*The purpose of this question was to understand the impact of the review process on feelings of self-efficacy and personal adequacy to do the job. To what degree does the review process lead to desire for increased work performance?*



**Hand written comments in response to this question:**

- I was demotivated because some of my suggestions to improve my job were not responded to.
- I've always had a high work ethic so as no guidance was given as to how to improve, it's hard to change or improve.
- I kept on working as usual.
- I always do my best for Dover Colliery.
- I asked for a shift change, which I received. Undermanager is now 100% better.
- As in Question 4, I just do my job as well as I can all the time.
- Indifferent.

## **Appendix B Report to MNC Coal on Results of Miner Survey at Dover Colliery**

- I can make improvements, but not because of a review.
- Carried on, changed with the changes – volunteered improvements and implemented them.
- Carried on.
- I felt my efforts had not been truly recognized.
- I just accepted the task given to me each day and did it to the best of my ability.
- Less done, less mistakes.
- I always try to do my best.
- Realized others were getting the praise for work carried out by myself, so became protective of my job and tasks.
- Resentment of peers and supervisor.
- Management expect too much and give you too little.

### **Summary:**

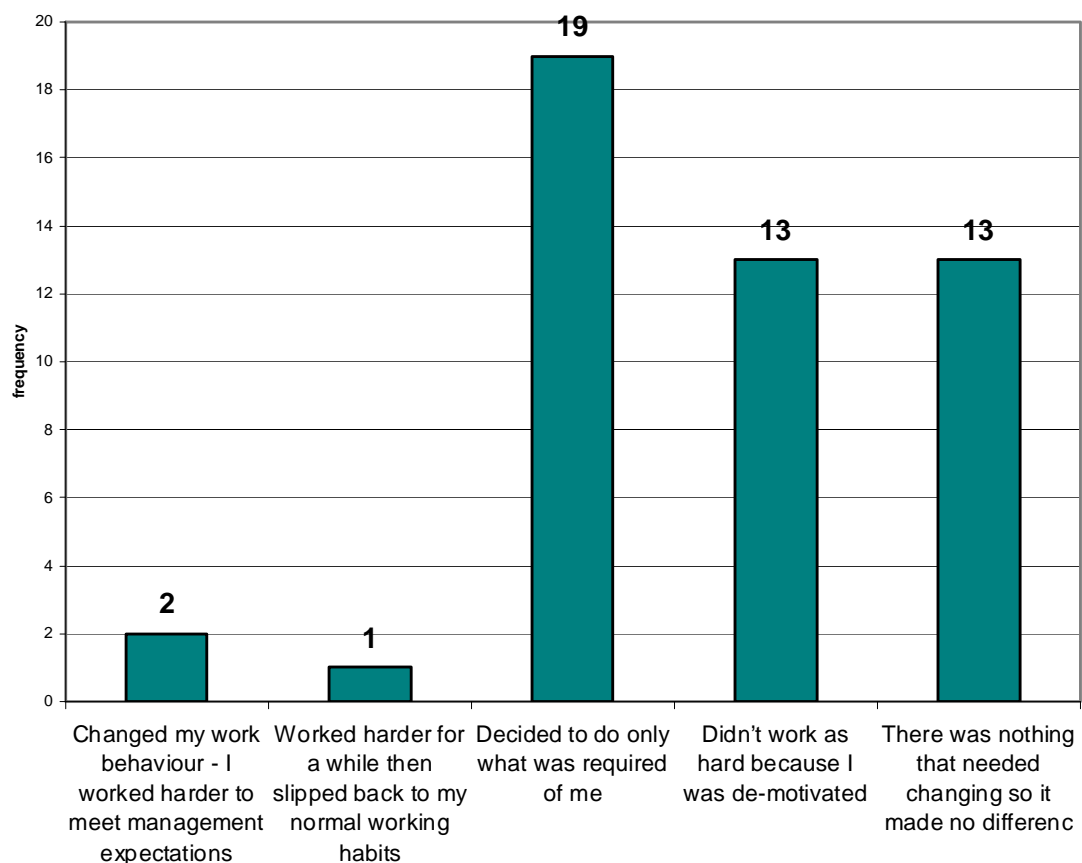
Survey results would indicate that there are highly negative emotional responses to the review process. The review process apparently leaves people demotivated, angry and upset. Handwritten comments confirm a sense of emotional tension being generated by the process. This is not a positive outcome for mine management. If workers feel more demotivated after a managerial intervention, the intervention is hardly likely to lead to improved performance.

## My work behaviour

5. **After** the last review meeting, I:
- Changed my work behaviour – I worked harder to meet management expectations
  - Worked harder for a while then slipped back to my normal working habits
  - Decided to do only what was required of me
  - Didn't work as hard because I was de-motivated
  - There was nothing that needed changing so it made no difference to me
  - None of the above – my response was...

*The purpose of this question was to go beyond worker feelings to see what response the review process prompted in worker behaviour. If effort and outcomes don't improve, it could be argued that the whole process in its current form is an expensive consumption of organizational resources.*

### After the last review meeting, I...



### Written comments in response to this question:

After my review meeting, I [felt]:

## **Appendix B Report to MNC Coal on Results of Miner Survey at Dover Colliery**

- ‘Who cares?’
- How can this [expletive] review me? I have not worked for him and do not know him.
- The final outcome can be biased by a dislike of workers.
- Waste of time trying to improve anything.
- I wanted to tell my supervisor what I really felt but it will go against me next review.
- No matter what I improve in I will never be assessed any higher [hopelessness?].
- Who puts the staff through performance reviews?
- Nonchalant, just doing job to the best of my ability.
- The assessment should be done by my direct supervisor who works with me.
- The bullshit didn’t equal the ranking.
- No change.
- It was a waste of time.
- Waste of time. Staff still don’t really know who does what underground. Still a personality review.
- Insulted.
- It’s bullshit.
- I don’t regard it as a motivational tool at all.
- From the first review I tried hard to improve. On the second review, he marked me down more.
- Went to work as before.
- Telling someone how good they are doesn’t always motivate people.
- That my time was wasted.

### **Summary:**

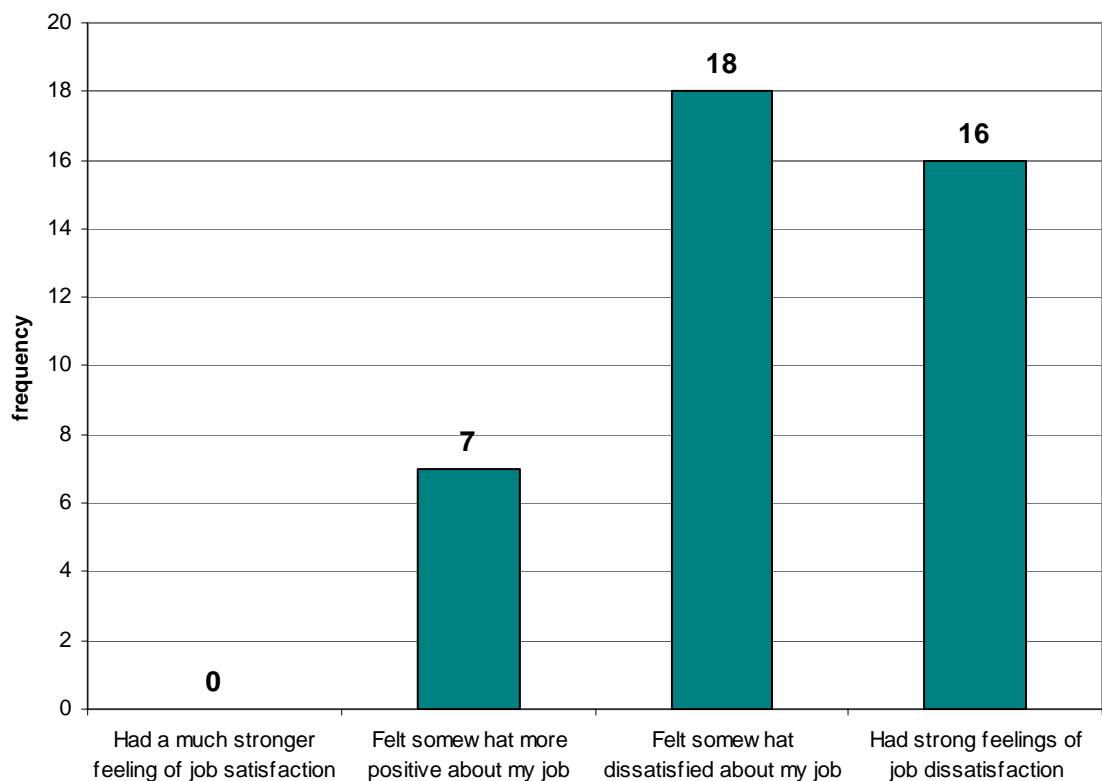
Responses to this survey question indicate that some workers restricted output after the review, doing only what was required. Workers’ responded to being rated by doing only what would improve the rating. Appraisal appears to be insulting and demotivating for some, and counterproductive to the notion of performance *improvement*.

## My job satisfaction

6. **After** the last review meeting, I:
- Had a much stronger feeling of job satisfaction
  - Felt somewhat more positive about my job
  - Felt somewhat dissatisfied about my job
  - Had strong feelings of job dissatisfaction
  - I'd describe my feelings towards my job as...

*The purpose of this question was to link the performance review process to job satisfaction, which leads to organizational commitment and organizational citizenship behaviour. Lack of job satisfaction is often linked to organizational withdrawal behaviour or 'neglect' behaviour.*

**After the last review meeting, I...**



### Hand written comments in response to this question:

- An awareness that management is out of touch with its employees.
- Management trying to reinvent the wheel.

## **Appendix B Report to MNC Coal on Results of Miner Survey at Dover Colliery**

- I felt somewhat more positive about my job because I was told my concerns would be acted upon.
- Management structure unclear on levels.
- It gets you down for a while. You think, 'What's the use?' But after a while you get over it and you're back to normal.
- The management have lost the plot.
- I like my job but the assessor didn't ask me that.
- Always felt confident that at the end of the day worked to the best of my ability.
- Put in hours worked then go home. No 'Well done, boys!' or praise from bosses.
- Still felt the process was a total waste of time. Very dissatisfied.
- My attitude was the same. I do my best. I was just dissatisfied with my assessment.
- The same as before. Nothing changed.
- Everybody is more worried about performance review than doing their job.
- There's no satisfaction in mining coal. It's dark – DUSTY – NOISY – cold and wet. No satisfaction there.
- I was starting to develop an 'I don't care' feeling.
- That the effort on the job was a waste of time.

### **Summary:**

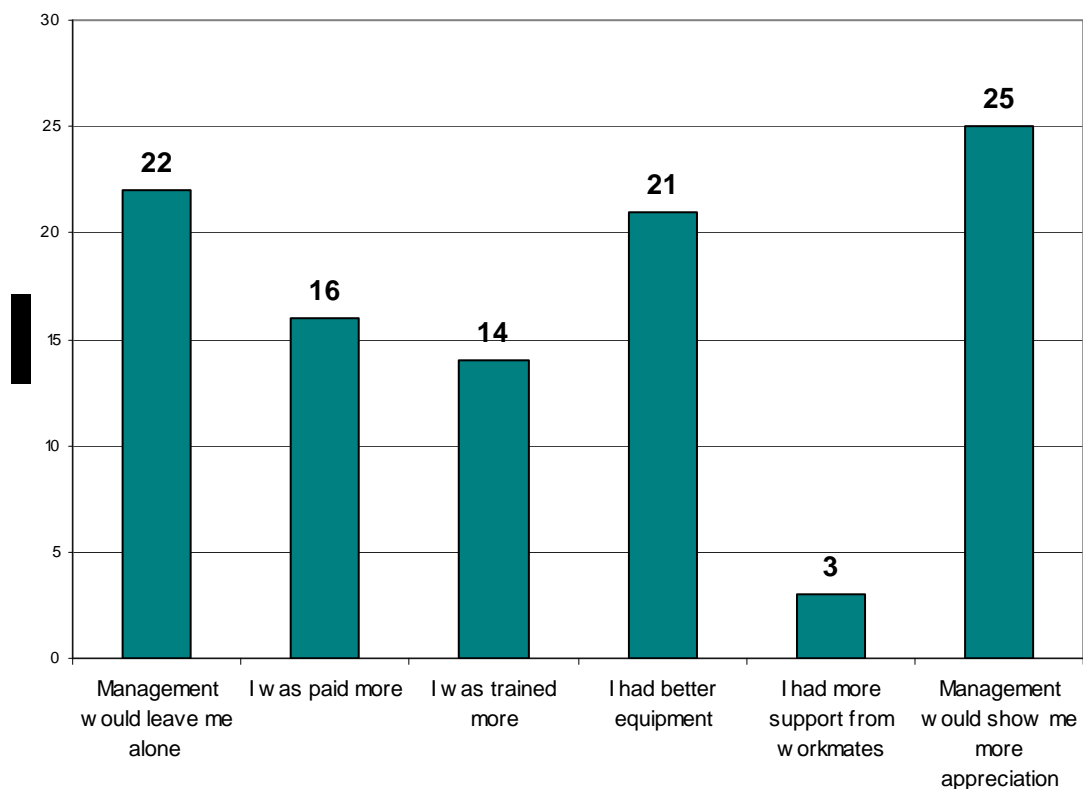
A few miners felt more motivated after the review, but the majority felt worse about their job than before the review. Since job dissatisfaction is related to absenteeism, withdrawal of effort, lack of organizational citizenship behaviour, and turnover, this is a rather negative result for the performance review process. In repetitive jobs, job satisfaction may be influenced by job redesign, but also by social networks and workmate support. Perhaps an individual rating system is counter to the team based nature of the mining industry? Job satisfaction is also related to concepts of fair outcomes, treatment and procedures. When organizational processes are perceived to be fair, trust is developed. And when employees trust their employer, they are more willing to voluntarily engage in behaviours that go beyond their formal job requirements.

## My productivity

7. In my opinion, I would be more productive on my job if:
- Management would leave me alone
  - I was paid more
  - I was trained more
  - I had better equipment
  - I had more support from workmates
  - Management would show me more appreciation
  - I'd be more productive if...

*The purpose of this question was to see if there were any other approaches that might increase worker productivity. Most of the responses above pointed to factors outside the employee's control. Perhaps there are systems issues that could provide greater productivity gains?*

**I would be more productive on my job if...**





## **Appendix B Report to MNC Coal on Results of Miner Survey at Dover Colliery**

### **Hand written responses to this question:**

- Dover needs a new longwall.
- Performance review is a poor way to get a pay raise. One employee could be good at one thing, but then not so good at different task.
- I could be more productive if I had more workmates.
- Management would stop the bullshit.
- We had a better management team.
- Management would not continually move the goal posts, giving us unattainable goals.
- Got a new manager and work your way down.
- Management planned business better.
- Had a better manager – one who talks to the worker.
- Better quality management.
- Some of the ideas that come from the workforce were seriously investigated.
- Christ, mate! After 20 years plus in the job – if I'm not doing it right by now, I never will!
- Management would leave things like rosters alone or consult workforce.
- I'd be more productive if the company led by example, the manager down to under-managers in charge are a joke.
- Getting swamped continually with work which coordinators should do themselves. Barrage of up to date info means pulling men OFF jobs just to satisfy management.
- Told on the job every now and then a simple 'Well done!'
- I worked for a better management team with more workers employed to help productivity.
- If I don't perform on a regular basis why aren't I told regularly? Once a year is a bit strange.
- On-shift training to be done and performance will increase. Scenario: you are reading this at 9 am over coffee. Try reading it at 2 am after days work.
- Management listened to the workforce.
- More time to spend on each facet of the job.

## **Appendix B Report to MNC Coal on Results of Miner Survey at Dover Colliery**

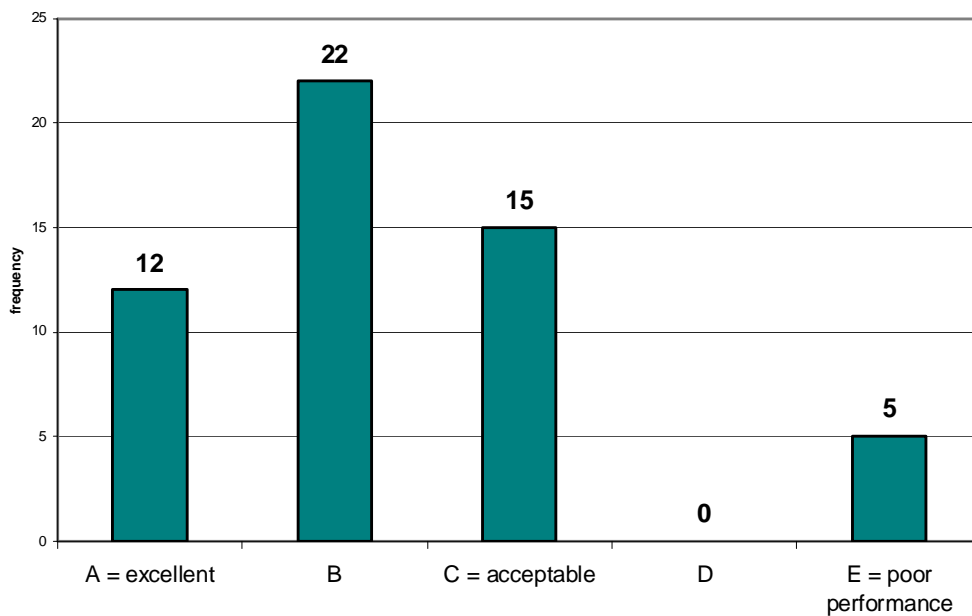
### **Summary:**

It is not surprising that workers would nominate factors outside their control as influencing their productivity, given the enormous gains in productivity brought about by changes in technology in the mines. What is disconcerting is the number who blamed management for their limitations. Perhaps even more surprising is that the highest contributor to more productivity, from the worker's perspective, would be for management to show more appreciation. The surveys are saying that what miners think they need is not more layers of control, but more respect and appreciation from management. This is not a need that will be met in an annual review. This would require a massive cultural change in the way mines are managed on a day-to-day basis.

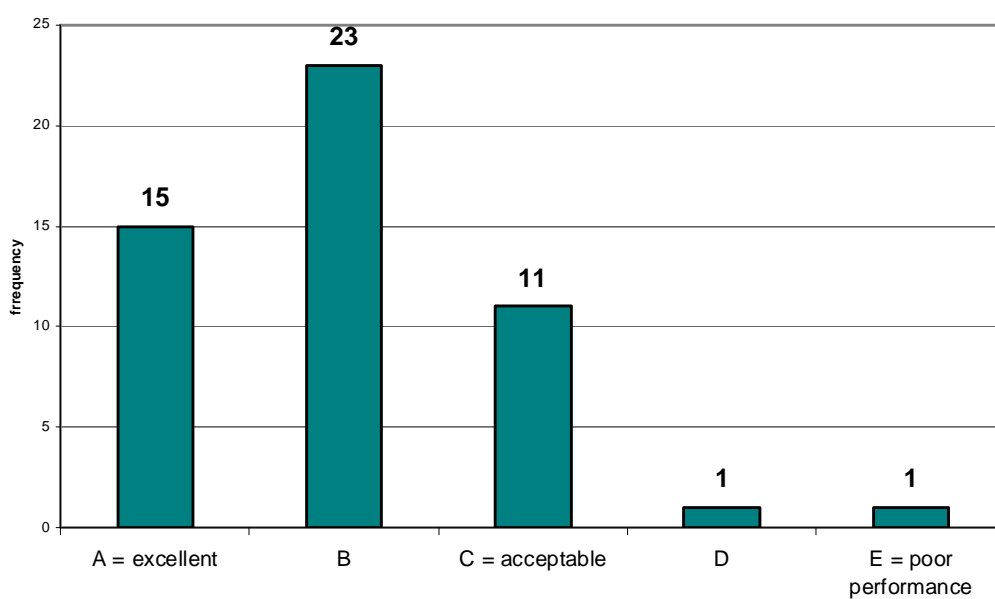
## Appendix B Report to MNC Coal on Results of Miner Survey at Dover Colliery

8. Imagine there was an **overall** rating system of performance, from A to E where A = excellent, C = acceptable and E = poor. Circle where you think you'd be scored (based on how you read the present situation in the company)

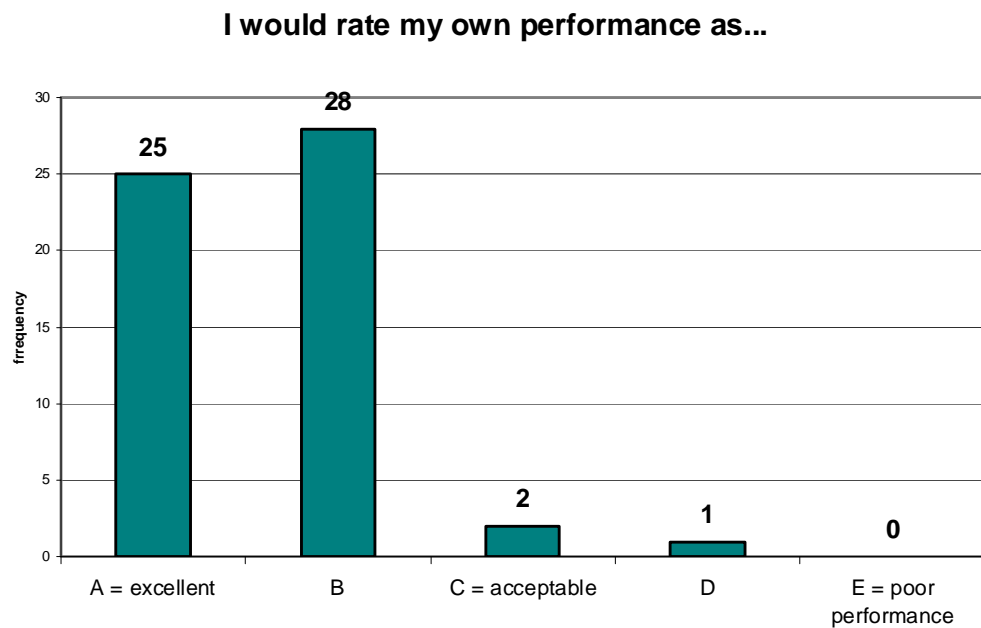
### The Company would rate my performance as...



### I think my immediate supervisor would rate my work as...



## Appendix B Report to MNC Coal on Results of Miner Survey at Dover Colliery



### Summary:

The purpose behind this question was to check the impression given in face-to-face interviews that many of the workers felt that they were performing to the best of their abilities. This was confirmed by the high ratings workers gave themselves. The one worker who gave himself a D probably misread the question, because he gave management perceptions of himself as A's in the questions above, and this positive attitude towards management was not displayed in the rest of his survey answers.

Given workers' high ratings of themselves, and given that workers thought supervisors and upper management felt less highly towards them, it is not surprising that the review process is viewed as an attack on their sense of worth and identity. Comments to this effect were verbalized to me over and over again as I handed out the surveys.

**9. Complete the following sentence: ‘The best way to improve performance in my work area would be to...’**

**Miners’ handwritten responses:**

- Stop fucking about with my life.
- Let us do our own work to the best of our ability.
- Do my job.
- Better equipment and left alone to do the job.
- Improve management skills.
- If the management would make better decisions, so the mine would run smoother. Production would therefore be higher.
- Better system of management. Management that knew how to manage.
- Better management from top management.
- 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.
- Give me direction of what we are doing – short tem, mid term, long term. Not, ‘Today...’
- Let me do my job. Don’t hassle me. Better managers. More workers.
- Be fair. No one could be A grade. No one is perfect. Performance reviews a waste of time and money. If bosses don’t like you, they mark you down. Look at what happened at Slade Colliery.
- Rid the place of performance reviews. Everybody on the same level.
- Do away with performance reviews and praise or help the employee on the job. Let him know where his mistakes are. It’s a general feeling that performance reviews are a job head hunting exercise with the company when in bad times.
- Listen to suggestions from the people who actually do the hard yards. Not criticize workers wanting to work safely. Management is more interested in production than safety.
- Respond to any ideas we have in the workplace.

## Appendix B Report to MNC Coal on Results of Miner Survey at Dover Colliery

- Listen to employees. Problems I brought up this time hadn't been answered from last time.
- Upgrade the train.
- New equipment.
- Give me more responsibility. Involve me more in job tasks.
- Recognize my qualifications and experience.
- Show 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, managerial incompetence has been extremely high. Practice what you preach. The reviews are biased, lead to unsafe work practice, sick people coming to work to fulfill criterion, personal viewpoint not reflected by my immediate workmates and general pressuring that leads to no more productivity. A decline in morale is always inevitable. Dover Colliery's greatest resource is its people!
- [expletive] all ex-Slade management. Put quality management on that will be here for 10 years or more and pay me more.
- Provide more labour for me.
- Undermanagers listen to the work experiences and ideas we have to offer – and for management to be part of the team (not above and better). Also when we have safety and production meetings, if we were treated like men and not children and told the truth instead of 'company speak' things may be better.
- Improve training on shift one to one. For above management to understand coal mining is 24 hours not just day shift and that back shift workers be leniently looked at for performance and attendance etc.
- To look, ask, analyze if the work given daily is carried out satisfactorily and not remember 1 or 2 things that were not perfect or could have been done better and use these spasmodic incidents as the whole criteria for the review.
- NB: I believe personalities play a big part in my review. I keep a low profile at work; do not socialize much with workmates and especially 'BOSSSES.' I accept tasks given, work with anyone, accept their idiosyncrasies, do my work and go home. Take very little time off. I think

## Appendix B Report to MNC Coal on Results of Miner Survey at Dover Colliery

I am a good employee. It's what I tell my children an employer expects of them. But to some these days, it just does not seem enough.

- To be treated as a man with a family to support, a life after work, and not a dog at the master's call.
- NB: FACT 1 Anyone below a 'B' doesn't get an interview – e.g. Slade men.
- Spend some money. Stop bickering about budgets etc and start communicating to each other as I said this manager just passes the buck and nobody has any confidence in him.
- Better communication between management and workforce. There is still too much of the 'us & them' syndrome. Leave things like rosters alone. There are things that really change my attitude towards staff, because it changes your whole lifestyle.
- To train people better. Less roster changes. Constant and accurate feedback from management. A little truth for a change.
- Just get on with the job we have to do.
- To have more time to spend on each aspect of the job.
- Tell me what you want done and to what standard. Then leave me alone to do the job. Be polite to the workforce.
- Improve our machines. Listen to the workforce and not just a chosen few. Be more consistent in preparation for jobs to be done. Once all the surveys are completed can the results be forwarded to the mine?
- Respect the workers' efforts. We all know the job and what is required.
- Provide better equipment. Better management (more hands on).
- Talk to the people who cut the coal, not the [expletive] in the office.
- Plan and report work carried out to a higher standard, which can be brought about by less crisis management.
- To see the staff underground on nightshift for 6 months.
- Give us more full-time employees actually on the job, to do all jobs required. Improve senior management.
- To give people more feedback and credit for their efforts.

## **Appendix B Report to MNC Coal on Results of Miner Survey at Dover Colliery**

- To stop being so critical on the workforce. It is a workplace not a school. Everyone knows what they have to do. Not being told every little thing. It's degrading.
- I don't think I can do better. As I said, I always try and do my best while at work for the company.
- Keep socialites out of office. Make relevant screens – monitoring available in all areas. Keep interruptions down.
- Give me a pay rise.
- Don't take the hat room off me.

### **Summary:**

There seems to be a general feeling of resentment against management's perceived irrational decision-making behaviour. The miners often talk about the latest 'management fad.' The feeling is, 'We've seen all this before.' They are jaded by change.

The feeling is often expressed that what they need is more management support (in the form of logistical planning and hence less down time). The miners hunger for more acceptance, respect and value to be communicated to them. There seems to be a rather general appeal to management to listen to the views and ideas expressed by workers. Given the wide array of responses, it seems that workers do care about their levels of productivity.

### **Findings and recommendations:**

The survey results confirm that issues raised in earlier qualitative interviews with employees from a number of work areas were typical of feelings and attitudes across a much wider cohort of miners. The survey has some positive findings in that it shows a growing acceptance of the right of management to make comments about an employee's work behaviour, and to a lesser degree, the acceptance of the rating criteria. The survey also indicates that efforts to include more positive feedback in the review process have been noticed.



## **Appendix B Report to MNC Coal on Results of Miner Survey at Dover Colliery**

There are two major areas of concern. The first is that employees do not report any significant changes in their work behaviour as a result of the performance review process. Considering the large investment of organizational time and management resources to the rating, calibration and review process, it would be logical to expect some positive impact on employee behaviour.

The second major area of concern is negative emotional reactions by workers. A high proportion of workers described their reaction to the review in terms of being 'angry and upset'. High levels of job dissatisfaction also confirmed this negative sentiment. Angry, upset, de-motivated workers who feel 'degraded', 'demeaned' and 'insulted' by the rating process may react emotionally to seemingly small trigger events in ways that are out of proportion to the trigger event. The question would therefore arise as to the long-term impact of the present performance review process on the industrial relations climate at the mine.

If the desired outcome of the performance management process is increased productivity, the survey responses would suggest that more focus be put on emotional, motivational, and coaching aspects of the process. It would be an unnecessarily expensive use of company resources to spend large amounts of time measuring performance as an end in itself. There needs to be a clear, consistent and ongoing message of performance *enhancement* as part of an emerging team-based company culture. The survey responses indicate that leverage could be gained by ongoing expressions of appreciation for what is being accomplished, especially if appreciation is framed in terms of positive support for process efforts. Leverage would also flow from explicitly valuing and rewarding worker 'voice' in the pursuit of organizational effectiveness.



## Research Project Information Sheet

### An Investigation of a Performance Management Process

**Principal Researcher: Peter McLean (4221 3647)**

Principal Supervisor: Dr James Reveley (4221 4626)

School of Management and Marketing

1. The aim of this research project is to provide a deeper understanding of what happens when management attempts to use a performance management process to improve productivity. We seek to understand the impact that such a process has on your subsequent performance and how it affects your relationships with the company, with other workers, and with family members.
2. We will ask your views on these matters in a semi-structured interview. We seek your honest views on how this process has affected you. Each interview will typically take about 45 minutes. However, you are free to terminate the interview at any stage if you feel uncomfortable with the direction or the content of the interview.
3. Your confidentiality will be preserved at all times. Tapes will be transcribed and interview notes will be kept in locked password protected files in the principal researcher's office at the University of Wollongong. Your identity will be changed on any thesis or journal publication to preserve your confidentiality. While research findings will be shared with MNC Coal, participant responses will be reported in such a way that individual comments will not be identifiable by MNC Coal management. Your identity will not be reported to management.
4. If at any time subsequent to the interview you wish to withdraw or change any of the comments you have made, you are more than welcome to contact the principal researcher at (02) 4221 3647, who will effect your instructions in this matter.
5. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. Your withdrawal will not in any way affect your treatment at MNC Coal, nor any present or future relationship with the University of Wollongong.
6. If you have any questions at any time about this research, you are welcome to phone the principal researcher (02 4221 3647), or Dr James Reveley (02 4221 4626), at any time.
7. If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the way in which this research is conducted, you should contact the Secretary of the University of Wollongong Human Research Ethics Committee on (02) 4221 4457.

Thank you for your participation in this research project.

**We value your comments.**

## Appendix D Ethics Approval Consent Form

### CONSENT FORM

#### An Investigation of a Performance Management Process

I have been given information about the *Investigation of a Performance Management Process* and discussed the research project with *Peter McLean* who is conducting this research as part of a *Ph D* supervised by *Dr James Reveley* in the *School of Management and Marketing* at the University of Wollongong.

I understand that, if I consent to participate in this project, I will be asked to

- *describe my experiences with the performance management process*
- *reflect on how the process has impacted on my subsequent performance and quality of work life*
- *explain what I believe are the ways performance could be improved at this mine*

I have been advised that there are no known potential risks or burdens associated with this research, and have had an opportunity to ask *Peter McLean* any questions I may have about the research and my participation.

I understand that my participation in this research is voluntary, I am free to refuse to participate and I am free to withdraw from the research at any time. My refusal to participate or withdrawal of consent will not affect *my treatment by MNC Coal in any way, nor will it affect any present or future relationship with the University of Wollongong.*

If I have any enquiries about the research, I can contact *Peter McLean* (4221 3647) or *Dr James Reveley* (4221 4626), or if I have any concerns or complaints regarding the way the research is or has been conducted, I can contact the Complaints Officer, Human Research Ethics Committee, University of Wollongong on (02) 4221 4457.

By signing below I am indicating my consent to participate in the research entitled *An Investigation of a Performance Management Process*, conducted by *Peter McLean* as it has been described to me in the information sheet and in discussion with him. I understand that the data collected from my participation will be used for *thesis and/or journal publication*, and I consent for it to be used in that manner.

Signed

Date

.....  
Name (please print)

...../...../.....

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