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22 Parallel Worlds: ‘This is How I Remember it ... This is How it Was. It Could Have Happened to Anyone’

HELEN DILKS

Introduction

The opportunity for this research was provided by my links through employment within the shopfitting industry over a period of approximately ten years, during which time I have investigated the relationship between formal employment law and the practical application in the lives of the workers. In the process I have learned a great deal about the industry through the ‘stories’ told by the workers themselves concerning their occupational experiences. The stories often involve disputes between those who perceive others to be ‘outsiders’ to their own group. I employ the concept of *embodying agency* when referring to the activity and experience of shopfitters within their own ‘insider’ world, and introduce the term *structuring agency* to identify outsider groups according to the narrative presentations of the respondents. These descriptions are contingent upon the relationship between the narrator and listener group in the present, and also upon ‘remembered’ associations from the historical and recent past, which may be skilfully combined to produce a coherent narrative. The narrative itself then forms part of the ‘remembered’ history of the group, and serves to consolidate a person’s position as an insider or outsider according to his accrual of shopfitting *capital*, earned through storytelling expertise (Dilks, 2003).

Insiders and Outsiders

When describing their occupational identity during interviews, most respondents begin by saying that they work *in shopfitting*, and then identify themselves as being a plumber, joiner, plasterer, etc.; *by trade*, as having worked *by job* on ships, pubs, hotels, shops, schools, etc.; *by experience* in other trades (ie. butcher, farmer) and as *being* a husband, father, brother, son, etc. It would seem that men do not accept the designation by occupational label because it describes *what they do* but because in the shopfitting world, as in the

historical past, identity is formed ‘through erecting and maintaining boundaries between an imagined “us” and “them”’, and is rooted in ‘a subjective experience of difference’ (Sahlins, 1989, p.271, quoted in Farr, 2000, p.4). Interview data suggest that although tradesmen have a reasonably successful working relationship with men in different trades, they all actively acknowledge a status hierarchy which places more significance on their own trade. This is initiated from a simplistic, but effective environmental viewpoint, moving from the lower status of external site workers or ‘outside fixers’ to the higher status of those fortunate enough to be protected from inclement weather, known as the ‘inside fixers’. Builders obviously fall into the former category, having the lowest status of all (from the perspective of shopfitters who usually work inside), followed by fixers in order of work programme, ie. joiners, electricians and plumbers on a first fix, sprinkler and heating contractors on a second fix, finishing with plasterers, ceiling and floor fixers, and finally decorators. Penn (1986) suggests in his study of skilled craft identities that ‘fellow workers’ are first and foremost those who work in the same trade, who guard the boundaries of specific skills ‘through the prism of occupational exclusions’ (p.5). Loyalty to one’s own trade often takes the form of contempt for ‘others’ according to the level of skill and the materials required to carry out the task, as well as the problems caused by improperly finished work. Frequently there may be several trades working in close proximity and occasionally problems arise between groups when workers have not completed phases according to plan, thereby causing additional work through disruption of some kind for other trades. There may be more than verbal insults offered on behalf of other trades, however, resulting in deliberate sabotage by the aggrieved individuals:

Narrative – The Sprinkler Contractor

Some men on site ... one of the guys was of Polish origin ... was working to install pipe work and complaining that the electrician’s cables were in the way. The electrician foreman was not chuffed, and had words with him ... he said if the cables were in the way to pull them gently to one side, or get the electrician to move them. The sprinkler man was not happy ... so he decided to cut the cables. He borrowed some tin snips from the ceiling fixers, and cut the cables randomly round the cable trays, so the electrician couldn’t get them to work. Fortunately it was spotted that the cables were cut – in time to check installation. If it had gone unnoticed, the shop would not have opened. He did it deliberately ... out of spite.

The narrator, a joiner, clearly sides with the electrician from the start, and suggests that the culprit not only behaves dishonourably by virtue of his

limited skill as a sprinkler installer, but also through the inherent 'inadequacy' of his differentiated ethnic origin, thus clearly situating him as an outsider to the narrator subject group. The ceiling fixers collude with the sprinkler installer – another example of dishonour by trade association – and disaster is averted only because of the vigilance of joiner/electrician coalition. It is clear that social honour between tradesmen can be extremely significant for their future relations within the group, as well as providing a means of entry into other 'associated' trades should the occasion arise. The nature of 'honour' is not fixed either within or between trades, however, and may be contested as new circumstances emerge or situations change.

Honour and Dishonour

The 'honour ethic' is significant for the shopfitting occupational experience which is built upon the notion of establishing and maintaining network links through reputation within the industry. Operatives are therefore usually constrained 'by honour' to act towards members of their own group in a certain way, while treating those of other groups with respect only in so far as they do not step outside the bounds of 'acceptable' behaviour. Such men are not criminals in the general sense, but are more usefully recognised in terms of the 'outlaw villain', who engages in activity outside of what is 'customary' for his own purposes, and is not constrained by any loyalties to or within the shopfitting group. These men are therefore 'without honour' and accrue no capital (either negative or positive) in the shopfitting world. One group which falls into this category is that of the security guards, whose presence on any large site is required by insurance companies as part of their counter-theft policy. The following narrative described the difficult position of shopfitters trying to reduce theft on site and adhere to the rules imposed upon them:

The Security Guards

The insurers wanted a security guard, and we thought that if we hired local labour, they would probably be in the pay of local gangs, so we decided the best thing would be to hire a large, well known firm. That didn't really work because they hired local labour anyway. (The YS who was acting as a foreman explains) The first security guard didn't bother to get people to sign in or out (all he did was sit there and read his newspaper), and when I spoke to him about it he started swearing and shouting, saying he wasn't taking orders from me. So I told Dave (the managing director) and he complained to (security firm) and they replaced him with another one. Dave was on site the following week and when he went up to the security guard, he was asleep on the job. He was sacked ... We think the guard had 'an arrangement' with some of the locals anyway ... when the computer went missing the fire escape door was wedged open – it was definitely an 'inside' job ... it could have been him ... or one of the labourers.

It would seem that the shopfitters are in a 'no-win' situation here, and when dealing with 'outsiders' they are particularly vulnerable to groups and individuals who do not recognise their 'high status' and can therefore act 'dishonourably' towards them. Shopfitting embodying agents, however, have devised a means of extending their ontological security by exercising a self-policing system linked to the customary code of honour for the apprehension of 'villains' (Giddens, 1991, pp.40-41). Labourers are often believed to be in collusion with local villains, and not without just cause in many instances according to the shopfitters, who quote the drug habits of local workers as among the foremost reasons for theft of tools and materials:

Shopfitter

You only have to go to the pawn shops near the site to see the Scallies coming in with arms full of tools to get money for a fix ... drugged out of their minds ... they inject themselves in their fingernails, you know, and they always wear long sleeves even on a hot day (because of the marks on their arms). When they've used up all their arms and fingernails, they do it in their gums ... they are muppets ...

From their superior perspective of a common 'insider' membership, the shopfitters reserve the concept of 'muppetism' to explain the dishonourable behavioural tendencies of the labourers. Even those who fall within the 'good lad' category for the duration of a job may quickly revert to an 'outsider' status

as the loyalties between the disparate groups diminish towards the final phase of the contract:

The Labourers and the Water

Towards the end of the contract, a female member of staff was in the women's toilets when she heard two men talking. She was in the cubicle (unknown to them), and they were standing at the wash basins. They were discussing what they were going to do to get their own back – they were finishing and would be out of work – they put the plugs in on all the basins and turned the taps full on. They were laughing about it, and (the woman) was afraid to make any noise in case they heard her. When they'd gone she quickly turned all the taps off and reported it to the manager. They escorted the men from site. It would have caused no end of damage if she hadn't been there.

There are several significant elements to this narrative, which when related by the narrator alternate between the comic and ridiculous (the pre-determined failure of the labourers), and the more serious aspect of menace (the potential threat to the client and to the woman). The local labourers are condemned as 'villains' by virtue of the ineffectual and non-masculine manner of their revenge, by association with the women's toilets and therefore 'girlie' attempt at sabotage, and by the potential threat to a woman which is regarded as a breach of traditional cultural behaviour within the shopfitting world. Finally, the shopfitters succeeded in 'putting one over' the ethnically differentiated labourers, who were publicly humiliated. Occasionally, however, 'villains' behave with greater sophistication:

The Tool Thieves

We were all in the shop like ... our tools were on the floor ... some (Store) staff were there talking about the job and we were just having a break. We saw these blokes walking about in shirts and ties, but we thought they were from (the Store), and thought nothing of it. They walked up to our tools, bold as brass, and picked up armfuls. They started to walk towards the door, when I looked up and saw them with our tools. I couldn't believe what was happening at first ... I wasn't expecting it. I shouted 'Oi!' and they ran out of the door ... we gave chase but they ran into an alley, and you don't follow anyone from Glasgow down an alley. So we lost them. They just walked in the door and nobody noticed them. I've never seen anything like that before.

The shopfitters are confused by the dishonourable display by the local thieves – they are 'villains' because they did not declare themselves as thieves by their actions or by their dress – in other words, they did not appear to be labourers, the usual suspects. The narrator subtly suggests that he and his group were not at fault for what happened, as, firstly, they were taken by surprise (the duplicitous nature of outsiders), and secondly, the shopfitting 'code' allows them to jeopardise their personal safety only within certain limits (agreement of insiders' behaviour when in outsider territory). The narrative has value due to the uniqueness of the situation, which again highlights the disjunction between outsider and insider honour.

Memory and Analysis

This disjunction may give rise to misunderstandings between groups from associated, but differentiated insider perspectives. In the following example, the narrative focuses on the embodying, shopfitting version as the 'legitimate' story. A situation arose which resulted in a number of allegations being made against a company regarding the conduct of a number of operatives and subcontractors on a particular site which involved a re-fit of various CLIENT staff rooms during the store opening hours:

The Allegations

A female member of CLIENT staff had passed through the basement to the stockroom when an offensive remark was made about her physical appearance. During the removal of rubbish from site into a skip in the loading bay, a young male member of CLIENT staff was acting as security guard. He overheard two members of the shopfitting team discussing female members of CLIENT staff in what he considered to be an offensive manner.

In response to the ‘personal comment’ allegation, a shopfitter gave his version of events:

A CLIENT female member of staff passed through the basement to the stockroom, and a complimentary remark was made about her bottom (Nice arse!), which she took in good humour (she laughed).

The wording of the shopfitter’s explanation indicates his difficulty in understanding ‘what all the fuss was about’. The intention of the remark as a compliment leads to a sense of bewilderment that the woman should have been upset, or even reported the incident to the CLIENT management at all. Traditionally shopfitters exercise restraint in their manner towards women, keeping derogatory or sexually explicit language for the company of men. The environment in which this incident took place is significant, in as much as by entering the basement, the woman had crossed from the public domain of the CLIENT shop interior where shopfitters maintain a jovial but ‘clean’ presentation, to an area designated as ‘a building site’ and therefore part of the shopfitting world, albeit temporarily. The contractor’s defence of the men involved was based on this aspect of the incident, and he saw it as perfectly acceptable within the material situation in which it occurred. During the ‘skip conversation’ a young man (17 years old) had been offended by the sexually explicit remarks of the workers as they discussed what they would like to ‘do’ to two specific female members of staff. He had informed his mother who was a senior member of CLIENT staff, who had reported the incident. The contractor considered this incident alone to be worthy of serious investigation in view of the nature of language used, but he nevertheless expressed reservations about this interpretation as follows:

- The men were outside (ie. in the external environment) and therefore not under the same rules as within the shop interior
- They were in all male company and were entitled under customary rules to discuss the women freely

- Possibly the men were unaware of the presence of the young man, but if so they may have exaggerated their language to shock him, as a preliminary initiation into the adult male world.

It is apparent that the shopfitters believed themselves to be within their own domain, and at liberty to behave according to their customary manner. Overall, this narrative demonstrates the assumptions of agents about themselves and others according to group perceptions of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ legitimacy. What would initially seem to be the dominant view of the structuring agents (CLIENT) is discounted as having little value, or more significantly as ‘accruing negative capital’ within the embodying shopfitting world (Dilks, 2003). Assumptions of activity by all agentic groups within an illegitimate ‘underworld’ of crime are often confirmed during this type of intersection of worlds – the civilised and the uncivilised respectively. It is commonplace for accusations of theft to flourish at such times when construction workers are to be found in such close proximity to CLIENT staff environments, such as offices, staff rooms, etc. However, although the blame for this activity usually begins with the construction workers as scapegoats, it is often the shopfitters who are proved correct in their assumptions of criminal activity by the CLIENT staff. This narrative works to affirm the belief by structuring agencies of the expectation that embodying ‘others’ operate within the illegitimate criminal world, and also to confirm the expectations of the shopfitting embodying agents about the nature of legitimacy in the structuring retail CLIENT world:

The Drug Dealer and the Thief

We were all told to attend a meeting about some drugs that had been found in one of the staff rooms, and that the contractor would never work for the CLIENT again when the culprit was found. The police were called, and later that day a member of CLIENT staff was placed under arrest for it ... they’d hidden it under a pile of clothes ... I ask you ... Another one ... on the opening morning of the store a staff member was caught shoving clothes into a bag before the store opened ... what an idiot ...

Note here that the shopfitting narrator does not deny criminal activity on behalf of his own group, but is satisfied with pointing out the inadequacies of the staff members, who, after all, are caught. There is sufficient evidence from these examples to begin to perceive the nature of the parallel worlds of legitimacy, but it is useful to explore further the intersections of the worlds as agents negotiate the accrual of diverse forms of capital both within and between differentiated social groups.

Storytelling is a skilled performance, practised over time, and it must be stressed that narratives are always an *interpretation* of events (Abma, 1999). Shopfitting narratives are not randomised accounts which are told as events happen – they have a structured form which is accessible to all narrators once they embark upon their narrative experience. This structure can be identified in the following narrative entitled ‘The Mugging’:

Narrative: The Mugging (1)

Background

While on site in Liverpool, a YS went out to a local night-club with some other shopfitters. After a few drinks, they decided to go back to the lodgings, but when the YS returned from the toilets the others had gone. He thought that they must be outside, and left the club through the wrong door, situated on the opposite side of the club. Not knowing where he was, he was wondering what to do when he was approached by a group of youths.

They demanded money, and his mobile phone.

The Event

Remembering the Event

He had already been involved in a fight in Scotland which led to his being hospitalised after being beaten up by a group of locals, and therefore he gave up his phone without a struggle. (Meanwhile the other shopfitters had left, being unable to find the YS.) It was snowing, and he was very cold (and drunk).

The narrator, a young shopfitter (YS), skilfully utilises the same narrative structure as in the previous example narrated by an older shopfitter (OS) – ie. the victim who acted according to the rules of self-preservation when in outsider territory – while embellishing the story with poignant, remembered personal details which serve to highlight the potential vulnerability of *all* listeners:

Narrative: The Mugging (2)*Telling the Story*

He did not know where to go, and took shelter under a hedge for a time, but he was so cold that he tried to get help from a nearby hotel. Three times he asked for help from the reception staff, and three times he was forcibly removed by male staff threatening to call the police. He begged them to call the police, because at least it would have been warm in the cell, but they just turned him outside. He found a coin and telephoned his employer from a pay-phone, repeating the story. The employer eventually managed to contact the foreman who immediately set out in the van looking around the general area of the docklands. Finally, the YS (sobering up by now) remembered that he had a £10 note in his sock, and was able to get a taxi to return him to the lodgings. The following day he reported the theft to the local police, who dismissed his story as a fabrication because he had no injuries.

The YS was highly critical of the response of the local (outsider) authorities, and all listeners were sympathetic to this interpretation. The narrator here plays on the listeners' abilities to 'put themselves in his place' and experience memories of similar situations when they were alienated from a group by virtue of difference (whatever that may have been). Again, the YS self-criticism at his potential weakness (he refrained from putting up a fight) induces an empathetic response from the listeners, who agree that he had 'done the right thing'. The other shopfitters feel partly responsible for the unfortunate series of events, as though they themselves had allowed it to happen, thus emphasising their code of practice and the importance of learning from experience (*Reflection*). Finally, the narrative reaffirms the necessity to remain associated with 'insiders' in an unknown situation, and at the same time confirms the 'insider' belief that 'outsiders' cannot be trusted (*The Lesson*). This narrative format is a fairly conventional presentation of a series of events and the consequences arising from the actions or inaction of outsiders, which thus provides a form of *Moral Imperative* for site workers if they are to conduct themselves according to collective tradition.

Conclusion

Each group of agents establishes its own focus of legitimacy – the 'acceptable' version is the one that is passed down and disseminated throughout the insider group. Other groups have associated, but different versions, with varying stages of 'acceptability'. Thus interplay of 'versions' is what allows agents to 'act out structure', which then confirms or becomes custom and tradition within their cultural group. As previously discussed, group boundaries may be

established on the basis of age (ie. YS/OS); trade (plumber/joiner/bricklayer/electrician, etc.); ethnicity (national – Scottish/Irish/English or local Newcastle/Nottingham/Glasgow, etc.); occupational status (labourer/ tradesman); experience (by job); or reputation ('being known'). These are not fixed groupings, however, and identification with any particular group may be almost arbitrary depending upon the circumstances and environment (ie. on site or in the wider locality/town). *Practice* therefore involves more than a *familiarity* with custom and tradition – it involves *respect* for precedent, but always allows for adaptation through narrative presentation.

'Insider' agents have to get on with 'others' to some extent in their working environment. However, what is commonplace for some groups does not necessarily lead to similar conditions in other working environments, as becomes evident through the narratives from areas which are outside of 'civilisation' and therefore, for example, on a building site. It is not everyone who routinely experiences aggression from 'outsider' groups, or theft of belongings, false accusation and punishment as do the subjects of this research. What are commonplace to them, ie. the events of their every-day life, are not things experienced by the majority of workers say, in an office environment. Therefore it is necessary to understand something of the process of narrativity as it evolves, where honour and reputation are dependent upon *remembered*, but at the same time, intuitively *adaptive* narrative versions. In this way the significance of custom and tradition can be understood as a form of innovation rather than as a historical artefact, and the difficulty of incorporating official regulations and procedures into this established, workable practice becomes more apparent. The sentiment expressed by the respondents, 'This is how I remember it ... this is how it was', remains both true and useful in the maintenance of social capital, identity and self-worth for individuals engaged in this type of occupational activity.

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