A Verstehen Exploration of Identity at Work: Interpretive and Participatory Analysis of the Cessation of Social Action from the Actor's Point of View

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Abstract

This paper examines social action and organization at work. The paper is a retrospective exploratory study of the industrial strike action taken by the Hamlets Homes mechanical engineers and focuses on one interview transcript in order to extrapolate the themes of social action and identity emanating from the analysis and attempts to consider what the possible explanations might be for the differences in the extrapolated findings. Using both descriptive and reflective commentaries, the analysis is further interpreted using subject relevant literature to reflect on the themes identified in the data set. In order to maintain the principles of beneficence pseudonyms have been used to ensure the anonymity of the organization and participants of the research.

Keywords: Strike; Union; Solidarity; Individualism; Collectivism; Egalitarian

Introduction

This paper is based on an interview examining the collapse of industrial strike action of the Hamlets Homes mechanical engineers and relates to the conceptual frameworks and theoretical perspectives of social action, identity and organization and is positioned on the themes of individual identity versus collective identity in social action. The discussion that follows is divided into three main parts, first focusing on the process in developing the research questions that will extrapolate the main reasons for the collapse of the strike action and the interview schedule. The second part of the paper consists of the reflections on the whole process of conducting the interview with a discussion on the emerging issues arising from the interview. The third part of the paper is a critical discussion which is centered on the themes of individual identity versus collective identity in social action and applied as an over-arching arc with the theoretical frameworks of Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu and others as a precursory lens to address the findings from the interview concerning the collapse of the strike action.

Background to Organization & Objective of Research Study

Hamlets Homes was originally created as an Arm's Length Management Organization (ALMO) consisting of 700 employees in 2006 and ceased trading in April 2016. ALMOs were companies which were set up under the previous Labour government from 2002 onwards and owned by councils in England which were responsible for managing and improving the council's housing stock. Under

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the governments Audit Commission's inspection grading system if an ALMO reached at least a 'two stars' standard, the sponsoring council could receive additional financial support from central government to fund major construction improvements to its housing stock as well as make use of loans to finance substantial works program to bring council housing stock up to the governments Decent Homes Standard. Hamlets Homes received nearly £250 million under the audit scheme. In 2011 when the coalition governments raised VAT by 2.5% to 20% this forced many ALMO's like Hamlets Homes to become Direct Labour Organizations (DLO) In order to save costs on paying VAT on labor by becoming an in-house labor contractor for the council.

The paper is an examination of the events which led to the collapse of the industrial strike action of the Hamlets Homes mechanical engineers on the 6th of June 2014. Following several months of negotiation by the managers of Hamlets Homes with the Unison-the public service union Trade Union convener representing the electricians over pay disputes, strike action was called following a ballot by its members. The mechanical engineers, the largest group within the organization, also members of the same union, were also approached by the electricians and asked to support their action as an act of solidarity with the aim of achieving improvements in both pay and working conditions equal to that of the mechanical engineers for the electricians.

On the 2nd of June 2014 the mechanical engineers were approached individually to obtain their views on how they felt about the action and whether they would vote to strike prior to the general meeting and ballot. Nearly half the department's engineers were undecided due to a lack of clear communication. Following the meeting on the 4th of June 2014 the entire workforce voted for strike action. But on the evening of the planned strike having already voted for strike action, the operatives who were approached to record their views had changed their decision and nearly half the operatives stated they were no longer in support of strike action and subsequently crossed the picket line on strike day. This lack of support and solidarity led to an eventual breakdown and cancellation of the subsequent planned strike action. Their behavior and events were observed and recorded and tabulated and formed the bases of the study into what were the underlying factors which attributed to the breakdown in the collective strike action (Appendix 1).

The objective of the research study was to carry out a heuristic enquiry positioned on individual identity versus collective identity in social action with the aim of examining.
- What factors influenced the decision by the mechanical engineers to strike or not strike?
- Why did some of the operatives change their decision to strike having voted for strike action? And

- Was the decision not to strike by some operatives a product of persuasion by others? Or an independent decision made by the individuals?.

Research Questions and Interview Schedule

The paper is based on findings from both primary and secondary sources and grounded theory was adopted as a theoretical framework of analysis and in grouping and clustering the data for the emergent themes to be extrapolated [1]. Further secondary research was then conducted from subject relevant literature and secondary research from internet sources. The interview questions were designed following consultation of subject relevant research literature on reflexive and reflective research methods. Ethnographical research was carried out as part of the additional primary research and engagement with the study prior to the development of the questions by observing the complete event in its entirety and listening to what was said , asking questions and collecting and recording data on spreadsheets, recording reports and general notes from questioning [2,3]. The data was then screened and filtered to ensure the most sensitive information remained confidential and was then condensed and tabulated (appendix 1), this than formed the basis from which more general and specific interview questions were devised to narrow the focus of the research area and probe further into the recorded observations with questions designed to directly point towards and address the recorded data. The questions were developed predominantly as open questions which indicated the saliency of the research topic but avoided suggesting answers [4].

The interviewee selected was based on privileged access and incorporated trust, a product of several years of employment in the organization. The interviewee was female, aged 39 and had been working as a mechanical engineer for over 21 years and has been a member of Unison Trade Union member for 19 years. The interviewee being highly reciprocal of the events leading towards the strike action also expressed a desire to disclose the details of the closed union meeting in order to aid in the narrative enquiry by sharing the 'lived experiences' of the other participants of the strike action which could be placed alongside the recorded observations to both represent the collective voices of the operatives who participated in the research and events leading up to the strike action as well as also avoid 'cognitive biases' of the ethnographic evaluation that could lead to logical fallacies as a consequence of the researchers own status quos and in-group biases [5].

A semi structured interview schedule was devised (Appendix 2) for the exploratory study with questions following a logical order for the interviewee rather than the researcher. The interview schedule can be organized

according to the needs of the researcher but 'If an interviewee gets confused about the questions because of the order in which they are asked, this will reduce the quality of the interview data' [6], therefore the three main research questions were placed in a certain order to segue naturally in the interview as the discussion progressed from topic to topic so that the most pertinent questions arose as the interview progressed further allowing the interviewee to internalize and tell their story whilst allowing for further topical probing.

Reflections on the Interview

The recorded interview took place within the premises of the now non-operational company as this was both suitable and convenient for the researcher and interviewee. The company conference meeting room was booked for an additional 30 minutes to ensure privacy and limited interruptions. Refreshments were also provided in order to create a more relaxing environment for the interviewee with the intention of creating a temporary dialectical talking partnership that was void of the positions of both the researcher (as a member of the management team and member of Unite the Union-Britain's biggest trade union) and interviewee (as subordinate mechanical engineer and member of Unison-the public service union) to encourage a smooth uninterrupted recording of the interview. At the start of the interview the researcher thanked the interviewee and explained the main aims and objectives of the interview and research and how the recorded data would be used and permission was sought and granted by the interviewee.

The interview was word verbatim transcribed (Appendix 3) including every pause, mispronunciation and grammatical errors in speech to insure an approximate recording of the interviewee's narration. On reflection what has also become apparent during the interview process and after word transcribing as [7] points out is that 'looking to words on their own is too narrow' as the interview process when word verbatim transcribed does not succinctly capture the 'kinesics and proxemics; accent, intonation and emphasis; acoustic and visual elements; transcription and interpretation: all are at play in this ethnography of speaking' Using the NVivo program a word cloud was also constructed to create a visual aid for research purposes in identifying the most prominent themes commentated on in the interview that could be used to further aid in the analysis of the interview when engaging with wider literature at a later stage (Appendix 4 & 5).

Researching with people you know can have potential ethical issues, as 'insider' data can be ethically more problematic to use given pre-existing relationships and associations' [8] this was particularly the case, in conducting the interview as a researcher whilst being in a position of

professional authority within the organization, which gave rise to concerns with confidentiality during the interview, particularly when discussing the conduct of managers. As Kvale S [9] notes 'the role of the interviewer can involve a tension between a professional distance and a personal friendship'. The interviewee when discussing the role of the management team and the conduct of union officials became self-aware of the professional position of the researcher whereupon verbal assurances were re iterated of total confidentiality concerning dissemination of data at which congruent point, feeling assured, the interviewee continued to disclose their experiences without hesitancy. In an epoch of public relations cranking out bland platitudes and meaningless none statements, the raw nature of unfiltered conversation and outbursts by the interviewee in the interview process was compelling [10].

The interview highlighted an important area of discontent towards the union shop steward who although elected to represent the workforce was viewed by both the interviewee and his union members with suspicion and an innate belief that he had been brought into the conformity of the organization. Hitherto, tainted by a close affiliation with management and perceived by his union members as motivated by personal interest and ambition. The finding from the interview had parallels with and draws attention to the fact that the union shop steward, in short, was the point at which a number of incompatible pressures converged [11]. The mechanical engineers rank and file pressed him to resolve their grievances; union officials pressed him to control his members whilst managers pressed for what [12] termed as 'tacit compliance', the codas from the interview inadvertently draws attention to the fact that , 'the shop steward therefore was simultaneously a rank and file leader, an unpaid personnel manager, and agent for his union, tasked with fostering social solidarity in the proposed micro level social action but facing questions concerning trust.

Discussion of Data Collected from Interview

What Factors Influenced the Decision by the Mechanical Engineers to Strike or not Strike?

The interview (Appendix 3) revealed an amalgamation of factors which influenced the engineer's decisions. The most pertinent being the 'bonus scheme' a performance related scheme that promoted competition and disproportionate differences in pay according to productivity. The findings of the interview suggest that the mechanical engineers were in fact against strike action and did not support the electricians. The manifestation of macro-economic factors such as changes in the rise in real incomes of some individuals coupled with job specialization and competition have disarticulated the workers perceptions of the need for

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and benefits of trade unionism and collective action [13-15]. These individualist modes of consumption by and large perpetuated by management have atomized some of the mechanical engineers against the need for solidarity and strike action [16].

The findings from the interview also revealed the absence of clear communication prior to the union meeting and vote as well as a lack of interest and questioning during the meeting. The engineers choosing not to exalt their individual knowledge and concerns due to a mutual distrust of their Union shop steward, opted instead for a form of 'rationalized conformity' in what [17] termed as 'group think'. Janis I [18] explained that individuals often seek consensus in order to maintain 'social cohesiveness' of the group. By contrast, Wilcox C [19] argued that 'group think' can lead to an inadequate redress of individual dissentions. In the case of the Hamlets Homes mechanical engineers strike ballot meeting, although votes were cast, individual voices of concern were not heard. The mechanical engineers thought process was already framed and constrained by the managements own 'communicative action' [20] (Appendix 4] as well as the 'social current' generated in the union meeting supported by a prior axiomatic obligation to comply with the dominant discourses which predicated social expectations and uniformity of the group.

To ensure that a strike action has the maximum effect, workers must withdraw their labour as a 'solid' mass, and remain on strike until it is decided to return equally 'solidly' Mc Carthy WEJ [21], Melucci A [22] argued in order for individuals to activate their collective identity individuals had to first recognize their shared values and come to a decision on whether action can be taken as a collective. The process required cognitive definitions such as shared common goals, active relationships amongst all participants and the recognition of the emotional investments made by the individuals.

The fragmentation in solidarity amongst the Hamlets Homes mechanical engineers and eventual breakdown in the planned social action can be located in the instrumental intervention of the management in the promotion of individual autonomy through individually tailored contracts and in mobilizing the union shop steward to its own conformity and agenda through informal and unregulated agreements which in part perpetuated the eventual breakdown in the planned social action. Durkheim E [23] termed this lack of group cohesiveness as 'anomie'. The ability of the Hamlets Homes managers to recognize the mechanical engineers failure in identifying their shared common denominators that support solidarity and in its absence to promote individual autonomy within the social system of the Hamlets Homes organization has resulted in a dramatic shift in the value systems of the collective conscious that the individuals shared to an extent that they no longer felt obligated to their union affiliation and 'mechanical solidarity'. The actions of the mechanical engineers suggest a shift towards what Durkheim E [23] termed as organic solidarity' with a sharp focus on their own individual interests and actions.

Weber M [24] argued to understand the basis of social action the 'Vertehen' (understanding) methodological framework could be applied to reveal human social behaviors and its motivational and aspiration values. Weber elucidated the conditions of social action as requiring the existence of at least two actors with the intention of one actor to influence the other or others and the other party in turn be influenced; the absence of any of the three conditions would preclude social action. Weber distinguished between four types of social action which were rational goal orientated (zweckrational), rational value orientated (wertational), affectual and traditional. Applying Weber's sociology of social action reveals that the Hamlets Homes mechanical engineers took rational goal orientated action, where the social actors (mechanical engineers) calculated the most efficient means of achieving their individual goals.

Why did Some of the Operatives Change their Decision to Strike Having Voted in Favor of Strike Action?

All individuals operate within a number of different institutions, or what [25], based on the theories of Karl Marx and Max Weber, called 'fields', such as families, peer groups and work settings etc. Participation in these spaces and places (or fields) is based on the composition and accumulation of capitals as well as symbolic resources which determine where individuals position themselves as well as being positioned [26]. In order to the understand the movements leading from one position to another by the mechanical engineers requires the distinction to be made between the mutually constituted relationship of the constructed social individual patterned by social structures and the concrete individual, i.e. the self as well the value and significance of the distributional structure of the different capitals in play in the fields being considered by the agents (mechanical engineers) and of these positions within the social fields they operate [27-30].

Applying a Bourdieuian perspective as a prism on the findings of the interview and observational recordings suggest that every field in which an agent operates has its own social expectations and controls. In the case of the Hamlets Homes mechanical engineers, the engineers exercised what some individuals perceived as choice with some engineers choosing to reaffirm their individual identity and individual consciousness over the dominant discourse of the union

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meeting which perpetuated conformity to their collective identity as union members. Bourdieu P [31] suggested that individual consciousness through 'regulated consideration' allowed individual freedoms from the compliance of the dominating social structures and recursions of the habitus, suggesting that 'the specific efficacy of subversive actions consists in the power to bring to consciousness, and so modify, the categories of thought which help to orient individual and collective practices'.

From the findings of the interview it could be suggested that the symbolic interaction of the mechanicals engineers can also be understood in the application of work on identity and his theorization on self and society. According to Mead GH [32] the development of the self does not transpire from birth but developed through the three activities of language, play and games. The self-according to Mead GH [32] had two aspects that make up identity; 'I' and 'Me'. The cognitive 'I' acts and reacts to the socialized aspect of 'Me'. The mechanical engineers in voting for strike action were acting according to the organized set of attitudes and beliefs of their socialized aspect of 'Me' but their cognitive aspect of 'I' questioned that decision resulting in a conscious adjustment and change of decision. Hoggart R [33], Dennis N, et al. [34] argued that not all individuals conformed to the functionalist forms of social action as peoples individual identity was also a part of their wider class identity which was regarded as 'objective'. Individuals who did not conform to this ideological conditioning were often viewed as 'deviant' [35], but prospered as identity was perceived as a continuous transformative interaction between the individuals sense of their environment as well as their sense of self awareness that shape social realities as well as formulate collectivities and identities [36].

Was the Decision not to Strike by Some Operatives a Product of Persuasion by Others? or An Independent Decision Made by Individuals?

The interview revealed (Appendix 3) that the managers discernibly approached individual union members after the strike ballot, exhibiting what the interviewee articulated as acts of intimidation designed to erode solidarity as well as informally offering individually tailored 'quid pro quos' as a measure of dissuading and dismantling the voice mechanisms which supported solidarity and repertoires of contention [37]. Jacoby SM [38] suggested managers operating in an increasingly profit driven market seek to reduce the scope and power of the collective organized labor in order to maintain competitiveness, growth and profitability in what [39] famously termed 'the spirit of capitalism'. Weber believed that society was shifting away from traditional norms and values in a process of 'rationalization' believing

that individuals made rational calculations in carrying out rational social actions with the intention of accomplishing the objectives of the bureaucracies (or organization), Weber understood this process as the institutionalization of purposive- rational economic and administrative action' [40]. Weber M [41] delineated 'without exception, every sphere of social action is profoundly influenced by structures of dominance', it can be argued that the actions of the Hamlets Homes managers towards the mechanical engineers elucidates concept of symbolic capital [28]. The ability of the Hamlets Homes managers to decentralize the collective bargaining power of the Union and persuade individuals with pay incentives as well as reconfigure the social organization of individuals, amounts to an exchange that appears to have eroded the social capital or social connectedness of the union [42], whilst legitimatizing the actions of the bureaucratic structures of dominance. Rose J [43] argued that 'Symbolic capital is what legitimates modes of domination (within habitus)' [44-48].

Conclusion

In summary, the analysis of the interview conducted suggests that a dichotomy of instrumental collectivism was led by a minority of individuals (electricians) as a means of achieving improvements in both pay and working conditions. This was not supported widely by the majority (mechanical engineers), who predisposed by insufficient shared knowledge necessary for coordinated collective action, prima facie, approved of the need for collective action by balloting for strike action. But lapsing into individualism, the mechanical engineers expressed disapproval of strike action by crossing the picket line. More than half the engineers opted instead for individualized bargaining and none activist mechanisms in the workplace leading to an eventual breakdown of subsequent future planned strike action [49-51]. The ethnographic recording revealed the mechanical engineers have both individual and collective identities which are not fixed and homogeneous but multifaceted and patterned by the social institution and the economy that appear to form a mutually constituted part of the social extension of the individuals which are activated according to the sphere of action [14]. The proliferation of neoliberal economic ideology and macro level organizational changes through tailored contracts and informal quid pro quos arrangements have increased competition and eroded the power of the union and allowed the management of Hamlets Homes to atomize individuals to its own conformity through a market exchange that appears to have facilitated the purchase of the mechanical engineers loyalty and silence as well as corrode the common egalitarian denominators considered necessary by individuals to galvanize for purposeful collective social action.

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