

DEVELOPING TRUST AMONG MIGRANT WORKERS: METHODOLOGICAL CONCERNS OF ESTABLISHING TRUST AMONG RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Arthur Morgan¹, Jocelyn Finniear², Ani Raiden³ and Mike Murphy⁴

^{1,2}*Glamorgan Business School, University of Glamorgan, Pontypridd, Wales, CF37 1DL, UK*

³*Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University, Burton Street, Nottingham, NG1 4BU, UK*

⁴*Coleg Sir Gar, Dyffryn Road, Ammanford, SA18 3TA*

The plight of migrant workers continues to generate widespread interest. Insights into migrant worker experiences within British work places continue to yield perspectives which reflect levels of vulnerability, even occasional abuse, unpleasant conditions, demanding employers, low wages and alleged sharp practice amongst 'agents'. Such accounts appear to present the British workplace to be beset with problems for the migrant worker. Our research aimed to explore the role, experiences and expectations of migrant workers in the construction industry in South Wales and the implications which this has for developing methodological approaches able to provide accurate perspectives from this group which are under represented in research. The aim of this paper is to contribute findings on the methodological challenges associated with gaining access to the workplace experiences of skilled and differently skilled migrant workers. Our work highlights a number of key issues which indicate that exploring the experiences of migrant workers using the idea of trust and considering the individuals relationship with the idea of community enables a more accurate, better informed perspective of working practices to be developed. As this suggests a cognitive centred approach we draw on the idea of a psychological contract to develop a conceptual framework against which these issues can be considered. We argue that utilising these key factors provides an opportunity to reconsider methodological approaches because without a genuinely held sense of trust between researcher and those researched a significant proportion of published reports and other research which aim to reflect the condition of migrant workers in the UK may be flawed in this respect. The implications this may offer for the organisation and management of research into the workplace dynamics of migrant workers are significant. To date little or no empirical insight captures the everyday work related experiences of this diverse employment group.

Keywords: boundaries of trust, determinants of trust, initial trust, methodology, voice.

INTRODUCTION

Recent official figures appear at odds in respect of migrant workers and their contribution to the UK economy (Dench *et al.*, 2006). In engaging with this discipline

¹ wamorgan@glam.ac.uk

² jfinniea@glam.ac.uk

³ ani.raiden@ntu.ac.uk

⁴ mike.murphy@colegsirgar.ac.uk

a key issue arises in respect of documenting the important role, experiences and contribution of such individuals. The degree of flexibility which many migrant workers provide to UK employers continues to be essential for the survival of many businesses (see for example CIPD, 2008). Significantly, it is not only the low skilled and low paid jobs that attract migrant workforce in Britain. Increasing numbers of well educated, skilled professionals enter the UK labour market each year. Without ensuring equity in working practices, conditions of work and subsequent experiences of work the UK may be jeopardising its position to attract and retain the best talent. Further, we risk the evolution and specifically the harmony which lies at the heart of the well rewarded, high performance workplace, the essence of which attracted such workers in the first place.

The aim of this paper is to develop understanding of, and extend knowledge about the role, experiences and expectations of migrant workers in the workplace and the implications which this has for methodological concerns. We begin with setting the background against a conceptual framework which reflects a cognitive centred approach to employment relationship in terms of a changing psychological contract. We argue this allows a better informed understanding of the philosophical (and cultural) tensions, which are imbued within the researched group, to emerge. Such an approach offers insights which up until now have eluded research which has focussed upon a more quantitatively oriented approach. The data used to focus this discussion allows a narrative concerned with developing suitable methodologies to emerge through a number of case study vignettes.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTRACT

Herriot and Pemberton (1996) define this contract as the beliefs that each of the parties brings to the employment relationship. There are two fundamental characteristics of the psychological contract: it differs between individuals and is a two-way continually changing exchange process rather than one that is unilaterally imposed (Guest *et al.*, 1996). The contract is implicit rather than written down and is based on a series of assumptions about relations between employer and employee. On the one hand employees will be treated fairly and honestly to meet the needs for equity, transparency in the relationship, justice and trust. Alongside this employees can expect to have some fulfilment of their need for job security and certainty about their positions in return for their loyalty to the employer (Burchel *et al.*, 2002). On the other hand, a breach of the psychological contract happens where the employee sees their organisation failing to meet their obligations. This often leads to feelings of frustration, resentment and anger with severed trust relations (Morrison and Robinson, 1997), which in turn lead to de-motivation, reduction in job satisfaction and a decline in organisational commitment.

Rousseau (1995) introduced a relational-transactional continuum as a frame of reference for analysis on the type of psychological contract. Relational contracts are long-term, open ended relationships which lead to exchanges of loyalty, trust and support. In contrast, transactional contract is a short-term relationship characterised by mutual self-interest. Previous research in construction (see Dainty *et al.* 2004) found that many project managers in the industry placed high value on the relational aspects of the employment relationship, such as recognition of their work contribution to the organisation, training opportunities, job security, career development, recognition and feedback on performance, fairness and justice on personnel procedures, consultation and communication with employees, support with personal and family problems and

promotion. The autonomy inherent in a construction project-environment created a climate of involvement supporting the notion of employee-organisation commitment.

In contemporary Britain the individual offers long hours, flexibility and accountability and in return receives a job with less security, although employers have argued that there are associated higher salaries (Guest *et al.*, 1996). A number of paradoxes or contradictions were identified by Templer and Cawsey (1999). On the one hand, people are increasingly the source of competitive advantage to organisations as access to other resources becomes less controllable in an absolute sense by management. On the other there continues to be examples of organisations treating employees as a disposable resource in responses to the pressure to pursue flexible labour practices (Anderson *et al.*, 2006). Over emphasis on the requirements for flexibility in the workforce will impact on the maintenance of trust within the employment relationship (Dainty *et al.* 2004). Since trust is one of the key characteristics of the longer-term relational psychological contract and as such has the potential to significantly influence [positive] work based experiences, there is a danger that the flexibility agenda may compromise organisations' ability to secure and sustain high quality outputs from their workers.

In terms of this paper this is significant because whilst we are reasonably confident that this is the position with westernised, UK-based employees we are less sure if these underlying motivations apply equally to the group referred to as migrant workers. What we as researchers are in clear danger of is failing to recognise there are a different range of tensions at work before being able to make assumptions about the relationships between employer and employee. We overlay western values on eastern European culture and in so doing create difficulties with accurately interpreting the results of research.

THE STUDY

Our interest for the purposes of this paper is in the work based experiences of migrant workers in the South Wales construction industry. The objective of this research was exploratory. The aim of the paper is to develop an enhanced understanding of, and extend knowledge about the role, experiences and expectations of migrant workers in the workplace and the implications which this has for methodological concerns. The strategy adopted for this research was based on an interpretive approach and the use of qualitative methods as a means of inquiry (following Bryman, 2001). Emphasis was on the actors' definition of the situation and attempting to understand how they recognise social actions (Schwandt, 1997:19). The focus was on providing a rich description of the issues and the interpretations of those most knowledgeable about them.

Although it is expected that gaining access to a relevant research population is a problem regardless of the other criteria in respect of the group researched it involved a complex process of negotiation and understanding about the community who needed much encouragement and reassurance about the motives of the researchers. Van Maanen and Kolb (1985) suggested this meaningful research 'involves some combination of strategic planning, hard work and dumb luck' (p11).

The first step of our research was to find a migrant worker who was willing to talk to us about his/her experiences. A local small business which employed migrant workers was contacted and permission gained to speak to them. Having gained the trust of two of the individuals we sought personal recommendations from them to others who

might be willing to talk to us. Identifying someone willing to approach other potential informants was critical and perhaps reflects Ram's (1994) opportunistic approach to fieldwork. Locating an insider, willing to act as a guide and possible translator was key to our study (Fontana & Frey, 1994) as the individuals' informal network allowed us to apply a qualitative methodology involving in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a number of migrant workers 6 of which are presented in this paper to represent the emerging themes. As our research was qualitative our sampling resonated with the idea of purposive sampling or the snowballing effect applied by Pettigrew & McNulty (1995).

To develop a wider understanding of migrant workers concerns not necessarily expressed to researchers a social networking site was accessed in which a number of those interviewed or their immediate families maintained regular engagement with their wider community including social networks in Poland and participated in written 'blog's. This allowed researchers to become aware of other stories and incidents which were important to these workers and other community groups, especially where such avenues allowed individuals an opportunity to voice their experiences, without fear of exposure.

The main findings of this research are reported in the section below. The data collected are presented as case study vignettes following Stake (1995) and aim to capture what Denzin (1989) referred to as 'verisimilitude'. That is, statements which might produce, for readers, the feeling that they have shared, or could share, a similar experience to the events being described.

FINDINGS

Case 1: It began with a holiday

Simon is 37 and originally came to South Wales on holiday four years ago. He originally trained as a mechanic at a college in Poland and now works for a local construction company as a labourer. He has no family members in the UK except a sister, who is employed elsewhere. Simon obtained his job after deciding he would like to stay beyond his holiday through a word-of-mouth recommendation and has been with the company ever since. Simon feels he is respected and trusted by his employer and feels he can talk to his boss, commenting that he is very helpful in resolving any issues. Simon believes his proficiency in English helps considerably should he need to discuss any difficulties which may arise. In common with all other employees in this company, Simon regularly receives training in health and safety matters, including manual handling and specialised operations training arranged by his employer through the training facilities at a local college. Simon is CSCS carded and is very happy to continue in his position for the foreseeable future believing that his working hours compare with those in Poland. This contrasts significantly with his assessment of the conditions afforded to workers supplied by a named agency. Simon was very vocal in expressing his concern for the status of those workers whose conditions of employment were in his opinion, tantamount to 'slave labour'.

Case 2: Roots in the community

Richie is 34 and has been working as a plasterer for two years. Originally from eastern Poland he trained at a college for three years in general construction and followed this with trade specific training for two years as a plasterer. Richie's story has many similarities with Simon – he obtained his employment through a personal recommendation and receives health and safety support and manual handling training at the training facilities of a local college. He also holds CSCS card registration.

Richie enjoys working for his employer and gets on well with the rest of the workforce and although his level of English is not as proficient as Simon, he feels this is not so important as he can understand what is being said better than he is able to speak. Ritchie contrasted the standard of workmanship with Poland in terms of the similarities and differences associated with more technical working procedures and minor technological differences associated with the type of plastering materials used. Whilst he believes his working hours compare to those worked in Poland, he does comment that the extreme weather conditions which may occur in Poland have the potential to alter work patterns depending on the type of task being carried out. Richie intends to continue his employment with the company as long as the firm will employ him. He has felt respected and enjoyed his time with the company. This is evidenced from his recent wedding which took place in Poland to which his boss was invited and attended. He currently lives with his new Polish wife near the site he is currently employed on. He is delighted they are expecting their first child in two weeks at the time of writing and in Simon's words, a Welsh baby being born from two Polish people!

Case 3: Here to stay

Peter is 33 and works as a 'semi-skilled' carpenter a far cry from Krakow University from which he graduated with a diploma in business/economics. Unable to find work at home, Peter was attracted to working in the UK as a result of the stories which recounted the high wages possible on London building sites. After initially working as a labourer on two building sites in London, Peter heard positive accounts of stories from Poles working in South Wales, particularly around the Carmarthen area. As result Peter decided to move to Wales and liked it. He obtained employment for a company constructing a large factory obtaining the position through a job centre. He was initially employed as a labourer and after working with a Polish carpenter on site he 'picked up' enough skills to carry out less skilled carpentry tasks. He is now being paid more as a carpenter as opposed to a labourer but is hopeful of further training to gain a qualification as a carpenter. The only difficulty encountered by Peter is associated with the technical language of building 'talk', compounded by his inexperience of site work. He believes he is employed and treated the same as 'local' construction workers and feels respected by his boss. He and the other workers with the company have no issues with the employer including working conditions and health and safety/ facilities on the sites. If there are any issues relating to health and safety or unusual working practices on any given day, the issues are usually highlighted by the site supervisor, a procedure used for all employees regardless of nationality. He commented that his ability to interact well with the local workforce is perhaps due to his proficiency in English. Peter now lives in Swansea with his wife and children who are at school where his children enjoy school and mix well. His wife has found a part-time job in the area and they consider they are here to stay.

Case 4: Onto bigger things

Paul is a carpenter by trade and completed his training in a technical college in Poland. He works for a construction plant hire firm. Now aged 31, he has mainly worked on houses, fixing roofs and other similar tasks but is pleased to be asked to carry out many other tasks including plant maintenance operations for his employer. He came directly to work in South Wales from his home town near the German border in western Poland, as a result of a recommendation from another Polish worker employed in the company. He has been with his employer for eighteen months and by his own admission would like to stay for 25 years! He gets on very well with all the

other employees of the company and finds his working hours comparable to work he could find in Poland. He suggests that occasionally some tasks in Poland would need longer working hours to complete than are given by his current employer but accepts this is an operational decision. Paul has heard of Polish workers with less favourable experiences. As in other accounts he refers directly to a specific employment agency where his observations are that minimum rates of pay are offered and deductions for accommodation commission etc are taken direct from the wage packet. Paul emphasises how his experiences are in stark contrast to this. His experiences and those of all his colleagues employed at this company are positive. The employer ensures that all employees are CSCS carded, and the future for Paul includes additional training to operate the larger elements of machinery in the company.

Case 5: A brilliant job

Graham is 52 and has worked for his current employer for 25 months. Originally from Krakow, he trained for 5 years as a painter at a technical college. He describes his current job as brilliant! His work involves carrying out painting jobs plus he also performs maintenance tasks on the plant and machinery as requested. Should he encounter any problems he has a positive relationship with his foreman who resolves any issues proactively. As with other accounts Graham's experience of employment is in direct contrast to stories he has heard about agencies. Graham however chose not to comment further on this issue. Indeed he feels his employer's attitude toward the workforce is entirely positive, regardless of ethnicity. Graham feels the company's attitude to health and safety resonates with his personally held views and he gets on well with his workmates. When considering his future he is happy to remain with the business at his present level. Moving into junior management or starting his own company is not part of his agenda. While Graham's family have remained in Poland by choice his intention is to stay in South Wales for the long term as he believes he has more opportunities to earn a good living. He has heard of a number of Polish migrant workers returning home recently as wages have improved from what he sees as an upturn in the Polish economy, largely from European Union funding.

Case 6: Fitting in

Toby is 35 and followed a similar path to many others by working initially in London for a couple of months and then receiving a recommendation from a friend working in South Wales. Toby had always been employed in construction in Poland and his training in Poland as a 'kitchen constructor/fitter' meant he had no difficulty in fitting in using his joinery/carpentry skills. Toby explained how the time spent and methods of training of carpenters in particular differed from his experiences in Poland. He recalled how tradesmen carried out 3 to 5 years training in general building tasks followed by 2 years training in their trade of choice. According to Toby, there is no real difference in the standard of workmanship between the local tradesmen and Polish tradesmen, with the exception of some technical issues. He contrasts his experiences of work in Poland and explains how some procedures relate to the amount of practical preparation carried out on site that would normally be performed in more 'factory' conditions in Poland which results in less work for the on-site carpenter; Toby recalls how previously his work would have entailed the positioning and fixing of an element such as a door/frame as opposed to 'manufacturing' an item on site as on many small construction sites in the UK. Toby works generally shorter hours in Wales than at home where, he could work anything between 7.00am to 10.00pm. He suggests a primary reason for the longer working hours at home is a combination of weather conditions and seasonal changes. For example he explains how hours

available to work in winter are short because of the freezing site conditions and summer working hours considerably longer to 'make up for lost time'. Toby feels all the employees are treated equally and has no issues with management or health and safety concerns on the sites he has worked on. Whilst he had experienced language barriers initially, this was directly associated with technological terminology but such differences are easily understood with explanation, and avoiding potential safety issues which could have emerged. Toby lives with his wife and family. His children attend the local school and mix well. His wife, a hairdresser, is not currently working but is intending to work locally. Toby is planning to stay in Wales permanently.

Analysis

In summary, some key themes emerge from these case vignettes: respect, loyalty, trust and the idea of longer term career. These insights present largely positive experiences within the migrant worker community in South Wales. The vignettes also offer useful examples of those who enter construction with different skill sets but which are framed within a strong desire to succeed and do well. Word of mouth recommendation plays a large part in securing employment and yet there remain those who seem to have falling foul of the practices of certain agencies who seek to exploit those in vulnerable positions. What we were not able to gain a measure of is what the impact of these experiences might have been when shared within their community through social networks. Training in health and safety and other issues were positively received and the relationship with employers, supervisors and workmates was very positive with the employers in particular appreciating of the skills these individuals bring to the workplace. This is returned by a clear sense of respect, loyalty and trust in their employer. Their commitment to sustain a high comparative standard of living is apparent in the numbers who have settled with their families in the local community where support for them as individuals and families has transcended the more usual type of support available within the close knit migrant communities.

The ability speak English is clearly a benefit but it is not insurmountable. What was important was the willingness to communicate with levels of linguistic ability developing over a, relatively short, period of time. One of the overarching themes which emerge from this is the essence of the flexibility thesis where willingness to work transcends an often quoted apathetic approach adopted by some UK-based workers. The emerging notion of 'career' may provide a key to help redefine the psychological contract and such an engagement allow the voice of migrant workers to emerge.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

There are a number of different categories of migrant workers who have varying rights to work in the UK. For the purposes of this research a migrant worker was defined as someone who has come to the UK to work in a job or for economic sustainability and who is neither a national of the UK, nor a national of the Republic of Ireland. In the construction industry there has been a relatively clear separation between skilled and unskilled workers. We suggest that there is another category which requires some consideration and this comprises those individuals who are 'differently' skilled that is individuals who have come to the UK possessing skills in non-construction related work and through networks have found work on construction sites or related contracting type organisations.

Often migrant workers are associated with low paid, fairly undesirable jobs. These individuals are more often to be found in organisations where low skilled jobs form a

large percentage of the organisations workforce or where the work is temporary or considered insecure. The insights emerging from these vignettes appear to reflect multiple perspectives of the obligations inherent in the psychological relationship where trust, respect and loyalty are key factors in decisions made to remain within the community, even if not with the same employer. On the one hand, it would appear that a transactional element is apparent in terms of good pay conditions etc. Yet it appears that the relational component is subsumed into the transactional contract (i.e. good working conditions and reasonable pay are secured because of good relationships, which was clearly not the case with those employed with the referred to agencies). From a trust perspective, this might therefore indicate that within 'exemplar' construction communities, affective trust and relational contracts appear to be what is sought and it could be even suggested an expectation?

As a piece of research this exploratory project has raised many important questions on the methodology employed for data collection and analysis. It has also indicated areas for further research. Fundamentally, the first consideration is: Why should individuals essentially jeopardise their strong bonds with employers by risking an exposé by talking to researchers, especially when there are so many issues which could affect migrant workers. We notice that many participants were really nervous about first talking to us and then having their interviews tape recorded; and how many would mention a certain agency but were reluctant to go any further detail. Also the majority of the researched group didn't want to be individually associated with the research but didn't mind allowing us access to social networking sites where they express their ideas. This to us implied a strong 'need' or desire to bring up an issue but reflected a fear of negative repercussions.

Many participants were found to be fiercely loyal to their employers even where the workplace did not represent a large proportion of one single migrant worker community. Their relationship with their employer and the construction site resonated with their sense of belonging to a 'community'. It appeared from discussions, and in this context, it was acceptable to have discussions on the experiences of migrant workers but not with those who were considered to be from outside of their construction community. This idea has significant implications for both selecting the research population and also the geographical location of study.

Following this idea of the levels of loyalty and trust vested with the employer and their community requires an exploration of what the related tensions might include; Is it a fear of destroying the relationship which causes access issues and is this an actual barrier to sharing their experiences? Developing a better informed understanding about perceived differences in acceptable norms of behaviour related to job, function, employer and workplace in the workplace will enable a more accurate picture of the psychological contact to emerge as a continually changing exchange process rather than one that is unilaterally imposed (following Guest *et al.*, 1996).

Concerns have been raised about a lack of social mixing within ethnic communities and migrant workers banding into same nationality groups. Where these groups appear, their members often freely converse in their native language apparently excluding other workplace members. Does this suggest a more malleable boundary which positively contributes to feelings of security within the place of work?

Much of the literature refers to a new form of psychological contract that is now in place. Since the demographics of our workforce are changing, clearly we need to investigate and recognise its applicability and implications within migrant

communities that are merging within western workplace. Our research suggests strong tendencies toward a preference on the relational elements of the psychological contract, such as trust and careers which both imply longevity. However, taking that the motivation to leave their home country for many migrant workers is to satisfy an economic need (i.e. very transactional priority) this is a factor that should be looked at in more detail. Perhaps existing psychological contracts undergo a significant change upon arrival and settling into a UK workplace?

The developing pattern referred to above may be changing fundamental beliefs about the relationship between the individual and the workplace. Among the key impacts evident in our research are the effect of time, length of residence, flow (of migrants into the UK) and the banding together of migrants to form expatriate communities. Building trust with these communities is not easy and made more difficult by applying a set of research based methodologies which may not be fit for this purpose. Thus for example in data collection, the impact of social networking sites where stories are shared and experiences aired now provide us with access to a narrative which was never previously available in such a widespread and easy to access way. With permission of the users and their networks, a longitudinal observation of such data could reveal invaluable stories especially those which underlie the relationships referred to above.

If it is true that the psychological contracts in which employer, employees and the society within which they exist are changing fundamentally, such changes demand different approaches to research that are able to reveal data which is meaningful in the context of what it means to be a 'migrant worker'. Our proposition is that the key component of the psychological contract consists of the key factors identified above: respect, loyalty, trust and careers. Methodologies that explore these (and other) themes in ways which are able to reflect the true story must be developed.

Changes in employment experience, culture and relationship with employers, employees and interacting with other migrant groups challenge researchers to refine research which considers the intricate tensions in trust, access and other personal and social concerns. Parts of the migrant worker population are particularly difficult to gain trust within because of language barriers or for historical reasons (one respondent recounted how the trade union movement in their home country had been an instrument of the state ever since 1945; was it any wonder there difficulties with engagement in this area).

Relying on interviews carried out through the intermediary of an translator creates its own problems in establishing trust, but also raises issues about nuance and the existing values and experience of the translator. How effectively are the true messages and meaning from the participants delivered to and understood by the researcher?

In short what emerges from the accounts above are overarching themes which transcend particular occupations or sectors and provide the construction industry with an agenda which requires innovative methodological approaches if researcher are to explore the real and signifier relationships which exist between employer and employee. We used the term career as a signifier of commitment which moves beyond instrumental approaches. Support from the employing organisation to ensure the welfare and well-being of its employees in turn encourages feelings of being valued. If as an employer you value me as worker then we are more likely to develop a relationship based upon mutual respect and thereby engagement. Acknowledging

reciprocity as a basis for building long-term relationships therefore becomes a strategic imperative.

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