

# DOING THE 'FUNKY CHICKEN' TO COMMUNICATE ON MULTINATIONAL PROJECTS

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An influx of migrant workers to the UK in recent times has meant the construction industry has had to adapt to nationally diverse workforces. In previous studies migrant workers have been highlighted as higher risk, and in 2007 the 25% rise in UK construction fatalities was attributed to communication issues and poor working practices. This study used an ethnographic approach to explore challenges created by a nationally diverse workforce on a large civil engineering project (+£500m), with particular focus on communication issues. Communication barriers meant that safety inductions took longer and bilingual workers were distracted from their work to translate. There were times when no translators/interpreters were present, and to overcome communication barriers a 'funky chicken dance' was used; or in other words, communication through noise and many body and hand movements. The funky chicken dance was sometimes successful in communicating to workers but was far from ideal. National diversity also meant that different ways of working was perceived as acceptable, which led to 'holes' in the procedures and tensions between employees. This study found: that confusion and debate surrounding safe working practices led to errors and confrontation; that safety risks were increased due to the challenges associated with communicating health and safety messages; there was significant reliance on interpreters and no simple way to check H&S messages were being communicated through them; the policy of one worker and interpreter to every six was inflexible and far from ideal; that there was greater difficulty in assessing levels of competency and there was a high turnover of foreign workers.

Keywords: communication, ethnography, migrant, safety.

## INTRODUCTION

The expansion of the European Union has led to an influx of foreign workers into the UK from the A8 countries (Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia). In the UK, it is estimated that approximately 88,000 (8%) of the manual labour in the construction industry are non-UK workers (CCA, 2009), which has put pressure on the management of health and safety at a time when the UK construction industry was progressing relatively successfully (Bust *et al.*, 2008). Though comprising of 8% of the total workforce, migrant workers account for nearly 17% of total fatalities (CCA, 2009). Owen (2007) attributed a 25% increase in construction fatalities to communication issues and poor work practices following an influx in migrant workers; a claim which according to Tutt *et al.* (2013), needs to be unpacked in terms of research knowledge. This problem is not only found within the UK construction industry, with research suggesting the United States is facing a similar problem (Hare *et al.*, 2013). Multi-national misunderstandings that occur can

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lead to health and safety problems, and therefore a new approach to health and safety management is required (Bust *et al.*, 2008; Tutt *et al.*, 2011). This paper aims to explore the challenges caused by a nationally diverse workforce on a large civil engineering project (+£500m).

## **MIGRANT WORKERS**

The influx of migrant workers has created additional challenges to employers in the UK (Tutt *et al.*, 2011). The injury rate of migrant workers in Australia has been found to be around twice that of local workers (Geraghty, 1979) - a finding consistent with Dong and Platner's (2004) work in the US, and statistical evidence from the UK (CCA, 2009). McKay *et al.* (2006) found that two-thirds of migrant workers received no health and safety training and the other third tended to have a short site induction that was often not understood or communicated effectively. The issue of understanding has been highlighted by Hare *et al.* (2013) following a study by Halverson (2003) in the US that found training did not result in reduced accident rates among non-English speaking workers. At least in the short term, language barriers are the greatest obstacle to the smooth integration of migrant workers (D'netto, 1997). Despite concerns regarding communication within the construction industry, Loosemore and Lee (2002) argue there has been an insufficient examination of intercultural communication problems within an increasingly diverse construction workforce and found significant communication problems with migrant workers. Communications difficulties have obvious implications including worker engagement and health and safety management (Hare *et al.*, 2013). The importance of safety communications has been highlighted by many in safety literature, with researchers including safety communication in their assessments of safety climate (e.g. Mearns *et al.*, 2003; Lin *et al.*, 2008). Hare *et al.* (2009) believe that an essential starting point is to develop methods of effective communication and Bust *et al.* (2008) and Tutt *et al.* (2011) stress that a new approach to health and safety management is required for nationally diverse projects. Trajovski and Loosemore (2006) recommend that safety training is provided in a variety of languages following strong support for this by non-English speaking migrants in their Australian study. However, some concern has been highlighted that this may hinder foreign worker's integration and could discourage learning English (Commission on Integration and Cohension, 2007). The best long-term investment is considered to provide English language courses (Hare *et al.*, 2013), though this approach may not seem appealing as according to McKay *et al.* (2006) most migrant workers in construction are employed in the short term.

## **RESEARCH APPROACH**

To explore the complex context on a nationally diverse construction site, this study adopted a rationalist ontology and interpretivist epistemology. Within this theoretical framework, reason is the primary source of knowledge (Schuh and Barab, 2007) and there is a belief in the ability of human beings to explain and understand their social world (Uddin and Hamiduzzaman, 2009). Based on this paradigm, an appropriate methodological choice was deemed to be ethnography. Ethnography is an established qualitative method that often uses participant observation as a main research tool and is now emerging as part of a repertoire of approaches for understanding the construction industry (Pink *et al.*, 2013).

For almost a three year period, the researcher was a member of the health and safety department on a large construction project. This provided a common interest with his closest informants, which can lead to assistance and engagement by informants in the

study or project (Murchison, 2010, p. 92). The H&S advisors each had different site areas in the project and the researcher used the advisors as 'gatekeepers' on the project. A gatekeeper can ease the passage of the researcher's entry, make the surroundings and contexts more visible and understandable, and can introduce a range of possible informants (Pole and Morrison, 2003, p. 26). An overt approach was undertaken which necessitated the establishment of rapport with the participants, and helped overcome any reactivity such as the Hawthorne effect (see Oswald *et al.*, 2014). A 'moderate' participant observer approach was adopted. This is where the participant observer has both insider roles in the research setting and other outsider roles. This can provide a good balance of essential involvement and necessary detachment to remain objective. The researcher was often perceived by construction workers as a trainee safety advisor who posed little threat likely to be due to his youthful looks, age, small height and that he was often with safety advisors. As a student still attached to a university, the researcher assumed the role of a novice or an apprentice, a role which can be very productive (Murchison, 2010, p. 42).

Data was gathered from attending safety department meetings, conversations with project employees of different roles, going on organised 'walk-arounds' and viewing photos and safety observation reports. Hence the majority of the data was through recalls of discussions or informal interviews with informants. Due to language barriers, discussions with migrant workers were less common and have not been included in this study. The data was input, sorted and organised in computer software programme, nVivo. The inputted data was analysed using a thematic analysis approach, which gives the researcher a 'bird's-eye view' of emerging patterns that could be drawn out (Aronson, 1994).

An iterative-inductive approach was undertaken, which is not unusual in ethnography (O'Reilly, 2009). This led to the research becoming progressively focused over time; a characteristic funnel structure that ethnographic research should have (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 160). One of the focuses that emerged was the findings related to migrant workers and communication, which have been highlighted within this paper. The majority of migrant workers were grouped based on nationality, in an attempt to avoid inter-migrant worker communication challenges. For ethical reasons, and to protect the subjects within this study, names within the following passages are false.

## **ETHNOGRAPHIC FINDINGS**

In the summer of 2014, the project was expecting an influx of different foreign workers on the site. The vast majority of operatives already working on the project were from the UK, supplemented by about a dozen operatives from Spain and Portugal, and a handful from Germany and Poland. The project had already had challenges with the Spanish subcontractor, operating with a mixed Spanish and Portuguese workforce (see Oswald *et al.*, 2014) and there had been conflict between the German and Polish operatives. Namely, that they would not speak to each other and displayed a 'hatred' for one another through aggressive intent and confrontation. In a H&S department meeting, this issue was highlighted, with one of the items being discussed surrounding the nationalities arriving and '*if they all get along with each other*'. The issue of communication was also discussed in detail with proposed 'multi-language signage', 'wallet cards to be developed with common statements' and 'black bands on hardhats for English speaking translator'. The translators or interpreters

(these terms were used interchangeably on-site and in this paper) were required to translate text or spoken words and were usually foreign workers who spoke English as well as their own native language. Tutt *et al.* (2013b) found a similar conclusion, that the same person was required to translate (written) and interpret (oral), highlighting a lack of appreciation of the different skillsets. As well as translating, the interpreters had their normal roles and responsibilities as employees such as operatives, foreman or site engineers. In the following months, Croatian, Czech, Romanian and US workers arrived on site.

The rest of this section presents various short and stand-alone ethnographic vignettes that are split up by informant's quotations (in italics), which generate greater understanding on a phenomena under study.

*'I spend 40% of my time on 3% of the job'*

Communication had been highlighted in advance as being a potential problem, but it was a difficult one to resolve. There were challenges with not only direct communications between employees but there was also time spent and resources used with translations. For example, the H&S induction would take much longer, especially if there were three different languages present, and employees that were bi-lingual were also found to being taken away from their own work to be used as interpreters. One of the H&S advisors was being required to translate the briefs to the workers in the morning. He believed he was spending *'40% of my time on 3% of the job'*. During one of these inductions, one of the Spanish workers asked *'do you mean we cannot jump from man basket to man basket?'*. This type of behaviour could be regarded as a gross misconduct on this project on the UK, yet his questioning suggests this was a behaviour that occurred in Spain.

*'It would come out complete nonsense'*

Issues with direct communication of safety issues, such as asking the workers to use ear defendant plugs were challenging. Such communications can sometimes be overcome with hand signals, though informants believed that they can be seen as being abrupt e.g. stop sign or 'cut throat' symbol. This can make it harder to make safety interventions in a positive manner. One operative said he had used a translator application on his phone, but *'sometimes it would come out complete nonsense'*. This issue become more of a hazard when successful communication was under time pressure. For example, on one occasion there was a suspended load being lowered; the load started swaying and when this occurs operatives grab the tag line to stop it swaying out of control. At the point where the load began to sway, the worker nearby was of Croatian origin and spoke no English. He was being told in English to grab the tag line, but he didn't understand. This incident was marked as a 'near miss'.

*'You feel like you are doing the Funky Chicken'*

One of the H&S advisors' said *'you feel like you are doing the Funky Chicken'* to try to communicate with the foreign workers. The funky chicken is a popular rhythm and blues dance where dancers flap their arms and kick back their feet in an imitation of a chicken. He was insinuating that in order to explain what he was trying to say he would need to use many body and hand symbols. He explained that on one occasion he noticed a welder was working without a fire extinguisher close by. He asked him: *'where is your extinguisher'*, but the operative did not understand. Therefore he started trying to represent the size of the extinguisher with his hands, pretending to pick it up and make the sound of an extinguisher hosing down a fire. However, this 'funky chicken' dance could not be understood by the operative. The advisor tried asking again, but this time using 'fire extinguisher' rather than 'extinguisher':

H&S Advisor: *Where is your fire extinguisher?*

Operative (loudly): *FIRE?!*

H&S Advisor: *No No No!*

The operative had understood the word 'fire' but not extinguisher, leading to confusion. The H&S advisor then tried his 'funky chicken' dance again and on this occasion the message was understood - the worker then went to get a fire extinguisher before returning to work.

*'If you speak to him in English, he will just say qué'*

Bust *et al.* (2008) note that one of the remedial strategies adopted by construction companies is to have at least one English speaking interpreter present in each group, a policy that was implemented on this project (one English speaker in every six).

However, there were suggestions that this policy was not being adhered to at all times.

One safety observation report explained that there were two English speaking interpreters but the team was divided into three gangs. When non-English speaking workers were isolated this increased the safety risk on the project. For example, an incident occurred when two foreign workers entered an area, signed onto the briefing sheet without understanding it and went into the construction hoist. On the briefing it stated that the hoist was out of order. Neither of the workers were trained to use the hoist and ended up getting accidentally locked inside.

A H&S advisor thought that the one in six policy attracted '*lip service*'. The policy became strained due to teams being split between the site and the office. In some cases, the management, who were mainly office-based were the recognised translators. In this situation, a H&S advisor thought the policy was '*pointless*'. He also added that a steel fixer had refused to wear the black band which identified him as a translator. The worker had explained that this was because his job description is as a steel fixer, not a translator. Though he understands English, the H&S advisor said that '*if you speak to him in English, he will just say que?'* and that '*he would be willing to do be a translator, if he was paid extra money to do so*'. Tutt *et al.* (2013b) raised the question of whether the informal translation of health and safety documentation is asking too much of migrant workers, especially when they may not be paid for it and it has little long-term benefit on their upskilling, moving through the construction sector or other aspirations. This refusal to take on the interpreter role suggests that there were migrant workers of this opinion.

*'They are being trained for everything'*

The roles of the interpreters were extremely important since all health and safety communications had to go through them. In a H&S meeting this issue was highlighted by one of the advisors: '*we are relying on these guys to communicate important messages and we have little or no idea what they are saying or how much they are saying*'. Since interpreters were often the only bi-lingual member of the team, they would regularly be put through lots of different types of training e.g. first aid. For some positions, such as the safety rep role, operatives are meant to volunteer but interpreters would often be asked. A works manager believed that they have '*too much responsibility*' and they are '*being trained for everything*'. One of the H&S advisors thought that though this may be the case, he was also aware that his opinion may be shaped by the fact he did not want to '*lose his interpreter for training courses*'. Communication from the top-down was a difficult task, even without the additional challenges a multinational workforce brings, and according to a H&S advisor there were '*many rumours and Chinese whispers on the park*'. Communication sent by email would still need to be briefed to the operatives since they have no access to a

computer, and for the foreign workers they would need to be translated and briefed. Some information was not documented on safety bulletins for fear that the media would use it against the project, which would put more emphasis on communication channels in person and on the interpreters.

*'Wee bit maire on the eirrse of it'*

Ten Romanians had arrived to work on site and on one occasion I was observing a Romanian operative working alongside a Scottish operative. They were carrying out an operation where a steel structure was being lowered onto the back of a trailer. Once the structure had landed on the trailer, it was light enough that they could push it into place, if it was slightly off-centred. The Scottish operative was taking the lead and said in a very broad accent: *'Wee (small) bit maire (more) on the eirrse (arse) of it'* or in other words, move the back of the structure a little bit more in the same direction. The British safety advisor was also watching this operation laughed because he knew there was *'no way'* the Romanian worker would understand. Despite the lack of understanding through verbal communication, many hand signals were used to complete this job. An ethnographic study by Tutt *et al.* (2011) found that migrant workers used their *'own language'* to communicate through a mixture of hand signals and languages.

Of the ten Romanians that came to work in the summer of 2014, two were removed from site very soon after their arrival because, according to the foreman, they weren't up to the required standard. Both the workers returned to site on a few occasions after their dismissal. This was believed as a desperate attempt to get their job back, though this raised concerns with the security department, who were worried about potential thefts. By November there were only two Romanians left, one of whom had an accident with his shoulder, but struggled to communicate what was wrong with him. Workers being sent home or leaving to be closer to home were not uncommon. Gherardi and Nicolini (2002) suggested that stable groups are linked with lower accident rates; hence such a high turnover can contribute to employee unsafety. In a study by Tutt *et al.* (2013) a multinational team including migrant workers maintained a stable group which *'allows the ongoing development of local knowledge and the fine tuning of interpersonal communication between team members'*.

*'They didn't know how to turn it on, where to clip on, how to lower it'*

Despite having equivalent qualifications there did seem to be differences in the level of competence. According to Biggs and Biggs (2013) as, well as attitudinal and motivational factor, competence appears to have a direct impact on safety. After an investigation into qualification levels, one H&S advisor believed that some workers had a higher qualification than what would be expected in the UK. Another H&S advisor thought the qualification levels of a group of foreign workers in his area were lower, and that it was evident. He gave an example that the workers had completed the MEWP training yet *'they didn't know how to turn it on, where to clip on or how to lower it'* (because the emergency break was on). He also said that a worker was caught jumping from MEWP to MEWP, a gross misconduct, yet the foreman didn't use any disciplinary action because the subcontractor was leaving soon anyway. Speaking with the workers, the H&S advisor was told they didn't want to come back because it is cold and they can wear shorts and trainers back home. There were also eight workers with no English speakers amongst them, breaking the interpreter policy.

*'I've not got anything against the foreign lads but something needs to be done'*

One morning, one of the H&S advisors received a call from one of the UK workers. It appeared he was aware that his call could have seemed vindictive, as he stated: *'I've*

*not got anything against the foreign lads but something needs to be done'*. He went onto explain that the Czech workers were driving into an area cars weren't allowed. The workers were coming in to pick up tools and leave but the UK worker thought that *'someone is going to get knocked over'*. He also said that they are using plant, such as cherry pickers, that *'I know they don't have cards for'* i.e. they are not trained to use. He claimed he had tried to speak to them, but couldn't get the message across, so the Czech workers were just getting in the cherry pickers anyway. The H&S advisor went into the area to investigate, and it was revealed that indeed some of the Czech workers were using machines that they weren't trained to use. Even though the work wasn't *'erratic'*, without deemed competence it could be indefensible in court, so the work was stopped. The training required only took four hours, and according to the HR department, they had requested training but never confirmed their attendance.

*'The steel fixers have never used steel before'*

There were some suggestions that the foreign workers were very inexperienced and had not worked in construction before. A factor, which according to Stranks (1994), can shape attitudes towards safety. A member of the H&S department stated that some of the *'steel fixers had never used steel before'*. Although he believed they can learn, he saw this inexperience as an extra risk. Soon after the Czech workers arrival there was an incident when they were trying to make grout cement. The seemingly inexperienced workers tried to use five bags of grout and no water and *'flashed out'* the grout pump. A site manager believed *'a lack of experience is the biggest problem on this job'*, that *'you have guys out of their depth'* on such a large project and it was *'all across the board'*.

*'The biggest problem the project faces'*

In October 2014, I joined an arranged walk-around with a H&S advisor, a H&S representative from the client and the works manager in the area. I was in the back of the group walking with the client's representative, Bill. As we walked past an oncoming migrant worker, Bill said: *'Alright mate, how you doing?'*. The migrant worker past without acknowledgement and Bill turned and said to me *'I could have been saying anything'*. Another migrant worker approached and he again tried to engage: *'Alright big man, how's it going?'*. Again the worker past without any form of acknowledgement.

McKay *et al.* (2006) found that some migrant workers had such poor English they could barely understand what was going on, but in site inductions they were smart enough to head nod at appropriate times, and to work out the induction was completed when others started signing the induction sheet. In Pink *et al.*'s (2010) work, they described how *'similar tactics'* were used by migrant workers, who also had understanding difficulties and displayed a fear of asking questions. In this study, since we passed migrant workers in a group, it may not have been as obvious that Bill was speaking to the migrant workers. This, a lack of understanding, and a fear of engagement as in Pink *et al.*'s (2010) study, could possibly have led to the lack of acknowledgement.

Bill believed the national diversity was *'the biggest problem the project faces'*. Although there was a mixture of different nationalities, with the project being in the UK, it was being built with accordance to UK health and safety standards. Bill thought that as different nationalities had different acceptable working practices, that the standards expected were not being met. He said that this meant that there were *'holes'* in the safety procedures, and if an accident occurred, it could be difficult to defend the prosecution. This issue was also discussed in the H&S department, with regard to rope

access compliance and the various training levels. One of the advisors thought that: *'there are too many nationalities out there that aren't 100% sure what they are required to do'*.

*'The photos speak for themselves'*

The different ways of working were a real concern, and there had been multiple unsafe behaviours that had been witnessed, with some being caught on camera. On the walk-around, Bill said *'the photos speak for themselves'*, and that *'we have guys hanging out MEWPS, working at height on beams not clipped on or tied to blue rope; and some of these guys are the supervisors... and you are like, hang on, you are the guys giving the briefs in the morning?!'* One of the Croatian workers had been immediately dismissed for one of these acts in what was deemed a 'red card' offence for gross misconduct. Communicating what was acceptable working practice, changing working practices and keeping consistency with this safety message was a real challenge.

*'In some places CDM is just three letters on a scrabble board'*

H&S advisors can get the opportunity to travel to different projects around the world. They were in agreement that there were different safety cultures throughout the globe, with one advisor stating that in *'some places CDM is just letters on a scrabble board'*. Note that CDM stands for the Construction (Design and Management) regulations, which places legal duties in the UK. While the H&S advisors anticipated that there may have been different working practices with Eastern European workers, they thought their way of working with the US would *'have been quite similar'* due to the *'connections'* between the two countries e.g. English speaking. However, at the beginning there were differences that caused some friction. On one occasion, a H&S advisor had to stop the hot works being carried out by the American workers because, though they had basic PPE on, they did not have any protective overalls on for hot works. One of the operatives claimed that *'they had worked like this for 40 years'* but the H&S advisor was of the opinion that it *'didn't necessarily mean they had been doing it right'*. This stoppage caused a strong reaction from the American works manager who *'went mental'* and was very confrontational. There was *'a couple of months of tension'* whenever the advisor went into the works managers office but they have since found common interests, that has improved their relationship.

*'They are hungry, will work all the hours, will do as they are told and are cheap'*

Though there were many challenges associated with a nationally diverse workforce, the migrant workers being employed were cheap. A member of the H&S department thought that employing many nationalities on this project had caused an extra risk. He believed when employing foreign workers people just see the *'bottom line'*. In other words, they just see how much it will cost them. His opinion was that *'migrant workers have been employed because they are cheap'* but once they are here we have to spend resources: *'to manage workers we struggle to communicate with, on workers that are inexperienced and on workers are not used to the UK standards and ways of working'*. Speaking with an experienced civil engineer on the project, he said that you can understand it economically as they are *'hungry, will work all the hours, will do as they are told and are cheap'*.

## CONCLUSIONS

A multinational workforce made it challenging to communicate health and safety messages on this project. Interpretations of messages, such as safety bulletins, lessons learned and posters used valuable time and resources, which meant it was difficult to

translate all communications into all languages required. There was a significant reliance on the construction workers who were interpreters as any communication to their teams (of maximum six) would have to be translated through them. Despite being a very important communication link it was very difficult to assess what safety messages were being passed on, or how it was being delivered. The one worker/interpreter in every six workers policy was inflexible due to: work locations (site and office), resistance from migrant workers to act as interpreters, interpreters being very busy as they had many additional roles (such as a safety rep, first trainer etc), as well as holidays and illness. Therefore, there were times translators weren't available and communications were made through a 'funky chicken dance' or many noise, hand and body movements. This was far from ideal as it led to confusions and difficulties in intervening in a positive manner (stop symbols can seem abrupt).

Different groups of nationalities had different ways of working despite all having to comply with UK health and safety standards. This led to: conflicts on what was safe, 'holes' in the procedures, unintentional unsafe acts due to lack of knowledge and misunderstandings, which in some cases, led to tensions between parties. There was confusion in deeming competence of the workers and those that were not perceived satisfactory were sent home, which combined with workers being away from home and wanting to return, led to a high turnover. There were also suggestions that the workers lacked experience. Communicating acceptable work practices, changing work practices and keeping consistency throughout the project was a significant challenge.

Appointing a nationally diverse workforce can create significant health and safety challenges and problems. In this study migrant workers were initially a cheap option, but also a greater risk, and significant time and resources was required in an attempt successfully manage the communication issues and the different working practices. The use of migrant workers, who also acted as translators, was an inflexible and far from ideal approach that led to a 'funky chicken dance' in order to communicate.

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