RAPID ETHNOGRAPHY IN CONSTRUCTION GENDER RESEARCH

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In advancing the intellectual debate in gender equity and diversity in the construction industry, feminist institutionalism is being used as a new lens to understand the failure of formal policies to shift the intransigent gender imbalance. Feminist institutionalism allows new insights into how hidden informal organisational rules, practices and narratives operate in conjunction with formal rules in achieving gender diversity and equity. However, the adoption of feminist institutionalism as a conceptual framework raises new methodological questions. While formal rules are created, communicated and enforced through official and highly visible channels, informal rules, norms and procedures are created, communicated, and enforced outside officially sanctioned channels and are often 'hidden' from view. The power of ethnographic methods to reveal such 'under-the-surface' institutions is well established in the social and political sciences but not in construction. This paper makes a methodological contribution in response to the practical constraints of doing ethnography in the construction industry, by describing the merits of rapid ethnography within the context of feminist institutionalism. It concludes that while rapid ethnography has its limitations, it has significant potential as an unexplored methodology to tackle the persistent problem of gender equality in the construction industry and other social issues in construction management research.

Keywords: gender, policy, equity, diversity, feminist institutionalism, ethnography.

INTRODUCTION

In the last few years, ethnography has become an increasingly popular approach in construction management research. Recent research which has explored the application of ethnography to issues such as class, safety, intercultural communication and change management (see for example, Pink *et al* 2012; Shipton and Hughes 2013; Shipton 2012; Subbiah 2012; Tutt *et al*. 2013; Thiel 2012; Oswald *et al* 2014). This work follows the classic ethnographies of construction work conducted by authors such as Sykes (1969), Applebaum (1981), Mars (2005), Paap (2006) and Theil (2007), which has revealed something of the 'masculinity' within which construction practice seems so enmeshed. Despite arguing that ethnography holds considerable promise for construction researchers, the relatively small number of ethnographic studies is somewhat surprising (Pink *et al*. 2010), and there remains an overreliance on interviewing in construction social enquiry (Dainty 2008).

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The aim of this paper is to explore the challenges of classic ethnography in the construction sector and how alternative ethnographic practices might offer pragmatic ways of overcoming them. Specifically, this paper presents a case study of the Australian construction industry (Galea *et al* 2014) that explores the practical difficulties experienced in using ethnography in researching gender equity and diversity. It shows how 'rapid' ethnography was adopted as a viable alternative and how this might be suitable to other social research projects in the broader field of construction management.

EXAMINING GENDER EQUITY IN CONSTRUCTION USING A FEMINIST INSTITUTIONAL LENS

Recent statistics show the Australian construction industry remains Australia's most male dominated sector despite many reforms to increase female representation (EOWWA 2012). Women have fallen from 17% of the Australian construction workforce in 2006 (ABS 2006) to just 11.6% in 2012 (EOWWA 2012). Countries like the UK have followed similar trends; early enthusiasm from women construction professionals about their own careers decreases with increased exposure to the construction workplace (Sang and Powell 2012; Dainty *et al*. 2000). In an effort to explain these discrepancies, researchers have turned to scholarship on gender in organisations. According to gender theorist Raewyn Connell (2005), gender is an embedded feature of all organisations. Organisations, including those in the construction industry, are not gender-neutral structures but institutionalise practices of femininity and masculinity into unequal gender hierarchies, gendered work practices and gender-specific jobs. In the construction sector, institutionalised gender practices play out through gender biases and discrimination in both formal policies and procedures that serve to uphold a masculine workplace culture, which emphasises presenteeism and long work hours (Powell *et al*. 2009; Watts 2007).

Research about the under-representation of women within and outside construction remains conceptually narrow. Dainty *et al*. (2007) note, construction management research is disconnected from theoretical developments in social and behavioural sciences and Terjesen *et al* (2009) has identified an urgent need for more scholarship in gender research. There is clearly a need to advance the intellectual debate in this area and to this end, new-institutionalist theories, especially its feminist institutionalist variant offers a valuable new lens (Chappell 2006; Waylen 2009; Mackay *et al* 2010; Krook and Mackay 2010). The basic premise of new institutionalism is that rules 'matter' (March and Olsen 1984, 747) as they structure social interaction and shape behaviour of people, organisations and government (Helmke and Levitsky 2004). Feminist institutionalism provides a lens to examine the gendered rules – formal and informal - operating in organisations and how these influence gender equality. According to new-institutionalism, formal rules are embedded in policies, strategies, constitutions, individual contracts and operational guidelines and enforced through channels widely accepted as official (Lowndes 2005). In contrast, informal rules, practices and narratives are unwritten socially shared rules which are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels (Helmke and Levitsky 2004). Chappell and Waylen (2013) and Azri and Smith (2012) argue that research using new-institutionalist theory has overly focussed on formal rules over informal. Yet as Krook and Mackay (2010) point out, the interplay of formal and informal rules may help explain the failure of formal policies to shift the gender imbalance in organisations. Examples of informal gender rules in the construction

industry which may undermine formal gender diversity policies include embedded views about the appropriate qualities necessary to be effective at work, expectations about presenteeism and time commitments, and the place and timing of meetings which often conflict with care-giving responsibilities. These accepted modes of behaviour, and many others, keep the industry's dominant culture intact (Dryburgh 1999) and as a consequence act as a barrier to women's recruitment, retention and progression.

METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF USING FEMINIST INSTITUTIONALIST THEORY

New theoretical approaches require new methodological thinking. The enforcement processes of formal rules can be more readily studied since they are written down and involve obvious actors such as managers, policy makers and committees. However, informal rules are much harder to research since they often take place through 'subtle, hidden, and even illegal channels' (Helmke and Levitsky 2004; Chappell 2006). Furthermore, analysing informal rules around gender practices raises practical issues since respondents may not even perceive or recognise the existence of informal gender rules because their normalisation and taken-for-granted nature may render them invisible.

Increasingly in the social and political sciences, these sorts of challenges are being addressed with the use of ethnographically-based research (Radnitz 2011). In simple terms, ethnography is a set of methods which involves the researcher participating in the daily lives of people for an extended period of time, observing what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions, undertaking follow up interviews and collecting any relevant that can to throw light on issues of interest (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). In ethnography, the researcher effectively acts as a translator between the group or culture under study and the reader (Millen 2000). In this sense they are both 'emic' (from the perspective of theparticipants) and 'etic' (from the perspective of the observer). Ethnographic research is typically more intensive than other forms of social research and is holistic, descriptive and reflective in nature (Ybema *et al* 2010). It tends to avoid causal relationships in favour of inductive explanations of explanatory theories and generally rely on a limited number of case studies that are investigated intensively in both a highly personalised and field-based context using primarily qualitative methods. This enables the researcher to capture the social meanings and ordinary activities of people in their natural settings. As such, ethnographic research must be seen as a reflexive and subjective practice within which the researcher is expected to contribute or participate (Pink *et al*. 2012).

The use of ethnography to reveal gendered dimensions of social life has a long history (Skeggs 2001; Visweswaran 1997), but as Chappell and Waylen (2013) note, ethnography has rarely been used in new-institutionalist research in specifically gendered ways, or as a gendered lens on informal institutions. Similarly, while ethnography's use in construction management is on the increase, its value in exploring gendered rules and practices in the sector has yet to be fully explored.

ORIGINAL ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH DESIGN

Motivated by the need to address the narrow theoretical and methodological understandings of the intransigence of gender inequity in construction, we adopted an ethnographic approach to investigate the interplay of informal gendered rules and formal rules and policies in two multinational construction firms. We used two in-

depth case studies of multinational construction firms. One company (A) is a privately owned multinational contractor, which operates in the commercial, residential, engineering and infrastructure markets. The second company (B) is a publicly listed multinational contractor which operates in the commercial, residential, engineering and infrastructure markets. This research was phase 2 of a larger project, where phase 1 has focussed on the formal institutions that influence gender inequity (Galea *et al* 2014). Phase 2 use an ethnographic approach

However, despite close interaction with, and support from senior management among our industry partners, we encountered a number of problems to entering the field which challenged our approach. These are described below:

A key concern for the research team, entering phase one, was how to position the research. It became clear after phase 1 that, in both companies, *gender* tended to be understood as meaning 'women' (Galea *et al* 2014). We wanted to ensure that in this second phase we were able to observe 'everyday' interactions, processes and workplace practices, not just issues understood by the companies as explicitly related to gender, such as the provision of 'family friendly' work practices including parental leave and the provision of childcare facilities and women's leadership training. This compounded management concerns that men in the companies may think we were trying to 'catch them out' or identify them as the main barrier to women's recruitment, retention and progression. A further concern was that men might be disinclined to participate in research about gender because, in thinking it was really about women, they did not consider that it related to them.

Contracting is a highly competitive business, in building rapport and trust in the early stages of the research, the research team also had to overcome concerns that the research was seen by some respondents as potentially risky for their business or that trade secrets might be revealed to the other participating company.

Construction is a highly time pressured and resource intensive process where there is little time for people to engage with researchers in any detailed way. This meant the research team felt that many usual ethnographic methods such as spending extended periods of time on site or asking participants to complete diaries about their experiences was too great an imposition.

The project-based nature of construction activity, across multiple locations and for finite periods of time, mean in-depth traditional ethnography at one site or location was not appropriate to investigate how informal rules interact with formal rules across different site locations and teams. It was also not sufficient to spend an extended period of time only at head-office, where employees may be less likely to bend formal rules compared to employees on distant project sites. Accounting for the multiple temporalities which characterise construction practice has been acknowledged as representing a significant challenge for classic ethnographic approaches (Pink *et al* 2010).

Our access to companies was through the HR departments based at head office who often acted as gatekeepers in accessing potential respondents. Our gatekeepers, who were usually the champions of gender-related initiatives, were particularly concerned that project site teams, who were responsible for the day-to-day implementation of policies and initiatives, would be reluctant for us to observe and shadow them. However, our phase one interviews with business leaders, suggested that while this may be the case for some, there were others on site who would support our fieldwork.

These issues, which are not necessarily unique to researchers engaging with large construction contractors, forced us to reflect on the practicality of doing ethnography in the context of our research (see also Sage 2012 and Hartman 2012). As Pink (2005) identifies, obtaining a richness of knowledge within a limited time frame using ethnography is challenging for researchers. However, in order to uncover the informal rules at work in shaping gender policy in practice we were mindful of the need to maintain an ethnographic methodology. Our solution to this dilemma was to explore a 'rapid' ethnographic approach.

REVISED RESEARCH DESIGN: RAPID ETHNOGRAPHY

In contrast to the wide-angled, explorative and time-intensive approach of traditional ethnography, rapid ethnographers work in teams to undertake short, intensive and focused investigations using multiple and iterative methods to gain a deep understanding of the work setting they are studying (Millen 2000, Schultz *et al* 2009, Isaacs 2013). In rapid ethnography, open-ended interviews and explorative observations are replaced with condensed equivalents which are more focused on specific propositions and/or issues of interest which are identified from existing theory and literature before the research begins (Baines and Cunningham 2013). Furthermore, broad conversations and interactions with numerous random informants are replaced with targeted and deliberative interviews with sampled respondents at key intervals and moments where data is the richest and most relevant to the questions of interest. Frequent interaction and communication with informants and the research team are essential through the iterative reflections on emerging results and the theoretical framework helping to focus the research even more and avoid time wasting in subsequent rounds of research. This requires careful up-front planning directed by research which has a strong theoretical focus and a systemically thought through method informed by specific research questions and propositions.

While rapid ethnography has been criticised by some for being a quick and dirty, second-rate approach to ethnography, arising from the commercial constraints of industry researchers who cannot afford to spend months in the field (Millen 2000, Isaacs 2013), it none-the-less provides some practical solutions to the challenges we encountered. As such we engaged a rapid ethnographic approach and incorporated targeted strategies to address some of the issues highlighted above. Our rapid ethnography approach comprised participant observation, shadowing and semi-structured interviews with a wide range of construction professionals from both case organisations. This allowed us to embrace both emic and etic approaches to our ethnographic work, allowing us to move from a position of an 'outsider' to a position of an 'insider' (and also simultaneously at times and in difference places and contexts). This is always a challenge in any ethnographic research since there are contradictory issues that need to be worked through. For example, while our interviews very much positioned us as an outsider, the onsite shadowing and our regular participation in the events we observed allowed us to build relationships and fade into the background and see issues from the perspective of our respondents. As noted above participant observation was a critical component of the research that was necessary to reveal how informal rules and practices undermine formal strategies to improve gender equity and how both formal and informal rules and practices may differentially affect men and women's career experiences. To address some of the concerns of our partners, the ethnographic phase of the research was also rebadged, or repositioned, and ultimately

depoliticised by shifting the focus away from gender per se, towards a proxy: career pathways. While information provided to participants acknowledged our interest in gender, we foregrounded our focus on recruitment, progression and retention. This rebadging addressed concerns that telling people we were researching gender would limit our exposure to a broad range of people within the companies, particularly men. Gender therefore became an analytical concept, rather than the defining concept of our research for participants.

Given the challenges described above, the participant observation was designed as a staged process, beginning with less intrusion and demands on individuals, to allow the companies and participants to become familiar with the research and to see that it would not interfere with their work. This strategy was adopted to build relationships, rapport and trust between the researchers and respondents. The first part of the observation focused on pairs of researchers observing events or activities, including formal and informal meetings, diversity training, new employee inductions, graduate assessment centres, leadership training, mentoring initiatives, management 'road shows', and diversity-specific events. These observations noted room layout and seating arrangements, presenters, timing of events, who attended, who had 'voice', tone of conversation and participant involvement and engagement, practices (who does what) and group dynamics (how do people participate etc.) and narrative (what is the message being reinforced). Researchers also collected data such as handouts and invitations and took photos of people's positioning and presentation materials. Where appropriate the researchers also participated in these events and conducted informal conversation with attendees asking questions such as 'Is this event/activity typical?' 'Is it important to attend events like this?' Participants were also invited to take-part in an interview if the conversation became more personal. Interviews that formed part of the rapid ethnography were designed to complement the observations and explore how formal and informal rules interact, conflict or are reinforced in relation to recruitment, progression and retention. As such they explored narratives around career history and recruitment, mentoring and networks, what kind of people do well around here, promotion processes and work practices (such as hours and work-life balance).

The second part involved observation of a number of construction project sites, which involved two researchers spending 3-5 days (depending on the size of the project) on site, shadowing and interviewing professional employees in a range of positions. Observations on site focussed on work practices (what time people arrived and left the site), roles on site (who does what roles, whether roles are associated with particular work practices such as total availability or leadership), whether there is a demarcation between project site and site office, the composition of work practices during the day (formal and informal meetings and interactions), who had 'voice' within these meetings and the tone of engagement, group dynamics (how do people participate etc.) and narrative (what messages are being reinforced). Shadowing also provided an excellent opportunity for informal conversations with participants and included questions such as 'Was that a typical site meeting?' 'Is it important to arrive on site at this time?', 'Who is looked up to on this site, Why?'. If the conversation became more personal, participants were invited to take-part in an interview. To address concerns around confidentiality, we took care to emphasise the fact that we were observing process rather than content or individuals.

Where possible, the two-member research teams involved in the observations were twinned, with an 'insider' and an 'outsider'. The insiders were members of the research team with extensive experience and established relationships in the

construction sector, while the outsider researchers were gender experts from sociology and political science. This combination allowed the researchers to overcome challenges associated with being both an outsider – potentially not understanding issues – and an insider – missing important messages because they are taken-for-granted (Baines and Cunningham 2013; Bjarnegard 2013). As Pink *et al* (2012) observe, construction is a very masculine space and much of the ethnography work to date has been undertaken by male researchers. Our research team comprised of both men and women and while not always possible, we actively tried to maintain this mix throughout the research, in recognition that our gender may impact on our interpretation of data. The researchers reflected on their gender and acknowledge different self-reflexivity between researchers in post-observation debriefs.

After each observation the researchers debriefed and reflected, recording their conversation, which was later transcribed and formed the first stage of data analysis. A final obligation in any ethnographic research is to reflexively consider how empirical insights are kept in dialogue with theory throughout the research process (Pink *et al* 2013). To address this issue, researchers also kept notes and reflected in the debriefs on emerging findings, theoretical observations, and how their own perspectives (gender, previous experience, academic discipline, etc.) may have impacted on their interpretation of the data. These debriefs and analytical memos were important in addressing the challenges of analysis in a multi-researcher ethnography, where there are bound to perceptual differences and various points of agreement and disagreement.

CONCLUSION

This paper explored the practical difficulties experienced in using ethnography in researching gender and equity and diversity in the construction industry. Through a case study, it explored how rapid ethnography was adopted as an emerging and viable alternative which might be suitable to other social research projects in the broader field of construction management. As construction activity becomes ever more resource constrained, time pressured and risk adverse, the need for construction management researchers to innovate in finding new ways to undertake social research which fit with the cultural and real-life constraints of their informants will no doubt grow. In doing so, we identified many benefits in adopting a more telescoped and rapid approach to our ethnographic research that addressed the constrains presented in researching the organisational practices of large construction companies These include less intrusiveness and avoiding the opportunity-cost of broad ranging unfocussed investigations which would have resulted in the collection and analysis of a large amount of data which did not relate to the problem being addressed. However, rapid ethnography needs a strong theoretical context and systematic method to be thought out in advance. It also requires teamwork, close interaction with informants, focus, new technology, multiple methods, up-front planning, multi-tasking, time and informant sampling and the identification of clearer research questions and propositions in advance.

Is rapid ethnography always appropriate? The answer is obviously no. It may also be argued that the rapid ethnography approach (which is based on less intensive but more targeted research) is at odds with our initial argument that informal rules and practices underpinning gender discrimination cannot be accessed at the surface level, we have shown and argued here that this is possible in well-designed rapid ethnography research.

But when faced with a range of practical constraints, rapid ethnography represents an interesting and potentially viable alternative, which fits with the cultural and practical constraints on the construction industry and which can provide meaningful empirical insights into the important and persistent problem of gender diversity and equity. It might also be of significant wider interest and value to many other aspiring social researchers in the field of construction management.

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