

Location Independent Working: An Ethnographic Study

Amanda Lee, MariaLaura DiDomenico, Mark N.K. Saunders,

Summary

This paper draws on the research experiences of the first author who conducted a longitudinal ethnographic research study to explore the impact of formalised location independent working (LIW) practices in a highly managerialist, post-1992 'new' UK university. Findings suggest the formalisation of LIW caused a fundamental shift in the nature of the relationship between academics, managers and trades unions. This has far reaching consequences for the case study university and, potentially, for other institutions, which may be supporting similar working practices by encouraging their employees to work in spaces other than those provided by the organisation. Adopting an ethnographic research design enabled the first author to become fully embedded in the social and cultural context of the case study university, which in turn allowed access to the mundane, often hidden everyday behaviour and practices of academics.

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Background to the research

The main aim of this paper is to reflect upon the adoption of multiple methods in an ethnographic study which investigated issues associated with academic employees following the introduction of location independent working (LIW) practices. In the context of this research, LIW is a term used to describe the practice of working in locations independent of the more traditional, fixed office setting. LIW employees sign up to a new working arrangement in which they are provided with a laptop, printer and smartphone, and forgo the right to an office on-campus. This ethnographic study examined how, and in what ways, LIW practices impacted upon the lives and working relationships of academics. Thus, the focus and level of analysis was on exploring the experiences, preferences, views, working relationships, day-to-day lives and self-articulations of both location-independent and office-based academic employees, within the case study organisation.

Our study specifically addressed the following three research questions:

1. How are the practices and contexts of the case study university affecting, and in turn being affected by, the experiences and working practices of academics?
2. How, and in what ways, do LIW and office-based academics articulate and make sense of their daily, lived experiences?
3. How, and in what ways, does this affect their working relationships and sense of academic identity?

Underpinning philosophy

In order to frame the institutional and social context of our research, labour process theory (LPT) was utilised as the underpinning theoretical ideology to examine the impact of managerialism in higher education and consider its wider implications for the working lives of academics. Marx (1867) was the first to contextualise the labour process within capitalist societies, which he described as an exploitative relationship in favour of the minority, ruling classes, over the working classes. Marx identified three components of the labour process, namely: the personal activity of man [sic]; the subject of the work; and the instruments of the work. In the context of academia this could be represented as the academic themselves and issues pertaining to social interactions at work and reactions to the working environment; the nature of the work they do, i.e. teaching, research, management etc.; and the instruments of work, which could be material such as laptops, smart 'phones, and other facilities/equipment, or tacit such as knowledge and experience. We chose to take an interpretivist, social constructionist reading of LPT, following in the tradition of writers such as Knights and Willmott (1990; 2007) and O'Doherty and Willmott (2009). These writers stress the importance of considering the multi-faceted nature of work, relationships and workplaces in the context of a labour process. Taking an ethnographic approach was suited to examination of the research questions through an LPT lens, because it enabled exploration at the societal, structural, organisational and individual levels.

According to Crotty (1998: 42) social constructionism can be defined as "*the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social*

context'. Although not without its critics (Hibberd 2001; Jenkins 2001; Maze 2001) social constructionist ontologies contend knowledge, personal experience and ascribed understanding of reality are shaped by existence in a social world made up of social interactions. Thus, personal concepts of reality are ultimately a social construction. These perceived realities become embedded in the way we see and construct our social world. Social constructionist perspectives are compatible with LPT as a theoretical lens, as their combination enables critical investigation into the nature and social construction of the employment relationship at multiple levels and from multiple perspectives.

Ethnographic methodology

The phrase 'ethnography' derives from nineteenth century Western anthropological studies of cultures and communities situated outside the Western world (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). In the last century it has become associated with qualitative approaches to research in the social sciences, perhaps because it is a methodology based upon direct observation (Gobo 2011). There is no single clear definition of the term, which Weick (1985:568) defines as "*A sustained, explicit, methodological observation and paraphrasing of social situations in relation to their naturally occurring contexts*". In contrast, Silverman (2009) suggests ethnography involves descriptive writing about specific groups of people.

Our multi-method (Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998) ethnographic research design utilized a range of qualitative data collection techniques including: the first author's own reflective research journal; comprising 3 volumes and 592 pages; 17 participant diaries; 26 in-depth interviews; photographs; pictures and other artefacts. Furthermore, through on-going and continuous access to the case study university, the usually hidden practices adopted by academics were revealed, thereby exposing the reality of how things work (Watson 2011). Such information would not necessarily be gleaned by interviews (Miller, Dingwall and Murphy 2004), or indeed other qualitative methods when used alone. In order to consider multiple perspectives, the views of senior management, human resources and trade union representatives were sought in addition to those of LIW and office-based academics.

A key element of ethnography is lived experiences and the first author's on-going personal reflective research journal was integral to capturing these. Being an ethnographer is an evolving process requiring total immersion in the field. Herein lies both its uniqueness and challenge. The first author's research journal introduced auto-ethnography as an additional element of the qualitative methods and aided researcher reflexivity. Using an auto-ethnographic methodology enabled the first author to present her voice in the research, allowed her to draw upon her own experiences and increased her understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Wall 2006). Denzin (2009) described this as writing from the heart. Thus, auto-ethnographic accounts of the first author enabled her to observe situations and record incidents as they occurred, reflectively look back and make sense of what happened, and reflexively question her role in the research process and how this changed over time.

In addition to close, personal, in-depth exploration and analysis, ethnography supports observation of interactions and behaviour in the specific organisational context in which they occur. Gobo (2011) argues this gives ethnography added value, because

compared to other approaches; actions and behaviours are observed, rather than just being recounted. In other words, an ethnographer is able to see what people are doing, as well as what they say they are doing. Ethnography also gives researchers the opportunity to employ multiple methods, as we have done, thus facilitating triangulation. This is useful as a means of widening and deepening understanding of the issues being studied, as well as serving to add credibility and validity to results (Lewis, Ritchie, Ormston and Morrell 2014).

Notwithstanding, limitations to ethnographic approaches should be considered. For example: closeness of the researcher to the subject under investigation has the potential to cause bias or possibly influence the research outcome; it may also make it difficult for the researcher to avoid becoming emotionally involved. Getting full access to the organisation may be difficult to negotiate and this could prevent the researcher from being totally immersed in the field (Feldman, Bell and Burger 2003; Samson and Thomas 2003; Tota 2004). There may be discrepancies between the views and interpretations of the researcher and views and interpretations of participants, so it is essential that this be fully discussed with participants. An often made criticism of qualitative research is its lack of generalisability because it is based on few cases (Gobo 2011). However, generalisation is not necessarily the aim of ethnographic methods, as each case under investigation is unique (Gobo 2011). Furthermore, the integration of multiple methods goes some way to alleviating concerns around bias or misinterpretation (Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998).

As discussed earlier, the first author's reflective research journal was an essential part of our primary data collection and enabled on-going and emergent discourse as themes emerged. Billings and Kowalski (2006) describe journals as '*written documents that stimulate increased personal awareness regarding our own beliefs, values and practices, as well as, those of others with whom we interact*' (2006:24). In contrast, critics of auto-ethnographic approaches suggest they are prone to introspection and self-indulgence (Holt 2003). However, we argue it is this introspection that allows such detailed unpicking of the minutiae of everyday life as it happens, however mundane and uneventful it may appear to be. Duncan (2004) agrees stating that for research questions requiring an individual perspective, these techniques are tailor-made.

Brannan and Oultram (2012) describe participant observers actually becoming the research instrument because of their direct experience of events and situations. This supports emergent research, which goes hand-in-hand with ethnographic approaches. From our perspective as researchers totally immersed in the field, keeping one's own personal journal can at times feel like a time-consuming and laborious undertaking. Furthermore, decisions have to be made over what to record and what not to record, how often to record, in how much depth and so on. One of the strategies employed to address these challenges was to record information in a variety of ways including handwritten notes, typed memos, audio recordings and photographs.

Main findings and theoretical contribution

The qualitative data collected from participant interviews and diaries were systematically analysed using the Framework method (Ritchie and Spencer 1994). The first author's auto-ethnographic accounts were used to provide context and

validation to the emergent themes and issues. Findings revealed an entrenched managerialist culture driven by private sector business models; work intensification and long-working hours, which were exacerbated by constant connectivity to mobile technologies. Academics displayed a strong sense of academic identity and a desire to be treated as professionals. Nevertheless, a fundamental shift in the nature of the relationship between academics, managers and students was observed and socially constructed divisions arose between LIW and office-based academics. Our research extends and refines existing theoretical understandings of the way in which the labour process is conceptualised within contemporary higher education institutions. A dynamic interplay in terms of control, resistance and compliance was revealed. Thus highlighting the complex interactions that exist between structural organisational constraints, managerial attempts to control, and their affect on the individual agency of academics.

Concluding comments

From an LPT perspective, it was important to capture the nuances between managerial, employee and trade union perspectives. Adopting an ethnographic research design enabled these multiple voices to be heard. Thus providing contrasting insights into the complex nature of academics' relationships at the individual and organisational level. Watson (2011) argued for greater use of ethnography to enable intensive observation and scrutiny of organisational practices within the specific social, cultural and political context within which they occur. Utilising initial and follow-up interviews, together with diaries, facilitated close scrutiny, as participants were able to reflect on earlier conversations and diary entries. Furthermore, the first author's auto-ethnographic accounts allowed situations and incidents to be observed and recorded first hand and facilitated reflexivity in terms of our role in the research process and how this evolved over time. In developing this paper for publication, we propose to present a detailed account of our experiences as ethnographic researchers and the emergent findings of our study. We will consider and debate the practical application, implications, value and limitations of utilising ethnography as a method to explore the complexities of life and work in contemporary organisations.

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