# Tales of an Immersed Researcher: Dealing with an Intimate Experience of Practice, New Perspectives on the Politics of Regulatory Change and Communication

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**Abstract:** Both Governmentality and accounts of collaborative ethnographic study are well served by the academic literature. However, this discussion focuses upon discourses that circulate around the debate of meat hygiene practice and how it mediates through implementing organizational and regulatory change. This study subtly illuminates the differing expectations and gaze of the researcher and sponsor relationship. It sketches the degrees of control for both, as each search for insights into existing practice, exposing challenging attitudes and communicating the need for change within a watchful public realm. Finally, it also traces how the research objectives evolved from challenges to organizational change to notions of 'Communities of Practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

**Keywords:** collaborative ethnographic study; communication; communities of practice; selectivity; governmentality

## 1. Introduction

This research centres upon the implementation of the new European Union 'H123' hygiene legislation in January 2006 and traces the change in the research emphasis which it brought about. In the United Kingdom (U.K.) the 'competent authority' is the Food Standards Agency; its 'executive agent' is the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) whose primary purpose is to implement meat hygiene policy. Originally, drawing upon the researcher's professional experience of working for the MHS as an inspector and an interest in organizational behaviour, the researcher approached the MHS with a research proposal. It was envisaged the research questions would focus upon three areas: potential challenges at the plant level, specifically, MHS teams themselves, due to pre-existing sub-cultures or even instances of 'organizational misbehaviour' (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999); was there consistent interpretation and enforcement of the legislation and finally to assess whether project management methodologies, such as PRINCE 2, were helpful to the overall implementation process. However, in consultation with the sponsor, they were particularly keen for a focus on the effectiveness of their communication methods. Communication and in a later revision of the research questions, notions of 'Communities of Practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, Wenger, 1998, Wenger *et al*, 2002) came to eventually dominate the research.

Communication methods are crucial to any organizational change strategy. For the MHS and its operational staff, the new legislation represented a significant legislative, cultural and organizational change, as it moved from an 'inspection and enforcement' to an 'audit and verification' framework. This specifically meant that Food Business Operators (FBO) would become far more responsible and accountable for their processes. As with any organizational change, implications began to emerged, such as a potentially reduced inspection workforce. Inevitably, tensions came to the fore between MHS and its non-governmental organization stakeholders. Concerns over the implications for food safety inevitably encouraged the taking of policy 'positions', which in turn created tensions and anxieties at different levels and locations within and between the MHS and UNISON, the operational staff's trade union. Set against this background, these perspectives help explain the views and responses given in the questionnaires and interviews. Given the sensitivities of food policy situated within the public realm, it identifies certain research issues, as such possible restriction of the research process and selectivity of material. This discussion will not preview an in-depth analysis of the results of the questionnaire or interviews, but will discuss how certain research problems were addressed.

## 2. Literature review

Although many reports and studies are conducted for and on behalf of the civil service and its associated executive bodies, they are often confined to looking at specific issues, policies or implementations. However, the processes of institutional behaviour, policy implementation and Governmentality are well covered (Douglas, 1987, Foucault, 1991, *Journal of Public Sector Management*) in the academic literature. Construction of discourse as a means of communication is very much a product of the language and metaphors used to convey and articulate meaning within that organization; this in turn shapes future discursive activity (Phillips, Lawrence, and Hardy, 2004a, Phillips, and Hardy, 2004b, Manning, 1989,


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Alvesson and Karremann 2000). These discursive practices present a way of reading an organization and how its people operate within that environment. Power and power relations (Foucault, 1980, 1997) ultimately shape discursive practice and this in turn informs this discussion.

Communication and engagement are key issues and matter a great deal too many people within an organization. Not surprisingly, there is no lack of material on how best to communicate with employees (Young & Post, 1993, Kegan and Laskow, 2001) often these are prescriptive in nature which can limit their utility for practice. For organizations like the MHS, their situation is far more complex, there is not just the head office, regional and plant structures and communities, but also there is a great deal of inherent diversity to consider. This diversity brings a spectrum of international perspectives, personal working histories, experiences and world views about how meat hygiene should be practiced. These heterogeneous groups and influences are then required to ensure an effective, homogeneous regulatory group. Synchronizing and maintaining the individual's personal needs, sense of self, wants and agendas with that of the organizational objectives are a major ongoing task. Maslow (1970) articulates such tensions between an individual's different conscious motivations and attitudes and organizational expectations. Indeed, partly focusing upon the individuals' situation, membership within multiple communities of practice and the inevitable tensions which this stimulates, Handley *et al*, argues that "the development of identities and practices is not solely *within* a community of practice, but in the spaces *between* multiple communities" (Handley et al, 2006, p650, original author's emphasis). Also, individuals can also be divided into 'cosmopolitans and locals' (Haas, 2006), these groups help contribute to their team's organizational goals, but not surprisingly, their roles and contributions are more complex, more subtle, and sometimes harmful rather than helpful. The difficulty for the organization then arises, when one single message is transmitted by what ever mode of communication and is expected to fulfil it's objectives for creating shared meaning.

Given these constituent features and challenges within the various communities in the organization, communities of practice offer possible analytical leverage to this review. Wenger locates communities of practice as a "mid-level" category neither specific, narrowly defined nor that is a broadly defined aggregate that is abstractedly social or historical (Wenger, 1998, p125). The original conception of communities of practice was proposed as a method of explaning and understanding how groups negotiated, situated learning and participation within an organization. Certainly interest has in the concept has continued, Roberts reports that in 1993 there were just four papers and by 2003 this had grown to seventy five (Roberts, 2006, p637) on the subject. Perhaps and not surprisingly, communities of practice have attracted academic examination from multiple subject areas, for instance, knowledge generation and acquisition, organizational learning, structure and agency. Roberts astutely recognises that "one of the strengths of the community of practice approach is that can be applied to a wide number of organizational settings...but it can be a weakness, in terms of inappropriate application" (*ibid* p634/5). Interestingly, in perhaps an attempt to discourage some of the misplaced expectations for organizational study and practice, Wenger *et al* do not claim that communities of practice are a "universal silver bullet to replace teams or business units" (Wenger *et al*, 2002, p14). Indeed they observe that a form of "stickiness" located between boundaries "miscommunication and misunderstandings are commonplace along boundary lines" (*ibid*, p151) which hinders communication and is a feature of communities of practice, although this is not entirely a revelation where human interaction features.

As the introduction made clear, the MHS grappled with the challenges of communications methods, the emerging questionnaire responses appeared to confirm certain aspects of academic literature. For instance, studies showed on a continuum of media richness, face to face communication is the most favoured and effective form (Daft, Lengel & Trevino, 1987) and that the preferred sources of information in organizations are from supervisors and co-workers, as opposed to senior managers or executives (Allen and Griffeth, 1997, Grice et al, 2006)**.** However hard an organization tries to convey a single message, people will interpret it within their personal situation. When an author provides a constructed account of reality or a discourse, ultimately, as Wenger (1998) has noted "the reader has jurisdiction over what it comes to mean to them".

For the MHS, the move towards 'all out' auditing and risk assessment represents organizational challenges. According to Du Gay (2000) there has been a dual attempt to 'enterprise up' the state and to move to a 'cultural' reconstruction of management. Some have described it as a response towards the creation of a 'risk society' (Beck, 1992), Strathern (2000) has observed an advocacy of adopting new monitoring 'cultures'. There are other tensions and pressures with such approaches for organizations, Crowther (2002) contends there are 'binary oppositions', for instance, between reporting financial versus environmental performance, and shareholders verses stakeholders, 'the individuals and groups who produce the audit report are the

 

authors of the script, who are at the same time the managers of the organization, who are the only people with the power to achieve results, who of course, are the authors of the text' (Crowther, 2002, p230). Shore and Wright (2000) have argued that 'psychological insecurities' and the expectation of public scrutiny can put managers and those charged with such activities in a challenging position. In such situations, propriety becomes a central consideration where the potential loss of public confidence is an issue.

It is worth remembering that audit practice in the MHS has developed over time, a process that Power (1997) describes as a 'bedrock of knowledge and practice that becomes codified' and is therefore hardly 'alien' to it. However clearly standards are set out, the potential for subjective and the various forms of heuristic decision making and judgement (Bazerman, 2002) will feature in practice. On the surface, this alludes to specific and targeted training as the solution, ensuring that operational staff are adequately and uniformly trained or conditioned, so that standards are consistently applied and they have the confidence to make decisions. This is difficult to teach, one cannot legislate for the imponderables at plant level, and therefore a degree of latitude must be afforded in the audit process, which requires negotiation and experience. Much of this relates to what is described within auditing as 'epistemic independent knowledge' (Power, 1997), that for auditing to be effective the auditor, in this case MHS staff, must not have to rely on the auditee, the FBO, for information to conduct the audit or react to practices.

## 3. Methodology

The regulated nature of MHS and the environment that it operates in, coupled with multiple negotiated meanings feature heavily within the background. For the purpose of this discussion the issues that arose from the methodology is the central focus. The research methods were no longer about a detailed commentary of grand theory, triangulation and the merits of qualitative versus quantitative research methodologies, but of selectivity, justification, responsibility and how the research tools might provide analytical leverage. As has already been eluded too, having identified a researchable problem and then narrow it down sufficiently to make it workable were key concerns (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The nature of the material and level of subjectivity, would in the researcher's opinion, be best served by using interpretative perspectives and methods. Alvesson (2002) argues that a 'constructivist' notion, with no direct access to an objective, independent reality, trying to describe it, we create a particular version of it' (2002, p178). 'Reality' is always filtered through the perspective taken and the language used. For the researcher, this means that within this context, reality is constructed by necessity, by power relations, by human actors and agency. In short, there are multiple meanings and perspectives found within the material, which needed to be identified and 'giving voice too'. Much of the organization's work is based upon rational, empirical and scientific knowledge. In this way, how the results, findings and observations of the study were presented was crucial to the MHS because they value and appreciate clear reporting. So 'giving voice too' respondents would need to be approached in a straightforward manner which could be easily understood.

Due to a host of reasons, both academic and personal, a snapshot of the implementation process was deployed. The quantity of all the data sets required a strict refocusing on the research questions. Transcription and coding of the interviews all helped with the process of analysing the interview data sets.

## 4. Re-evaluation of research questions

As was indicated in the introductory remarks, there was a change in the emphasis of the research questions. This was partly in response to the emergence of the data sets especially from the interviews, along with some initial reflection on them, and a tentative grasp of Glaser and Strauss's 'grounded theory' (1967), it became apparent that:

- It was inevitable with multiple geographically located teams, variation of interpretation and methods of practice would occur.
- The MHS as an organization has at its disposal professional advice on quantitative methods of sampling mass opinion.
- Use of PRINCE2 as an implementation tool had been significantly scaled back by the organization.
- The restrictive nature of an undergraduate dissertation discussion would not fully do justice to the material.

As a result of these preliminary decisions, the focus of the research shifted considerably to people, 'actors' situated within their 'communities of practice' trying in often difficult and pressured circumstances to perform their jobs and tasks, how they made sense, and negotiated the boundaries to make decisions. With this change of emphasis, the revised research questions emerged as follows:

- Using notions of communities of practice, this would provide the analytical leverage and insights into understanding the inherent challenges of managing meat hygiene at different levels within the MHS and multiple locations within the U.K.
- With regard to communicating with the MHS's stakeholders, how permeable is the particular language of communities of practice, for instance in political practice, how is this permeability currently being managed, was the metaphor of 'stakeholder' providing adequate insight into communicating and developing shared understanding.

## 5. Discussion

Out of the four semi-structured interviews, two particularly lent themselves to answering these revised research questions. To do this, vignettes were selected for providing leverage on understanding the politics underpinnings which surround communities of practice at the headquarters. Also, the question of communication and the challenges of surveying different opinion were discussed. Of particular interest was the acknowledgement that it is relatively straightforward to canvas opinion and to consult staff, but as was noted in the literature review, the challenge from an organizational perspective is how to formulate a credible and directed response to multiple comments from staff. In addition to targeted communicative responses, such as newsletters and informative articles placed on organization's 'portal', the encouragement of individuals to become change 'evangelists' within the organization is crucial. It does assume that some staff are willing to fulfil such as role. However, this takes time and would require further targeted research to measure such sustained influence within groups.

For other parts of the research focus, certain questions contained in the questionnaire were utilised in the analysis. This was done in two ways. The 'no' responses to question seven on the questionnaire (W*ill official controls be consistently applied in plants?*) were used in two ways. First, the additional comments were analysed for references which indicated a shared awareness of community, there were some who indicated awareness of a shared community, but not an association with the notion of being a 'stakeholder'. Certainly there was some acknowledgement of being part of a wider team. Second, six respondents who answered 'no' to question seven (this did include one 'yes' response, who made a specific comment) were selected. This called for specific comment and analysis from the researcher. The aim was to 'give voice' to the dissenters and to explore in greater depth what the respondents comments could mean to practice and implementation.

This approach may on the surface seem rather negative or even mischievous in some quarters. But this was certainly not the intention; the analysis of those responses was rigorous to ensure credibility. Rather, it was an attempt to provide a more considered analysis of some of the detractor's comments, in the hope that these comments could be taken in the spirit that they were offered, but then be constructed into valuable contributions for organizational improvement. Although the majority view which confirmed that controls would be consistently applied, in the researcher's opinion 'yes' responses would tell the reader or the MHS very little about what are the issues that concern the 'vocal dissenters'. This should be encouraged, as Kassing (1997, 1998) argues that dissent is in the middle of a continuum of openness that ranges from 'voice' (a broad behaviour) to 'whistle blowing' (a specific behaviour) and can be seen as a form of participation and engagement in organizational daily life. Edmondson (2006) advocates the elimination the adversarial relationship that often exists between management and employees who speak up. They both observe that when employees choose not to share their feedback within the organization, they suffer by forfeiting potentially valuable information; thankfully they did not withhold their opinions which afforded the researcher much room for discussion.

However, the dual research questions and objectives of the researcher and sponsor hindered one another. Attempting to analyse and answer the revised research question of how the communities of practice informs the receiving and contextualising of communication at the plant level was problematic. For instance, at the request of the sponsor the questionnaire primarily focused upon the preferred communications methods, asking specific questions about the effectiveness and level of penetration of previous correspondence. This took up a significant proportion of the questionnaire and coupled with other questions, the opportunity was small. Also, there was always a sense of urgency that the questionnaire had to be produced to coincide with the training days for staff. The pilot testing was perhaps not as rigorous as it should have been. The response rate to those questions with the resulting analysis was straightforward and was particularly informative for the sponsor. However, this reduced the options and space for other questions, the questionnaire was initially intended to focus on communication methods and not communities of practice. Therefore, the questionnaire was perhaps too blunt an analytical tool for the task of providing more nuanced

 

insights to questions about communities of practice. This emphasis limited it's usefulness in this research's context and any further analysis would have therefore been purely speculative. On reflection, one to one semi-structured interviews or perhaps focus groups of operational plant staff may have been preferable.

## 6. Some comments on collaboration

Obviously to organise the logistics of a questionnaire of this size takes a degree of planning and collaboration within any organization. Although the researcher was partly employed by them, by using the MHS's national and regional networks, infrastructure and resources, both undoubtedly contributed to the high response rate. Moreover, the researcher had made reference to his position as a 'causal' inspector in the opening text of the questionnaire; this may have encouraged some people to complete the questionnaire. Becker (1986) has noted such empathic phenomena. Originally, the sample size would be 300, but for a variety of reasons responses eventually reached 1004, 90% of training day attendees who were given the questionnaire. Operational necessity had a significant influence on the immediate utility of the results, questionnaire responses were still being received by the researcher in March 2006. Ironically, the results were too late for advising the immediate implementation, but what emerged from this extended questionnaire survey period and increased response rate was a more complete comment on communication methods and attitudes by operational staff than had previously expected.

The agreement regarding questionnaire was problematic, whatever it's undoubted value as a piece of primary research material for both researcher or sponsor. Differences of opinion over the timing of the release to respondents and the wording of questions needed to be dealt with almost diplomatic sensitivity, so as not to be overly negative in nature towards the MHS or being hijacked as means of protest, thereby questioning its utility for the MHS. It required a telephone conversation between the researcher and the then Chief Executive to remove the impasse; there was an element of brinkmanship, which the MHS was always going to win. There is a balance to be struck between a differing focus of research objectives and potential outcomes (see Cronholm and Goldkuhl, 2004). Even when a rationale was produced for including certain questions within the questionnaire, this could not allay all fears related to specific subjects and issues. It was an illustrative example of custodial power being deployed to protect the interests of the organization and its reputation. As an organization, the MHS exists within an environment in a state of flux and political underpinning; it is all too aware of the potential political nature of methodology. For example, the composition of the questions contained within the questionnaire could influence the type of results that could be ultimately reported.

## 7. Conclusion

Although Governmentality is well served by the academic literature, published research studies into the workings of government agencies are rare. This discussion does offer a glimpse into the workings and perspectives of organizational daily life, very much at the forefront of implementing public health and food policy, but it has its limitations. Perhaps it should be no surprise that this area of research is problematic, given the political underpinnings of an organization, one especially involved in the public realm. Certainly in terms of providing useful insights for organizational practice, the questionnaire undoubted was taken serious both by the organization and the respondents; the high response rate would indicate such an assertion. The resulting report produced for the MHS, continues to inform communication strategy and method which is satisfying for any researcher. As with any form of collaboration, encouraging trust and credibility is the primary consideration, once this is established and then maintained, as with these results, they have proved to be valuable to both parties producing unexpected insights.

In many ways the act of selectivity is a demonstration of political judgement, the awareness of multiple audiences' demanded restraint and thoughtfulness by the researcher. This is almost as crucial as the selection of research objectives, design or methodology for the research. In this context, being considered and resisting the temptation to emphasise the controversial is not in anyone's best interests. This does of course touch upon the familiar discussion on authorship and power though.

The concept and value of 'communities of practice' as a vehicle and conduit of knowledge generation and transmission certainly fits within and guided this discussion. Although attempting to develop the concept of communities of practice as a methodological research tool to bring understanding of organizational daily life, its application was less evident within this study. Perhaps we should not be surprised by this. The metaphor of 'Stakeholder' is a ubiquitous term, but although 'community of practice' is becoming increasingly familiar topic for academic discussion. Within a wider organizational setting, the concept has someway to go before it is easily recognised by people within organizations, that said, once identified, communities of practice would

be easily recognised and identifiable by staff as members of such groups. In terms of research design, attention should focus upon interviewing groups who belong to specific communities of practice to find out how communication could be improved. By focusing upon what modes of transmission and the type of language which mediates most effectively between the boundaries of different communities of practice and the target communities of practice, this could significantly improve organizational effectiveness and commitment of such groups.

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