

The Insulted Worker Thesis: seven ‘deadly diseases’ of performance rating

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ABSTRACT

Performance rating may be experienced as insulting to workers. A discursive analysis of coal miners’ reactions to being performance-rated indicates that rather than morale boosting, ratings can be morale busting when scores are interpreted as diminishing a worker’s sense of worth, contribution or competence. The insulted worker thesis suggests that reducing employees to a performance rating score runs the risk of generating a profound sense of insult and belittlement leading to negative organisational consequences in various forms of resentment and retaliation.

Keywords: appraisal, performance rating, insults, identity disruption

INTRODUCTION

Twenty years ago, Deming (1986) advocated the scrapping of the annual performance review, claiming it was one of the seven ‘deadly diseases’ of management. Despite his call, performance appraisal is now in widespread use in Australia and New Zealand (Morehead et al., 1997) to the point where appraisal has become part of the ‘received doctrine’ (Carson et al., 1991) of HRM. However, the plethora of literature lamenting difficulties with appraisal suggests that there is something inherently flawed with appraisal, at least in some of its present incarnations. Deming’s assertions that ‘fair rating is impossible’ (1986:109) and that the rating process is a ‘lottery’ (1986:110) have implications for the hapless victims of these ratings. Why do employees react the way they do to being rated? What ‘psychic injury’ occurs (Gabriel, 2000:231)? What methodological processes can be used to understand more fully the impact of rating on employees (Grant and Shields, 2002)?

Whether intentional or not, insults occur in organisational settings. Insults are capable of generating enormous negative emotion, often in the form of intense anger and resentment towards the alleged perpetrator (Gabriel, 2000). Long after the initial words, behaviours or events which triggered the belittlement, embarrassment and shame have occurred, negative organisational consequences remain.

While study of emotions in organisations has enjoyed a resurgence of interest recently (Fineman and Gabriel, 1996; Fineman, 2003) there has been a paucity of research on the causes or consequences of insults in the workplace, or the powerful effects of insults on organisational relationships. This paper contributes to that gap by providing an analysis of factors causing insult in the context of performance rating with subsequent effects on workplace relationships in a specific organisational setting, that of an underground coal mine in Australia.

The organisational event which triggered this research was the implementation of a performance appraisal system for underground miners in a number of collieries in a multinational mining company in Australia. Miners reacted with such extensive anger, resentment and resistance to appraisal that the researcher was invited by the company to help them understand why such negative emotion and prolonged resistance were occurring. The fact that senior managers were perplexed by the unintended consequences of the implementation of appraisal highlights the fact that very little empirical research has actually addressed the question of the implications of these performance rating systems on employees (Brown and Benson, 2003). Especially lacking are studies investigating the impact of performance rating on blue collar workers in heavy extractive industries such as coal mining.

The paper firstly provides a brief overview of the concept of narrative analysis, and introduces Gabriel's (2000) work on insults as a subset of storytelling in organisations. The context and methodology of the present study in an underground colliery in Australia is then briefly described, followed by a section where a taxonomy of seven types of insults is generated from coal miners' narratives of their feelings and responses to being performance rated. The paper concludes by suggesting that understanding the processes which create, maintain or revive feelings of insult allows the 'submerged voice of those who experience HRM initiatives' (Legge, 2005:41) more prominence, provides rich insights into the needs and expectations of employees, and suggests a reappraisal of the wisdom of ratings as a motivational device. The insulted worker thesis suggests a rethink of the ethical and relational implications of using rating scales on employees in team-based work processes.

NARRATIVE APPROACH

Brown (2006) advocates a narrative approach as a useful interpretive lens through which to understand worker identity. The systematic study of narrative leads to 'an understanding of collective identities as multi-voiced, quasi-fictional, plurivocal and reflexive constructions that unfold over time and are embedded in broader discursive (cultural) practices' (Brown, 2006:732). A narrative approach allows the collection of stories and story-fragments, which provide insights into the emotional states of individuals and groups. This approach is particularly appropriate in research seeking to understand employee emotions and thought processes. Direct questions on workers' feelings about being appraised were met with taciturn responses such as 'It's bullshit!' It was only as workers began to recount the appraisal implementation process in story fragments that reasons for their profound sense of insult and denigration began to emerge. This paper, through highlighting seven common themes emerging from miners' narratives of insults, seven 'deadly diseases' of rating, to borrow a famous line from Deming (1986:109), provides a framework for considering insults in other organisational contexts.

THE INSULTED WORKER

Belittlement is at the heart of insult. Aristotle wrote in *Rhetoric*: '*An insult consists of doing or saying such things as involve shame for the victim, not for some advantage to oneself other than that these have been done, but for the fun of it.*' Not all insults are intended, and certainly not all managerial insults are intended or 'just for the fun of it.' Nevertheless, insults do occur when employees feel belittled, shamed, neglected, ignored or treated as inferior, especially when asymmetries in power relations mute the voices of protest from injured parties in the relationship. Kapuscinski (1983:83) contends that rebellion and resistance more commonly arise from 'insulted dignity' than from the more 'routine' discontents of oppression or exploitation (Burawoy, 1979). The question, then, is how and to what degree does performance rating insult or shame an employee?

Insult occurs when a victim experiences belittlement, shame or humiliation, understood as the disruption to the sense of worth, competence or identity, occasioned by the words or behaviour of

another. Shame is experienced as painful emotion caused by consciousness of guilt, shortcoming, failure or disgrace (Scheff, 2003). To experience shame is to experience painful inadequacy, inferiority or impotency against the bullying power of an assailant. Any managerial discourse that causes shame, belittlement or embarrassment to a worker insults the worker's sense of worth; insulted dignity will lead either to withdrawal and repression of anger or to various expressions of resentment, resistance and retaliation against the perceived perpetrator of the insult.

Insults require a perpetrator and a target (Gabriel, 2000). Establishing the intent of a perpetrator is notoriously difficult; indeed the intention of the assailant is often not fully understood even by the person themselves. However, the victim almost invariably assigns motive of intent to insult to the perpetrator, along with ascription of motive in inflicting hurt for vicarious pleasure. Following Gabriel (2000), who preferred to define insults in terms of the victim rather than the perpetrator, this paper examines insults from the perspective of employees rather than from an attempt to unravel the motives of management.

Performance rating is especially prone to being experienced by workers as insulting. Fair and accurate ratings of employee performance are dependent on three assumptions (Carson et al., 1991), all of which are problematic. The first assumption is that employees must differ significantly in their contribution to the organisation. Where employees have worked collectively and effectively in teams, differential rating can be received as favouring some employees over others (who therefore feel less valued for the same effort and thus insulted). The second assumption of effective appraisal is that the source or cause of performance differential must be at least partially due to individual employees' efforts or abilities. Where appraisal differentiates performance which employees believe is due to factors outside their control (such as systems failures, dependency on outputs of other work groups, or equipment failures) employees feel insulted that their efforts are being unfairly discounted or belittled. The third assumption is that raters must be willing and able to distinguish between person and system sources of work variation; where employees blame the system and managers blame the employees, the process is prone to 'deadly disease'. Employees feel humiliated, shamed, insulted and profoundly

angry towards the rater for unfairly blaming workers for organisational problems. In organisational contexts where the social lubricant of trust (Six, 2005) has broken down, performance rating may, therefore, be viewed as a form of worker belittlement and blame.

Rating an employee reduces his or her mental, physical and emotional contributions to a number, a letter or a category. Rating, in order to fit organisational constructs, necessarily ignores, marginalizes or sanitizes significant achievements, contributions and efforts of some individuals and privileges the accomplishments of some over those of others. Rating is about identity – whose story or narrative will be heard. It is an exercise of dominant voice or power – and a political resource of control over other voices. The dominant discourse (Fairclough, 1995) of performance claims the right to assess the contribution of others according to its concept of organisational reality. Performance rating, like psychological testing or other forms of examinations in the workplace, violates a worker's sense of self or identity (ten Bos, 2006). Rating attempts to 'regulate' an individual's work based identity; the individual's worth to the organisation is rendered visible by the rating. When the individual does not pass the test, that person feels unmasked and painfully visible. It leaves the victim feeling stupid (Ronell, 2005). However, even when the individual passes the test, the individual may still feel that their identity has been violated or 'spoiled' (Goffman, 1963) by being put on public display. The test (or performance rating) incites shame, shame that the individual's self has been unmasked so publicly (ten Bos, 2006). Performance rating thus is an organisational text that declares how an individual's efforts have been seen or ignored, how they are classified, and what significant details of their behaviour are appreciated – or overlooked. An individual's place in the pecking order is publicly announced – and received as ritual humiliation and stigmatisation by the losers.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on qualitative research over the last five years in a number of underground coal mines in Australia since mid 2000. This report focuses on one mine in the division, Dover Colliery (a pseudonym). The research question pertained to understanding why miners were reacting so negatively to the implementation of a behaviourally anchored rating scale (BARS) system of appraisal.

While aboveground staff had had annual appraisals for a number of years, early 2000 saw the introduction of formal appraisals on underground miners for the first time in the history of Dover Colliery.

Data collection began with semi-structured interviews seeking understanding of employees' experiences of the rating process, listening with a 'big ear' (Glaser, 2001) as individuals described significant incidents and experiences connected to the implementation of the appraisal process. Some 58 formal interviews and meetings with mine managers, HR officers, union officials, and miners working at the coalface were recorded. Each interview lasted, on average, about 90 minutes. Interviews were supplemented with a nine question survey which all miners at Dover Colliery were invited to complete (response rate of about 30%). Extensive observations occurred through some 60 hours of attendance at mine management and union meetings, plus underground mine visits and two eighteen hour days spent at the colliery when surveys were offered to miners at the start of each shift. Informal chats with miners in the muster room provided further insights. Interviews with miners were conducted on site, at the local pub and clubs, or in their homes, where partners also shared insights into the impact of this HR practice on extended family members. Company records were made available to the researcher, as were minutes of various mine review meetings (some of which the researcher attended) where the impact of the appraisal process was evaluated by mine managers, functional coordinators, undermanagers, deputies and union representatives.

It became apparent that miners, even though intensely angry over the rating system were often not prepared in the masculine culture of a mining organisation to explore deeply emotional issues in public. Questions about emotion were deflected. To keep the interviews going, the interviewer adopted the stance advocated by Gabriel (2000:136) as a 'fellow-traveller', someone keen to hear the stories miners had to tell, enjoying and sharing the pleasure in the storytelling process, rather than sitting dispassionately as a non-participant researcher. It was only in hindsight that miners' stories began to gel around the theme of insulted dignity. While a disadvantage in eliciting stories is the risk that the researcher may impose his/her categories of what he/she feels is significant, meaningful or important

on interviewees, in this particular case these stories occurred in their natural state and were only later reflexively decoded into categories of insults.

CATEGORIES OF INSULTS: MINERS' NARRATIVES

The following seven categories do not represent an exhaustive taxonomy of insults. Indeed, in different organisational settings different types of insults may prevail. However, these seven categories capture major themes of miners at Dover Colliery.

1. Exclusion

Aboveground managers assumed that they could and should write the BARS performance indicators to distinguish superior from poor underground performance. This was profoundly insulting to miners who felt that aboveground managers did not appreciate the difficult, dirty, dangerous conditions underground. They questioned the right of aboveground 'tea-sipping' managers to rate their accomplishments underground, given the 'shit-jobs' they had to do. They were insulted by a system that rated them without including them in the rating process, and didn't appear to take into account the extremely difficult conditions under which they were labouring.

I was almost up to my crutch in sludge every day. The splash, the mud was continually caked on. You couldn't even dream about wearing the same clothes the second day. You just couldn't do it. Each day you had to put on a clean pair of clothes. And not only that, because of the hot, humid conditions you just stunk. Your own body stench was phenomenal. You couldn't stand your own smell at the end of it because you were working hard...The undermanager would say, 'Did you get one or two metres today?' [a sarcastic question because the expected daily norm was 6 metres]. And some days, you'd only get 3 metres and to have got 3 metres of coal was an absolute dogfight because you're losing the roof – you had to support the roof without hurting anybody, you had to keep the miner [machine] out of the water, so you were forever monitoring the pumping and the gas because of where we were [in a difficult stretch of the mine].

[Longwall operator #21]

Miners were also offended at being brought into a review meeting where pre-set scores were placed before them. Reviewers had received instructions that they were not to negotiate over scores. So, as the men were rated on each of the 13 BARS indicators, heated arguments broke out over the scores, but at the end of the day the miner was excluded from influencing the final score. This they deeply resented.

The problem I had with it [the rating process] was that before you went into that room they had already worked out what you were [your score]. That's the biggest issue I had with it. You were rated before you go in there and no matter what you say, they are not changing your rating!

[Longwall operator #3]

The present format they've got is a waste of time. It's not done correctly. If 25 guys are Bs and there is one A and one C, then so be it. This is how they rate us. But they have to fit them in to this [bell shaped curve]. Not very good. It almost makes it like, let's just get through it, it's pointless. But we're going to be employed by that later, so we have to take notice of it. And then someone like me got a bit emotional about it. Hang on a minute! This is my job here, you treat me like that, because of stupid clerical – it should not have been, but it turned out to be – opinion or errors. *They're toying with my future!*

[Longwall electrician #7]

They [miners] feel like they don't get justice out of it. The fact that even when you go in to do your review, what is set in front of you is virtually set in concrete until you go through an appeals review. So you have to sit there and listen to the judgment day expecting to be criticized and knowing that you can't change any of those criticisms until you go through an appeals process. So they feel frustrated by that exercise in itself.

They make an initial statement. This is fucking bullshit, or whatever. And that will be it, until the next time comes round. 'Oh, not these fucking things again! I've got to go in there and listen to this sort of shit!'

[Longwall operator #11]

2. *Favouritism, discrimination*

Miners recounted stories of how two men could be working on the one machine, both being needed to progress the work forward. One rated highly while his workmate rated lowly. This, to them, was absurd. It was interpreted as a classic case of favouritism, insulting to the one whose score was diminished, and also insulting to the one with the higher score because it still underlined their subservient status as relying on the favouritism of those in power for the 'spoils' of that power. In their terminology, *'If your face doesn't fit, you're screwed!'* Another miner put it this way, *'If your face fits, you get a good review; if not, you get shit!'*

Newton and Findlay (1996:50) see appraisal as a control device where people 'toe the line...to please and placate their superiors so that they may one day be granted favours just as kings and queens rewarded their courtiers.' A miner colourfully described this 'game' of currying favour this way:

As I've always said, working at Dover Colliery is like smoking marijuana. The harder you suck, the higher you go. And it is, mate. It is unbelievable.

[Longwall operator #13]

A panel development worker described how two miners on the back of the tunnel drilling machine they call an ABM have to work together in preparing to cut a path through the coal:

They both have to have their fingers on the buttons at the same time, left and right hand side – it's interlocked – or else it [the canopy supporting the roof] won't come down. Once the canopy does come down, and everything is ready to move forward, unless you press the correct button on both sides according to a certain procedure, the miner driver can't move the machine...

[Development panel miner #3]

Given, then, the essential nature of team-based synchronisation of work effort to progress the drilling machine forward, the following comment by the above panel development miners typifies this problem of favouritism:

There were guys in our crew who got knocked down [low ratings]. And they were very resentful of the fact that we were working in a crew – that blokes that they were working beside got a higher grade. He's a C and I've got an A [sic], and I'm standing right beside him. He's doing the same work as I am, as a crew, and we're all working together. We should all be the same.

[Development panel miner #3]

Miners saw the absurdity of individual ratings in what is essentially an integrated production *system*. To provide some members of a crew with good ratings while excluding other members of the same crew performing the same work seemed insane.

You got the methane drainage blokes – two of them sat on the drilling rig year after year. One done [sic] the driving, the next day the other bloke done the driving, the other bloke done the drilling. And this bloke got an A and he got a C. It was just insane!

[Development panel miner #4]

A union official, in a meeting with company officials to assess the effectiveness of the appraisal process, summed up the feelings of miners this way: 'The scores are fucked. Some reviewers said all positives, and still gave the miner a 3 [C grade]!' A union secretary in a memo to miners wrote about the inconsistencies of ratings as follows:

...I have come to my conclusion that this blatant system of injustice put together by wellpaid [sic] HR personnel is a system that does not reflect on the actual performance of the majority of employees and in my opinion is unaustralian. I say most due to the fact faces and or personality has the 'A' brand and not necessarily the PERFORMANCE...The weekend warriors [an affectionate term for weekend shift workers] were told that through an exhausting interviewing process these guys were the 'best of the best' but not one in their latest interviews scored an A...I have no doubt that [managers] are plucking out of thin air [the rating scores based on] INDUENDOS [sic] PERSUMPTIONS [sic] PERSEPTIONS [sic] and HEARSAY.

3. *Stereotyping*

Stereotypes assume the power of insult when targets find themselves trapped by the perpetrator's biased perception, where their every action can be twisted to reinforce the stereotype (Gabriel, 2000: 223). Stereotyping adds to feelings of powerlessness and shame by reducing self esteem to a number or category. One of the first and lasting impressions of Dover Colliery was the harshness of labels in use: swearing, name-calling and 'shit-stirring' flying in all directions. Calling workers 'lazy bastards', 'fuckwits', or 'slack-arses' is hardly motivational stuff. Even the term 'fed' used of underground workers is somewhat of a shorthand expression for those who are at the bottom of the pecking order. The performance rating system led to an aggregation of 13 criteria into a global score, which then became a shorthand form of stereotype for that category of miner. To be labelled a 'C-grader' (average) was considered the 'kiss of death' by most miners. It meant in their eyes they were not viewed by management as exceptional miners. This cut deeply; men who had worked underground for over 30 years were now being told they were 'average.' Many felt 'gutted' by this assessment:

[The bloke who gets a bad rating] He's totally lost it. 'Why should I bother? Fucking worked me fucking guts out; these pigs don't have a clue what I'm doing'. They go the opposite way. In saying that, it has come back full circle because when they [the scores] first come out the blokes who got less than what they thought they would were **worse!** They [management] really, really kicked them in the arse, you know, and it wasn't good for morale. Morale of the place, I suppose, for the 3 month period when it [reviews] finished was at an all-time low.

[Development panel driver #1]

Grades became stereotypical labels to describe particular types of miners. Again, those who scored average (C) were not happy with their belittlement in the eyes of management and their mates.

If we found that someone had a C, and most guys come out and [others] say, 'How did it go?' and they say, 'I got a C' ...and [later] when they do something wrong, they'd say 'No wonder you're a C'er!' You know what I mean? You don't want to be a bloody C!

[Longwall operator #9]

Some of this stereotyping was just friendly banter, but miners who were rated lower than their crewmates sometimes took it very badly. One miner's wife told of how it broke her husband's heart to be called a 'C'er' after being a proud miner all his life. Even those who rated well were not immune from the hurt. A miner who scored in the A category ('exceeds expectations') put it this way:

You're called 'teacher's pet' or 'crawler' or this or that. It does hurt, but you learn to develop a thick skin to it. It's something you don't need in your life, but it's something you just learn to put up with.

[Longwall operator #9]

Comments such as the following show the intensity of anger expressed by those whose efforts had been devalued by their rating:

If they think I'm a C, I'll fucking act like a C! You can get your fucking A-grader to do that fucking job!

[Field notes from informal interview with a miner]

4. *Ingratitude*

If performance labels perceived as denigrating hurt, so too does the failure to notice significant effort and contribution. On a survey of miners' attitudes towards the rating system, the highest response to a question framed as follows: 'I would be more productive on my job if... [Fill in the blank]' was 'if management showed me more appreciation.' Miners were insulted when management either failed to see how hard they worked or failed to express that appreciation in ways meaningful to workers. Handwritten survey responses confirmed their hunger to be '*told on the job every now and then a simple 'Well done!'*'

On my job I do 'have a go'. I give my effort. I was feeling happy with my score, until I heard what [another miner] scored. I couldn't believe it! Someone lazy got a higher score than I. And one of the other guys, who I reckon is a real goer, got one of the low scores. It really destroyed me. It really destroyed me.

[This other miner] was real down. He was surprised that no one saw his effort. I did. I know what he was like and I'm just surprised that no one else saw it as such. I still can't understand it. I could see the effort he put in the jobs he tackled. At the end of the day, I thought he deserved a lot higher score, but I say he was pretty upset.

[Longwall electrician #2]

Apparent lack of managerial *appreciation* for worker efforts made a mockery of performance reviews.

What is this thing called 'performance'? Every year they expect more and more! Every year they cut the labour force and expect more and more! Why should we be forever screwed in our working lives to produce more and more with less and less? I mean – we're not fucking machines! ...Why can't they say, 'Good job, well done' rather than saying we've got to get more tonnes next time. Work isn't meant to be like rats on a treadmill!

[Development panel driver #4]

5. *Infantilism; treating adults like children*

The darker side of ingratitude was the negative feedback received during appraisal reviews. Here the insult was not only a failure to notice the good, but a perceived active search by management for the shortcomings, weaknesses and failures of the employee in order to justify the less than exceptional

rating. Ratings thus were received in the coal mines as treating grown men like schoolchildren, and were a particularly common theme as a cause of insulted dignity.

I think the system stinks. It's not fair. It's demeaning. It's wrong. I think it is insulting the way the system works. This whole PMS [performance management system] erodes our dignity. It makes us feel that we are being treated like kids. We're grown men! This is no way to treat adults! ...There's no recognition of how long we've been here. There's no sense of caring for the workforce!

[Panel development miner #4]

I'm very critical of bosses. Superiors. So-called superiors! People who have a third - or a quarter - or less - of my experience are trying to tell me something I know will work or won't work. I don't mind being told to do something. I don't like being told *how* to do something. After the years I've been doing it - I was doing it before they even started school, half of them! And I'm still alive, and I've still got all me fingers...I felt like I was a dunce at school. Like I'd been smacked on the bum and told to go and stand in the corner. Hang my head in the corner. I was a D!

[Longwall operator #12]

6. *Scapegoating and blame*

Particularly offensive was an apparent inability of raters to differentiate between systems factors and personal factors in performance variance. Ratings based on factors outside a miner's individual control were deeply resented as unfair, unjust, subjective and wrong. Managers and miners also differed in their analysis of causes of poor performance. Managers consistently blamed miners for poor performance; miners consistently blamed poor performance (when it occurred) on factors beyond their control, including mismanagement of supplies and maintenance by aboveground staff. Miners thus felt that a low rating for poor performance was unjustified, wrong and insulting. Attribution theory (Feldman, 1981; Robbins et al., 2004) would suggest that people attribute success to themselves and blame to others or factors external to themselves. This attribution of blame was borne out in interviews in the current study.

They [managers] don't get dirty and they've got their own little tearooms. They're sipping their tea when they should be providing our supplies. For sure. So when there's a breakdown, it is their fault.

Oh, yeah, there is this hostility. Starts with just watching these guys walking around the yard and having their cup of coffee. There is this appearance that they don't do a real lot. So if anything happens underground that stops you, it is reflected on you when the mine's going bad. The manager gets all the guys out, [but] he doesn't get the staff out. He gets all the workers and sits them down and says, 'Listen! Here we need 20 metres a shift, you know! Man, we're going to get our arse kicked, bla, bla, bla.' How about telling [the aboveground staff]? We are the ones always copping the kick, and these guys don't realize that!

[Longwall operator #1]

Miners complained that managers blamed them for poor performance when the cause was poor supply chain management. They thus saw the performance rating system as more about power and control than about performance enhancement or improvement.

If they [miners] run out of something, they can't cut coal, and that's when the blokes get very, very frustrated. 'It's not our bloody fault', the blokes will say, but management will try and turn it around and say, 'Well it is your fault; you're not getting the coal'.
'But how can we get the coal when we haven't got the gear?' It's an endless cycle of resentment against the guys up top, and accusations against the blokes in the pit.
[Longwall operator #4]

7. *Broken promises*

Performance ratings were supposed to be delivered in a meeting where the context was ostensibly about improving performance. As part of the dialogue in such meetings, reviewers were supposed to listen to the concerns of workers and seek their input on how their work could better contribute to organisational effectiveness. A common theme was the fact that aboveground managers failed to implement any of the processes they promised they would as part of the performance review process. To hold miners accountable for performance targets while failing to meet their own targets, managers were seen as insulting the intelligence and the motivation of these men.

Promises of training were made, but according to miners such training never eventuated. Promises of upgrades to equipment, and educational field visits to other sites were made, but never happened. The performance management superintendent admitted this shortcoming, acknowledging that so much effort was invested in getting the ratings right, through multiple raters, calibration meetings and standardising scores across functional areas and between collieries that they 'ran out of time' to implement the ideas or suggestions of miners, and failed to set in place a process to follow up on approved training requests from miners.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research provided an opportunity to explore in some detail how classification schemes such as performance rating are experienced by employees. Performance rating tends to be a deficit model of employee assessment, identifying areas where the employee does not live up to the discursive concept

of 'ideal' worker. Thus, rating leads to a sense of belittlement on the part of down-rated employees, resulting in negative emotions of shame, embarrassment and anger. Shame is an intersubjectively generated emotion (Scheff, 2003) and results in profoundly intense sentiment projected outwardly through a sense of insult and attribution of motive (Gabriel, 2000) towards the real or perceived perpetrator.

Miners at the coalface resented the individuating process of performance rating which disrupted their highly valued culture of solidarity expressed in their oft-repeated phrase 'watching each other's backs' in the dangerous conditions of mining. Any HRM process that 'pits mate against mate' was seen in the heavily collectivised and sequentially interdependent process of mining to be particularly irksome. For an outsider (such as an aboveground HR manager) to disrupt the *informal* ratings that miners held of each other was particularly offensive. The present study demonstrates that HR practices, even those accepted as part of orthodoxy, can have seriously negative consequences on employees when applied without a careful consideration of the historical, political and contextual situation in which employees develop their sense of worth in the workplace.

How employees react to shame and denigration has not been the focus of this paper, but several reactions were evident at Dover Colliery. Some employees withdrew their discretionary effort, feeling a profound sense of injustice at being blamed for factors outside their control. Insulted dignity led others to retaliate, trading insult for insult which led not only to an escalation in resistance strategies, but also more frequently to the authoring of counter-narratives that attributed incompetence to the perpetrator, and attributions of blame towards others for performance-limiting practices and policies.

While there are obvious limitations to the generalisability of this study, it adds to the growing body of critical literature concerned with the power and control issues of 'playing God' (Newton and Findlay, 1996) with the lives of workers through the 'performance of appraisal'. If the intent of management is to improve the performance of the business, then a system which employees find insulting is counter-productive and needs to be seriously questioned. According to the miners involved in this study, their

productivity would improve if they were given the tools and resources and left to 'get on with the job'. Appreciation costs very little, yet was often cited by miners as a resource in short supply. Managing the context, rather than the worker (Jones, 1995), may indeed encourage a cultural shift towards increased discretionary work effort. At the coalface, it's not the rating but the resourcing and supporting that matter. At the coalface, employees want to be appreciated and respected, not degraded by an insulting system that reduces their considerable efforts to a number or a category.

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