

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

Introduction

The overall aim of the research was to understand what impact the labour process has on employment relations in small firms, locating this in the United Kingdom racehorse training stables. A review of the small firms' employment relations literature was conducted and it was found that there was a gap with regard to worker voices and experiences. It was argued (Ram 1999; Ram and Edwards 2003; Atkinson 2008) that the small firms literature was 'informed' by labour process theory. However, as this thesis has argued, few studies of a small firm or firms had been conducted which explicitly examined the labour process and placed this in the twin contexts of industry and history. A detailed study of the labour process in racing stables was chosen as this is an under-researched area which could offer important insights. This approach, it was believed, would restore the voice of labour to research in small firms and require contextual research to understand wider influences on social relations at the level of the racing stable.

The main research question in this thesis was 'How does the labour process impact on employment relations in the small firm?' This question was formed against a review of the small firms and labour process literature which found that, although the literature had developed and moved away from the harmony thesis proposed by the Bolton Committee in 1971, many studies had been conducted from a management perspective and the voice of small firms' employees was largely absent. A particular aspect of the labour process in racing stables was the fact that their work is undertaken in a rural

location, thus some consideration of rural small firms or rural labour processes was necessary.

Five specific research objectives were developed: (1) to discover the industry context of the racing labour process; (2) to establish the history and development of the employment relations context of the racing labour process; (3) to examine and analyse the labour process in racing stables; (4) to establish how racehorse trainers exert control over the labour process; and (5) to explore how workers display agency through resistance to their employers.

In order to present conclusions to this thesis, this chapter is therefore structured into eight sections, commencing with a review of the research strategy. It then considers each of the five research objectives. A section on employment relations in the small firm considers the contribution that has been made to small firms research. A final concluding section sums up the chapter and makes recommendations for future research.

How were the research objectives addressed?

This was an innovative research design since it focussed on a complete labour process in a discrete group of small firms. It addressed an important gap in the small firms' literature, where the workers' perspective has been under-reported, capturing the voices and experiences of stable staff. The research placed the racing labour process in its industry context and in the historical context of the development of employment relations. In short, the research design addressed Barrett and Rainnie's (2002) view that the way forward for small firms' research was to employ a labour process framework. It also met Ram and Edwards' (2003) position that empirical research was needed in order to test Barrett and Rainnie's thesis.

A mixed methods research strategy was adopted in order to engage with the actors involved in the social relations of racehorse production, as well as generate wide-ranging data. Detailed interviews with key respondents amongst employers, workers, and industry organisations provided access to rich data. In sum, the research design has allowed for the nuances of the racing industry, the labour process in racing stables and, in particular, the experiences of employers and workers to be more fully explored. This was aided by the fact that the primary research developed over a four-year period, from 2000-2004, and allowed the researcher to deepen the analysis via a staged approach over time.

Inevitably, any research has its limitations. However, a research programme was followed which maximised data collection as far as was possible within these constraints. In particular a conscious effort was made to interview workers away from their prime workplace, the stables, thus avoiding the problem of access to worker perspectives being denied or undermined by the owner-manager as had been the case in earlier studies (Marlow and Patten 2002; Barrett and Rainnie 2002).

One point worthy of particular comment is the problem of interviewing 'cold' in a busy workplace setting which was an issue in Phase E at the racecourses. This places particular stress on the researcher, as there is no guarantee that many, if any, respondents will be prepared to cooperate. There is equally no guarantee of who the respondents will be. Fortunately, a detailed knowledge of the racing industry which had developed over the course of the research was immensely helpful in seeking out respondents and securing their cooperation. Respondents found it easier to respond to someone with whom they had common ground.

The results do address a gap in our knowledge of the racing industry and area that has hitherto been under-reported, namely the position of labour in a small firm labour

process. The results do also suggest that there is value in studying any small firms' labour process in its proper historical and industry context if at all possible. It is believed that the research presented in this thesis has provided as complete a picture as possible, taking all factors into consideration, and the chapter now turns to sum up the results.

How has context influenced the racing labour process?

There are few studies that focus explicitly on the labour process in small firms and those which do have been conducted at the level of the firm only, without the wider industry context. It was important to commence the analysis here for, as Hyman suggests (1987:27), 'there is far greater realism in a perspective which recognises that the terrain of industrial relations is above all conditioned by capital'. Racing is often regarded as a club, entry into which is very difficult and it was found that many of the bodies which comprise racing, such as the Jockey Club, BHB and Racecourse Association, are still drawn from a distinct stratum of society, owning significant wealth in terms of land and well-bred horses. There is a formidable array of interest groups, all of which have representative bodies and some voice at industry level. These bodies represent the interests of trainers, racecourses, owners and breeders of racehorses, regulators of racing, developers of racing, the betting industry but the one key group which does not, workers in racing stables. A range of powerful industry bodies have structured the social relations of production in racing stables. Racing is a multi-million pound industry constructed out of these various interest groups, all of which contribute to the conduct of racing in the UK and to the extension of UK racing interests overseas. It contributes to a significant betting industry in the UK and provides direct employment for 60,000 people. Of those, 6000 are employed in UK racing stables full or part time; at the entry level of stable lad/girl employment of men and women is almost equal.

Within racing, bodies such as the Jockey Club and the British Horseracing Board act in the interests of racing. Thus, we have instruments such as the Rules of Racing and the Racing Calendar that are designed to promote racing's competitive interests, even if they result in low wages for key workers in racing stables. It was seen that low wages had been a long running issue for stable staff, resulting in a strike in 1975; being the subject of renewed comment in a study of employment in racing stables by the BHB (2004); and being the subject of extensive comment in Phases A and E of the research reported in this thesis. An inextricably linked influence therefore is that of the history of employment relations in racing stables and the next section turns to consider the effect of historical developments in employment relations on the racing labour process.

Employment relations history and the racing labour process

The thesis confirms that the study of employment relations history is important to an understanding of the contemporary labour process and its effect on contemporary employment relations (Edwards 1990; Hobsbawm 1997). It was not sufficient merely to examine social relations between stable staff and trainers in the contemporary setting but to establish how those relations had been created, including the emergence of industrial relations machinery, which was unusual in the small firms' sector. The contribution of the 1975 stable staff strike, the intervention of the Horseracing Levy Board to end the strike and the creation of the NJCSS, SLA and NTF were all critical incidents which would help understand the current state of employment relations for this group of small firms. It has been shown therefore that a sectoral study of the labour process in racing stables would be incomplete without this. The contemporary situation has been born out of a forty year period of trade union organisation, culminating in the 1975 stable lads strike, effective derecognition of the TGWU and creation of an employer dominated staff association.

This thesis therefore enlarges our understanding of employment relations in these small firms by consolidating accounts from a number of different sources. Workers in Newmarket had been unionized by the TGWU since the 1930s but the union had not been successful in expanding its organisation throughout UK stables. The 1975 strike was called in pursuit of a wage claim in Newmarket when the Trainers' Federation remained implacable in its opposition to the lads' claim. It lasted some 12 weeks and was largely successful in securing the economic demands put forward by the TGWU. However, it also provided the opportunity for factions within racing's governing and industry bodies to pursue the derecognition of the TGWU and its replacement by the SLA, a staff association controlled from within the industry, more in the nature of a yellow union. This provides further evidence of the ability of key bodies within the industry to influence employment relations within racing stables. National collective bargaining through the NJCSS was one of the strings attached to settlement by the Horseracing Levy Board, further evidence of the influence of the industry. An organised employers group was able to rebuff trade union organisation in favour of a weak, employer-controlled staff association and staff have generally felt disempowered as a result. A combination of the strike, weak trade union organisation, hegemonic control through the industry's binding culture, all secured the demise of independent trade union recognition and the possibility of effective collective bargaining. This further confirms the ability of racing's national bodies to influence the labour process in racing stables.

The thesis builds on our understanding of employment relations in the small firm, showing that this group of workers did prove capable of resisting their employers' demands, most notably in 1975. Echoes of the strike are still heard to the present day and workers did on occasion show an ability to identify with each other collectively and

to organise effectively, for example the canteen dispute at Taunton racecourse. In order to consider these issues in more detail, the next sections consider the detailed elements of the racing labour process.

Contemporary employment and the racing labour process

The study of a labour process allowed for consideration of the nature of the work undertaken, an aspect remarked on by Thompson (1983) as being under-theorised. The combination of skilled labour with routine tasks, the physical requirements of the job, the relationship of the worker with the horse, the fact that the labour process is split between two locations – the stables and the race course – were all found to be influential on the orientation of the workers to employment relations issues. The study also developed further our understanding of horseracing as a form of employment, adding to the work of Tolich (1995) and Harbridge and Crawford (2000).

It was found that the number of stable staff employed in racing stables has continued to grow throughout the period of research, with male and female employment rates almost equal at the basic grade of stable lad/girl. It should be noted that a large number of young workers occupy this grade which has possibly affected the propensity of workers to unionise, since this group is least likely to have encountered trade unions in the post-Thatcher era. The thesis in particular confirms the findings of Waddington and Kerr (2002) that young workers often do not join a union because they have not been asked (see Chapter 7).

The thesis confirms the relevance of labour process theory to the study of small firms. It allowed for a wide range of data to be structured round the daily activity of stables' routine and taking horses to race meetings. The data confirmed the view of Scott et al (1989) that the employment relationship in small firms is one of subordination and exploitation of workers. The research confirmed that low wages, low status and long

hours of work remained unresolved issues between stable staff and trainers. Stable staff regarded themselves as skilled workers but this was not reflected in the wage packet. The literature review specifically considered the debate on harmony or conflict in the small firm, finding that the evidence pointed to conflict rather than harmony but that while the basic antagonism between capital and labour exists in small firms, worker responses are muted (Sosteric 1996).

The preparation of racehorses is a rural-based activity and attempts to draw a comparison with farming and with deferential farm workers (Newby 1977) were interesting but not conclusive. This is an activity that takes place in a rural location but does not equate to the explicitly rural labour process found in farms. Stable staff wish to be able to remain working with horses but should not be regarded as wholly deferential as a result, since they have displayed the capacity to resist.

Employers seek and the racing labour process

Racehorse trainers operate in a niche market that large producers do not wish to enter, as it is an unattractive market proposition lacking economies of scale. The individualised demand for attention of a group of racehorses does not lend itself to mass production, since there is no possibility of substituting machines for labour in order to reduce unit cost. Work can be, and is, intensified by giving individual workers more horses to care for and by lengthening the working week.

It is argued that trainers are small capitals, subject to the social relations of production under capitalism and all that these relations entail. They employ a range of strategies to secure control. Paternalism is part of the fabric of the industry and manifests itself at the level of stables through the close daily working relationship between trainers and staff. Simple direct control is possible as a result of the small size of most training stables and the fact that trainers also work alongside their staff, dealing with horses on

the ground. One of the greatest sources of control in the moral economy of the racing stables is the horse itself since workers have chosen that form of employment in order to work with horses. The alternatives to do so elsewhere are scant, and generally even worse paid than racing. Employers have a great opportunity to manufacture consent through the horse, citing horse welfare for example in order to secure their objectives. Employers also have control of employment relations through the NJCSS which is an employer dominated body through which the voice of workers is mediated and mainly ignored. Employers are able to deflect blame for low wages and long hours onto industry level bodies so that their workers often do not identify their immediate employer as the source of problems, believing that industry bodies such as the BHB are the architects of workplace problems through, for example, expanding the racing calendar. Coupled with this, the SLA was created, by the employers, to ensure no repetition of the 1975 strike. The SLA has not shown that it is prepared to take industrial action at any point during the years which have elapsed since then. In fact it has not shown that it is prepared to take any action to support its members.

Consent is an important thread, which warrants separate consideration here. It was revealed that the employers have an important opportunity to manufacture consent through the horse that dominates the racing labour process. This marks out racing stables as a quite distinct analytical setting since it is highly unlikely that the labour process in other small firms contains such a specific source of consent. There have been some arguments that small firms workers are of a distinct type who seek out employment in small firms because they are prepared to trade higher wages for a closer set of working relationships but these are inconclusive. In racing, the evidence is clear that the workers *do* seek out these small firms but this is because racing stables represent the only real opportunity they have to enter paid work with horses. That is to

say, they have a positive orientation to the work and the horse but it would be hard to argue that they have a positive attitude to working in small firms. However, to what extent is consent an issue of significance within other groups of small firms? It is not an issue that has yet been fully considered as a small firms' issue and would warrant further research.

Workers and the racing labour process

In the literature review it was demonstrated that the experience of workers is weakly reported in the contemporary literature on employment relations in the small firm. The research therefore actively sought to capture the lives of workers in racing stables and it found that stable staff work in a labour process which is common across all racing stables. It was also found that they are subordinated to capital, as they have no means of producing racehorses and lack access to large amounts of investment, premises and land. Workers can only sell their labour time working with horses and are particularly 'captive' since they positively want to work with horses above all else, confirming the view that workers in small firms do not leave because they have nowhere else to go (Auer et al 1988). They labour with their emotions to the extent that they want to work with horses and the horse-human relationship inevitably facilitates a close bond. However, this is a form of emotional labour that has not yet been fully explored in the literature; more work could be done to explore emotional labour and the implications for employment relations.

It was found that work in racing stables takes place under the social conditions of capitalism and therefore one analytical issue that was examined was to establish what type of worker a stable hand represents. It was established that s/he is a wage labourer, selling the sole commodity of her/his labour power but undertakes skilled work for which there is no formal industry recognition through qualification.

It was also found that staff work long and sometimes unsocial hours and have a great deal of responsibility vested in them for a valuable product, the racehorse. They are a prime contributor to the well being of each horse they look after, including ability to race successfully. They occupy a specialised labour market which requires physical fitness, low weight, willingness to work in all weathers and long hours. Nevertheless, they are low paid and accorded low status in the hierarchy of racing.

They do have a degree of autonomy in their work, since their trainer cannot be with each horse all day and riding is a skill that they must apply individually and in a way which secures the safety of themselves and the horse. This has been identified as a Responsible Autonomy control strategy when away racing, as there are occasions when the trainer relies on the member(s) of staff to transport horses and to represent his/her interests at the racecourse. This is a source of job satisfaction which might provide one reason for the fact that exit is not more common amongst stable staff.

Workers do not generally capitalise on their labour market position although they do display individual agency. They generally do not formally act collectively because of an overriding concern for the horses they tend and lack of effective channels to do so. Nevertheless, they need ways in which to relieve undoubted tensions of working life in a busy stables and use opportunities when racing or exercising horses or socialising outside of work for teasing, bantering, drinking sessions or catching up on much needed sleep. These are all points of resistance to the pressures of their daily working lives but are individual acts.

Workers do display some informal collectivism through exchanging gossip and news at race meetings and by 'looking out' for each other at the workplace and when out socialising. There are cultural bonds that hold racing together and which also bind

workers to each other. It is argued that these could enable support for more formal collectivism if the SLA or a trade union should decide to launch an organizing drive.

Worker voice is weakly articulated through the Stable Lads' Association and the NJCSS. There appears to be a huge gap between the activities of the SLA at the level of the National Secretary and the daily lives of stable staff. There is a lack of communication from the national organisation to its members that translates into a lack of knowledge, understanding or valuing of the Association at the level of the stables. Respondent workers did not show enthusiasm or willingness to use the SLA to represent their interests at the level of the workplace. Stable staff have lacked a voice in any forum that makes decisions about the future development of racing, despite the fact that they are a crucial element in the labour process at racing stables. There is little evidence that the SLA has proved to be a credible expression of employee voice in bargaining terms. In this sense the employers' initial strategy of supplanting an independent trade union has proved effective.

While there is only a little evidence to suggest that stable staff are inclined to mobilise to support wage or other demands, or that they are able to use collective voice, they have proved capable of mobilisation around wage demands, most notably in the 1975 strike. This does not mean that there are no opportunities to mobilise or that it would be impossible to achieve this. There are sources of informal collectivism which transcend organizational boundaries and which might be regarded as atypical of the small firms' sector more generally. These arise particularly when going racing but also in racing towns; in both locations there are large groups of stable staff who do identify with each other through the labour process. The 'industrial action' reported at Taunton racecourse, for example, did show that this can be used to resolve grievances in an

immediate fashion. It also clearly showed that stable staff could think and organise for themselves.

There are clearly grievances that are long held and shared between stable staff. As yet, however, they have lacked the availability of an independent trade union that could enable them to identify the source of these grievances as their employer and thus mobilise their voice collectively. It is clear that the activity of 'going racing' represents a good opportunity to mobilise support and that staff are already acting collectively, albeit informally, in meeting and exchanging information about their workplaces and their workplace grievances. It remains to be seen whether the National Association of Stable Staff, which was formed from the old Stable Lads' Association, will be able to capitalise on this.

Callaghan and Thompson (2001:29) argue that 'Workers, even under the most difficult conditions, retain and articulate agency, both individually and collectively'. Stable staff may be regarded as possessing individual agency, however they are making choices in a predetermined structure which is not of their own making and one over which their predecessors have had little or no control. Roscigno and Hodson (2004:15) point to the individualised nature of worker resistance, eg theft, sabotage, work-avoidance, stating that 'The workplace and its dynamics are the natural starting point for understanding how, why, and when workers resist'. For stable staff, there are opportunities to resist, at the stable, when travelling and while at the racecourse, all of which are occasions when the trainer is not always immediately present.

What can we conclude about employment relations in these small firms?

This thesis has examined racing stables in the twin contexts of the total racing industry and of relevant historical developments. It has been identified that racing stables are an important and integral part of the industry but this means that they would not exist, save

for the existence of the racing industry itself; they have one sole market for their product. It would be very difficult therefore to extrapolate the results to other small firms, although some parallels might be drawn with small firms where the labour process involves emotional labour.

Using a labour process framework, the research encompasses job content, the nature of the work and the location of the work. With regard to job content, it tells us what employers and workers in racing stables actually do. With regard to the nature of work, the research establishes that the horse lies at the heart of this labour process and has a significant influence on management control and worker resistance. The horse is the focus of both management control and worker orientation to the industry and, on current evidence, has such a strong effect on the labour process that workers are more likely than not to comply with the demands of capital. With regard to the location of work, it was clear that the grouping of stable staff in racing towns, coupled with the fact that staff meeting regularly at race meetings, offered an opportunity to mobilise staff, building on latent collectivism to mobilise stable staff.

However, it was found that these small firms workers are not incapable of resisting their employers and that some of them do very clearly see the subordinated nature of their work and position in the racing labour process. What they generally do not seem to recognise is the fact that they could combine to resist without harming the welfare of the horses they so deeply care for. Post-1975, no external body has intervened successfully to mobilise them collectively. Nevertheless the 1975 strike did happen and stable staff did reveal that 'industrial action' had taken place in 2003 at Taunton racecourse over a dispute on canteen facilities.

In racing there are general influences on the level of conflict. The binding culture of the industry remains strong, as evidenced from employers and from workers throughout the

research. At the level of the industry there are the Rules of Racing, the National Joint Council for Stable Staff and the nature of the work in racing stables. At the staff level, there are workers whose prime aspiration is to work with horses; a lack of identification of class interests among workers; the sub-division of the collective worker through a large number of small capitals; and a diminution of worker voice. The cheap labour strategy pursued by employers in 1975 is still largely in force and is aided by the fact that stable staff have nowhere else to go in order to meet their aspirations to work with horses; the alternative is a job in a completely different industry where their skills will be irrelevant.

It is nowadays unusual for small firms to be part of national wage agreements and national collective bargaining arrangements (Kersley et al 2006) but the racing industry has held on to its NJCSS since 1975. An employers association, the NTF, and a staff association, the SLA, are present and were studied. However, study revealed that the conduct of employment relations at this level is more apparent than real and that power lies in the hands of the employers who also have control over the staff association which is funded by the racing industry. Interviews with the NTF supplied some insights in to the way in which collective bargaining has developed (or not). It was clear that the employers have lost no opportunity to take advantage of the SLA's weak position and lack of bargaining nous,

There is scant evidence also of formal industrial relations operating at the workplace level since the SLA has lacked workplace representatives. Stable staff respondents displayed an aversion to being associated with SLA activity at the workplace level, believing that this would do nothing for their employability. Where respondents did also comment on employment relations, it was to be critical of the SLA's lack of

activity. There was no evidence that workers would turn to the SLA for help when in difficulties.

We thus have a situation where there is a veneer of formal industrial relations, mainly conducted between the National Secretary of the SLA and his counterpart at the NTF, the Chief Executive, with some meetings between the NTF wage negotiating committee and the National Secretary. The national pay agreement under the NJCSS initially removed wages from individual bargaining between trainer and staff, although the agreement is only intended to set minimum pay rates. However, other potentially divisive issues remain, such as the payment of overtime worked while racing at the level of the National Minimum Wage, rather than hourly or enhanced wage rates.

On the most basic level of analysis, it is unlikely that employment relations in small firms would be more harmonious than in larger organisations since the basic antagonism between capital and labour (Rainnie 1989; Edwards 1990) is as present in the small firm as in the large. It is not resolved by the small size of the organisation and it may be made more apparent as there are fewer layers, or indeed none, between the worker and their employer. Arguably in racing stables there is a workplace-specific source of conflict since profit maximization cannot be facilitated by substituting machines for labour. Labour productivity can only be increased by obliging workers to care for greater numbers of horses. This is however limited by the time available in the working day to exercise horses, care for them *and* go racing.

Herein lies an essential paradox – the social relations of production are very clear to the external observer but are obscured at the point of production. In the particular circumstances of racing stables, trainers do not appear to exceptionally value the skill and diligence of their workforce, while stable staff remain prepared to do arduous and skilled work without pressing any claim to higher levels of remuneration and

appreciation. This was not always the case: as the 1975 strike showed workers were prepared to act collectively and were successful in pressing their demands through industrial action.

The evidence from racing is that conflict exists in racing stables, confirming Ram's (1999) research in small firms. In the past, conflict has spilled over into industrial action but at a time when workers could identify collective strength and were prepared to use it; this was particularly evidenced by the 1975 strike. Conflict is also present in the current day but is not addressed through the formal collective bargaining machinery, the NJCSS, or through the workers' organisation, the SLA. Workers were able to articulate their grievances about pay; hours of work; and workplace bullying during the fieldwork. However, worker voice is only weakly articulated at the level of individual workplaces. As Sosteric (1996) has observed, conflict is still present in small firms but remains subterranean for want of the ability or the means to express views or raise issues that conflict with the views and interests of small firms owners. This means that grievances have remained unresolved for many years in racing and look likely to stay that way for the foreseeable future. The main sanction for workers in racing is exit and as revealed by the research, this is an individual sanction that is unlikely to be applied.

Conclusion and recommendations for future research

This chapter has presented the main conclusions from a four-year research project. The focus of the research was the labour process in UK racing stables, placing this in the twin contexts of the racing industry and the development of industrial relations machinery. The research was largely qualitative in nature, enabling the researcher to get close to individual participants. The research has shown that racing stables form part of a wider racing industry, which has inevitably affected the ways in which they operate, including the labour process. Employers control the labour process, with little

effective opposition from their workforce. However, there is latent collectivism, most often expressed away from the main workplace when attending race meetings. There is also the possibility of building on worker grievances and the fact that stable staff are a closely knit occupational community; they have been mobilised in the past and shown collective resistance and this remains a possibility for the future.

The nature of the racing labour process as a labour process in the world of sport was uncovered in the research. While a number of studies of the work of sports(wo)men have been undertaken (Horne et al 1999; Roderick 2006), the labour processes of support workers in sport have not been studied. It is recommended that this be an area for future research consideration.