RESISTANCE IS FUTILE?
EVIDENCE FROM THE SMALL FIRMS SECTOR

Introduction

This paper explores two aspects of the employment relationship in the small firm: the degree to which these workers resist their employer collectively and what individual strategies of resistance are adopted. However, these are not counter posed as the opposite sides of a binary divide, since the evidence will show that they co-exist in these small firms, with or without union presence.

The research draws on the experiences of veterinary nurses and stable staff, both working in a collection of small firms throughout the United Kingdom. Veterinary nurses are not organised in a trade union, although they do have the British Veterinary Nursing Association (BVNA) as their voice on professional issues. Stable staff have been organised by the TGWU, a staff association and, since 2006, a trade union once more, the National Association of Stable Staff (NASS).

Earlier studies have generally concluded that workers in small firms do not mobilise around issues and grievances, or lack the ability or consciousness (Moore and Read 2006) to do so. Paradoxically, this study found that veterinary nurses (non-unionised) were far more likely to collectively resist their employer than stable staff (unionised). The evidence also shows that both groups undertake high levels of caring responsibility towards the animals that they deal with in their respective labour processes, offering a source of control for employers through workers’ emotional labour. While this inhibits formal industrial action, it does not prevent individual or collective acts of resistance as will be shown.

Collectivism or individualism?

A useful discussion of what collectivism might mean can be found in the works of Stephenson and Stewart (2001) and McBride (2006), none of whom assume that
collectivism is inextricably linked to trade union presence in the workplace. Stephenson and Stewart particularly remark on a growing emphasis on the individual through the adoption of HRM practices; arguably this emphasis has always been significant in the small firm where employers........(Marlow and Patten ??). Stephenson and Stewart also point to the de-emphasising of the collective worker while reminding us that this concept is no less valid than hitherto (see also Martinez Lucio and Stewart 1997). They state (ibid:3) ‘collectivism takes a number of forms, some are elaborated in the workplace, some outside, some for sure involve hostile challenges to the logic of managerial control’. They identify three forms of collectivism: trade union collectivism; the collectivism of everyday life; and workplace collectivism which are inter-related and are ‘influenced by the experience of the labour process and wider social relations’ (ibid:7). They argue that collectivism may be found both in the workplace and in worker's relationships with each other outside of the workplace.

McBride (2006) moves the discussion forward by considering Stephenson's and Stewart's three forms in different industries in NE England. In particular she focuses on the presence of informal collectivism, even in what she calls 'subordinated workplaces'..... and where trade unions no longer hold sway. findings that collectivism is often expressed despite the presence of trade unions in a workplace. She argues that collectivism at the workplace still exists, despite emphasis on the individual in the employment relationship. Collectivism should not be measured on absence or presence of conflict, but by the ways in which workers help and support each other over a wide range of issues, both in the workplace and outside. She finds a range of resistance strategies derived by workers from aspects of the labour process. In particular they bend the labour process to their will when possible. She also finds that what appear to be individualistic strategies are often actions which are shared with other workers, for example by ‘feigning collective
indifference and silence’ when questioned by managers about resistance activities.

Wages are a source of dissatisfaction that feeds into resistance.

**Individual resistance strategies in the small firm**

The idea that resistance is mainly or wholly formalised through unions and bargaining must be examined carefully. As Edwards demonstrates (1990), it is naïve to assume a direct causal link between exploitation and resistance, for the labour process does not operate in a vacuum. It has been presented as a response to management control (Braverman 1974; Friedman 1977; Edwards 1979; Callaghan and Thompson 2001) but not as the starting point for analysis (Rosenthal 2004). Worker strategies of resistance in the small firms sector have been studied by Sosteric (1996), Moule (1998) and, more recently, Moore and Read (2006) in settings as varied as a night club, a small manufacturing firm and care provision.

As Renton (undated) has pointed out, the employment relationship is and remains the site of potential conflict. In the small firm, in particular, conflict has been remarked on by Ram (1991; 1999) who finds that workers find ways to resist an autocratic employer, albeit on an individual basis. and Rainnie (19??), In their survey of small firms, Marlow and Patten (2005:536) found that workers were able to exploit the ‘particular nature of social relations of production in small firms’ to negotiate ‘lateness, absence or variable performance’ because of the obvious reliance of a small firm on key workers. They do not examine outright resistance and while the use of voice in the small firm has come under recent scrutiny (Dundon et al 2006) as has the propensity of workers to mobilise (Moore and Read 2006), relatively little recent attention has been focused on whether small firm workers resist their employers during the labour process and how they do this and whether they are successful.

Nevertheless, resistance strategies are discussed elsewhere in the literature. Roscigno and Hodson (2004:32) argue that workers will display agency on the shopfloor, even in informal situations, in order to ‘combat the harshness of their
jobs on a day to day basis’. They 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

McBride (2006) finds that resistance operates in subtle ways in subordinated workplaces, for example phoning in sick, or holding informal meetings during cigarette breaks, using a range of informal collective practices. Management responses only serve to reinforce resistance since managers are often extra-harsh in their treatment in order to root out dissident worker behaviours. This reflects the findings of (Scott et al 1989) that resistance is often characterised by small employers to their workforce as a failing of moral character; workers who resist are seen as ‘traitors’.

Smith (2006:391) argues that ‘the threat of exit is used as a form of labour resistance’. Earlier studies, such as that by Scott et al (1989) find that harsh working conditions, eg long hours and heavy overtime, may prompt workers to resist by leaving but do not necessarily lead to resistance through trade union means. However, Miller (2012) finds that exit is usual marginally by firms workers in racing because of their affective bond to the work and through their emotional labour. Ryan (2005) argues that workers who file grievances are more likely to use exit in small firms, and that grievances procedures are often seen by employers as ‘vehicle for whingers and moaners to cause trouble’ (ibid:210). He usefully uses two definitions of exit, either as physical (resigning or absenteeism) or mental (lack of enthusiasm for the job, daydreaming on the job).

Concluding section stating what is taken forward in research.

Collective resistance in the small firm
Here the literature is less developed, as the reality is that small firms are not highly unionised and within the sector ‘employers could not imagine the need for a trade union........(Marlow and Patten). As pointed out above (Renton undated; Ram 1991), size of organisation is not a predictor of harmonious relations and the employment relationship remains the site of potential conflict, including in the small firm.

In their study of collective organisation and mobilisation in small and medium sized enterprises, Moore and Read (2006) confirm the use of exit over voice amongst workers in this sector, citing proximitous working relationships with managers and proprietors as a barrier to greater trade union organisation. Workers are unable to identify and voice grievances because this represents too great a threat to their position in the workplace; in turn this inhibits the mobilization of workers around grievances (Kelly 1998) and collective identification between workers, which may lead to trade union organisation.

In her study of Tyneside workplaces, McBride (2006) also looks at informal workplace collectivism, which she argues is at once neglected and important, for workers devise their own strategies of resistance, outside formal union organisation. Work groups show dynamism and workers ‘look out for each other’. This is in contrast to the individualisation of resistance that has been discussed by Marlow and Patten and Roscigno and Hodson. She states (ibid:720) that her research:

suggests that both members and non-members viewed trade unionism favourably, yet very few had developed a sense of how their actions could be further mobilised

This strikes a chord with the work of Moore and Read (2006) who........

Concluding section stating what is taken forward in research.

The research
The research commenced as a funded project under the UWE Early Career Researcher Fund, looking at employee voice in the small firm (Miller 2012) and focusing on staff in UK racing stables and nurses working in UK veterinary practices. A striking finding of this project was the degree to which veterinary nurses were prepared to pursue informal collective means in order to resist what they saw as unreasonable employer demands. A parallel finding was the relative lack of collective action amongst stable staff, despite the presence of union voice, a relatively unusual phenomenon in the small firms sector overall.

Both groups of staff were surveyed by questionnaire, available on line and advertised to BVNA and NASS members in their respective journals. Meetings were held with one group of stable staff and one group of veterinary nurses.

Research indicates that these workers more likely to use exit over voice to solve workplace problems

Research design - Two groups of small firms workers – stable staff in racing stables and veterinary nurses in small veterinary practices
Comparative data
Qualitative study, reflecting success of earlier projects in terms of data gathering individual interviews were also sought from members of both groups.

Research strategy - Qualitative interviews – 20 with stable staff and 20 with veterinary nurses; 1 each from NASS and British Veterinary Nursing Association (BVNA) key informants
Focus groups – Newmarket and Lambourn for stable staff; SW Region for nurses
On line questionnaire for each group, advertised through NASS and BVNA journals

What actually happened - 20 interview respondents selected by NASS – 3 indicated they were prepared to participate, the rest not
One successful focus group in Newmarket
One focus group organised in Lambourn – no-one turned up
SO, I contacted local racecourses and interviewed 15 stable staff at Bath and Wincanton
Negligible response to questionnaire, despite reminders in NASS journal
Interviews with NASS President and Chief Executive and Regional Officer
BVNA were not prepared to select individual interviewees for reasons of confidentiality, however
I was put in touch with the BVNA industrial relations helpline – very informative telephone interview
I was invited to attend the BVNA Regional CPD meeting to recruit interviewees – 2 agreed
I had an exhibition stand at the BVNA annual Congress – interviewed 15 nurses
Slightly better questionnaire response but still not significant
Interview with BVNA President

Despite low response rates to questionnaire, data was helpful in developing interviews
Had to be pragmatic, hence racecourse interviews and BVNA exhibition stand
Essentially I was going in cold and having to marshal all my resources in order to recruit interviewees
It was quite hard work and a bit dispiriting at times.
Most significantly, workers’ responses show that they are not shy about raising their voices, whether they have a union or not

Findings and discussion

Opportunities for resistance – stable staff and vet nurses; what they actually do.
Edwards (1982:70) argues that:

The phenomenon which needs to be explained is...the fact that workers do not resist more and that they are prepared to commit their energy to a degree which is acceptable to employers
In racing attitudes were very ‘traditional’ and staff could be intimidated by their managers, particularly through concerns about horse welfare and the threat that a good horse could be taken away from an individual worker if s/he did not cooperate. Respondents were consistent in their experience that a great deal of emotional blackmail was used on individual workers with the effect of atomising workers at the level of the stables. One stable girl had been told that she would be sacked if she took a pre-arranged day off when ‘her’ horse was going racing. A second stable girl was told that ‘her’ horse, an exceptionally successful Flat racing animal, would be taken away from her if she did not obey the trainer’s instructions to the letter. Earlier research in the industry (Miller 2010) showed that workers were inculcated with the notion that each horse they dealt with was ‘their’ horse, for example one head lad stated that he could put up with poor working conditions ‘so long as my horses are ok’.

Stable lads have considerable control over particular stages of the labour process, most notably when exercising racehorses and transporting them to race meetings. The product that they are dealing with at this stage in particular is a perishable one and there is a real sense in which poor or inadequate treatment by workers will materially affect the performance of the individual horse. The experience of one stable lad was that unless staff gave uninterrupted and consistent care ‘The horses become upset and won’t race as well’. This view was generally accepted by stable staff but this is a point of control that they do not turn to their advantage as a collective industrial weapon.

Taking Roscigno and Hodson (2004) finding that workers will display agency on the shopfloor, even in informal situations, it is clear therefore that opportunities do exist and several potential forms of resistance were referred to by stable staff respondents; these were fooling around when on horseback; teasing each other; meeting in the racecourse canteen; taking advances of salary then ‘disappearing’ without repayment; and absenteeism.

Discussions with veterinary nurses also revealed a culture of bullying around issues of animal welfare.
Collectivism – formal and informal;

Amongst stable staff, there was evidence of a residual collectivism based in the cultural bonds of the racing industry and the informal ways in which workers ‘look out for each other’ in the stables, at race meetings and outside of work in the various towns, such as Newmarket and Lambourn, on which racing is centred. This very much supported the findings of Stephenson and Stewart (2001), as elaborated by McBride (2006). It was very clear that working at the stables enabled the expression of some group or collective identity, but that this could only be initiated more strongly away from that workplace.

While dispersed across small organisations, around the country, both groups have opportunities to meet on an inter-firm basis. For veterinary staff this was through regional Continuing Professional Development meetings and the BVNA annual conference. Stable staff met regularly at race meetings and more infrequently at NASS regional meetings and the NASS annual conference. Collective identity exists, with or without a union, and workers deploy this in their battles with employers.

Stephenson and Stewart (2001) argue that a range of ‘collectivisms’ must be identified so as to avoid the binary divide between individualism and collectivism, which persists in much of the literature. They argue that collectivism may be found both in the workplace and in workers’ relationships with each other outside of the workplace. Three comments from stable staff particularly referred to this being a reality in racing also:

The staff canteen is a tremendous information exchange

There’s a lot of word of mouth recruitment – staff swap notes at race meetings re good/bad trainers and stables

We work as a team, we’ve become protective of each other. We all enjoy seeing staff from other stables at races. Its an information exchange, gossip, who’s having an affair etc

Affiliations between staff span the boundaries between individual firms and across other organisational boundaries because staff are required to be highly mobile to the point of travelling literally from one end of the country to another;
the author witnessed this at Hamilton Park race course where one Kent trainer had transported three horses, plus stable staff, 460 miles each way, to compete in two races. It is at this level that the author found most expressions of solidarity between workers, being told by Respondent E35 that ‘we look out for each other, even when we don’t work at the same yard’ or by Respondent E27 ‘the craic is good but we need it because of the bloody boss’.

Resistance – collective or individual
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’.
In the case of racing, workers generally treat resistance as an individual act and one, which may, in extreme situations, necessitate exit, a change of employer, rather than using voice to resolve matters at the immediate workplace level. Hodson (2001) argues that workers, in what he terms ‘disorganised’ workplaces, are more likely to accommodate the demands of labour than to resist them. By ‘disorganised’ he means ‘poorly run’, rather than ‘non-union’. By his definition (ibid:295)
Accommodation behaviours are strategies used by workers to minimize their involvement in work without directly challenging the organization of work and without exiting from the organization.

This research suggests that workers in racing are similarly inclined to adopt accommodative behaviours in order to repel an otherwise harsh management regime. These were variously cited as socialising, drinking, betting on horses, and travelling to and from the races.
However, these workers do not bear out Hodson’s assertion that workers under direct control may be relatively unenthusiastic about their work, while not resisting their employer’s demands outright. Experienced lads develop speed in accomplishing tasks, allowing for effort to be conserved and opportunities for ‘down time’ to be created, very much reflecting Ram’s point about labour, even in
small, non-unionised firms, resisting the demands of an overbearing employer (Ram 1991). Collective responses may be found in other behaviours such as socialising between workers, regaling each other with tales and this was borne out by several respondents who particularly remarked on the support they derived from travelling to race meetings together, away from the scrutiny of the trainer. Among the 43 staff interviewed, 15 men and 10 women (all stable staff) remarked on the importance of meeting staff from other stables across the country and how much support they derived from sharing experiences and the opportunity to compare workplace experiences. 52% of veterinary nurses had been part of a group dealing with a problem at work, without the help of the BVNA. Veterinary nurses also proved capable of collectively resisting employer demands for example over increased out of hours work. Here staff met away from the workplace and went back to the employer as a group. Their resistance was successful and they said that they now had a much greater say in workplace issues as their employer had realised that they not only had collective power but they were prepared to use it. Scott et al (1989) found that at times of change the nature of the employment relationship is made visible and may fundamentally alter, for good or bad

Overwhelmingly they said that they did not contemplate taking a form of collective action, such as a work to rule. However, they were prepared to meet their employer as a group and confront the employer with their problem to seek resolution. One group of nurses, however, did embark on unofficial collective action............ Assumptions that workers in small firms do not form collective identities and are inherently anti-union

[insert 11 and 12]
[insert 13 and 14]

For both groups, a strong inhibition to industrial action came from concerns with animal welfare.
With regard to worker resistance, a complex picture starts to emerge which tends to support Ram’s findings (1991) that workers in small firms often resort to individual methods of resistance. Individual staff resistance was evidenced by absenteeism, mainly a subject of complaint by staff interviewed, three of whom reported that workmates regularly failed to turn in after a night out and by labour turnover. Respondents E31 and E33 reported their experiences of borrowing money from the boss, then leaving the job. A particular example was offered by Respondent E6 who had been summarily dismissed. She did not feel inclined to pursue her case, either through the SLA or an Employment Tribunal because ‘my name would be blackened’, rendering her unemployable in a tightly-knit industry. Her personal resistance had been centred on finding fresh employment and restoring her reputation as a good worker. That she had achieved this was supported by Respondent E13. He approached the author showing some curiosity as to her purpose at Chepstow and at Taunton the day before when he had also been in attendance. During a conversation outside the Chepstow stable yard security barrier, he particularly pointed to the Travelling Head Lass referred to above saying:

You see her, she was sacked by her boss just because he wanted to give someone their old job back. She’s a very good worker, very well respected and she eventually cleared her name, became a head girl again.

This worker’s personal act of resistance bears out Callaghan and Thompson’s (2001) finding that sometimes workers resist through being ultra efficient and also Rosenthal’s (2004) suggestion that in some cases workers are able to use management controls as a form of resistance.

Use of exit as means of resistance – It was clear that stable staff and veterinary nurses would vote with their feet if problems could not be resolved at the workplace (Smith 2006). However, the results did not show that this was not the first course of action likely to be contemplated. Again, their bond with the animals in their care made it more likely that they would stay and try to endure
unreasonable employer behaviour. However, where exit was used it was a marginal action, involving a move to another stables or practice, rather than outright exit from that form of employment.

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**Conclusion**

Is resistance futile for these workers?
As McBride (2006) argues, collectivism should not be measured on absence or presence of conflict, but by the ways in which workers help and support each other over a wide range of issues.

The research also indicated individual strategies of resistance, aimed at avoiding a direct challenge to the organisation of work, specifically by manipulating the
rules of the workplace to create small oases away from management control (Hodson 2001:295). So, for example, stable staff ‘going racing’ use the opportunity to avoid the rigours of mucking out and use the race course canteen to exchange information aimed at avoiding bad bosses wherever possible; find opportunities to play games while on horseback; indulge in teasing. However, for both groups of workers the research suggested that individual resistance continued to be a way of making the labour process tolerable, rather than securing change. Workers feared reprisals such as being branded a ‘troublemaker’ for ‘upsetting the boss’, leading to exit as an option to resolving individual workplace difficulties. This in turn reflects the findings of Moore and Read (2006) that individual workers feel that they stand to lose more by standing up to their employer.

Nevertheless, there was some evidence of informal collectivism amongst stable staff, which on at least one occasion had spilt over into unofficial industrial action. Staff formed bonds across organisational boundaries in the various racing towns and at race meetings and used what opportunities there were to pool knowledge and resist ‘bad bosses’ by avoiding working at some stables. It was important to realise that stable staff form an occupational community and may draw on strong bonds formed from the industry’s unique culture and shared experience of a common labour process. Nevertheless, this has not yet been transformed into lasting workplace collectivism from which stable staff could draw strength and support.

Stable staff did nevertheless demonstrate a capability for at least using what opportunities they found to resist their employers on an individual basis. They also were capable of manipulating points during the labour process to evade management control, both at the stables and when going racing. Socialising in the racing towns and when at the racecourse were valuable opportunities to form resistance but underlined the fact that workers found it easier to express resistance when away from their main workplace.

Stable staff said that they had a particular problem resisting the emotional blackmail used by their employers to ensure cooperation with sometimes
unreasonable management requests. Again the horse was a tremendously important factor here. Workers do, therefore, find what means were at their disposal to resist but in a situation where they wished to continue working with horses and cannot, as yet, contemplate taking actions that might compromise this.
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