DIALOGUES, LANGUAGE AND HUMOUR IN A GROUP OF WORKERS

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Abstract: *For three years I studied a group of eight workers with an exclusive night schedule, as a full member of the group, using autoethnography, participant observation and informal interviews as research methods and techniques. The ethnographic research approach offered the opportunity to discover the social micro-universe of a unique social group in the working landscape of Romania. Dialogues between participants are conducted using two types of language, depending on the location of the work place and the activity performed. During so-called empty labour, when participants are engaged in all types of discussions, mostly unrelated to their work, the language they use is day-to-day normal language, but during work processes, when they are subjected to time and noise restrictions, participants resort most of the time to a very simplified form of language, often using a single word to replace a whole sentence. Humour is a constant presence in the group's discussions, often expressed in an aggressive and offensive manner, frequently with misogynistic and homophobic overtones. The participants' humour is even more aggressive when they are inside the larger group of the organization's local structure – the district, most likely having the role of either maintaining or provoking the existing informal hierarchies within the larger group.*

Keywords: *ethnography; participant observation; small group; social interaction; working class.*

1. Introduction

This article is extracted, for the most part, from the author's doctoral thesis, the data being obtained in the course of an ethnographic research spanning almost three years, during which time the author was fully integrated into a small group of workers. It shows elements from inside a group of workers, working exclusively in night shifts, obtaining data that would probably be inaccessible if the research were conducted by a person from outside the group or organization, whether it took place over a shorter period of time or a similar one. The main research methods and techniques are autoethnography, participant observation and informal interviews, with field notes being used abundantly. The article comprises a brief review of the literature, the methodology used, the results obtained and the conclusions.

2. Literature review

Social interactions like discussions, that do not have a well-established purpose and are an end in themselves are part of what Simmel (1949) calls sociability (*Geselligkeit*), i.e. a form of social interaction without a meaningful purpose or having an innocuous social content, a process of pure socialization that represents its own purpose.

Schatzman and Strauss (1955) discovered that there are differences in modes of communication between social classes, in intelligibility, grammar, and vocabulary. Furthermore, Bernstein (1960) argued that there are differences in language between social classes, and those differences can be classified in two types of language use in society: the elaborate code and the restricted code. Although this paper does not

analyze the language strictly from this point of view, we found that the members of the studied team are using two forms of language during their group discussions, which correspond, to some extent, with the categorization made by Bernstein, respectively a form of normal day-to-day language (elaborated) and a simplified (restricted) form of language.

Humour and jokes are ubiquitous in organizations, generally having the role of helping to combat boredom and daily routine (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). From the point of view of psychology, humour is defined as a process that is initiated by a stimulus, respectively a joke, which results in a response, such as laughter, which indicates pleasure (Godkewitsch, 1976). Humour can play a normative social role, creating ridiculous and embarrassing situations for the individuals involved (Butler, 2015). Humour, something that is amusing, mutually recognized as such by individuals, facilitates friendships, the emergence of trust and intimacy and has a pivotal role in shaping and defining the notions of "us" and "others" (Friedman and Kuipers, 2013).

3. Methodology

In ethnographic research, the main research methods and techniques used are participant observation and informal interview (Agar, 1996: 111), participant observation being considered by some authors as the basis for the design of ethnographic research (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011: 16). Given this, for this research, we chose participant observation because, despite all its limitations, such as the fact that the observer is biased or has access to different information depending on gender, participant observation improves the quality of information collected and promotes the development of new research questions and new hypotheses (DeWalt and DeWalt, 2011: 10-16), thus leading to a better understanding of the observed group.

3.1 Participant observation

Participant observation is a process of recording, interpreting and transmitting the information obtained, being influenced by permanent transactions between the observer and the observed individuals, where the role of the observer can be passive or active, involved in the activities of those observed. Given its nature, participant observation is not without problems: the obtained information may be distorted depending on the experience, personality or vigilance of the researcher, and factors such as anxiety or observer's preconceptions may also contribute to this (Schwartz and Green Schwartz, 1955). However, Becker and Geer (1957: 32) argued that participant observation is superior to formal interviewing because it provides "a rich experiential context which causes him [the researcher] to become aware of incongruous or unexplained facts, makes him sensitive to their possible implications and connections with other observed facts, and thus pushes him continually to revise and adapt his theoretical orientation and specific problems in the direction of greater relevance to the phenomena under study."

Spradley (1980: 58-61) shows that there are four types of participant observation, depending on the degree of involvement of the researcher, both with the people and in the observed activities, namely: passive, moderate, active and complete. Passive observation is that in which the researcher is not involved at all in activities and does not interact with the observed persons, while in the case of complete

observation, which entails the highest degree of involvement, the researcher is usually already a member of the group.

The choice of participant observation for this research was also influenced by the fact that the author was already a member of the studied group, and only a long-term research of this nature could identify and explain certain aspects which the participating researcher might consider self-evident.

3.2 Autoethnography

The term auto-ethnography is usually thought of as coined by Hayano in 1979 in "Auto-ethnography: Paradigms, problems, and prospects," but Ellis (2004) points out that the term was already used by anthropologist Karl Heider, a few years before the publication of Hayano's article (Prasad, 2019). Autoethnography is defined by Ellis (2004: xix) as an approach to research and writing that seeks to systematically describe and analyze personal experiences, in order to understand ethno-cultural experiences, a method of connecting autobiographical and personal points of view, with the cultural, political and social ones.

Bruner (2004) considers that narratives are an integral part of individuals, that they become "autobiographical narratives," narratives being the way in which individuals transmit information about their lives to others. Laslett (1999: 392) also argued that the intersection of personal and societal perspectives offers a new perspective that can be a unique contribution to the social sciences: "Personal narratives can address several key theoretical debates in contemporary sociology: macro and micro linkages; structure, agency and their intersection; process of structuration, social reproduction; and social change."

Autoethnography also emerged as a result of the crisis of representation in the 1970s and 1980s, when the idea that the researcher could be detached from the research he was undertaking and could render in a neutral manner what he observed was questioned, with some researchers beginning to argue that emotions are an integral part of conducting and understanding social research (Adams, Holman Jones and Ellis, 2014: 9-10).

However, to differentiate autoethnography from autobiographical or personal writings, Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis (2016) propose the following features of autoethnography: it includes intentional commentary on culture and cultural practices, contributes to existing research, includes vulnerability intentionally and creates a reciprocal relationship with the audience to get a response.

Autoethnography was chosen for the possibility to bring some additions to the aspects revealed by the participant observation, and also for the opportunity to present the personal and emotional context of some elements on which the author still has doubts, so that the public can draw their own conclusions.

3.3 Informal interviews

Spradley (1979: 58-59) states that in the case of ethnographic research, a skilled researcher "gathers most of his information through participant observation and several regular, friendly conversations," conducting informal interviews without participants being aware that they are being interviewed, considering that the use of too many elements of ethnographic jargon would discourage informants from participating in further discussions.

In ethnographic research, when the researcher is a person outside the observed group, by entering the group and asking questions, he alters the "natural" state of that group (Frey and Fontana, 1991), which is not the case with this research, where the observer is also a member of the studied group. Frey and Fontana (1991) also claim that the informal group interview is a very good technique for exploratory queries, as well as for interpreting or even validating data previously obtained from a single person.

Given that informal group interviews are spontaneous, take place in a natural setting, in a normal conversation, participants are self-selected and the interviews generally do not contain predetermined questions, the introduction and clarification of ethnographic elements depend on the researcher's skills and experience (Schensul, LeCompte, Natasi et al., 1999).

The choice of the informal interview was determined by the ability of this research technique to bring to light things that escape participant observation or autoethnography, aspects that can be clarified by asking the participants directly, as well as the higher chances of getting an answer through such an unstructured interview, which gives the interviewee the feeling of a friendly discussion, as opposed to a strongly structured interview, with many specialized terms, which can make the interviewee feel intimidated and less inclined to offer an honest answer.

4. Results

Discussions between participants take place in two types of locations: in the team locker room or at the place of specific activities, and hence their different nature, as well as the language used. The first type of discussions would be what Paulsen (2013) calls "empty labour," with the observation that, in this case, the absence of work is generated by the very order of specific activities, an order that includes two waiting time intervals, the first until the actual work process can be started, and the second after the end of the work process. The second type of discussions take place during the work processes, in a generally noisy environment, and are related to their work activities. Humour is commonly present in both types of discussions.

4.1 Participants' dialogues

The dialogues within the group take place in the context of a topic, whether it comes from outside or is something that concerns the members of the group and they want to discuss it with the others. What matters is not only what is being said, but also who is saying it, and who the others are: the participants who can interact, who can respond or not. When only team members are present, the discussions unfold in a different manner to when one of the hierarchical superiors, from the district or division leadership, is present. In the latter case the atmosphere is different, and the discussions often revolve around work-related issues, much more than usual, this topic generally taking up a small amount of time in the group's discussions, on most days this subject being seldom addressed.

It sometimes happens that one of the participants makes a statement that does not attract any comments, for various reasons: the topic is not interesting to the others, the speaker suddenly changed the topic of discussion, and others do not want to follow this new topic or the statement arouses suspicion among the other participants by sounding untruthful. In general, such statements appear when participants have lost

interest in the current discussion, and one of them tries to keep that dialogue going, which is why the statement is often an artificial, shaky construction. When this happens, when what has been said remains only a statement from which no further discussion results, there is first an embarrassing silence from all participants, after which either the one who made the statement or one of the others tries to resume the dialogue, by attempting to move it in another direction. The one who made the statement from which no further discussion ensued is visibly confused in the following moments, seeing that the others are not reacting at all. He does not always try to continue the dialogue on another path and sometimes just allows the others to resume the conversation, while he retreats temporarily. I called such a statement "something-said" because, most of the time, its purpose is to fill a gap in the almost uninterrupted discussion that takes place between the participants. The speaker is probably aware, to a greater or lesser extent, of this purpose of the statement and is not sure that what has been said will spark the interest of the other participants, but he fulfills his role as a participant in the discussion, who's implicit duty is not to allow silence to set in, because such moments have proven, over time, unpleasant, almost embarrassing for all participants.

Participants often look for topics when there is an oppressive silence, preferring to discuss something than to have an atmosphere devoid of any interaction. Such moments of innocuous verbal interaction are only intended to maintain a continuous discussion, regardless of its content, as a kind of remedy for the boredom that would arise with silence, representing what Simmel (1949) calls "sociability" - a form of social interaction that doesn't have a meaningful purpose.

The topic of discussion is often born when there is something present, not so much physically present, but mentioned by the participants; an object that attracts attention, that has a certain history and certain characteristics. The discussion can then lead to the class of objects to which the object in question belongs and to certain specific objects, which also have a history and a series of attributes, or it can start from the specific object, going to the class of objects and then back to the specific objects. For example, from a discussion among the participants extracted from the field notes we notice the following: "V. mentioned something about a TV (the object), recently bought and installed in his daughter's room, and how his wife managed to break the screen, while trying to wipe the dust off the TV, and then L. took the conversation further by saying something about the quality of modern TVs (the class of objects) and about the warranty conditions, which do not cover the breaking of the screen, to which M. mentioned that he had a TV from the year 1997 (the specific object) and which still works, then L. continued the dialogue and specified that he also had a similarly old TV from 1995 (another specific object), which he took to his parents residence in the country. The discussion was punctuated with the rather detailed description of the objects: screen size, brand, price, screen type, etc." (excerpt from the field notes, March 5, 2018).

Each topic of discussion has an informal leader tacitly recognized by the others, due to his authority in the field. For example, when the topic of discussion is cars and everything related to them, from engines, to spare parts or fuel consumption, the quality of informal leader belongs to A., who previously worked as a car mechanic and still deals with various car repairs in his free time. In such moments, there is a break in the group, with the three people not interested in the topic of cars often forming their

own parallel group, where they discuss other things. Following this separation those participating in the discussion about cars express their opinion with less certainty than in the case of other topics, often asking A. for confirmation of certain technical aspects. His attitude changes accordingly, obviously assuming the role of authority on cars and, consequently, informal leader of the group.

Discussions that take place within the group also have a therapeutic role, filling an otherwise dead time, and most dialogues occur when group members are waiting for something to happen (e.g., the unplugging of the third rail), and are forced to wait together. Of course, if they just sat together and kept silent, just looking awkwardly at each other, the atmosphere might be quite uncomfortable. Often, when there is a longer interruption in the group's dialogue, the mental effort of some of the members of the group to search for a topic to be "thrown" to others becomes almost noticeable. What is important in such instances is the number of individuals in the discussion area, for example, in the locker room; if two or three have gone out to smoke, and at least two of the remaining individuals do not seem interested in a dialogue and instead they prefer to use their mobile phones, then others are less tempted to look for a topic of discussion, preferring to be silent or turn their attention to the TV set, waiting for the dialogue to resume, which usually occurs with the return of the smokers.

There may be times when a member of the group disturbs the discussion, with an unexpected gesture that is no longer related to what is happening. For example, someone may talk on the phone, either in the locker room or outside the room, temporarily withdrawing from interaction with others. The moment brings with it a profound disturbance of the conversation: the others simply stop for a few moments, seemingly undecided whether to continue or not. The resumption of the conversation also depends on who is talking on the phone and to whom they are talking. For example, if the team leader is talking on the phone, whether it is a conversation with the district chief or the coordinating foreman, everybody is being quiet and the attention of some is focused on the TV set. The discussion is not resumed until the telephone conversation is over, and the stimulus for resuming the discussion can come from one of two directions: either from the team leader, if the telephone conversation included information that has to be shared with others, or from another member of the group, who can ask for details about the conversation because he understood certain things by listening to only one half of the conversation, or take the discussion in a new direction, or simply resume the previously interrupted conversation. If the person talking on the phone is not the team leader, the discussion often resumes after a very short break, often with ironies towards the person talking on the phone and, sometimes, with the utterance of jokes or obscenities.

But there are also times when a member of the group leaves the discussion unexpectedly, by suddenly turning his attention to the TV. He takes the remote control and starts changing the channels, completely ignoring the group. This kind of withdrawal from the ongoing discussion makes the others feel awkward, as it conveys to them the fact that their dialogue was boring, since it was abandoned by one of them with such a gesture of obvious rejection. However, after a few initial moments of hostile silence the discussion is resumed.

4.2 Participants' two types of language

The language used in the social interactions between the participants differs depending on the nature of the activity carried out. Thus, in discussions during the actual work process, fewer terms are used to communicate, a single word often replacing an entire sentence. For example, during work processes, the team leader or another participant may say the word "winch," which any participant with seniority within the group will know to mean that the winch needs to be brought and inserted under the rail, with the purpose of lifting the rail from the metal baseplate. Therefore, the need to perform this operation is deduced by the participant from the meaning of that single word, but this implies that the participant previously encountered similar work processes during which he learned the implicit sentences (referring to a sequence of tasks) that are meant to be replaced by that single word. The simplification of the language used between the participants is possible only by repeating the same types of social interactions and arises from the necessity to perform certain tasks in a more effective and timely manner which, given the fact that at any moment during the work processes there is the possibility of encountering a maintenance track motor car, and there is a time limit for the completion of the work processes.

On the other hand, during the dialogues outside of the actual work processes, the language is not affected by such a simplification, the sentences being uttered in their entirety, in order to make sense for the others. In the absence of time constraints there is no need to reduce the number of language terms being used, in order to make dialogues unfold faster. In a way, such a simplification of language would be something unnatural outside of work processes, and a participant who spoke in this way would most likely be seen by others as behaving in an abnormal, bizarre manner. But the decisive element that does not allow the use of simplified language is that dialogues outside the work processes cannot accurately anticipate what is to be said or done, the discussion and possible actions of the participants cannot be established in advance, as is the case with the work processes - these are carried out, most of the time, in a predetermined order, which cannot be modified and, thus, one word is enough for the participants to understand the action, respectively the implicit sentence replaced by it.

In both the simplified language and the normal language used by the participants, there are elements of jargon, derived from their specific activity, unintelligible to outsiders, but also elements of slang, borrowed by some participants from interactions with other people, from outside the group, and introduced over time into the vocabulary used within the group. Also, insults and obscene terms are an important part of the participants' vocabulary. "There is no man who does not swear," a phrase being often uttered by a former member of the group, now retired, was provided as an explanation for his frequent use of profanities, when other participants would reprimand him, jokingly, for speaking in a too "colourful" manner. The group avoids the use of words such as regionalisms, although some members come from rural areas, and this happens due to the fact that when someone uses such a term they generally become the target of irony.

4.3 Offensive humour of the participants

Humour is part of the participants' daily interactions and manifests itself in the form of dialogues that may seem offensive and aggressive to people outside the group, but which fall within the participants' generally accepted definition of the notion of

joke. Humour is also present when the group is joined by members of other teams and districts (when it is more aggressive and offensive), or divisions (in which case its manifestations become less offensive and aggressive, since the humour relies on exchanging remarks with members of another division, i.e. persons with whom the participants do not interact very often). An explanation for the offensive tendency of most of the jokes between participants is provided by Watson (2014), who, synthesizing the three theories of humour (the theory of superiority, relief theory and incongruity theory), says that we find humour in the misfortunes of others, that laughter helps release emotional or psychic tension, thereby producing pleasure, and that absurd situations, inconsistent with one's expectations, that does not conform with one's idea of what that situation should be, produces amusement.

Many of the social interactions between participants are intended to create embarrassing situations for one of them, and humour is a commonly used way to achieve this goal. But sometimes it happens that one of the participants actually intends to insult another participant, and the way he tries to mask that intention is by employing humour. Using humour to mask an insult insures that the reply will also come in the form of a joke, although the target of the joke may be aware of the other's intentions, thus avoiding possible conflicts between participants. Despite all these precautions and assumptions, some participants occasionally exaggerate with the use of this form of offensive humour, which leads to quarrels. This type of aggressive humour can also have the role of either maintaining or provoking the existing informal hierarchies within the group (Porcu, 2005), which is most likely the case of our participants.

In general, it can be argued that participants share the same opinion on what is funny and what is not. Even if there are some participants who do not share the vision of others related to humour, most likely they will not openly acknowledge this, so as not to be excluded from the group by the other members. It has been found that when members of a group do not share the same views on humour, this leads to the impossibility of creating close social relationships. Friedman and Kuipers (2013: 193) consider that shared humour is "a foundational ingredient of friendship, trust and intimacy," with a central role in shaping and defining the notions of "us" and "others," its absence marking an uncrossable social rift. Therefore, even if there are participants who do not like the forms of humour used by the team members, they mimic the fact that they approve of this type of humour and even participate in it, responding with similar jokes.

Wherever the activity of the team takes place, a certain kind of social interaction is regularly present: jokes directed against sexual minorities. Homophobic jokes sometimes include aggressive behaviour, from mimicking sex when someone bends over to pick up some tool or materials from the floor, to inappropriate touching. From the observations made over time, it would seem that this homophobic attitude derives from the participants' shared notion of masculinity: what it means to be a "real man", what a man should or should not do.

This type of behaviour, which includes jokes about sexual minorities, has been studied by several authors in an attempt to elucidate its motives. Among them, Connell (1995) argues that working-class men manifest their hegemonic masculinity through collective behaviour, with practices such as jokes against effeminate men or violence against women and homosexuals. Also, Embrick, Walther and Wickens (2007) showed

that heterosexual white men, who are members of the working class, draw boundaries of masculinity and femininity: for them, a "real" man can only be heterosexual. Therefore, the existence of homophobic jokes could also be explained by the desire of the group members to prevent any manifestation inconsistent with their view of masculinity, thus indicating appropriate behaviour, recommended and accepted within the group, this type of jokes being a part of internal rules and expectations about roles within the group (Kozlowski and Bell, 2003). Participants' ideas about masculinity are undoubtedly profoundly influenced by the fact that they work in a male-oriented field (Applebaum, 1984), considering that in the five districts working permanent night shifts, there are no women and there has been none in the organization's history.

In connection with this homophobic behaviour, the question was asked to what extent the participants ever thought about the reasons that lead them to resort to such an attitude. If they haven't given it any thought, then they won't be able to answer if asked why they manifest themselves the way they do. For this reason, attempts to find an answer relied mostly on asking indirect questions or observing certain opinions or beliefs of the participants, which led to the conclusions in the next paragraph.

The role of the male is well defined within the team: he is the main financial provider of the family, he is a husband, father and head of the household. Any behaviour that departs from these internal rules and norms set within the group, raises suspicions, and men who do not adhere to these rules and norms are almost always the target of homophobic jokes. There is also a saying often repeated by the members of the group, in some form or another: "If you have never had a child, you have lived in vain." The reason for this phrase's frequent reiteration is the fact that no less than three of the participants have no children, which often makes them the victims of homophobic ironies or jokes. In this context, it is most likely that the periodic repetition of the life creed mentioned above has a double role: firstly, it asserts the need for procreation, to be "like everybody else," as an exhortation for those without children to follow this advice and to strengthen the position of those who already have children; and secondly, it is a way of harming the feelings of those without children, of lowering their status, as unworthy members of the group and, consequently, of society. This reference to what the world considers to be the best conduct represents the "invocation of the generalized other" (Rock, 2001).

Another important part of the jokes made by the participants consists of misogynistic humour. Unlike in the case of other teams, however, misogynistic humour is not directed against participants' partners: women who are the victims of jokes are almost always strangers to the participants. The only instances in which group members accept jokes about non-foreign women are cases of ex-partners, but such events are quite rare, participants generally avoiding such humour when it comes to women who have been a part of their lives at some point.

Thus, the humour used by the participants is generally offensive and aggressive, and whether its role is to provoke or maintain existing hierarchies or if it is used to mask a conflict between two participants, it is a constant presence in daily social interactions among the members of the group.

5. Conclusion

As we have seen, members of the group tend to have an almost continuous and aimless discussion, an often erratic social interaction touching on various topics, whose single role is to not let the silence set it and create an awkward moment for the participants.

Furthermore, we observed that dialogues between members of the studied team are conducted using two types of language, between which they choose depending on the location and the activity performed. Although this is a conscious choice, the location and activity are the ones that ultimately dictate the type of language that is used. When the participants are engaged in so-called "empty labour," where usually there are no time and noise restrictions, their language is normal day-to-day language (elaborated), while during work processes, where normal language is not possible, due to time and noise restrictions, participants are forced, most of the time, to communicate using an extremely simplified (restricted) language, in many instances using a single word to replace one or several sentences.

Inside the group, participants use a type of humour which is generally very aggressive and offensive, often characterized by misogyny and homophobia. When the team is working together with another team or both teams from the local structure, the type of humour is even more aggressive, most likely having the role of maintaining or provoking the existing informal hierarchies within the larger group, as Porcu (2005) has shown. The misogynistic nature of the participants' humour is most likely also determined by the fact that the members of the group rarely interact socially with women during their working hours, as women are usually employed in other structures than those the studied group belongs to. It is not clear how the presence of one or several women inside the group might change the behaviour and the type of humour of the participants, but if women were ever to join the group in the future this topic would certainly be worth researching.

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