

Workflow, Gender, Clean and dirty, heavy and light and wet and dry work in a Commercial Laundry

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1 Introduction

In many ethnographies of the workplace the basic distinction between the Emic and Etic Frames, identifying respectively the *inside* perspective of ethnographers, interested in a particular culture in its own terms, and (2) the *outside comparative* perspective, describing differences across cultures in terms of general, external standards is made (Pike, 1967). The nuancing of workplace experiencing is not necessarily well comprised in these classic distinctions, but the study reported here is determinedly Emic. Over time and with reflection, the Emic can become Etic and vice versa. Moreover the notion of a “moral career” developed by Goffman which has been widely-adopted in relation to long-term perspectives on academic life and mental illness, has only rarely been applied to short-term scenarios and to instant careers (but see Weir, 1977). Gender analysis of the workplace is also very common as is the distinction between “heavy” and “light” work, but these may not map onto each other in a predictable way.

We argue that there is now, more than ever, a place for the classically-constructed detailed observation-based studies of the workplace in which the tight constraints of technology and time permit a strong framing in which areas of control and conflict can be identified by the methods of thick description (Geertz, 1973). Given the fact that many such arenas of work are fast disappearing from the industrial and occupational landscape we argue that there is still a place for the autobiographical and memoir approach. Indeed it is hard to see what better sources of information about these vanishing locales can exist.

Workflow, Gender, Clean and dirty work, light and heavy-work and wet and dry-work in a Commercial Laundry

Laundry work is one of the oldest professions and the social organisation of the laundry in a particular epoch deserves its ethnography. Laundry work is a very public aspect of the contemporary Indian city for example and visitors to Mumbai are encouraged to view the open-air activities of the dhobi-wallahs, whose social role and craft is handed down in specific families inter-generationally. In the UK large commercial laundries are less visible in the Twenty-First century since it became common from the late 1950s onwards for most domestic homes to have equipment for washing, drying and ironing.

Washing other peoples' clothes has always been an "underclass" job and its growth and industrialisation follows the patterns formed by the characteristic growth of urbanisation and of urban settlement and migrations to the towns through the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries. Laundries became a prominent feature of the late nineteenth century urban built environment in Europe and North America and Hall notes that air pollution from the urban laundries was seen as a nuisance comparable with if not always on the same scale as that from urban factories (Hall, 2002). Hall further and intriguingly identifies the need to control the spread of Chinese laundries in burgeoning Californian cities, first in Modesto and then in San Francisco as having been an important spur to the town planning movement (Hall, 2002, p 60.) The Economist moreover concludes that the steam laundry was a "society-shaping institution" (The Economist, 2003, Vol 367).

Ball and Sunderland document the transition from the largely hand laundries of the earlier Victorian period to the mechanised stream-powered laundries of the twentieth century, noting however that most of these establishments were relatively small in scale with on average under forty employees though they tended to be concentrated in certain sectors of large towns for example the "soap suds island" of Kensal Green and the "laundry land" of Notting Dale (Ball and Sunderland, 2001, p 324). These businesses tended to deal mainly with laundry from large institutions such as hospitals and of course factories, offices and retail establishments with collective arrangements for laundering work wear and uniforms but some concentrated on the domestic market and others had a mixed business model, like the one described here.

In the mid Fifties, I had the opportunity to work in a laundry during a summer vacation in the town in which I lived. It was a branch of a large company that had its business throughout the North of England and the business model was quite characteristic of such enterprises. There was an adventitious element in this choice of a holiday job because I had got to know the manager as a fellow congregant at the Baptist Chapel that I attended five times every Sunday. Indeed he had been my sponsor when I had become confirmed as a believer in the Baptist faith by total immersion: he was a good man and my grandmother felt that I should be safe under his wise supervision. Eheu Fugaces!

It was the first time that I had worked in a quasi-factory environment and the experience was striking but at that time of course at that stage in my life, I had no formal experience or training for ethnographic research nor probably any idea that such a metier existed. This paper then is based on recalled memory and thus suffers from serious methodological weakness and it is presented with the usual apologies and caveats. But there may be interest in it, in part because having looked seriously for more authentic literature to benchmark my memory against, I have found very little.

The business model of such a laundry is fairly straightforward. Dirty clothes are collected in bundles prepared by the customers, normally of course housewives, weekly by vans that serve a different district each day. They are washed, dried, ironed and parcelled up and delivered back by the same van one week later. The town was quite small, at that time around 20,000 inhabitants and this laundry served a total area of about sixty square miles with other small towns probably amounting to around fifty thousand people therefore in all. There were some hotels, hospitals and nursing homes in the area that did not have their own specialist laundry facilities and two or three industrial premises but the main business was in the domestic market.

The van drivers delivered the bundled dirty washing to the back door of the laundry building where it was opened and labelled with a heat and water proof tag identifying it as part of the order of a specific customer. Each customer was allocated a number and each tag was colour coded. Thus each item had a specific but not a unique identification. The colour code changed during the course of a day roughly each hour to accord with a “journey” which signified approximately an hour’s worth of work. But there were always likely to be balancing problems as the “journey” progresses through the laundry because not every bag of laundry will ever contain precisely the same proportions of different kinds of clothes, in terms of sheets, pillowcases, blankets, shirts, socks, underwear and so on. Every kind of laundry category requires a distinct treatment, and most items have to be washed, spun and dried with others of the same category. There are some cardinal sins of course in handling these items as they passed through the laundry and among them would be mixing coloured items with white or wools with cottons etc exactly as in a domestic washing machine situation.

The sorting room gave the appearance of disorder with dirty clothes on the floor in rough piles, but was of course highly ordered as women worked fast to open the bundles, tag each item and throw them into open drawers with others items of the same class in a floor to ceiling metal structure with different drawers for each type of item. When an appropriate amount for a notional “journey” was ready, the load was pushed through a metal flap divider secured by a hinge at the top. By this time if all has gone according to plan, there will be empty space on the other side as the previous “journey” will have been passed through into a washing machine. But if there has been any blockage or delay in the washing, spinning or drying parts of the subsequent cycle of operations, there may be still clothes in the other side and rough words will indicate displeasure. Likewise if a machine is empty, ready for a further load and there is nothing in the hopper, “get me a load” and “hurry up! Stop kallin’On” would be shouted the other way.

The sorting room therefore represents a double interface, with the outside world of the vans and drivers, and the inside world of the laundry processes. The van drivers are men and the sorters are women who thus receive their work from men and pass their work on as input to the work operations of other men, who are in charge of the wet and steamy work at the washing machines. The sorting work has its disadvantages as not all of the washing in the bags is of a comparable order of dirtiness. It is surprising to note that some dirty laundry has evidently been pre-washed to make it not unpleasant for others to handle while some is appalling in its filthiness and disdain for the sensibilities of the laundry women. Some sheets have been pissed on and worse: little hard brown turds rolling round the sorting room floor was a not uncommon hazard. For the men on the washing side, pulling clothes from the hopper is “blind” work as you have to get in it up to your elbows before you know what you

are among! In those days, fleas were more common and a few bites and some arm slapping were part of the job.

Table 1	Dirty and Clean Areas
Dirty	Clean
• Sorting	• Spinning
• Washing	• Drying
	• Folding
	• Ironing
	• Mending
	• Packing

The men's next job is loading the machine. From the start of the working day you are continuously aware of the time/loading balancing required. One journey represents a *notional* hour's work and this there should be eight journeys of each class of item in a day's work. But you have to leave one journey and no more in the hoppers so you can start the next day with an hour's worth of work. Anymore and you will create a start of the day backlog and always be behind; any less and you will have empty machine time. On a light day if you start ahead and keep up to speeds you can finish early, sometimes even half an hour early.

Table 2	Heavy and Light Areas
Heavy	Light
• Washing	• Woollens
• Spinning	• Ironing
• Sheets	• Folding
• Blankets	• Packing
• Tumbling	

There were four roughly similar machines on a similar washing cycle for general washing and one separate slower one for woollens. There were five machines and four male operators. I was one of these. The workforce at the washing station consisted of one foreman, myself plus one other boy of my age and one senior man a little older than the two boys, me and another David, and who both ran his share of the regular machines but also the specialist woollen washer.

The specialist woollen washer was the domain of Colin, who was somewhat senior by reason of longer service, but he was not the foreman. This machine was not continuously in operation because woollens were only a relatively minor part of the total work mix. But it was an older machine that had previously been in the general work flow but it was slow and operated on a rocking rather than a continuous rotation cycle. It was unpredictable and occasionally caused alarm by rocking back and forth in an unstable motion. One day it rocked right off its mountings and demolished the brick pillars on which it stood. Colin was quick to take responsibility admitting that he had "overloaded it because we had to get on". This explanation was accepted though it seemed irrelevant and possibly devious, and everyone agreed that it was an old machine and should have been retired long since. But on reflection, it could well have been a victim of old-fashioned industrial sabotage as described by Mars (2002).

Opposite each washer was a large spin dryer, driven by a belt from an overhead spindle that rolled continuously during the working day. Each large spin dryer had a number of internal divisions normally four though one spinner had three and was thus difficult to balance. The clothes go into the spinner fully wet and come out dry enough for the next stage of the process.

The balancing had to be done evenly and care was needed to get the weight distribution as accurate as possible. A bad distribution can cause severe problems of oscillation, in the worst case this can throw off the belt and this is very dangerous, because a flying belt can cut a person's head off and all processes have to be stopped, the work area cleared and the engineer has to reattach the belt. This causes great dislocation and everybody hates the person whose incompetent work has caused this massive inconvenience. Everybody goes home late. Even worse, and I only saw this happen once, the oscillation can directly affect the spinner and break it off its mountings. A large metal tub hurtling across the floor will definitely kill or maim anybody in its way. The routine dangers were less terrifying though still not pleasant: you can be scalded by hot water or suds and you can be burned with bleach or can get hands caught in moving parts.

The pace is pretty relentless but times had to be kept up because at 12:00 precisely the laundry hooter will go and the power should go off soon because you will be expected to be ready to restart at 13:00. If you have a load still spinning, it is your own time you are using.

After the spinning phase the semi dry clothes are separated and the big items, sheets and pillow cases go to the Calendar. This is a big machine set right in the middle of the working area, staffed by women who feed the sheets through a large heated roller. If the sheets are still too wet they may have to go through more than once and the women will give negative feedback to the man who has taken the sheets out of his spinner too soon. This interface gives opportunity for verbal embellishment usually of a sexual nature. Typical comments include "You've pulled it out too soon!", "Your thing's still wet.....look it's dripping over t' floor" "Oh, he allus does that, but he'll learn", "Aah'll learn 'im fast enough!"

Table 3	Male and Female Areas
Male	Female
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Washing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sorting
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spinning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sheets in Calender
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drying • Tumbling • Woollens • Blankets washing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ironing
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Folding
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blankets drying
	Packing

Other clothes that have to be finished dryer than for the calendar go to the tumblers. This was a bank of one horizontal tumbler dryer and two upright ones. Usually you keep one upright tumbler for shirts that only need a quick tumble to get them ironing dry and they are then passed to the ironing tables. The tumbler operator was an older man who was on most days very much better before lunch but good at all times for repartee, again usually with an implicit sexual dimension. After I had been working at the laundry for a month, the tumbler operator injured himself in an unnecessary accident of a rather unpleasant type. The tumbling process creates a good deal of fluff from the drying clothes and this tends to get caught up the back of the tumbler dryer. The appropriate way to clear this is to stop the tumbler completely, then rotate it slowly by one hand while scraping the fluff off with the

other. If the tumbler is still under power, and only partially stopped it will drive up to full operating speed unexpectedly and has the potential to severely scrape the arm and remove at least skin.

As this incident occurred after lunch and Jim had clearly been imbibing incautiously (“nobbut a couple of pints” he explained), he was suspended from all duties before being sent to the hospital. But he would obviously be off work for a while so I was rapidly promoted on the spot to tumbler operations, having been severely warned not to put my arm up the back. I did not need the warning: I had seen the incident and helped Jim to the ambulance. He was despite his afternoon jocularity not an especially popular colleague because his weakness for the electric soup made him unreliable and unpredictable and not merely a danger to himself, so the general opinion was that “he had it coming” and “it’s a bad day for him but he’s been found out, daft bugger”.

This promotion signalled a subtle change in status because as the tumbler man I was not only in charge of my own bank of machines, but I was also put into a new kind of role, that of interfacing between the male and female arenas of the laundry. This was immediately seized on both by my former group-mates on the washers and spinners but also by the females with whom I was now in more direct contact as I had to deliver my dried or semi-dried part-finished work as inputs to their finishing processes of folding, ironing, mending if necessary, and finally if any tags had come off, as they intermittently did, to the sorting table where untagged items were reconciled with their other halves in the case of socks and to the customer package of which they were a part. This position was a gateway to the female side of the arena and thus this role had sexual implications. I knew one or two of the younger women and the expert opinion of the men on the washers was that these were “fit birds”.

Behind and adjacent to the tumblers but with direct access to the female side was the Blanket Room where big slow drying items like blankets were hung on lines. It was dark, steamy and warm. I had of course been in it before to hang up cotton blankets that had come from my machines. But I was pleasantly surprised when one of the older women advised at the start of the lunch break that “someone wants to talk to you”. When I asked “who?” and “where?” I was told “you’ll find out in t’ blanket room”. I did, and (as Baedeker would advise) discovered that the experience “vaut bien le detour”.

The women at the ironing tables were of higher social status than the women on the Calendar who were universally regarded as a “rough bunch”. They had to be sturdy because this is heavy work. Many worked in curlers, covered by a scarf, whereas the ironers and still more so the folders, packers and menders dressed their hair more neatly and appeared more conventionally feminine.

There are some areas of interface therefore where work is passed between males and females but no areas where both genders work on shared tasks.

Table 4 Interface areas	
• Van-Sorting	• M-F
• Sorting to Washing	• F-M
• Washing to Spinning	• M-M
• Spinning to Tumbling	• M-M
• Spinning to Calender	• M-F
• Tumbling to Ironing	• M-F
• Ironing to Packing	• F-F

• Folding to Packing	• F-F
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Instead there are Zones of Control dominated by one gender.

Table 5	Zones of Control
• Sorting	• Women Only
• Wool Wash	• Men Only
• All Washing and Spinning	• Men Only
• Calender	• Women Only
• Ironing and Folding	• Women Only
• Canteen	• Notionally mixed but actually usually dominated by Women
• Blanket Room	• Aha!

But beyond the partition wall that separated the laundry from the office and ultimately the front desk where customers could pick up their finished, packaged washing if they needed to recover it before the weekly van delivery was a different world, where the clerical, accounting and management offices were located. Although my introduction to the laundry had come from the manager, who I knew on social terms through Chapel, he never once came through the working areas of the laundry while I was working there. On my last day, after I had drawn my last pay packet from the wooden tray which the wages clerk brought into the laundry on Friday morning, I was told that Mr X wanted to see me, “as you leave.”

So at five o’clock I went for a ritual and slightly embarrassed handshake and the pronouncement that I had “done very well”: even then, I wondered how he could possibly have known this. It is hard now to recount the intense dimension of class and status differentiation that existed in that era in practically every place of work.

Discussion

Working environments like the laundry are worth studying because social processes are observed in a direct and constrained environment. The classic accounts of industrial work such as Roy (1959) and Bensman and Gerver (1963) and the role of discourse and humour in work rate controls and the studies of workplace deviance reported by Mars (2006) have been widely reported and cited in the literature as typical of industrial work-places and factory environments but have not much focussed on laundries as research loci. But we can use these frames to understand the organisation and flow of work in a conventional commercial laundry in which for a variety of reasons the fundamental technologies have remained relatively stable over a considerable time period and in which perhaps as a consequence, the research site has appeared remarkably unattractive to ethnographers. In fact we may know from the literature more about the Chinese laundry than about the regular commercial laundry (Yang, 1999) possibly because of the apparently exotic nature and culturally-comic implications of the research locus.

Laundry work is not usually portrayed as especially risky in comparison with other types of factory work, but this under-represents the actually physical dangers that exist in this milieu. In fact there are some quite risky types of work in the commercial laundry but the risks are of differing types and significance. There is endemic exposure of the skin to one type or another

of irritation in all of the wet areas. In India this skin irritation syndrome is known as “dhobi-wallah’s itch” and dhobi-wallah’s are respected as a specific caste in some parts of India..

Table 6	Zones and Types of Risks
Most Areas	Slipping, falling, exposure to heat, electricity and exposed machinery
Wet Areas	Dhobi-Wallah itch
Sorting	Bugs, Fleas, Shit, Vomit
Washing	Scalding, Bleach Burns, Trapped fingers
Spinning	Drum rupture, Broken/Disrupted drive belt
Tumbling	Burns, Finger/Limb removal
Dropping bay and Front of Building	Vans in Movement

The organisation of work and in particular the distinction between the areas in which male and female workers predominate and brings out the social controls on behaviour and the front-stage and backstage opportunities for contravening these technological and behavioural constraints. In particular the blanket room incident (incidents actually because there was more than one) may illustrate the way in which the role of the “stranger” who becomes the “newcomer” permits a systematic testing of moral boundaries in a tightly organised social structure or may simply provide evidence about the use of backstage areas for sexual purposes by mutual tolerance.

The work-flow is divided between a number of bipolar regions in terms of distinctions between “Male-Female”, “Wet-Dry”, “Heavy-Light”, “Team-Group” and “Loose-Tight”. There is an overall hierarchy but in general the closer distinctions are most significant. While areas of men’s and women’s work are strictly defined they do not follow the obvious patterns of heavy or light work or clean and dirty or wet and dry. The governing controls are based on the temporal rhythms of the work-flow, which, although it is based on a notional amount of work to be done in an hour’s approximate duration, is still variable according to the unpredictable volumes of work arriving through the door.

Much of the heavy work was in fact done by females on the Calender and much of the dirty work of initial sorting was also female. Females and males nowhere worked together on the same type of task, except perhaps in the office, but there were no female managers.



Figure 1 The Calender

Much of the male work, while also heavy and wet in fact involved opportunities for quite fine operations of judgement about timing and pacing that directly affected the opportunities for others down the line to control or be controlled by the work flow. Much of the work flow conformed quite well to that identified by Baldamus as offering opportunities for “traction” though the inherent variability in the items and their balancing through the processes meant that actually “tedium” was unusual (Baldamus, 1961). As David T, my oppo on the next washer observed “it’s all right here, there’s allus summat comin’ off. It’s not allus t’ same bloody thing”.

In the laundry there is an implicit timing process symbolized by the notional mapping of a “journey” onto approximately an hour’s worth of work, but this mapping has to be flexible because there is in fact considerable variability in the actual mix of work and therefore many opportunities to exercise local control and judgement, that has implications for others further down the workflow. Judgement calls on mix, timing and effort have to be made on more than one dimension as while the machines do work to a determinate cycle, the settings and the start and finish times may be more loosely defined and there is scope for operator-induced variability.

Accidents offer another lens to examine the operation of social processes. It is possible to start to empty a spinner while it is still spinning by knocking off the safety bar that lies across the top of the spinner, while the loaded drum is still rotating quite fast. But do this too soon, with an unevenly packed load and you could lose a leg. And as Jim, the not always fit for purpose tumbler operator found, however many times you have previously held back a spinning hot tumbler with one hand while getting your arm as far as your armpit up the back of the machine to de-fluff, with just one pint too many inside you, your grip doesn’t hold.

But the consequences in this case were perceived to be individual rather than collective. There have been many studies of accidents at the workplace, many of them related like Hill and Trist’s (1955) work to other demographic and behavioural variables and many like Mars (2006) to aspects of the social cultures of the workplace, but accidents are also individual events that occur to and involve the agency of individual actors, and the general judgement on Jim’s unfortunate was neither tolerant nor empathetic because it was perceived that he was a “silly bugger” and “it were his own bloody fault...he’s a bloody nuisance.”

In fact accidents can offer a serendipitous opportunity to change the allocation of workers and/or the organisation of tasks in unanticipated ways. However accidents are never completely accidental and in Jim’s case the outcome reinforced pre-existing judgements of competence and social contributiveness while that to (or “by”) Colin at the woollen washer did nothing to diminish the respect towards him from the others in the men’s work group though arguably he was just as morally and professionally culpable.

There are of course profound methodological implications of relying on personal memory in ethnographic work of this kind but I have tried to deal with these in another paper (Weir, 2011) and simply offer the description as it stands and hope that this account can be seen as useful within its obvious limitations. If there are readers who know of other ethnographic reports of laundry work, I should be very glad to be informed.

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