

## Researching the multinational corporation: contributions of critical realist ethnography

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**Researching the multinational corporation:  
contributions of critical realist ethnography**

critical perspectives on international business

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4 Multinational corporations (MNCs), have been conceptualized as venues of interlinked relations  
5 (local, national and international). Located at the cross roads of ideas, knowledge, interests and  
6 values (Van Maanan, 2011) they are places where meanings of various origins converge, mix,  
7 blend and clash (Blazejewski, 2012). They therefore provide challenging contexts and interfaces  
8 for the researcher to explore. Recent literature has argued that these challenges require a nuanced  
9 epistemological approach (Birkenshaw et al, 2011; Brannan and Doz, 2010). This **article**  
10 therefore provides a timely opportunity to consider methodology in international business  
11 research and within the context of the MNC.  
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15 The **article** draws on the example of research on the transfer of management practices within the  
16 MNC to discuss the potential of critical realist ethnographic approaches to respond to the  
17 methodological challenges faced in research within the MNC. In attempts to transfer  
18 management practices across the MNC, practices and processes can converge, mix, blend and  
19 clash often with unintended consequences. **The transfer of management practices thereby**  
20 provides a useful context to demonstrate the strengths of an ethnographic approach underpinned  
21 by a critical realist ontology, **which** encourages a focus on agents as active and reflexive, having  
22 the powers to deliberate and respond to the structures and cultural contexts in which they find  
23 themselves (Rees and Gatenby, 2014). A critical realist ethnographic approach sensitizes the  
24 researcher to consider analytical narratives in which the interplay of agency, structure and culture  
25 is examined over time and to address questions such as under what conditions and how  
26 managerial practices may be transferred, sustained, resisted and adapted across the MNC. The  
27 stratified 'depthful' ontology of critical realism encourages attention to a search for underlying  
28 causal mechanisms and contingencies that can explain the outcomes from attempts to transfer  
29 management practices within specific conditions.  
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33 In the following sections the **article** firstly introduces ethnography as a research approach in the  
34 field of international business and management. It then examines the features of critical realist  
35 ethnography and the contributions it can make to research in the MNC by drawing on the  
36 example of research on the transfer of management practices across contexts within the MNC.  
37 Finally, implications for researchers working from a critical stance are discussed.  
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### 40 **Ethnography as a research approach**

41 In the inaugural issue of the journal "Ethnography", Willis and Trondman (2000) refer to  
42 arguably the first ethnographer Herodotus who said, in possibly the first ethnography "*The*  
43 *History*" (trans. 1987, p.171). "So far it is my eyes, my judgement, and my searching that speaks  
44 these words to you", **in** this way "this-ness" and "lived- out-ness" is central to the ethnographers'  
45 account. Willis and Trondman (2000, p.5) define ethnography as... "a family of methods  
46 involving direct and sustained social contact with agents, and of richly writing up the encounter,  
47 recording, respecting and representing at least partly *in its own terms* the irreducibility of human  
48 experience. Ethnography is the disciplined and deliberate witness – cum recording of human  
49 events". As noted by Hammersley and Atkinson (1997) ethnography is in many respects the  
50 most basic form of social research. Not only does it have a long history, it also bears a close  
51 resemblance to the routine ways in which people make sense of the world in everyday life. As  
52 argued by Rosen (1991), an individual conducts ethnography because the problems that interest  
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3 him or her are believed to be best mined by the machinery of ethnography and conveyed in its  
4 product.  
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7 The roots of ethnography are often seen to lie in European cultural anthropology. Malinowski  
8 (1922) with his research on New Guinea is often cited for his writing on the method of  
9 ethnography. Early ethnographers have sometimes been described as “naive realists” who  
10 considered immediate sensory experience as enough to precisely record the truth. The Chicago  
11 School of sociology further stimulated an ethnographic approach to research in the 1920's-1930's  
12 that sought to study industrialized society “as it is”. Ethnographic studies of workplaces grew  
13 during this time (Rees and Gatenby 2014). In contrast to the Chicago School, later ethnographic  
14 studies tended to be influenced by a more phenomenological or hermeneutic ontology and an  
15 erasure of “structure” from the ethnographic imagination (Porter, 2002). Critical Realism  
16 provides a basis for re-introducing structure into the ethnographic imagination. The following  
17 sections consider the significance of this in the context of the study of the cross-border transfer  
18 of management practices within the MNC.  
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22 An underlying premise guiding much qualitative research including ethnographic research in the  
23 hermeneutic tradition is that the subject matter of the social sciences is fundamentally different to  
24 that of the natural sciences. Human action has an internal logic, which must be understood, to  
25 make action intelligible. The social world cannot be understood in terms of causal relationships  
26 that do not take account that human actions are based on actor’s interpretations of events,  
27 intentions, motives, attitudes and beliefs. Research in the social sciences is seen to require emic  
28 analysis in which the meanings and interpretations of those being studied is important rather than  
29 placing an etic external logic on the behavior. In this way the task of the social scientist is to  
30 understand the framework of meaning out of which behavior arises. The nature of the social  
31 world must be “discovered” and this can only be achieved by first hand observation and  
32 participation in “natural settings”. The researcher typically becomes an observer within the  
33 social setting being studied. Ethnography has often been described as a longitudinal research  
34 method, geared towards a “process based” understanding of organizational life. Ethnographic  
35 studies in the hermeneutic tradition consider analysis of reasons, purposes and rules as more  
36 appropriate to the study of social processes than cause, effect and law (Winch, 1958), thereby  
37 requiring a study of the culture in which these are embedded.  
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42 For Geertz (1973, p.21) ethnography is microscopic, involves thick description, it is interpretive,  
43 the ethnographer “inscribes” social discourse, writing it down. Further the essential task of  
44 theory building is not to codify abstract regularities but to make thick description possible, not to  
45 generalize across cases but to generalize within them. Classic organizational ethnographies (for  
46 example of Roy, 1952; 1955; Lupton, 1963; Burawoy, 1979 and Kamata, 1982) have  
47 demonstrated the contribution that ethnographic approaches can make in gaining insights into  
48 social processes in organizations. For example, the work of Kamata and Roy provided detailed  
49 analysis of manufacturing companies shop floor processes in specific contexts, by focusing on  
50 worker behavior within factory settings.  
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## The relevance of ethnographic approaches in researching the cross-national transfer of management practices

Within the MNC, empirical and theoretical attention has been given to examining management practices, work organization and control strategies and the nature of subsidiary headquarter relations (see for example Powell and Rhee, 2016; Kostova, Marano and Tallman, 2016; Kostova *et al.*, 2008). The vast majority of research publications in these areas still do not however draw on qualitative research methods (Doz, 2011) and more specifically on ethnographic research. Within handbooks of qualitative research methods for international business (Marschan-Piekkari and Welch, 2004) ethnographic approaches **have been** located under the section on “alternative methods and methodologies”. More recently reviews have noted that research publications based on qualitative research methods have primarily drawn on case study research and interviewing (Piekkari, Welch and Paavilainen, 2009) and that qualitative methods remain marginalised in the field of International Business and International Management (IB/IM) mirroring the broader trend towards more positivistic empirical methods in the social sciences. Similarly, recent work has sought to open-up discussions on the plurality of approaches that can be used in case study research that go beyond positivistic assumptions (Piekkari and Welch, 2011; Morais, 2011).

Much research on the MNC has been shaped by an “economic view of the world” that includes assumptions of rationality, goal- directed action and the determinant nature of market processes. It can be argued that research still tends to leave unexamined or unproblematic a huge part of the social life of multinationals. Moore (2011a) points to the need for studies to be able to explore and elucidate ambivalence in MNCs for example of conflicting practices and processes. Ambivalence still tends to be under-analyzed even in the more context and power sensitive research to date (see for example Boussebba and Morgan, 2014 for a discussion). Studies of the internal organization of the MNC today are still comparatively rare and tend to be guided by conceptualizations of the MNC that downplay informal processes that can significantly contribute to outcomes (Birkenshaw *et al.*, 2011).

The potential for ethnography to play a larger role in management studies and in the field of IB/IM research has been noted in recent discussions. (for example, by Watson, 2011; Moore, 2011a; Moore, 2011b; Westney and Van Mannen, 2011). Ethnographic studies are well suited to explore ambivalent situations (Moore, 2011a) such as the adjustment of managers and workers to new ways of working and cultures within an MNC, and to examine contradictions within social practices. Ethnographic approaches may enable access to the informal as well as the formal practices (Watson 2011). They can for example capture the process of *how* the transfer of management practices within the MNC takes place and the ways in which new work systems impact on social relations in different contexts and conditions. Ethnographic studies can examine the unintended as well as intended outcomes surrounding attempts to transfer management systems across contexts and explore the ways in which different social groups may adjust or resist new systems. Research themes which are arguably less easily researched, understood and explained using other approaches. Ethnographic studies in the hermeneutic tradition seek to provide thick descriptions of the context in which management practices are introduced and examine the ways in which different groups may make sense of and respond to the practices. In this way ethnographic approaches provide an opportunity to study and portray the diversity of

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3 cultures in an organizational context and to provide a rich appreciation of the organization as a  
4 social and political arena. Rather than seeking to identify discrete taxonomies of control systems,  
5 such approaches seek to for example examine the social relations and social processes  
6 surrounding the control systems. This can include exploration of worker's commitment and / or  
7 resistance to new systems through the researcher providing a thick description of the cultures  
8 studied.  
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11 Having discussed some of the features of the ethnographic approach and the hermeneutic  
12 tradition that has tended to inform much ethnographic research the **article** will turn to the  
13 potential of drawing on a critical realist underpinning to inform ethnographic research in IB/ IM  
14 research.  
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### 16 17 **The potential of a critical realist ethnographic approach to re-introduce structure into the** 18 **ethnographic imagination** 19

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21 Whilst ethnographic studies of MNC's in the hermeneutic tradition work with an ontology  
22 encouraging focus on agents' conceptualizations (Yagi and Kleinberg 2011), there is a relatively  
23 smaller number of studies in the field of organization studies and IB/IM premised on a critical  
24 realist ontology (for example Porter, 1993; Delbridge, 1998; Reed, 2001; Sharpe, 2006). The  
25 potential of a critical realist philosophical foundation to address methodological challenges in the  
26 IB/IM field has not been widely considered yet within conversations of philosophical  
27 assumptions informing methodological choices.  
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30 A significant differentiating feature of an ethnography with critical realist underpinnings is the  
31 premise that subjects' own accounts are the starting point but not the end of the research process.  
32 Realist ontologies therefore seek to go beyond agents' conceptualizations of events and seek to  
33 look at social structures thereby offering the potential to re-introduce structure into the  
34 ethnographic imagination. Within a realist ontology social phenomenon are seen to be a result of  
35 a plurality of structures. Human action is conceived as both enabled and constrained by social  
36 structures. This action in turn reproduces or transforms those structures (Bhaskar, 1979).  
37 Ethnographic investigations within this context can be used to explore the relationship between  
38 structure and agency. A realist approach to ethnography aims not only to describe events but  
39 also to explain them, by identifying the influence of structural factors on human agency.  
40 Explanation also focuses on how agency maintains or transforms these structures. Ethnography  
41 when located within a critical realist perspective has the potential to examine how stability and  
42 change take place within specific structural, cultural and power relations. Therefore, it  
43 potentially provides a transformational ontology and model of social action (Brown, Fleetwood  
44 and Roberts, 2002). This will now be explored with the example of research on the transfer of  
45 management practices within the MNC.  
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50 As discussed in the literature the cross-national transfer of management practices is complex.  
51 There **is** an array of possible outcomes pointing to a critical role for in-depth case studies to  
52 enable deeper exploration of processes of transfer and how practices are implemented in the  
53 routine life of the subsidiary (Ferner *et al.* 2012). It is with such a conceptual and analytical  
54 challenge that critical realist ethnographies are well suited to explore the ongoing social  
55 processes at the individual and work group level and provide a more nuanced analysis of 'actors'  
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3 at the micro level. Critical realist ethnographies offer a lens to examine the ways in which power  
4 is exercised through for example the management of meaning by different groups and the  
5 intended and unintended outcomes of practices (Boddewyn et al, 2004).  
6

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8 Further, the focus on structures as well as agents' conceptualizations encourages attention to the  
9 social, economic and political structures within which the transfer of management practices is  
10 being attempted. (Rees and Gatenby, 2014). Critical realism is helpful as a sensitizing tool and  
11 means of conceptualizing the phenomenon studied encouraging attention to the day to day micro  
12 level social relations and processes that are both impacted by changes in social structures and  
13 that may in turn change social structures.  
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16 In exploring ambivalence surrounding power relations and political processes within  
17 multinationals critical realist approaches access the micro-foundations of organizational power  
18 relations and the role of agency and micro-politics within MNC's. They can explore the  
19 unintended as well as intended outcomes of new management practices whilst working with a  
20 sensitivity to the ways in which macro and meso level structures may influence but not  
21 determine agency. (Ybema and Byun, 2009; Geppert and Dörrenbächer, 2014; Mir and Sharpe,  
22 2009)  
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25 A large amount of research on multinational organizations has used survey style research and  
26 structured questionnaires to address research questions of *what* management practices and work  
27 systems have been transferred from headquarters to subsidiaries within the multinational. Framed  
28 within positivist epistemologies and nomothetic research designs such surveys often are pitched  
29 at top management and require an acknowledgement of whether a practice has been transferred.  
30 For example, whether quality circles or teamworking has been introduced. Such analytical  
31 survey design is less suited to an understanding of *how* management practices are introduced,  
32 received, responded to, adapted, resisted or transformed in different contexts. Ethnographic  
33 approaches can provide an in-depth insight into *how* management practices translate across  
34 different social contexts and the ways in which different social groups and individuals may make  
35 sense of and respond to the practices. It can be argued that the *how* questions are of much  
36 significance for an understanding of why particular management strategies within a subsidiary  
37 may have unintended outcomes and why performance may be less than anticipated.  
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41 Adopting a critical stance to an ethnographic study the researcher will problematize current,  
42 dominant and common- sense understandings about for example the implementation of new  
43 management practices and would rather see the social world as multilayered, complex and  
44 marked with ambiguous contours (Houston, 2010).  
45

#### 46 47 **How critical realist ethnography responds to methodological challenges in researching the** 48 **MNC** 49

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51 The following section discusses how critical realist ethnographic research can respond to four  
52 central methodological challenges faced in researching the MNC. These include firstly  
53 researching structures and processes (Edwards et al., 2013), secondly developing explanations  
54 and understanding the role of agency (Reed, 2001), thirdly dealing with the issue of  
55 representation and the role of the researcher (Wray-Bliss, 2002) and fourthly responding to the  
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3 challenges of linking the local to the global (Burawoy, 2001). For the critical realist ethnographer  
4 of the MNC these challenges are responded to through the 'depthful' ontology of an ethnography  
5 informed by critical realism. This provides a conceptualization of the multinational embedded in  
6 its wider context. It provides a basis for firstly examining the relations between local, national  
7 and supranational structures and the micro-level processes within the subsidiaries, secondly, for  
8 seeking explanatory analysis of how social structures can condition action and thirdly for  
9 research on how actors' experience and challenge structures in specific conditions and contexts  
10 and with what outcomes.  
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### 14 *Researching structures and processes*

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17 Research, on the transfer of management practices within multinationals, (Edwards *et al*, 2013;  
18 Fichter *et al*, 2011; Sharpe, 2006), notes how organizations adopting similar structures may have  
19 different outcomes. The implication of this for the researcher is that the researcher is encouraged  
20 to study and understand process as well as context. Comparative critical realist ethnographic case  
21 studies are well suited to examine how managerial control systems are introduced and adapted  
22 and with what outcomes in different contexts. **This article** will draw on my own research on this  
23 topic as an example to discuss methodological issues raised. I aimed to look at the  
24 implementation of management practices as ongoing social processes, moving from analysis  
25 solely of structures to an analysis of processes within and across structures. This is important in  
26 addressing the theoretical question of “*under what conditions*” and “*how*” managerial practices  
27 may be transferred, sustained, resisted and adapted within the context of the MNC.  
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31 Researching from a critical standpoint the focus on process sensitised me to view the  
32 organization as a political arena in which social interaction, power and political games become  
33 more central in the analysis and understanding of organizational life (Karreman and Alvesson,  
34 2009; Fichter *et al.*, 2011; Geppert and Dörrenbächer, 2014; Dörrenbächer and Gammelgaard,  
35 2011). Social processes may be shaped by the wider institutional context (Morgan and  
36 Kristensen, 2006; Schneider and Soskice, 2009) but not determined by them, as argued also by  
37 researchers working within an actor centered institutional perspective (example Scharpf 1997)  
38 drawing on a relational perspective seeing actors and institutions as mutually constitutive. **In**  
39 **my own research within MNC's, critical realist ethnography was seen to be well suited to**  
40 **empirically explore the nature of internal micro-political processes and active agency.** These  
41 ongoing micro-level social processes within specific micro level contexts were also interrelated  
42 to meso level (i.e. subsidiary, headquarters) and macro level (societal and transnational  
43 institutional) influences that were explored in the research. As noted by Ferner *et al.* (2012) a  
44 multinational's micro-institutions are full of ambiguities, complexities and inconsistencies.  
45 These can be unpacked and explored with ethnographic approaches of how subsidiary actors  
46 interpret, challenge and counter- interpret management practices that are attempting to be  
47 transferred. This is captured in the following extract from field notes I took during the study of  
48 the transfer of management practices within a Japanese multinational to the UK subsidiary  
49 operations. I became a participant observer in the UK subsidiary operations for around fifteen  
50 months - working as a shop floor worker across different departments, work groups and factory  
51 sites enabling a comparative study of how workers responded in different contexts and in  
52 different social and technological conditions. The extract provides an insight into workers'  
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3 experiences of transitioning boundaries between old and new ways of working in the factory.  
4 Such rich descriptions by the workers are a starting point for the critical realist but not the end-  
5 point of the ethnographic study. These are examined in relation to changes in underlying  
6 structures, contexts and contingencies.  
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8  
9 (extract from field notes: 'Aluminium' department)

10 Daisy: *I've been all over I have. I was in the new section before (new extension built following*  
11 *the Japanese purchase where the shop floor social systems/ work practices from the parent*  
12 *company were being attempted to be transferred alongside the transfer of technology) It's better*  
13 *in there than in here. A better atmosphere. They are really strict in there. Always pushing for*  
14 *more output. I mean it's not that the people in there are not friendly, it's just that there is*  
15 *pressure all the time to work that you have no time to talk. People are too concerned about*  
16 *getting the work out. In the breaks you are not allowed to have a few minutes over- it's not like in*  
17 *here. You sit with your supervisor and so you can't. I mean it shouldn't be like that these days. I*  
18 *mean today. It is cleaner in there and there isn't the smell, but I prefer being in here. They want*  
19 *quality and output in there. They pushed me to get the output and then were criticizing me*  
20 *because I had made some faults. You can't have it all ways.*

21 Paul- *In there you are just an extension of a machine.*

22 Zed- *Ten years ago people wouldn't stand for what we put up with in here. But times have*  
23 *changed. It's the economy – its bad now. People can't find work elsewhere so they put up with all*  
24 *this here. The managers giving all their shit. You know there is a pyramid. This is the class*  
25 *system. There are a few at the top that give all the orders and a lot at the bottom that have to*  
26 *follow. You know this Japanese system it says more decisions by the workers, the managers to be*  
27 *more democratic. But this is not working here. We have a bottle neck with the teamleader. The*  
28 *English managers go around telling everybody what to do and it is left to the teamleaders to run*  
29 *things.*

30 Author: *Has it changed much in Aluminium since you started working here? (Aluminium is a*  
31 *department in the older established part of the factory that existed prior to the Japanese*  
32 *purchase).*

33 Bob: *Oh Yes. It used to be a real dirty place to work. There was rubbish everywhere. People*  
34 *would just throw things in the direction of the bin and leave them on the floor. You would put*  
35 *your hand down a tube and find chewing gum, tea bags, food, anything. It was terrible. You*  
36 *would be working in oil everywhere on the floor. On the night shift there was a man that just*  
37 *made scrap all night. We would have to take the things to pieces on our shift. There used to be*  
38 *units stacked all down this side of the factory- going nowhere. There were millions of pounds of*  
39 *units just standing on tables around.*

40 Author: *So what happened.*

41 Bob: *Well it was the Japanese. They changed everything. They gave the managers in here about*  
42 *three months to tidy the place up. After that time the English managers thought it was really tidy*  
43 *but the Japanese thought it was still a mess. The Japanese used to come in at weekends and put*  
44 *white lines down on the floor.*

45 Author: *So is it better now?*

46 Bob: *Its much stricter now.*

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54 The intensity of the work and the transition workers were experiencing was frequently talked  
55 about by the workers on the shop floor.  
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(extract from field notes Aluminium department)..

*Author: Who is that?*

*Brenda: It's the time and motion man*

*Author: What does he do then?*

*Brenda: He stands with a stop watch timing you*

*Author: Do you go slow then?*

*Brenda: You try to, but they know if you are going slow, they can tell. They stand over you for an hour.*

*Author: And then do they change the times? Does it get faster?*

*Brenda: It can go faster or slower, but it always goes faster.*

As discussed earlier, several methodological issues are faced in research on the MNC, including the relation between structures and processes- the connection between the micro level and the macro level. Neo-institutional research approaches have been giving increased attention to a more situated, actor-centred stance (Jackson, 2010) that is prompting empirical inquiry into how embedded actors respond to institutional complexity and the interplay between actors and institutions rather than seeing institutions merely as constraints that largely determine actor behaviour. Critical realism is seen to be helpful as a sensitizing tool and means of conceptualizing the phenomenon studied through a depthful ontology. In this way “process” is seen as being influenced by structures but not determined by them. Within a critical realist layered ontology (Delbridge and Edwards, 2013) social structures serve as “generative mechanisms” that give rise to action, manifest not in the form of deterministic outcomes, but rather as empirical tendencies. Observed empirical associations and the actions of agents can only be understood by reference to these underlying generative mechanisms which can account for and contextualize the discourses of specific agents being investigated (Rees and Gatenby, 2014). Further, actors do not experience structures uniformly, rather they have different perceptions and depth of knowledge of their contexts. From a critical realist perspective social structures reveal 'a prior distribution of interests vested in social positions which antedate their holders' (Archer, 1995, p.130).

This can be considered through reflection on the above example of the study of the transfer of management practices within a multinational. In critical realist ethnography the rich descriptions by the workers given above are supplemented by examination of the underlying structures and mechanisms. In the above example the research sought to examine the importance of context and contingencies in influencing the implementation and evolution of shop floor managerial control systems across two sites of a Japanese subsidiary in the UK. The research began with an awareness of the “ideal typical” Japanese and English work organization and control systems and how these were embedded in broader social and institutional arrangements. The research was interested in examining the following areas. Firstly, the various means of managerial control on the shop floor within the UK subsidiaries of the Japanese multinational, including formal and informal, social and technical. Secondly in addressing process as well as structure and connections between the two the research also wanted to learn *how* the control systems were sustained, adapted and resisted in the local context over time. Thirdly the implications of these processes for the outcomes, including the experience of work and organizational performance.

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4 Such research questions therefore required micro level and macro level analysis and a link  
5 between the two in studying cross border interactions within the firm (Edwards *et al.*, 2013).  
6 The research questions were also put forward from the standpoint that the study of the  
7 experience of changes in organizations and institutional contexts at the level of the “individual”  
8 are important both for theorizing about change and for developing policy implications on change.  
9 The specific research questions were addressed by adopting critical realist ethnography, which  
10 enabled the micro level study of processes to be linked to underlying structures, generative  
11 mechanisms and contingencies influencing outcomes.  
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15 Porter (1993, p.596) outlines how: ‘exclusive concentration on and uncritical acceptance of  
16 subjects’ own accounts is the Achilles heel of phenomenological ethnography. Understanding  
17 actors’ viewpoints may be a necessary condition for social knowledge, but it is not a sufficient  
18 one. For critical realists the ontological assumption that individual interactions and  
19 interpretations are ultimately all there are leads to analytical superficiality. A realist ontology  
20 considers social reality as the result of a plurality of structures with human action being both  
21 enabled and constrained by social structures. This action in turn reproduces or transforms those  
22 structures (Bhaskar, 1979; Morais, 2011). A realist framework thereby provides a sensitizing tool  
23 and means of conceptualizing how the actors’ experience within the transnational social space  
24 can best be examined by a macro regress to the social structures shaping and constraining  
25 individual action. Using ethnographic approaches, analysis can be developed away from over-  
26 socialized conceptions of actors to empirical studies of the interests and identities of individuals  
27 and the analysis of the ways in which collective action within and between groups and subgroups  
28 is constructed, sustained and resisted (Geppert and Dörrenbächer, 2014; Morgan and Kristensen,  
29 2006). This is particularly interesting in the case of research on the cross -border transfer of  
30 management practices given the comparative institutional contexts across which the MNC  
31 operates which provide a context for action. During attempts to transfer new management  
32 practices the contextually embedded practices within subsidiaries may be challenged. The  
33 stratified ontology of critical realism guides the researcher to study the duality of structure and  
34 agency looking for the underlying structures and mechanisms that may be operating in specific  
35 conditions and how actors engage with these.  
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40 In my example given above the Japanese company in response to the challenges it faced in  
41 transferring management practices into a brown field site and managing changes in work  
42 practices on the shop floor, followed an alternative approach of opening on a Greenfield site  
43 where it arguably could mitigate the influence of prior ways of doing things and recruit workers  
44 who had no prior experience of working within the traditional UK shop floor context. However,  
45 whilst this enabled some practices to be transferred with less resistance- such as the introduction  
46 of associate meetings to replace the traditional practice of trade union representation within the  
47 subsidiary the research adopting a critical realist ethnographic approach was able to highlight  
48 how workers responded to new structures and with what outcomes. Whilst the ethnographic  
49 narratives of workers such as Daisy help capture how workers experienced the transfer of  
50 management practices the placement of these within the critical realist underlying analysis of  
51 structures enables an explanation of how workers resisted control systems in different macro -  
52 institutional and meso socio-technical conditions on the shop floor. This is illustrated firstly in  
53 table 1 which shows a comparative analysis of the outcomes from technical controls across  
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3 different sections of the greenfield and brownfield site researched. For example, Daisy and her  
4 colleagues in Aluminium actively engaged in peer pressure to not rate bust on the shop floor.  
5 They stockpiled and fiddled output reports as a routine practice. Such individual acts of  
6 resistance were possible within the specific socio-technical system that Daisy was working in. In  
7 contrast at the Greenfield site studied on the Heater line which was an assembly line context the  
8 specific combination of social and technical controls within that context led to different forms of  
9 resistance taking place such as for example the strategic use of “andons” by the workers to  
10 protect friends and expose others.  
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14 *Explanation and the role of agency in maintaining and transforming structures.*

15 A realist ethnography aims therefore not only to describe events but also to explain them, by  
16 identifying the influence of structural factors on human agency. Explanation also focuses on how  
17 agency maintains or transforms these structures. Drawing on critical realism the researcher can  
18 examine changes in institutional structures and the relationship between structures and agency in  
19 processes of change. Ethnographic investigation can explore the changing nature of generative  
20 mechanisms that impact on the transnational social space of the multinational. Critical realist  
21 ethnographies are thereby sensitive to the ways in which agency can potentially seek  
22 emancipatory change in structures. Social structures serve as generative mechanisms that give  
23 rise to action, manifest not in the form of deterministic outcomes but as Delbridge and Edwards  
24 (2013) note, empirical tendencies. Human actors do not create structures from nothing, they  
25 reproduce or transform them. The stratified ontology of critical realism encourages researchers to  
26 examine *how* social structure conditions action and how actors may in turn transpose and  
27 challenge institutional logics, scripts, rules and norms in specific contexts. Therefore, critical  
28 realism provides a stratified and potentially transformational ontology (Brown, Fleetwood and  
29 Roberts, 2002).  
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33 In the research work outlined above the critical realist underpinnings allowed for the recognition  
34 of the role of structure and human agency in the analysis of shop floor practices under changing  
35 forms of managerial control. The ‘structures’ referred to in the realist analysis can be considered  
36 as sets of internally related objects or practices. The manager, trainer, associate “internal  
37 relations” in the Japanese work organization form a social structure for example. Even though  
38 social structures exist only where people reproduce them, Sayer (1992, 2000) outlines how in the  
39 case of internally related objects (for example team leader and team member), emergent powers  
40 are created because this type of combination of individuals modifies their powers in fundamental  
41 ways. Thus, although social structures exist only where people reproduce them, they have  
42 powers irreducible to those of individuals. In this way, explanation of the actions of individuals  
43 in my comparative study of managerial control systems required supplementing of agents’  
44 conceptualizations with a “macro-regress” to the social structures in which they are located. In  
45 examining the transfer of management practices within the multinational a contrastive  
46 explanatory approach can build on a critical realist ontology to examine how causal mechanisms,  
47 structures and contingencies operate in different cases such as the subsidiaries of the MNC  
48 following attempts to transfer management practices.  
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52 In this way critical realist ethnography provides a means of examining and theorizing about the  
53 connections between micro-practices and macro-structures. Realists note that research in the  
54 social world must acknowledge the nature of social systems as open systems, and that theory  
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development cannot be approached in the same way as in closed systems. (Sayer, 1992; Layder, 1993). For realists, the impossibility of constructing the conditions of closure in the social sciences means that the social sciences are primarily *explanatory* and not predictive. Explanation and prediction are symmetrical only under conditions of closure. For the critical realist ethnographer, the intellectual journey in the field moves on two tracks (Tsoukas, 1989). On the first hand it is “up in the clouds”, dealing with abstract and theoretical conceptualization of the issue at hand. By contrast, the second track is “down to earth” looking for the specific differences within and across cases, investigating the existing contingencies and their interaction with the postulated mechanisms within a depthful ontology. In the example of my own research described earlier, I was examining how the managerial control systems were introduced, experienced and with what consequences across different work environments including different institutional contexts and technological/ social contexts. Empirically, ideographic studies help elucidate the specific, contingent manner, in which a certain mix of causal powers has been formed and activated. In my own research the critical realist ethnographic approach enabled a study of how resistance to new control systems played out in different contexts and conditions as demonstrated in table 2.

#### *Representation of and relations with those we research.*

As ethnographers seek to delve into and share with the reader of the ethnographic text the nitty gritty of social life, there is considerable debate over the ways in which representation is made in the text (for example Abu-Lughod, 2000). The “nitty gritty” of everyday life cannot be presented as raw unmediated data argues Willis and Trondman (2000), this is the empiricist fallacy- that data in some way speaks for itself. The principle of reflexivity recognizes that texts, do not, simply and transparently report an independent order of reality. Rather the texts themselves are implicated in the work of reality construction. In this way the ethnographic text requires a reflexive awareness of its own writing, the possibilities and limits of its own language and a principled exploration of its’ modes of representation.

Burawoy *et al.* (1991) note that the purpose of fieldwork is not to strip ourselves of our biases, for that is an illusory goal, nor to celebrate these biases as the authorial voice of the ethnographer, but, rather to discover and perhaps change our biases through interaction with others. In this way an “I-You” relation between observers and participants replaces a “we” relation of false togetherness and an “I- they” relation in which the “I” often becomes invisible. A similar argument is made by Wray -Bliss (2002) in a discussion of reflexivity of the researcher in interpretive research and by Michailova *et al.* (2014) in their discussion of the process of exit from fieldwork and the ensuing writing process. Wray Bliss (2002) highlights the power - infused relations of the researcher with those researched and points attention to the need for a critical interpretive stance to give “voice” to those being researched, enabling alternative voices to be heard in the text rather than assuming an interpretive omnipotence. From a critical standpoint analytical concepts from postcolonial analysis can sensitize the researcher and writer to the issues of power relations between researcher and researched and can be drawn upon in a critical realist analysis. In examining interpretive practices, Wray Bliss (2002, p.3) sensitizes the researcher to the dangers of “appropriation” in which citing Opie (1992, p.56) “the experiences of the “colonized” are interpreted by a (more) dominant group to sustain a particular representation or view of the ‘Other’ as part of an ideological stance”. For example, in representing “the Other”, one strategy to avoid such concerns is to provide the opportunity for



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3 those being researched to write their own texts or contribute to shaping the texts produced by the  
4 ethnographer, reading through drafts and giving voice to their own interpretations of events.  
5 Such a relational approach can be seen to “break the silence about exiting fieldwork”  
6 (Michailova et al., 2014) with reflexivity around the process of exit, separation and distancing  
7 with those being researched in the writing of texts.  
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10 Analytical concepts from postcolonial theory can also enrich the analysis of ethnographic studies  
11 of the transfer of management practices and control systems within organizations by sensitizing  
12 the analysis of control “systems” to the dynamics and processes of domination and resistance  
13 within and across the fields of the multinational, and the “hegemony” of one group over another  
14 within the transnational space of the multinational. For example, drawing on postcolonial  
15 analytical concepts in my own research encouraged attention to the discursive processes by  
16 which headquarter-subsidary relations were played out through the expatriate managers and  
17 subsidiary employees. It encouraged attention to the ways in which the subsidiary was “readied”  
18 for the transfer of management practices and the ways in which various constituents of the  
19 subsidiary hybridized, transformed and indigenized demands from the headquarters to create a  
20 space for local agency. It also encouraged attention to the ways in which processes of  
21 ambivalence to headquarter control played out in day-to-day resistance, and to the contested  
22 terrain in which the internationalizing organization operates as argued for example by Prasad  
23 (2012), Westwood and Jack (2007), and Boussebaa and Morgan (2014).  
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27 Within the transnational social space of the multinational, headquarter processes of control over  
28 the subsidiary may be conceptually compared with the deep ambivalence of colonial discourse.  
29 As Bhabha (1994) notes and as further examined in the work of Becker-Ritterspach and  
30 Raaijman (2013), what characterizes colonial discourse is not monolithic homogeneity, but  
31 heterogeneity, fragmentation, contradictions, inconsistencies and incongruities. Consequently,  
32 colonial discourse fails to establish hegemonic control and opens spaces for resistance in the  
33 oppositional space on the part of the colonized. In my own research discussed above a  
34 postcolonial reading sensitized analysis to the discursive processes by which the headquarters  
35 sought to persuade local managers and workers to adopt new control systems and work practices.  
36 The ethnographic study within work teams highlighted the ways in which the team leader was  
37 placed between the shop floor and the expatriate managers in the “demand for narrative” by  
38 which the managers sought to ascertain the extent to which new values had been adopted. From  
39 the shop floor it was clear that whilst the team leader may engage in acts of sly civility and  
40 evasions (Bhabha, 1994) to the demand for narrative, the team workers acts of resistance took on  
41 a more direct and active form of confrontation. The team meetings provided an interesting event  
42 in which to examine “hybridity”, the process of cultural “translation” in which messages from  
43 the expatriates are translated by local managers and fed down by the team leader to the shop  
44 floor. The role of the expatriate manager in “readying” the subsidiary for the transfer of  
45 management practices could be seen. Processes of “ambivalence” to headquarters hegemonic  
46 control, played out in the day-to-day social relations within the transnational social space. In this  
47 way ethnographic approaches are well suited to examine “hybridity”. A postcolonial lens in the  
48 critical ethnography can encourage attention to the ways in which race, gender, class and  
49 ethnicities, shape both identities of self and the experience of work within the MNC.  
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### *Linking the local to the global within a critical realist framework*

Burawoy (2000) reflects on the challenge of how ethnography can be “global” and how it can be anything more than micro and a-historical. How can the study of everyday life grasp lofty processes that transcend national boundaries? As Burawoy argues global ethnographers cannot be outside the global processes they study. Global ethnographers must rethink the meaning of fieldwork, from being bound to a single place and time. As noted by Burawoy (2000, p. 4) “even when our participants (ethnographers) do not themselves stretch across the globe, and it was only the participants imaginations that connected them to the global, our ethnography was no less multi-sited... *we sought to understand the incessant movement of our subjects*”. As noted by Yagi and Kleinberg (2011) the complexity of global organizations highlights the ability of members to span diverse boundaries. Ethnographic approaches are well equipped to explore the nature of these boundaries and the ways these are constructed, contested and responded to. A critical ethnography can be sensitized to the ways in which boundary construction and boundary spanning are themselves political processes.

Global forces of change within and across institutional contexts become part of the research study in examining the link between micro-level experiences and practices and macro level contexts. In a study of Japanese and Korean expatriate managers as members of transnational communities (Author xxx) the expatriate managers provided a window into the complex set of social relationships that existed between head office and subsidiary and the characteristics of this transnational social space where the interplay of rival groups within the firm took place. The groups in turn drew on resources embedded in local, national and supranational institutional contexts such as capital, skills and knowledge, networks, access to scarce resources and political influence (Morgan 2001). In depth interviews with expatriates provided insights into the meaning of the expatriate assignment for them and the ways in which they perceived themselves as part of social structures that cut across the boundaries of the firm and nation.

For Burawoy (2001, p. 148) global ethnography speaks first and foremost to those left behind on the ground. There is a commitment to showing that time –space compression or time-space distanciation are not universal as the cosmopolites would claim. It shows globalization to be a very uneven process, and most important an artifact manufactured and received in the local. Globalization is produced and consumed not in thin air... but in real organizations, institutions and communities. From this point of view the global becomes ethnographic (Burawoy, 2001, p. 149). Firstly, through its experience, reception or consumption. Here one studies the *experience of “globalization”*, to insist that the effects of “globalization” are not homogeneous and ubiquitous but specific and concrete. Secondly from the standpoint of its production, “globalization” can be researched through the way it is constituted in the local, in specific institutions, agencies and organizations such as MNCs and international regulatory agencies.

Global ethnography seeks to understand how the experience of “globalization” is produced in specific localities and how that productive process is a contested and thus a political accomplishment. Gille and O’Riain (2002) note that place still provides a foundation for global ethnographers, but as a location from within which ethnographers can explore the socio-political projects that are remaking social relations and places. Methodologically there is a re-conceptualization of place considering the multiple connections cutting across places for example of immigrants, migrants, expatriate managers and transnational entrepreneurs within the

MNC. Places matter in global ethnography, not as self-contained sets of social relations, rather to also understand the social relations that extend *beyond it*.

### **Conclusions and implications for future research**

The purpose of this **article** has been to discuss the contributions that critical realist ethnographies can make to an understanding of the MNC. The **article** began by reflecting on the ways in which the MNC has been conceptualized in recent literatures as a complex cultural organization at the cross roads of ideas, knowledge, interests and values. It then discussed the ways in which ethnographic approaches are well suited to respond to the methodological challenges raised in researching such complex organizations. Taking the example of the transfer of management practices within the MNC the article has discussed the potential of a critical realist ethnographic approach to addressing concerns of the critical researcher and to address questions that have been largely unexamined to date.

In summary the implications of adopting a critical realist ethnographic approach discussed in this **article** point to the possibility of studying both structures and processes within the MNC. From a critical standpoint the sensitivity to process enables the researcher to study the organization as a political arena in which social interaction, power and political games become more central in the analysis and understanding of organizational life. The **article** has examined how critical realist ethnographic approaches have the potential to provide a processual understanding that brings into focus such issues within MNCs as complex socio-political sites (Geppert and Dörrenbächer, 2014), increasing understanding of conflict, tension, and the experience of work within firms in the “new global context”. Drawing on a critical realist ontology helps the researcher explore beyond and below the surface appearance of organizational strategies and practices. It encourages examination of the interaction of agency and structure, in a specific context with a critical realist ethnography looking not only to describe events, but also to explain them. (Rees and Gatenby, 2014). The depthful ontology provides that we seek to explain observable events through consideration of the conditions that enabled these events. Comparative critical realist ethnographies within the MNC can thereby look at the ways in which combinations of structural, historical and operational contingencies may interact, such as the ways in which managerial control systems may be introduced and responded to in different contexts of a subsidiary and with what outcomes.

A further implication is that the researcher has the possibility of gaining a privileged insight into the lived experience of globalization – whether it be for the migrant factory workers around the subsidiaries of the MNC, or the salaried expatriates from the headquarters. As Burawoy (2000) notes, the relevance of such research in the study of the MNC is significant, in terms of the importance of an understanding of “global” processes, the link between the local and the global, and the processes within the transnational social space of the MNC in which ideas, people, resources and practices cross national boundaries and institutional contexts with corresponding conflicts and struggles.

**From a critical standpoint** fruitful themes for further research relate to the experience of change for example in business systems, internationalization of organizations and “globalization”. For the critical realist ethnographer this becomes an empirical question the implications being that

the researcher is required to be sensitive to the ways in which gender, race, ethnicity, and status for example as “colonizer” or “colonized” (Boussebaa and Morgan, 2014) shape the understanding and experience of social relations within the transnational social space of the MNC. The researcher is sensitized to look at the relation between such micro level experiences and outcomes of actors and the macro level structures and processes of continuity and change.

In conclusion this **article argues for** the potential contributions that the sociological imagination of the critical realist ethnographer can make in addressing significant questions facing the critical researcher of the MNC.

### Note

1. Andons were signal lights sometimes used with accompanying sound that could be turned on to draw attention to a workstation and sometimes to stop production. They were part of a system to manage quality/ process issues quickly by drawing attention to problems in production that could attract maintenance or teamleaders. In practice they were used in a variety of ways on the shop floor by workers.
2. ‘5s’ was a term used on the shop floor. It was seen by managers as part of the system of continual improvement. It included Seira (sort), Seiton (set), Seiso (sweep), Seiketsu (standardization) and Shitsuke (sustain).

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Table 1. Comparative analysis of outcomes from technical control systems

Technical control	Heater Greenfield site	Condenser Greenfield	Press Shop Brownfield	Aluminium Brownfield site
<b>1. Andons [1]</b>	yes	Red for breakdown only	Not used	in place but not used
<b>for expression of resistance</b>	yes	yes	-	-
<b>protection of friends</b>	yes	no	-	-
<b>exposure of others</b>	yes	no	-	-
<b>2. Tact times</b>	yes	yes	Yes	yes
<b>peer pressure to not 'rate bust'</b>	no	yes	Yes	yes
<b>stockpiling to build up spare time</b>	not possible	yes	Yes	yes
<b>fiddling of output reports</b>	not done by individual	yes	Yes	yes
<b>informal status for faster worker</b>	yes	yes	Yes	yes
<b>pressure by</b>	yes	no	No	no

<b>group to reach standards</b>				
<b>informal targets set</b>	no	sometimes	Yes( 80% of formal target)	no
<b>times for jobs informally changed/rejected</b>	no	yes	yes	yes
<b>3. Monitoring of output quantity</b>	recorded hourly by team leader for line	recorded hourly by worker	clocking system for each job	recorded daily by worker
<b>peer pressure to restrict output</b>	no	yes	yes	yes
<b>peer pressure to conform to informal code of work</b>	yes e.g. rest times, cleaning	yes, eg rest times, cleaning, unofficial breaks	yes eg. clocking practices, rest times, cleaning, unofficial breaks	yes, e.g. rest times unofficial breaks
<b>informal fiddling of output records</b>	no	yes, by carrying work over to next period	yes, by clocking practices	yes, by stockpiling
<b>4. Monitoring of output quality</b>	intense immediate feedback/monitoring by co-worker	delayed feedback for faults from down the line	delayed feedback by inspector or worker down the line	delayed feedback from down the line
<b>consequences of quality checks</b>	workers hiding or reporting each other's faults	little pressure to reduce	concealment of scrap	concealment of scrap

scrap

Table 2 A comparative analysis of the nature of resistance across teams

Form of resistance	Heater Team— Greenfield site	Condenser Greenfield Site	Press Shop Brownfield Site	Aluminium Team— Brownfield site
<b>1. Active Individual Resistance</b>	1. stopping line	1. being late for work	1. being late for work	1. being late for work
	2. walking away from workstation	2. not doing 5s [2]	work 2. challenging cleaning or multitasking to teamleader	1. not doing 5S
	3. not doing 5S	3. openly challenging output expectations	3. refusal to do another job eg. Serviceman to work a press	3. leaving
	4. leaving/looking for jobs elsewhere	4. underperforming as an expression of non commitment ie. not making output tarket	4. verbal 'threat' that they would not work any harder	4. direct questioning of authority of team leader
	5. direct questioning of the authority of the team leader	5. not doing quality checks as instructed	5. finishing early and standing talking at back of presses	5. refusing to do something (finally going along with it)
		6. talking to others openly on the line and not working	6. sitting in the 'pig pen' until told to start work rather than getting up	6. active resistance to suggestions to do work differently or to do extra work

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			themselves	
		7. breaking safety rules eg. Not wearing safety clothes/ shoes for a task or not following the safety procedures for a task	7. open criticism of continuous improvement and productivity plans	7. criticism of management
				8. refusal to work on some area
			8. orientation of 'them and us'	9. fiddling the work record card
			9. Reference to works committee to help in work conditions	
			10. fiddling the work record card	
<b>2. Passive individual resistance</b>	1. not offering suggestions for continuous improvement	1. not showing interest in QC circles, suggestion schemes or other company initiatives	1. going to the toilet for a break	1. joking about the work and conditions
	2. not doing overtime	2. not listening in hot corner meetings	2. smoking on the shop floor	2. going for breaks in the toilet
	3. not showing 'positive attitude'	3. not following instructions for personal safety on the job	3. drinking ( not alcohol) while working	3. not declaring scrap, hiding it
	4. sarcasm/ joking at work expectations	4. complaining/ moaning	4. coming late for work	4. smoking on factory floor
	5. 'tuning out'		5. going off sick	5. not showing interest in attempts to improve practices
	6. complaining/moaning		6. not listening to team meetings/	6. conditions informal criticism of the team

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			using it for a coffee break	leader
	7. not checking own work for defects		7. negative attitude/critical of company and management	
	8. working fast to make time for self, not company			
	9. not applying 5S			
	10. not wearing full uniform			
	11. not cleaning hot corner after use			
	12. not listening in team meetings			
<b>3. Active collective resistance</b>	1. talking on the line	1. informal agreement/ peer pressure to stop work half an hour early	1. complaints to the teamleader by press operators resisting doing other tasks	1. peer pressure to finish half an hour before the end of the shift
	2. not volunteering for overtime	2. peer pressure not to get up immediately when the buzzer goes	2. Works committee speaking in team meetings ( sometimes happened)	2. peer pressure to get off the shop floor and queue by the clock-out machine before the end of the shift
	3. standing talking instead of working in off line tasks, e.g. 5S	3. informal agreement to have longer breaks and not record hourly output only the total at weekends	3. queuing up by the clock-out machine a few minutes before the end of the shift.	3. not paying attention to hot corner notices/actively ignoring them
<b>4. Passive collective resistance</b>	1. not using peer pressure	1. informal agreement/ peer pressure not to work over the output target.	1. standing talking at back of presses	1. using team meetings for a coffee and cigarette
	2. not reporting defects of others on the line	2. not cleaning hot corner- leaving it messy	2. 'work to rule'	2. break 'work to rule'



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3. 'work to rule'

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