

Conversations with Truckies: Looking at Life through Glass

Gaining entry to the long-haul trucking industry is difficult for an ‘outsider’. In the case of truck drivers it is made more difficult by their mobility. Truckies are sometimes labelled as deviants, separate from the broader working community. This research, which focused on male drivers, resulted in gaining information around issues such as why they chose the profession, and economic factors. The research was conducted by building a relationship with the participants while riding along with them, and the ‘data’ was the collected information; hence the title of this paper. The value of the research collection was the breakthrough of stereotypes in order to present life and work as the truckies themselves see it. These Australian voices are found missing in research about the transport industry. The results of the research are a greater understanding of the influence of economic factors and industry regulations in the long-haul industry, particularly concerning health and safety. The aim of the work was to continue building an understanding of working people’s lives and pass that understanding on to ‘outsiders’: essentially giving workers a voice.

Introduction

Interstate truck drivers in Australia have been the subject of scientific studies with regard to technical issues, i.e. weight carried, time of arrival and safety regulations, but the social context has not been included in any such research. This research is interested in the social and cultural networks as part of the context of an important Australian industry. The national gross income can increase as much as 23 per cent over three years as a direct result of truck movements. This contributed a 23 per cent increase in the national economy from the trucking sector between 1998 and 2003 <www.abs.com.au>. The research reported in this work was conducted in 2008–09 during a period of economic downturn. The aim of the research was to develop an in-depth understanding of truck drivers’ lived experience of their working lives including market pressures, dealing with government regulations, connection with family and community, and working conditions such as long hours of driving. This research has led to a greater understanding of the nature of the community of companies, subcontractors and interstate (long-haul) drivers. The barriers to truck drivers’ wellbeing, their exclusion from community, and difficulties in their health have been identified.

Literature Review

Eric, a retired truck driver, said recently ‘twenty years ago trying to talk to truck drivers would have been like trying to get into the Masonic lodge.’ (Pers. comm., Autumn 2008). The analogy describes the typically closed culture of many types of occupations and groups.

Economic pressures have resulted in more public discussion of issues such as; accidents, oil dependence, and congestion (Santos et al, 2010). “Economic theory shows how policies, which affect consumption and production incentives can be used to achieve the optimal outcome in the presence of externalities” (Santos et al, 2010:1) An Australian study that recently indicated results concerning the substantial economic impact as well as the associated illness and injuries in the industry used a survey to collect data from a risk management framework (Health Survey of the NSW Transport Industry 2009).

The collection of conversations has resulted in a view of a work place that is a sub culture. The drivers were not secretly talking about a work place. These voices of the drivers telling their own story allows the reader to develop their own understanding from the information provided (Meyer & Crothers, 2007). I have used this method of inductively gaining information from identifying issues from the work place previously in a police organisation (Karp 2008). The approach of this research is reflected and summarised by Connell:

All of them need to wear out shoe leather. Good researchers in all the social sciences do”. This applies to theorists as well as to fact-grubbing empirical researchers. I want to suggest a new meaning for the term ‘grounded theory’: linking theory to the ground on which the theorist’s boots are planted (2007 Pg 206).

This type of research then will lead to generalizations that will promote understanding beyond technical discussions. Overseas studies refer to technical aspects such as the optimum trucking routes and the optimum speed and safety conditions, but do not refer to wider issues such as the truck drivers’ experiences. The interstate truck driver is part of a service and an important economic partner in Australia (May 1984). Heavy vehicles are over-represented in road trauma in New South Wales, particularly for serious crashes. Heavy vehicles represent only 2.5 % of registered motor vehicles in New South Wales. They are involved in 7% of recorded crashes. They account for 8% of all motor vehicle travel in New South Wales. Crashes involving heavy vehicles account for 6% of all injuries but heavy vehicles are involved in 21% of all fatalities on New South Wales roads. These statistics are available on the Roads and Traffic Authority website <www.rta.nsw.gov.au>. The technical aspects of truck comfort, in the main American health studies, report drug use, coronary data and other health issues. This work has utilised information from many different sources and researches the Australian long-haul drivers’ day-to-day work experiences, against or with government policies and regulations, and is an important contribution to literature in this area.

Today’s truck drivers can be subjected to high levels of regulatory supervision, and policy development that impact on their lives (May 1984, Jain et al. 2006). So drivers are not as closed to outsiders as they once were and this research gives them an opportunity to voice their opinions, the conflicts and their joys of truck driving (Frey et al. 2008). The proposed research methodology is designed to create or use space(s) for dialogue that are ‘safe’ and comfortable for the truck drivers. The researcher engaged in discussion with drivers as a passenger. The truck was regarded by the driver as a safe space and that did lead to drivers being ready to comment on regulatory and policy implementation practices and the implications of them. This is important, as the Australian trucking industry is a unique working environment and quite different from those studied in America and Europe (Mayhew & Quinlan 2006; Laden et al. 2007; Quinlan & Wright 2008).

Existing literature reports on research in specific technical categories such as those listed above, health or economic issues but do not connect these different aspects. A search of the literature reveals a focus on technical effects and on the level of traffic, versus economic viability, versus maximising road space (Geertz & Jourquin 2000; Parkinson 2007). Some common ground can be found internationally when it comes to issues for truck drivers. Looking at health issues of drivers, sexual disease in the trucking industry, for example, diverts the reader towards research from very different geographical areas such as Africa and South America (Luxenburg & Klein 1984; Lydie & Robinson 1998;). Dietary issues have been discussed in American and Australian literature (Solomon et al. 2007; Whitfield Jacobson et al. 2007).

There is also a large body of work devoted to drivers' medical issues such as the effects of repetitive vibrations and the inhalations of diesel fumes (Solomon & Winkelmayer 2007). Conditions and driver interactions, however, also vary cross-nationally. American highways, for instance, are long, straight, well-resourced routes existing in a different economy, while Australian weather conditions are some of the best in the world for driving. Truck drivers have to negotiate different standards of infrastructure and competing traffic conditions (Silverman et al. 1997; Walton 1999). Therefore, while previous studies provide some insight into the stressful conditions of truck driving, this research is about Australian conditions from the truck driver's point of view and will help expand the knowledge available locally (Quinlan & Wright 2008).

This research relates to the broader aspects of the culture of a sub culture. The work points to the complexities of group loyalties, and the stress of earning a living. This work also refers to the tension between regulatory systems and the drivers work demands (Paolinee 2003). At the same time, the livelihood of the driver depends on his or her ability to manage the stress of driving on the highways and to manage costs. While the economics of the industry is of major importance, this project examines economics from the perspective of the driver. This is what makes this research distinctly different from other research in this area of social life. For example, a New Zealand study (Walton 1999) on the professional truck driver's perceptions of speed safety, skill and consideration released important findings but the researchers did not link their findings in any detail to wider social issues. The current literature is directed to the prevention of accidents (Naveh & Marcus 2007), the issue of alcohol use of drivers, (Snowden et al. 2007) the use of drugs in the industry (Drummer et al 2007; NAICS 2007), and the more general discussion of alertness as presented by Oron-Gilad et al. (2008), but does not incorporate the driver's point of view.

Methods

The interesting factor about social science research is the variety of methods that a researcher can employ. What approach was used? Different types of information about the work setting were read; different levels of statistical data were extensively examined. The collected interviews were then listened to, transcribed and analysed. Different data offered different explanations and when compared and set against each other a series of different explanations resulted. This allowed the researcher to weave a range of information from different sources all referring to the same workplace. This work is not a case study as the industry is vast and country-wide with many participants. The hypothesis was about learning from the information collected rather than testing a proposition.

The strategy became one of not trying to capture comments from drivers while on the run, but to engage in a timely way, which meant getting in the cabin and driving with the men. The design was experimental as the researcher could be at risk and the drivers can't be distracted. Safety for the researcher and the driver was important. Therefore the method of engagement had to be ethical, disciplined and focused. This did not provide an initial direction on how many interviews to conduct or how much field data to record. This question was answered as the interview data collected was resulting in repeating the same information. The questions asked were on specific areas such as why they drive a truck, what aspects of family life or relationships did the drivers want to talk about, how did they engage with community or social events, what were the economic factors that affected their decisions, and what had the drivers observed in terms of drug taking in the industry? After six months on the road the

data collection became fatiguing and when the answers became repetitively similar field data collection was stopped.

The data processes involved taping and transcribing, note taking and all measures available for numbering and maintaining security around the data to keep it confidential and the identity of participants anonymous. The researcher had conducted this type of research previously but there was no prior research in the trucking industry of this type to refer to in the relevant literature. Discussion with colleagues about the approach and any ethical issues helped the review process enormously and provided good support.

Seventeen recorded confidential interviews were collected averaging one and a half hours each, plus three hand recorded notes of a long interview. Two participants agreed to support the research data collection and were spoken to on the phone from time-to-time throughout the length of the data collection for clarification of industry cultural practices, terminology, and on-site work practices. The researcher accompanied the drivers for an agreed portion of the journey during which observations of the driving conditions were observed. There was consultation with industry partners, unions and the community groups connected with the industry so that experts in the field could advise the researcher as well as clarify issues raised by the drivers during the process. Gaining entry to any mobile community is a common problem of social research (Karp 2008) and in the case of truck drivers it is made more difficult by the labelling of some truckies within the broader community as akin to deviants. In this research the researcher built a relationship with the participants the drivers wanted to talk while sitting in a safe place, the driver's seat. They repeat often that they like the independence of the lifestyle. Their voices are often found missing in academic literature about the transport industry. The questions presented in the results section represent the main themes identified. The first question was one of my initial inquiries and then the safety issues would arise later. The economic issues would regularly be raised by the drivers and I would then follow up with general questions concerning the political environment of the work place. The economic issues were mentioned by every person I spoke to and reflected not only a time of global downturn but the personal stress of earning a living. This would then return the interview to the initial question of why do this type of work.

Results: What the conversations revealed: perspectives on knowledge and method.

The conversations you are reading below are taken directly from drivers that I did long haul trips with as a passenger in the truck. I have changed any elements that would identify the driver.

1. Why do you drive a truck?

The typical response was the lifestyle, the freedom, the independence and liking the 'blokes' on the road. The blokes they like are usually men who drive either in the same company or the same type of truck, or have a similar connection in the type of product that they are moving. The men describe being willing to help anyone in the industry who is in trouble and out on the road. They provide each other with advice concerning new regulations, new technical features and how to get in and out of difficult loading and unloading terminals. The interstate runs mean that drivers can find themselves in cities and dock areas with which they are unfamiliar. In contrast, the men will focus, feel free of outside responsibilities and almost

go into a meditative space out on the open road. An example of a question and answers now follows.

Q. Why do you drive interstate trucks? A. I like the lifestyle. I like being independent. I can run my own race.

Q. It was interesting you referring to trucking being a service industry. Could you explain what you mean? A. It's a service, whether it would be from the original concept of picking paper up and goods up from a point, whether its furniture, whether its goods from the waterfront or whether its goods from the warehouse, after its been picked up from a farm and taken to a waterfront, all this is a service. You're a service to the provider and a service to the distributor and that service then carries on to the customer all the way through.

Q. How do people outside the industry view truck drivers? A. The usual comments are that truck drivers are maniacs on the road and they tell being frightened of some incident on the road, and expect not to have accidents with the cars 'cause people get frightened of big vehicles on the road. Ah I don't criticise the truck drivers, people, a ... big truck coming along, they panic, they run to the left, run to the right or run into someone, something.

Q. What do truck drivers talk about amongst themselves about being an interstate driver? A. The bosses are talked about by the drivers regularly. They say the job of driving a truck is paying irregular wages. Drivers have lost jobs during this period of economic downturn as the demand for drivers, decreases. Men who can't meet payments for their own trucks are trying to get driving jobs but have found that if the employer finds out they had their own truck they would not get the work. The employer was worried that the driver would compete for the subcontract work in his own right and not just do the work of a driver. So the country depends on us but there is a lot of distrust in the industry at the moment (2008-2009). I don't think anyone knows much about how bad it is until the big companies started being liquidated.

Q. Why does the community talk about drivers and the trucks being dangerous? A. In America they talk about the roads being long and straight. Here in Australia we have got up and down hills and around corners. It's the difference, the temperatures, we get extreme temperatures here and they are very hard for people to stay awake when you're going from one extreme, like 100 degrees and you hop outside, it's very hard. The 'administration squad' they want to be a supervisor but they don't have any knowledge of how things work, how long it takes to unload a container, how long, how they load them, how a forklift works so they just go into administration. We get stressed, we used to drink, now there is a drug problem and it's national, not just in one state so we get a bad reputation.

2. Economics and trucking

Q. Would you deregulate the system further or try to centralise a standard wage structure in the industry? A. A decentralised structure amongst small companies or large companies with a really helpful apprenticeship system that would help the driver's responsibility, in different areas associated with the industry. We provide a service that keeps it all working and you don't particularly care if that's nationalised or state or free market. See, the ideal situation in Australia would be that they had a rail system that linked the rail system with country areas all the way out to the eastern seaboard, that the rail system had break down depots where the container would be delivered, to a depot, and then unloaded off the rail train, put onto vehicles delivered to those locating areas, that would create jobs for those people in those local areas.

Q. So you think there was a direct relationship between large trucking companies and the rail system? A. Of course there was, 'cause the railway tried to do it and the railway couldn't compete with the road operators and so they adopted the American system where they had the long-haul drives and put everything on road. Consequently all the roads get carved up and people from Sydney come and deliver to the country areas, unload, go back and live in Sydney or live in other areas but they don't generate money in the country areas where people are living; they are here today and gone tomorrow. The distance is a big problem.

Q. So how or can you make money in the trucking industry? A. Well you got two areas, you've got the owner drivers that will go into a business, there is a lot of them , that got no idea of running a business, they see the opportunity, they go to a company and they can give them a \$200,000 vehicle and I give them a \$5000 dollar deposit in addition, so they think, 'Oh well, if I'm an owner driver I'm going to make a lot of money'. So the kid puts five grand down and the company sells for \$200,000 for an end result. The bank or the insurance company makes money. They know quite well if the driver goes bust the finance companies can take them back again, but these poor fellas, they work their butts off. We've tried to get a rate system. We had a rate system working for New South Wales but the Federal system that has just been introduced(2010) has reduced the basic rate for a Grade 7 driver! They are earning something like \$630 per week, basic wage.

3. Politics and trucking

Q. A social system is that where everything's run and owned by a single body watching over the industry? A. Basically, all different companies that operate can be subsidised by the government that allowed these people to get involved, people that had less experience. Every advertisement you see in the paper for a truck driver or someone in the transport industry, they put experience necessary or experience is essential. How can they get experience if they have never worked in that industry?

Q. What if they're making decisions in an industry in which they have never worked? A. Well, see the truck driving now is a lot easier than it was years ago. Years ago you had to load bags of coffee beans, you would load 12 or 14 pallets of it, and then you would take it to the other end and load them off the pallets. Now they're all in containers so everything's automated in the containers, just unloading out of the containers so the automation did cut down on a lot of work. Because of the big carriers, we can do it cheaper by road. But road conditions is where you have to have the experience, maturity, the road can be dreadful, holes, bumps -that can cause mechanical failures. The drivers all comment things are bad but they won't or can't do anything. Truck drivers are starting to film from inside their truck what is going on. Other drivers don't like it, community does not like it, so on the ground, the level of tension is rising. Sweat shop on wheels! Why do you bother? No one listens, nothing will change, and we prove them right. I think we are by default getting rid of people who want things to change but not in the direction that they are.

4. Safety Issues

Q. What do you think about the current level of regulation in the industry? A. My mate recently fell over in the pit as he was delivering a product. He thought he had broken some bones. He was on his own, it was late in the evening and he had completed his 14 hours of driving. He works for a company that has a global supervisory system on the truck. The information goes back to the company and depending on what system the company is under the information either goes immediately to a government road authority or the company can

keep the information and if a serious event happens then the driver can have his mobile phone records, log books and all information on the global oversight systems handed over to the police. So my mate is injured and he needs to drive the truck out to a site where he is allowed to rest. He moves the truck, tells them (the employer) he is injured but finds that the pain is so severe he is then driving himself further to get medical attention. Officially all this driving is against government regulations. He could find himself fined and in court explaining what has happened. So if you are half an hour from delivering a product and you have used up your time you can't drive any further, you can't get home, you can't get to a designated rest spot, you can't be independent and free on the road, in control of your own life! Ridiculous you can't even deliver the product. Drivers should not be on sites with no one else around.

Q. Would the Global System be useful if it was interactive? A. We deliver to sites in the middle of the night and there is no employee at the site of delivery. If we fall, have an accident, then you may be able to ring an employer but they could ring an ambulance but they don't want the truck moved to an isolated area. The person you ring is the job allocator; he is not going to ask, what the injuries etc are. Drivers will wait until the pain or stress of the injury eases. The employer, work cover they all have duty of care responsibilities but basically the driver is out in the dark possibly no mobile coverage and not complying with his work rules around fatigue.....

Discussion

The environment of long distance driving has been described referring to the 'freedom' felt and discussed by the drivers (Paoline 2003). But the results and importance of the findings of this research are the dichotomous relationship between wanting workplace freedom, in a potentially unsafe work environment. The men report the difficulties of surviving economically and the conflict around negotiating wages. The focus of the research is 'driver driven'. Further research will reveal the different networks and behavior reflecting a 'trucking culture'. The lived experience is reflected in their everyday conversations. Drivers have different sub groupings within their own sub culture. Schein (1991, 1992) argues that organizational responses are possible for members of one working group. This would suggest that drivers can as a group cope with the demands of their work environment. However, the mobility, communication barriers and isolation of most of the drivers make collective action difficult not impossible.

Government and other regulatory bodies subject the trucking industry to rigorous external oversight. The results are usually presented in statistical format, accompanied by little if any qualitative analysis. Economic considerations, accidents, incidents, and occupational health issues are recorded as significant from a truck driver's perspective. The significance of these issues may relate to the mentioned economic stresses, while regulatory enforcement and an increasing number of sanctions on driver behaviour are clearly meant to maximise health and safety for both drivers and the public. Murray (2002) refers to the 'scandal of tolerance' that exists within the industry. The data does point to evidence that individual and organisations will for a range of 'legal, business and financial reasons' fail to address serious issues within the industry (Pg. 8).

The drivers understand the purpose of the new technology that enables surveillance within the environment pointing directly at the truck drivers' work practices. However, the issues of how regulations and surveillance technology affects their sense of themselves has not been reported in today's changing work environment. The results indicate a deep underlying

conflict between the perceived freedom and independence that the drivers desire and the new supervision practices.

Conclusion

The research explores the connections between community opinion about trucking as a safe/unsafe industry and how this influences drivers' perceptions of their own work practices. The labelling of drivers as dangerous does create a sense of isolation from their own communities outside of the trucking networks. There is a demonstrable lack of knowledge about the impact of increasing regulatory systems, and the culture of truck driving. More stringent restrictions on the parking of trucks and hours of driving, plus a lack of flexibility in the regulations, make it more difficult for drivers to 'Stop, Revive, and Survive' (New South Wales Government Advertising Driver Safety Campaign). Certain sections of the trucking industry have been scrutinised by the media when serious breaches of safety or serious accidents occur, and government has implemented reforms on a reactive basis. However, these reactions have seriously ignored the complexity of the workplace. This can only be determined by venturing into the culture of the interstate and long-haul truck drivers, by listening to and giving meaning to their accounts of their lives, and by developing relevant policy and practical reforms in consultation with the drivers (Karp 2008).

In difficult economic times, competitive advantage is crucial. Financial stresses are linked to the need for success. One driver's statement about the industry was that it was a 'sweat shop on wheels' (Pers. Comm., April 2010). This paper broadens our understanding of the links between individuals, work culture and economic pressure that hopefully will inform the decisions as new initiatives are introduced.

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Dr Jann Karp served for 23 years in the NSW Police Service as an operational sworn police officer. Much discussion has gone into how best to deal with attempts which have been made to reform a police culture that is regarded as secretive and corrupt. This long-haul trucking work is her second major research project and was conducted as a retired police officer and independent researcher. Her published research addresses matters that touch on this work as ‘an insider’ and academic critic.