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## **PLAYING DETECTIVE-RESEARCHER: THE CHALLENGES OF RESEARCHING CSR IN THE TOURISM & HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The tourism industry is fundamentally reliant on 'myth-making' to successfully market 'desirable' holiday destinations and products. 'Business unfriendly' data may be considered threatening – as well as the researchers who persist in uncovering them. In the absence of strong stakeholder support, a researcher who chooses to 'study up' this image-conscious industry may have to rely on informal methods of data gathering. This requires the skills of a detective as much as a researcher, particularly for an industry with deep and complex supply chains. There are ethical and practical dimensions to the challenges that result with regards to gaining and maintaining access, particularly if institutional approval and support is required.

This paper discusses the key issues related to conducting politically sensitive research, which in this instance involves investigating working conditions in the hospitality industry. There is a particular focus on the complexities of conducting research in an authoritarian country and an emphasis on labor rights as a corporate social responsibility issue. While this article does not deliver answers to these challenges, it does aim to generate a broader and more inclusive debate on the future of action-oriented research in corporate social responsibility, with a particular emphasis on the tourism industry.

### **Keywords**

Politically sensitive research, research and access, elite research, activist research, research ethics, reflexivity.

### **INTRODUCTION**

A day after my first (and only) shift as a night kitchen cleaner for a five-star hotel, the skin on my right hand starts to peel. It is flaky and unsightly. This is the direct result of cleaning with industrial strength chemicals without gloves – which I was not given; neither were the two other women I was working with. For a seven-hour night shift (11pm-6am), the wages



were US\$2.30<sup>1</sup> per hour, of which US\$6.50 was to be deducted for the contracting company's T-shirt (it was mandatory for all cleaners to wear it).

Our selection 'interview' took place at a public space in a central area of town. From the group that showed up, there appeared to be a clear gender and ethnic composition with regards to 'this sort of work'. The 'contract', which we were given about five minutes to read and sign on the spot, was two pages long and requested information like our race, contact details, identity card numbers and the occupations of our immediate family members. The contract offered no protection or benefits to the workers – it basically listed our obligations as contract workers for this cleaning company, including their right to reassign us to other duties if deemed appropriate. The salary was also lower than what was advertised in the newspapers – the additional US\$32.50 'incentive' was only for those who could work six days a week.

From that one night of work, I gained information not only in quantitative terms (e.g. wages, contract terms, gender ratio) but was also enriched with qualitative insights on subcontracting recruitment processes and modes of interaction between supervisors and contract workers and among contract workers themselves. Experientially, the term 'invisible workers' was brought to life – dressed in our dark blue company T-shirts, black pants and black rubber boots, we navigated our way through the back entrances, kitchens and winding hallways of the large hotel as people slumbered, never once seen or greeted by a single hotel guest.

Overall, the experience was valuable and interesting – but to build a robust argument with the potential to inform policy and influence stakeholders would require data gathering on a longer-term and consistent basis. While investigative journalists have been known to do similar covert research and publish their work (Wynhausen 2005; Ehrenreich 2001), as a doctoral student, I need to gain approval from my university's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). Therein lies my first challenge, for covert research is considered deceptive and risky.

The heart of my dilemma is this: How does one be an 'ethical researcher' when investigating unethical practices? Institutional requirements for 'ethical research' places demands on me to be explicit about my research objectives and methods and seek informed consent. This, however, presupposes strong stakeholder support for the research project to succeed.

The tourism industry is a global, interlocking industry with deep and complex supply chains (Environment Business & Development Group 2004; Reid 2003; Mastny 2002). Examining employment practices means trying to thread disparate pieces of a globalized puzzle which involves the casualization, de-skilling, outsourcing and subcontracting of labour. It requires an understanding of the policy and regulatory framework governing employment as well as knowledge of how different businesses operate within it. The variety of actors involved can make this complicated; the lack of support by companies in releasing information and providing access to workers compounds the situation (Barrientos 2002, p.71). As Barrientos (2002, p.61) admits, investigating employment conditions and codes of conduct through value chain mapping in a globalized economy is "a complex process, [involving] piecing together a wide range of information from diverse sources, and much of it informal or anecdotal". It therefore requires "the skills of a detective as much as a researcher" (Barrientos 2002, p.61).

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of writing, the exchange rate was S\$1 (Sing) to US\$0.65; the wages in Singapore dollars were S\$3.50 per hour.



Currently, local anecdotal evidence gathered at an informal level indicates widespread instances of worker exploitation in the hospitality industry, particularly in the restaurant sector. Illegal deployment occurs and recruitment agents are playing an increasingly prominent role in perpetuating exploitative practices, in particular by taking advantage of vulnerable low-wage migrant workers. There is indication criminal syndicates may be involved. There also appears to be a measure of collusion between some private tourism and hospitality educators, hospitality businesses and recruitment agents, with the latter using food and beverage job attachments for foreign students as a way to generate income at the expense of this group of generally young and cash-strapped students/workers. Stories circulate at an informal level but finding substantive evidence with legal weight will involve working one's way through the various layers or 'chains' to determine culpability at each stage. Getting workers in vulnerable positions to speak is difficult – particularly if losing their livelihood or getting deported is a potential consequence. Investigating agents who are flouting the law and may have criminal links is daunting.

For an academic researcher, wading through such murky terrain requires boldness tempered with caution and intuitiveness – as well as institutional approval and support. While all researchers – whether academic, trade union member or journalist – should interrogate the ethics of their methodology, an academic researcher is accountable to different institutions and 'acceptable' codes of practice. Moreover, though objectives may be aligned with activist goals of contributing to social change, a tension often exists between the shorter-term legal goals of activist groups and the academic role of 'detached' critical theorist.

Several caveats are necessary here. This paper is not a debate about the merits of qualitative *over* quantitative research methods. Neither is it claiming that participation observation – which covert research falls under – is the only means of gathering meaningful data. It is also not my intention to separate academic research into camps of 'activist-oriented' versus 'non-activist-oriented'. As Pain (2003, p.652) points out, "activism exists on a continuum and is embedded to some extent in all our activity as academics". This paper simply draws attention to some of the tensions that arise from trying to balance academic demands with activist goals. The focus is on key challenges that have resulted from the collision of personal research choices with status quo conditions in my case study site.

Context is crucial. Certain research challenges tend to be industry-specific and influenced by the particular characteristics of the tourism and hospitality industry, which is complex and interlocking. Others are issue-specific – labour relations are a politically sensitive issue, regardless of industry. There are also country-specific considerations – using Singapore as a case study site means being subject to the political norms of this authoritarian state. Discipline-specific issues concern what Jamal and Everitt (2004, p.2) have identified in tourism studies as a "split between the economics-externalities camp (the industry-oriented aspect) and the impacts-internalities camp (the social and cultural aspect)". Tribe (1997, p.639) further problematizes the 'indiscipline' of tourism studies, including the "permissive and imprecise" use of the word tourism. Research-specific issues include ethics, resource pressures and the merging of activist goals with academic requirements – these can affect researchers of all disciplines to varying degrees.

Finally, I acknowledge that several challenges are researcher-related. My prior experience with migrant worker activism has been greatly influential in the current focus of my doctoral project. From the selection of topic and case study site to choice of research methods, I have been guided by my personal epistemology as a feminist scholar with social justice objectives. My research journey has also been influenced by my visible difference as a woman of a certain age, class, ethnicity, nationality and even demeanor – in both positive



and negative ways. While I would like to stress this should not affect the validity of my data, some of these factors have either created or inhibited research opportunities. As I become more aware of such dynamics, they are affecting the ways in which I devise research strategies.

This paper thus sets out to highlight, in context-specific terms, some of the key challenges faced in attempting to investigate a politically sensitive topic within a strictly controlled environment. My PhD aims to be a qualitative multi-stakeholder study that involves in-depth interviews and participant observation as well as discourse analysis of secondary data. I hope to engage with low-wage service workers (considered a marginalized group), influential industry gatekeepers and policy-makers as well as academics and NGOs (non-governmental organizations).

I begin by outlining the socio-political context of my case study site, which determines fieldwork conditions and influences issues of access and support for the research. Nader (1969, p.301), in highlighting the phenomenon of 'studying up' – that is, studying the powerful among our situated social milieu – categorizes the obstacles of doing such research in terms of "access, attitudes, ethics and methodology". However, these issues are not separate but interlocking – attitudes, for example, influence access as much as ethics impact on methodology. The following sections focus on the various dimensions of access, with particular regards to elite interviewees. This is of particular relevance to those conducting research on corporate social responsibility (CSR), which involves casting a critical eye on business practices. In the final section, I share some of the tensions that arise from trying to balance academic demands with activist objectives, a key personal struggle.

While methodological 'confessions' tend to be retrospective accounts, I am currently in the beginning stages of my fieldwork and am in the process of negotiating access even as I am writing about some initial and perceived challenges. Therefore, this paper aims to contribute less in terms of sharing successful strategies – which is a work in progress – but in generating broader questions relevant for researchers who are attempting similar research.

## **SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT OF CASE STUDY SITE**

My doctoral research relates to corporate social responsibility (CSR) agendas in the tourism and hospitality industry, with a particular focus on low-wage workers in this sector. My case study site is Singapore, where I am a citizen.

A highly globalized economy where neo-liberal free trade values govern, Singapore is currently ranked the 'easiest place in the world to do business' (World Bank 2006, p.3). It also has the most extensive Free Trade Agreement network in Asia (Singapore Economic Development Board 2007a), with total trade valued at US\$470 billion (S\$716 billion) (Singapore Economic Development Board 2007b). According to the 2007 Index of Economic Freedom, Singapore is the world's second freest economy, with an overall score much higher than its regional average (Heritage Foundation 2007).

This 'open door' policy to trade and investment, however, does not translate into an equally liberal embracing of global activism. This is evidenced by the Singapore government's tactics at curbing political expression during the September 2006 World Bank-IMF talks held in Singapore, which included banning 27 accredited activists from entering the country and a stern warning by the Home Affairs Minister that public protests may "attract severe punishment, including caning and imprisonment" (Rodan 2006).

Buenas (2007) has noted the 'Singapore paradox' on transparency, whereby it rates high on economic transparency but not in political transparency. Such 'selective'



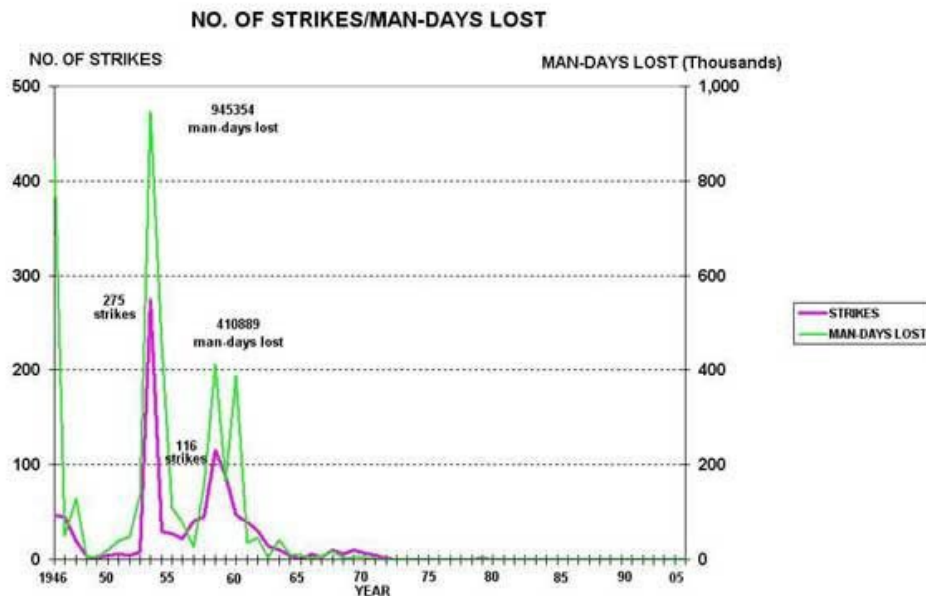
transparency means there is no Freedom of Information Act and the state's main media outlets are tightly watched. In fact, Reporters without Borders ranked Singapore 146<sup>th</sup> out of 167 surveyed countries in terms of freedom of the press (Reporters without Borders 2006). In 2006, a freelance writer for a local newspaper wrote a commentary on the rising income gap in Singapore. The Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts responded with a letter calling the writer a "partisan player" whose views "distort the truth". The newspaper suspended the writer's column a week later (Straits Times, 7 Jul. 2006).

There is also a selectiveness to statistics available for public consumption. An academic researcher working on migration issues, for example, has been unable to directly access statistics relating to the exact numbers of foreign workers in the country according to sector and nationality. Similar requests by a visiting NGO staff member from the region were also refused. Gaining access to policy-makers, I have been advised, will likely be futile or else yield little information not already available publicly – particularly with regards to my topic, for industrial relations is an especially sensitive issue.

From a legal perspective, there are no minimum wage laws in Singapore. The government's stance is that the free market determines what is a competitive wage and to do otherwise would be business-unfriendly – this is true for all workers, whether local citizens or foreigners (Ministry of Manpower 2005). In light of recent concern over increases in income inequality, the government has stressed it believes in 'workfare not welfare' (Straits Times, 14 Jun. 2007) and has set up a tripartite committee to look into the plight of low-wage workers. Through this, the government aims to "help low-wage workers find work, boost their income and build up their retirement savings" (Straits Times, 18 Jun. 2007).

Trade unionism in Singapore differs from the traditional view of trade unions as agents of collective bargaining and direct action. In Singapore, the "industrial relations system and trade unionism remain largely geared towards enhancing worker employability and encouraging job creation" (Tan 2003, p.151). As the diagram below illustrates, there has been no recorded strike in Singapore since the early 1970s. Generally, collective bargaining through direct action is not a viable strategy for employees in Singapore, whether local or foreign.

**Figure 1. No. of strikes in Singapore between 1975-2005**



Source: Ministry of Manpower (2007)

Interestingly, under the 2007 Index of Economic Freedom, Singapore scored 99.3% under 'Labor Freedom', defined as follows:

The labor market operates under highly flexible employment regulations that enhance overall productivity growth. The non-salary cost of employing a worker is low, and dismissing a redundant employee is costless. Regulations on increasing or contracting the number of work hours are very flexible.  
 (Heritage Foundation 2007)

This makes it quite clear what 'freedoms' are accorded and in whose interests they are skewed towards – namely, employers and industry.

In Singapore, the tourism industry is highly valued for its economic contribution – the country posted an estimated S\$12.4 billion in tourism receipts between January and December 2006 (Singapore Tourism Board 2006). At the same time, a growing emphasis on increasing tourism revenues as an economic development strategy is coupled with a high reliance on unskilled or semi-skilled workers, including migrant workers who are vulnerable to abuse due to a lack of political and social rights (Yeoh 2007). Meanwhile, downward pressure on wages also affect local low-wage workers struggling with increased costs of living (Low 2006).

The Singapore Tourism Board ([www.stb.com.sg](http://www.stb.com.sg)) is optimistic about continued growth with the hosting of the inaugural Singapore Grand Prix in September/October 2008 and the opening of two integrated resorts (with casinos) in 2009 and 2010. The board has a target to attract 17 million visitors and generate S\$30 billion in tourism receipts by the year 2015. The hospitality industry has benefited from the tourism boom, with average occupancy rates (AOR) and average room rates (ARR) steadily increasing. AOR are expected to remain in the high 80s and ARR expected to continue to increase. Some of the identified challenges facing the hospitality industry are room shortages, labor shortages and service



quality. Some suggested measures to tackle these challenges include land sales to encourage the building of more hotels, training programs for service staff and campaigns to change the image of service work as well as the mindsets of service workers (Lim 2007). Rhetoric does not include considerations about wages and working conditions for service workers and its relation to labor shortages and high turnover rates.

Attendant to this is a notable surge in corporate social responsibility initiatives (at least in rhetoric). CSR Asia, a social enterprise that runs capacity building programs on corporate social responsibility, set up an office in Singapore in 2005 to promote CSR in the region ([www.csr-asia.com](http://www.csr-asia.com)). In 2006, they organized a 'CSR in the Travel and Tourism Industry' in Singapore. More recently, a registered society called Singapore COMPACT for CSR ([www.csr-singapore.org](http://www.csr-singapore.org)) has been set up. This society is a participant of the UN Global Compact ([www.unglobalcompact.org](http://www.unglobalcompact.org)), the world's largest voluntary CSR initiative that aims to promote responsible corporate citizenship.

Singapore thus offers a rich and intriguing case study. Its peculiarities and paradoxes, along with my status as 'insider-outsider', offer both opportunities and barriers for conducting research of this nature. I begin with a discussion of a key research challenge: access.

## THE ISSUE OF ACCESS

From their experience of researching international hotel groups, Okumus *et al.* (2007) note that gaining and maintaining access is a key issue for in depth qualitative case studies and require considerable time, effort and patience. With the tourism industry, "the interdependence of different sectors... generally smaller scale of many operators... fragmentation of markets... [as well as] spatial separation of origins and destinations... make the task of facilitating and maintaining entry into its organizations more complex" (Okumus *et al.*, 2007, p.8). Moreover, "organizations are dynamic and complex places and outsiders are not always welcome, particularly those asking what may be perceived as sensitive and awkward questions about firms and managerial actions" (Okumus *et al.*, 2007, p.9). While most organizations are image conscious, the tourism industry in particular is highly competitive and fundamentally reliant on 'myth-making' to successfully market 'desirable' holiday destinations and products. With "impression management" (Fine 1993, p.269) a crucial aspect of the industry, 'business unfriendly' data may be considered threatening - as well as the researchers who persist in uncovering them.

There are risks involved in engaging in research that may potentially uncover discomfiting truths - for example, instances of worker exploitation, illegal activity or financial impropriety. It cannot be assumed there will be strong stakeholder support for the research. In most cases, one may expect opposition. In such instances, Barrientos (2002, p.71) acknowledges that "informal research methods may be required, and the skills of a detective come into play". This includes thinking laterally (for example, seeking out companies that are more progressive), managing presentation of our researcher selves, respecting confidentiality, developing contacts, searching a wide range of publicly available information and being persistent. Strategies for gaining and maintaining access therefore differ and it is important to recognize that "human factors influence the accomplishment and maintenance of research access. Disregarding these noneconomic aspects of the practice means ignoring the real-world complexities of tourism research" (Okumus *et al.*, 2007, p.22).

As mentioned previously, some of the issues associated with 'studying up' include "access, attitudes, ethics and methodology" (Nader 1969, p.301). These are not separate



issues but interlocking ones that critically influence each other. Industry attitudes, for example, affect researcher access as much as personal and institutional ethics govern methodology. Access also encompasses several dimensions. Okumus *et al.* (2007, p.9) discuss Gummesson's (2000) identification of three different types of access, whereby "physical access means the ability to get close to the object of the study; continued refers to maintaining an ongoing physical access to the research setting; and mental refers to being able to understand what is happening and why in the investigated settings". This necessarily enlarges the discussion of access as a multi-dimensional and interlocking issue that interacts with other dynamic factors such as timing (see Desmond 2004), power relations and the political climate of the case study site. The following sections include a discussion about the dimensions of access and the particular challenges faced in gaining and maintaining access to elites.

### **Physical, continued and mental access**

By virtue of the separate entrances and passageways that exist for guests and staff at five-star hotels, it is clear a certain façade – and therefore distance – needs to be maintained between 'guests' and 'hosts'. It was my desire to gain insights into a hotel's 'invisible' workforce that prompted me to answer the recruitment advertisement for 'Night Kitchen Cleaners to work in 5-star hotel' [sic]. This allowed me temporary *physical access* into the desired research location as well as some interaction with my target research participants.

It soon became clear, however, that gaining physical access is just one aspect of participant observation. In relational terms, I was denied access to informal banter and gossip (the 'hidden transcripts' of the workers) due to my inability to understand the ethnic language most of the workers communicated in. While most of them spoke (at least) a basic level of English, the preference to chat in their ethnic tongue meant I could gain verbal information only by asking them specific questions.

Further thwarting my imperative to be an 'unobtrusive' participant observer was my demographic misfit. Among the other local workers, I was a bit of a curiosity by virtue of my race (Chinese), manner of speaking (English-educated) and even address (a middle class suburb). During our coffee break, I received stares and a similar series of questions in the staff canteen: 'Chinese?'/'Married?'/'What you do?' [sic]/'Where you stay?' [sic]. I was also asked questions I could not answer convincingly – for example, 'Why don't you work in a factory?'; 'You're studying tourism – your English must be very good right?'.

I told several lies that night. Filling in the application form entailed lying – for example, I did *not* state that my highest educational qualification was an MA. When co-workers pressed me for where I lived, I 'tweaked' my address to include an adjoining suburb (which would not immediately betray my middle-class background). I was honest about my age (34) and said I was a student (not untrue) – unfortunately, this made me even more of a curiosity. When questioned further, I mentioned being in a private school doing 'tourism' (a partial truth). After a while, there seemed to be some tacit understanding that a person who does work like this clearly needs the money badly enough and the questions ceased (till a new worker joined in the conversation). However, the lies created a barrier to rapport building with other workers centered on trust. Ultimately, the strain of secrecy made me nervous. I decided to discontinue until I had worked out a longer-term strategy for not just gaining access, but maintaining it *with* institutional support. I also felt a need to consider more deeply how to 'ethically' manage personal relations during the process of covert research.



Another key concern is the “worst possible outcome” of researching working conditions – having a worker lose their job as a result of sharing information (Barrientos 2002, p.72). This is a very real and troubling dilemma. A researcher who volunteered for an overseas organization campaigning for a living wage related an incident where a service worker was dismissed after her involvement in the campaign was discovered. The organization in question was unable to compensate for this and the researcher, disillusioned, has decided not to continue a working relationship with them. Another researcher with many years of experience doing covert research believes that this is an unfortunate consequence but, nonetheless, the contribution of the dismissed worker can indirectly benefit the plight of many others. The issue, in the latter researcher’s opinion, is whether the risks were properly explained and if the interviewee was willing rather than coerced into participation. Clearly, there are ethics that govern all research, even research considered ‘unethical’ (that is, undertaken without informed consent). My task is to interrogate what *non-negotiable* principles govern my research practice and integrate them into my risk management strategy.

In a separate encounter, I attended a ‘mass’ recruitment drive for room attendants, again for five-star hotels. The event was advertised in the local newspapers. At the door, I was required to give my identity card number and list my highest educational qualifications (once again, I lied). I was handed two forms to fill in, requiring details like name, gender, birth date, contact details, race, religion, marital status, previous working experience and highest educational qualifications attained. I stayed for the presentation, which covered issues like the job scope of room attendants, wages, shift hours, employer expectations and training requirements. The next step for all attendees was to go through a screening process (there were eight screening officers present). Those who were not ‘weeded out’ would proceed to be interviewed by representatives from three luxury hotels, who were present.

Again, I was extremely self-conscious and took steps to mediate my ‘misfit’ by dressing plainly and trying to remain as low-key as possible. (Notably, I was the only participant scribbling notes as the speaker talked). This temporary physical access yielded insights into another recruitment process and information such as wages, working hours and some indication of worker demographics. However, there was minimal interaction with other attendees at the talk and I left before the screening began, so as to avoid a) handing in a form which would leave a paper trail of misinformation; b) feeding further lies to screening officers trying to determine my suitability for the job; c) the possibility of being interviewed by a hotel manager I may encounter further on in my fieldwork – only this time in my role as a PhD student who has requested a research interview with the *same* five star hotel.

My particular challenge as researcher is therefore one of *maintaining* access to a variety of stakeholder groups over a sustained period of time concurrently. This means negotiating access and power relations between a variety of stakeholder groups vis-à-vis my own ‘positionalities’ as doctoral student *as well as* member of a local NGO involved in migrant worker activism. While my NGO involvement has been advantageous in facilitating access to like-minded others involved in similar work, the reverse has been true for another key stakeholder group – business elites and bureaucrats.

## **RESEARCHING ELITES – THE ART OF ‘POLITICAL IDENTITY MANAGEMENT’**

The problems associated with researching elites are a key concern for those involved in CSR research, which often entails a focus on the values of powerful private sector stakeholders.



Challenges may include “locating and funding travel to interview a hyper-mobile social group, gaining entrée into elite settings, modifying dress and appearance, and mastering specialized forms of knowledge in order to successfully complete interviews” (Conti and O’Neil 2007, p.63). Conti, whose research involved interviewing influential ‘experts’ from the World Trade Organization, also had to grapple with “the strategic contest over authority during the research process and the feelings of despondency that resulted from being ‘talked down to’ by informants” (Conti and O’Neil 2007, p.63). It is argued that such “significant methodological difficulties... have dramatic effects both on the manner in which research is practiced and the character of knowledge claims that it produces” (Conti and O’Neil 2007, p.63).

While gaining access to and interviewing participants should entail careful consideration, planning and reflexivity regardless of stakeholder group, the issues encountered can be quite different when one is interviewing business elites or policy-makers. As posed by Conti and O’Neil (2007, p. 68): “Are the methods used to study elites different or more difficult than studying those people who are excluded from the institutional and personal networks of power?” The authors’ response: Yes and no. Methodological problems such as access, authority in the interview setting, problems related to language, style and cultural capital are relevant whether one studies those in positions of power or those excluded from power networks. What varies is the “different, difficult dimensions” these methodological problems take on and the new problems they pose for conducting research (Conti and O’Neil 2007, p.68).

Marshall (1984, p.236), in discussing her experiences of research in policy settings, warned: “Elites, people in high positions, may keep tight control of information and access.” Moreover, bureaucrats, “whose livelihood requires them to protect agency goals, may invoke rules that frustrate researchers.” In such high-powered environments where spin, manipulation and applying pressure to meet outcomes is common, Marshall (1984, p.236-237) says that a researcher “must know what is sacred, sensitive and valued in this environment to avoid violating trust”. Ethical managing of data collection and research reporting is important, as is reciprocity for the time, information, access and connections provided by policy-setting actors (Marshall 1984, p.237). However, reciprocity for time when an interviewee is, say, an industry expert who bills clients by the hour is problematic. A researcher would more likely be reliant upon “the ‘donation’ of time” from time-poor subjects who watch the clock tightly; interruptions and cancellations are to be expected (Conti and O’Neil 2007, p.71). ‘Ethical managing’ is also tricky when one is approaching a group of power elites whose political views may be in conflict with the researchers’.

It is known that researchers sometimes ‘manipulate’ respondents in ‘harmless’ ways in order to gain information – for example, through appearing more naïve (Marshall 1984), sympathetic (Fine 1993) or ‘a-political’ (Conti and O’Neil 2007) than one is. When undertaking research on a value-laden concept (like corporate social responsibility) and investigating a controversial issue (such as labor relations), there may be a need to maintain a veneer of political neutrality when in the company of those whose values may be in conflict with yours. Conti and O’Neil (2007, p.75) use the term ‘political identity management’ to refer to the strategy of hiding personal politics, the visibility of which could lead to an early end of an interview or else provoke a defensiveness in the respondent. By containing the perception of the interviewer as a ‘threat’ to the organization (in this case the World Trade Organization), Conti subtly manipulated the interviewee by distancing himself from anti-WTO protestors and couching his work as ‘sociological’ (rather than political) in nature. Marshall (1984) similarly dispenses with strategies to deal with reluctant and



suspicious elites, some of which include strategic behavioral changes throughout different stages of the research process.

Tapping into personal networks for introductions, however, means balancing the desire for data with transparency of motives and motivations. Where there is a real chance of uncovering 'unsavory' material with negative consequences for participants, gaining access through a mutual friend may place that person in a precarious and awkward situation. Snowball sampling, therefore, has been a limited strategy for this stakeholder group so far. I continue to debate the wisdom of using personal contacts to gain access versus the chances of success by going through formal channels and will likely depend on a mixture of both. There is a need for creative strategizing in searching for alternative means to gaining information. This requires one to be alert, flexible and opportunistic – in other words, a mindful 'detective-researcher'.

Researcher reflexivity is a central tenet of feminist research and a way to acknowledge that the construction of knowledge is a political process (Kirby and McKenna 1989, p. 27). According to Conti and O'Neil (2007, p.66), two key aspects of feminist research particularly relevant for studying elites are "researcher accountability to knowledge claims and critical examination of the micropolitics of research". In the following section, I unload some "conceptual baggage" (Kirby and McKenna 1989, p.21) and share the tensions I struggle with as an academic researcher who is also an active member of a local NGO promoting a controversial cause.

## **BALANCING ACADEMIC DEMANDS WITH ACTIVIST OBJECTIVES**

As DeLyser (2001, p.443) notes, "when insider researchers choose topics in which they are deeply embedded in their personal lives, the entanglements can become difficult to unravel". The overlap of roles can be strenuous, as researchers divide their time between the pursuit of longer-term academic achievements and, in most cases, the shorter-term goals of justice movements. Thorne, a sociologist who studied the American draft-resistance movement in the 1960s, battled with feelings of guilt as others in the community devoted their time entirely to the movement while hers was split between activism and research (DeLyser 2001, p.443).

Outside the academy, I am a member of two non-governmental groups concerned with the wellbeing of low-wage migrant workers. I experience similar tussles as such involvement competes for my time and attention within already concentrated fieldwork periods. There is also a tension between the impulse to seek immediate redress for injustices witnessed and a more detached stance that sees value in data collection to challenge misleading developmental myths. This does not mean that assistance is not rendered to research participants who require it. Often, however, there are limited ways to affect change immediately when problems such as discriminatory labor laws and the lack of collective bargaining rights are structural.

It is often personal commitment to a cause that drives a researcher to focus on a particular topic. Ironically, such fiery passion often needs to be tempered with 'scholarly perspective' in order to be accepted as academic work. Wakefield (2007, p.340), herself an assistant professor in geography and activist involved in the food movement in Canada, warns that "Academics who become directly involved in activist campaigns must walk a fine line, since giving support in an unqualified way can lead to questioning of a person's "academic integrity" in a way that negates the ability to mobilize an academic identity... In this context, there is pressure to maintain or enhance the perception of objectivity, however



false this perception may be." When it comes to politically sensitive research topics, this perception of 'political neutrality' becomes even more important while at the same time increasingly problematic. Conducting such research in an authoritarian country where information is controlled and self-censorship rife adds further complexity.

I am currently sitting on the research and policy committee of one of the NGOs and last year presented the findings of a report at a public forum. To lend some socio-cultural context to the situation, while media coverage on migrant worker exploitation has been increasing, this is not a popular or 'sexy' cause for the general populace. A fellow member of the same group has encountered peers questioning her loyalty to her own country's citizens; calls for volunteers, membership as well as sponsorship of programs is challenging and pales in comparison to public and corporate philanthropy channeled towards more 'fashionable' causes such as children's welfare societies and conservation efforts.

My active involvement with this movement has several implications. On a positive note, it has given me relatively easy access to people aligned with my political views (fellow members of the NGO, other like-minded researchers, even overseas activists involved in similar advocacy work). Most are forthcoming with contacts and rapport is generally easier to establish from the location of shared goals. Gaining access to elite networks, however, has been challenging. In a small and highly networked country, there are concerns my activism will subvert attempts to appear politically neutral, which is important in a country still in the process of redefining 'acceptable' boundaries of social activism (Lim and Li, 7 Jul. 2007).

Another tension that arises is the activist imperative for evidence-based data gathering (to meet short-term legal goals) versus the academic role of critical theorist. This is not to suggest that these two elements are mutually exclusive. In fact, as Speed (2006, p.71) has argued, instead of treating activist research and cultural critique approaches as distinct and separate, there is a way "the two can be productively practiced together, as part of one undertaking". The multiple tensions and contradictions between the two should be perceived as "productive tensions that we might strive to benefit from analytically, rather than seeking to avoid" (Speed 2006, p.71). The author recommends a collaborative research approach that merges activism and cultural critique, which she terms 'critically engaged activist research' (Speed 2006, p.67).

This is the research methodology I have gravitated towards. However, in this particular instance, the desire for evidence-based data gathering is a major fieldwork challenge. Realistically, I could reduce some of the practical problems encountered if I adopted a broader cultural critique stance; after all, it is already known that the hospitality industry offers poor working conditions for those in its lower rungs. After sharing stories of worker exploitation with a friend who has worked in the hospitality industry for years, he shrugged his shoulders as if to say: 'Tell me something I don't already know'. His nonchalance, in stark opposition to the difficulty I am facing in gathering data to prove a widely accepted 'fact', led me to reconsider my persistence.

Essentially, there is no real need for me as a PhD student to 'prove' that exploitation exists in this industry - for that I can reference the work undertaken by NGOs like Tourism Concern ([www.tourismconcern.org.uk](http://www.tourismconcern.org.uk)) or unions like Hotel Workers Rising ([www.hotelworkersrising.org](http://www.hotelworkersrising.org)). As a member of an NGO concerned about labour exploitation, however, the lack of existing local empirical data on this particular industry impedes my ability to call the industry to task or make relevant policy recommendations. When challenging powerful stakeholders such as multinational corporations or bureaucrats, activists' claims are often refuted. The burden of proof lies on activist groups to gather consistent data, to demonstrate that injustices are neither isolated nor random but structural and consistent, demanding intervention. Therefore, if given the approval to undertake



covert research, will my activist impulse to collect evidence and 'expose' unethical behavior lead me to take more risks than necessary for a doctoral thesis? There is a need, therefore, to be constantly mindful.

As Speed (2006) has noted for some other scholars paralyzed by methodological dilemmas, the temptation is to withdraw completely into a cultural critique framework and abandon the 'messiness' of attempting 'critically engaged activist research'. The temptation is strong. External pressures can compound the situation. These can include resource constraints (for example limited fieldwork time and budgets; visa expiry dates) as well as lack of institutional, social and peer support (leading to feelings of self-doubt and isolation). Fortunately for me, doing fieldwork at home has reduced my fieldwork costs and eliminated visa problems. Supervisory support has been excellent and peer support forthcoming. Time pressures regarding completion within set timeframes, however, impede and will influence qualitative depth and research strategies.

For Wakefield (2007, p.341), the academy is "*both* an easy and difficult place to act" in terms of critical praxis. The author defines praxis as "the melding of theory/reflection and practice/action as part of a conscious struggle to transform the world (Wakefield 2007, p.331). Wakefield considers critical praxis easy because she has the freedom to set her own agenda and benefits from supportive colleagues and mentors both within and outside the academy. She is well paid for the work she does and has found the Canadian research funding infrastructure generally supportive of certain types of critical inquiry. By the same token, as an academic, Wakefield is under pressure to be productive and publish in peer-reviewed journals, which can overwhelm other activities. It is also noted that "institutional interest in exploring alternative models of research, pedagogy and governance is low" (Wakefield 2007, p.341). She concludes that while such "institutional pressures have not directly impacted on what I think or say instead, they can force my praxis into narrowly defined channels" (Wakefield 2007, p.341). It needs to be acknowledged, therefore, that 'critically engaged activist research' exacts certain demands on researchers that require strong institutional and peer support, not just within the academy but also from the wider community within which academic institutions are embedded.

## CONCLUSION

As this paper has demonstrated, "Fieldwork is at once a political, personal and professional undertaking" (Hyndman 2001, p.262). These are not clearly defined roles; neither do such interwoven undertakings occur within neatly defined spaces. A critical approach therefore necessitates "thinking through one's own praxis in relation to the interplay between identity and situation" (Wakefield 2007, p.340).

In highlighting the dilemmas faced while conducting research on homeless women, Doyle (1999, p.245) admits the intractability of some of the issues. At the same time, she believes that "reflexive research on socially excluded groups that is aware of power relations is better than no research at all" (Doyle 1999, p.245). Desmond (2004, p.268), who also encountered challenges in 'researching up' an elite field, says a "reflexive approach to fieldwork demands... acknowledgement of the researcher's positionality, the 'experiences' of 'others' and the demands of the research project itself"; it also "signals that the knowledge produced by the research exercise cannot be understood as objective, pure or innocent".

This paper has attempted to share some of the key dilemmas generated from investigating a politically sensitive topic in an authoritarian state. As such, it is an attempt to examine the "micropolitics of research" (Conti and O'Neil 2007, p.66) through critical



reflexivity. The ethical dilemmas of conducting research of this nature are significant but not insurmountable. Admittedly, it is an emotional challenge trying to retain an optimistic outlook as a researcher who frequently encounters instances of injustice and unethical behavior. Pessimism, and its close relative, cynicism, constantly threatens to cloud perspective and drain enthusiasm. At the same time, the work of other researchers who have encountered (and creatively mediated) similar challenges continue to inspire and inform. As Conti and O'Neil (2007, p.80) note, tales from the field help build community and provides training for future researchers. This is necessary as "social research continues to grapple with the scale and complexity of social relationships in this age of globalization". This paper is one attempt to contribute to this collective effort.

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