In Spite of Institution: Community Engagement and the Lived Experiences of Kearl Oil Sands Workers in Northern Alberta

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTERS OF ARTS

In

PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION

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We accept the thesis as conforming to the required standard

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Abstract

Prison or paradise is a matter of perspective; within the walls of a highly institutionalized work camp in northern Alberta, it is one that employees are constantly negotiating, as the boundaries that typically separate areas of work, sleep, play and life blur. By adopting an interactionist perspective, existing theories of organizational structure and human interaction within the framework of a total institution can be analyzed and expanded. As growing demand for these specialized work camps grows in the region, employers and workers alike can benefit from integrating this level of social interaction into both camp amenities and daily routine. The very framework that promotes compliance, order and security for the stability of the institution also, simultaneously, limits and controls the freedom and autonomy of those within it, leading to disengagement and burnout. However, ethnographic interviews conducted at the Kearl site have revealed that many workers have elected to cope with the stress of institutionalized living through an alternative method: by connecting with their fellow co-workers through friendship and choosing community engagement over dissociation.

Keywords

Total institutions, ethnography, remoteness, oil sands, workplace communities, burn out, engagement, organizational culture
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Introduction

“To study an organization is to study not only what people do, but how they rationalize or explain the whys and wherefores of that work.” - P. Manning (2008)

It is a rare occasion to encounter a situation when large groups of people eat, sleep, live and work within a strictly regulated and physically separate location, self-contained and severed from the rest of society.

It is even rarer to see this form of organization take the shape of a workplace, where its members willingly choose to participate under this structure. Organizations such as this provide a unique opportunity to examine and expand upon current theories on organizational structure and human interaction, as members are isolated from the influences of the external world. In his seminal text, Asylums, Erving Goffman described total institutions as situations under which the normal barriers that exist in society to separate sleep, play and work spheres of life are broken down and amalgamated (Goffman, 1961). He further describes four key elements that are common to all forms of total institutions:

First, all aspects of life are conducted in the same place and under the same single authority. Second, each phase of the member’s daily activity is carried on in the immediate company of a large batch of others, all of whom are treated alike and required to do the same thing together. Third, all phases of the day’s activities are tightly scheduled, with one activity leading at a prearranged time into the next, the whole sequence of activities being imposed from above by a system of explicit formal rulings and a body of officials. Finally, the various enforced activities are brought together into a single rational plan purportedly designed to fulfill the official aims of the institution (Goffman, 1961, p.6).

While this definition can apply to a variety of different organizations, from prisons and hospitals to military barracks, boarding schools, and monasteries, the focus of Goffman’s work was on mental
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patients living within the walls of an asylum. The focus of this research is on another form of total institution, oil sands work camps; and more specifically, on the work camps of the Kearl Oil Sands Project, located in northern Alberta, Canada. Although the work camps of this study share many of the characteristics of total institutions described by Goffman, it also highlights a key distinction not well defined or pursued by Goffman’s work: how voluntarily participating under the structure of a total institution alters the interpretation of each individual’s experience of that institution. This key distinction shifts the base of power of the “inmate”, as described by Goffman, from one who is humiliated, degraded and debased of their identity, to an individual who makes rationally considered trade-offs and sacrifices of self on a voluntary basis. In addition to work camps, other similar examples of voluntary total institutions may also include military personnel, boarding school students and members of secluded religious orders, such as monasteries.

Hailing from a background in sociology, Goffman’s work heavily emphasizes the structure of the institution itself as the basis for shaping human behaviour and interaction within. While this focus has laid a foundational approach to research on the topic of total institutions, communication scholars can expand on this work by contributing insight into how human interaction and experience shapes the significance and meaning of those institutions from the level of the individual. From this perspective, meaning is not fixed, but rather, fluid and dynamic, and arises through interaction with other individuals as opposed to a pre-determined experience based upon the rigidity of institutional structure.

Based on interview data collected from ethnographic field research conducted on the Kearl site, this paper will argue that the element of arriving and staying voluntarily changes the individuals’ experience of working within a heavily institutionalized framework as described by Goffman, largely because the freedom of choice each member has to leave this environment at any given time changes
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how they relate to that institution. Further, although many of the effects on “inmates” described by Goffman still pervade the environment of a work camp situation, studying the lived experiences of oil sands workers provides a unique situation under which the basic framework of total institutions can be analyzed and expanded. In addition, based on these distinct circumstances, evidence has been noted of alternative methods for coping with the institutionally imposed challenges of this unique environment. In short, the Kearl Oil Sands site provides a unique opportunity to examine a different kind of total institution, and suggests that even amongst the stark contrast of a highly institutionalized framework, a group of transplanted and often temporary residents have developed effective strategies to cope with the stress and strain imposed by the very institution under which they choose to engage. The rest of the paper shall shadow the following structure: a discussion of the existing literature on total institutions and remote work settings, highlighting significant gaps in the body of research towards which this study can contribute; a description of the methods used to conduct this research; a narrative summary of interview findings followed by the detailed analysis of the themes of separation, disconnection and connection as experienced by the informants of this study; and finally, concluding comments on the strengths and limitations of this study in addition to proposed areas for future research.

Literature Review

A review of the current body of literature on the subject of total institutions and remote work places reveals broad gaps both in empirical study and theoretical foundations. Primarily rooted in the field of sociology, much of the current literature on total institutions focuses on those to which admission is involuntary, and therefore does not easily translate to the experience of remote work camps. However, an understanding of the existing foundation provides a starting point upon which this research builds. The following is a brief summary of the aforementioned gaps in current research, as
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well as background resources that identify a growing need for attention towards building upon these
gaps for the benefit of organizations and employees working and living within highly structured remote
work camps.

Existing Institutional Literature and Opportunities for Expansion

Institutions and institutional organizations have been topics of interest primarily in the fields of
sociology, politics and economics for many years (Lawrence & Suddaby 2006; Meyer, 2008; North, 1991;
Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; and Wallis, 2011). Loosely described as “humanly devised constraints that
structure political, economic and social interaction” (North, 1991, p. 97), from an economic standpoint
institutions have been devised, built and maintained “to create order and reduce uncertainty in
exchange” (North, 1991, p. 97). They are also conceived as the “(more or less) enduring elements of
social life that affect the behavior and beliefs of individuals and collective actors by providing templates
for action, cognition, and emotion, nonconformity with which is associated with some kind of costs
(Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2011, p.53) from a sociological one. However, with the exception of recent
work focused on institutional message practices (Barley, 2011; Hardy, 2011; and Lammers, 2011), little
work has been undertaken by communication scholars, particularly with respect to community
engagement and support within institutional organizations.

In keeping with the phenomenological and sociocultural traditions of communication studies,
the research for this thesis was conducted with the intention of gaining understanding for the ways in
which work and life organization within the framework of a total institution shapes the experience of oil
sands workers, contending that the way this understanding is created is through direct, interactive, lived
experience with it. The perspective of social constructivism within communication and culture studies is
well established (Carey, 2009; Dewey, 1916; and Williams, 1966), especially as it applies to ethnographic
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studies such as this (Clifford, 1986; Hymes, 1974; Mead, 1934; and Turner, 1987). In this respect, “communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed” (Carey, 2009, p.19). The reality of life as a remote camp worker, therefore, is not an objective external set of arrangements, but rather, co-constructed and continually re-evaluated amongst group members through their interactions (Carey, 2009). Further, valuable insight into institutionalized work and lifestyles can be gained by examination of these unique worker communities, and ultimately, through the life stories of its members.

Working Within a Total Institution

Few other workplaces permeate the lives of their employees to the degree that camp workers in the oil sands face. Studies previously conducted on parallel institutions such as live-in hotel employees (Shamir, 1981), military communities (McClure, 2003), tree-planters in the backcountry (Sweeney & Holmes, 2008) or remote nurses (Kulig et al., 2009) share similarities, either in their remote settings or group dynamics; however, the experiences and community in this study are markedly distinct due to the isolation of the site, the highly institutional nature of the organization, and frequency of breaks home which intersperse and separate time spent at work. The transitionality of place, of work and of home makes the experiences of remote workers unique (Meerwarth, 2008; Strawn, 2008). Whereas tree-planters often remain for a full season, military personnel or remote nurses are stationed for many months or years and often accompanied by family, and hotel personnel are not operating in isolation, studying the experiences of Kearl oil sands workers can offer an alternative situation for analysis and can contribute to building the current body of literature on remote work and life within highly institutional organizations. Due to their often remote and isolated settings, as well as the challenges for accessibility to outside researchers, studies conducted in this area have been limited primarily in focus to address
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business opportunities (Fahay & Steel, 2008), civil engineering challenges (Andres & Doyle, 1984) and discoveries in physical geology (Kashiwara & Tsuji, 2012) or biology (Raab & Bayley, 2012; Sherrington, 2005), with little attention to the experience of the workers whose role remains vital to the growth and sustainability of industry in this region. By focusing on developing an understanding of the experience of remote workers, organizations operating within the region can focus the allocation of services and amenities on the actual needs of the workers, better enabling them to attract experienced staff in a competitive labour market.

The Growing Demand for Work Camps

A larger remote workforce requires expanded facilities to provide accommodations, and with no nearby towns or communities as alternative options, heavily institutionalized work camps will increase in demand as the industry grows. Smaller camps often manage to avoid implementing a lot of regulation and structure; however, as camps grow in size and larger groups of people must be accommodated under the same roof, highly institutionalized facilities become the preferred manner to efficiently manage so many individuals. As the world’s supply of oil diminishes, companies are finding increased economic opportunity in exploiting oil sands resources from projects previously considered financially unfeasible.

In Canada, the oil sands currently represents a multi-billion dollar industry, second in the world for crude oil deposits only to Saudi Arabia, and is this country’s most economically valuable resource (Government of Alberta, 2006). As a result of the increased value of the oil sands resource, employment predictions for the future indicate an increasing shortage of local labour in the area (Government of Alberta, 2006). This predicted shortage of labour, combined with rising demands for labour as further large-scale projects are developed in the region, indicate a greater number of workers will be required
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to adopt a remote work lifestyle in order to meet industry needs (Honarvar et al., 2011). Although institutionally structured work camps are an efficient means to provide a safe and secure place for living and working in the region to meet the demands of industry, they also promote an environment of disconnection and depersonalization.

The Downside of Total Institutions

Heavily institutionalized facilities breed a culture of stress, a reaction Goffman describes as the result of “mortification or curtailment of self” that is likely to “involve acute psychological stress for the individual” (1961, p. 48). He attributed the stress to the degradation and humiliation inmates faced within the institution. While some recent research has provided further evidence to support this finding (Lucas, Kang & Li, 2012), others are critical of the extent to which this process exists and some even question its negative implication (Karmel, 1969; Mouzelis, 1971). Although these studies contribute to understanding the psychological impact inmates face within the structure of a highly institutionalized organization, they are primarily focused on situations when admission is involuntary. At Kearl, workers are free individuals who voluntarily choose to participate in exchange for financial benefit and are treated with respect and dignity within the parameters of the institutions and its goals. However, despite voluntary admission, employees on the Kearl project share similarities with the involuntary inmates as they are still subjected to a marked loss of autonomy and limited in their “access to valued resources: not only material possessions but also time, personal space and control over one’s daily routine” (Scott, 2010, p. 214). For many, this leads to feelings of distress as the result of “a disruption of the usual relationship between the actor and his acts” (Goffman, 1961, p. 35). Even aspects of life not normally attributed as characteristics of self, such as sleeping patterns, dietary options and basic decision-making capacity, are often challenged within the walls of Kearl. While the lack of control over a
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large degree of ones actions and daily routines may not result in the “acute psychological distress” cited by Goffman, combining this lack of empowerment with long hours and disconnection from home and outside support certainly strains many Kearl workers. Identifying those sources of strain, however, is only the beginning. Studying how those individuals who cope well under their external influences manage that stress can provide awareness and insight valuable to both the organizations operating these work camps, as well as the workers who choose to join them, to achieve a mutually beneficial purpose of boosting morale and productivity, and improving worker health and well-being.

Summary

The current literature provides a good introductory framework for understanding how total institutions can shape and affect their members, but has also revealed many gaps in studying how those effects translate to a wider variety of environments and situations, particularly those where members’ participation is voluntary. What has been revealed about the way people manage and cope with the stress of a total institutional way of life does not always translate to the circumstances of Kearl workers, largely due to the fact that they are not exchanging their current way of life in its entirety for that of the institution. Kearl remote workers do voluntarily participate, but only for a short period of time, and those shifts are interspersed with breaks at home at which time the workers can regain that former life for another short period of time prior to returning to work. The frequent exchange of work and home lives that are so dissimilar causes many to feel like they are living a dual life or a distinctly separate one depending on whether they occupy their work or home life sphere. The frequent transition also causes many workers to manage their institutionalized time differently than if their situation was more permanent or involuntary, providing an excellent opportunity to expand the existing body of literature and current theories on total institutions.
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Method

Design

The information gathered for this thesis was drawn from three months of ethnographic fieldwork and supported by observations gathered over nearly three years of participation at the Kearl Oil Sands Project. The great power of using ethnography lies in its depth and its innate ability to yield “explanatory insights into the reasons why people, groups, and organizations act as they do, and how conflicting social forces are resolved” (Alder & Alder, 2001, p.17). As a fully integrated member of this remote work community, I have been afforded a unique opportunity to experience, participate and bond with many employees that comprise this more than 5,000 person worksite. It has provided me with a level of access to a community and organization typically secured, removed and inaccessible to the outside world. While I am cognizant and cautious of the ways in which my own experiences may potentially have arisen within my research, I was very eager to focus my data collection not on my own experiences, but rather on the others around me. Ethnographic interviews, the primary form of data collection for this study, required an established rapport and a relationship of trust between me and the interviewees, built over a period of time (Sherman Heyl, 2001). My embedded position within this community served to facilitate these relationships and provide access to this exclusive and removed group. From fresh out of school to nearly retired, this community of Kearl workers bring a wide range of skills, educational backgrounds, professions, cultures, languages, religious beliefs, ethnic backgrounds and demographics to the site.

Data / Location

Kearl is like a world unto itself; a metropolis amongst desolate boreal forests developed in the pursuit of oil. With its plant site still under construction, a plethora of camps support the more than
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5,000 full-time workers who reside there for the duration of their shift. Workers from across the country and around the world fly in on company provided charter flights, delivering workers to a private airstrip an hour away from site and bypassing the larger city and closest hub of Fort McMurray completely. Although this is the closest major centre for shopping, supplies and entertainment, the majority of this project’s full-time employees may never see or visit the city at any time during their career at Kearl. The main camps that accommodate Kearl staff while on rotation are Wapasu Creek Lodge (East, Main and West camps), Kearl Lodge and Henday, with overflow accommodation on an as-needed basis at Creeburn Lodge, Beaver River, Athabasca, Barge Landing and Albian Village. All employees are expected to adhere to a strict zero-tolerance policy for drugs and alcohol for the entire duration of their rotation, including days of travel, and any infringement on that policy will result in immediate dismissal from the site. Scanning facilities within the camps and airports, as well as random drug dog searches through camp rooms, vehicles and offices are used to enforce these policies. Seatbelt policies, speed traps, random inspections, morning tailgate meetings and a full suite of project job bulletins and safety flashes ensure workers are informed about and comply with project safety standards. At every point, from the moment you check-in to board your flight arriving to site, the procedures and protocols for conduct and behaviour are clearly outlined and strictly enforced. Even off-site, within the walls of the fenced in camps, rules are in place to regulate all activity from visitors and contraband goods, to dress code in the cafeteria and boot cover use in the halls. Camp-issued swipe cards are required for access to dining facilities, living quarters and workers’ private rooms, as well as additional project cards to swipe for entry to bussing and access to the worksite. Cameras monitor activity in the camp halls and your movements are recorded with every swipe of your card. Failure to
comply with any of the outlined policies or regulations can lead to disciplinary action, including leave without pay or dismissal from the project.

Data / Participants

Interviewees were volunteers, starting with personal contacts and acquaintances on site, with snowball selection guiding identification of future participants. The twenty interviewees selected comprised a broad and diverse group. They ranged in age from their early twenties to late sixties, and carried a breadth of experience in work camp and remote situations that varied from between two months to over fifty years. They hailed from different provinces across Canada, as well as a few representing Kearl’s numerous workers from the United States. Twenty percent of the interview participants were female, a close approximation to the actual percentage of total women currently working on this particular project, and a wide variety of professions and project roles were represented within the group of interview participants. More information on interviewees can be found in Appendices B and C.

Data Collection and Analysis

To assist in improving transparency in my data, I employed a series of 20 semi-structured narrative interviews to allow participants to self-identify themes for focus and facilitate their own observations and interpretations into the data (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 2001). Each initial interview lasted an average of 60-120 minutes and some follow-up interviews were additionally conducted to verify findings and interpretations, facilitating a more collaborative approach to the research process (Lassiter, 2005).

All interview participants were afforded anonymity throughout their participation. Although each of the interviewees participated on a completely voluntary basis and were often eager to share
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their experiences and insights, many participants expressed a greater freedom in sharing information during the interview that they knew would not be shared or identified to colleagues, superiors, or professional contacts.

Interviews were audio recorded and field notes taken during the initial discussions, with the conversations later transcribed and analyzed privately. Fieldwork was interspersed with breaks away from site as I followed my regularly scheduled ‘two weeks in, one week out’ rotations.

In order to achieve the objective of producing a “thick “ descriptive account (Geertz, 1973) of the life stories that shape camp worker experience, interview data was transcribed and analyzed through a process of thematic analysis (Gobo, 2008), a useful method for “identifying, analyzing and reporting recurring patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Data for this analysis came primarily from interview transcriptions and field notes; supported by written accounts and observations, prior to interpretation (Emerson et al., 2001).

Lived Experiences Shared

The following narratives are the combination of stories and insights shared by the 20 interview participants involved in this study. As a way to present the data collected from so many different anonymous informants with “a vividness otherwise unattainable” (Alder & Alder, 2001, p.17), the following vignettes are representational characters whose “experience” is a reflection of snippets from all or many of the interviewees. Virtually every aspect of their stories comes from direct quotes or close paraphrases of actual interview data.

**Linda**

*You know, I never really pictured I would end up in a place like this, but life is funny that way. I grew up in a small town in Nova Scotia and good jobs are hard to find. When I graduated from*
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university, I had a lot of student debt and not a lot of opportunities at home. My cousin worked out at a project nearby and told me I should come to work up north in Alberta. Although I didn’t really want to leave home, I needed a job, so when I was lucky enough to find myself a job at a fly-in/fly-out camp, I took it. I had no idea what I was getting myself into and honestly, it probably didn’t matter. I would have taken it anyways. While it’s not exactly a career for me, it is a good job for the short-term.

Being a single woman at a remote camp has its own challenges. I’m largely outnumbered by the men, which my mother thinks should only increase my odds of meeting a good one. Mathematically speaking she should be right, but it doesn’t seem to work out that way in reality. Besides, dating doesn’t really fit into my travelling and rotations so that part of my life is kind of on hold for now. Camp life can be a different place – almost like a self-contained bubble or an artificial city where men stare and ogle in the halls and women raise their eyebrows if you wear lipstick, as if to say “who do you think you’re trying to impress?!” I don’t ever wear heels here and wouldn’t dare put on a skirt. When I’m at home, I dress very differently than here, even on my off-work time. But come to think of it, most everything about my life here is different than at home, so much so that sometimes it almost feels like I’m living two unique and separate lives: my life at home and my life at Kearl, and the only thing joining the two is the plane ride in between. My home life, despite being completely different, is always being influenced by work though – work is the rock that everything else shapes around.

You’re never really off the clock when you live where you work and you work all the time. I’ve never had a job before where my employer was responsible for everything from the bed I sleep in to the food I eat. It’s quite limited to the basics though; I couldn’t get a haircut here if I needed it, or attend a religious service. I guess in that respect, it’s still very much a workplace. Some people I work with complain that there isn’t enough to do at camp in the evenings for recreation, although I’ve never really
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understood why they would want it. I mean, after you’ve just spent the past 12 hours working with these people, the last thing I want to do is spend more time in the evening with them. I use my time between shifts as time to myself, which I find is a hard thing to achieve in living quarters that are so close I can hear the person in the room next to me sneeze. I just tend to keep to myself at camp, put my head down and work through my shift until I can go home again.

I find it easier to cope with the stresses of camp life, limited autonomy, long hours and geographic isolation by just shutting everything else out; and with housekeepers to clean your room, cooks to make your meals, and bus drivers to transport you around, it becomes an exceedingly easy thing to do. I get to throw a switch, and that’s just the reality that’s dictated when I go to work – you just don’t have access to me. Even with email and cell phones and all the technology we have to keep connected, at the end of the day I have so much to think about and manage with my work life here at Kearl, that I simply can’t add that layer of home on top of it all so I just shut it off completely. I disconnect from home for two weeks out of every three, which is easier for everyone. My family and friends really don’t understand what I’m experiencing anyways. They always ask me about what I do on the weekends when I’m away. I tell them that I eat, sleep and work when I’m here and that’s about it; 12 hours a day, 14 days straight until I get to go home. That usually elicits a cursory “oh” response, before they switch the conversation to the latest movie they saw at the theatre or the winning pitch they made at their last softball game. I’m finding it harder and harder to relate to those things the longer that I keep working away. I know I sacrifice a lot – birthdays, events, parties, concerts, all the ‘real life’ stuff, but the truth is I think it’s worth it. Sure, the hours are long and the days can be gruelling, but I have an opportunity here to put in the overtime and earn a good living that I just couldn’t do otherwise. I don’t think my friends at home really understand that part of it. They see the income I’m earning now and
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they think that it’s just easy oil sands money but at the end of the day, they can have a glass of wine with their dinner and sleep in their own bed. They work a 9-5 and take their kids to swimming lessons in the evenings; they really can’t understand the sacrifice and the long hours. Until you’ve actually gotten yourself up at 4:30am on day 19 and gone to work, you can’t really understand.

For me though, it’s still a choice and it’s a trade-off I’m willing to make. Pretty soon I hope to pay off the rest of my student loans and then save up for a deposit on a house. Some of the people I work with here have families they support by working away. I can’t imagine being able to do this job while raising kids or leaving a husband at home. My plan is just to work hard for a few years while I’m still young and single to get myself ahead and then hopefully I can find a decent job to get by on and raise a family close to home. I guess you could say I’m pretty driven and hard-working, which helps me fit into this lifestyle, but I’m also pretty unattached. I think if I had a family of my own, or a spouse, or a house, or a pet, working up here would make life incredibly difficult to balance.

Jim

I’ve been working in the oil sands now for almost 10 years, but I’ve been an ironworker and a proud union member for most of my life. When the opportunity arose for me to work up north, my wife and I talked about it a lot. We knew the time apart could be a big strain on our marriage, and for our two kids who then were ages seven and four, but I felt that by going away to work I could provide more for my family and give them better things in life than if I stayed working at home in the city. There are lots of jobs for me here in Edmonton where we live, but nothing that pays the way the remote jobs do. To be honest, I think it has been a good thing for us and, while I’d never admit this to my wife, I think my absence from home has made our marriage stronger. We appreciate each other more when we’re together and we don’t argue and fight about small things like we did before. I get time to myself when
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I’m away, and she manages the household. When I’m home though, it’s not a vacation like some people think. I have a week off but between family and household chores and commitments, banking, errands and the rest of the honey-do list, I might have a weekend to spend fishing at the lake or doing something fun, and then it’s back to work again for me. Besides, even though I’m off for a week, what a lot of people don’t realize is that the rest of the world still works their Monday-Friday day jobs and aren’t around to spend time with me, so it can still be lonely and leave you feeling isolated at home too.

I’m not sure how single people do it though; I’m fortunate that my wife is able to handle the house for me while I’m away and take care of a lot of the everyday things. I think it would be really hard if I was still single and didn’t have that help and support at home. The kids do miss me and I missed a lot of their growing up by being away like I am. A lot of people I work with focus on the sacrifices they make for this job. For me, though, working away for me never really felt like a sacrifice. I mean, I miss a lot, but it’s a choice I make in order to provide my family with a better life. Missing the birthdays and anniversaries and such doesn’t really bother me, because when I really need to take time off for a really important event, I know I can do it without facing repercussions at work. For the most part, my family has adjusted to me being away so often that they don’t even seem to notice anymore when I’m coming and going. By now, we don’t even talk on the phone or email much anymore but I find that easier too. They can’t understand what it’s like for me up here or to relate to anything I can tell them about this place. They can tell me about the dog and the neighbours and things they did during the day and I understand that; but they can’t even begin to imagine the people and activities I try to tell them about. The hardest part about the job is everything except the job. Camp life can be stressful and the rules and control are hard for a lot of guys to handle. Some people compare it to a prison or an institution, but while I can see their point, I don’t think that’s really fair. Those negative attitudes really
bring people down and I get tired of listening to them whine and complain. Ultimately it’s a choice to work and live here so you need to accept it or leave; but it’s the structure that causes frustration and stress to build up like a snowball. I’ve seen guys just explode over lineups at the cafeteria or someone taking too long in the lunchroom ahead of them – that’s what happens when the stress builds. But camp life also provides a certain level of ease and comfort that’s hard to explain. I don’t have to worry or think about how my day will unfold. I can coast right through my shift if I wanted and a lot of guys I see around here do.

I’ve also seen a lot of young pups burn out in my day. They come up here fresh faced and start earning money beyond their wildest dreams. Pretty soon they’re spending beyond their means, buying up toys and trucks and getting involved in drugs and gambling and parties. And it’s not just the young kids that get stuck in that pattern, but they sure seem to be a lot more susceptible to it. Then they get into a position where they can’t leave and they now need to stay to keep earning enough to keep up with what they’ve got. It can be a vicious cycle and I’ve seen it take its toll on a lot of relationships, marriages and families. I think sometimes people come here to do this kind of work to avoid or escape from their lives at home. Balancing your personal life and your work life is a delicate art that many people struggle with.

The crew I work with are just like a family to me and I think about them and their safety even when I’m away from site. When you think about it, we spend more time together with our coworkers than we do with our own wives and families, so even if we wouldn’t have chosen some of these people to be our friends in the outside world, we find ways to build friendships anyways. We’re a close crew and share a lot with each other about life back home. The long-timers in this game have figured out that there’s no one else really to vent that stuff to and around here and it can eat you alive otherwise. We
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rely on the people we work with much more here than back in the ‘real world’. In the evenings every few
days we play poker, or catch a UFC fight or play floor hockey. It helps break the monotony of the shift,
even though there aren’t always a lot of social activities available. Some of my fondest work memories
are of things I did for fun with my coworkers, both on the job and off, like the time we improvised our
own driving range behind the parking lot to whack balls or just the evenings we spend having dinner and
joking around. I’ve met a lot of people over my years from all different backgrounds and cultures and
you really get the chance to make a lot of connections. Most of the work the non-union guys get is
through those networks. Our industry is growing, but it’s also close-knit and eventually you start to see
the same faces floating around from camp to camp and site to site. There’s something common about
the ones that stick it out – it’s hard to describe. You just never know when your paths will cross again.

Bill

Up until recently, I had been enjoying the retirement I had worked all my life to earn. But, the
2008 economic crisis really caused my retirement savings to take a hit and pretty soon I was facing either
a very penny-pinching and cautious remainder of my retirement years, or the possibility of returning to
work. Before then, I had never even heard of the oil patch, and since I’ve lived in southern Ontario most
of my life, I’d rarely even been on a plane until now. With no one wanting to hire an old fart like me in
my home town, when I decided to go back to work I didn’t know where to turn. Then one day I saw a job
posting for a bus driver up at the camps in northern Alberta, and I figured that might be something I
could do to earn some money without too much physical strain. I sure was in for a surprise.

My wife was disappointed with my decision to go back to work out west. With our kids long
grown and moved away, and no one else around the house, she was lonely at the house during the day
and afraid on her own at night. I tried to reassure her that she would be just fine, but sometimes I even
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doubted that myself. How could I know that when I’m thousands of miles away? I find my mind wandering a lot during my day while I’m running the same routine loops dropping off tired looking workers to their various stops on site. I wonder if I’ve made a mistake to leave her in exchange for money, and how she is coping at the house without me. I think about the pipes bursting and the lawn that needs mowing, and how I’m not there anymore to take care of those things.

When my shift ends after my final run of the day, I’m back at camp around 7:30 p.m., but by then it’s after 9 o’clock in Ontario so it’s too late to call home. By the time I eat dinner, I usually go straight back to my room and either watch some tv or read before bed. As a bus driver, I usually work split shifts, covering shift changes and bringing the workers from the camp where they live to the site where they work for the beginning and end of their day. It’s really an amazing feat of logistics, when you think about it; it’s like evacuating the equivalent population of a small city every day at the same time in the morning and then bringing them back again at the same time every night. That demand on resources isn’t just in bussing, but also in the kitchen for meals and housekeeping for cleaning. I don’t think too many people realize what a coordinated effort it is to meet this kind of demand. They just see food that’s only lukewarm, or the towel the housekeeper forgot to replace.

Bus driving is not as exciting as I’d hoped. I thought it would be great to talk to so many people from all over the site, but actually I don’t really get to say much beyond cursory greetings and the mandatory reminder to buckle up seatbelts. Without daily interaction with my fellow coworkers sometimes it feels a bit lonely driving the big touring coach down dusty gravel roads that link the camps to site. The scenery never changes but I always have to stay very alert and focused when I’m responsible for the safety of so many others under my care and control. The days are really long and I get bored a lot on my between shift time at camp. Since no one else is really off when I am, I use my time to walk
around the camp or read. Sometimes I feel a bit like a caged rat; all the hallways look the same and
every room and wing are all decorated alike. It makes me feel a bit like I’m trapped at camp and just
passing time until I can go home again on rotation.

One thing I think they could do better to make this an easier experience is to better prepare
people before they first arrive. I had no idea what I was in for, what the camps would be like, what to
bring with me or what I would need. I wish there had been someone who could have explained some of
that to me before I arrived because I think it would have really reduced a lot of the anxiety I felt in my
first few days here. I couldn’t even figure out how to get my room key to work or where to go to get
lunch. It’s a big place with all these people milling about through the halls, I just felt really overwhelmed.
A lot of people I hear complaining about the camps really have no idea how good they’ve got it. I
remember back when I was a young man flying peacekeeping planes in Cyprus. We stayed in horrible
conditions and ate whatever we could get our hands on most of the time. Here, my room is warm and
clean and comfortable – it’s a lot like a hotel room actually. The menu selections can become repetitive
but there is always something to eat when I’m hungry, and once a week we get steak or prime rib. I
think sometimes people here, especially the young kids, are spoiled. They haven’t got a clue what it’s like
to really sacrifice and endure hardship.

There’s definitely a unique sense of community that has formed here at this remote camp in the
middle of what feels sometimes like nowhere. But rather than a single, large common group, it seems
like people bond in smaller sub-groups, largely with direct coworkers. While most members of the
community are quite tolerant to many things, when someone crosses a boundary or breaks an unspoken
rule, they are made aware of it pretty quickly. I remember one morning I was driving a bunch of craft
workers to their stop. A guy boarded the bus that hadn’t showered for a few days and he really smelled
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bad. The guys called him out immediately and told him that if he didn’t shower that night, he wouldn’t be allowed on the bus the next day. Well, the next day came and he hadn’t showered, so they left him at camp and he missed a day of work because he had no other way to get there. You can be sure he never did that ever again.

My friends back home can’t really understand what this kind of work is like. It’s not like anything I’d ever done before; not like any job, nor like when I moved away for college, nor like my days in the military. It’s just really different. When I go home, one of the first things I like to do is grab a beer with the boys down at the Legion and talk about anything else but work and Kearl. They just can’t understand anything I might tell them anyways, and when I’m home, I’m thousands of miles away not just physically, but mentally as well.

Discussion

All twenty interviewees told twenty different stories of their experiences; what brought them there, their struggles and challenges, and why they stayed. However, the narratives above and the interview data and observations collected highlight, in particular, three distinct but interrelated common themes: a definitive separation of work and home life; a sense of disconnection as a result of that separation; and, a desire to establish connections with coworkers in order to manage the stress of that disconnection.

A Constant Duality: Work and Home

Nearly every participant involved in the study expressed a separation in some form of work and home lives, as demonstrated in the narratives of Linda, Jim and Bill. For many, it was extreme, to the point where they expressed a feeling of living two completely separate lives. Even those who felt that the differences were not extreme could not relate many of their home life rituals or routines to the ones
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that defined their work life experiences. Although they were quick to clarify that this rarely meant their personality or character changed between these spheres of life, they felt that every aspect of their daily lives was distinct – their identity as a person virtually changed depending on their physical location. Some described going to work as “throwing the switch” or “putting on the other hat” while others identified specific rituals to mark the transition from home life to work life and back, such as “boarding the plane,” “packing my bags” or “arriving to camp.” While most identified this as a coping strategy for handling the disparity between the spheres of work and home life, others described it as a tactic to enable avoidance: “working up here [at Kearl] allows you to avoid your other life, which is huge, and a lot of people don’t realize that’s what they’re doing. People escape home to work and at the end of the shift escape work to home.” No matter what the motivator, all participants either identified this behaviour in themself or could see it displayed in others.

Reasons cited for what drives the separation between home and work lives included the perception of geographic isolation, stressful work and living conditions, long days and hours on the job and a marked lack of control over the daily routines and rituals of work life. Further, in every interview, informants stressed an inability to convey their work-life experiences to their friends, family and contacts outside of their work environment. They repeatedly expressed difficulty in communicating or relating their daily experiences in a setting that is so distinct from home: “unless you’ve done this, you simply can’t understand what it’s like.” Being not only removed physically from those support networks, but also emotionally through the inability to relate their experiences, many remote workers deal with the incongruences between their home and work lives by disconnecting: both through further separation and distinction of home life from work, and within the work environment often perceived as the root of that disconnect. However, while this coping mechanism can provide short-term relief from
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the stress of institutional work and living, it is not an effective long-term strategy for most of the interview participants consulted because it leads to decreased job satisfaction and productivity, disengagement and, ultimately, burnout.

Disconnection & Burnout

Linda’s narrative, in particular, focuses on her strategy of disconnection from her environment as a method of coping with the crowds of people, the long and stressful days, and her lack of ability to communicate or relate her experiences to others outside of her work environment. She deals with the challenges of remote work in this type of setting by disengaging and disconnecting, a not uncommon experience. She is institutionalized in many respects, and feels the strain caused by emphasis on structure, routine, control, rules & regulations which results in what one informant described as “crowds of people who are tired, overworked and oppressed” or what another called “a sense of being exhausted all the time, even when you’re getting enough sleep.” But this was not unique to Linda’s story. Jim also observed disconnection in his coworkers, the ones that just put their heads down and coast through. He is identifying a pattern of behaviour he observes that demonstrates how workers can become detached by the forces of institutionalization. While he approaches the work and camp situation through engagement, becoming involved with his crew and coworkers personally, he disconnects from his home life and family while he is away. As one interview participant commented: “With technology, I have the ability to pick up the phone and give moral or verbal support to any family member anywhere on this planet.”

“But do you?” I asked him.

“Do I? No.”
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Even Bill tells you he shuts work off when he is home – that the distance is not simply physical but also mental as well. Kearl was often referred to by informants as “a bubble”, “a world of its own”, “an artificial reality”, or “not a normal place” due to its highly institutionalized structure, internal rules and regulations, and isolation from “the real world.” In addition, a lack of official support networks or outlets to vent building stress, combined with limited activities and options to promote, invite or boost community involvement, leaves many workers unsure of where to turn for help. As one interview participant mentioned: “we don’t really talk about the challenges, perhaps because we’re in the same boat.” There is unspoken pressure to comply, to “not make waves” or to appear less than able to manage. But tolerating the negative effects and stress that builds up as a result of institutionalized living does little to resolve the underlying issue: institutional environments exchange individual freedoms for organizational efficiency, however, the longer-term effects of that exchange cause workers to disconnect, rendering them less efficient and less productive to meeting those goals of efficiency. Since the safety, security and coordinated movement of such a large volume of people often relies upon the adoption of many institutional practices, the challenge now becomes one of discovering ways to promote engagement and reduce stress within an organization structure which inherently inhibits connection.

Connection & Engagement

The social aspect within a total institution is critical to maintaining the health and wellbeing of those living inside its confines. Without external outlets to vent the stress that builds, irritation begins to grow within people, or as one informant describes: “if you go to your room and just fester – and I say the word fester because if you had a bad day and you just fester in your room – if you don’t have any social release, then I can understand how you wouldn’t be able to cope up here. You have to have
something.” For many at Kearl, that ‘something’ is community. Workplace communities at Kearl help workers adapt to the structure and challenges of living within a highly institutionalized camp. In doing so, Kearl employees are defying current literature on institutional adaptation strategies and integrating an interactionist approach to institutional survival based in community growth and engagement.

Goffman (1961) describes practices inmates develop in order to adapt to the mortification of self he saw them experiencing that included: withdrawing attention from everything except that which was immediately before them (detachment), intentionally challenging the institution by breaking rules or refusing to comply with procedures (rebellion), or replacing the outside world with the institution as a model for desirable living (complete integration). Yet, he never suggested what informants did – to integrate wherever possible aspects of home life (the outside world) into their work lives (the institutional world) and build relationships with coworkers that extend beyond the typical boundaries of workplace relationships. They build communities amongst their coworkers within the framework of the institution to instill and regain a sense of normalcy in camp life. Some of the ways informants identified that community is built and maintained at Kearl included starting or joining sports teams or special interest classes, partaking in special events celebrating coworkers’ birthdays or other events, joining weekly poker nights, and participating in the ritual of sharing of stories and details of home life and events with coworkers. Those who have discovered the benefit of a yoga class or a weekly poker night with coworkers recognize that, not only does it alleviate stress and tension after hours back at camp, these activities also facilitate friendships amongst coworkers that spill into the workplace, improving morale and job performance and easing stress and tension during work hours.

Remote workplace communities provide support networks to vent problems and stress; they replace the presence of friends and family workers are cut off from, and they create stronger bonds to
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facilitate improved organizational performance. A community has been defined as “a partnership of free people committed to the care and nurturing of each other’s mind, body, heart, and soul through participatory means” (Naylor, Willimon & Osterberg, p.42) and has been cited in recent literature as becoming increasingly important in the workplace because, due to extended working hours and longer periods of time spent away from home, “it may be the only source of community in which they participate” (Manion & Bartholomew, 2004, p.46). Remote workers who are removed from their hometowns, from their geographic communities, religious communities, volunteer groups or special interest communities especially require community engagement within their remote workplace locations to fill that void.

People who find ways to engage and connect with others in their community report lower levels of stress and decreased detachment between their home and work identities as well as improved job satisfaction. As one interview participant described: “Establishing a connection with people on a personal level changes the game. Then you’re not stressed out and you’re not going back to camp thinking ‘grumble grumble grumble, I’m gonna sit in my bedroom and just go to bed.’ But, if you’re able to connect with people, you can go for a walk or do something and feel more comfortable with people, and at the same time, leave work at work.” Leaving work at work is an incredibly challenging thing to do in a place where the workplace also defines how you eat, sleep and play, but those who have developed personal relationships with their coworkers and are connected to their workplace communities, find the challenge significantly easier to manage.

The more people engage with their coworkers or others on site on a personal level, the less stressed they feel and the more productive they are on a professional level, a finding that is consistent with other studies on workplace friendships and stress reduction (Goodman, Zammuto, & Gifford, 2001;
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Kuipers, 1999; Milam, 2010; and Pakeeza, Haris & Sajjad, 2011). It is an interesting aspect of a workplace organization that extends to the personal lives outside of the job itself. Recent research has consistently demonstrated that “burnout is less likely to occur within a positive and supportive workplace environment” (Maslach & Leiter, 2008) and confirmed that supervisor support, coworker support and a sense of community all lead to greater engagement and satisfaction, as well as reduced feelings of exhaustion and inefficacy in the workplace (see especially Maslach & Leiter, 1988 and 2008; as well as Truchot & Deregard, 2001, Schnorpfeil et al., 2002). Not only does it help individuals to cope with stress on the worksite, it also builds rapport amongst coworkers and facilitates improved performance in the workplace. Being more connected to coworkers in the context of community helps individuals identify where their contributions fit, feel like they’re a part of something bigger than themselves, and contributes to a greater sense of both personal and professional satisfaction. While concepts like “positive, supportive environments” or “connected workplace communities” may seem idealistic and utopian, organizations that “manage to convey a genuine sense of community and belonging to their employees are thriving as a consequence” (Peters, as cited in Naylor, Willimon & Osterberg, p.43). Employees are “emotionally and cognitively engaged when they know what is expected of them, have opportunities to feel an impact and fulfillment in their work, perceive that they are part of something significant with coworkers whom they trust [emphasis added], and have chances to improve and develop (Harter, Schmidt & Hayes, 2002, p.269).

Institutions, however, promote depersonalization. When people feel like they do not matter, they feel like their actions – good or bad – also do not matter. This causes a ripple effect that is neither positive nor supportive and eventually leads to burnout. Community engagement, according to the informants of this study, functions as an effective buffer to manage the negative aspects inherent within
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heavily institutionalized organizations. Through community engagement, Kearl workers are not simply coping to survive, but effectively managing their situations to thrive.

Conclusion

In a more traditional workplace, workers often present themselves in a particular way that conforms to the expectations of their individual role or job. There, separation of one’s personal life from their professional one is likely encouraged and, often, personal aspects enter the workplace only to a small degree. A place like Kearl, however, is hardly traditional. It is still a workplace, but one that operates in isolation from many outside influences, and one that provides the bed where workers sleep, the food that they eat, and the amenities for recreation and entertainment for off-time while on the job. People, therefore, naturally bring their personal lives to work to a much larger degree, and, in the same respect, they bring their work lives home. There is a constant blending of identities and priorities, and the language, dress code and norms for workplace interaction shift as a result of these fluid and loosely defined boundaries. However, a highly institutionalized organization typically discourages individualism and the routine and regimentation of behaviour can have a negative impact on the emotional wellbeing of the workers who make this lifestyle their choice. Stress builds as freedom and autonomy diminishes amongst adults accustomed to exercising a certain degree of personal agency. Decreased support networks, combined with a lack of understanding or ability to relate from external ones, further fuel this disconnection. In addition, long hours and strictly enforced rules and demands drive many towards burnout and further away from engagement. Burnout and disengagement cause workers to disconnect and become less productive and dissatisfied both in their jobs and, often, life outside of work. The very system that regulates its workers’ lives with such a high degree of rigidity and structure to achieve organizational efficiency and compliance simultaneously undermines those very workers’ ability to
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 maximize their productivity and satisfaction on the job. With demand growing in the region, expansion of current work camp facilities will be required to house the additional workers expected to fill industry needs, and therefore, work camp facilities such as the ones studied at the Kearl project will also continue to grow. There are some valuable insights that can be adopted from this study that can help ease the incongruities that develop between heavily institutionalized facilities and the communities of individuals who voluntarily reside within. Some planning for common amenities, shared spaces, program options and community events would make great strides towards bridging these gaps. Incorporating “real world” services such as a barber, religious services or retail services may also help integrate aspects of home life into the camp world to ease the strain of disconnect. Further, integrating official support networks for workers to connect with while on site and making them aware of these challenges and possible outlets for support during their onboarding orientations could make a significant difference towards not only improving the lives and satisfaction of the individual workers, but also in improving their efficiency and productivity while on the job.

The Kearl site has been described by many informants as “significantly more invasive” than other camps in the region, largely due to its size and owner-directed operational agenda. As such, this extremely rigid and highly institutionalized organization provides a unique glimpse into a way of life that is isolated and unknown to many outsiders, despite growing demand. While not all aspects of this study will translate to other individual camps in the area, many of the fundamental characteristics and findings will. Thus, this study provides a unique opportunity to examine an organization typically inaccessible to outsiders and, in particular, the research community.

One limitation of this study is also closely linked to the restrictive nature of access that gives it strength: a limited sample size. Part of this was a methodological choice on my behalf, as I elected to
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gain in-depth and descriptive knowledge from a smaller group of participants as opposed to a larger pool of informants with more standardized and general responses. This choice reflects my phenomenological standpoint that human experience is interpretive and dynamic in nature, particularly with respect to complex and multi-layered experiences such as this. Narrative interviews provided the best opportunity to tap into those individual interpretations. However, the other part was due to limited access. During my research, I was unexpectedly moved to another camp much smaller in size and further away. As I was conducting interviews completely on my own time outside of work, my access to informants shifted greatly. This situation exemplifies some of the types of stress individuals face while living within the care and control of an institution – my time off was still my own, but my schedule, routine, mobility and access to others were not. A larger sample size could perhaps have provided either further insight or a greater weight of support to the findings of this study.

Further research could be concentrated on the migrant worker experience or the Aboriginal experience to integrate a cultural context to this particular type of institutional study. In addition, this study could be expanded to include a variety of camps in the region to determine how closely the findings of this study translate to other work camp environments. Ultimately, demonstrating how investments made in programs and amenities to boost morale as a team and build community amongst members of highly institutionalized organizations can translate into increased productivity, job satisfaction and improved well-being will be the greatest challenge, especially within a corporate environment that focuses heavily on the tangible costs of those outputs with little appreciation for the payback and benefits of that investment. However, as competition grows in the industry and the region to attract and retain qualified and experienced staff, organizations that develop and invest in these programs and amenities should earn a substantial return on their investment.
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Appendix A: Map of Kearl Oil Sands Project, Alberta, Canada

Appendix B: Interview Participants, by Gender and Marital Status

*Kids refers to dependent children under the age of majority