

How the front-line works at Ontario's WSIB

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Background

- Site of tension
- what happens; standpoint of FL
- point is to understand, not judge
- aligned with small workplace research agenda

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Research Objectives

From a sociological perspective...

- To *characterize* the nature of work at the FLs of the WSIB, particularly the work-related understandings and practices of ADJ, NCM and CSR working with small businesses
- To *locate and account for* these understandings and practices in terms of the socio-institutional context
- To *reflect on* the implications of findings, drawing on previous research

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Lines of investigation

- 1) getting 'in the shoes' of FL staff
- 2) identifying the general properties of work practices
- 3) linking work practices with the broader organizational apparatus

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Data

- *verbatim transcripts* of 36 'open-tethered' qualitative interviews with individual FLers and managers
- *ethnographic observations* (8 sessions @ 4 hrs) from on-site participation in naturally occurring routine work activities, combined with 'go-along' inquiry
- *documentary materials*
- Two offices – one urban, one regional

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Mode of analysis

- discourse analysis and 'structural-interactionist' grounded theorizing
- variety of analytic devices to contextualize interpretation, develop core concepts
- theorization strategies for identifying generalizable abstract properties of empirical instances

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1. Work at the FLs is framed by the disciplinary role and contradictory institutional imperatives of the WSIB

- disciplinary role
- Institutional imperatives:
 - solvency
 - impartiality
 - productivity
- Tension/contradiction between imperatives
- played out at FLs
- mediating role of FL

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2. FL work as a professional assembly line

- **'keep the system moving'**
- **hard to routinize**
- **'soft skills'**

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3. Front-line work involves strategic discursive and discretionary practices

Discursive framings

- employers: mom & pop, economic legitimacy, 'giving a little slack'
- IW: economic advantage not legitimate, moral deficiency, 'calling the game'
- 'employer pays'
- Injured worker role

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Adjudicator:

"The doctors didn't think he [IW] could walk, much less run. This man, in 6 months, he was not only walking he was running! Took himself back to work before the doctors were even ready to tell him he could go back to work. And it was astonishing his recovery. He did that because he wanted to. There was no way that he was not going to recover. You gotta admire them, you almost want to make them your poster person. See what the human spirit can do right?.. Then on the other hand you have people who have entitlement issues, they think that they are entitled to everything and more that there's no way that we can satisfy or compensate for that injury."

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3. Front-line work involves strategic discursive and discretionary practices

Discursive framings

Discretionary practices

- as strategic resource

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Adjudicator:

"Like I originally *in good faith*, I approved the retraining programme to start some time mid-August.. he [IW] said, "No, I cannot go, I'm not going to that, I have my kid, no-one's going to look after my kid, I can't afford day care". So just to kinda, *I probably shouldn't have done this*, but just to kind of accommodate him, you know, it was like okay, I can push your start date back two weeks, you know, so you can arrange [child care]... Even though like *I'm not really supposed to be looking at that kind of stuff*, because *I'm trying to show him ...in good faith* and then he's like, "Okay, you know, I'll go" and then as soon as the programme started he said, "No, I'm not going, can't afford the bus". So I got a barrier every single...nothing I can do to work at this guy. I've given him pretty much everything I can offer him, nothing more I can do.

(Interviewer: So what do you do with a case like that?)

I'm *looking at it basically as a non-cooperation* type issue. So basically what I'll do is I'll just basically stop the--cancel the training programme and stop the benefits then. He doesn't clearly want to participate so.....

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Discretionary practices

- as strategic resource
- as capital
- personalization
- compromise and unsettle
- language of justification
- simultaneously abide by and bend rules

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4. FL work with small business has distinctive social form, and is affected by the marginal status of small business within the operating framework of the WSIB

- relatively greater power over client
- framework oriented to large: smalls handled by exemptions and adaptations
- FL drawn into discretionary practices

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In sum

- 1) the mediating role played by FL staff in managing structural tensions in the WSIB

- 2) the nature and functions of the 'soft skills' side of FL work- particularly their discursive and discretionary practices.

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Implications

- opposing scripts for injured worker role
- conflicting logics: eligibility vs justice
- who pays?
- organizational change affects social relations at FLs
- re-framing the narrative

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