Discipline and Resistance at Workplace

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Background

Office is a place for work. There have been many ideologies at workplace about how an employee should be so as to extract labour force to work for the company. Vaguely as discipline they seem, they do manipulate employee from the way they work, to how they should be at work. Pun (2005) followed an idea of Foucault’s concept on micro-physics of power, analyzed the disciplinary techniques over the women workers of at the Meteor plant so as to extract labour power from them. In this light, I set my focus to the disciplinary techniques prevailing at my workplace.

Foucault (1979) claimed that ‘the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive and subjected body’. (p.26) There requires a system of subjection, ‘which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body’, which is discipline. (p.137) Discipline is not only for the growth of skills or intensifying the subjection of human body, but forming a mechanism which ‘makes it more obedient as it becomes more useful, and conversely’. In other words, discipline is ‘a policy of coercions that act upon the body’ so as to produce ‘subjected and practiced bodies, “docile” bodies’. (p.138)

Aim

1. To reveal technologies which made one become productive in the workplace.
2. How these technologies work.

Positioning of researcher

The research was based on my experience as a part-time clerk in the Bank. I was hired by Credit Evaluation Department there which primarily dealt with personal lending of housing and automobiles mortgages. The team I belonged to was
responsible to do primary processing of the applications and other administrative tasks of the department. Except the manager and two officers of my team who were permanent staff, all other colleagues in the team were paid on hourly basis, with most of us were hired by an outsourced personnel agent; no matter worked there part-time or full-time. The experience here may not be a universal one, but my position as a part-time staff, hiring by another company, working ‘on-site’ to the ‘client’, facilitated the understandings to workplace and the discipline within.

Methodologies and the choice of topic

Information for this research was mainly gathered from participant observation and in-depth interviews. Field notes of observations were written during mid-March to mid-May 2007, for the days I worked for the company as a part-time clerk. Interviews were made in May, which were intended to know more about my colleagues’ thoughts on this issue.

Analysis was drawn mainly from these two sources of information, supplemented with my experiences and memories since last May, the time I started working for the company as a part-time clerk.

Participant observation was chosen as a means of ethnography, which I recognized it for a purpose of homework, with misconceptions that ethnography pointed only to this type in the early beginning before full understandings. Still, I would say that it is a suitable method for this research which gives chances to look into the life in the workplace as a staff, especially for us – lower and even marginalized, because of the outsourcing employment, in the hierarchy of the company. Field notes were written between slack times during office hours and were not fully revised until the writing of this paper, except three which I have tried to write more in details after working hours for the issues happened that day.

Taped interviews were conducted to broaden my mind on the issue, as a supplementary to the field notes. Six interviewees were all my colleagues, who were all paid on hourly-basis, worked full-time or part-time there. They were all aged around 19-25, who were post-secondary students or form five/ form seven graduates. While A brief interview guide was prepared with some questions of certain directions. Follow-up questions would be asked next after the interviewee(s) answered a question so as to have a better understanding to the answers. Strictly speaking, only one full in-depth interview was made with a full-time colleague of
mine, Gigi, who I identified as a key-informant. Another one was a casual focus-group interview to five other colleagues during lunch at a restaurant. Not all questions were asked because of the situation and limited time. There was another short one conducted to one of my colleagues in the focus-group during slack time in office on the same day afternoon, which was kind of a supplementary interview to the focus-group one. Information put in the field notes also contained some conversations of casual talks or casual interviews during work, which were not taped and transcribed fully as an interview.

**Result and analysis**

**Life at Distribution Team**

Primary processing to housing mortgage applications was the major task we have to do in Distribution Team. After our processing, the application would distribute to the assigned approver for approval. Contrary to common office setting, except for the permanent staff, space of our team were not subdivided and individualized, but having a big bench which placed with several computers on it. Seats were surrounding two sides of the bench. We didn’t have designated seats, but tasks did have designated seats owing to conventions and limitations.

There were five tasks for us to do in primary processing of applications. In ‘official’ and correct sequence, they were creating a case (Create case), printing out applicant credentials from the Old System (Printout), assigning cases to approvers (Registry) as well as entering information in the Customer Matrix System (Customer Matrix), checking and printing Customer Credits Report Reports for applicants (Customer Credits Report) and searching and printing property documents from the web (Land Search). Processing time was limited to two hours for normal ones, one hour for fast queues and five minutes for extremely fast queues. There was a cut off time of 3 pm everyday; those applications arrived after 3pm could be treated as arrived at 9 am the next working day. We were told to sit next or opposite to one another in order to shorten the time wasted when passing the application between one another, though we didn’t bother much about this. Due to confidentiality of customer information, only one computer would be able to check and print Customer Credits reports, in a strict sense; while only one person will do the Registry/ Customer Matrix tasks, and would sit nearest to the main passage of the office.
The practice of processing applications would be one or two persons to be responsible for a task. After one task was done, the application will be passed to another person for another task. A tracking system was there for tracking the flow of an application, and the amount of applications we have processed and that of still under our processing. As ‘official’ practice, we were told to take logs into the system for the application (with their uniquely assigned number) and for the task we performed to it, before and after doing a task.

In this arrangement, a person would normally be concentrated on one task of the processing, at least for a period of time, provided that there were enough colleagues showed up that day. When times staff were not enough to allow such division of labour, one person may pick up more than one task at the same time or focus on one task for numerous applications at one time and shift to another task at the other time until all applications finished processing.

Here illustrated was the minute arrangement of the workflow. With this arrangement, labour force was believed to be most efficient which staff could deal with specific tasks non-stop, one application after another.

**Labour supply**

Labour supply was one of the problems our team has to confront with, because most of us were taking this job as a part-time one, while we have some negotiation powers about when we would show up. Normally, we will input our working hours into a system about one week before, so that Mimi and Tony, respectively the manager and the officer of our Team, would know who will be there to work in the Team on different days next week. However, there would be late arrivals or no shows at times, which made crises on labour. There were once that only two people attended to work throughout most of the day, with another one showed up only two hours after lunch. In order to make us working more, and deal with those late arrivals and no shows. There were talks about ‘the more hours you work, the more you can earn’ and blaming the late arrivals and no shows.

*Ritchie arrived at 1100. The first thing happened was that Tony called out, ‘you finally arrived, Richie. It’s 1100 already.’ [claiming that he should arrive earlier](March 15, 2007)*

*Ritchie ... by arriving late around 1130, which he was supposed and declared to be arrived at around 9am. Tony told him that he has to write his log sheet and
register his arrival time then, when he found Richie's appearance. (March 22, 2007)

... Mimi also asked Marcus why he was not showing up these days even though he has inputted the system that he would be there for one or two days. Mimi requested him to phone her next time if he was too busy to work. (April 20, 2007)

... Mimi asked about where Candy was as it’s been already around 1000, asking if she was lazy and woke up late. Then Gigi explained that her facial allergy has made her sick and she will be late for work (March 12, 2007)

This also applied to our returning time after lunch, as we were supposed to have lunch for a maximum of one hour. There were times colleagues in the office called those who were having lunch outside to come back early so as to have enough labour for dealing with tasks of the afternoon. One afternoon, I received a call from the colleague in the office, when we have been out of the office for lunch for nearly an hour.

Gigi called me when we were happily playing at the video game arcade, I thought she was calling us to go back early, while she would like us to help buying some snacks for her. (May 3, 2007)

This manipulation not only worked on me. It also worked on Richie, one of my colleagues. Here was what I noted on a day he was late for work.

Richie left first to 1/F Canteen for his lunch and promised to be back within 30 minutes ... When I have my lunch in hand and sit in front of him, he has finished nearly half of his meal. He told me that in order not to get mad/ angry by Tony, he would like to finish his lunch as fast as possible and appear at Distribution Team [office]. (March 22, 2007)

Finish within limited time

In order to make the whole department worked within the limited time constrain imposed to process and approve applications, there existed an incentive program. Cash coupons would be distributed to the approvers when they become the top ones for approving the most applications on time. There was also a competition between approvers for coupons in the sense of a team. For us, when a certain percentage,
around 90%, of application we processed could meet the time limit, we would receive coupons for the whole team.

Even though this is the first thing one of my interviewee thought about which would make us working productively, there weren’t many concerns about this incentive program for us in the office to my observations. Still, there were times which coupons were at our talks, especially when we noticed that we could not finish the application processing on time or mistakes were made.

* [When doing Customer Credits Report] Today Andy made mistakes with typing/ inputting a wrong digit, which misread a ‘5’ as a ‘3’ in the ID copy. Then he told me that he or we will have no Wellcome coupons this month because errors/ mistakes are made. (March 2, 2007)

This may also be a reason why we were told not to think too much about what we have done wrong when approvers would like us to re-do our tasks because they found we have missed some documents or given them wrong ones.

* The thing all concerned [here] is to make tasks done, with the minimum need of training, therefore the actual meaning of tasks were never told to us, in addition that the approval process was not our required knowledge. There were times that we were told that we had done some mistakes. But we would never know why, even if we would like to know so as to minimize/ prevent it next time. It was because the approval process was timed, and all those errors we made and amendments we have to be done at that time were actually timed towards their limited time. I remembered an occasion or two that we were told not to think or discuss about it, when we were discussing what we had done wrong:

  * Bonnie: Don’t think too much why, just do it first and give it to me.

  * Even though we were in good intention to rectify our wrong 'concepts' or ways of working, it was no way to know, as we were all ignorance to the whole ‘inner’ knowledge. (March 15, 2007)

**Working without really knowing**

This led our work here a paradoxical one, even though we could ‘smoothly’ deal with tasks every day, we actually know little about what we were doing. Even for
those who have worked long as a part-time staff may not have the knowledge about the meanings and product details. This borrowed me the sense of factory workers at the assembly line, which was also recognized by Gigi, when we went into the topic about not knowing what our works really were.

... I felt that I am working as button-bearing worker in the factory. I make no sense to am really doing. If you asked me what is NEP, or OEP, [names of different kinds of products] I don't know the answer at all. Why some of the applications will be using Old System while some others use New System, I don't know why, either.

(Did you ask for the answer then?) When I first came, I know nothing at all, if you ask somebody ... I remembered I asked Nicole once, she told me she didn't know the answer, either; but that's the practice. That is, when you saw that paper, you will know the application is ‘under redemption’. What is ‘under redemption’? I don't know.

(It seems that this is our way of working, for all the things. To a certain extent, we know how to deal with the tasks, but indeed we know nothing about it.) Yes. Don't know what I am doing at all. However, as they ask for similar issues, you would know how to answer them. But I don't think I know why.

(Gigi)

And this topic reiterated with another example.

... I felt there were many things unknown to me. You think you know because colleagues around told you about their experiences. Such as New System ... they said Pam said ... for many times ... it would be the second case of a dual case required entry of New System to check Customer Credits Report ourselves. Why? We never know.

As we were just following the experience of others, there were times we wouldn’t confirm the correct way to deal with things.

... We didn't read or study the policies and principles of the processes and products, and so it is common for us to find problems. HOS [Housing ownership scheme] was one of the hottest topics these days as the government re-sold the housings. However, there was a 'myth' around; those mortgages claimed over
70% for HOS are not treated as those of private estates. They were just normal cases no matter how much percentage they are lending. So, should we treat it as a HRP [over 70%] case or a normal case? Gigi asked around us and phoned Jamie. Even with Jamie's experience, there was no such thing as HOS, she added a note that Gigi has to confirm it by asking others. This stayed to be a myth longing to be solved. (March 26, 2007)

Jamie was one of those who worked long here, who changed to be a permanent Approver Trainee after being worked full-time at our Team for a year or two. This way of working resembles the situation which Pun (2005) put into her book about the work process at Meteor. The workers there ‘simply followed the instructions of the layout and forced themselves to recognize the English letters along with the arrows, graphics and alphabets.’ They were actually trained to be ‘a body without mind, a mindless body’ in this sense, so that the productive won’t be relied onto a specific person, and easily replaceable. (p.82-3)

This type of working does have drawbacks, in my view. The following encounters are good illustrations.

Nancy’s unhappiness ... While she was registering the cases and putting the information to the Customer Matrix systems, she found one of the HRP case missed out a premium amount. She would like the salesperson to clarify if this application really a HRP one, as most of the HRP cases do have a premium amount, but not all to my mind. That’s the background of her uneasiness. When she phoned the salesperson, they just don’t know what each of them saying, but the salesperson said that it’s a genuine HRP case with no premium amount while Nancy insisted that there should be some kind of a premium. Nancy was scolded by the sales in a bad manner and cut the line rudely. Nancy felt quite uneasy about that. (March 23, 2007)

To Nancy’s mind, an HRP product should carry a premium amount, and that was what we were told about. However, I just found that was only part of the truth. I was told at another occasion that there were different kinds of HRP products varied in the payment of that premium amount, while some of those won’t require stating a premium in the applications, which means ‘no’ premium entry to our system. However, because of this lack of knowledge, we were made unhappy and frustrated.
Another example was a occasion when I was asked to photocopy two completed applications. This was a paradoxical one. On one side, training a staff costs much to a company, but not training the staff would still cost some other resources, which may cause one guilty about.

... fetched the folders, they were kind of thick, I will say, consisted of many pages and they were taped in small sets in the folder. At first, June told Tony not to photocopy the letters ... but then Tony just replied that it was actually difficult to distinguish which were relevant and which were not, and counter proposed to photocopy all of the contents inside the folders. I did agree to Tony's views in heart as it was not easy for me to distinguish what June really wanted. June just said that she was intended to be environmental friendly, not to waste so many papers. I just thought that she was a little bit not practical ... I agreed Tony's view because the case was actually a full case, not only having the things I was trained to process and familiar with, but also all other documents which I was unfamiliar with, but above all was that I am not trained as an approver, so as to know which were crucial documents in the folders ... During the process, Kay passed by and would like to photocopy her document. She just said something like ‘Another big production? It’s true that it won’t help even if [we] become trees in next reincarnation.’

I didn't said much about her words, but the sense of environmental unfriendly was clear. The metaphor of being a tree next life was common among us, meaning that the world would have a revenge on us because we have wasted so many papers for processing applications. (March 30, 2007)

Although we may not know what we were really doing in the office, we learn how to deal with those things consistently. Not only will be there new products or amendments to policies we have to know, but also we would forget how to do something right, left out some of the steps, or because not confident enough as we didn’t do it for quite some times.

There was new kind of product, applications with a yellow-page in the front, not the same as the one sending us ordinarily (May 3, 2007)

While Nancy asking about the waiver for pre-approval-HRP application, Mimi showed up and told us that there would be new policy that the $1000 thing or waiver for the $1000 for pre-approval-HRP application was not required for
those under lending amount 85% or lower of property cost, until September 30. (May 10, 2007)

Here was an occasion about learning the ‘new’ knowledge, about distributing overdraft documents.

Andy: Do you remember how to do this?

Wendy: What is it? Have you ever taught me about this?


Wendy: He is not around now, I can’t prove it.

...

... so as what Richie was doing, picking up how to do the Customer Credits Report Reports right. This was not the first time he did the Customer Credits Report process, but he was only familiar with the Old System ones and the pre-done New System ones until now ...This time, as he was having a dual New System cases (having applicants overlapped in cases), he has to do one of them anyway (because the salespersons won’t check twice Customer Credits Report for an applicant). He would like to seek help from me, because he told me that Andy had shown him how to do it several times, but still, he forgot how to recognize which case was undone by the salesperson. (April 19, 2007)

Even though someone was taught about using the system, they would not tell about its meaning or how it really worked. Checking the Customer Credits Report through the New System was just another similar case to Meteor workers. We learned where to be clicked, what to be entered in boxes (e.g. salary amount of the applicant at the nth box) and what to be chosen in drop down lists (e.g. four No’s for all four Yes/No boxes) and which box to be checked so that we will have the result we wanted – a Customer Credits Report. We knew how to deal with all those things, while not knowing what they are; we were reduced as machines to perform tasks.

Result of a social body

There were times we really become mindless bodies in a sense that habits developed within workplace became our practices of our body – manners, tones of speaking and attitudes or feelings to situations.

Gigi put an [old] automobile loan application to the laser barcode scanner (while there wasn’t any barcode on the paper) and both Glen and I were stunned
and laughed at it ... The action putting the folder to a laser barcode was the action to those ordinary mortgage cases, because there would be a barcode on the left top corner of the cover page. The scanner would read the barcode [with unique application number] and logged to the Tracking System before began the Registry/Customer Matrix process. The work Glen would like Gigi to do was to change the folder’s location so that Glen could take the folder with her and to process it. Gigi just did the same thing as she did to ordinary new mortgage cases, and put it under the reader. However, this time, there wasn’t any barcode on the paper actually because it wasn’t a new case and there came an embarrassment. (April 2, 2007)

Because we were in the office to help, we did have change our personalities [manners] that we would answer a ‘yes’ when approvers would like us to help searching / printing (again) a document or coming for an enquiry. This was especially obvious when Andy was criticizing Gigi and Wendy meanly changed to a hospitable manner when someone approached for help and enquiry. His swift change stunned most of us who noticed. [And this was the same to that of the salespersons.] (May 3, 2007)

... I was actually having free time that I help Jamie also filing the folders and just sat at my seat. Hearing from what the salespersons were working, they were quite busy at all. Similar to us, they have new cases (customers) to follow-up (the step before giving the case to us to process). I was not quite feeling easy at all because I did think I was the most idle one in the office, while everyone around was busy on their work. (April 19, 2007)

... 28/F. Sitting over the partition wall was a salesperson called Esther. Her voice and telephone manner to customers quite different to the way she talked around office, and even others on phone. I could tell that the greeting and conversation she said was actually a carefully planned script drafted by the company circulated throughout all other salesperson. Though it’s artificial it seemed, it really lent a sense of hospitality, friendliness and care to the customer, especially added with ‘that’ voice. No matter the way of telling the customer her name or a confirming / replying hum (hmm), all these gave the customer a polite and friendly sense, conforming a logic that ‘customer should be correct’ and the staff was actually helping the customer out. [not in the sense of making money from them (but they do actually), but helping them to lend money from the bank so that they can have enough money to buy property or have money for their own
Even though the salesperson was not in our team, this illustrated well about how organic a social body can be, after the disciplinary power. This was also parallel to our calls to the applicants so as to verify their employment status against what they claimed in the application form.

Going back to the way we dressed for work, we were bound to the discipline, too. We were told to dress properly in the office, in the attire of business casual, with a tie for males, except Fridays or Saturdays, which casual wears would be accepted. Even so, we would still dress properly for casual wears. This has become norms surviving between us.

*Will you wear slippers to work? Or will you come to work with a tee shirt and jeans? (Me: Yes. On Fridays.) Only Fridays. (Emily: Just we could wear them on Fridays) That’s what we call a norm. (Samuel)*

*I am now wearing this skirt with camouflage patterns [today], Mimi will pick on me about this. And she just pick the way I dress, even if that’s a pairs of black jeans!...(Nancy)*

Even though trivial, meticulous and minute it may seem, this is the micro-physics of power, which made every little part of the body conforms to ‘a certain mode of detailed political investment of the body’. (Foucault 1979, p.139)

**Resistance, transgression and surveillance**

However, without surveillance, those disciplines won’t work at all. Transgressions and resistances happened at times to subvert and resist the power controlling one’s body.

In order to know how much we have learnt during the period of we worked, our knowledge on the operations was tracked down on a table. However, committing knowing every tasks was, in our mind, an unwise decision.

Something more was explained during an interview.

*I think it is a bit unfair. The more you learnt, the more tasks you have to handle,*
while there wasn’t any increment on my wages. [I still paid as those with fewer tasks to handle] (Gigi)

Our manager used this table, which was a form, to track down how many tasks we have learnt to do. The table had the names of the staff against a list of tasks, including those uncommon tasks, and would like us to fill in how much we knew about these tasks – fully or partially. It was circulated around every 3-5 months so as to update what we have learnt. With this form, the manager may know how much we knew. Then, It could be easier for her to assign tasks when necessary, especially during times when she found some tasks left undone on the bench, and keep track of one’s knowledge of the operations; or as an evident to retort those who avoid doing some tasks by using the reason of ‘forgetting how to do’ or ‘never learnt about that’.

An excerpt of my field notes showed how we would fill in the form.

_The partial/full skill form appeared again today. I just found that not everyone has filled in when it was passed to me. It recorded down what we knew to do, with an indicator (filled by us) about the degree, F – full or P - partial, tracking our knowledge. In order to decrease one's workload, some of them put most of the tasks, especially the alienated tasks a ‘P’ or just leaving it blank (which means not knowing about the task). Even when UM (Unit Manager, a part-time staff)/Mimi came and asked about that, we may then negotiate about what we knew, [and left some of the tasks unfilled,] so that we would be saved from those tasks [at least for a period of time]. _(March 12, 2007)

It was kind of a resistance to exposing fully what we knew about the operations. The following showed an incident about the negotiation, even could be described as an argument, while Mimi thought Kim should be filled all tasks with an ‘F’ – ‘full’, Kim put some of them as a P – ‘partial’.

_Kim: I know how to do it but not quite familiar with those tasks
Mimi: But it should be ‘full’ [you should know how to do them] after 3 months
Kim: Oh yes, I was always a ‘fool’ – ‘f-o-o-l’._
(March 12, 2007)

That was a little bit success for Kim, as some of the tasks filling with a ‘P’ remained as a ‘P’ after the negotiation. There revealed the politics behind the
surveillance of our operational knowledge.

Being selective when doing tasks was another resistance of working. There were five tasks to do for a processing of mortgage applications, while some tasks only concerned about searching and printing documents, some others could tolerate no errors and required inputting accurate information. The Customer Credits Report checking was an example, as the information entered was sent to an outside party for a Customer Credits Report. Mistakes made during entries led to extra costs paid to the outside party and a delay of cycle times. As a result, there were tasks which we would intentionally avoid, if possible. This led to a selective mind in doing tasks. We also tended to concentrate on our own task and not to help in other tasks when someone has been working on it, even if applications were piled up for that task and urgent to be done; and/or knowing that the one doing that task headed for somewhere and will not be back for 5-10 minutes, leaving a pile of application untouched.

Processing mortgage applications was only one of our tasks; there were some other like checking and generating other reports, processing automobile loan applications (with a thirty-minute limit upon received), distributing overdraft accounts and so on, which their urgency may overweigh the mortgage one at times. The following happened when I just arrived office one day, which illustrated this.

*Searching for something to do. Found 3 automobile loan applications lying in the tray. I said something controversial (a little bit provoking)*

*Me: Hey, Why don’t you do the automobile loan when you are so idle?*
*Nancy: Which eye do you see me idle?*
*Jennifer: I know that you are arriving, so [we] wait for you to do [them], as I am not familiar with these things.*

*Actually both of them know how to do the cases, even though [it’s true] they may not be quite familiar with it, and/or afraid of doing the automobile application’s Customer Credits Report, as Nancy claimed she made mistakes every time she did the automobile Customer Credits Report. They were actually just eating bread and checking mortgage cases... in [front of] one computer, sitting 2 people there ... I just found out that there was only about 10 minutes left for the cases and I just asked Nancy to do the printout of those cases for me while she was concentrating on the mortgage case printouts. Just then she seems doing*
Those cases reluctantly. (March 23, 2007)

Doing one’s own matters with company resources was another kind of transgression. Surfing on the net for discussion boards or news, posting one’s blog, printing lecture notes or dealing personal affairs were acts which were included in this sense, I put them as subversive because ‘we were paid hourly for our work, which means every minutes count’, as told in one of the interviews. Two of the interviewees cast same view on these acts:

I don’t think staff that is hourly-paid should do this. But for permanent staff, without overtime [paid], I think that doesn’t matter. All they need to do is get everything done within a given time period, even if they finished at 2am or whatever time, that’s ok. (Because hourly paid means every minute…) counts. Yes. (What if there was nothing to do then?) If there were really nothing to do, I think that’s ok. It’s not my fault to sit here freely, but yours [employer’s / supervisor’s] that you have nothing for me to do. (Gigi)

(Do you have worries about being seen when you’re surfing on the net or posting your blog?) I do, and I don’t encourage staff to do this, because here was a workplace. It’s true that it’s not so appropriate to do so, but as we are just part-time workers, cases were [always] kept here [for processing], there are slack times between, let us do other things. (Emily)

Although we do think that these acts were not so appropriate, still, we did it in the office, when we think we were during slack time. However, this sense of inappropriateness may be the effects of what Mimi often said.

When today's cases are nearly finished, Mimi looked around to see if there are things to be done as Kim is surfing on the net ... those BBS / discussion boards ... As Mimi saw Jennifer is typing the Customer Credits Report letters, she first asked Kim if all the cases are done. And Kim replied a yes ... Mimi's boss arrived, telling Mimi (and actually us as a final), to lock the fax cabinet. (as the auditors are coming this month for historical context) After he (the boss) left, Mimi hit (not very hard) on Kim's head and reminding him not to surf on the net as it was violating sort of policies - handling the customer information, for the sake that it may go on web or stored into inappropriate places. ... (March 26, 2007).

Surveillance was not simply by telling you about the compliance or discipline, and
overseeing directly whether you were following it or not. It was also in a sense of panopticism, ‘to induce … a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power’. (Foucault 1979, p.201) Our Team was divided to two sides, on the one side, Mimi and Tony would sit nearby, while another side was having a partition wall at the back, where a team of approvers sat at the other side of the wall. As we may think that it would be safer to do our owns’ affairs on the other side, Mimi did tell us once that managers and other management tended to have contacts with the approver team, which will see what we were doing at the other side. This discourse imposed the consciousness about surveillance so that we would discipline our behaviors at the office. This can also be reflected from the interviewees:

You will notice [these acts] … if someone isolated oneself at the other side, you don’t have to say anything about this. What you have to do is just walking to them, then he/she will notice your approaching… if you saw someone was surfing on the net, just approach them, they will minimize the window. (Gigi)

I would say it isn’t so much pressure about [doing one’s affairs in office] … but no matter how, you will be sort of cautiousness … not very afraid of [being found] … but will stay cautious. (Emily)

The identity, self-position and impression

The sense of surveillance and panopticism also deepened and affected one’s self-position, and one’s impression in the office, which manipulates one’s acts in office. The followings are examples – to stay behind late, being cautious on doing personal matters and the way we attend work – which impressions, as a sense of automated surveillance, dominated one’s acts:

... It may be due to ... others may feel that you are responsible. Maybe this is the answer. (And the responsibility is about ... if things are not cleared today, it will become too rush for tomorrow. Or if I left early [today], I won’t know what would happen later... is that sort of this?) Yes. Sort of. And you should know, as you did work overtime late sometimes. Even though Mimi is asking if you are willing to stay or not ... [it means you should stay] This is the way of working here, if there are having nothing to do, you have to leave early, while there are things to finish, you have to stay behind. And you said OK when you are hired
... and if you can’t answer people’s enquiries, you will feel shameful. And Mimi will think that you don’t know what is going on here. But she won’t think it’s because you left early last night, she won’t think this way, a must; but if you don’t know [about what was going on], she would [think] why you acted like this...[ignorance and not good enough] (Gigi)

(Why would you be cautious [when surfing on the net]? From where would you think they are watching you?) Because it may have bad effects to the my impression on others. Anyway, you are now working for the company and, earning money from it. But your working performances affect your impression on others. If it’s just because of some conveniences, to post a blog [as an example], and making others to have another [bad] image on you ... that is [not] about your working performance ... [but] your impression on others ... though it won’t affect much to our operations. (Emily)

... When don’t I want to attend to work? Times when I feel tired. Although, the working hours are flexible here, you can’t attend very late or no shows all the time. Then you have to attend work... (Emily)

Emily came back, telling me it’s because she had made a promise to work today, though she’s just worked all night and finished her homework at 8 am [this morning]. (March 9, 2007)

... I did (arrive office at 8:30am) for the first few days. You won’t be late when you are just hired. (Candy)

These impression-related views subjected one’s position – one’s identity. For Gigi, she would be as responsible as possible so as to gain a corresponding impression – staying behind until late nights was for the sake of knowing everything happened in the office and finishing all the tasks received that day. For Emily and Candy, they would not like to leave an impression of slacker or someone who can’t keep promises.

However, identity is a dynamic relationship. Without changes of one’s self-position, impression may not dominate or have less effects in one’s identity. Some of us with different positions – for example, just having a sense of part-time worker and being someone in the office for just offering some help to the operation or having some thoughts on these tasks– showed some other working attitudes.
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I will [just] finish all the tasks while I am here. (What does that mean by ‘finish all the tasks’?) That is, for those you gave me to handle, I will have them done; but if you would like me to further improve them, I won’t. That’s no meaning for me to help improve them because I am not a permanent staff. In addition, you [the employer] may fire me the next day. (Samuel)

What I want is to earn more, but don’t you understand ... every time when I think I have to repeat those five tasks, I become mad. (Because you felt monotonous and tired [of the tasks]?) I felt no morale [incentive] at all. (Nancy)

Gigi asked me again about my leaving time.
Gigi: When will you leave today?
Me: A little bit later today... around 7pm.
Gigi: So early?! It’s a normal!
Me: Compared to [you] 9pm every day, it is.
Gigi: No, it’s 10pm.
... 
Mark and I left around 7pm; while Tom [a staff of 16/F, came to relieve shortage of labour force] caught up with us at the lobby. We had a conversation.
Tom: Don’t wanna feel so toilsome even you paid me
He told us that we didn’t have any shortage of labour that day.
(May 10, 2007)

No matter how, we were still under supervisions and had to follow the disciplines.

[Talking about the overtime] ... I think we can [leave early, too]. We are the same [as Mimi, who will leave earlier than us if we stay until 10pm] It just about who is the reporting supervisor. There is a choice there. I can choose to leave early, too. (Gigi)

[Talking about the attire, as Nancy saw staff at 30/F are in casual wear even for weekdays] ... the main point is, there is someone overseeing you ... but who will oversee those there [at 30/F] ? Maybe their boss flew to another place for a long period of time... [Staff at 30/F] concerns would be finishing all tasks they have to do, not the others. (Samuel)
Conclusion

The result and analysis here showed the art of discipline within the workplace, which minutely manipulate every little parts of working, ranged from the way we work to the way we should work – giving a birth of social body. Even though it seemed that the disciplinary techniques are powerful over the body, resistance and transgressions occur during times so as to escape from the exploitations. Surveillance was another force within this contest to maintain the disciplines, which imposed and affected one’s behaviors. It also induced and regulated an appropriate or ‘docile’ identity which keeps the company operations running by driving out the labour force.

Reflections upon the research process

Thoughts about the methodology throughout the process of observation arose when the senior management made their observation visits to us. From the way of their ‘research’, it was no doubt a process of ethnography – getting close with the research subject (the application processing and us) in order to understand them. They came to us to observe how we process the applications, as well as the approval process made by the approvers after ours, so as to streamline the whole process of mortgage application from making contact with customers to confirmation of their applications, by boosting its efficiency with shorter cycle times. The observation was recorded in my field note on May 4:

... June, our senior approver, showed up with some other seniors as a tour to observe how we process the cases. While they were asking questions to all those things they didn’t know and understand, Wendy was the first stunned because she was not doing printouts before the cases were created. They surrounded her and would like her to explain what she was doing [then]. Mimi just came and helped to answer those questions. ... To me, they were quite a nuisance, especially that we were very busy. 7x [seventy something] cases in total are to be done within two and a half hours at that time. I was really unhappy to see them. I just took a pile of cases from Wendy and create the cases as [that of] the ‘correct’ process {processing}. ... Those seniors then turn to Gigi to know {learn} about the Registry and Customer Matrix entry process. Gigi was feeling uncomfortable to this and they told her to perform as usual, not faster or slower...By then, I just knew that they were timing each process...
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Their coming recalled what I’ve learnt from ethnography classes and this was a good example of bad interview and observation ... They won’t find out the truth at all. Everything happened in front of them were faked and unreal. But they were going to use these to evaluate the whole process and think they knew it thoroughly and [so as to] re-engineer it. I told Tony later that it would be much better if they stay here for 2 days [no matter just observe or participate in]. He replied me that they won’t have the 2-day time. John also noticed Mimi’s unreasonable replies while I was doing the case [demonstration]. Mimi said those things were said to fulfill the senior’s thoughts... (Field notes of May 4, 2007)

The situation inspires me about the natural environment with the research and researchers, which I put their experience as ‘a bad example’ for mine. It seems to be a naturalist claim about letting the observed activity to be done in the natural setting without disturbance so as to find out the truth (Cheung 2007 p.5, summarized from Hammersley & Atkinson 1983; Hammersley 1990, author’s translations), while there was another thought that the entry of a researcher into the field will, inevitable to certain extent, disturb the ‘natural’ environment. Their visit was actually a devastation to the field instead of disturbance which had made their observation out of the original context; becoming a faked and unreal experience. Making an observation out of the context will strip away meanings because they were situated and contextualized, even though they may think that they only concerned about our operations on processing mortgage applications, which was only one type of our tasks. This sense of ‘out of context’ was not only about their nuisances made to us, but, more importantly, the attempts which we were going to flatter them by doing what they expected to see so as to drive away possible troubles, including the sense of our under-performance and failure to follow compliances which may arise during the observations.

Their casual interviews made to us also reflected this problem. As the previous excerpt of field notes revealed that we felt uncomfortable to their arrival, and Mimi become our spokesperson, with some kind of flattering manner. The following showed something more about this.

... Then they would like someone to show them Customer Credits Report. I just picked a New System cases as random, so as to show them how we retrieve Customer Credits Report Reports from the hard disk. The case was eventually
found that not even having a creation in the New System system, what an extraordinary case! Then I have to answer them why this happened and how we would handle this ... Next, they asked how often this situation happened. As I don’t have the statistics and didn’t count about it, I was just unable to utter a word for that. They encouraged me to say a number by telling me to say it in a guess by gut feelings. The fact was that I haven’t done Customer Credits Report process continuous for a period of time. I switched my tasks each day I was back {arrived to office}, and kind of intentionally, I was not at the task of Customer Credits Report. I looked at Mimi somewhere near me and she said it’s around 20% at a maximum, and I just didn’t answer them an exact number...

Should we force our interviewees to give out an answer even if they don’t think they have one? This was the thought reminding me when I am interviewing others. Similar questions also apply to my research. Even although I have been working as a part-time staff there since last May, imposing a research parallel to my work will inevitably make changes to my behaviours, which in turns, change the working environment and the context which I was having a research. These changes of behaviours might be as subtle as taking notes during working hours and being asked what I was doing at those times by my colleagues. In order to avoid long explanations to my colleagues and reading my field notes, in which may exist controversial issues; as well as to remain the least nuisance, in my mind, to the context by saving their feelings of being an research object, I have tried to tell them that I was just doing some kinds of homework at times when I was seen taking notes. However, there were drawbacks for this, which included embarrassment of keeping something unknown to a person in the relationship of friends and colleagues, and reinforcing my identity as a university student by the sense of who could write well in English, or writing something in passage.

Concerning about the interviews conducted, apart from the manner which the management persons reminded me, there were still issues to be noticed. During interviews, many mistakes were made. However, with these mistakes made, it helps me to think through this method. As mentioned in the methodology part, a brief interview guide with some questions of certain directions was prepared. Questions about already known personal information were avoided as the interviewees were actually colleagues of months which make asking ‘What’s your name?’ or ‘How old are you?’ silly questions. During interviews, I found that it was easy to have answers not really into the field of my concerns, though the answer was a bit related and relevant to my thoughts. This was especially common in the first
interview I conducted. In a question that I would like to ask about how company disciplines made change to her, especially about the overtime work, I just found our conversations was not pointing to that issue at all:

**Q:** What do you think you have changed or personal growth about after working at this post?
**A:** Growth? People I saw, I think.

**Q:** How about on yourself?
**A:** For example … I have seen different kinds of people … the more I saw [met] … they do have effects on my way of thinking.

**Q:** For example…?
**A:** For example, you will notice that there were conflicts about their interests, which happened to every department. But what you will see, just like drama episodes, or… I will think that everyone doesn’t speak as what they really think; i.e. no matter how nice their reply is, it isn’t what they really mean at heart.

Then I re-construct the questions which hoped to have a better result:

**Q:** So, how about your life? Are there any effects to your life after working here?
**A:** Yes! Of Course! How come you won’t?! What kind of effects…

**Q:** Sort of… Do you have something neglected or thinking something would be more important now than before? For example, will working become the most important thing, or something else? How is it? Do you have feelings about …
**A:** Most of the time would be devoted to work now; i.e. you won’t … maybe most of your classmates were good friends [in the past], but that does not apply to colleagues. Because you [they] will have your [their] own group of friends, because you are not that young already. [you have your own group of people grew with you] Yes. There must be some differences, maybe school was a place where friends learn together, while it isn’t the same as work, [workplace] isn’t somewhere for both fun and work.

First, it may be something wrong about the construction of questions. With another way to ask, better answers can be obtained. I also thought through this problem with the possibility that of an ambiguous introduction, that the interviewee was not sure what to answer. Another thought about this was about the randomness between questions and answers, because different people will have their own interpretations about the same question and give different answers after all. These may lead the
‘weird’ answers now I have although I think the questions were relevant to my topic.

Another issue was solely about the way of asking a question. In the casual focus-group interview, I uttered a new question of ‘Have you ever not wanted to go to work?’ after some discussion on a topic. ‘As you are now doing focus-group interview, you shouldn’t ask such a question which have a leading sense.’ This was an immediate answer to my question, criticized what I had just asked. Although another interviewee thought this question was still appropriate because it first asked for a Yes/No, before assumption of an answer. When I transcribed the interview, it led my mind to think again about the neutrality of questions should be. Maybe next time, the question would be ‘How do you feel when you go to work?’, instead of a question like that.

During interviews, I felt about how interactive the interview could be. The position of interviewer and interviewee may not be a rigid as thought. Not only should the interviewer prepare questions without senses of leading, the interviewer should also prepared how to answer if interviewee asked the views on any questions the interviewer will ask. Interactive also arises in times which the interviewee would like to help setting some more questions which may be related to the topic, although it may be my case of weak questions. These two issues subvert the fixed relationship of interviewer and interviewee.

Not only the relationship of interviewer/interviewee has made issues to note, it also extended to the problem of positioning self. Owing to one’s knowledge was situated, it may lead to wrong interpretations of interviewee’s answers. This is also true for the understanding of things happened in the field. As a part-time staff in this research, it was a totally a different picture to that of a permanent staff. While the duration of working hours won’t matter much a permanent staff, it does matter much part-time staff like us, as every minute was paid. The problem of self also made known when confronting the research object, as analysis was made from researcher's interpretation. There were times I was confused what am I during the research project. I was a part-time staff working in the company, a researcher in the field observing, while at the same time a research object in the field.

The note-taking process let me feel about the construction of language throughout the research. I would say that I’m lucky to have time to jot notes during work time, which made me possible to grasp not only events happened but also short dialogues
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on their original wordings. However, events and conversations barely happened one by one in office, which would have given time and opportunity for a researcher to jot down in details, but happened simultaneously or in the mid-way of the other. This made me under struggle about the fact that there was no way for me to record down all events happened in the office while keeping good track on what I saw, heard, talked, smelt or felt, all those sensations I had during the course; even if I added more after working hours by memory. This is also true that events and conversations were like episodes in series which an event halted in the morning would continued in the afternoon or some time, even some days later when I was actually absent to the scene. As Pun (2005) put in her book about ‘the pain of ethnographic practice’,

> Ethnographic reconstruction is a never-fulfilled attempt to make sense: to order and reorder rich yet chaotic lived experiences that are inherently resistance to patterning and conceptualizing. (p.19)

Notes token were then selective in nature, though I try making sense to things happened and feelings I sensed, giving back all backgrounds and results into the ‘stories’ as possible. Even though events were recorded with the use of a realistic style as possible, there diffused with personal interpretations, which resembled the claims that

> ... ethnographic research process must be a highly personal interpretation. Ethnographer is unavoidable to use self-understanding to make sense of the meaning behind things, to an extent which defined reality... (Cheung 2007, p.6, my translation)

> ...We begin with our interpretation of what our informants are up to, or think they are up to, and then systematize those ... (Geertz 1973, p.15)

Facing these postmodern claims, I would use Cheung’s view (2007) to legitimatize my ethnography. Cheung (2007) urged us

> … to understand that language cannot represent everything, while the world doesn’t only consist of words; truth isn’t merely a text, whereas real encounters aren’t discourses. ... it should always be the latter one outweighs the former one, but not the other way round. (p.10, my translation)
And,

_No matter how importance language is in ethnography, there are always a lot of things and encounters left in our consciousness outside language, or even not able to be described with language._ (p.9, my translation)

Therefore, no matter is the ethnographic writings unilateral and unreal it may seem after the postmodern thoughts, there still exists experience and knowledge which could be drawn from the field, especially to those fields or lives which a prejudice was constructed or was marginalized.

**Notes:**

1. This was only a common belief, as this is the original and top-prioritized, of normal time, task of the team. With the expansions of tasks we have to do, it only constituted up to 40%~50% of the total tasks we have to do, in conversations with my colleagues.

**Notes about field notes and interview transcripts**

1. The field notes were initially written in English with some Chinese words and phrases, as well as Cantonese dialogues, which were remained after the revision of the field notes.
2. Field notes were revised so as to polish its grammar and readability. Thoughts, or explanations put in [] were added while revisions so as to help analysis and understanding. Words, phrases and dialogues in {} are actual meanings of the original wordings in the field notes.
3. Interviews were conducted in Cantonese. Only excerpts used in the essays were translated into English. Wordings in () was questions. Only one in-depth interview was arranged. Another times, the focus-group interview was conducted during lunch time and a follow-up interview during slack times with a casual setting, research topic and issues were not fully explained to the interviewees, which may lead to unfocused answers as they may seem.
Reference:


張少強(2007), 折返田野：自我：民族方志與社會尋繹