Conference Theme: Assessing the response for collective actors to wider changes at work and in their societies and the impact of different representative systems on their ability to respond to those issues.

Female Pattern Resistance in the Service Industry: The Impact of Social Dialogue and Action on Union Organizing

The paper explores how females in the service industry in one large Midwestern hotel resist exploitation in the workplace through social dialogue and social activism via three avenues: worker/worker, worker/management, and worker/community. This exploration focuses on the way female housekeepers negotiate their work environment with other workers, management, and the broader community to overcome barriers to organizing. By providing a forum in which workers can share their stories about barriers to union organization, the researcher empowers workers, experts in their fields, to talk about their perceptions of ease or difficulty in achieving union recognition. This “insider” approach allows the hotel workers to generate solutions to barriers associated with union organizing not apparent to “outsiders,” such as management or researchers. The solutions they generate comprise an “action plan” which, when implemented, may overcome barriers to union organization and serves as a blueprint for further organizing.

Participants for this study are thirty-one housekeepers in one large Midwestern major hotel chain who are attempting to form a union through UNITE-HERE. These workers, who receive little pay and no benefits, are building a network of fellow workers inside the hotel and community activists outside the hotel who are sympathetic to their plight. Focus groups were formed to elicit dialogue from the housekeepers about the barriers to organizing they faced, their desire for a better standard of living, and their wish for dignity and respect in the workplace. Dialogues were noted by the researcher who asked probing questions during the focus sessions which resulted in emerging research questions. An analysis of the collected data revealed themes of resistance utilized by female housekeepers which allowed them to negotiate and mediate their work environment while simultaneously attempting to organize.

The study is situated in Grounded Action Research Theory (Simmons & Gregory, 2003) which explores and informs complex organizational and social problems and issues. Beginning with no a priori notions, this inductive research method, known as the explanatory theory of action, allows research questions and action problems to evolve from collected data. The explanatory theory of action is drawn from Participatory Grounded Theory which explores collaborations between outsiders (management, researchers) and insiders (individual workers) in an environment to develop a “local theory” of participative research and empowers insiders to inform practices within their workplace environment. Participatory Grounded Theory is used as a starting point from which evolving research questions and data emerge. The explanatory theory then informs an operational theory of action, a rationale and model of action which theoretically predicts outcomes. Implementing, reflecting on, and evaluating this plan of action allow adjustments to the suggested policies to be made.