WORKING AS A SECURITY GUARD ON POTCHEFSTROOM CAMPUS: ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES

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WORKING AS A SECURITY GUARD ON POTCHEFSTROOM CAMPUS: ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND COPING STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT
Studies on the private security industry have mainly focused on the growth of private security firms and the regulation thereof. Research focusing on the working experiences of security guards has been notably absent. However, in a recent article, Sefalafala and Webster (2013) have addressed this issue by surveying and interviewing security guards in Gauteng, a South African province. Although their study is very thorough on a number of levels, there are some important limitations. In this article, I add to this literature by highlighting the importance of place and agency in such discussions. This article addresses these limitations, by focusing on job-related issues and challenges security guards working at a particular place (North-West University’s Potchefstroom campus) experience on a daily basis and what agency (coping strategies) security guards use to overcome these issues and challenges. Semi-structured in-depth interviews with a manager and 20 security guards working at Potchefstroom campus were conducted. Verbal abuse by white students, the effect of irregular shifts on security guards and their families, and boredom were some of the main issues and challenges found to be associated with their job. Security guards show different levels of agency in coping with these job-related issues and challenges.

Keywords: security guards, university campus, verbal abuse, shifts, boredom
1. INTRODUCTION

In South Africa, the landscape of policing has changed with the growth of the private security industry (hereafter PSI), which consists of security guards and neighbourhood watch companies among others. Research shows that the South African Police Service (SAPS) works alongside the PSI to combat crime (SASSETA 2012: 27; Shearing and Kempa 2000: 206). In post-1994 democratic South Africa, the scaling down of police personnel from certain functions, such as the protection of public spaces, has led to feelings of insecurity by the public about the ability of the police to offer protection. Combined with the commoditisation of security through the PSI, this has led individuals to seek their own security by making use of armed response companies, by employing security guards and by adopting other forms of surveillance measures (Irish 1999: 3–4; Berg 2004: 106; Minnaar 2005: 132; Lubbe 2010: 3). Figures on the growth of the PSI in post-apartheid South Africa indicate a massive rise in private security companies (PSC). For example, in 1997, there were 4 345 PSC and 363 928 security guards registered in South Africa. These figures increased in 2013 to nearly 9 000 PSC and more than 400 000 active security guards (De Waard 1999: 155–156; PSIRA 2012; Eastwood 2013).

Although security guards provide an immensely important function in society, for a long time they fell outside the confines of labour law regulations. Only in 2001 was the PSI formalised and regulated, mainly through Sectoral Determination 6, which focused on the regulation of wages, working hours, leave provisions, and termination of employment for security guards. In 2001, the state formed the Private Security Industry Regulatory Authority (PSIRA) in order to control and protect the workers of the PSI, provisioned by the Security Industry Regulatory Authority Act, 56 of 2001 (SASSETA 2012: 27).

Research done on the security industry has largely focused on the growth of the PSI due to high levels of crime, which led to the commercialisation of security (Bayley and Shearing 2001: 22; Shearing and Kempa 2000: 206, Cock 2004); on the nature of the relationship between the SAPS and the PSI (Berg 2004); and on the role and main provisions of the Private Security Industry Regulations Act and its regulation for the PSI (Gumbedze 2007; PSIRA 2012). These studies have focused more on the macro-level of the PSI and not on the micro-level working experiences of security guards. Studies that have focused on worker experiences include ‘domestic workers (Cock, 1980; Ally, 2010), mineworkers (Moodie & Ndatshe, 1994); and industrial workers (Webster, 1985’) (Sefalafala’s 2012: 5). Studies focusing on the working experiences of security guards remain (apart from Sefalafala Master’s thesis, which has been published in a subsequent article by Sefalafala and Webster in 2013) unexplored. Sefalafala and Webster’s (2013) article focuses on security guards’ experiences of their workplace by linking these to the International Labour Organisation (ILO’s) decent work framework. They surveyed 1 205 people and conducted in-depth interviews with 24 security guards in Gauteng, South Africa, on their working conditions. They found that job insecurity,
lack of social protection and safety, low wages, long working hours and low unionisation were particular issues for security guards. Their conclusion reveals that there is ‘a significant gap between what PSIRA aims to achieve’, that is to protect the workers of the PSI, and ‘the reality of widespread non-compliance with the legislation on the ground’ (Sefalafala and Webster 2013: 93).

Although their study is very thorough on a number of levels, there are some important limitations. Since Sefalafala and Webster’s (2013) study is the only detailed study on the working experiences of security guards that could be found, the aim of this article is to draw on their research that examines the working experiences of security guards on a general level and to offer a detailed analysis of the experiences of security guards working at a specific location, the Potchefstroom campus.

2. BEYOND SEFALAFALA AND WEBSTER’S SECURITY GUARDS

Sefalafala and Webster’s (2013) study provides an in-depth analysis of security guards’ working experiences and argues for a more robust implementation of the PSIRA to protect workers in terms of wages, working hours and leave provision. Nonetheless, their study suffers from several limitations, some of which this article aims to address. Firstly, they fail to provide a specific location where security guards have been surveyed and interviewed in their study. The only reference to place is Gauteng, a province in South Africa. This may be problematic, as security guards working at a specific location, within Gauteng or elsewhere, may experience their job differently due to different rules and regulations. This article takes a labour geography approach to address this issue. This approach, promoted by Andrew Herod in 1997, argues that ‘place has typically been conceived of in rather unproblematic terms, simply as the spot in which the work and employment action occurs’. Agnew (1987, cited in Herod et al. 2010: 8–9) makes a distinction between three levels of locality: place as location is a specific location on Earth where workers must structure their work and employment practices according to specific legal systems insofar that Paris, France, differs from Paris, Texas. Each location has its own unique characteristics and histories, which have to be taken into consideration if one wants to understand the internal processes of that location. Place as locale serves as a physical arena within which everyday life is played out, where boundaries are constantly made and remade. For example, technology that replaces the physical labour of workers may cause rising unemployment rates which may have dire effects within and beyond a community. Place as locus of identity serves as a focus for personal and collective loyalty, emotional attachment and commitment. The specificity of place, with its three levels of locality, matters because ‘people, institutions and things come together in unique ways in different locations, social relationships and regulations’ (Herod et al. 2010: 10). Based on this, place as location, as locale and as locus of identity plays an important role in how workers may experience their work and employment.
The second limitation of Sefalafala and Webster’s (2013) study is that they fail to recognise the agency of workers, in other words, what actions workers use to overcome challenges. For example, Herod, Peck and Wills (2003: 176) argue that place is more than simply ‘a background scenery’. It plays a key role in understanding what happens to workers and what workers can do to improve their working conditions. In this regard, Katz (2004: 244–257) makes a distinction between three types of agency: resilience (coping strategies to get by every day); reworking (efforts to make everyday life materially more liveable); and resistance (confrontations against conditions of oppression and exploitation, typically with help from unions). Workers are therefore not passive actors, but actively take part in shaping their daily lives in various ways.

By relating the importance of place and the agency of workers to Sefalafala and Webster’s (2013) study, three important weaknesses are identified in their findings. Firstly, they show how ‘the uniform of security guards seems to signify general stereotypes such as the idea that they are not learned and functionally illiterate, that they are failures who are useless, poor and without the ability to reason’. Security guards are expected to ‘tolerate the demeaning utterances by the public and attempt to remain patient and calm’ (Sefalafala and Webster 2013: 87). However, Sefalafala and Webster fail to take the unique characteristics of place into consideration, leaving the reader unclear as to why security guards are expected to remain ‘patient and calm’; who the ‘public’ is that mocks them and what types of agency security guards possess to overcome ‘demeaning utterances [made] by the public’? Secondly, apart from the health issues arising from long working hours, Sefalafala and Webster (2013: 84–85) discuss how 12-hour working shifts result in a work-life imbalance for security guards, leaving them ‘stressed, frustrated and anxious about the relatively little time they have to spend with their families due to work commitments’. Security guards only spend time with their families ‘during leave, and/or during off days’. Sefalafala and Webster (2013: 85) have not sufficiently addressed how working hours and shifts impact security guards’ family life and this article will address this issue. Thirdly, Sefalafala and Webster (2013: 86) show how boredom is a daily work-related issue and challenge for security guards, and they argue that some security guards are ‘doubtful of any realistic prospect of making their job more stimulating and interesting’. However, they fail to show how and when security guards experience boredom and what types of agency they use to overcome boredom.

This article aims to address these weaknesses of Sefalafala and Webster’s study by providing a better understanding of specific job-related issues and challenges security guards experience on a daily basis at a specific place and what types of agency they implement to overcome these job-related issues and challenges.

### 3. NEO-LIBERALISM AND UNIVERSITY SUPPORT STAFF

Globally, neo-liberal policies, improvements in technology, unemployment and the growth of the service sector have caused a decrease in permanent, full-time employment...
and an increase in non-standard forms of employment such as part-time, temporary and outsourced forms of labour (Bosch 2006: 41; Edgell 2012: 146; Theron 2005: 293). Changes beginning in the mid-1970s have created conditions for organisations to cut labour costs by seeking to adjust the size of their workforce in response to changes in market relations, by making use of part-time or temporary workers and contracting out services to outsourced companies that were once performed internally (Kalleberg 2000). Other factors, such as competition and the growth of educational institutions, give employers the benefit of shedding responsibility for workers to third parties and focusing instead on their core responsibilities (Rosenberg and Lapidus 1999: 64).

Universities have often followed similar patterns of work restructuring in recent years by subcontracting their low-wage routine work, such as cleaning, catering and security, to third parties (Bezuidenhout and Fakier 2006: 45). For example, Bezuidenhout and Fakier’s (2006: 54) study focuses on the outsourcing of cleaners at the University of the Witwatersrand (WITS) and finds that outsourced cleaners experience high levels of job insecurity, low pay and lack of service benefits. They argue that outsourcing of support staff allows universities to focus on their core functions – research and teaching – while shedding the unnecessary costs and responsibilities of support staff to third parties, often at the expense of the workers involved. North-West University (NWU) is no exception in that, like other South African universities, it outsources support staff such as cleaning and security to third parties. NWU, as locality, is a multi-campus university with the Potchefstroom and Mafikeng campuses located in the North-West Province and the Vaal Triangle campus located in Gauteng. Security at the Potchefstroom campus, which is the focus of this study, is divided into two groups: one group of security guards is employed directly by the university and its workers are regarded as employees of the university, while the other group of security guards is employed by an outsourced firm. These two groups work together at nine access gates to Potchefstroom campus, usually in groups of two to five.

4. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

4.1. Research problem and objectives

Since little research has been done on the working experiences of security guards, this article aims to remedy some of the limitations of Sefalafala and Webster’s (2013) study by focusing on the role of place and agency. The research question of this study is two-fold: What are the daily job-related issues and challenges that security guards experience at Potchefstroom campus and what type of agency do they possess to overcome these job-related issues and challenges? In order to answer these questions, this article focuses on three objectives: the first objective is to explore whether security guards working at Potchefstroom campus experience any form of abuse and, if so, to explore the types
of and reasons for abuse against security guards and what types of agency security guards possess to deal with these. The second objective is to expand on Sefalafala and Webster’s findings that long working hours and shifts are not only harmful to security guards but also to their family life. The third objective is to explore whether security guards working at Potchefstroom campus also experience boredom as a job-related issue, as is the case with the security guards in Sefalafala and Webster’s study, and, if so, to explore particular circumstances that lead to boredom and what type of agency they possess to overcome boredom.

4.2. Case selection

The aim of a case study method is to arrive at an up-close and in-depth understanding of a single or small number of cases in their natural settings, especially when little prior knowledge exists (Yin 2009: 18; Sarantakos 2005: 212). Case studies are also pertinent when the research question is descriptive in nature by asking the ‘what’ question. For these reasons, a case study design seems most suitable and a relevant method for this study, which also enables the researcher to expand on Sefalafala and Webster’s study.

Potchefstroom campus, as a case, is unique in the sense that it is the only Afrikaans university campus in South Africa. The majority of contact students are white and Afrikaans speaking, which may influence the working experiences of security guards. Another reason why Potchefstroom campus was chosen is because it can be argued that the physical nature of security guards’ job at Potchefstroom campus is not markedly different from security guards’ jobs at other university campuses. For example, security guards patrol campuses to secure the safety of students, personnel and university buildings from theft.

4.3. Sampling selection and collection of data

In total, 20 security guards were interviewed: ten security guards directly employed by the university and ten security guards provided by the outsourced company. A manager overseeing both groups was also interviewed. All interviewed security guards were black, 12 men and eight women, while the manager was a white man. Prior to the semi-structured interviews with the security guards, informal observation was done at different times of the day and night, which enabled the researcher to establish which gates were busier than others and on average how many security guards worked together at an access gate. Notes on these informal observations were used to expand on certain questions during the semi-structured interview.

Ten security guards from each group were randomly selected and semi-structured interviews with them were conducted in a small room at the respective access gates where they were working during the day and night shift. Interviews with security guards
lasted on average about 30 minutes, while the interview with the manager lasted about 45 minutes.

4.4. Limitations and recommendations for future research

The aim of this study is to move beyond Sefalafala and Webster’s (2013) study of security guards’ working experiences on a general level and to provide insight on specific job-related issues and challenges that security guards working at Potchefstroom campus experience on a daily basis. However, there are limitations to this study. The single case selected (only Potchefstroom campus) and the size of the sample, which only consisted of 20 security guards and one manager, are quite small. Whether security guards at other universities experience similar working conditions remains unanswered. This study also did not take the number of years of working as security guards at Potchefstroom campus into consideration. This may have an effect on how well security guards are able to cope with job-related issues and challenges.

Future research is necessary to establish whether security guards at other campuses in different locations with different students, rules and regulations, experience similar or different job-related issues and challenges to security guards working at Potchefstroom campus, and whether they possess similar or different types of agency than security guards working at Potchefstroom campus use to overcome job-related issues and challenges.

5. ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF WORKING AS A SECURITY GUARD AT NWU

In addressing some of the limitations of Sefalafala and Webster’s study, this section focuses on job-related issues and challenges that security guards at a specific location (Potchefstroom campus) experience on a daily basis and the types of agency they possess in overcoming these issues and challenges.

5.1. Emotional labour, verbal abuse and racism

Apart from the physical nature of their job, security guards at access gates at Potchefstroom campus also use emotional labour. In Hochschild’s (1983: 7) breakthrough work, ‘The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling’, emotional labour refers to situations where emotion management is transformed from an originally private act influenced by cultural and social norms to the public world of work where it is regulated and controlled by organisations. Since then, theorists have defined emotional labour as ‘the emotional regulation required of the employees in the display of organizationally desired emotions’ (Zapf et al. 1999: 371); ‘the effort, planning and control needed to express organizationally desired emotion during interpersonal transactions’ (Morris and
Feldman 1996: 987); and ‘the act of displaying the appropriate emotion as a form of impression management’ (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993: 90).

Although face-to-face interaction between security guards and students/personnel/visitors only lasts a few seconds, security guards have to be ‘neatly presented and friendly’. The manager overseeing security guards at Potchefstroom campus said: ‘A security guard is the first person one sees when one enters the university campus, so he must be friendly. A person must feel welcome when entering the campus.’ This relates to Morris and Feldman’s (1997: 258) argument that appropriate employee behaviour and emotional expression are important, because clients are more likely to comply with organisational goals when the affecting bonds of liking, trust and respect have been established. Thus, place as location plays an important role for security guards at Potchefstroom campus as they have to obey the specific rules of the location (using emotional labour apart from physical labour) and they fulfil these specific expectations of staff/students/visitors by being friendly and neatly dressed. These job requirements may be specific to security guards at Potchefstroom campus. This is a weakness in Sefalafala and Webster’s study as they did not specify the location where they interviewed security guards. For example, the identification of place as location is important, as work and employment are governed by different legal systems in different locations. Thus, one can argue that the working experiences of security guards at one location differ from those working at another location due to different legal systems, rules and regulations.

Security guards working at Potchefstroom campus also indicated that they have to smile and politely greet students/personnel/visitors at access gates. Rafaeli and Sutton (1987: 24) argue that short interactions between employees and clients usually involve a ‘highly scripted interaction format such as smiling, greeting or saying “Thank You”’. Zapf et al. (1999: 379) argue that only in short script-like interactions might an employee or client express emotions without trying to sense the emotion of others. This shows that place as locus of identity plays a role here as security guards are loyal to the job expectations posed by management in terms of displaying appropriate emotions during interaction with students/personnel/visitors.

However, the main issue of engaging with emotional labour is verbal abuse from some students and the challenge is to cope with this. One male security guard employed by the outsourced company at Potchefstroom campus said:

Sometimes when students come back from the party in town, they will yell at us and say ‘maak oop die fokken hek (open the fucking gate)’. They don’t respect you at all. Sometimes they say ‘jou dom aap (your dumb monkey)’. It is very sad to be treated like that, because I do my job.

Another female security guard employed by the outsourced company at Potchefstroom campus said: ‘Sometimes they (students) say “you are a nothing”. It is very hard, because I cannot say anything back. I am just a nothing. I just have to accept it that people are different.’ Some studies have indicated that verbal abuse from customers is emotionally driven aggression based on dissatisfaction with services (Grandey et al.
Grandey et al (2007: 66) argue that customers are more likely to yell and threaten an employee when they know that they can get away with it while venting their anger or aggression. For example, a female security guard working for the outsourced company at Potchefstroom campus said: ‘You see, when students come, they think they are the owners. And it makes me feel sad sometimes, because they do not own me.’

The challenge that security guards face at this campus is that they cannot report verbal abuse to their managers, as a security guard said: ‘[I]t is very hard to proof it. It is their word against mine.’ The manager also said that he teaches security guards not to take such incidents personally.

In terms of ‘race’, white students are the perpetrators of verbally abusive behaviour towards black security guards at Potchefstroom campus. A female security guard employed by the outsourced company at Potchefstroom campus said that ‘the White students ... they are saying that stuff to us. They get angry when I don’t open the gate fast enough.’ Another female security guard employed by the outsourced company at Potchefstroom campus said ‘the White students with their big cars are verbally abusive towards me’. The majority of security guards interviewed, regardless of their gender or employer at Potchefstroom campus said they have experienced some form of verbal abuse from white students.

In terms of agency, security guards show low levels of resilience and resistance and they seem to struggle to find a positive coping mechanism when dealing with verbal abuse from students. For example, one male security guard employed by the outsourced company said: ‘I don’t know what to do. When I tell my manager, he doesn’t do anything about it, and he just say “do your job”. It is very hard.’ What is clear here is that security guards have no support from managers and have to deal with verbal abuse issues themselves. More worrying is that nationally only 18% of security guards belong to trade unions (Sefalafala and Webster 2013: 93). None of the security guards interviewed belonged to trade unions, because ‘it does not help’. One male security guard said: ‘I don’t believe that the unions fight for your rights. At the end of the day, it is every man for himself.’ Security guards have negative attitudes towards work and trade unions and are unable to translate their discontent to managers, leaving them to deal with issues themselves, which escalates into overall job dissatisfaction and feelings of powerlessness. Resilience (daily coping strategies) and resistance strategies (confrontations against conditions of oppression and exploitation, typically with help from unions) are weak for security guards at this campus as they are left powerless.

Although security guards are trained to deal with ‘difficult customers’ who include ‘drunken students’, the manager said that he ‘trains security guards not to get angry at students and just to do a professional job’. However, not dealing with verbal abuse issues efficiently may cause security guards to feel alienated from their job, which again may have an alarming impact on place as locale where everyday life plays out, such as higher rates of domestic violence or alcoholism.
5.2. Working hours and shifts

A second limitation in Sefalafala and Webster’s (2013) study is that although they discuss long working hours as a job-related issue for security guards, they fail to take the specificity of place as location into consideration. How are working hours and shifts structured at a specific workplace? How are these monitored? What effect do these issues have not only on security guards, but also on their families?

Shift work for security guards at Potchefstroom campus is based on a timetable where one group of employees succeeds another at the same access gate at specific times. The security guards employed by NWU work in a rotating four-day working shift, two days off cycle, from 06:00 until 14:00; 14:00 to 22:00 and 22:00 to 06:00. The outsourced company’s security guards work in 12 hour shifts from 06:00 to 18:00 and again 18:00 to 06:00. They also work in a four-day shift cycle with two days off, then four night-shifts, two days off. In other words, security guards’ working hours and shifts are regulated at this campus at specific times, which means that they have to structure their working and private lives around these times. Thus, place as location is important here, as working hours and shifts may be different at other locations, which may contribute to different working experiences, something that Sefalafala and Webster did not address in their study.

A job-related issue identified by both groups of security guards, regardless of gender or employer, is their shifts, which cause fatigue. Smith et al. (1998: 233) argue that although there is generally no difference between the eight and 12-hour shifts on workers, night shifts have more negative effects on workers than day shifts in terms of stress and other health issues. The night shift starting from 22:00 for NWU security guards and 18:00 for the outsourced group was found to be the worst. Irregular and long working shifts were identified as a major job-related issue for all security guards, regardless of employer, as they cause problems with sleep and fatigue. Security guards show low levels of resilience in dealing with fatigue at work. The only way they cope is to ‘drink tons of coffee’, ‘to patrol the area around the gate’ and ‘to speak to each other’. If fatigue is not properly addressed, then security guards may be less vigilant to prevent crime, making the campus (as a place as locale) less safe for students and personnel.

Long working hours and shifts are especially challenging for female security guards after work. As women, most of the household tasks, such as cooking, cleaning and washing, remain their responsibility. For example, a female security guard at Potchefstroom campus said:

When I arrive home I sleep for four or five hours and then I have to cook for myself and my boyfriend, clean the house, and do the washing. I don’t get help from anyone. And I have to cook every day, because I don’t have a fridge.

In contrast, male security guards cope with fatigue after their working shift by ‘sleeping a few hours’ or by ‘relaxing and drinking with friends’. Similar responses were echoed.
by other male security guards working at this campus. Thus, for female security guards, shift work is especially challenging when it comes to balancing work and family life, because they generally carry the additional responsibility of unpaid household chores. Shift work, therefore, places an extra burden on families, especially women, as traditional roles of men and women still apply in this case.

Apart from the fatigue caused by long working hours, transport was identified as another issue. Some security guards at Potchefstroom campus said that they find transport to work expensive. The issue of transport becomes a financial challenge for security guards at Potchefstroom campus as they either have to take a taxi or take the transport provided by the university at a cost of R200 ($18.31) per month, which is deducted from their monthly salaries. There is not much choice as taxis are too expensive and walking or riding a bicycle to work is considered ‘dangerous’. Thus, place as location seems to contribute to security guards’ daily job-related challenges. If the university campus (place as location) was closer to their homes (place as locale where they live), transport would not have been an issue. This again may save security guards some money to make their lives materially more meaningful – increasing their agency in terms of reworking.

Another limitation identified in Sefalalafala and Webster’s study is that they say little about the effect that long working hours and shifts have on security guards’ families. Irregular shift work may disrupt family functioning, which may cause marriage instability, problems with child care and conflict over unpaid household duties (Hertz and Charlton 1989: 491). Security guards with children also indicated that shift work makes it impossible to care for children and they often have to find alternative solutions. For example, one female security guard at Potchefstroom campus explains:

I have a girl. 17 years old, and when I leave home, there are lots of men there. It is not safe. I have to be at work for 12 hours, so I can’t look after her. That’s why she lives with my mother and father in the township in Wolmaransstad. My mother looks after her, if she does her schoolwork. It is safe there, because they look after her. And my two brothers and sister are also there to help.

Long working hours and irregular shifts are challenging for security guards in the sense that they often feel that children left at home are unsafe. Hiring external childcare is not an option due to financial constraints. They cope with this challenge by placing their children in the care of the extended family. However, shift work is not the only reason why workers find it difficult to care for their children. The family structure of many black families, especially migrant ones in post-apartheid South Africa, remains influenced by poverty, where children face periods of residential instability as they are moved from one household to another, often in the care of other family members (Vander Waal 1996, cited in Chuong and Operario 2012: 43).
5.3. Boredom

Sefalafala and Webster (2013) identified boredom as a job-related issue for security guards, but they failed to specify factors that contribute to boredom and what coping strategies security guards implement to deal with it at work.

Research on job-related boredom is limited compared with other workplace emotions such as emotional labour, which leads to a less clear and robust definition. Literature on boredom defines it as ‘an emotional response to an environment which is unchanging or which changes in repetitive and highly predictable fashion’ (Davis et al. 1983: 1); ‘boredom exists in monotonous or repetitive work’ (Kass et al. 2001: 318); ‘is an unpleasant, aversive feeling as well as an altered perception of time, reduced arousal, and the motivation to change the activity or to leave the situation’ (Nett et al. 2010: 627); ‘a state of relatively low arousal and dissatisfaction which is attributed to an inadequately stimulating environment’ (Mikulas and Vodanovich 1993: 3); ‘a unique psychophysical state that is somehow produced by prolonged exposure to monotonous stimulation’ (O’Hanlon 1981: 54); and ‘an unpleasant, transient affective state in which an individual feels a pervasive lack of interest in and difficulty concentrating on the current activity’ (Fisher 1993: 396).

Loukidou et al. (2009: 384–387) argue that when employees are compelled to perform certain tasks that are seemingly boring, this causes deterioration in attention, lack of concentration and reduction in overall performance at work. Monotonous work is often associated with a distortion in the perception of time as time appears to ‘drag on or pass more slowly’ (Loukidou et al. 2009: 385). Fisher (1993: 6) compares job monotony to work underload, which occurs when work is perceived as repetitive, monotonous and unchallenging or when an employee has little to do. For example, a night watchman who has to keep watch or patrol certain areas is subjected to work underload.

Security guards at Potchefstroom campus, regardless of gender or employer, described boredom as an emotionally driven state, ‘not a nice feeling’, ‘unpleasant’ and ‘when I’m bored, I’m sleepy’. These feelings are attributed to external job characteristics as most of them said that they find their job ‘boring’ and ‘repetitive’.

Specific times are challenging for security guards, which reinforces feelings of boredom. For example, a security guard said:

On the holidays, say Christmas, our work is boring. You are looking at the cats, talk to the cats, no person here, you get tired. There is no car, there is nothing. We are only looking at the buildings, because we don’t allow the persons to come in. Everything is closed.

Apart from a lack of stimulation that causes boredom and a distortion in time, monotonous work can have detrimental effects on employees such as low motivation, chronic negative emotions, mental illnesses such as depression, stress, anxiety, feelings of entrapment and deviant behaviours (Martin et al. 2008: 197; Game 2007: 703). A challenge for some security guards regarding boredom is constant tiredness, lack of sleep and changes in eating behaviour. One male security guard said:
I am not sleeping well, because of the times. And it affects my diet. I am not eating well. I used to exercise before, but now it is difficult to exercise. I like to exercise. I have gained a lot of weight since working here. I am tired and I am not allowed to sleep at work.

Fisher (1993: 9) argues that organisational control practices increase boredom at work. The constraints of movement, restrictions on talking, prearranged working procedures, constant surveillance by managers and restricted breaks all cause boredom at work (Fisher 1993: 10–11). The university campus as place of location with its unique rules and regulations forces security guards to be ‘at the gate the whole time’. They are allowed to go to the toilet, but only when there is another security guard present at the gate. Managers also said that supervisors do random spot-checks to check whether security guards are at the gate during their shift. Thus, security guards’ movement is restricted and this limits stimulation and increases the chance of boredom as the security guards cannot leave before their shift is over. One male security guard said: ‘I am sitting here all the time. I’m not allowed to walk away here, because I don’t know when they (supervisors) will come.’

From the organisation’s perspective, security guards are forbidden from sleeping or taking prolonged breaks during their shift. They are expected to be at the access gates all the time during the shifts, which increase feelings of boredom. For security guards at Potchefstroom campus, boredom is caused by monotony and formalisation of the workplace and this may have dire consequences for the university itself such as job dissatisfaction, absenteeism and high turnover.

Another challenge for bored workers is that they are more likely to be dissatisfied with the overall nature of their job regarding wages, working hours, promotion opportunities and co-workers (Kass et al. 2001: 323). Research has indicated that motivation leads to a reduction in boredom and this can be achieved by increasing the variety of skills utilised, feedback on performance, promotion opportunities and increased job autonomy over decisions such as shifts (Loukidou et al. 2009: 387). The majority of security guards said that they are not satisfied with their salaries, working shifts and uniforms. For example, one male security guard said:

The salary is bad. The money is not enough. I have two children .... The times are bad. They are too long. I don’t see my friends and I’m tired. I have to work on holidays, when my roster says so .... The uniform ... I am cold in the winter.

Mikulas and Vodanovich (1993: 3) define boredom as ‘a state of relatively low arousal and dissatisfaction which is attributed to an inadequately stimulating environment’. Whether the boredom and job satisfaction of security guards are related remains questionable. Attempts to enhance job stimulation and minimise boredom are beneficial for any organisation as it reduces absenteeism and turnover, job dissatisfaction, and overall employee discontent while increasing task performance and motivation (Thackray 1981: 166; Drory 1982: 144; Martin et al. 2008: 206). One female security guard at Potchefstroom campus said that all she does ‘is swiping licences of students’.
Strategies to cope with boredom are essential in any training programme, because boredom may have severe consequences on both personal and organisational levels.

There are various strategies that individuals use to cope with boredom. At home, people watch television, make snacks or play computer games (Martin et al. 2008: 204), while employees whose movement is restricted and controlled at work by organisations typically engage in counterproductive behaviours such as playing with cell phones, talking to colleagues, daydreaming, singing, playing mental games, reading, looking around or stretching their arms (Martin et al. 2008: 204; Fisher 1991: 22–23; Fisher 1998: 504). Security guards, regardless of gender or employer, show resilience by coping with boredom in many ways such as reading newspapers, magazines or the Bible during quiet times, talking or gossiping with colleagues about family matters, singing, standing outside and even sleeping sometimes during the night shifts.

6. CONCLUSION

This article aimed to address some of the limitations of Sefalafala and Webster’s (2013) study, by taking the importance of place and agency into consideration. It identified three shortcomings in their study: Firstly, although they point to the security guard’s uniform as a signifier of general stereotypes, it is unclear why they are stereotyped, by whom and what coping strategies they use to overcome these judgements. Secondly, Sefalafala and Webster discuss how long working hours and shifts impact negatively on the health of security guards, but they fail to discuss how working hours and shifts are controlled at specific workplaces or what effects long working hours and shifts have on security guards’ family life, especially for those with children. Thirdly, Sefalafala and Webster discuss boredom as a job-related issue for security guards, but they fail to explain what unique circumstances reinforce feelings of boredom and what type of agency security guards possess to overcome boredom at the workplace.

This article has argued that by taking the specificity of place into consideration, it enables a better understanding of specific job-related issues and challenges at a particular location that may or may not be different from other places. This also enables one to understand what types of agency workers possess to overcome these job-related issues and challenges at a specific place. For this reason, this article focused on Potchefstroom campus as locality. Addressing the three identified limitations of Sefalafala and Webster’s (2013) study, this article found the following in terms of security guards’ working experiences at Potchefstroom campus: Potchefstroom campus serves as a particular place as location, where security guards’ work and employment are structured according to specific rules. For example, they have to use emotional labour as part of their job description. This may not be required from security guards working at other locations. The downside of this is verbal abuse by some students. Security guards, regardless of gender or employer, identified verbal abuse as a particular job-related issue and indicated that white students were the perpetrators. The challenge that security
guards face at this campus is that they cannot report verbal abuse to their managers, as they cannot prove such cases. Security guards show low levels of agency, in particular resilience and resistance, in coping with verbally abusive situations.

Secondly, irregular shifts are another job-related issue (for security guards working at Potchefstroom campus) that contributes to fatigue. Not taking fatigue seriously may have an impact on the particular locale in which security is provided. Less vigilant security guards may cause crime-related behaviour to increase on campus. In addition, long working hours and shifts are especially challenging for female security guards, who are still mainly responsible for household chores such as cleaning, cooking and laundering. Transport to and from work and caring for children are other job-related issues and challenges. Security guards at this campus show low levels of agency in this regard as they do not have a choice but to pay for transport provided by the university and to place their children in the care of extended family members. The third job-related issue is prolonged boredom, which security guards describe as ‘not a nice feeling’ and ‘unpleasant’. Monotony and lack of stimulation during working hours cause boredom for security guards working on Potchefstroom campus. However, these security guards possess resilience in that they cope with boredom at work by reading, singing, talking to colleagues and playing with their cell phones.

To conclude, this article shows that place as location, locale and locus of identity is crucial in order to understand how it impacts not only workers’ lives, but also their private lives. By taking the different layers of place into consideration, it enables one to move closer to understanding the particular issues and challenges and types of agency that workers possess at a very specific place, that may be different from other places.

REFERENCES


PSIRA – see Private Security Industry Regulatory Authority.


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Working as a security guard


BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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