This paper describes how the initial difficulties and barriers encountered by the researcher, in gaining a qualitative understanding of the health and safety culture and practices of migrant workers in Malaysia, abruptly and unexpectedly collapsed through the serendipitous nature of practicing ethnography, as ‘Ops 6’ raids on illegal workers were suddenly encountered on the site under study. This is ethnography at the moments when informal labour becomes illegal labour, in practice.

2015 marks the final year of the Tenth Malaysia Plan (10MP), which was designed to enable Malaysia to become a high-income and developed nation by 2020. In addition to driving its global performance and competitiveness as part of the Construction Industry Master Plan 2006-2015, the Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) has recently amended the Act 520 to broaden its mandate to include the setting of standards with regards to “registration of construction personnel; training; accreditation and certification; company quality assessment; and health, safety and environment” (CIDB Malaysia, 2014). The sector is, however, highly dependent on migrant labour.

The CIDB reports that, of the 800,000 registered workers in Malaysian construction, 69% are foreign workers. However, this figure excludes illegal workers, and the Malaysian immigration authorities estimate that there may be as many as an additional 2.2 million undocumented workers in Malaysia (Amnesty International, 2010). A new government strategy was effected in 2011, named the Comprehensive Settlement Program on Illegal Immigrants (6P Program), to reduce the number of illegal immigrants and to strengthen the management of foreign workers in the country. However, our study portrays the employment of illegal immigrants among the subcontractors’ workforces being a common practice. As Kaur (2014) states succinctly, “the State’s low-skilled labour policy essentially vacillates between ensuring a continual supply of cheap labour and instigating crackdowns on undocumented migrants”. The bureaucratic employment procedures, the high cost of renewing a work permit, and the system’s restrictions to regulate the movement of workers by tying them to a particular employer, sector and location, can be seen as pushing workers towards irregular migration.

The researcher embarked on eight weeks of ethnographic fieldwork on a construction project in Penang, working as a practical trainee or intern. Building relationships with subcontractors and migrant workers (primarily Indonesian and Bangladeshi workers) proved understandably difficult given her research interests in occupational health and safety and accidents onsite. In addition, the researcher felt that attitudes towards her gender proved an initial obstacle, with workers voicing both an unwillingness to participate and that construction sites were unsuitable places for women. Whilst carrying out the internship, the researcher worked under the supervision of two company employees; a senior quantity surveyor (also a senior project manager) and a junior project manager, and undertook tasks composed of both site and office works. Her work onsite included shadowing the junior project manager, monitoring site activities and jotting down notes to update the company’s site diary, which involved an increasing amount of time observing a number of trade groups; mainly the plasterers, bricklayers, carpenters and tilers, as trust and relationships grew. In the afternoon she worked
at the company’s main office, focused on cost related works and participant observation of the work and meetings accessed through shadowing the junior project manager.

This paper builds out of three ethnographic episodes, based on fieldnotes, which unfold and interact to provide insights on health and safety practice in the Malaysian construction industry. We argue that the gap between policy and practice (or rather the hiatus before the enactment of policy), provides opportunities for work in informal construction in Malaysia, but it also creates a climate of fear and paranoia which amplifies the risk of accidents on site. The combination of heavy manual construction work, hot climate, and the wearing of inappropriate PPE (personal protective equipment), amplified at times of fasting, which was physically draining for the ethnographer-as-intern during Ramadan, pose routine problems in the practice of safety onsite. In addition to these factors, the episodes capture how a major safety risk to the operations onsite stems from the 6P program’s encroachment on everyday decision-making (in terms of its impending threat and eventual execution through the “Ops 6P Bersepadu” raids, both of which featured during this fieldwork).

The unstable and shifting employment environment (particularly in emerging economies who are struggling to develop a local and sustainable workforce) can transform overnight. For a large section of the migrant construction workforce, the physical demands of manual labour in this equatorial climate are accompanied by the threat of detainment. In this context, our paper argues for the necessity of a consideration of labour rights and the continuities between the offsite and onsite worlds (Tutt et al., 2013) of the workers in any credible attempts to implement effective occupational health and safety systems.

References:


