

Revealing the hidden costs: research experiences from a case study evaluation project

Jo Burton
Rashmi Rajan



Jo Burton (top photo) is an Assistant Policy Analyst, Labour Market Policy Group, Department of Labour, New Zealand.

Rashmi Rajan (bottom photo) is a Senior Policy Analyst, Occupational Safety and Health Service, Department of Labour, New Zealand.

Aftermath: the social and economic consequences of workplace injury and illness was a case study evaluation of the experiences of 15 individuals injured or made ill at work, their families, friends, workplaces, colleagues and government officials.¹ It was a unique research experience for those on the project team, as it brought the researchers into close contact with the pain and suffering of the participants. This article discusses the methodology of the study, the experience of the researchers, and what lessons can be taken from these research experiences.

Introduction

Employees who are harmed will inevitably bear much of the consequences of what happens to them by themselves, as others simply will not experience or fully understand the degree of pain or isolation that they may experience. Likewise, the costs and consequences to family, friends or work colleagues often go unrecorded and unobserved, although they are nonetheless real. Many consequences are unable to be measured directly as an economic cost or some other cost, such as a loss of intimacy between spouses, or the breakdown of a family unit due to an unexpected death.

To explore these wider costs for society the Social and Economic Consequences of Workplace Injury and Illness Study was begun in 2001. It aimed to gain an understanding of the full range of consequences of workplace illness and injury. It attempted to do this by examining the costs through the experiences of the affected participant in the study, their family, friends, colleagues, employers and supervisors in the workplace. As much as is possible, the study tried to gain a depth of understanding of each case and chart the uncounted effects on society.

Methodology

The study objectives were:

- to explore the social and economic consequences of workplace injury and illness for injured and ill employees, their families, and the workplace
- to identify key characteristics that determine social consequences
- to inform investment in health and safety in the workplace.

The unit of analysis for these questions was the ill or injured employee and their relationships in the home, workplace and community. A case study approach, with

both quantitative and qualitative methods was utilised (Mostyn 1985, pp. 115–146; Salomon 1991, pp. 10–18; Leibrich 1993; Taylor 1990). This involved triangulating data (Miles & Huberman 1994) from a number of sources including existing research from the Accident Compensation Corporations (ACC) and the Occupational Safety and Health Service of the Department of Labour (OSH), analysis of stakeholder views, and case studies interviews with the affected person their family, workmates, and if appropriate OSH and other health professionals. Fifteen cases were selected using a number of criteria including age, family status, socioeconomic status, occupation, gender, and nature of workplace injury or illness or conditions/environment.

All the cases were characterised by serious direct consequences to the participants. An iterative research process was used. The research objectives, questions, case study framework, and a participant selection process were developed. From this a literature review was completed, semi-structured interview questions developed, workshops on the analytical framework for data analysis conducted, and a report-writing process established. Using two researchers for each interview, peer review of cases with a ‘buddy’, and ‘workshopping’ the data and the analysis repeatedly, contributed to the rigour of the research. The report was written by all team members, with constant reviews and checks at every stage. From each interview the key themes were drawn out using the interview transcripts, OSH and ACC information.

The research team consisted of 10 researchers from a wide range of academic disciplines and backgrounds (nursing, law, health, community development, and social sciences). The majority of the researchers were from the Department of Labour, consisting of four analysts from OSH policy, two from the Labour Market Policy Group, and one who was both an OSH Inspector and an occupational health nurse. Of the rest of the team, one researcher was from ACC, working in injury prevention, and the other two were private contractors. There was a distinct gender bias in the team, with eight women and two men. Participation in the project team was very stable, with only one team member leaving the project unexpectedly.

An external virtual group was set up to provide extra input by email. Information and comments were available to the whole group. This kept those outside the project up to date with the research, provided different perspectives, gave additional information and access to international knowledge.

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Guidelines for researchers' health and safety

Before fieldwork began, ethical guidelines were developed for the conduct of interviews and the use of information. It was acknowledged at this stage that the research process would potentially have an impact not only on the participants, but also on the researchers. The need for easy access to support for the research team was therefore included in the ethical guidelines (Homan 1991). A number of sources were consulted in the development of these guidelines, in particular, the *Health Research Council handbook* (1997), the *AES guidelines for the ethical conduct of evaluations* (1997), and

consultation with OSH and ACC. All team members had access to counselling throughout the research if they felt it was required.

Throughout the research process the adequacy of support was discussed,

so that revisions could be made if necessary.

Ultimately, the researchers found that the support offered by other members of the project team was sufficient.

The other consideration was that researchers would be going into private homes, or other forms of private property, and so a comprehensive set of health and safety guidelines for researchers was compiled before fieldwork commenced. However, the team experienced absolutely no problems in this area.

Researchers' experience

For the researchers involved in the fieldwork, this was a unique research experience. From the outset of the project, most of us were surprised and humbled by the generosity and honesty of the participants. The OSH Inspector on the team, however, was already aware, from prior experience, of how much these people would want to tell their stories, and:

... how much they would want to try and prevent it happening to others. (Sue)

What was most extraordinary about the project was the constant exposure to the experience of the participants, many of whom had not told their story to anyone before. The project team all found that the experience of conducting the interviews stayed with them:

I still remember each and every interview.
(Frances)

The field work was emotionally and physically draining, mainly because of exposure to the participants' high levels of pain and suffering, but was at the same time a rewarding experience because of the openness, strength, courage and positive attitude displayed by the participants in spite of the huge burdens they carried:

While it was extremely hard work, both emotionally and physically, it was also very rewarding. The hardest aspect of the project was the exposure to the pain and suffering of the participants. Working intensively with their experiences over a period of 18 months placed a huge burden on the researchers. For me, what made this bearable was the courage and strength of the participants; that they could go through so much and come out smiling was a testament to human nature at its best. (Jo)

To help express this in the final report, the researchers drew extensively from the original transcripts, using quotations to illustrate findings wherever possible. The interviews showed that the voices of all the participants were immensely powerful. Direct quotes allowed the participants to speak to the reader through the report. We were constantly amazed at how clearly experience could be encapsulated in a single sentence or two:

I have lost my marriage ... I always feel I live in the shade, I no longer live in the sun. (Widow of employee killed at work)

He had gone through Northern Ireland ... He had gone through Vietnam. And we bloody killed him. (Company occupational health nurse)

The use of direct quotations throughout the report also enabled the researchers to go some way towards disseminating the intensity of the research experience to the reader. This could be done very objectively and without the need for any explanation in most cases because the participants were, through their quotes, able to speak directly to the reader.

The power of the direct quote shouldn't be underestimated. (Frances)

At the beginning of the project, there had been some discussion about the relative merits of taping interviews versus taking notes. Ultimately, participants were given the option, with the vast majority choosing to have their interviews taped. This had major benefits for the project. It allowed the interviewers the time to observe expressions and body language, and interact to a greater degree. More importantly, it allowed the use of direct

quotations in the final report. Our participants expressed their experiences far more eloquently than we could, and the records of their interviews were not altered by our perceptions, our choice of what to record, or by our own use of shorthand, as might have happened if we had relied solely on written notes. It also meant we missed nothing.

Throughout the project, the research team 'workshopped' the data regularly. Discussion of the researchers' experiences formed an important part of this process; an informal debrief that became increasingly important as the weight of the collective experiences of the participants increased.

In addition to these issues, the researchers also found themselves engaging with the participants.

This was problematic, as the role of the evaluation was to allow

the participants to tell their stories, without being judged. It was

particularly hard for the

project team to remain impartial in the few situations where the employer showed no awareness of, or remorse for, the injury or illness:

I have felt a great bond with the other researchers because of the nature of the shared experiences that we have had, dealing with – no other words for it – other people's pain.

I also felt considerable frustration and even anger at how some of the victims had been treated and in one case in particular found it hard to understand that a victim could be so loyal and forgiving of their employer after being treated so badly in my opinion. (Sue)

Through the process of the interviews, analysis, and, most importantly, during the report-writing process, the researchers were constantly aware of the need, and took appropriate steps, to maintain objectivity and to make sure that their 'voices' and opinions did not in any way colour the end products. This was achieved through grounding our analysis through multiple observations, perspectives and sober consideration of the evidence. As a result, we are confident, through all the checks that we used, that the report is sound and fair.

Working with a team that was interdisciplinary, open to constructive criticism, that possessed complementary strengths and weaknesses, and was extremely committed, was a great strength and advantage, particularly for a qualitative study of this nature.

Working with members of the research team was a real bonus. I can't speak highly enough of their skills and contributions – they all amaze me. (Sue)

I have thoroughly enjoyed working in this diverse (members were culturally diverse and hailed from

different disciplines and organisations) but extremely cohesive team. (Rashmi)

The nature of the project, and the fact that the same researchers remained on the project for the duration heightened the uniqueness of the study in terms of a research experience:

The experience of working on this project has been like no other. I have felt a great bond with the other researchers because of the nature of the shared experiences that we have had, dealing with – no other words for it – other people’s pain. (Richard)

The project has left a deep mark on the researchers:

It was, overall, a moving and deeply impacting experience which has left me changed for life. The strength and courage displayed by the participants in the face of the adversities they faced after the injury/illness – which for most had changed their lives forever – made me see my own life in better perspective, and increased manifold my respect for humanity. (Rashmi)

All of the researchers commented that being involved in the project had made them more conscious of their own health and safety, both professionally and personally. It also had broader attitudinal impacts:

It has made me aware of the fragility of what we consider our normal lives. I make the most of things, because I know how fast things can change irrevocably. However, I also know that it doesn’t have to be this way – that the illnesses and injuries in the study were preventable, which is what makes them so tragic. (Jo)

Having worked on this project and at OSH ... I think much harder about not only my own but other peoples’ safety. (Andrew)

Throughout the project, the researchers became increasingly committed to both the study and the promotion of health and safety more generally. The majority of the participants had stated that their primary reason for taking part in the study was that they hoped by telling their story they might help prevent what happened to them happening to someone else.

Throughout the project, the researchers became increasingly committed to both the study and the promotion of health and safety more generally. The majority of the participants had stated that their primary reason for taking part in the study was that they hoped by telling their story they might help prevent what happened to them happening to someone else. This provided additional motivation for the research team:

The motivations of participants have been a spur to me to get the most out of this research for them. (Richard)

Their stories emphasised for those on the project team the importance of the research, and reaffirmed their commitment to the area of workplace health and safety:

Interviewing people who have suffered great loss as a result of workplace accidents and illnesses demonstrated to me how vital it is for occupational safety and health to be a principal concern for employers and employees and how in most organisations in New Zealand this is still far from reality. (Mary)

While intellectually I was aware of accidents in the workplace, the participants’ stories brought home the reality of injury and illness. Extremely bad things happen to good people each and every day in this country. (Andrew)

The research emphasised the great need created by the stories of the injured and ill to not just identify the costs and consequences of their injury or illness, but seriously consider the means to reduce them. The stories brought home the reality of injury and illness and the hope is that they inform practice in the workplace and improve health and safety of New Zealand workers.

Lessons from the research process

Although the study was challenging for the project team, both the research experience and the final report were tremendously rewarding. The experiences of the researchers in this project produced a number of lessons that are worth considering in a case study of this nature. A number of implications for future research of this kind are set out below:

- It is important to have procedures in place for ‘debriefing’ researchers, and to allow time in meetings for experiences to be shared and discussed and for issues to be resolved. These need to be flexible as it is likely and often

inevitable that more issues will arise during the research that had not been thought of or highlighted before the fieldwork began, and there needs to be a way to incorporate them and review the research guidelines on an ongoing basis.

For most of the researchers this project was unlike any other that they had been involved in. It created a bond both among themselves as a team due to shared experiences in the study, as well as the intangible link with the participants in dealing with their pain and suffering. The project personalised for the researchers the extreme, enormous, and ongoing consequences of serious workplace injury...and the real need for improved public awareness.

- Interviewing can be both physically and mentally exhausting; it was important that sufficient time be allowed between interviews to enable researchers to 'regroup'. Scheduling several interviews into just a couple of days greatly increases the stress on the researchers (Sharp & Howard 1996, p. 147).
- Diversity in the project team was essential for a whole host of reasons, but particularly because they complemented each other's strengths and weaknesses.
- There can be implications for objectivity – the researchers felt quite strongly about the cases and therefore needed to be aware of and careful that their feelings and involvement did not in any way influence the report or jeopardise the fieldwork. For example, caution needed to be exercised when interviewing the employers after the injured/ill employee and their family had been interviewed.

Conclusion

For most of the researchers this project was unlike any other that they had been involved in. It created a bond both among themselves as a team due to shared experiences in the study, as well as the intangible link with the participants in dealing with their pain and suffering. The project personalised for the researchers the extreme, enormous, and ongoing consequences of serious workplace injury and illness, and the real need for improved public awareness of practical health and safety systems and procedures. It has also provided a number of lessons that can be carried over to future evaluations of this kind.

Case study research like *Aftermath* provides a unique set of challenges to the researcher, not only because of the physical and mental strain they can

produce, but also in presenting the material gathered in a fair and objective manner. However, the depth of information that they can provide, and power of using personal narratives make them challenges that are well worth taking up.

Note

- 1 Copies of the report are available online at: www.dol.govt.nz.

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