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Final Essay
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# "Eagerness for Lunch Break" in the British Workplace: Culture or Surveillance?

During the course of my past internship placement at Stylus Media Group in London, I came across a discrepancy in the way Stylus' employees treated their lunch break vs. how they treated their time in the office space. Not only were they more blissful, which one would assume due to allocated free time, they were actually completely detached from their duties in the workplace. Juxtaposed to several internships I have had in New York, where employees enjoyed lunch but did make an effort to discuss upcoming duties at work during their lunch breaks, this detachment specifically struck my interest and further observation. Many conversations during the lunch breaks as this internship placement revolved around topics such as family, relationships, and even reality television. From this observation, I had first made the assumption that cultural differences had enforced their whole-hearted love of break but then with further observation of the workplace and its personal effect on my own work, I realized this respect for alleviation may have been a result of the physical office structure. The office layout is completely open, with no barriers separating desks and the surrounding offices and conference rooms were enclosed with glass walls. The office is literally a version of a "glass house" where everyone was under complete and constant surveillance. Unlike other internship placements, where I have worked in a semi-closed office spaces, I began to experience anxiety while completing my work from the pressures of being constantly watched by surrounding employees and department heads. This experience led to my second realization that the effects of this layout may be a contributing factor to the high pedestal "break time" is placed on among my co-workers at Stylus. Throughout this ethnography, I will focus on both the possible cultural differences of British workers, and the physical difference of the office layout as possibly contributing to the need for "properly relaxing" lunch breaks at Stylus Media Group.

This internship placement site, Stylus Media Group, is a marketing firm that specializes in innovation research and brand advisory for both start-up and established corporations. During my

placement, I worked for the marketing team as a whole, but mostly completed tasks for the Senior Marketing and Events Manager. Members of this team were often my companions during lunch outings. In terms of my physical placement throughout the office, I sat adjacent to several departments including the sales, editing, design, and finance teams. Each department was allocated a space within the office that consisted of one or two rows of connected desks with Mac computers attached. The design of the office was also considerably stark. It completely white from the walls, down to the floor panels with pops of color only coming from the actual workers(who the majority of were in their late twenties and considerably stylish) and magazines and art pieces that lined the walls and tables. The office had a feeling of "perfection" as if it was intentionally set up with a idealistic mentality, and this "perfection" made the idea of messing it up simply horrifying, whether that be due to cluttered desks stains or generally bad work ethic.

What initially prompted my further eagerness to explore the "lunchtime experience" began during my first lunch outing with my co-workers. As we left the office and hit the elevator directly outside of Stylus' walls it seemed as is their weariness had worn off immediately. I found this change of energy increasingly more striking as we carried on to their usual lunch spot at the park situated about ten minutes from the office. Not only did the conversation immediately start when leaving the office, but it also ventured into many personal and emotive stories that stemmed far from the harsh personalities I was sitting amongst in the office. Their discussions ventured from boyfriends to reality television, and so on. Then strikingly enough, one member of the group suggested that we "go for ice cream" before heading back inside and the enthusiasm and familiarity that followed as we went to pick up a few simple ice pops enforced just how highly my co-workers valued their time away from the pressures of the office. For a sheer couple of moments it was extremely easy to forget that I was amongst twenty-six to thirty year old workers due to the "lunch break environment" creating a feeling strangely similar to primary school recess time. To my dismay, the minute we entered the walls of the office there was a complete shift in my co-workers attitudes to the point where the gladness of the lunch break seemed to be actively and forcefully forgotten.

Since the office was extremely busy and employees rarely decided to come up for air unless it was lunch time most of my study was done through methods of participant observation as described by Matt Stroh in chapter fifteen of "Research Training for Social Scientists." Since there was such an age gap and unfamiliarity with my setting I felt as if I needed to base myself in the environment and among my co-workers for a long period of time before they were willing to open up to me about their experience at past jobs and their relation to how they viewed their lunch breaks. When discussing how to learn about deviant and hidden activities when completing a study Stroh said, "Much of what we know about criminal and deviant subcultures has been gleaned from participant observation. These are areas that insiders are likely to be reluctant to talk about in an interview context alone. Understanding is again likely to come through prolonged interaction"(Stroh 328). Similar to this standpoint I don't believe I would have been able to gather so much personal information without first making my presence a norm within their lunch break activities. After regularly attending lunch with my co-workers during break I began to examine my first assumption, that cultural differences were the attributing factors to the discrepancy between their treatment of lunch time and work time through conducting several informal interviews during our hour-long break. I asked several questions such if they value their breaks, what they usually talked about and if this attitude towards break was similar in their previous job placements. When asked if break including vacation was extremely valued almost every co-worker of mine agreed. One even said that it was his favorite part of the job. Also, when asked what topics the conversations revolved around during break most of my co-workers agreed that family and relationship matters were discussed most frequently among them followed by infrequent discussion about, sports and television. Interestingly enough, when asked whether they tend to speak about work during lunch the majority of them said no. There was a general consensus that work belonged at work, and play belonged outside of it's walls, and many had agreed that, that had been their same mentality during several of their previous job placements in London. There was a member of the marketing team who had worked in both London and the United States who found enjoyment in discussing his particular fondness of London's work culture. He explained that in New York his work often fed into his personal life as well as almost always flooding into his "lunch break" which

caused him to experience less time feeling relief from separation from the office and considerably more anxiety due to his need to constantly multitask in order to work at the pace of his New York office. In her work, “Who Dares to Speak against the Work Ethic”, Alleen Pace Nilsen describes this same pressure and consequential obsession with work among America’s workforce. She says, “The concept of the *workaholic* is distinctively American. We measure time in relation to work: the *eight hour day*, the *four-day week*, and *five o'clock traffic*”(Nilsen 13). She also discussed the fact that people are assigned labels depending on connections with with their jobs, such as “white (blue or pink collar) workers”(Nilsen 13). She theorizes that this obsession with work ethic is more than a “cliche” and even goes on to describe it as a “national belief.” She theorizes that this work obsessive ethic dates back to the “frontier heritage where settlers were forced by harsh climates and primitive conditions to either work or perish”(Nilsen 13).This eagerness and want for success and wealth as determined by how much work is completed daily has been a key driver at many of my previous work placements in New York. Enjoying the full period of lunch break has not been particularly viewed as rewarding in these previous placements, unlike the ease in which my co-workers in my placement at Stylus Media Group can leave the office without worries of having to rush back to their duties awaiting them in the office. In a 2014 CBS News Article titled, “Americans Value Money Over Time Off” Suzanne Lucas discussed the idea that Americans are simply reluctant to leave the office. She says, “But when push comes to shove, what do we want? More money. Given a choice between an extra week of vacation or 5 percent increase in salary, 79 percent of Americans will take the raise, according to a recent survey by finance recruitment firm Accounting Principals.” Then she went on to say, “When it comes to napping in the workplace, by contrast, Americans are more ready to sign up: 48 percent would take a nap if it was offered.” From this reporting it becomes obvious that it some sort of stimuli within American workplaces that is driving workers to stay within the walls of office and obtain an increasingly task focused mindset within and outside it’s walls. According to a 2007 article by the Economist, “Europeans: Rational, Not Lazy the The Free Exchange subsection of the website said,"According to the economists Claudio Michelacci and Josep Pijoan-Mas of Spain's Centre for Monetary and Financial Studies, the difference between work-happy Americans and

lolling Europeans isn't a cultural gap about the value of leisure and work/life balance. It's incentives." They went on to report that the, "GDP per capita is today 30% higher in the US than in France or Germany, while productivity, measured by GDP per hour worked, is roughly equal. This means that Americans are today richer than Europeans not because they are more productive but simply because they work more." The Free Exchange column contributes the "gap in labor participation" in the European economy as resulting from the higher tax rates which they theorize are creating less "incentives to work" among the European workforce and also consequently creating less incentive for entrepreneurs to take chances on new business ventures thus halting productivity. Furthermore, in a Bloomberg article, "Americans Work 25% More Than Europeans" by Ben Steverman, the same theory of taxation ruining incentive is addressed but also there is the mention of the stability of labor unions and strong pensions that Steverman attributes to less work in European offices. Steverman theorizes that "Generous pensions in Europe are also a strong factor in discouraging older people from working... In the U.S., more people over 65 are working than at any point in the past 50 years. The U.S.'s shift from traditional pensions to 401(k) plans makes it harder for Americans to know when it's safe to retire." From gathering the economic information from these reports it began clear that the study of cultural difference within my ethnography was in fact not culturally based but actually based difference on how European workers broadly view their economy as impacting how much they decide to enforce their work ethic within and outside the walls of the office space.

In order to further engage with the second factor of my study, whether the physical structure of the office increased the need and enjoyment of lunch break, I asked my co-workers several informal questions about their relationship to the workspace. When asked if the structure of the office put added pressure on my co-workers to deliver work at a quicker pace the answer was pretty spilt. Many said they did work faster in this environment than in other work spaces, but those who disagreed often said that though not forced to work at a faster pace, they admitted that they did work with more due diligence than previous enclosed work spaces. Then when asked if constantly been looking over and watched during their time in the office added to their daily anxieties while trying to complete their work, many of my

younger co-workers said yes but the older workers mostly agreed that this anxiety was only present near to an upcoming due date or Stylus event. In order to further engage with this concept of anxiety in relation to constant surveillance I worked with Foucault's "Discipline and Punish." The many of the effects of active surveillance within the Panopticon can be seen as similarly working throughout the walls of Stylus' workplace. Foucault described the Panopticon as prison in which prison guards could complete rounds of surveillance on inmates without their knowledge of when they were actually being watched. This resulted in anxiety among the inmates that led to the inmate's self-regulation of their own activities even in the absence of authority figures. Many aspects of Stylus' office structure gave way to these consequently self-regulating anxieties. Due to the open layout and the removal of all barriers between rows, desks, and departments within the firm, the whole staff was viewed by not only their individual departments, but also potential clients, company executives, several department heads. The glass offices further enforced concept of literally working under a magnifying glass. In Foucault's "Discipline and Punishment" he said, "Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power"(Foucault 3). When analyzing the effect of the glass offices it becomes apparent that not only are the employees working through this conditioned state, but so are their employers. The regulation of power through the means of active surveillance is a occupying feature of the workspace that may have given way to the stark character change I witnessed after the first lunch with my co-workers when we came back to the office. There seemed to be a desire to conform to the unspoken, but conditioned rules of the office space because of constantly being watched by their co-workers and bosses. Further analyzing the effect of Foucault's theory of Panopticism, Jane Tynan compared this method of observation as a "function of power" to the wider effects of society. In Chapter 11, "Michel Foucault: Fashioning the Body Politic" Jane Tynan writes, "Once the prison becomes a metaphor for how people are organized throughout modern society, we can see how Foucault saw social life as embodied subjectivity. The anxiety we feel about our bodies – particularly concerns about appearance – result from this scopic regime of modernity" (Tynan 6). When analyzing her stance, it becomes apparent that beyond the actual prison structure of the Panopticon, the way the human body is

viewed as compared to everyday societal norms regulates the way in which members of society choose to condition their bodies. The change from glee to stark attitudes almost every time I went back into the office from lunch with my co-workers is the way in which they chose to condition their bodies in order to fit into the social and almost idealistic norms and even decoration of the office space. In Lisa Blackman's, "The Body: Key Concepts: Introduction" she describes an extract from Foucault's "Discipline and Punishment" in which he describes the Panopticon as "a form of an apparatus intended to render the individual docile and useful" (Blackman 26). She then also equates the "Docile body" to a "Disciplined body." Within the wall of Stylus Media Group the seats are filled with docile and disciplined bodies. There is no actual time to de-stress due to such an open work space and I do believe this factor majorly contributes to the character changes of the employees and their eagerness to enjoy lunch break away from the pressures of prying eyes.

In conclusion, when analyzing both factors, cultural and physical, that contributed to the need for Stylus Media Group's employees need to escape for lunch time through both observation, discussion and its personal effects on my work ethic, the constant surveillance of Stylus' employees due to the physical office structure was the dominant factor creating this eagerness for lunch break. Though cultural aspects did not drive the relaxed attitudes that accompanied break, I can conclude that though not as dominant, several economic factors such as pressures due to taxation and more stability from stronger work unions and pensions than those in the American economy, may also contribute to the leisure granted to lunch break activities within my internship placement.

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