

S/A 4074 Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 23: Rituals of the Workplace

* Ritual theory can be usefully applied to workplaces:

- the self and relationships are meaningfully constituted through material and symbolic labor
- these dramatize, redress, or mediate pressing social/cultural contradictions
- may help us understand dynamics of coercion/collaboration
- may shed light on tense boundaries between family and work
- the workplace may be seen as a “ritual arena” for such issues

Ritual and Labor in Pre-capitalist and Capitalist Societies

* In small-scale societies, ritual cannot be easily separated from labor: both reproduce society itself (e.g. women gardeners identified with their products, or “children”).

* Modern society has radically separated labor and family, obscuring producer-subject from product-object: such commodification, becoming a “cog in the wheel” or “slave to the clock” is alienating

* Since 17th century, “rational” work has been structurally opposed to family/religion, yet its ritual practices are complex and developed (e.g. rooted in the “Protestant Ethic,” a career is a secular pilgrimage toward worldly goals to prove one is of “the elect”)

* Despite recent changes (downsizing, women in labor force), the workplace celebrates the mysteries of capital/value production through commodity exchange, being the formal, public basis of identity to which family life is structurally subordinated

Business is Business: The Sacred Bond of the Contract

* Contracts transform pre-industrial systems of gift-exchange, through which giver and donor are intermingled via elaborate ritual acts, hedged about with mystical prohibitions and supernatural sanctions

* The contract has remained the most important ritual of economic life, still the object of near-mystical reverence by employers/employees (e.g. ritualized handshakes, formal signings in lawyer's conference rooms, hushed voices, etc.)

‘Our Corporate Family’: Philanthropy, Sponsorship and Donations

* Philanthropy shows broad resistance to family-friendly workplaces: gifts also reflect interests of donor and debt of recipient

* Commodity vs. gift: the former involves impersonal, abstract relations between buyer/seller; the latter “altruism” and enduring bonds (e.g. an idealized, yet hierarchical “family”).

* The philanthropic creation of “virtual families” serve as compensatory substitutes for commitment to work-family balance/family well-being

Border Crossings: Policing the Boundaries of Work and Family

* As "work" and "family" were separated in the early modern period, ritual practices emerged establishing firm boundaries between them

* Many have endured, as employers seek to reintroduce allusions to familial and home lives, as "work" expands into once quasi-protected domains

* Rites of formal separation from the home (“getting ready”) followed by structured “pilgrimage” to work

* Rituals performatively marking entrance/exit (e.g. time clock, meetings); and week (TGIF). Same in telecommuting (“Mom is working

now”)

* Today work-family distinctions are hard to maintain; often a source of anxiety, resentment and frustration for workers and their family members (e.g. “flexible” hours in software industry).

A Semi-Permeable Membrane: Signaling Home at Work

* While work increasingly invades family time, strong restrictions remain on bringing family life into employment contexts (office picnics reinforce this boundary, as does frequent lack of child care at work)

* Nevertheless, a great deal of semi-illicit "kinwork" (the informal management of family relations) seems to go on in most workplaces

Creating Virtual "Families"

* Management often makes efforts to present the labor environment as a kind of virtual "family" by staging office versions of normally family rituals (e.g. birthday, Christmas parties)

* These emerged during periods of relative job security and stability. Increasingly, despite “healing rituals” and “pep rallies” these must contend with the fact that corporations are not families (one cannot be downsized from a family).

* Virtual family rituals are often compensatory, sometimes couched in therapeutic, even spiritual terms

* Rhetoric and symbolism of "the family" is frequently deployed by management, at times in conjunction with restrictions on collective bargaining or public dissent (e.g. downsizing “a private, emotional, family time”)

Social Class and "Family Feeling": Rites of Hierarchy and Equality

* Workplaces rites of the virtual family simultaneously assert egalitarian social principle while dramatizing underlying institutional hierarchies (e.g. “Secret Santa and award luncheons controlled by management)

Rites of Passage: Incorporation, Integration and Separation

* The formal and informal hiring process is usually structured as a three-part rite of passage:

- the newly hired person is separated out from his or her prior identity (e.g. given new clothes, tools, identifying objects)
- the new worker occupies a temporarily "liminal" (intermediate) position, often subject to forms of marginal play (hazing/pranks)
- s/he is integrated into the new organization or network

* Intensified affiliation is accomplished through repeated "integrative rites," such as annual conventions of professional associations that oscillate between shared disciplined discomfort and periods of "anti-structure"--carnavalesque revelry

* Permanent transitions out of the virtual "work family" are invariably marked through symbolic enactments (e.g. ritualistic retirement or “buy-out” parties; the gold watch symbolizing the retiree)

* Degradation ceremonies: fired workers ritualistically escorted out as stigmatized, polluted, and a virtual (or at least potential) criminal, subject to the symbolic equivalent of summary judgment and execution

* Many organizations signal a break with their past through elaborate new strategic plans, often marked by shifts in logos, architecture and design aesthetics

Buttoned Down: Rites of Adornment

* Transitions between work and family are signaled and negotiated

through symbolic practices of adornment and self-presentation (e.g. changing clothes communicates explicit and implicit meanings, whether formal or informal uniforms)

* Beyond this, a fit body is widely seen as a sign of discipline, self-control and virtue, while flabbiness is increasingly stigmatized as manifestation of laxity and self-indulgence (esp. for women)

* The pre-eminent unmarked uniform of the modern workplace, the business suit, signals sobriety, self-denial, self-discipline and privileged access to the mysteries of Capital: the term "buttoned down" still evokes commitment to routinized, rationalized and rule-bound behavior

* Despite the entrance of women into the professions, many basic principles associated with male executive office subcultures, have endured: getting dressed for work poses more political and symbolic challenges for professional women

Where's the Beef? Oral Consumption, Hierarchy+ Business Culture

* Food preparation, exchange and consumption expresses and mediates the social frameworks of labor, evoking the shifting terrain of modern capitalism and gender relations:

- historical shifts from red-meat/male dominance to other cuisines signaling meritocracy
- food consumption, at times, helps constitute "virtual families" in the workplace, especially with sharing of more "common" meals
- the water cooler as temporary oasis from hierarchy
- consuming coffee, cigarettes, or alcohol together in bounded social contexts temporarily relaxes social distinctions, yet reinforces them in other ways (e.g. smoking rules, secretaries making coffee)
- food exchanges along the work-family frontier are highly contested

Virtually Connected: Cell phones and Cyberspace

- * Exchanges via new communication technologies help produce and reproduce social networks as well as emerging forms of personhood
- * Workers' do not devote all their time work-related assignments. Yet, many dramatically perform work-related identities through visible usage of electronic devices
- * Given growing pressures to be virtually connected while at home, we need a better understanding of how spouses, partners, and children aid workers in negotiating computer and internet technologies at home.

Mysteries of the Temple: Secrecy and Security

- * Dramas of secrecy characterize most workplaces: Professionals make extensive use of esoteric language, both for convenience and to signal membership in the privileged inner circle (has grown as some “secret societies” have declined)
- * Corporate security visibly dramatizes the high status of the persons and institutions it protects, often invoked to justify elaborate perks for senior management
- * Increases in corporate and workplace security may have intensified the mystique and privilege of senior management, been used to justify the intensified surveillance of workers, and to restrict dissent

Resistance is Futile?

- * Workers show inventive forms of expression, often with a subversive edge. Opinion is divided whether such acts are creative expressions of workers' resistance or futile products of alienated disenchantment
- * Reprieve is snatched at water coolers, at lunch, on coffee breaks, or,

through email. Office gossip runs up against “virtual families”

* ID cards can have an alienating impact, but there have been numerous attempts by management and workers to personalize these and render them less drab and anonymous. Further collapses work/family boundary

Implications for Practice and Research

* Detailed research is needed on:

- “rites of solidarity” and workplace alienation
- “rites of reversal” (i.e. when can they be co-opted?)
- the gendered organization of workplace ritual

* Some preliminary conclusions:

- ritual cannot be excluded from the workplace
- they allow persons and groups to step out of ordinary time and apprehend shared social bonds and values
- they ideally orchestrate time flow and the mediation of central tensions, contradictions and conundrums
- rather than relying on "top-down" rituals, it is important to give workers the capacity to propose and experimentally develop ritual and performance activities that they themselves find meaningful, especially as they negotiate the complex intersections of family and labor responsibilities