

S/A 4074 Ritual and Ceremony

Lecture 23: Rituals of the Workplace

There is considerable evidence that the well-developed body of ritual theory - primarily based on the study of small-scale or premodern societies - can be profitably applied to practices of symbolic action within modern work contexts and along the work-family frontier. In modern societies, as in others, human beings meaningfully constitute themselves and their relations with other persons through labor practices, which are simultaneously material and symbolic enterprises. Like "rituals" in the non-capitalist societies classically studied by anthropologists, modern rites and ceremonies in the workplace dramatize and to some extent redress or mediate a set of pressing contemporary social and cultural contradictions. These tensions include: the ambiguous boundaries of work and family, the uncertain relationship between material production and information-based value, and the often opposed ideals of hierarchy and egalitarianism, teamwork and individual achievement, collegiality and predation, "stability" and "flexibility", predictability and improvisation, and fulfillment and material success.

Relevance to Work-Family Researchers

Inasmuch as virtually all aspects of modern work environments are ritually and symbolically elaborated to some extent, analyses of these signifying practices may help us better understand the often-enigmatic dynamics of coercion and collaboration in the workplace, as the well as highly charged, fluid frontier between family and work. Attention to the ritual and symbolic dimensions of modern workplaces may cast light on the puzzle long ago posed by E.P. Thompson (1968) in reference to the English industrial revolution: how does the worker become his or her willing slave-driver? Conceiving of corporate offices as "ritual arenas" (partially devoted to delineating and reproducing underlying symbolic and categorical distinctions) may help account for some of the subtle and not-so-subtle dynamics of the glass ceiling, the striking resistance in some quarters of corporate America to on-site quality childcare, and the curious proliferation of expensive morale-enhancing and "team-building" exercises in an era of downsizing and short-term contracts.

State of the Body of Knowledge

Background: Ritual and Labor in Precapitalist and Capitalist Societies

Many anthropologists would argue that in small-scale (so-called "primitive") societies, the primary "work" of society is not economic subsistence per se but rather the production of social persons. In such societies, ritual often cannot be easily disentangled from labor practices, for ritual plays central functions in the primary social enterprise of reproducing society itself. Elaborate ritual events, often centered on the tools and products of labor, strive in effect to transmute persons into objects and objects into persons within the overarching conceptual framework of kinship relations. A woman gardener of the Upper Amazonian Achuar becomes identified with her manioc tubers, which are considered her living "children." In Swaziland, a king, acting as "father" to his people, compresses his essence into a single gourd preserved from the last year's harvest, and thus expels from the kingdom the accumulated pollution of the previous annual cycle. In Nuerland, a spear, associated with a man's patrilineal descent group, becomes the living extension of the arm of the hunter or warrior who flings it. Anthropologists often call attention to the libratory and transcendent qualities of these subject-object transformations, which they tend to view as vital to the "life-giving economies" of archaic societies.

Yet under modern economic and social conditions, predicated on the radical separation of labor and family domains, such transformations (of persons into objects, and objects into persons) may be profoundly alienating. As Marx emphasized by coining the term "commodity fetish," the modern capitalist insistence that a physical thing has value in and of itself tends to obscure the personhood and labor of the worker who fashioned it, in manner comparable to the magical aura surrounding a Central African fetish figure. As memorably captured by Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times* or by Fritz Lang in *Metropolis*, the transmutation of subject into object is hardly liberatory, if such transformation means becoming a "cog in the wheel" or a "slave to the clock." Taken to its logical (or illogical) extreme, commodification negates or erodes the value of family bonds or any form of expressive action.

"Rituals of the workplace" might thus at first seem a contradiction in terms. Since the 17th century, the category of work in the West has been structurally opposed to the domestic and religious realms, privileged sites of nurturance and the inculcation of spiritual and ethical values. Work is usually thought to be rational, goal-driven, and devoid of sentiment, affect, spirituality, or mysticism, in direct contrast to "ritual" as the term is colloquially used. Yet modern practices and conceptions of work may be among the most complex ritual systems ever developed, all the more powerful for their seeming transparency and naturalness. As Weber long ago argued, rational capitalism has its historical foundations in the strict temporal discipline of the medieval monastery and the Benedictine Rule, projected through the Protestant Reformation out into the wider social universe, emphasizing routinization, delayed gratification, "worldly asceticism," and judicious re-investment of profit. Career became envisioned as a secular pilgrimage towards ever-receding material goals, through which the anxious bourgeois sought tangible evidence of being among the worldly elect.

In our era of corporate downsizing, strategic realignments, short-term contracting, and precarious employment patterns, work can no longer be so easily envisioned as a unilinear narrative up the career ladder within an internal labor market. The growing incorporation of women into nearly all employment domains has largely (but not entirely) eroded the classic ideological distinction between male-coded work sites and the female-coded domestic sphere. Yet, as in Weber's day, the "iron cage" of the workplace still bears subtle traces of its (male-dominated and gender-segregated) ecclesiastical origins, simultaneously celebrating and concealing the core mysteries of capital and the production of value through commodity exchange. Professional work is still largely idealized as a "calling," the formal basis of one's public identity and private self-esteem, yet most remain unconvinced that work alone can provide sufficient meaning and fulfillment in their lives. Family life is still formally celebrated, yet in practice is usually subordinated to the perceived needs of "work", defined in strictly economic terms. Modern rituals of the workplace reflect these profound ambiguities and ambivalences.

Business is Business: The Sacred Bond of the Contract

To apprehend the subtle, ubiquitous presence of ritual and symbolic action in seemingly secular and "disenchanted" modern workplaces, and to appreciate why there has been such deep resistance to balanced work-family integration, it is helpful to consider Marcel Mauss' classic essay *The Gift* (1967). Mauss argued that the contract, the seemingly rationalist, transparent foundation of the modern economy, is in fact a complex transformation of archaic and primitive systems of gift-exchange, through which the personhood of giver and donor were intermingled by means of elaborate ritual acts, hedged about with mystical prohibitions and supernatural sanctions. Modern contracts are founded on principles of possessive individualism and tend to

supersede less formalized claims of kinship or emotion. (Significantly, as the ideal of romantic companionate marriage has developed since the 19th century, the concept of the "wedding contract" has grown increasingly metaphorical; "real" contracts are thought to involve money and rationally specified goods and services.)

Throughout centuries of changes in tort law and business practice, the contract has remained the most important ritual of economic life, still the object of near-mystical reverence by employers and employees. As in early modern times, the constitution of a contract demands some kind of physical enactment (a handshake, verbal exchange or signature). In most instances, these enactments are formally ritualized in direct proportion to the amount of money at stake. The handshake, a transformation of aristocratic greeting rites, remains the visible expression of the formal egalitarianism of the contracting individual parties: in principle, co-equal partners should "look one another in the eye" and apply the same amount of physical force to the grip at the moment their hands are interlinked. (Conversely, an overly forceful grip is a standard strategy of intimidation, an overly weak grip a sign of insufficient commitment to the deal.) Important deals are usually finalized in lawyers' conference rooms, often decorated with wood paneling and ersatz antiques to give them the reassuring patina of age and venerable stability. Voices are often hushed and extraneous movement curtailed during the signing of important instruments, the aura of respectful anticipation broken only by the obligatory mild joke or humorous remark. Bagels and donuts might be proffered before, and champagne might be uncorked afterwards, but consumption is usually deemed inappropriate during the closing of the contract itself.

Children might be welcome in office work spaces from time to time, but are nearly always excluded from major contract-signings; "business is business" and is most emphatically not "child's play." Pointing to Western European social democracies, work-family theorists argue for a more expansive notion of "contract" that would encompass social obligations by employers towards employee's family members. Yet in the United States, this model of social contract cutting across work-family borders remains elusive in most practical contexts.

"Our Corporate Family": Philanthropy, Sponsorship and Donations

Paradoxically, the complementary institution of philanthropy (which would seem to support sentimental causes and affective relations) also casts light on the broad resistance to "family friendly" workplaces. In classic "gift-based" societies, it is nearly impossible to disentangle the interested and disinterested aspects of the gift, which constitutes enduring social and moral bonds between donor and recipient. These bonds are sometimes egalitarian, but are often hierarchical and asymmetric, for inability to reciprocate places the donor in the subordinate position of debtor to the donor; as the Inuit put it, "as whips make dogs, gifts make slaves." Capitalism introduces a radical distinction between the commodity, which is associated with self-interest and impersonal, abstracted relations between buyer and receiver, and the modern gift, which is in principle associated with altruism and enduring bonds between donor and receiver. Broadly speaking, this contrast between "commodity" and "gift" is structurally equivalent to the distinction between "work" and "family." Modern corporate philanthropy may thus be understood as the necessary complement of the contract; whereas contractual relations in principle imply alienation, rational calculation, and social distance, philanthropic gifts establish enduring social and affective bonds with other persons and institutions, placing the donor in an elevated position while creating the appearance of sentimental intimacy between donor and recipient, along the lines of an idealized "family." Large monetary donations are made manifest in corporate-sponsored concerts, festivals and parades; major gifts are often signaled through the

ceremonial (often televised) handing over a check to recipients. Intra-office social life, in turn, is periodically punctuated by fundraising drives, at times organized by management (as in United Way campaigns) or by workers themselves (to buy a gift after a baby is born to a colleague, or for disaster relief, as in the wake of 9-11). In these contexts, money, an enormously complex symbolic form, is seemingly reclassified as an instrument of interpersonal affect, an expression of community and "family feeling."

Although the rhetoric of "family" and "caring" is prominent in philanthropy, these occasional financial gifts tend to create artificial or "virtual families" (discussed below) and often function as compensatory substitutes for more fundamental commitments to work-family balance and family well-being. The spirit of philanthropy, in effect, needs to be extended from periodic acts of charity to enduring, everyday commitments to work-family integration.

Border Crossings: Policing the Boundaries of Work and Family

As the domains of "work" and "family" were gradually disentangled during the early modern period, ritual and symbolic practices emerged that established firm boundaries between the domestic and labor domains. Many of these micro-rituals have endured; at the same time, through numerous ritual and symbolic acts employers and management seek to reintroduce limited allusions to the familial and home lives of employees. Ironically, some scholars argue, many of these efforts to alter work-family boundaries have severely limited the individual and collective freedom of workers, as "work" expands into once quasi-protected domains.

Earlier rites of formal separation from the home (such as kissing one's spouse at the threshold space of the door) may have diminished in many dual-income families, yet workers continue to constitute themselves as "going to work" through elaborate preparation of clothing, coiffure and make up and carrying related insignias of labor and professional identity, ranging from laptop cases and PDAs to cell phones, beepers and rolled up copies of the Wall Street Journal. The commute itself functions as a minor pilgrimage-style rite of territorial passage, emphasizing the social and conceptual distance, as well as geographical gap, between home and work. Not insignificantly, many commuters intensify the structured ritual aspects of the commute by developing private ceremonials: buying a cup of coffee or a newspaper from a specific vendor, listening to a special radio station in the car, or exchanging a standard joke with a train conductor or security guard.

The practice of punching the time clock, developed during the industrial revolution, has endured in many industrial facilities; in addition to the practical utility of tracking in and out times, this action serves as a mini ritual of self-enforcement, through which the worker performatively marks his or her movement in and out of a work orientation. In professional contexts rites of entrance are a bit more subtle but no less effective; signing in at Security, swiping an electronic card, exchanging greetings with a secretary or co-worker, or leaving an office light on or a door open. Early morning meetings are a favored mechanism to ensure early attendance. Although rarely as dramatic as Fred Flintstone's now mythic "Yabadadoo!" mini-rites of departure are similarly conventionalized in various office subcultures, ranging from standard humorous exit lines to brief informal chats with coworkers, often about children, sports, or planned leisure activities. Barker (1993) reports that over time seemingly autonomous and unstructured "participative" self-managing teams of engineers may tend towards using color coded wall charts to track attendance, in a manner rather reminiscent of Bentham's Panopticon prison as analyzed by Michel Foucault; team members engage in rigorous, disciplining surveillance of one another, but usually do not refer problems up the chain of command.

At the dawn of the modern era, the beginning of the workweek was heavily ritualized

through a day known as "Saint Monday," allowing for a gradual transition from the Sabbath into a period of increasingly intense productivity later in the week. In the modern work setting, perhaps because of the growing centrality of labor itself, matters have reversed, and the close of the work week is more heavily ritualized than its onset, through transitional events such as the Friday morning bagel tray, Casual Friday and TGIF parties.

As more and more workers telecommute or work from home offices, novel rites have emerged to mark "work time" from "personal time" or "family time." Some of these are highly visible, such as the wearing of distinct clothes, sitting in a special room, occupying a reserved desk above which hangs a diploma or certificate of professional recognition, closing a door, or stating aloud "Mommy is working now." Other markers are subtler, such as adopting a special "work" tone of voice when talking to professional colleagues on the cell phone or a special posture when answering work-related email.

In many instances, however, work-family distinctions are extremely difficult to maintain; often these breakdown of categorical distinctions are a source of anxiety, resentment and frustration for workers and their family members. Perlow (1998) and Shih (2002) explore the endlessly expansive nature of labor time in hi-tech firms, in which management's emphasis on "flexibility" and expectations of demonstrated "commitment" by workers means that those involved in software and hardware development often sense themselves to be working all the time, without any symbolic boundary markers indicating distinctions between "work" and "personal" time; weekend meetings are called at the last minute, sleeping over in the office is expected at "crunch time", vacations must be abruptly cancelled.

A Semi-Permeable Membrane: Signaling Home at Work

Although work continues to invade family time at an ever-increasing rate, strong restrictions remain on bringing family life into employment contexts. To be sure, photographs of family members are ubiquitous on desks and cubicle walls. Yet these are distinctly limited in number and size; hanging a three-foot by three-foot portrait of a family member on a cubicle wall would in most cases probably be deemed inappropriate. (In contrast, portraits of CEOs, company ancestors or of noted ancestors in family-owned companies are deemed eminently appropriate by senior management.)

Office picnics and Take-a-Daughter-to-Work days are occasional rites of reversal that, paradoxically, express and reinscribe the normative radical separation of work and family. The striking paucity of quality childcare in many corporate environments has many economic causes, of course, but may also be partly rooted in the pervasive sense by management that work, is by definition, structurally opposed to "family" and that the workplace would be contaminated by the excessive presence of children.

In spite (or perhaps because of) these severe restrictions on work-family boundary crossing, a great deal of semi-illicit "kinwork" (the informal management of family relations) seems to go on in most workplaces, as parents coordinate childcare and family scheduling over the telephone and via e-mail.

Creating Virtual "Families"

While the work place is hedged about with various symbolic boundary markers, policing the distinction between work and the family, management and workers often make efforts to present the labor environment as a kind of virtual "family." This is often done through the staging of office versions of normally family rituals, such as Halloween, Christmas birthday parties, Kwanzaa displays or outings to sporting events. These celebrations partly mimic traditional family rites in that they tend to be organized by women, usually in secretarial and

administrative assistant positions. Yet, in contrast to company picnics, they are not open to spouses, romantic partners or children, but are limited to co-workers in a given office or division. Building on Turner's concepts of "communitas" and "anti-structure," Rosen and Astley (1988) analyze an advertising firm's Christmas party as a "social drama" characterized by complex joking relationships; participants negotiate relations of structural ambiguity through jokes, banter, skits and dancing.

Many of these virtual family business rites emerged during periods of relative job security and stability, amidst expectations of long-term employment with a given employer. Increasingly, those organizing and enacting these family-like performances must contend with the manifest fact that corporations are not families (one cannot, after all, be downsized from a family). Management-enforced "healing rituals" or pep-rallies after mass lay-offs are often resented and dismissed as inauthentic by workers. Yet rites such as office birthday parties are often enjoyed, valued and organized by workers: are they, in part to be understood as compensatory operations, through which employees consciously or unconsciously seek to impose a degree of predictability and regularity over highly unpredictable and precarious work environments? "Familial" discourses and rites are often framed in a therapeutic idiom, in keeping with the growing tendency towards New Age corporate spiritualism or evangelical Christian capitalism in many American workplaces. Such dynamics were especially evident in the wake of the September 11 tragedies, as workers and managers joined together in often-spontaneous memorial and "healing" rites.

Even (especially?) at times of severe economic contraction, the rhetoric and symbolism of "the family" is frequently deployed by management, at times in conjunction with restrictions on collective bargaining or public dissent. In a telling scene in Michael Moore's *Roger and Me* (1989), a corporate spokeswoman refuses the film crew access to an automobile assembly plant on the day it is being closed down, explaining, "It's a very private emotional family time and we would not let outsiders in the plant." (The 1800 downsized workers were all sent home that evening with bouquets.) In turn, workers are often urged to identify with their clients in a kinship idiom, treating them "just like family," which in business-speak means avoiding the frankness, arguments, and emotional intensity that characterize most real families. Chun (2001) notes the ritualized features of daily production meetings in Silicon Valley; through demonstrations and game playing, managers try to break down ethnic divisions among high tech assembly workers by encouraging them to feel common loyalty to invisible consumers who are "just like" their family members. Higher up the corporate status scale, team building exercises and retreats for senior managers often take place in natural or pastoral environments, the same kinds of places where ordinary families are expected to seek renewal and reconsolidation. Through ropes courses, survival treks and paintball competitions -that recall both the austerities of medieval pilgrimages and the dramas of Victorian hunting rituals---managers are expected to bond, "like family."

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

Many of these workplaces rites of the virtual family simultaneously assert egalitarian social principle while dramatizing underlying institutional hierarchies. In an era of self-managing teams and indirect forms of "concertive control" the dynamics of social stratification are not always evident at first glance. Consider, for example, Jandreau's (2002:5-7) perceptive analysis of an office Christmas party. The practice of "Secret Santa" gift-giving, in which each worker is randomly assigned another worker to buy a present for, expresses in principle a family-like egalitarian logic of general (non-specific) reciprocity (since no two people specifically exchange

gifts with one another, symbolic exchange duels of one-up-manship are avoided). Yet all the gifts are distributed by management, emphasizing the over-riding principle of "unitary centralism." Similarly, annual award luncheons or banquets may in principle honor representative individuals from all layers of the organization, including those at the base of the payscale, who may all be termed members of the organizational "family." Yet such events are nearly always tightly controlled by management and tend to re-emphasize vertical, hierarchical integration.

Rites of Passage: Incorporation, Integration and Separation

The appropriated symbolism of family ritual also characterizes rites of passage in and out of the modern workplace. Although American firms have nothing to compare with the annual spring "company entering" rituals of Japanese corporations, the formal and informal hiring process is usually structured as a three-part rite of passage, along the lines sketched out by Van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1967) in reviewing rituals of status-transition the world over. In stage one, the newly hired person is separated out from his or her prior identity, often given new clothing, tools, privileged knowledge, or identifying objects. In stage two, the new worker occupies a temporarily "liminal" (intermediate) position, "betwixt and between" conventional social categories, and is often subject to forms of marginal play, such as hazing or pranks. Finally, in stage three, he or she is integrated into the new organization or network. Kidder (1981:63) describes the process of signing up to be part of a project team at a New Economy company as a "mysterious rite of initiation," in which the workers tacitly agrees to devote himself or herself without reservation to the project goals. Rites of local incorporation may also mark the geographical movement of senior staff; a visit to town by a CEO or senior management team may require "ritualistic meetings" by a retinue of host subordinates.

For professionals, intensified affiliation with peers is further accomplished through repeated "integrative rites," such as annual conventions or meetings of professional associations. Like such rites of renewal the world over (Turner 1969) these events promote crosscutting bonds by oscillating between periods of shared disciplined discomfort (boring plenaries, lectures and workshops) and periods of "anti-structure"--carnavalesque revelry and excessive consumption.

Permanent transitions out of the virtual "work family" are invariably marked through symbolic enactments of one sort of another. More or less voluntary cessations of employment are often associated with considerable ambivalence among the various parties, and are therefore symbolically dramatized through rites of passage such as retirement or "buy-out" parties. These ceremonies signal and help enact the ambiguous attenuation between persons, and between the departing worker and the place of work. The traditional gold watch upon retirement was a classic "polyvalent" symbol, carrying multiple (and at times contradictory) meanings (Turner 1967). On the manifest level, the gift evoked the semantic message that the retiree would have lots of "time" on his or her hands and was entering his or her "golden years." More subtly, the watch functioned as a structural "operator" that condensed and transmuted the essence of the modern workplace, the over-riding emphasis on time-discipline, into a small material object that was clearly not fully functional (a precision up-to-date wrist-watch wouldn't quite have been deemed appropriate). In the process of handing over the watch, in the context of formal speechmaking and toasts, the object came as well as to stand for the departing worker, effectively transferring this symbolic reduced functionality to the retiree, who in effect is becoming a somewhat obsolescent human antique. Hence, perhaps, the ambivalence reported by nearly all retirees upon receiving gold watches, and the periodic, if rarely successful, quest in modern workplaces for more palatable retirement gifts.

Since involuntary terminations convey less ambiguous messages, they are usually ritualized in only the most minimal, preemptory fashion. Increasingly, the fired worker is taken by a security guard to empty out a desk of personal belongings and then escorted out of the building. The message is clear: the fired worker is stigmatized, polluted, and a virtual (or at least potential) criminal, subject to the symbolic equivalent of summary judgment and execution. Less dramatic rites of "status degradation" may be enacted for the firing of a corrupt or incompetent CEO; in most cases, however, these symbolic dramas visibly separate office from incumbency in order to emphasize institutional continuity.

At an institutional level, many firms and organizations signal a break with their past identities through elaborate new strategic plans, often marked by shifts in logos, architecture and design aesthetics; Berg (1985) argues that these processes are highly ritualized and may be conceptualized as "rites of renewal" that bear structural parallels to classic rites of passage. In turn, managers and employees of dying organizations often stage ceremonies of parting, which allow for the updating of participants' cognitive histories and personal "event schematas."

Buttoned Down: Rites of Adornment

These transitions between work and family orientations are invariably signaled and negotiated through symbolic practices of adornment and self-presentation. In all known human cultures the surface of the body -termed "the social skin" by anthropologist Terry Turner (1980)- is a vital symbolic form mediating relations between the person and the wider social universe and among the varied social orientations, roles and statuses held by a given person. These functions are dramatically evident in the forms of attire associated with modern labor and business; adornment helps constitute hierarchical and egalitarian relations in the workplace and helps mediate relations between the domestic and work spheres. Hence, the strong expectation that a businessman will remove his tie upon entering the house, or the sensation, widely reported by flight attendants that they have not really "come home" until they have changed out of their flight uniform into "civilian clothes."

In many respects, clothing operates as a kind of language, communicating explicit and implicit meanings. Just as linguists distinguish between "marked " (overt) and "unmarked" (taken-for-granted) conceptual categories, we may distinguish between marked and unmarked work uniforms. Broadly speaking, marked uniforms (specifically identified as "uniforms" by wearers and observers) are required in those professions that come into regular contact with extraordinary danger, filth or power over life and death--the clergy, the military, air pilots, the judiciary, medicine and health, cleaning and garbage collection--as well as those who come into an unusually intimate contact with the domestic domain or other restricted spaces, such as postal letter carriers, electrical meter readers, or dishwasher repair persons. In many work domains uniforms signal a degree of subordination. Police patrol officers wear uniforms, while detectives wear jacket and tie and senior officers wear standard business attire (except when on dress parade or at special occasions). Fast-food counter workers wear uniforms, while managers tend to wear business attire. Yet uniforms on the job are expected of even the most high ranked physicians, airline pilots, judges, military officers, and members of the clergy; significantly, all these professions have unusually direct contact with matters of life and death. (Funeral home operators often wear a quasi-uniform, an exaggerated dark frock coat.)

Those occupations and job types that do not require formally marked uniforms nonetheless are characterized by elaborate unwritten dress codes. Construction workers might be expected to wear blue jeans and flannel shirts. Certain professionals, like academics or software engineers, might often dress down in jeans, but will usually indicate their status through various subtle or

not so subtle signifiers, from tweed jackets to expensive haircuts. (At special ceremonial occasions, faculty members wear academic garb, a transformed vestige of the academy's ecclesiastical origins.)

The state of one's body underneath all the clothes is also subject to considerable concern, regulation and surveillance. The cultural ideal of lean, flexible competitors in the marketplace finds its symbolic realization in the firm, sculpted bodies produced in (or at least marketed by) elite health clubs. Working out and displaying a visibly fit body are widely apprehended as signs of discipline, self-control and virtue, while flabbiness and obesity are increasingly stigmatized as manifestations of laxity and self-indulgence. Ortner (1997) argues that in virtually all human cultures, women are classified as relatively more "natural" than men, who are in turn classified as relatively more "cultural" than women. This classic structural equation ("women are to men as nature is to culture") may help account for the especially intense pressure reported by many professional women to present themselves as thin and physically fit; seeking to subvert or transcend implicit social categories of "naturalness", women professionals are pressured to triumph over flesh itself.

Gender politics are also embedded in the pre-eminent unmarked uniform of the modern workplace, the monochrome business suit, which has its origins in the somber clothes of northern European 17th century male financiers (as immortalized by Rembrandt). From its inception, this kind of attire has signaled sobriety, self-denial, self-discipline and privileged access to the mysteries of Capital. (Bankers could justifiably be reckoned the modern priesthood.) These adornment practices were a feature of the "great renunciation, of the early modern era associated with the decline of the aristocracy and the triumph of mercantile capitalism: men ceased wearing colorful clothing, wigs and extravagant jewelry, in effect shifting extravagant adornment and coiffure to their wives and daughters, who were in effect expected to display signs of the wealth of their bourgeois fathers and husbands, while being confined to the domestic realm. Although the business suit has undergone numerous stylistic shifts since the 19th century frock coat, the basic design principles endure: dark colors and necktie still signal disciplined constraint, and certain body areas must remain covered in multiple layers. The term "buttoned down" still evokes commitment to routinized, rationalized and rule-bound behavior. (Paradoxically, the advent of Casual Fridays--a modest "rite of reversal"-- in many offices underscores the enormous significance that business attire still holds in modern office spaces.)

The large scale entrance of women into the professions since the 1960s has posed many ideological and aesthetic challenges to the dominant fashion system, yet many of the basic principles, associated with exclusively male executive office subcultures, have endured. Black, the classic uniform of the (male) medieval clergy, remains the preferred color for those who traffic in financial capital (such as bankers) or cultural capital (such as artists). Jewelry is still expected in most professional contexts to be muted and understated; even a male lawyer's earring should be subtle and tasteful. Getting dressed for work poses more political and symbolic challenges for professional women than for professional men. Most women executives must put considerable thought into skirt length, visible cleavage, coiffure and manicure (finger nails, like the wearing of running shoes during the morning commute, are a point of distinction between women in executive or professional positions and those in clerical or secretarial slots.). Professional maternity clothes, perhaps the most visible signifier of work-family integration, pose especially fraught fashion challenges for working women.

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

Rather like clothes, food consumption may be viewed as a symbolic arena in which the

complex cultural politics of gender and work-family relations are subtly negotiated and contested. Levi-Strauss (1979) observes that in all human cultures certain animal and plant species are not only good to eat but also are "good to think"; foodstuffs reflect and help organize social and conceptual categories, in a manner that is nearly always predicated on underlying gender distinctions. Modern workplaces are no exception: the preparation, exchange and consumption of comestibles expresses and mediates the social frameworks of labor, evoking the complex, shifting terrain of modern capitalism and gender relations.

In earlier phases of capitalism, red meat and game symbolized financial capital, masculine dominance, and predatory acumen. To this day's, Veblen's (1934) discussion of rites of conspicuous consumption retains considerable salience; fine foods, liquors and wines are still signs of privilege and high status, and steak houses still cater to (primarily male) business clientele. Yet, as capitalism has shifted from industrial production to postindustrial information-based exchanges, there has been a corresponding emphasis on more abstracted, esoteric and refined forms of oral consumption among elites, ranging from nouvelle and fusion cuisines to exotic organic produce, as signs of inclusion in the new, "cutting edge" (and gender-mixed) meritocracy.

Food consumption, at times, helps constitute "virtual families" in the workplace, with all of their attendant contradictions. It is striking, for example, that when conventional social hierarchies are eased during "emergency" late night work sections, even health-conscious managers are usually willing to share lower-status (and higher-fat) foods, such as pizza or Chinese take out. Anthropologists have long noted that in ritual contexts, water often functions as a universal solvent, breaking down conventional categorical distinctions and facilitating novel recombinations of previously discrete elements and persons. In this light, the water cooler might be regarded as a symbolic oasis enabling the momentary relaxation of social hierarchy in its immediate environs.

As in other cultures, shared consumption of addictive substances often establishes atypical social bonds. Alcohol in some contexts temporarily dissolves social distinctions (as well as the superego); bar visits or office evening cruises may temporarily lift everyday restrictions on fraternization between those of different ranks. Anti-smoking restrictions in most corporate offices leads to a degree of camaraderie among smokers clustered outdoors on the street near office building entrances, where senior managers, administrative assistant, temps, and maintenance workers may chat and bum cigarettes from one another, before returning to their socially distant, compartmentalized sites of work.

Coffee exemplifies the ambiguous capacity of comestibles to evoke both familial and rationalized social relations. The shared cup of coffee is in some contexts a miniature rite of social egalitarianism, yet the insistence by some male managers that their female secretaries make and bring them coffee is often a resented exercise of patriarchal power, uncomfortably reproducing domestic scenarios. The double-sided nature of coffee has a long history; in 17th century northern Europe, coffee and tea, thought to be stimulating beverages (in contrast to alcohol) were deemed obligatory consumption items for capitalist entrepreneurs, who simultaneously signaled their solidarity with one another and their distinction from the masses. It is not coincidence that the London stock exchange had its origin in a coffee house. To this day, at morning business meetings, in airport departure lounges and at Starbucks, coffee remains the privileged drink of capitalism, simultaneously expressing commonality and difference among rich and poor, managers and workers, men and women.

Given the gendered symbolic associations of food, it is scarcely surprising that food

exchanges along the work-family frontier are highly contested. Professional women, for example, may resent expectations that they will automatically host dinner parties for their husband's business associates. Increasingly, the solution has been to shift business-related entertainment to restaurants or catered functions, in effect replacing a hierarchy based on relatively uncommoditized intra-family gender relations with a hierarchy based on commoditized class relations, outside of the family domain.

Virtually Connected: Cell phones and Cyberspace

While displays and exchanges of consumption items helps constitute (and do not simply reflect) tangible sub-communities and "virtual families" of face-to-face consociates in the working world, linguistic and data exchanges via new communication technologies help produce and reproduce less tangible social networks as well as emerging forms of personhood. It is of course well known that workers' do not devote all their time on company computers, landlines and mobile phones to directly work-related assignments. Yet, there is some evidence that not all of this 'extra' communication time is devoted to family or leisure pursuits; many professionals, in effect, dramatically perform work-related identities through visible usage of mobile phones, wireless PDAs, beepers and other electronic devices. These communication efforts do not always have direct bearing on formal productivity, but they do seem to be consistent with cultural ideals of flexibility, high-speed mobility and rapid-fire improvisation. Clearly, the cultural implications of these electronically-mediated communicative acts warrant detailed ethnographic inquiry: what new forms of selfhood are being performed for others and for the actor through long strings of cell phone work conversations in restaurants, airport departure lounges, and shopping mall atriums? Given the growing pressures on workers to be virtually connected to work while at home, we also need a better understanding of how spouses, partners, and children aid working family members in negotiating computer and internet technologies within the household.

Mysteries of the Temple: Secrecy and Security

Simmel (1964) notes that practices of secrecy function to constitute and consolidate social hierarchies and social formations, even when the information being concealed is of little or no practical utility to anyone. Dramas of secrecy characterize most workplaces, especially those concerned with the management of great deals of money, the central mystery of our secular age. Even though most capital now resides in intangible, abstracted electronic form, bank lobbies are often designed to permit a tantalizing glimpse of the elaborate metal apparatus of the vault, the sanctum sanctorum of these modern temples. Professionals are expected to make extensive use of esoteric language, including acronyms, and restricted codes with peers and colleagues, both for convenience and to signal joint membership in the privileged inner circle of cognoscenti.

It is intriguing that as capitalism has matured, and corporations have developed ever more complex internal forms of secrecy and compartmentalization, secret fraternal societies (such as Masonic lodges) have undergone a considerable decline, in many cases being replaced by service organizations (such as Rotary and Kiwanis), which have themselves suffered from lowered membership in recent years. Yet some secret societies such as Yale's Skulls & Bones have long served as prime recruiting grounds for Wall Street banking; evidently, in elite capitalist domains discretion and compartmentalization remain the coins of the realm.

Corporate security has long served practical and symbolic functions, visibly dramatizing the high status of the persons and institutions it protects from the public gaze. "Security" is often invoked to justify elaborate perks for senior management, ranging from transportation practices (chauffer-bodyguards, limousines, time shared corporate jets and helicopters) to physical renovations in the homes of corporate officers (not to mention relocating corporate headquarters

close to the CEO's residence!) The vast increase in corporate and workplace security in the wake of September 11 undoubtedly has important practical dimensions, but it may have intensified the mystique and privilege of senior management and been used to justify the intensified surveillance of workers and restrict expressions of dissent. In some respects, the arcane theology of anti-terrorist security (nearly always directed by male security consultants) could be read as backlash politics, reasserting ultimate male control over an increasingly women-populated workplace. Research is needed in this area, including the impact of new security measures on parents' ability to bring children into the workplace and lobby for quality on-site childcare.

Resistance is Futile?

For all the increasing technologies of surveillance and social control, corporate and industrial workers exhibit highly inventive forms of personal and collective expression, often with a subversive edge. Although there is little of the physical rough-housing associated with factory floors and blue collar worksites, those working in technical and administrative offices often circulate satirical email, scribble bathroom graffiti about an unpopular boss, and hang barbed Dilbert and Far Side cartoons on office doors and cubicle walls. Scholarly opinion is divided as to whether or not such acts are creative expressions of workers' agency and resistance or ultimately futile products of alienated disenchantment.

Moments of reprieve are snatched through the working day, at water coolers, at lunch, on coffee breaks, or, increasingly, through email. Legitimate topics for informal communication with coworkers often include sports, popular movies, TV programs, children and pets. Office gossip is not only pleasurable, but in many instances appears to be an attempt to impose order and meaning upon a complex field of largely intelligible management policies, and to establish social bonds in an unpredictable work environment. At the same time, as noted above, "virtual families" at work may function as compensatory substitutes for more fundamental structural initiatives aimed at healthy work-family integration.

ID cards, ubiquitous in the wake of September 11, 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, often encased in creative necklaces and beadwork. The ironies are worth pondering. Fanciful jewelry, banished from the standard uniform of when labor was forcefully removed from the household at the dawn of the modern era, now returns to decorate the very instrument, the ID card, which defines the person in terms of employment status. Ambiguous polyvalent symbols, these customized and personalized badges simultaneously symbolize the formal separation and collapsing together of our family and work identities--precisely at the historical moment that work seems to be invading all domains of life. Once again, ritual practice evocatively dramatizes the underlying conundrums of our intertwined personal and working lives.

Implications for Practice and Research

As this discussion suggests, it is often difficult to determine the political and experiential consequences of ritual and symbolic elaboration in the modern workplace. As one scholar notes, "organizational rituals often symbolize underlying forces of disintegration as well as integration." Careful research, informed by comparative ethnography and theoretical reflection, is therefore needed to distinguish between the fulfilling and pernicious implications of ritual practice in the modern workplace. When do rituals of solidarity, designed by management consultants and partly modeled on premodern rites of passage or celebration, inadvertently further the very sense of alienation they were developed to defuse? When do "rituals of reversal" (such as satirical skits or office parties) developed and organized by workers themselves tend to

reinstitute hierarchical schemes of domination and control? When do playful and symbolically rich work environments, such as internet start up offices marked by ping pong tables, subtly coerce workers into sacrificing all other aspects of the lives on the altar of productivity, to the point of sleeping over in the office and cutting off non-work social relations?

Detailed qualitative and quantitative work is especially needed on the gendered organization of informal and formal ritual in the workplace. It is often noted anecdotally that women tend to take on responsibility for organizing marked ritual activity in work environments, from office birthday and Christmas parties to baby showers and company picnics. In what respects do women workers seek or find fulfillment from such activities, and in what respects are they coerced into such roles? In what ways do these rituals of the "virtual family" promote, or undercut, solidarity between women in executive and support positions? What are the long-term positive or negative career implications of being recognized as a competent, or incompetent, ritual organizer or participant? In turn, what kinds of ritual and expressive activities do men at various class and employment levels pursue in and around the workplace? In what respects does masculinity remain entailed in certain modes of symbolic performance and does this entailment help illuminate the striking staying power of gendered hierarchies in many modern workplaces?

Although a great deal of research remains to be done, some preliminary conclusions may be ventured. Human beings are a meaning-making and ritual-performing species, and the exclusion of ritual from the workplace or any other significant context of our lives tends to have disruptive, even debilitating, consequences. When rituals "succeed," they allow persons and groups to step out of ordinary time and to apprehend, consciously or unconsciously, shared social bonds and values. Rituals ideally enable the orchestration of time flow and the mediation of central tensions, contradictions and conundrums. Rather than relying on "top-down" rituals imposed by management and efficiency specialists, it is thus important to give workers the capacity to propose and experimentally develop ritual and performance activities. Or, to put it another way, it is vital that workers "seize control" of ritual genres, developing and performing symbolic enactments that they themselves find meaningful, especially as they negotiate the complex intersections of family and labor responsibilities. As we have seen, although ritual can easily be misused, it is --under positive conditions--one of the wellsprings of solidarity and effective action upon the social universe. In our work or family lives, we ignore ritual's creative, humanizing potentials at our peril.