

THE SYMBOLICS OF SKILL

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Preface

The Symbolics of Skill is a collection of selected papers presented during the Conference Workshop on Organizational Symbolism and Corporate Culture, Trento, Italy, June 30 - July 3, 1985. The conference was organized by SCOS-Europe/EGOS and the Dipartimento di Politica Sociale of Trento. The University of Trento and the Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche also supported the conference financially.

Organizational symbolism is a new approach to the study of organizations. On this subject and on the qualitative analysis of organizations the Dipartimento di Politica Sociale has formal cultural exchanges with the Department of Sociology of the

University of Exeter, U.K. and the Department of Business Administration of the University of Lund, Sweden.

The Standing Conference on Organizational Symbolism was formed out of an autonomous study group within the European Group of Organization Studies in Glasgow, 1981. Founding members were University researchers from different European countries - from Italy the Universities of Torino and Trento. SCOS has now in the order of 160 members from 23 nations. Conferences have been held in Exeter (1982), Groningen (1983), Lund (1984), and in 1985 in Antibes and Trento.

Introduction

Individuals and organizations are generally proud of their own skills. They are also proud of being able to recognize someone else's skill. This usually happens without any scientific support and, even if organizational actors and audiences do not share the contextual values, competences and rhythms, skills are anyway acknowledged.

At least in principle it is of value not to appreciate unskilled organizations and unskilled people, and in everyday life it does occur to almost everybody to assert that these operators and these organizations are not skilled, while other people and organizations are. It is not a matter of being previously against them because the skill of enemies and adversaries are acknowledged in ceremonies and rites.

It may also be possible not only to distinguish but also to locate the skill of organizations and individuals in some activities better than in others and do it without providing any scientific statement concerning skill. Thus, skill seems likely to be a fact that does not need specialists to see and locate it. In a motor shop or in a local war everybody looks for skilled people and skilled organizations. Skill has the power of distinguishing the favourite elements of the context.

The sense of pride in skill belongs to the owners and their supporters. Anyway this sense goes beyond them toward other audiences in the organizational environment. The ritual is to ask for positive feelings, and people are trained to perform that ritual.

Skill, in conclusion, constitutes one of the reasons why individuals and organizations need to legitimize themselves in human societies. It is a fact which is easy to perceive, recognize and locate. It is also highly frequent, and people are trained to search for it, to acknowledge it and to feel receptive towards it. Its history, too, is a very long one, whereas linguistic clues are grounded in meaningful actions. These clues have their origins in Old Norse, and they belong to several ancient languages, meaning: 'distinction', 'discernment', 'incisiveness', 'knowledge', 'reason', 'cause'.

However, its factual existence, its rate of recurrence, its emotional and linguistic grounds have not led social scientists to put skill into a precise and comprehensive statement. With all its significance, skill seems to evade description and to be rooted in intuitional understanding. Social scientists have

conceived and analysed skill as a form of work activity. 'Skill' and its synonyms such as 'ability', 'competence', 'mastery', 'proficiency' have been utilized in order to properly characterize organizational actors and to map the distinctive levels of action of an organization. 'Skill' has been used to qualify operators and jobs, to classify the kinds of activity of an organization and their outcomes. It has been included in designing organizations, e.g. in collective bargaining. New skill has been claimed to face difficulties in organizational life and in inter-organizational relationships, performing the ancient ritual of collective renewal.

Skill has been described mainly through its synonyms. 'Ability' and 'dexterity' have been coupled in many observations of workers' performance. 'Talent', 'adroitness' and 'gift' have been used to describe the work of a craftsman and a masterly command of managerial techniques. Special capabilities and distinctive competences have characterized successful organizations in comparison with their competitors within a similar environment. The focus is mainly on the organizational actors' performance. A Skilful organization possesses capabilities of its own, which are possible to perceive since the organization performs its specific activities better than others. The sense of a fact acquired and developed through experience has been preserved. This fact brings into discussion the unspecified element that is more than what individuals and organizations could act out.

The paths of the analysis of skill have crossed each other. Skill seems to go further than the boundaries of the content of a form of work activity. The performance which makes skill recognizable by the audience looks more like a proof of the existence of the skill as such, which allows both experiential and mythical levels to be understood. On the contrary, the individual, organizational and inter-organizational levels of the analysis constitute a spectrum of contiguous frames that mainly reinforce the significance of the *sine qua non* of skill.

The belief of the important influence of skill on organizational life and, generally speaking, on society dynamics and processes is common to both laymen and social scientists. Their identification of skill may be based on different kinds of investigation but their findings seem to be similar in their use of the synonyms and their acknowledgement that significant characters do not have scientific names.

The aggregate level that the organization maps in the metaphoric cartography of skill does not seem to have added anything to analytical conclusions that may lead to the formulation of proper methods, and thus is no different from analysis at an individual level. In both cases, skill seems to be an aggregate of its synonyms and of its unspecified fields. The differences seem to be located in the performance of skill rather than in the nature of skill.

Intuition understanding provides the premises for a discourse that identifies the topic of skill, while analytic logic focuses on the limitations of social scientists' instruments for its understanding. Skill has an immediate and historical validity

for theorists and organizational actors. It makes sense to almost everybody. It produces the feeling of a deep understanding of reality and of incisive action. Skill is meaningful in several cultures and does not belong to a specific process of learning. Rather, learning skill is a process of discovering capabilities, and is an initiating rite. Rituals provide training which includes, for instance, competence, the command of people and crafts, and the institutionalization proceed that may be acquired and developed learning from experience.

Likewise, skill has the power of adding new value to an organization's or individual's performance. This fact does not seem to violate the nature of the organizational actor's performance. Also, it does not appear to be needed in order to provide ordinary and good performances, while, for example, competence does. On the contrary, it is needed only in the case of skilled performances by an organization, but those performances are regarded as vital in organizational life by its producers and its users.

In this booklet a great deal of emphasis is laid on the study of the symbols of skill, on their uses and their meanings in organizational life, in professional life, and in the processes of acquiring, positioning and analysing skills. Not all the symbolic boundaries of skill are delineated, but the symbolic topic as such among organizational studies and theories is emphasized. The variety of concerns that are introduced reflects what is going on in the changing framework of the understanding of organizations and the growing importance of the approach of organizational symbolism.

The interest in symbolic forms of organizational life includes studies of power, control, legitimizing processes, life-cycle rituals, ceremonial events, social reticula, all of which structure the time boundaries and the symbolic lay-outs of organization dynamics. This booklet is a collection of selected papers that show how much symbolic anthropology, symbolic philosophy and logic, and linguistics have influenced contemporary multidisciplinary analysis of the organization. The sociology of organization, too, is included in this process of studying the symbolic orders in modern life.

In the first part of *The Symbolics of Skill* the interpretations and the representations that are discussed examine the symbolic acquisition of skills. In the following sections of the booklet, individual, organizational and societal levels are mapped out from field-work using different methods and techniques. David Sims argues that organizational skills are developed mainly through a process of reflecting feelingly, and that this process of mental rehearsal takes place in detail. The topics on which the organizational actors reflect feelingly become the topics on which the skills are developed. This process regards both the areas and nature of those skills, and it is interestingly effected by the subjects' daydreaming. Stephen Fineman outlines the skills of survival, where acting as if purposeful displaces other senses of purpose, and where 'getting through' the day is an emotionally flat

process of working life. The skills of 'getting by' are associated neither with job satisfaction nor with dissatisfaction, comfort or discomfort. Rather, it is argued that moving beyond basic survival may be observed in very different occupations and that there is no necessarily higher order of need states. Omar Aktouf argues that the display of symbols indicating potential skills is a highly symbolic activity for the acquisition and development of power in and around organizations. The conditions required to create a real similarity between symbols, skills and facts are observed. Verbal and non-verbal symbols, as well professional attitudes are involved in this process, but generally have almost nothing to do with real competence.

In the second part, the symbolic positions of skill are analysed in organization life, in professionalism, and in an inter-organizational network. Kristian Kreiner analyses skills as assets and liabilities in organizations. Organizations produce, succeed and survive by means of skills. Skills help to determine wages, promotions and the status of the organizational actors. Paradoxically, the kinds of skills which are ritually celebrated constitute organizational liabilities, while the skills that according to the organizations' criteria may constitute an asset are ignored. Bob Grafton-Small and Steve Linstead focus on skill as a socially negotiated construct in the activities of professionals. They argue that the skills of these kinship groups are constituted by the generation of persuasive accounts of action, and by the ability to render esoteric knowledge both important and efficacious. Professional skill is indeterminate and directed toward achieving and maintaining status and authority, not just through technical competence and determined knowledge but mainly through linguistic and symbolic performances. Elisabeth Sundin and Ulf Wiberg discuss some symbolic imperatives that can be applied to skilful entrepreneurs and firms. The skill development of organizations depends both on how the organization succeeds compared with other organizations in the sector and also on the supporting characteristics and attitudes in the local sociocultural tradition. The choice by entrepreneurs of an unusual sector and activity may be of great symbolic relevance for the skills of the organizations, showing and reinforcing how the socioculture of the company constitutes its skill among the environmental factors.

In the final section of the booklet the argument moves towards the tools and skills of symbolism for understanding organizations. The use of skills for research purposes is based on the proposal of a method for obtaining qualitatively rich data which is significant for the debate on researchers' skill in the symbolic understanding of organizational life. The method of a 'running commentary' on imaginatively re-enacted events also presents various novel aspects as a research technique. Robert Witkin and Robert Poupart propose replacing the normal interview with one in which the subject is encouraged to imagine that the events that he is going to speak about are happening now. Therefore, he is asked to give a

running commentary on them in the present tense and to make them visible to the researcher by describing everything he can actually see, touch, smell and so forth. Similar techniques are used in clinical analysis and psychotherapy, but in the cases presented in this section of the booklet the main concern is the instrument for research as such.

In the Conclusions, the development of the symbolic framework as such and a deeper understanding of the symbolic topic of skill are discussed. Skill is the trait d'union between feelings and the production of reality, which is possible to understand through a process of grasping and discovering, a process of analysing and reflecting, and a process of voicing and winning an audience, letting organizational actors and social scientists 'play the music and not the background.'



The Acquisition of Skill

«When I think about presenting this paper», David Sims writes, «I have an image of the situation and of myself in it.» Skill is a fact deeply rooted in this process of prefiguring a course of action within an organization and in the outside world on behalf of the organization. The room, the light, the smell, the people attending the meeting, the friendly atmosphere and the fear in a person's stomach once he imagines himself about to present the paper, these are all imagined and experienced during the mental rehearsal. The process is under a certain control. The daydreams shape the substance, the expectations and the extent of a skilled performance, and the mental rehearsal leads to its awareness. The skill is fantasized as need be in order to succeed in finding an audience with whom to communicate concerning the subjects which are significant in the action.

The action may consist of coping with impossible tasks, characterized by insufficient information and an uncertain outcome, and by the fact that, whereas the nature and the type of impossibility have been ascertained, the task remains impossible. This action emphasizes the meaning of the *sine qua non* of skill. Moreover it highlights the differences between competence, knowledge and skill. It emphasizes also that skill is recognizable, not only when the performance renders it observable but also when the performance makes it desirable. The action of coping with impossible tasks focuses on the energizing vitality included in the skill and its nature as a qualitative measure of effective acts.

Dealing with impossible tasks is the type of action that indicates the elements of the myth of skill. In work life, such as in complex multi-cultural society, organizational actors have recourse to skill for their renewal and for the celebration of themselves for all time. Mythical thought symbolizes secular values of skill, reinforcing through heathen rites the circumscription in human society of

its roots and its boundaries, while the form of activity may not be so. Work life and organizational life have also been investigated and understood in theology; thus other deep meanings and ultimate senses of experience that providing the basis for labour cultures and the organization corporate cultures have been brought to light. However, symbolic and religious ways of thinking are only two separate areas in the discourse concerning courses of action and organizational actors, as shown by various disciplines such as sociology, linguistics, psychology and so on.

Fantasies and imaginings locate and develop the process of acquiring skill. Daydreams may prove to be both a cause and a consequence of the awareness of the organizational actor. Once the decision has been taken to choose a course of action, the decision-making processes are enacted by reflecting feelingly, and the symbolic representations and interpretations of the passage towards different or superior levels of experiencing the work and the organisation life show the acquisition of skill. Both Stephen Fineman and Omar Aktouf underline the management of impressions according to rules of social conduct in order to survive in organizational life. Fineman points out that occupation marks a key passage to full membership of organization and of society on the part of people, and that this passage is supported by the belief that people are what they act. Aktouf illustrates how promotion marks another passage to full membership of an organization, and that promotion is supported by the belief in the one single interpretation of action within the corporate culture of the organization as a whole.

The symbolic reasons for acquiring skills, therefore, are grounded in the image of loosely-coupled processes and conflicting meanings of the occupation (and of its synonyms, e.g. 'work', 'labor', and 'job'), and of the organization. The skills required to 'get through' the day despite difficulties constitute a 'strong currency' in the initiating rituals of both occupation and career socializations.

Fantasies and the Location of Skill

DAVID SIMS

I have a dream. No, that may have been true for Martin Luther King, but it is only a part of the story for me. I have a large number of dreams, — a whole blooming buzzing confusion of dreams, dreams piling up on top of each other, getting in each others' way, fantasies, daydreams and snatches of mental rehearsal which between them sometimes draw me and hold me with little attention left over to spend on externalities.

I have many dreams, which go in and out of focus. While writing this paper, my mind has wandered off several times, and I have travelled in my imagination to several different times, places and situations, not all of which I am prepared to reveal to you. These dreams vary in the level of activity associated with them. Some fantasies may be acted out. Faberman (1980) gives a vivid description of some «lived out» fantasies, and concludes pessimistically that such fantasies lay those who indulge in them open to exploitation.

«So, the circle closes, people escape the drag of everyday life by retreating episodically into moral regions where they live out their dreams and fantasies which, like bait on a hook, land them in someone else's net. The dreams and fantasies that used to transcend the world now reinforce it.» (p. 20).

Faberman's fantasies are acted out; they include fishing for giant tuna, hunting (decrepit) big game, and making down payments on cars you will never be able to buy. There is then another kind of fantasy which is associated with more limited activity. You act out some small part of the fantasy. You do not hire an orchestra and a concert hall to act out your fantasy, but you do get out of your chair at home and physically conduct the orchestra concealed behind the grilles of the loudspeakers for a few bars of your favourite music. The orchestra is real but recorded; the fantasy is active but limited. Similarly you may act out a fantasy by making a rude gesture at a colleague, but delay the gesture until he has just left your office. This too is a low-cost acted fantasy; the highest likely cost is that someone catches us in the act of acting out.

At the other end of the scale, there is a purely cognitive thinking out of how events are likely to unfold. «If he says x, I will say y. He will then probably say q, in which case I will respond with r.» Thus we prepare arguments for forthcoming meetings, by attempting a dynamic simulation of an expected conversation. Hewitt (1984) describes it as follows:

«We can anticipate what the physician may ask us to do, what questions

will be asked, and what her manner will be. This is not to say, of course, that we routinely catalog all possible happenings in our minds before entering such situations, so that we are prepared for anything and everything. We do not, in fact, imagine everything that will take place, nor do we attempt to do so, nor could we do so. But we do entertain at least some ideas about what may occur — we imagine what is going to happen — and we get our ideas about what may happen from our knowledge of roles and situations.» (p. 79).

Such a 'chess-style' thinking out of situations has two main drawbacks: firstly that other people persistently respond in unexpected ways, and do things which we had not thought of, or which we had thought too unlikely to plan for. Secondly, we too respond in unexpected ways and do something different from what we had planned either because of a mistake in our performance, or because we find to our surprise that we want to do something different. This kind of preparation seems to be useful but limited: it develops responses rather than skills.

Symbolic interactionists often place some emphasis on the importance of «imagination», but do not say much about what imagination means. I suggest that the kind of fantasy which has most bearing on both our interactions and our skill development entails a much more active imagination, in which I not only think out what events are likely to unfold, I feel the sensations in my body which would accompany the situations if they were actual. If the situation is embarrass-

ing, I feel that embarrassment in my finger tips. I have trouble defining this kind of mental simulation, which involves the person so thoroughly in a highly active fantasy, but I have previously referred to it as «reflecting feelingly» (Sims, 1982).

This process may be more than cognitively involving, and often the state seems more like a trance than like the waking state. Shorr (1983) gives the following example of the possible depth of the condition.

«At one point during Walter Shirra's Mercury Space Flight, NASA observers in Houston were unable to make contact with him. Repeated signals went unanswered and there was concern that something had happened either to the astronaut, the spacecraft, or the telemetry. Everyone experienced great relief when it was learned that Shirra was unaware that he had been called because he had been lost in a daydream.» (p. 198).

Skills at Work

I want to give a skilled performance at this Conference. I have not been to a SCOS meeting before, and I have not got much idea what it will be like. I am not sure what would constitute a skilled performance, and I am sure that whatever kind of mess I may make of my contribution, I shall be able to find ways of explaining and justifying it to myself.

So, I am unable to judge whether my performance is skilled or not even when I am performing; I do not know what a skilled performance

would look like even in the abstract, and I do not know the situation I am performing in. That sounds as if I do not have much basis for preparing for this situation. Does that mean I have not prepared? No. I spend a lot of time preparing for situations about which I know very little. What form does that preparation take, and does it enable me to give a more skilled performance when I get to the situation I was preparing for?

When I think about presenting this paper, I have an image of the situation and of myself in it. I imagine a room, dark, with bright sunlight outside and the windows open, with about 40 people sitting round in a semicircle. I imagine the smell, slightly aromatic and dry, with the occasional whiffs of soap which always seem to come off massed academics. The atmosphere is friendly, there has been quite a lot of noise as people who cannot remember what they said to each other last time they met start talking to each other. I imagine a table, and I know that it is my turn to go to the table and start talking. I feel some fear in my stomach, and I feel it now as I sit at my desk in England writing this.

So far nothing that I have said makes me particularly more or less likely to give a skilful performance. My imaginings may be right or they may be wrong. If they are totally out of line, I may have difficulty adjusting myself to the situation. However, if I now continue to fantasize my way through giving this paper, I have

a degree of choice as to which fantasies I allow to run and which I cut off. Sometimes I imagine it all going well, with me feeling enthusiastic and interested, and you responding with vigour, questions and challenges that provoke further thought on the subject by me. Sometimes I imagine the down side; I imagine myself struggling to get through my 30 minutes without looking too silly, and you are shuffling your feet, looking bored, falling asleep, or busy fantasizing about what it is going to be like when you give your papers.

These and many other fantasies come to me. How does this affect my skill development?

Fantasies and Skill Development

Downs and Stea (1979, quoted by Shorr, 1983) tell the story of a person who

«... once applied imagery to help her master left-hand driving before touring England and Scotland. In flight and just before falling asleep, she saw herself in a car designed for left-hand drive. She drove the roads, imagining she was coming out of a one-way street, entering into complicated turns or traffic patterns. "And," she added with a grin, "the system really works.» (p. 12).

In an earlier paper (Sims, 1982) I quote research studies which lead to the same picture, that mental rehearsal is effective for skill building. I cite Jones' work (1965), which shows that mental rehearsal is effective for learning gymnastic skills. I also cite

Marks and Gelder (1967) and the use of mental simulation for treating transvestism and fetishism. But of even more interest for our present purpose is the work of Fransella (1972), whose research I summarized as follows;

«Fransella addressed the problem that practically all stutterers have lucid periods as well as stuttering periods in their speech. Using Personal Construct Theory repertory grids, she found that stutterers had a better organized construct system, and a clearer image of how they fitted in with other people, when they were reflecting on their stuttering periods rather than their lucid periods; to put it another way, their image of themselves in their world as stutterers was clearer than their image of themselves in their world as nonstutterers. Fransella's diagnosis was that the threat of being unsure how to relate to the world in lucid periods, contrasting with the comfort of knowing how to relate to the world as a stutterer, was significant in maintaining the stuttering.

She enabled the people she was working with to use mental simulation to overcome their problem. She did this by asking them mentally to reenact situations in which they had been lucid, and to preenact future situations with them being lucid in those situations. In both cases, the enactment was to be a full, emotional process, and not a mere cognitive running through of a situation. This, she found, resulted in (1) a better elaborated construct system for the individual reflecting on lucid periods, and (2) a reduction of stuttering behaviour.» (p. 4).

Thus Fransella showed that fantasies could affect skill, and she suggested a mechanism by which this might

work. I have made frequent use of fantasy in training activities, where the trainees want to practice a new skill which is too dangerous for them to try out live initially. My experience of it for myself is that it is effective but boring; I have tried practising musical instruments by means of a detailed fantasy. My playing improved; strangely enough, when undergoing such practice, I can make mistakes just as I can when physically practising. The difference is that there is not the physical sound of the music to entertain me during practice.

Houston (1982) refers to the «kinesthetic body» for the body which you can imagine doing things, and gives a large number of instances of people developing skills kinesthetically. For example:

«One eight-year-old of my acquaintance is a competitive swimmer. Before a race he rehearses the race kinesthetically for a few seconds, imagining himself moving through the water effortlessly and without fatigue. He regards his brief time with his kinesthetic body as his "magic" time – and has become a formidable opponent.» (p. 20).

Houston gives a whole series of exercises which help with gaining control of the 'kinesthetic body' and developing skills with its help. I have tried several of these, and most of them seem to work quite nicely. This is not restricted to gross physical skills such as swimming or playing a musical instrument; it also seems often to be effective for overcoming a writing block too.

These are some of the evidences that fantasy influences skill development.

The Location of Skill

Let us return to my problems with giving a skilled performance at this conference. You may recall that I had a choice that I could make as to which of several fantasies about my performance of this paper I would allow myself to dwell on. From what I have said in the last section, it is clear that such dwelling is of significance: if I dwell on failure, I am more likely to generate it, because fantasies of failure will help me to become more accustomed to an image of myself failing, to the point that this is the outcome with which I feel most comfortable. I wish in this last section to go on to apply the notion of fantasy as a key to skill development to the topic of the location of skill.

When I first saw the publicity material for this conference, I thought it looked as if it should be extremely interesting. I put together an abstract for a paper that I thought (a) might be accepted and (b) I might be able to deliver. I then forgot about it. Not completely. Occasionally I would receive a communication from Professor Strati, and sometimes the procession of images, daydreams and fantasies running through my head would include something to do with the conference or with my unwritten paper. The greater bulk of fantasizing, though,

and the fantasizing that I took most seriously concerned matters internal to the University, and connected with my role as Director of Studies. I felt that I was doing the right thing if I was fantasizing about the next Board of Studies, or Board of Examiners, or Student Working Group on the Tutorial System, or other such internal matters.

However, I have also had in the last few months the task of adapting myself to a change in role: my term as Director of Studies is soon to end, and for an academic in my career position the internal skills that have served me in this role are not nearly as important as the skills of dealing with people and agencies outside the University. The political climate for Higher Education in the United Kingdom reinforces this. So I have been trying to decrease the value that I place on skilled performance within the University, and devote my energies and my fantasies to things that take place outside the University.

In order to do this, I have been stopping myself from spending time fantasizing about events within the University which I would have regarded as being very important a year ago. I have caught myself beginning to think about them, and have then rebuked myself for wasting time and have got on with something else. Conversely, if I have become conscious that I am fantasizing about a meeting with a potential source of research funds, or a client, or somebody from outside the University with whom I

might wish to do some work, I have been much more tolerant of that.

Now I have got myself into some trouble here, because I said that this was what my paper was going to be about, and I would like to tell you how my experience fits with the theory. But skills are easier to observe in their absence than in their presence. I have been better able to observe my internal skill declining than my external skill increasing. I have been aware in some meetings that I have been less well prepared for the way events have unfolded than I would have been in the days when they were the focus of my fantasies.

By observing my own data, I am able to tell that I now engage in more fantasizing as a rehearsal for meetings with people who have research funds

to give, and less time fantasizing meetings with students. But because this is both a consequence and a cause of a change in my awareness, how can I tell whether my skills have decreased in the area of which am now less aware, and increased in the area of which I am more aware?

So I am not at a stage with this topic where I can feel satisfied even with introspective data. However, if the drift of what I am saying above is true, then skill development takes place in those areas and in those directions where I allow my fantasies and daydreams to take place. And if this is true, I have a major new tool to help me when I want either to develop a skill for myself or to help someone else in their skill development.

The skills of getting-by

STEPHEN FINEMAN

Generally speaking, the emphasis on vocation in our cultures is a pervasive one. Part of the vocabulary of education, and all of the direction of training, reifies «the job» or «the career». Recruitment literature will often wax lyrical about the delights of company membership. Despite growing unemployment, obtaining a job is still regarded as a key passage to full membership of society. A job is a mark of respectability. It is one of the few approved sources of money; an essential token for obtaining what we cannot, or may not, produce ourselves.

Another feature of our cultural wisdom concerns the value of enterprises, especially large ones. They are something to be steady and serious about; they symbolise the glory of man's commercial and organizational achievement. Yet organizational members, workers, are not to be seen as an homogenous population; there is a rank order of prestige and worth marked by the skill of the job holder, his length of training, and his income. Doctors, dentists and lawyers are regarded as having particularly challenging, rewarding jobs. Production line workers, road sweepers and lavatory attendants drop rather lower in public esteem.

I would like to take a sideways look at this scene. I would like to suggest that much of our experience of work is pretty dull. That the differences between white collar and blue collar experiences is far less than commonly imagined. That surviving the day – getting by without too much disruption in routine – is an implicitly shared aim; a tacit, perhaps universal, culture of organized labour. Passing time in this way leads to feelings about work that are more often flat than extreme. Notions of job satisfaction are part of the rhetoric of occupational images; a rhetoric with which social researchers tend unwittingly to collude.

Of course, what we see of work life does not usually look like this. The public world in which we participate is saturated with socially acceptable symbols work and labour, some of which can lead us to believe that we are what we act. This layer of activity is a key one. It reflects a curious social imperative, which probably has roots in a secularised form of the Protestant Work Ethic: that if we do not really feel that we are working, we need to look as if we are working. If a sense of purpose is not experienced, then we still make purposeful gestures. So, managing impressions

becomes, effectively, the daily task of work. Looking as if we are satisfied, busy, harassed, challenged, important, valuable, are the tasks of the moment. Our manipulation of the symbols of «working» by our appearance, gait, speech, memos, meetings, printouts and conference papers may convince others, and ourselves, that life is somewhat richer than it feels. To perform effectively, to be plausible, requires a repertoire of skills which are normally acquired in a hit and miss fashion during periods of occupational socialisation and experience. In order to survive occupational life they are probably more important than any other forms of expertise. Surviving, in dramaturgical jargon, is being allowed to remain on stage; to hold down the job.

Symbol Minded

This three-dimensional view of work experience is consistent with the notion that has been an enormous shift away from work which has a direct, tangible end-product for all those involved. Jobs are now where people spend much of their time with other people, and with abstract symbols of some remote product or process. Back in 1951 C. Wright Mills made this cool observation on the American middle classes:

«They are expert at dealing with people transiently and impersonally; they are masters of the commercial, professional, and technical relationships. The one thing they do not do is

live by making things; rather they live off the social machineries that organize and coordinate the people who do make things. White collar people help turn what someone else had made into profit for still another.... They are the people who keep track; they man the paper routines involved in distributing what is produced.»

Mills' thesis is a classic on alienation. Add-in the effects of computerisation, and it could have been said today. Job satisfaction, he maintains, can only be viewed properly within a framework of alienation. As work for so many is disconnected from any resultant product, or indeed from the rest of life, it is performed with more or less disgruntlement. Money is its main legitimising symbol and each worker has a financial market value. How disgruntlement is translated into socially acceptable performance is less central to Mills' analysis, although he is fascinated by the «personality market», such as the shop assistant whose calculated smiles for the customer reveal disaffection rather than warmth. Nevertheless, that smile is her ticket to survival in the job - a point that Mills does not develop.

It is not uncommon for novelists to penetrate individual experiences in ways which elude social scientists. Joseph Heller's wry characterisation of an effete middle manager gets somewhere close to the point of the argument so far:

I am bored with my work very often now. Everything routine that comes in I pass along to someone else. This makes my boredom worse. It's a real

problem to decide whether it's more boring to do something boring than to pass along everything boring that comes in to somebody else and then have nothing to do at all.

Actually I enjoy my work when the assignments are large and urgent and somewhat frightening and will come to the attention of many people. I get scared, and am unable to sleep at night, but I usually perform at my best under this stimulating kind of pressure and enjoy my job the most. I handle all these important projects myself, and I rejoice with tremendous pride and vanity in the compliments I receive when I do them well (as I always do). But between such peaks of challenge and elation there is monotony and despair. (And I find, too, that once I've succeeded in impressing somebody, I'm not much excited about impressing that same person again; there is a kind of emotional letdown after I survive each crisis, a kind of empty, tragic disappointment, and last year's threat, opportunity, and inspiration are often this year's inescapable tedium. I frequently feel I'm being taken advantage of merely because I'm asked to do the work I'm paid to do)

Candidness

Heller's character gives us some insight into the interplay of personal feelings about work and its purpose, and the display required to look right. The man is precariously balanced between doing the right kind of things that will please others, and ensure his survival, and falling into a chasm of his own despair about the purpose of it all. Such tensions are normally not

revealed; which is perhaps not surprising. For one thing, it is difficult to be candid about a job which carries a social image of being rewarding, challenging, and fulfilling. Who could you tell? Who would believe you? Secondly, a confession from a supposed responsible professional that he is doing nothing more than a big act to get by, is tantamount to heresy. We do not find many heretics amongst those in our the middle classes who have «made it». Also, where self and work role are closely intertwined, the person identifies with the job, feelings of inadequacy about the job are direct reflections on the self - a particularly threatening state of affairs. Finally, such admissions are most unlikely to be made on the clinically tidy attitude questionnaire, even if some bright researcher managed to frame some relevant-looking questions.

The issue of candour can be looked at a little differently. We can take a glimpse at the depth of feeling associated with performing a work role when an individual's taken for granted perceptions are disturbed through crisis, urgency, or intimacy. Sometimes this can happen in an unplanned manner when we wish to «unload» to a relative stranger. In such circumstances secrets are revealed, often with a sense of catharsis. It could happen in a waiting room, a party, train or plane, a doctor's surgery, or a counsellor's office. It is a natural form of Garfinkel. More formally, phenomenological, ethnographic studies have a clear lead in accessing such data. I would

like to offer some illustrations through my own and others' work. They reveal, amongst other things, how job holders of relatively high socio-economic status, seek ways, acquire skills, of appearing to do well while feeling anguish and emptiness about their role.

Social Workers

I have recently undertaken an intervention study of social workers. For me it involved a fusion of the counsellor and researcher roles, aimed at assisting social workers with their stresses, and also gaining candid information about how they made sense of their world and survived. I worked with forty social workers, often intensely over time. As part of the complex picture of their lives, the following emerged.

Many harboured a deep sense of confusion and distrust about the nature and purpose of their work. Success seemed rare, and it was difficult to be clear about what was successful. Typical comments were:

«It's very easy to feel discouraged about one's purpose and role. Ironically, most of the encouragement is given to social workers for the things they've contributed to least. A quick solution involving little skill or expertise often brings the most appreciation from the client. It looks an excellent service to these clients, but can be professionally least consequential to the social worker.»

«And how do we know we're right? That's the frightening bit - have I

made the right decision? This is one of the things that tires you out. Your time is so limited. You can get so many feelings of doubt - you can too many of these feelings.»

Much of this anguish was smothered by «hard work». A casual observer of the the social work office would be impressed by the buzz of activity. Phones ringing, clients calling, diaries being consulted, people moving about. Some looked harassed and concerned; some would smoke and tap their pens nervously on their desks; all were busy. The symbols of hard, purposeful work were everywhere - except, it seemed, in the social workers' hearts. There were one or two give-aways of this which soon came to my attention. The social workers were quite happy to linger over a long lunch once out of the office. None found difficulty finding time in working hours to spend with me. The attractive art poster on the glass door of the open plan office was to prevent their boss spying on them. More time than was initially apparent was spent in chatting with each other and carping about the world and the job.

Yet carping, moaning, was a very different matter from revealing to others more profound professional doubts. To do so could be extremely problematic. It would be a sign to those around that certain tacitly shared meanings about work, the gentle collusion that the performance must go on, was being questioned or disturbed. This would foul-up the act. Really upset role relationships. Moreover

it would set up, or reinforce, personal doubts which could be very hard to live with.

There was another twist to this for social workers. Disenchantment, or confusion, over professional purpose, could translate into all manner of individual stress symptoms, not unlike those displayed by some of their clients. What were they to do with such anxieties? Well, they did not confess them to their colleagues, and certainly not to their supervisors. The logic behind this was of the following sort: If I am not sure what I am doing then I certainly do not want other social workers doing that sort of thing to me. I do not want to be seen as a client, and I do not want to be seen as someone who cannot take care of herself. How can I live with myself at work if everyone knows that I am weak? A social worker who is cracking up! Consequently, all this was hidden, privatised, and a veneer of being OK was preserved. Yet, at the same time, there was an informal institutional safeguard which sort of recognised that many staff felt like this but could not talk about it. It was accepted that people needed to «go sick». This happened a lot and no-one saw it as anything particularly unusual. They would talk about the «need» to go sick. This helped to preserve the pattern of getting-by on the job.

More individually, there were some very private ways of finding emotional relief while maintaining a relatively orderly front. Social workers talked

of «emotional bolt holes». One of these was within the intensity of relationship with a client; such as affection for a loveable child, or prolonging the association with a particularly amenable or compliant client. These were grey areas of a professional conduct, where training talks of emotional distance in dealings with clients. They also reminded social workers of their personal fallibilities as well as their professional ones: love, hate, child rearing problems, growing old, marital difficulties, were part of their own biographies which could not be simply written out of their daily practice. It was not uncommon to find social workers leaning heavily on any out-of-office supports that they could locate. Sometimes these were marriages (although social workers married to social workers had a hard time); sometimes they were professional peers or therapists.

Some talked of survival in social work by very deliberately manipulating certain procedures or processes. In effect, working according to the accepted symbols of performance, but within calculated limits. One example was to divulge only certain material to a supervisor, knowing that a full declaration would invite more work (there was always a backlog in office referrals). Another was to get an assistant to make difficult client visits «for her own good», or for the social worker to attend only certain team meetings «to be seen». Some would avoid all paperwork other than that which would be obviously noticed by a

superior if it was missing. Others would cultivate useful alliances with influential personnel at Headquarters. All in all this made a job to which commitment was strained or negligible, quite workable; it permitted a relatively undisturbed passing of time. We sometimes call this political behaviour.

Emotion - Social Workers and Fight Attendants

It is almost a cliché to observe that a social worker deals with a world where feelings and practical problems get very mixed-up, for herself as well as her clients. But, as I have already suggested, managing feeling is no ordinary problem for the social worker.

To some extent we are all faced with the business of dealing, interacting, with people whom we feel uncomfortable, anxious about, or do not like. But, it is not normally acceptable to express these feelings openly and directly to work associates or clients. Thus we all do some work on the presentation of our emotional responses, work which to a greater or lesser extent helps us to re-package what we actually feel. Not to do this disturbs the instrumental relationships we get into. In the terms of interactional theory, we need such surface acting to maintain many of our organizationally circumscribed relationships; and in the language of the present paper, such activity is part of our skills of survival.

The labour involved in emotional management, and the personal costs, depends upon a number of factors. A major aspect is how far the institutional or occupational codes governing emotional display prevent an individual's spontaneous expressions. So, it is «unprofessional» for a social worker to actually show the derision, despair, or affection in which she holds the client. Likewise, the salesman, or waiter must positively homogenise his manner towards clients to serve the proper ends of the commercial transaction, regardless of his feelings for those clients. It becomes imperative to «be nice» towards others about whom one does not feel nice. To some extent this is true of all aspects of social interaction. So those people who insist on saying just what they feel we regard as quirky, eccentric, or, more likely, downright insulting and socially unreliable.

The point is, though, that much of everyday life offers opportunities to renegotiate the rules of emotional display within micro settings - families, partnerships. This can be a quiet process, a painful process; but there can be sufficient degrees of freedom to bring into rough alignment private feeling and outward display. The social worker and salesman have far less flexibility in this sense. If they cannot maintain an appropriate emotional front then they cannot operate. If they can maintain the proper front, but cannot cope with the dissonance so produced, they cannot operate. Some social workers alienated themselves

ves and their feelings from the act that they were producing, so they survived, but were cynical and detached. Others were unable to achieve such a protective split, identified closely with their work role, and experienced stress and burnout. They could find no way of managing their actual feelings about work and clients in a manner which looked professional, organizationally acceptable.

The social worker cannot withdraw from her clients and colleagues and also remain effective in the job. So avoiding distressing personal encounters, something that many of us are able to do to some degree in our work, is difficult or impossible for her. Escaping the source of stress has to be done intrapsychically, not physically.

Client-centred jobs accentuate the skills of emotion management. Some of these jobs, though, can be particularly problematic by offering the job holder virtually no discretion over his or her emotional display. They tend to be occupations where uniformity of style, in a service role, is paramount. The flight attendant is a case in point.

In a recent ethnography of the flight attendant, Hochschild (1983) looks at how company rules and corporate dictate govern all other rules of feeling. If the flight attendant cannot or will not conform to such influences she cannot survive in the job. If she does perform the company-scripted act, but does not believe in it, she survives at considerable personal cost. In Hochschild's terms, social exchan-

ges are not «as they are in private life, subject to change and determination, but ritually sealed and almost inescapable». Expressions of feeling become an instrument of corporate control for corporate profit. She describes the following scene, which solidly makes the point:

A young business man said to a flight attendant «Why aren't you smiling? She put her tray back on the food cart and said,» I'll tell you what. You smile first, then I'll smile. The business man smiled at her. «Good», she replied. «Now freeze and hold that for fifteen hours».

The major symbol of performance, acceptable to the company, is the smile. But the company asks for much more than a switch-on smile; the customer is supposed to be served with a «genuine inside-out» smile. Such sincerity is held in line by Recurrent Training where flight attendants are taught to control their feelings towards the passenger. Boredom, hate, envy, repugnance are to be experienced and reprocessed with a smile. They are expected to internalise and believe in the company's propaganda, if necessary to sexualise the smile to be consistent with advertising slogans of the sort: «Fly me you'll like it», and «We really move our tails for you to make your wish come true». Hochschild notes the considerable labour required in denying natural expression to feelings. The act becomes difficult or impossible to maintain when demand for production is high – such as during very tight time schedules and high volume passenger

loads. If the job is accepted as one of creating illusions then the act can turn stale, and survival is threatened. On the other hand some flight attendants begin to take the company's internalisation messages seriously and identify with the job.

This, though, seemed a recipe for burnout, confusion over self identity and loss of sexual interest. The constant expression of feelings according to corporate rules, which some could do skilfully and persuasively, led to uncertainties about the nature of private feelings out of work, and the ways in which they should be expressed. It is likely that this phenomenon will exist in many jobs where the commercial engineering of feelings and body for public display directly challenge already taken for granted, intuitive, rules of self presentation. Professional models, counter clerks, and a range of «show business» jobs, are cases in point.

Top Jobs - Maintaining Impressions

Social workers and flight attendants can be viewed as working hard to maintain a pattern of behaviour and emotional display; a pattern which will portray them as competent, performing individuals. Such skills seem essential to locate the individual in a world where symbols of work and performance are our major currency of social exchange, worth and position. Yet self-estrangement from the operation, from the skilled

performance, can hit some of our most prestigious workers, leaving dulled feelings about work and uncertainty about the meaning of a dominant (and often dominating) activity in their lives. Seymour Sarason (1977) tells this anecdote about an American physician:

I had just been examined by a locally well-known and highly respected surgeon whom I went whenever I wrenched my vulnerable knee. He conducted his examination and prescribed a course of treatment. I started to leave his office and in a perfunctorily courteous manner I asked, «How has life been?» To my surprise he did not respond «routinely» but sighed and said: «I do not know why I allow myself to be so busy». His tone of voice suggested that he wanted to talk and so we did, in the course of which I told him about my current interests in the frequency with which people seem to be changing careers. He then said to me: «Surgery is interesting. For a period of years it did fascinate me. I am a good surgeon. In fact I'm a damn good one. So I'm good, so what? What I really want to do is to get into the history of medicine». He went on to relate how so many of his days were filled with uninteresting problems (like my knee), and only occasionally was he faced with a challenge which made his day.

Sarason relates other encounters with physicians in mid career, conveying a similar theme: feeling deeply troubled about significant aspects of their work; hunting for new meanings, fresh symbols of worth and acclaim. Such accounts raise serious questions about the very opposite image of the physician conveyed in public

rhetoric. They also point to the thinness of satisfaction surveys of these people. It is very hard for a physician to declare that much of his work life feels a hollow ritual, but that he will carry on because it gives him something to do and a reason to draw a salary cheque. The feeling of vacuum, noted one of Sarason's physicians, is usually filled with «psychoanalysis, alcohol, women, and drugs».

The confidences revealed to Sarason were of a similar order to the ones I have received from forty elite technical staff in the nuclear research industry (Fineman, 1980). To the uninitiated eye their work appears impressive in scope, mysterious, and above all challenging; at the frontiers of knowledge. But not so. In the pauses between stages of my rather structured research with them, they spoke in earnest about what their work life felt like. Most had worries about their status in the organisation and feeling deskilled in relation to the more academic research staff. But, the strongest image portrayed was one of spending the day doing odd jobs, work that felt inconsequential, a boring routine. Any early-career aspirations towards creative technical work soon gave way to a recognition that life in their organisation would be well paid, fairly comfortable, but no more. Most felt trapped professionally (there were few other jobs of their type around) and they would try to compensate for the dreariness by spending their surplus income on engaging hobbies or part-time business ventures.

Such fortuitous admissions (in a research sense) are probably often heard but rarely recorded. But, it sometimes takes a much sharper event to enable an individual to see, not least admit, the deeper structure and experience of his or her work life. An event such as job loss can be one such an occasion. In a recent study of my own (Fineman, 1983) I found that some thirty out of one hundred middle class unemployed – senior managers, managing directors, professional engineers, looked back on their past jobs with distaste, disquiet, and a sense of relief to be, in their terms, «free». The counselling setting, in which the research took place, released a flood of candid admissions about self and job which many confessed were tightly guarded before the job loss. Others noted that only by being quite beyond the routines of work could they begin to evaluate the quality of their previous lives, and recognise some of the routines, rituals and obsessions that had occupied them for so long.

The most striking impression was the extent that sheer, sometimes frenetic, activity of some of these people became the *raison d'être* for work: it convinced others and themselves that they had a significant and worthy place in the world. They were survivors – at least, so they thought. So, for example, answering telephone calls on industrial relations problems late into the night could become an unquestioned ritual. Travelling daily from meeting to meeting across the

country had to happen. Working around the clock was just one of those things. The costs in stress terms were not counted, until it became debilitating. Questions about the meaning and challenge of it all were generally smothered by the all enveloping activity. The repercussions on family relationships were evaded. Notions such as «job satisfaction» were rather meaningless.

By way of contrast many had a life replete with monotony and boredom. Despite their exalted positions, like the physicians, they had «seen it all before». One client, meeting, problem looked very much like another. There was little sense of excitement or reward about the job itself – it could be done on «automatic pilot». The financial rewards, and maybe colleague contacts, were sufficient reasons in themselves to carry on without complaint. Some were less than keen to put themselves into open competition for

a new job as they were now unsure of their skills and worth, especially when pitched against younger candidates.

And so we learn to get-by. If my analysis is correct, managing impressions with skill, though shared symbols of work and labour, is a mark of the quality of our working lives. This is not necessarily a cynical process – it is an essential one. If there are fundamental needs to satisfy, they get translated into this phenomenon. It is an imperative of survival in social organization: an activity which penetrates all layers of Maslow's hierarchy. Indeed, we can view notions of satisfaction at work as yet another symbol of proper functioning that we need to learn to play with, and display according to rules of social conduct. Its presence helps us to avoid asking ourselves uncomfortable questions about how we might really feel about our work and existence – if we know.

Skills, symbolic activities and career

OMAR AKTOUF

Foreword

It is customarily considered that to climb the promotion ladder in organizations, it is «sufficient» to show competence, success at one's undertakings, and initiative... in other words, recognised professional capacities, or «skills».

There are some «skills» (in the direct sense of the term) to be developed in order to be noticed and set off the mechanisms that will push the candidate up the hierarchy; A. Wickham and M. Patterson give us a few enlightening glimpses in *Les carriéristes*. Without venturing as far, nor as «high» (up the structures) in terms of «career building» as these gentlemen, we think, in drawing on our own experience⁽¹⁾, and research⁽²⁾, that there is serious matter for analysis of what is happening in this respect in the middle and lower echelons of organisations.

⁽¹⁾ The author spent almost ten years as a middle – and upper-level manager in several different types of business and industrial sectors.

⁽²⁾ The author has conducted systematic research of these phenomena as a «participant-observer» (using the ethnographic model) in two breweries, in Canada and in Algeria in 1981-1982.

Exactly what qualities underly the term «skills»? Does everyday reality reflect – as commonly held «theories» and beliefs would have it – an amalgamation of know-how, efficiency, competence, hardiness, and «leadership» potential...?

Let's ask the question in another way; what, precisely and concretely must the ordinary worker show – who desires – to accede to the first levels of management? Is this some sort of individual «gift» which is «objectively observable» and for which managers have the codebook?

Apparently, this is the way that promotions are supposed to happen, and this is also the way that industrial «tradition» likes to portray the situation. This may be so, but it is certainly not systematically sanctioned by «tests», exams or competitions. On the contrary, it is totally subject to the arbitrary «discretion» of the hierarchy; the obvious question therefore, is to determine how one goes about showing the necessary «skills»?

There is, in this matter, a question of revealing «signs», and therefore a «symbolic» process at work. This is doubly important in that this symbolism does not manifest the same meanings nor the same foundations for everyone. We know that the «misun-

derstanding» surrounding promotion systems (especially at the lower levels) is one of the factors most often noted⁽³⁾ as a cause of «distance» between enterprise and employees: «those who “climb” earn their promotions by means which have nothing to do with their knowledge of the work» was the usual comment made by workers in the two breweries. «They» (the management) choose them «from amongst those whom they believe able to be against the workers»... while at the same time the «policy line» of management affirms choices «based on competence», «the capacity to lead», to be «listened to and respected» and to «create collaboration»... (Aktouf, 1983).

As a participant observer, it was possible for us to tabulate and analyse daily occurrences, and the problem is much more complex than it appears to be. There are in fact, three types of behaviour that the worker can use to «transmit» «signs» to management concerning his career orientation; signify a desire (and the aptitudes) to be promoted, signify indifference, or, at the other extreme, signify the non-desire for promotion.

We are primarily interested in the first of these types and we shall see that the manner in which promotion-

⁽³⁾ This is also clearly confirmed by our research: in both factories, promotion is always «suspect» for the employees; there «must» be some under-the-table activity, in terms of favouritism or co-opting... never «competence» or «value at work».

related mechanisms are «signalled» implies highly symbolic activity including acts of language and non-language. We will use as our example, the choice and promotion of foremen and team leaders in the two breweries studied, to illustrate what appears to be an operation wherein singular games of occultation, contradictory messages and collusion⁽⁴⁾ are played.

Of the requisite skills?

Drawing on our in-plant experiences and observations it becomes evident that the line worker aspiring to the position of team leader or foreman⁽⁵⁾ must learn very early on, to show a series of «abilities» demonstrating that he is worthy of belonging to the hierarchy; that he possesses something «more» and «different» in comparison with «ordinary» workers.

One of the first things necessary, is to show these «qualities» very early on. The quicker one appears «promotable» the better it is, because the time and effort required will be much greater if one loses precious time behaving like «any» other employee.

⁽⁴⁾ Collusion: a term borrowed from R. Laing (*Self and others*, 1969), and designating a mechanism of mutual self-dupery in which each partner confirms self and partner in a reciprocal game of false identities and consciences.

⁽⁵⁾ The «team leader» stage represents a sort of trial period in the hierarchy. If the newly promoted person confirms the potential he is trying to show as a «chief», over several months, the way is then open for him to become a foreman.

Our future candidate for promotion then, will generally adopt the necessary «attributes» on entering the plant, event as a «temporary»⁽⁶⁾.

First of all, a complete and unconditional interiorising of productivism is required: «zeal in all directions» is the absolute rule of conduct. Doing more, at all times and on all occasions (what the workers call a «shit eater»⁽⁷⁾), transform oneself into a «producing machine», never satisfied unless one is «at the maximum». Briefly, what one must show is «obsession», that his entire existence is involved (the machinist who used his breaks to clean up his machine and «prepare» his work-place, or the electronic eye-cleaner who telephoned the plant on his days off to make sure that «his controls» were working well, are good examples). Next, an equally unconditional submission and obedience are required: no matter what happens, the hierarchy is always right, and anything it requires is always justified. The ideal here for the Administrative Director in Algiers, is the worker «who doesn't raise his head», who «has respect for authority» and «says nothing». Paradoxical-

⁽⁶⁾ The period wherein a workman has «temporary» status (at the complete mercy of arbitrary cuts or affectations), which can last from 3 to 8 years, is a sort of «purgatory» where the person is «used» in a manner which will render him a future «good worker»⁽⁸⁾.

⁽⁷⁾ «Shit eater»: the workman who «the more you pile it on (work) the more he asks for». A kind of unconditionnal hyper-zeal.

ly, this same worker must show a strong capacity to direct other men, and «keep them in hand»... How is this reconciled with a state of hyper-submission?

The other quality which our man must show, is to be something like «pitiless»: the end (produce), justifies the means. From the moment rates and quotas are at stake, nothing else matters; this is the only rule. Nothing will temper in any way his productivist ardor; not friendship, nor compassion, nor (even less) solidarity. The conduct to be encouraged is something like: «In case of accident, look after the machines first»⁽⁸⁾. All of this is well summed up by the workers' formula: «The company doesn't like "good guys" as foremen».

Next is to «keep one's distance» from the rest of one's colleagues-in-rank, maintain the maximum distinction between self and others⁽⁹⁾. One must also know how to reproduce the

⁽⁸⁾ S. Terkel in his *Working*, reports the example of the foreman who rushed to restart the line (which a workman had stopped as a result of a serious accident which happened to one of his colleagues), before giving any attention whatsoever to the injured person. In our breweries too, we have had witnesses describing foremen who «looked after the machines first, and the man afterwards» in case of accident and even very serious injury.

⁽⁹⁾ It was possible for us to observe a typical case in Montreal: Someone who had been designated to us as «a guy who wants to climb», and who constantly exhibited a closed appearance, didn't talk to or smile to anyone, ate alone... as his colleagues said, «you musn't be pals with the workers if you want to climb».

speech of the managers (Aktouf, 1985), and forge for oneself a «language of imitation» which confers on the user the right to pass over to the other side of the barrier.

This language should serve to support another quality: to have a multiplier effect on the statements and positions of management, «support» them at every opportunity, and justify in one's own words their every action... whether or not this is done publicly is unimportant, as long as it's known by the «right people».

The last «skill» that we will list here (before dressing the profile of the typical future foreman and looking at his symbolic mechanisms), is the appearance of «aspirant-boss» that one must adopt (reproduce the appearance of one's immediate superior, and that of management in general). We will discuss what this consists of a little further on, but for the moment, suffice it to say that a candidate for promotion must show a thousand-and-one verbal, behavioural, gestural, and even «culinary» and «recreational» signs of his proximity to the world of «management»⁽¹⁰⁾.

In order to better understand the nature of these «skills» it is most interesting to review and compare the descriptions of «good foreman» (and more briefly of the «good employee»)

⁽¹⁰⁾ Such as, for example, the table at which one sits during breaks and at mealtimes, the type of food one eats, the places (clubs, restaurants) one frequents, and the sports and leisure activities one practises (golf, ski, squash...).

given by management on one side, and workers on the other.

From both managements and both sets of employees (Algiers and Montreal), it is roughly the same portrait that emerges, almost in the same words.

Where the managements are concerned, the «good employee» (who has the potential to become a foreman) is the one who is:

- submissive: ever consenting, obedient, hyper-disciplined...
- punctual: doesn't miss a half-minute⁽¹¹⁾ to production...
- serious: «doesn't talk», totally absorbed in his task...
- malleable: lets himself be «formed», acquires the «right» bent...
- ambitious: «wants it», «works his guts out» to succeed, gives «his maximum»...⁽¹²⁾.

On the subject of foremen, they should (as presented, in order of importance by different managers):

- achieve the objectives: First and foremost «the numbers», everything else comes «after»...
- set the example: Particularly concerning the points listed above...
- be «firm»: Never yield on any issue, not be «soft», output before all else...
- be a policeman with «velvet glo-

⁽¹¹⁾ «Half-minute», because production lack of earnings are based on 30 seconds slices of time. Every 30 seconds of down time must be justified, and ascribed to a particular position, and therefore to a particular person.

⁽¹²⁾ We note that for the workmen, this represents a «pathological» case: a «shit eater», or a «block-head», or a «boot licker»...

ves»: Supervise and obtain production with «no problems»...

- «have a grip»: Able to boss men, inflexible and uncompromising...
- not «try to please»: «To please» the employees is «playing their game»...
- know how to be tough: «Deal severely with», «sanction» and «make an example of offenders to «avoid abuse»...
- be «able to solve his own problems», «to have initiative»...
- but all the same, know how to «communicate» while «maintaining discipline» and «not going further than he's asked»⁽¹³⁾.

Here are the criteria for the evaluation of foremen's work in Montreal (as given by the Technical Director of that brewery):

- Production per line
- Production per machine
- Production per job
- Number of breakdowns
- Number of conflicts...

The spirit and orientation of this sort of «criteria» are unworthy of comment... But it is very interesting to note that the term «competence» never appeared! It would appear, in effect, that a knowledge of the work to be done is only a minor consideration to what is required of a foreman.

⁽¹³⁾ Here, management made allusion to a foreman (whom we have called «S»), particularly «perverse» and «detested» who «went too far» in «severity»... But all of that is merely words and rituals because in fact «S» and his ilk are largely encouraged. As long as «it produces» nobody will be asked any questions, and especially not foremen who are reputed «push them 'till they drop».

We do, however, often find this term in the comments of the employees (who see only incompetence in the overwhelming majority of their immediate superiors); «they (foremen) don't know anything about the job and they just come around to be disgusting».

Here is the worker's idea of a good foreman:

- competent, firstly,
- has confidence in us, doesn't feel obliged to be incessantly on the workers' backs,
- we can have confidence in him, isn't «two-faced»,
- a man of his word, dignified, a «true example»,
- talks to the employees, listens, «has a heart»,
- «respects» the employees, treats them like «people»,
- is just,
- is not «tense» (obsessed with output, and who transfers obsession to everybody).

We agree that this «portrait» from the workers themselves is a sort of «ideal» that one might dream about; reality, on the other hand, abounds with foremen who are exactly the opposite... which is not surprising in the light of management's preoccupations in this regard.

The reality in this case, as seen by the employees leaps to the fore in these few quotes, entirely representative of their quasi-unanimity:

- «Most of the guys are chosen (to become foremen) not because they're competent hard workers, but because they're "two-faced" or "hard-

headed»⁽¹⁴⁾; these are guys who climb over the backs of their colleagues, I don't like that».

- «They don't know anything, don't do anything except try to catch you out⁽¹⁵⁾ just to disgust you! Those are the types that are encouraged».

- «Good or bad, they're all the same... a dog doesn't eat its brother, so they close ranks against us...».

- «There are some here who only want to crush you, crush you with work and filth».

- «They never stop pushing... one might think they're only here to make trouble».

- «One time I injured my hand, the blood was pissing out of me, and all the «boss» was interested in was that I fill out a report before going to the hospital! And they come around every year to shake your hand!»⁽¹⁶⁾.

We could lengthen this list considerably with more of the same... we have shared, experienced, and observed all of this, first-hand.

⁽¹⁴⁾ «Two-faced» and «hard headed» designate members of the lower levels of the hierarchy and those who are preparing to join it. These are «hypocrites» who «don't keep their word», who pass their time «sucking up to» the bosses (hanging on their coat-tails).

⁽¹⁵⁾ «Watcher» (French slang): obvious surveillance, examine someone minutely while he is working. This is generally the equivalent (or the prelude) to «being timed» (MTM analysis).

⁽¹⁶⁾ Alludes to the «hand shake» which management offers the workmen each year at new year's.

Symbolic activities in play

By «symbolic activities in play» we mean the ways and means, implicit and explicit, by which the employee will «signify» (establish series of «signs») his desire to be promoted, and those «aptitudes»... which make him a good candidate for promotion.

From the results of field-observation, there would be two major categories of «sign games»: verbal and non-verbal.

The verbal signs

One of the first verbal symbols which designate he who wishes to «make himself a career» is what we have called elsewhere the adoption of a sort of «official language»⁽¹⁷⁾; which consists of taking for oneself specific elements of management's jargon. This can go from simple daily use of accounting, «technical» and «administrative» terms, right up to the repetition at every opportunity of well-known slogans clearly identifying in which «camp» one is situated. This last means belongs more to the Algerian situation, but in both cases it is a question of demonstrating that one interiorises the language of the power-holders.

It is in this manner that we hear

⁽¹⁷⁾ A type of language stereotype destined to operationalise a sort of permanent occultation of reality (demagogy, paternalism, cynicism, propaganda...) Cf.

employees talking about «costs», «productivity», «rates» of this and that... when dealing with superiors (notably when «senior management» makes a tour...).

We must, nevertheless, see quite clearly that this imitation is not a simple question of vocabulary, but also, and importantly of «form»: an employee wishing to «step up» will make an effort to detach himself from «common» parlance and to speak in a «correct», authorised, «competent» manner (in the «official» and «dominant» sense that P. Bourdieu (1982) gives to the term). For example, in Algiers the worker in question will make an effort to speak «classical» Arabic, while the commonly used language is what is called «dialectal» Arabic, much different from the former.

Corollary to this imitation there is also a vast propensity for the reproduction of management's discourse. It will take two distinct forms: amplification and praise. From what we have observed on the ground, those who involve themselves in this activity play a role as a kind of «multiplier» of information and dispositions emanating from management. This must be seen by those in executive positions, and in contrast with their «less well informed» colleagues. Most often they will «add something» to show that they have «clearly understood», and at the same time are likely to heap praise on whatever is, or is about to happen: they «justify» it meticulously, and assume for them-

selves all inferences to be drawn from the policies as stated.

This explains the difference between those workers in Montreal who find the «new production line» totally inhuman, and those (rare ones) who excuse all its problems straight away in the name of «the competition», «progress», «productivity», and a «bigger cake to share».

At the plant in Algiers all of this is much more flagrant because it is purely and simply a question of repeating hollow abstractions officialised as «projects» or «transformations»... everything is always in the future... so it's a question of boasting in advance of the benefits of something which is no more than a few words from the mouths of one «responsible person» or another.

We should note another particularity of this situation as it pertains to Algeria: those who assume this role (or who will assume it) are known in advance. Their discourse surprises no one. These are the people who «know someone», who are allied with, and protected by someone in management, in the party... or even in the union. Everything that the management, or power might do is «good», and «just», in advance. In any circumstance these are the people who climb the promotion ladder. They are called «string-pulled».

Next, there is what we shall refer to as the ability to modulate one's own discourse to conform to that of management. This is naturally the other half of the mechanism described

above, and the same persons will be the first to fully adopt this mechanism. This is more clearly obvious in the plant in Algiers (though present on a smaller scale in Montreal, especially amongst the older employees and union representatives). Any change in directives, orientation, justification of delays, annulment of measures and promises by the authority in place, finds automatic defense offered by these same people. This can reach the point of defending today a position which is in complete opposition with yesterday's, simply because the «official organs» have changed their discourse. In Algiers this is called «talking like the newspapers».

Another demonstrative practice, equivalent of those already noted, is to play what we call an «echo-role». Each person in our plants has understood for a long time that what management expects of him is to return exactly the discourse that they would like to hear. Which is to say, that which managements had forged in their arsenal of productivity «theories» (every «good» worker should interiorise and restore it as being properly his own). This echo-role is perfectly fulfilled by our «careerists» who even go so far as repeating the company's publicity slogans (Montreal) or entire portions of official propaganda (Algiers).

All of this has twofold consequences on the particular language activities of our future «promotables»: the integration of a clearly «anal» component, and assuming an equally clear

capacity for «double discourse». Briefly, as we have seen elsewhere, the «anal-character» (affirmative, calculating, authoritarian, numbers-oriented, obsessed by time...) of management's speech is aped by those employees wishing to distinguish themselves at the expense of the primarily «oral» nature of worker behaviour (Abraham, 1966). This «anality» will obviously manifest itself in other behaviour... (which we will see further on).

The second consequence, double discourse, is the direct corollary of all the support and modulation activity which is centred on management's positions: double discourse across time, and in the perception/conscience of the situation experienced. This represents, in fact, the pure and simple sharing of the systematic dissimulation of reality: situation and events are one thing, what one says about them is quite different. In this way, some employees maintain the language of the «united family», the «benevolent father-figure» of management, and the «worker-king», all the while extolling the virtues of ultra-taylorist and fundamentally demagogical practices.

Non-verbal «signs»

The non-verbal symbolic activity demonstrative of the desire for promotion is much more varied. We will content ourselves with a passing in review of what we consider to be the

principal manifestations of this activity, which is divided into three major groups: those involving behaviour, those involving only «attitudes», and those involving a relational mode specific to one's colleagues.

Firstly, concerning «behavioural» symbolism, we note in ascending order of importance:

- Actions in absolute conformity to management's prescriptions (zeal in observing rules, quotas, cadences...) and showing it as ostensibly as possible.
- Do all possible to «help» management by different actions from «seeing with the master's eye» to outright spying. All sorts of actions, incidents, facts and even quotes can-and-should-be reported to the hierarchy.
- Avoid becoming unionised, and if it is inevitable, show clearly that it is against one's will. Boycott and systematically counteract all union activity.
- Use one's breaks to improve one's output at work; systematically use a part of this time to clean up and verify one's work-space/machines, observe and «learn»...
- Be constantly «in the bosses' coat-tails»: Use every occasion to speak to them, show them, warn them, attract their attention... but these occasions must invariably concern production!

Secondly, we have observed the following manifestations of attitude-related symbolism:

- «Keep Your distance» and «know your place»; not «mix» with other workers and not exaggerate the intensity of one's contacts with the bosses. This can even go as far as

exaggerated obsequiousness toward bosses, and disdain for all others.

- «Appear to suffer», have a constantly preoccupied look, worried and unsettled. «Bosses» like to see intense concentration and a «serious» mien in «good» workers.
- Care for one's appearance: this can range from the «always freshly shaven» to a style of clothing which reflects management's «fetishes» (shirt and tie, avoiding blue-jeans, etc.).
- Appear ambitious, «want it», notably by mimicry, which can consist simply of being seen to always have a shirt pocket full of pens, or a pencil behind one's ear. At the limit, one can carry around an attaché-case, and loudly proclaim that one is «taking some courses». Essentially, it is important to manifest one's «white collar» fantasy.
- Evidence a sort of «output obsession», even outside of working hours, and outside of one's proper area of responsibility... In this, breaks, starting and quitting times are the ideal moments for playing one's role of «informer» to the bosses: reminders and notices,... of a thousand little things that slow up production, or cause additional waste, or increased costs...
- Appear ideologically «irreproachable»; never miss an opportunity to underline one's total adherence to «the system» (especially by the positions one takes - verbal or not - during confrontations, strikes, and general assemblies...).

Thirdly, concerning the symbolic implications of one's relations with other workers, we have observed the following phenomena:

- Be the one who is not liked. This is very important because it shows

immediately that one is «trustworthy» and not interested in «fooling around». By definition, only agitators and «dissipators» are liked by workers.

- Be obviously «out of», and if possible opposed to all «activist», «unionist», or other «worker oriented» groups. The more one provokes their rejection and aggression the better it is for one's career.
- Use all possible means to keep one's distance from one's peers, including mealtimes, leisure and social activity...
- Put the «interest of the firm» before all else, particularly solidarity, and community... avoid like the plague anything that looks like a petition or group action... which questions the established order, even outside the workplace.
- Lastly, and above all, demonstrate lively adhesion to «swim or sink»; every man for himself, fierce competition, neither help, nor pity, nor compassion, nor excuses... show clearly that one is able to become the foreman who «at work, doesn't even know his own mother!»

It would be fastidious to give examples illustrating each of the points reviewed here. We will just say that daily plant life supplies a thousand illustrations. The machinist in Montreal who talks to no one, eats his meals alone, looks like he's dying as he works at his bottling machine, rushes breathlessly to «un-jam»⁽¹⁸⁾ the line all around him in order to

⁽¹⁸⁾ «Un-jam»: one of the factors slowing the production of beer. This is when containers «jam up» the mechanisms, one must unjam them to reestablish regular flows...

ensure that the flow of bottles never slows... and who is clearly identified by his fellow employees as «the one who wants to climb the ladder» is an excellent example. There are also the cases of a few «comers» in Algiers who are immediately better off than their peers; more often with the team leaders than their co-workers, having immediate access to the best jobs, and immediately identified as potential bosses or union delegates. They also maintain a climate of ostracism towards their peers; their situation as «string-pulled» forces them to, almost in spite of themselves. Therefore they have little choice but to adopt the behaviour of a «careerist».

It is even further edifying to note the groups of expressions used by the employees to designate and characterize those amongst them who are preparing themselves for promotion; «block-heads», «shit-eaters», and «limp wrists» in Montreal, and «traitor», «lickers», «porters», and «sure, yes-yes»... in Algiers. It is sufficient to indicate that these terms in their respective environments have connotations of treachery, obsequious submission, weak dependence, misplaced zeal, the absence of self-respect and dignity, and even... a lack of virility! This is what the overwhelming majority of workers think of those who will be called to become their bosses.

Naturally, those who wish to signify to management their non-desire to pursue a career in the hierarchy have recourse to a symbolism which is the inverse, and are immediately classi-

fied (by the chiefs) as undisciplined, not serious nor ambitious, and unworthy of confidence...

In this sense, the reasons invoked by those workmen non desirous of promotion (the near totality of those whom we approached during both stays) are extremely edifying:

«I want to stay right where I am until retirement, I'm not interested in stepping up. If somebody goes up he becomes awful... if he does what the bosses want, he becomes dog... you musn't be friend with the workers if you want to go up».

«I'd rather stay clean. I refuse any promotion... I don't want any trouble... have to whip the guys».

«I don't want to become a pig».

«I'm staying the way I am – at peace».

«I'm not a boot licker... What counts is who you know... To help you climb...».

«You gotta have grease and polish to climb...».

«A serious attitude, education and work don't help... that's not what's important, it's being able to be a dog».

These workers are described by the foremen as «useless», «slackers» who «refuse all challenges»... and their managements echo these sentiments.

From any viewpoint one must be careful not to see in these attitudes only spite, or rationalisation or fecklessness. We have personally witnessed at least two cases of voluntary demo-

tion: team leaders who preferred returning to their jobs as simple workmen after a few weeks of promotion... because the required «skills» cost them too much!

Conclusion

Without any doubt, the principal focus of our attention is that the observations and facts «on the ground» unveil a fundamental opposition between the ways that identical symbolisms are perceived, and interpreted. For the hierarchies, it is a question of seriousness, desire, challenge, ambition, leadership and great potential... whereas for the workmen it is a question of pettiness, shabbiness, duplicity, lowness, treachery... and something approaching prostitution!

We are uncontestedly in the presence of opposed systems of representation (Aktung, 1956) which implies necessarily a type of «collusional» relationship (Laing, 1969) wherein double discourses and occultations dominate the scene almost totally.

The central question is how these pseudo «skills» are being «inculcated», (with their attendant symbolisms), and hold by candidates for promotion? While all official discourses (therefore the only authorised ones) of all managements are «being a family», «help and understand workers», and «establish a dialogue...»? Is it the concrete example of the bosses in the everyday exercise of

their functions that shows the difference between what is stated, and what is desired in reality? As far as we are concerned, there is no doubt. Entire hierarchies do their utmost to maintain a particular discourse, and to act in diametrical opposition to that discourse. Foremen «auto-reinforce» themselves in those areas of action wherein they feel encouraged... and supported...

Interrogated directly concerning the reasons for the systematic reproduction of the same sort of foremen – in flagrant contradiction of the «official wishes» of management – the managers invariably replied that it was «because the others don't want to be promoted!» have a few of the reasons why...

There is here, an abundance of contradictions: between reality and discourse, between discourses themselves, between symbolic activities and practices, between required and expected abilities, between being promoted and degrading oneself... This means that as soon as one enters into the «career» game, there follows a whole self-maintained process of collusional relationships, and the induction of experiences and inter-actions reposing on a systematic false-self⁽¹⁹⁾.

The least that one might say is that

⁽¹⁹⁾ False-self: it is from within the false-self that collusion is set up. A term borrowed from R. Laing, op. cit., designating the false identity which people having identity problems develop. In daily life, the games of «being» and «appearing to be», derive from the same mechanism.

the systems of symbolic manifestations of «management's love» and «employees' love» appear to be mutually exclusive and irreconcilable.

Even at the heart of political-economic and cultural differences as vast as those of Canada and Algeria, all the mechanisms in play are strangely identical. Can the factory system, even that virtually totally «automatic» industrial behaviour, relationships and representations that are truly harmonic?

An even more serious question is how to ensure the social and psychic integrity of a hierarchy whose basic skeleton is composed of people who must successfully traverse a schismogenic process in order to «prove their worth»? ⁽²⁰⁾ What sort of working atmosphere can one reasonably expect?

⁽²⁰⁾ Schismogenesis: term borrowed from G. Bateson, designating a process of progressive «rupture» characterised by a permanent exposure to a «double-constraint» mechanism (contradictory demands which are very costly psychically and affectively). Cf. Y. Winkin, ed. *La nouvelle communication*, Paris, Seuil, (Points), 1981, chap. 2.



Positioning Skill

Job policies and collective bargaining illustrate the relevance of the symbolic reasons for the acquisition of skills in organizations and in society. In job policies and in collective bargaining there are claims for acquiring, developing and applying skills that are functionally important if job creation in competitive markets is to be successful. Better performances on the part of the members of an organization are also claimed through wages indexically related to skills. Claims are also addressed towards the development of distinctive competences of organizations, and the acquisition of professional skills to the technical, cultural and economic benefit of the organizations.

Kristian Kreiner argues that wages and skills have a symbolic, not an indexical relationship, and that there is much confusion over the role of skill in organizations: the organization's success is explained in terms of individual abilities; the statement of such abilities is rather unprecise and, moreover, organizations celebrate the skills which are a liability, according to their own criteria, and neglect the ones that are an asset. Bob Grafton-Small and Steve Linstead point out that professionals, and consultants as professionals, in dealing with the fundamental problem of intervening in states of disorder, directly or through agency and on behalf of society at large, often use skill and success as mutually supportive. They argue that professionals manage the identity and the boundaries of such occupational kinship groups by claims of indeterminate skill, and by a continual negotiation in society of the body of abilities and knowledge that constitute skill. Elisabeth Sundin and Ulf Wiberg illustrate how an organization's skilful performance can both escape the common sense understanding of a context as a determinant for behaviour and be grounded in activities that are interpreted as symbolisms in such an external environment and inter-organizational network. The

symbolic image of the organization's skill is a picture of the socio-culture of the company and of its courses of action in the sociocultural structure of the local environment, and of the attitudes and qualities in the inter-organizational network of the other organizations and institutions as interpreters.

Claims for skills as a means towards successful courses of action are not grounded, therefore, in functionally determinable special capabilities of organizational actors. Rather, the nature, the contents, and the boundaries of skill are socially constructed, continuously negotiated, and ritually celebrated, without having been ascertained. The relationship between power, autonomy, and success and the skill of individuals and organizations are conventional and mutually supportive, and they focus on a symbol. The processes of positioning skills in the organization life, in the inter-organizational network, and in professionalism, indicate and describe skill as a tool for understanding the symbolic boundaries of a course of action of individuals and organizations, and the nature and the extent of such action. Skills convey meanings of work life, of labour organization, of professional competence, and of corporate culture as crucial explanatory variables.

Skills in organizations: Assets and Liabilities

KRISTIAN KREINER

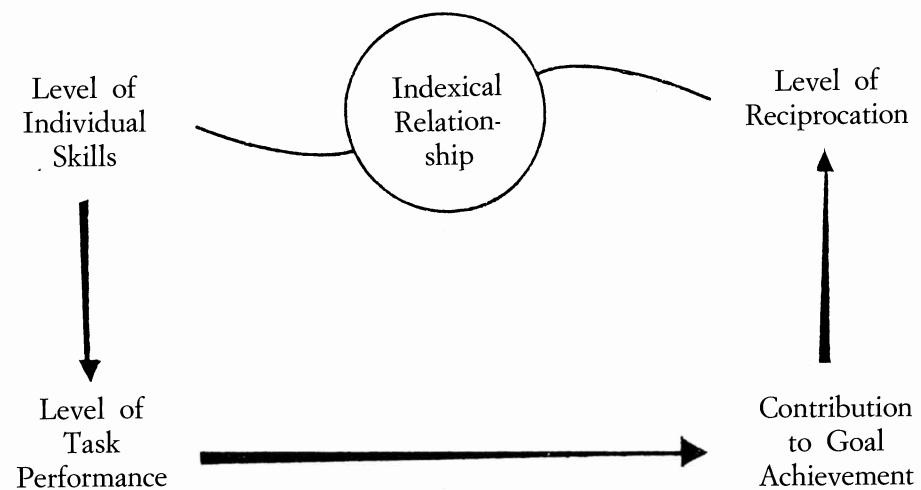
Introduction

According to conventional usage, the concept of skill refers to a developed or acquired ability to use one's knowledge effectively in doing something (Merriam-Webster Dictionary).

Organizations mobilize, exploit and reward such individual abilities for the purpose of goal achievement. They select and train people in ways which will ensure that the appropriate kinds, and amounts of, knowledge are present for the planned task performances; and they situate such task performance within a formal structure which will ensure that the knowledge is used effectively, i.e., that skills are actually applied.

In this sense, we may conceive of skills as *organizational assets*. They constitute the «human capital» on which organizations produce, succeed, and survive.

Like all other kinds of organizational assets, also human skills must be bought at a certain price. The «price», i.e., the wage, fringe benefits, social status and recognition paid to the holder of skills, is conventionally believed to represent a «fair» reciprocation of the contribution to the overall organizational goal achievement which the skill-holder makes. The skills of a given person enable him to carry out tasks which are functionally relevant to the organization. The higher the level of skills, the higher the



level of task performance reached – and the higher the value of the performance to the goal achievement of the organization. Consequently, organizations can afford to reward members in accordance with their skills.

Along such lines of reasoning, wage differentials in organizations are commonly explained and legitimated. And manifest reciprocations have become the commonly accepted, shorthand *empirical expression* of individual skills.

However, the validity of manifest reciprocations as an indication of contributions to organizational goals, of task performance, and ultimately of skills has been seriously challenged (Offe, 1976). Our data, to be reported below, support such a challenge. We will argue that the *reputation* of being skillful may be earned (and may even *only* be earned) in ways which are remotely related to formally prescribed task performance and manifest contributions to goal achievement.

Socially acclaimed, but functionally dubious, skills still find empirical expressions, in terms of appropriate levels of reciprocation. However, in this case the logic of the «achievement principle» (Offe, 1976) does not work. Instead, skills provide individuals (and groups of individuals) with a certain bargaining power with which they make their claims on the organization's resources effective.

To the extent that we come to see skills as constituting a platform for claims on organizational resources,

which cannot be convincingly and independently demonstrated to rest on actual contributions, we may also come to see skills in organizations as *liabilities*. However, we will hypothesize that organizations, for the sake of legitimacy, will try to rationalize successful claims on its resources.

Even if skills are in some sense liabilities, organizations which operate in competitive markets can only succeed and survive when its members develop and apply *functionally relevant* skills. We will discuss how organizations motivate their members to do so, even when such skills find only vague – and sometimes illegitimate – empirical expressions.

To facilitate our discussion we will use a bit of data which we have reported elsewhere (Christensen & Kreiner, 1984). The data were collected in the Danish building industry and describe the remuneration and social status of a gang of semi-skilled construction workers. However, our discussion of organizational skills as assets and liabilities will not be confined to this particular organizational setting.

The Super-Gang which Nobody Wanted

A major Danish contractor hired gangs of manual, semi-skilled laborers on a temporary basis. A piece-rate was negotiated for each gang covering fairly large trunks of work. The average hourly wage was seen to, and

meant to, reflect the effort and skills of the gang.

One gang, referred to as the «super-gang», constantly earned DKR 10 more per hour than all other gangs. «They must be damned efficient», reasoned our informant who was an experienced site engineer. However, he went on to observe,

«... not very many site engineers want to have them. Now, if I got them out here I would have problems like Hell because they earn DKR 10 more. That really would spell trouble... because DKR 10 is only ten per cent and it doesn't show that a man is producing ten per cent more when he is out there. In other words, the other gangs would get the impression that they were not at all more efficient than themselves, and that they get (more) because I go hunting with one of them... Quite simply, I would not have them out here.»

Let us pre-empt our discussion of the data by making a few observations on the «site organization» (Kreiner, 1976). Compared to ordinary organizations, the site organization seems, by and large, to be better equipped to make reciprocation of its members contingent upon actual task performance.

First of all, the goal of a site organization is uncommonly clear and explicit. It is typically spelled out in great details and documented in written contracts with the client/owner. The nature of the goal further facilitates a decomposition of it into a logical sequence of tasks to be executed. Also this operationalization is to a large extent based on written docu-

ments, which enables everyone to assess the functional relevance of each individual task to the goal of the site organization.

Secondly, the site organization is close to being a «task-continuous status organization» (Offe, 1976). The status hierarchy consists of three levels: the ordinary gang member, the ganger, and the foreman.⁽¹⁾ Typically, gangers are recruited among the successful gang members, while foremen are recruited among the successful gangers. Thus, the mastery of the technical rules of the position of an ordinary gang member is an essential component of the position of the ganger. This, in addition to the wider responsibilities of the ganger, is in turn also an essential component of the position of a foreman. Thus, the functional and the hierarchical differentiation of the site organization can be said to coincide. In comparison with ordinary organizations which are typically and increasingly task-discontinuous, the site organization has a better chance of making «informed» assessments of the actual task performance.

Thirdly, the building technology is far from being developed to the extent that workers have lost their *initiatory influence* (Lutz & Willener, 1959

⁽¹⁾ The site engineer represents a fourth level which is somewhat discontinuous in relation to the other levels. However, typically site engineers and foremen work in pairs with a somewhat diffuse division of work. Thus, the site engineer may rely upon the foreman's assessment of task performance.

- discussed in Offe, 1976) on the work process, as might commonly be the case in ordinary industrial organizations. Construction workers still have much discretion of the work-speed, the quality of the product, the material, the production procedures and the amount of output. Thus, variations in output and quality more reliably reflect variations in the skills applied to the task – compared to what is true when workers are «pendants» to some machine.

Fourthly, construction workers are temporarily hired to a given site. This shortens the interval with which wages can be negotiated and adapted to actual task performance. Furthermore, the use of piece-rates holds the promise of making wage levels fluctuate directly with the amount of output made by the gang.

However, other aspects about construction work add noise to the relationship between task performance and remuneration. Construction work is subject to numerous contingencies, the most apparent one being the weather conditions. When the «technological core» (Thompson, 1967) cannot be sealed off and the conditions of production not fully controlled, the same amount of skills and effort on the part of the workers may yield different amounts of output. In addition, since the tasks of construction workers are not highly standardized and since the specialization is not very elaborated, as a matter of convenience piece-rates are negotiated for fairly complex and composite tasks, consi-

sting of many, quite varied types of operations, and covering the gang as a whole. Both aspects make it less immediately apparent how task performance relates to goal achievement and to the reciprocation. Some notion of «average» conditions, «average» skills (over gang members and across different work operations), etc. must exist to make fairly accurate assessments of the actual performance possible.

All in all we would expect site organizations to be in a comparably favorable position when trying to link remuneration to actual performance. Indeed, the company from which the data were taken, has made the achievement principle a building block in its corporate culture (Christensen & Kreiner, 1984). However, in spite of this, the claim of such a link was highly dubious.

Indexical or Symbolic Relationship between Skill and Wage

According to the «achievement principle», and according to the «corporate culture» of the contractor, the high hourly wage of the super-gang is *an effect* of its high productivity. Their skills are supposed to be indexically related to the earnings, since the hourly wage is calculated (in accordance with the rules of the wage system) on the basis of their task performance. The hourly wage is, in other words, the *dependent* variable in the calculation.

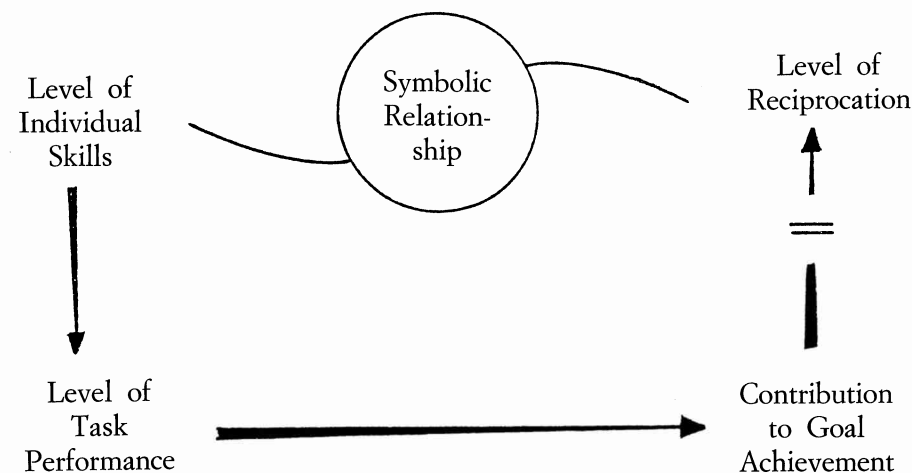
However, as we discussed at great length in Christensen & Kreiner (1984) this was not the way wages were actually calculated in practice. It was rather the other way around: the productivity of the gang (its task performance) was calculated on the basis of the *expected*, pre-established hourly wage. When the work was done and the accounts settled, an average hourly wage emerged which systematically was very close to the expected one. Such a pattern is, of course, highly unlikely and does require some engineering to persist:

«If we make a perfectly square contract we would have to be damned efficient if we were to hit (the expected hourly wage) with such precision as we always do... If one considers... how few hours would have to slip before we would miss...»

Obviously, some tinkering with the official accounts is taking place in order to reach the expected hourly wage for the gangs. There are many

reasons why the site engineers engage in such tinkering. In the present context, however, it is only important to conclude that, under any one piece-rate contract, the hourly wage of the gang is not causally linked to actual task performance. It is causally linked to the reputation of the gang as being highly skillful - a reputation which justifies paying them a high wage.

We lack data to trace the origin of the super-gang's reputation. However, from the way hourly wages are calculated in practice it is clear how such a reputation becomes perpetuated. Their reputation, as symbolized by their record of previous hourly wages, enables them to negotiate an «appropriately» high expected hourly wage, and many forces combine to fulfill the expectations - almost no matter which level of task performance they actually achieve. It is equally clear why our informant might be reluctant to hire the gang to his sites: he might have to pay a higher wage to the reputable



gang without necessarily receiving a better task performance.

If this is the way wages are determined in practice, the skills of the gang and their hourly wage do not have an indexical, but a *symbolic* relationship. Wages are an arbitrary, but conventionally understood, representation of skills.

By the same token, such reputationally established skills might be considered organizational liabilities.

Output and Behavioral Expression of Skills

Only to an outside observer may the wages paid to the gangs be seen as an indexical representation of skills. To the site engineer (and to the other parties involved on the site) such a short-hand expression is of little use. The fact that wages are loosely coupled to actual task performance, and to contributions to the goal achievement, means that remuneration cannot be used to motivate the application of skills^(?). Nevertheless, the success of the project, and of the site engineer, depends on the ap-

^(?) This statement needs a couple of qualifications. When manifest conflicts between the site engineer and a gang arise, wages may be re-coupled to actual task performance. However, it rarely happens. Secondly, the site engineers sometimes motivate the application of skills and efforts by increasing the *expected* hourly wage. Thus, the statement only has validity in the ordinary implementation of an agreed piece-rate contract.

plication of *functionally relevant* skills. It is not a prime responsibility of the site engineer to signal skills, but to motivate and ensure the application of such skills in order to meet the dead-line and the budget of the project. However, even though it must be true that the application of skills will somehow become manifest in the output and the task behavior of the gang, these areas are not unproblematic empirical expressions of skills.

If skills make a difference for the output of the gang, it will manifest itself in the ratio of actual to expected output. As already mentioned, on construction sites it is less of a problem to measure this ratio than in most other organizations. However, the actual output of the gang cannot be ascribed to their skills alone. Obviously, the conditions under which they must produce will be an intervening variable. The output of the gang is conditioned by *physical* contingencies (such as the weather and the soil conditions), and the *quality of the project planning* (e.g., the consistency and clarity of task descriptions, the availability and efficiency of tools, equipment and materials, and the interference from other gangs on the site). Since contingencies are not foreseen at the point of negotiating the piece-rate contract, actual output normally falls short of expectations. However, whether this fact is an expression of the skills of the gang cannot easily be settled, neither in the negative nor in the positive. (We shall return to the issue below).

If skills are applied in task performance it is likely to leave some behavioral traces. May the site engineer not be able to spot skillful performance on observing the behavior of the gang? First of all, he actually has few opportunities for observing task behavior. Most of the work must necessarily take place outside his vision. More important, however, even when he does make such observations they are not easily interpreted. The difficulties are indicated by the fact that not even the super-gang's close peers may be able to see the difference - as mentioned in the quotation on page 4. It is further illustrated by the fact that even when observing people not working at all, the site engineer was not sure on the interpretation⁽³⁾.

It is somewhat puzzling that construction work does not offer skills a more explicit empirical expression. However, a closer consideration of the kind of skills requested on construction sites may help us solve the puzzle.

Technical and Practical Skills

Much confusion over the role of skills in organizations (e.g. in the literature on de-skilling) stems from

⁽³⁾ Our informant recounts his reluctance to intervene when observing the gang in the shelter outside break periods, since it might mean that they were late coming back from a casting which they wanted to finish. (Christensen & Kreiner, 1984)

an inadequately gross conceptualization of skills. A full discussion of the concept of skills falls outside the scope of the present paper. However, we do want to distinguish two types of skills, both of which are vital to the accomplishment of construction tasks.

First, we may talk about *technical skills*. The knowledge of, and mastery of, all the different tasks on a construction site, and the steps in accomplishing them, easily singles out the technically skillful construction worker from the less skillful. Although the level of technical skills varies across construction workers on any site, it probably does not vary considerably. On the whole it can be assumed that a sufficient number of the workers masters all the technical rules of construction work.

Second, we may talk about *practical skills*. In relation to the technical rules, practical skills manifest themselves in the ability to make productive «short-cuts». Numerous examples might be given, for example:

- using the tools at hand, even if inappropriate or dangerous, instead of waiting for the «right» tools;
- relaxing formal and craft-defined requirements of a certain quality of output, realizing that much of what they do will be covered as the work proceeds and therefore not subject to close inspection. Few things need to look like an altarpiece, although someone might like (and pay for) them to do so;
- saving time on prescribed safety precautions and other «super-

fluous» preparations, in order to get on with the work;

- doing work which obviously needs to be done on one's own initiative, rather than waiting for the site engineer to catch up with his planning.

In other words, practical skills prove themselves in the ability to use one's initiatory influence on the work process in a productive way⁽⁴⁾. The trick is to produce, *in spite of* the conditions - to express it in the local jargon.

Considering the fact that contingencies arise all the time on construction sites, practical skills are of equal saliency to success as are technical skills.

However, at the same time it is clear that practical skills find vague empirical expressions. There are few behavioral clues because basically they are doing just ordinary things under conditions which - to an outside observer, even if a peer - might not look at all extraordinary. And there are few output clues because at best they will reach the planned level of output, while normally they will probably fall short of this.

Thus, *when inclement conditions for production are skillfully overcome, they cease to look inclement!* And the vision of practical skills disappears. Such a situation would be untenable,

⁽⁴⁾ We should realize, of course, that willingness and ability must go hand in hand to achieve such a result.

were there no opportunity for *ritually* claiming and acknowledging practical skills on construction sites.

Ritually Claimed and Acknowledged Skills

Some of the behavioral patterns which we described above, and which potentially might become identified as empirical expressions of practical skills, often have a questionable legitimacy - even legality. Short-cuts and other informal practices may only be possible when they can be carried out unobtrusively. At best, they are tacitly accepted by the site engineer. But behavior of questionable legitimacy does not constitute proper material for ritual celebration of skills. With some modifications, the situations which call for the application of practical skills may take its place.

It is a consistent pattern on construction sites that construction workers complain about the conditions under which they work. They complain about the tight production schedule, about the availability of tools and equipment (especially cranes), about the quality of materials, about the quality of the planning and task descriptions, about other gangs working on the site, etc. The communication of such discontent probably characterizes the daily interaction between the site engineer and the workers, more than any other single item does.

Such complaints might in many

cases imply a claim on additional remuneration - and when the site engineer does not contest the validity of the complaints, he often grants such additional remuneration. Thus, at first glance nothing seems ritual about the complaining: it seems to be a natural part of the on-going bargaining over reciprocation.

However, remember that we demonstrated above that wages are loosely coupled to actual production - that the average hourly wage consistently ends up being very close to the pre-established, expected one! Therefore, the complaints hold no prospect of leading to higher wages. They may only help the site engineer justify his tinkering with the official accounts.

We believe that the attempt to assess the conditions for task accomplishment serves a different purpose. Such assessments provide a backdrop on which the actual accomplishments of the gang may be appreciated and socially sanctioned. E.g., if the gang members (almost) accomplish their designated tasks, even when so many things worked against them, they must be skillful. Since practical skills cannot be addressed openly, by default their *technical skills* (and their effort) receive social recognition through such rituals - even if practical skills account for the achievements.

By symbolically acknowledging the fact that the gang succeeded, in spite the conditions, and in spite the subsequent need to tinker with the official accounts, the site engineer at the same time communicates to the gang that

they earned their keep - that they deserved the hourly wage which he was bound (through informal agreements) to pay them. Such social sanctions may seem oddly out of frame in the light of the harsh physical and economic realities on construction sites. However, they do carry weight in the extremely sensitive, informal structure of site organizations. (Kreiner, 1976)

In the daily interaction on the site the site engineer will often contest the gang's claims that a certain situation is inclement. Since such claims do not carry (immediate) economic implications, it might be tempting to give them a proforma acknowledgement. However, that would grant the gang too easy excuses for not accomplishing their designated tasks - and would consequently not motivate their application of functionally relevant, practical skills. Furthermore, in many cases the celebration of the skills of the gang would take place at the expense of the site engineer's reputation. His own performance (e.g. in terms of planning and monitoring of the flow of materials and equipment) creates important boundary conditions for the work of the gang - and is therefore a likely source for contingencies. He would ritually destroy his own claim on being a skillful site engineer by too readily granting the claims of the gang. As might be expected, the weather, the architects and consulting engineers, the clients, the suppliers and even the mother-company often play the role of the scape-

goat in the ritual affirmation of skills on construction sites.

Discussion

Our analysis has shown that even in the case of manual workers on construction sites, wages are not a reliable expression of actual achievement. From the perspective of the «achievement principle», wages and skills have a *symbolic*, not an indexical relationship. The reputationally established skills create a platform for claims on organizational resources. We have shown that those (technical) skills around which reputations are created may not be the functionally most relevant ones for actual achievement. In this sense, such skills may be seen as organizational liabilities.

The functionally relevant, practical skills (which are the true organizational assets) cannot be given explicit empirical expression in spite of the fact that they may account for manifest achievements. Therefore, they are symbolically neglected.

It follows that in a certain sense organizations ritually celebrate their liabilities and ignore their assets.

As we mentioned above, site organizations are not ordinary organizations, for example in the sense that:

- they have explicit goals which can easily be operationalized into clearly defined tasks;
- they are task-continuous status organizations;

- they grant the workers much initiatory influence on the work process.

When it comes to more ordinary organizations, the links between skills and task performance, and between task performance and organizational goal achievement, become weakened. For example, types of skills become recruited, and types of tasks become executed, because they are institutionally prescribed, rather than functionally relevant (in a narrow sense). (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) The rationalization of goal achievement in terms of individual task performance and individual skills becomes proportionally dubious.

Whatever the empirical expression, individuals succeed differently in organizations. Organizations develop criteria for the assessment of success, when such success is not self-evident. When skills, task performance and goal achievement are loosely coupled, such criteria are likely arbitrary. However, to the extent that success is measured on such criteria, they will help determine individual pay, promotion and status. And success will conventionally be rationalized in terms of individual abilities, i.e., legitimate (predominantly technical) skills. But if the criteria are arbitrary, variations in success will less likely reflect variations in formal, technical capabilities. More likely, people will come to look relatively more successful if they develop skills in «making out» (Burawoy, 1979), in «loophole engineering», in «bureaucratic politics», etc. - in short,

«practical skills» in the sense used in this paper. The more we move in the direction of task-discontinuous status organizations, with diffuse goals and with little initiatory influence on the work process, the less functionally relevant may the formal, technical skills indeed become.

Thus, ordinary organizations may certainly share the paradox with the site organization: that they symbolically celebrate the kinds of skills which constitute organizational liabilities, while they ignore the skills which are more easily seen as assets - at least according to their own criteria.

The Everyday professional: Skill in the symbolic Management of occupational Kinship

BOB GRAFTON-SMALL and STEVE LINSTEAD

Skill and Professions

The concept of a 'skill' is important for the establishment of the identity of a 'profession'. *Firstly*, professions often claim that they have special competence based on esoteric knowledge which guarantees the *quality* of their work. (Boreham 1983). The 'skill' may be in the ability to acquire such knowledge, or to interpret it, in the technical translation of it into a form of work activity, or in the sense of a 'visualisation' of alternatives and possibilities. There is often no differentiation between the 'skill' born of the ability to apply this knowledge and the condition of merely possessing it. *Secondly*, there is the 'skill' of accomplishing professional identity, managing organisational and public relationships in the development, utilisation, organisation and control of professional activity (Friedson 1970). This may often involve claims of the first kind, and has often been most effective, as most theoretical accounts have taken special knowledge and skill as one of the primary characteristics of professional occupations. (Boreham 1983).

There has been little work which has sought to distinguish between the effectiveness of *claims* of knowledge

for building public or organisational support and the effectiveness of that knowledge for everyday professional *practice*. Friedson (1970) argues that professional ideologies are imperialistic in claiming more for professional knowledge and skill than can be justified through an examination of professional practice. Indeed what is 'successful' is subject to definition and negotiation: it could be argued that professionals often use 'skill' and 'success' to be mutually defining and supportive.

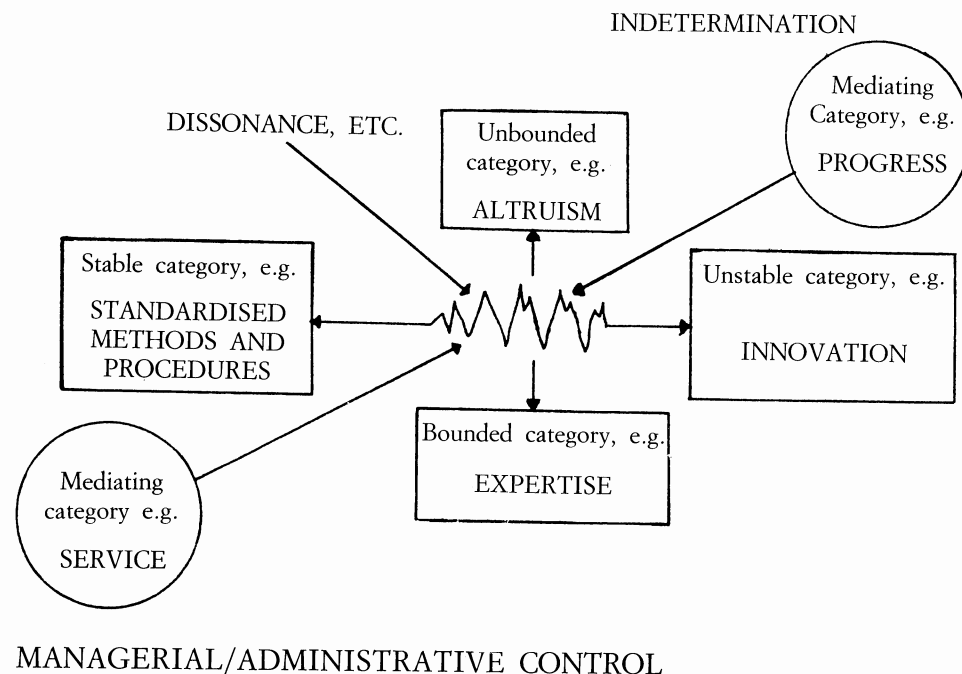
Early 'trait' and 'functionalist' theories of power tended to take on trust that professions had as their main attributes «high levels of skill based on theoretical knowledge, altruistic service and adherence to a code of conduct maintaining integrity». (Saks 1983). These theories tended to stress the abstract knowledge basis of professions, their collectivity orientation, the need for prolonged training, and autonomy in practice, so legitimating professions without scrutiny of their activities. Hughes (1975) and Becker (1962) unmasked the pretensions of many professionals, exposing the divergence of rhetoric from practice. Their studies were predominantly individualistic, and failed to explore the institutional features of professions;

they also neglected the wider issues of power, and historical social processes. Where power surfaced as an issue, it was a zero-sum concept deriving entirely from social relations within organisations. Gowler and Parry (1979) and Gowler and Legge (1980) have developed a model of the 'cruciform effect' (Figure 1) in professional practice which elaborates this divergence between practice and principle, expediency and morality, whilst introducing a more sophisticated conception of power. Professionals seek to maintain the *mask* of authority whilst nevertheless *needing* to persuade others and themselves of the *legitimacy* of

their claims to scarce resources and authority.

Gowler and Parry (1979) are primarily concerned with identifying individual strategies for coping with the stresses of *altruism* (self-denying, valid in its own terms, holistic) and *expertise* (forms of specialisation, self-affirming, validated by external criteria, atomistic), *routine procedures* (stable, precedented, low risk, high control) and *innovation* (unstable, high risk, low control) and *innovation* (unstable, high risk, low control). However, Boreham (1983) identifies a tension in organisations which corresponds to a pull between the qua-

Figure 1: *The Cruciform Effect*



drant we have labelled 'managerial/administrative control' and that of 'indetermination'. That is to say, the more categorical and specific a profession's expertise, the more it is likely to be routinised and thus subjected to managerial or administrative control within the organisation; the more its skills can be said to escape rules or codification, as a result of experience or socialisation of attitudes and values, and are subject to the 'virtualities' of the professionals, the more indeterminate they will be and the more autonomy will be ceded to the profession. (Jamous and Pelloille 1979). Thus the crucial importance of the symbolisation of skill to the social and organisational power of the profession.

'The power of professional elites resides in their monopolization of the approved symbols of legitimation and these are precisely the symbols which are least accessible to ... elements whose claims are centrally located in the area bounded by cognitive reactivity and technicality' (Boreham 1983: 700).

Kinship Relations

Professionals, and aspiring professionals, participate in a constant process of the symbolic legitimation of their position. This they accomplish by skilled performances and skilled representations of those performances: their status depends not solely on a body of esoteric knowledge, but also on their ability to justify and render that knowledge both important

and efficacious. Thus in the process of defending that knowledge they also constitute it: in rhetoric they establish grounds for the recognition of new knowledge. This 'stock of knowledge' is thus not given once-and-for-all and neither is it impermeable to lay influence - it is reconstituted by professionals as they endeavour daily to establish their social and organisational position.

In this process it might be expected that congeries or sub-groups of professionals might have different aims and goals, and differential success in achieving them. It may well be that some pattern of hegemonic pre-eminence may emerge amongst them. But this is the result of a process of negotiation and interaction - to talk of 'professional status hierarchies' produced as the result of the collision of underlying variables is to neglect the importance of the symbolic creativity of professionals.

We consider that, as participants in and consumers of a fluctuating but particular stock of knowledge, professionals are an occupational kinship group. Indeed, organisations may be fruitfully considered to be shaped, at least in part, by the negotiations of such kinship groups, and kinship relations may be seen to be at the symbolic heart of both the rational/technical and the commercial/economic systems of organisational activity. An extension of this argument may be seen in Eco's (1876) assertion that kinship relations form the primary nucleus of institutionalised social rela-

tions. However, as Eco (Op. Cit.) also observes, there are parallels between kinship relations, the economic exchange of goods and those objects which transform the relationship between man and nature in that all three of these phenomena are commonly regarded as being culturally significant but not as means of communication.

Culture and Professionals

Whilst not necessarily seeking a semiotic interpretation of these symbolic cultural phenomena, we nevertheless affirm the importance of these evocations as means by which professionals may intervene in institutionalised on 'customary relations' (Golding and Linstead 1984) and so maintain the status, authority and privilege of their kinship groups. Our paper is accordingly intended as an examination of these kinship groups and the symbolic evocations which participate in 'the economic exchange of goods' and 'the production and employment of objects used for transforming the relationship between man and nature'.

Our data come from interviews with marketing managers (Grafton-Small 1985) and other professionals, notably doctors of medicine. Our analysis is also informed by our work on the processes by which consultants in personnel work establish their credibility (Linstead 1983, 1984). Our acceptance of social negotiation as an influence upon the constitution of pro-

fessional kinship groups does not, however, confine us within the limits of symbolic interactionism (Saks 1983). We, like Giddens (1979), acknowledge the importance of social structure and consider the 'creation and movement of goods' to be an unavoidable element in any understanding of professionals and professionalism. Our focus is accordingly upon the ways in which these kinship groups and their establishment affect the problematic relationship between individual perceptions and an everyday reality based on mass consumption, mass production and mass employment.

This understanding is vital to our analysis for we believe the boundaries between lay and professional kinship groups to be the product of continual negotiation in these terms and therefore socially permeable. Our argument stems from suggestions of 'nascent professionalism' (Walker 1976) amongst personnel and marketing managers and, more significantly, the importance of language and symbolic usage to this process of elevation.

A body of technique is accordingly defined as having assumed value to both laity and professionals and some measure of trust or acceptance conceded whereby the exclusivity of a profession may be maintained. The resultant position of autonomy, authority or self-discipline then allows professionals to gain acceptance for what is an essentially minority perspective and thereby engineer defensible margins in terms of the general background of social power relations.

The concomitant difficulties, of establishing legitimacy, discipline and the criteria for group membership, are examined at a branch of a professional Institute where language is found to be an important and persuasive means of accounting for both past and future behaviour. However, as action or performance itself is equally effective in evoking these accounts, or models on which they can be based, a similar importance attends the processes of establishing of credibility and the production of acceptable results. The following case in point comes from one doctor talking about another and neatly underscores the way in which kinship groups use symbolic phenomena to reinforce their right to exclusive participation in the life of their organisation or community.

Off the Road

Late one night, on a motorway in the South of England, a Luton bodied Transit van suffered a puncture in one of the rear wheels. The driver, who was travelling in the outside lane, decided not to risk the drive to the hard shoulder but pulled up on to the central reservation instead. Here he began to examine the four rear wheels with the hope of swapping the damaged one for the spare tyre. He had just removed the latter from the van when a Mercedes Benz saloon came round the corner at enormous speed and buried itself in the back of his vehicle. The police and the fire

brigade were called and so, in time, was the doctor on night duty at a nearby hospital.

The driver of the Mercedes was dead and the police needed a death certificate before they could have the body cut out of the wreck. The doctor arrived and was told that the Mercedes must have been travelling at more than 110 miles an hour (175 kph) as the Transit had been pushed fifty yards up the road by the impact. The van had been hidden by the darkness and the corner, which the Mercedes driver, himself an ex-policeman, had cut, obviously believing the road to be clear. The eighteen inch (45 cm.) skid marks showed how little time there had been for braking. The nature of the collision can be guessed at from the doctor's recollection that he pronounced the Mercedes's driver dead after putting his hand through a hole in the chest cavity and feeling the motionless heart itself.

As he wrote the death certificate the doctor noticed that two policemen had retrieved the driver's thermos flask and open sandwich box from the front seat of the Mercedes. 'Christ!' said one 'I'd have done myself in if my missus put broken glass in my sarnies!' A cadet stumbled into the darkness as did the doctor who had to be on duty for the rest of the night. As he passed the crumpled Mercedes he noticed its registration plates and thought 'Last year's registration, eh? I wonder...' He walked back to the wreck and looked through the hole

that had once been the front seat passenger door. A huge gash in the dashboard showed where the Blaupunkt stereo cassette player and radio had been. The firemen had made their appraisal of the situation.

Three inter-related kinship groups were present at the scene of the accident; the police, the fire brigade and a representative doctor. Each of these practitioners works within a strict and widely enforced code of behaviour whilst recognising the others as a necessary part of the emergency services. As such they are responsible for protecting the public from the sort of unpleasantness which comes with incidents like the destruction of the Mercedes. An important and remarkable part of this cleansing is the indulgence, by each group, in some form of defilement which nevertheless leaves them as protectors of the public good.

The police took a sandwich filled with potentially lethal windscreen shard from the dead man's last meal and used it as a means of initiating one of their cadets into the gruesome matter of road traffic accidents. The doctor violated the corpse itself by an unnecessary handling of the once vital organs, an act which the fire brigade matched, in symbolic terms, by looting the radio cassette player from the dead man's car. These denials of the deceased's previous existence can also be seen in the deliberate way in which everyone was made aware of his prematurely abandoned career in the police force; he used to be like us but now he's gone – excluded from

the kinship group and then from life itself.

Purity and Pollution

It is important to note that in the above example each group committed a symbolic act which would have been gross, or criminal, had a member of the laity attempted to do it. Not only does their special position enable them to do such things with impunity, but the doing of it enhances their special charisma, and reinforces their position. Abbott (1981) following Shils (1965) argues that professional status stems from 'effective contact with the disorderly', in the eyes of the laity at least. Professionals can confront disorder, the ambiguous, the problematic, the dangerous, with a system that enables them to control it, or order it. They can render the unintelligible intelligible and in doing so acquire the charisma of the disordered, with all its power and potential for change. As Douglas (1970) argues, actions and phenomena which are outside the categories of given cultural systems are considered 'impure', or even taboo. Ambiguity, indefiniteness or amorphousness may bring together those things which the system requires separate. The professional's stature grows from this ability to deal with and render harmless those exceptions and impurities which threaten the cohesion and coherence of the symbolic and moral social order.

Abbot's (1981) analysis is broadly

sound in so far as professional skill is seen to allow efficacious and undefiling contact with the impure on behalf of society. But he argues that status *within* professions depends on the reverse, i.e. lack of contact with the defiling or professionally impure. He argues that high status professionals deal only with problems that are defined or referred by lower status professionals, who have regular contact with the defiling laity. This is a result of this implicit separation of the cultural system of the professional from that wider society, but this cannot be so. Professionals exercise their skill, in part if not in total altruism, on behalf of society at large. If not, they would be unrespected. A professional, though, is also a layman when viewed from the perspective of other professions – a lawyer is a doctor's patient, a marketing manager is also a consumer. Thus, the principle of actual or potentially effective contact with the disorderly must be sustained. The power of professionals who are more highly regarded, in so far as it relates to status, influences it in two ways. *First*, they must have either actual or potential power to intervene, directly or through agency, in 'impure' situations on behalf of wider society which perplex *even* other professionals. *Second*, recognising that professions do have kinship systems which diverge from those of the laity, they must be able to intervene to render *professionally impure problems* (those issues which are disorderly or threatening to the 'professional' sy-

stem) orderly on behalf of fellow professionals.

Thus, they are analogous to the priest whose greater faith enables him to withstand more temptation. Being more conceptually and symbolically 'pure' in the professional sense, they can deal with more strenuous problems. Such great power is normally used sparingly and held in reserve, which may account for the professional 'regression' which Abbot (1981) identifies.

The boundaries between professionals and laity are, therefore, permeable, and require active management for 'slippage' of professional usage occurs constantly. Purity is not bestowed but must be achieved in action and justified through rhetorics of action. In this way professional groups can exert influence as an *authoritative* body which may be disproportionate to their democratic influence as a minority. The display of 'professional skill' which is thus crucial to the establishment of such authority and its attendant privileges is often problematic. In an emergent profession such as marketing, it is not always clear who is practising legitimately and who is the charlatan.

Through the Looking-Glass

A Sales Manager for a firm supplying Double Glazing and Cavity Wall Insulation spoke quite unabashedly.

'One of your squad does a street or two with the old market research

touch. Knock, knock, foot in the door. Are you interested in fuel economy, madam? Oh yes, and what conservation measures have you thought of? And you have central heating? Gas fired? Thank you madam. Then you follow up the probables and do the business'.

Several strains may be derived from this fairly readily. There is a clear understanding that 'Market Research' is preferable to door-to-door selling because it can be made to appear more respectable to prospective employees and is consequently much easier to recruit for. Market Research is also more acceptable in that it is less evocative of socially undesirable stereotypes amongst unwitting potential customers. It was made plain that in the 'Cavity Wall and Glazing game' marketing was only useful in so far as it offered direct aids to selling, short term benefits being at a premium.

In complete contrast to the discretion which might normally be expected of a professional, there was a brash confidence about the insulation seller's remarks which implied that he was not at all concerned that relating this might have any adverse effect. Quite the contrary, for it was a matter of pride that he had such a wide repertoire of trading techniques. He also expiated the norms amongst his group of salesmen.

'You need housing estates for your standard size double glazing. This gives you your sales target 'cos they're easy to sell. They're slow, see, especially when you get 'em at home in the evenings when they're tired. But

your real money you make on these old houses. All the windows are odd sizes and have to be made up special. You tell 'em about your «craftsmen» who are goin' to do a grand job and remind 'em of what a sensible idea it is in the long run and how much the value of their property will appreciate'.

This observation was heavily laced with irony as one of the 'craftsmen' was indicated at work in the yard outside. No doubt the aluminium window frames were knocked about before he loaded them on to the lorry. Otherwise, our hero's approach, with his hand-picked squad of fast talkers, seem based on the assumption that any 'real marketing', in so far as it might need doing, would be done by the first firm into the market. After this it becomes a matter of selling on whatever basis will keep the turnover up. The manager who talked to us said that he was 'in marketing' because he had worked out this argument which was all his firm needed. The company had ten different subsidiaries all competing with each other despite the fact that the windows and doors they installed came from the same factory. Similarly the foam for the cavity wall insulation was a result of several agencies for the same product.

Wallys, Blaggers and Sharks

The sales representatives were four to a car, the most successful in each week getting the car for the weekend. The bonus payments, for exceeding

sales targets, were similarly arranged. Each representative would collect an amount derived from the average weekly sales for his car. Anyone who might, if allowed to do so, choose to live on the basic salary would be under continuous pressure from those who sought higher earnings. Representatives were thus exposed to a series of frustrations which were seldom lessened by transfers from one car to another. If a quartet should come to be comprised of the ambitions or simply ambitions there would be a great deal of in-fighting to protect prospects from each other and some measure of bitterness resulting from having to walk home on Friday after sales figures which had once meant a car for the weekend. These 'prima donna' squads were generally short-lived and not particularly popular amongst the fitters because of the extra work they caused.

Rarer, and much less popular with the management, was the alternative where three or four 'wallys' shared a car. Despite their communal disregard for high sales figures these representatives were nevertheless enormously active during good weather. They would do business at any number of Northern seaside resorts or beauty spots. However, given the distances and the frequently small profits involved, these jobs were seen as being more trouble than they were worth. 'Wallys' were also prone to taking time off once they had realised their sales targets rather than earn bonuses. In the words of the Sales Manager:

'the only cure for a bunch of "Wallys" is a real shark. Preferably two. Wallys get so agitated they either work or piss off. But you've always got to keep on at 'em if they stay. Trouble is you need *some* Wallys to stop the place going to pieces.'⁽¹⁾

In essence, the entire structure of this company embodies the intention

⁽¹⁾ 'Blaggers', 'Wallys' and 'Sharks'.

These are all categories of sales representatives drawn from the sales force of a Double Glazing and Cavity Wall Insulation business. According to two of the fitters who have to install the goods sold by these travellers the descriptions were intended as no more than a joke but proved popular and stuck. Perhaps the least unknown in the representative sample is the sobriquet 'blagger'. A 'blagger' is a commercial traveller, agent or representative who makes a practice of inflated, misleading 'patter' when promoting distinctly ordinary merchandise. 'Blaggers' also leave themselves a loophole so that when retailers become angry over stock which isn't selling the blagger can blame the retailer and seem justified, in his own eyes at least.

'Wallys' are also known as 'wombles'. They do not care for great amounts of work - nor are they motivated by greed, avarice or bonus schemes. However, these gentle creatures can generally be relied upon to complete their sales quotas. They will then take time off in lieu of attempts at earning bonuses. They are pleasant and harmless, having only one natural enemy.

'Wallys' and 'Sharks' do not get on at all. The latter work long hard hours, are jealous of their sales information and prospects, and enjoy earning lots of money. There is also a tendency for 'Sharks' to be short-tempered and avoided, especially when out in numbers, two or three for example. 'Sharks' have differing views over what is the most important part of a salesman's job and tend not to join professional bodies. They do however appear to enjoy the 'camaraderie' of the road more than most.

The structure of this firm is such that whilst the majority of representatives fall into none of these categories their organisational lines are at the mercy of this triad.

to sell its products as hard as possible. There is also a strong case for arguing that marketing managers who aspire to 'professional' status are being countered by such organisations. Similarly, by bastardising one of the few publicly accepted signs of specialist knowledge, these salesmen are rapidly lessening the value of that practice as a form of competence worthy of lay respect.

A Country Member?

It is thus important for professionals to arrange or engineer meetings of the various congeries within their ranks in order to affirm their commonality, and good practice, and to distinguish themselves from the ungodly. They must counter the influence of those who fail to cultivate lay respect, and who exploit both the laity and other respectable professionals in doing so. In an attempt to garner some professional accounts of the acceptable constitution of the discipline of marketing, we attended a meeting of the local branch of the Institute of Marketing, where we encountered some slight problems. However, we first settled comfortably to hear the guest speaker.

The latter was an extremely high ranking manager from one of Britain's nationalised industries. He prefaced his address with the question

'There are no reporters in the audience? Good.'

The phrasing and tone of this re-

quest seemed calculated to ensure that any reporters who were on hand would say nothing and pay attention.

The speaker then delivered a paean to empire building and power seeking at its most ruthless. Particularly popular with the assembled rank and file was the detailed demolition of a subcontractor who proved intractable, initially. The applause was sustained and genuinely enthusiastic. It was as if the speaker had described communal frustrations in a way which would help Institute members surmount the difficulties of their individual organisations. The Branch Committee were much more nervous about the whole affair. They seemed particularly wary of the embarrassment which would result from the speaker being quoted in public, especially by a reporter. An alternative line of conversation was attempted.

'The speaker seemed very popular. Was he chosen because of his management style? His industry seems to be under a lot of pressure at the moment.' 'Ah, no. These addresses are an opportunity for the visitor to speak in personal terms about some aspects or items of individual interest. Normally one might hope for a little more, shall we say, discretion'.

As the evening wore on it became apparent that the officials of this branch took Marketing very seriously. They used phrases and concepts which we recognised from our vocational training as part of contemporary theories of Marketing. Encouraged by earlier anxieties over reputation and members' conduct, we took this to

indicate the negotiation of a body of knowledge that might be considered the exclusive vocabulary of marketing managers and asked for some assistance with our research. The initial response was one of interest and pleasure. The officials were pleased to talk about their jobs but would not consider anything beyond that.

Eventually the story emerged. Some weeks prior to our invitation a brace of salesmen had joined the Institute. They managed to obtain a copy of the official membership lists for the district. Equipped with the job titles, names and addresses and similar information concerning members the duo then sold these records to a series of insurance companies and related concerns. All the purchasers do business by speculative mail-shot. These unsolicited letters, competitions and offers are intended to have an effect not unlike that of door to door salesmen. This sales technique depends on the maintenance of large up-to-date collections of addresses. Professional bodies and societies, such as angling clubs or bridge groups, are of particular commercial interest because they maintain lists of subscribers. Information from these sources tends to be specific, accurate and recently compiled. Advertisers who buy such data feel their subsequent postal appeals are therefore less likely to go to the uninterested or the penurious. As these lists get older they are resold for lessening amounts. There is a similar decline in the likelihood of any of the later deliveries reaching

either suitable or desirable customers. All of this is not to say those who receive what is often known as 'junk mail' are not annoyed or inconvenienced.

Whilst no doubt embarrassing, these did not seem to be sufficient grounds for the Committee's obvious misgivings. The most unforgivable aspect of the whole affair appeared to be the sense of betrayal felt by branch officials. Supposedly legitimate candidates had been admitted, by them, after a selection procedure intended to protect the Institute's standards. These rogue members, if such they were, had then found branch notions of adequate office practice equally permeable.

Apart from the implicit criticism of an Institute being unable to manage its internal affairs there would seem to be a more serious side to this. If members of the Institute of Marketing actively aspire to professional status then they must have access to a means of disciplining deviant practitioners. The two adventurers, who demonstrated undeniable ability in their coup, were expunged from the Institute membership. However, there is nothing approaching a guarantee to suggest this 'striking off' would jeopardise the further profitable use of those skills. The Institute therefore appears to recruit so few marketing managers that there is no need for those who are not enrolled to do so as a necessary adjunct to their careers.

This does not mean that marketing managers are not involved in a renego-

tiation of current understandings of 'professionalism'. The existence of the Institute and the concerns of its branch officials may be taken to offer a degree of support for Walker's (1976) description of marketing as a nascent profession. However, given the Institute's apparent inability to differentiate between suitable members and supposedly deviant practitioners it seems likely that other parties to a negotiation of 'professional status' would be similarly confused. In terms of an understanding of marketing managers the emphasis would therefore seem to lie with those who are *not* members of the Institute.

Acceptable Practice/Practical Acceptance

The visit to the Institute of Marketing was originally undertaken with the intention of collecting members' accounts of acceptable practice. Pahl and Winkler (1974) explain that 'professionalism is competence under any circumstances'. Whilst accepting that the membership of the Institute would be unlikely to provide an exclusive 'professional' definition it was hoped that some points of interest or measure of consensus might emerge. Features such as these would then form the basis of conversations with marketing managers who were not in the Institute. Silverman (1975) observes that,

'..... (socially organised practice) guarantees the orderly character of the world as members understand it.'

Thus members of the Institute are, by virtue of their conference, bound to have an exclusive outlook. Similarly, other marketing managers are unavoidably different because of their singularity. However, the assumption of embryonic professionalism could be taken to encourage expectations of a considerable degree of similarity between these points of view. If an instance of behaviour is universally agreed to have been 'professional' then certain concessions are granted to those responsible, the minority who become 'professionals' as a result of the interaction. Should subsequent activity by this minority also reflect contemporary expectations or understandings of 'professionalism' then the 'professionals' accrue status, influence and authority accordingly. However, these negotiations of respective social placings include a common sense understanding of context as a determinant of behaviour. Thus the pressures of expectation tend to be greatest when 'professionals' are seen to be in circumstances which demand those talents accepted as part of 'professionalism'.

Moreover, the understanding in question will allow acceptable behaviour by a member of society when certain aspects of a situation are impenetrable. For example, specialist language may not only serve as a defensible perimeter for 'professional' but also, by virtue of its opaqueness, indicate a 'professional' to the lay public.

Johnson (1972) then may be correct in ascribing partiality to the consi-

deration of 'professionals' in situations which involve them as such. However, the social understanding implicit in the recognition of 'professionalism' as a legitimate form of activity concedes certain authority in given situations. If these situations can be seen to warrant 'professional' behaviour then to expect anything else is to outrage both 'common-sense' and 'professional' understanding and so challenge the social order.

Persuasive Accounts

Marketing managers who have aspirations of professional status must, therefore, be seen to behave as professionals. This is not simply a matter of rejecting the laity for it has been established that a successful professional must negotiate the role in terms of contemporary understandings and expectations. It would also appear, given the effects of language, that the discussion of 'professionalism' with marketing managers alters their behaviour as executives, 'professional' or otherwise. McCall and Simmons (1966) argue that such re-negotiations of social understanding are both unavoidable and endless.

'We need confirmation of the way we interpret our identities from other people, but experience teaches us that there is always a discrepancy between our own interpretations, and those of our role partners. The identity we project in interaction is subject to misinterpretation. As a result, the actor is motivated to bridge the gap

between his projected idealized image, and the image that the audience holds.'

In addition, Brittan (1973) argues that certain aspects of an event cannot be rendered explicit because of the nature of language.

'... it is difficult to grasp the phenomenological aspects of interaction without encapsulating it in the language of normative discourse, yet if we fail to consider the undefined aspects of interaction we neglect an important aspect of social experience.'

It was exactly this problem which presented itself during the previously described meeting of the Institute, for the intended collection of members' amounts of 'professional' marketing had clearly resulted in something else. The striking way in which members underscored their embarrassment not only made their stories persuasive rather than simply credible but also demanded that we should present our accounts in a manner which, in part at least, reflected these characteristics.

Given this, the necessarily temporary nature of negotiated understanding, and our concern with 'professional' standards of behaviour in both content and preparation, we may well ask 'How do we know that we are following the rules in the right way?' Silverman (1975) observes that the 'search for all-encompassing rules is endless and never successful' whilst Blum (1975) would appear to agree.

'If to theorise is to employ rules for constructing a sensible and intelligible environment, then theorising descri-

bes the conditions of sensibility and intelligibility for some typical actor (rules and grammar). Such a construction acquires its authority (its reality) from its methodic, public character, and it 'exists' only in so far as it is accomplished.'

By advancing the notion of the 'persuasive account' in this way, Blum is, in essence, suggesting that the recognition of individual circumstances and the renegotiation of social order are necessarily dependent upon viewpoints which are not only partial but acceptably so for they are intended as expansions upon members' common sense understanding and not as replications of an event.

Performance

The argument is, therefore, that professionals establish their identity by producing and reproducing behaviours which are rendered acceptable by their description through a 'persuasive account' which renders them meaningful for all concerned. We have discussed elsewhere (Linstead 1983, 1984) the way in which consultant professionals orientate themselves to the customary symbolic relations of an organisation in order to gain entry, establish credibility and, finally, to produce in the consulting report an icon of successful practice which is also a persuasive account of that practice. Consultants can thus be seen to be justified and credible even when not effective. Interestingly, the ways in which their work is symbolically

presented are not fundamentally dissimilar to the ways in which primitive sorcerers have been observed to work. (Cleverly 1971; Levi-Strauss 1977; Mauss 1972; Linstead 1983, 1984).

Professionals, and consultants as professionals, in espousing techniques common to their kinship groups, are grappling, however unconsciously, with the fundamental problem of ordering a chaotic world, the problem of creating and sustaining knowledge. Once established, these techniques influence the capacity of the group and its members to intervene in the wider social and power relations which constitute the context of everyday life. Professionals depend, however, not on any objective measure of their work but on their capacity to produce performances and accounts which will successfully influence the common sense understandings and customary evocations of the other groups with whom they have relations and social negotiations.

In brief then, we are arguing that professionalism is not simply a matter of the transmission of objectively determined knowledge or the acquisition of rational-technical competence. We feel that professionals are not given to the pursuit and acquisition of some absolute and ontologically distinct body of skills or knowledge because professionalism itself involves neither the attainment of rational-technical competence nor the transmission of any such form of knowledge. Our argument is based, instead, on an understanding of professionalism as a

socially negotiated construct, determined by the ways in which kinship groups of 'professionals' manage the boundaries between themselves and each other, and laymen, on a day-to-day basis.

This work of negotiation and construction, as the symbolic approach shows, must be perpetually sustained and reconstituted. In accomplishing this work, professionals demonstrate the features of a distinctive form of socially deviant group. They achieve their specially deviant status through linguistic and other symbolic performances which create persuasive accounts and establish their credibility, authority and legitimacy. It follows that professionals are actively involved in and dependent upon the social

determination of a group identity through which they can mediate and intervene in the shaping of social structures and public perceptions.

Our final conclusion, we leave in the hands of Eco (1983).

'Excess of loquacity can be a sin, and so can excess of reticence. I didn't mean that it is necessary to conceal the sources of knowledge. On the contrary, this seems to be a great evil. I meant that, since these are arcana from which both good and evil can derive, the learned man has the right and the duty to use an obscure language, comprehensible only to his fellows. The life of learning is difficult, and it is difficult to distinguish good from evil. And often the learned men of our time are only dwarfs on the shoulders of dwarfs.'

Skill in small and medium sized firms in a regional and branch perspective

ELISABETH SUNDIN and ULF WIBERG

Success in the long run requires competence

To begin with we will stress that all competence that is connected with running firms is attached to individuals. Individual persons are the bearers of knowledge and practical attainments that form a competent behaviour. A successful firm can therefore be looked upon as the result of competent action by one or several people within the firm. Competence can be both specific and general. In the first case we mean competence within a special field - often technical specialization. In the latter case we mean competence in a broad sense - management capacity. Competence is not just attached to individuals, but also to environmental factors. The skills that will be developed are often strongly dependent on supporting characteristics and attitudes in the sociocultural local tradition. Sociologists and ethnologists are defining dominant life styles which strongly influence the degree of utilization of potential possibilities for new firms and reorientation of old firms.

The combined competence of the entrepreneur and the employees creates the strategic knowledge and the

business idea of the firm. Sjöstrand (1979) claims that the competence of an organization is more than the sum of the individuals' competence. There are for example routines and systems which are not connected to individuals. However, no competence can be activated without action from individual persons. Management means perpetual choices between different types of strategies. A positive or negative result depends on the competence of the entrepreneur and a few other key persons in the firm. The organization of the firm is often influenced by an interaction between individual competence and sociocultural «playing rules» for business development. On the other hand the formation of the organization of the firm also has an influence on which business ideas will be realized and which kind of knowledge and skill will be developed.

Within the firm the organizational structure determines how existing competence can be used for creating a powerful coordinated competence profile. The chosen development policy or strategy defines competence demands on management and other important assignments. The competence profile includes both general and specific competence.

The complexity and dynamics of the environment

In every decision situation there is uncertainty involved for the entrepreneur. According to research conclusions the factors that cause most uncertainty are the development of technology, the complexity of the environment and the size of the actual firm. All firms, especially small and middle-sized ones are therefore dependent on the complexity and dynamics of the environment.

The two main components mentioned above, technology and environment, vary considerably from branch to branch, but of course also from firm to firm within different subbranches and with different market conditions.

Competence support by external competence network

The discussion above has been focused on the relationships of the firms to the commercial environment. In the Swedish society, but also in other parts of the western world, the interrelations between private firms and the official authorities have developed rapidly after the second world war. What is known as «organization economy» has developed. In the beginning the «organization economy» mostly involved larger enterprises but nowadays also small and middle-sized firms are strongly involved. The demands on the entrepreneur have thus been expanded to handle both the

market and the bureaucratic system. We think those circumstances are the background for discussions about territorial competence and network competence. Brevik & Eriksen (1982) defines territorial competence as insight into local conditions and with network competence contacts with persons on different levels and within different institutions of society. Both the territorial competence and the network competence involve both commercial and public as well as semipublic institutions. The strongest external competence will naturally appear when the territorial competence is coordinated with the network competence.

Spilling (1984) follows the same line of thought. He means that a firm, by its connections to other firms and organizations, can obtain competence previously lacking. The competence that an entrepreneur on another key person in the firm can obtain by acting in an adequate way is by Spilling defined as network competence. The possibilities of building up the external competence network vary from firm to firm. The differences depend both on the management style of the firms and on the environment. Are there firms in the environment which can offer relevant supplementary competence? Geographical nearness is of course not completely necessary but it often makes it easier for small firms with small resources (both time and money) to build up a competence network.

Earlier research conclusions indica-

te that the smaller the firms the fewer the contacts with authorities, especially on the regional and national level. It is however important to note that there are also a large group of entrepreneurs who want to minimize the contacts with the authorities. This we cannot regard as incompetence. It is a conscious choice to avoid the authorities. Those entrepreneurs mean that they can handle the situations better without intervention from the authorities, whose rules and attitudes they experience as insidious and obstructing. On the other hand one can say that they are poorly adapted to the «organization economy» and that they would reach better results if they could use the support systems at different levels of the society in a strategic way.

Competence demands and size of the firm

The competence demands on the entrepreneur of the small firm are not the same as for a large firm. These differences have not earlier been observed so much by researchers. For many organization theorists there seems to have been a lack of interest for small organizations. McGuire (1976) expresses the researchers' lack of interest for entrepreneurs in small firms in the following way: «they are as plain girls and acne-ridden boys at a high school dance - they are present in a large number, but usually unnoticed». Our opinion is that this can be true, with exception of the phase

when the firm is set up, which has interested many researchers within economy and psychology.

Axelsson (1981) also mentions some researchers who have especially analyzed the size factor. The correlation of size and bureaucracy is complicated by the fact that size also varies in correlation with other explaining variables as technological complexity.

Many researchers seem to look upon small firms as embryos for large firms. This is in most cases wrong. Most entrepreneurs of small firms have no intention of expanding the firm. To manage an firm on a «adequate» level demands other insights than those needed for making the firm grow. Also these, not growing firms, can be classified into different development phases in which the demands on the entrepreneur/owner vary.

Entrepreneurs of small firms have still, (on the whole) low levels of education and tend to stress the meaning of technical competence prior to both administrative competence and orientation towards an external competence network as supplementary support. It is particularly within the technical competence that they compete on the market.

The lack of administrative capacity in the firms and the entrepreneurs' low competence in that field have been observed in several research reports. Schjelderup (1980) comes to the conclusion that the entrepreneurs who are aware of this try to seek market niches where the administrative demands are low. In analogy with

this Spilling (1984) means that the specialization of the firm is nothing but a type of competence adaptation. He also points out that the small firms often are obviously problem oriented. The result of this is that these entrepreneurs do not understand that they should demand certain types of competence, if these services are not immediately accessible. The conclusion of this is that a well functioning local environment is of great importance.

General regional differences

A dominating geographical pattern is that regions in the periphery are lagging behind central regions as far as technical level and growth rate within industry are concerned. This is strongly connected with uneven conditions for financing and recruiting competent people to development projects. It can also be explained by observations that entrepreneurs in peripheral regions are not so oriented towards innovations as entrepreneurs in central regions. This is connected with low competence, lack of local ideals and partners to co-operate with and lack of contacts to centres for R & D (see for example Thwaites et al, 1981, Spilling 1984).

Woodbased industry and electronics industry - some comparisons

Different branches are in different phases of development. The woodba-

sed industry is an example of a traditional industry with a strong connection to the skill of craftsmanship, with roots far back in Swedish history. This branch can definitely be regarded as a mature branch even in peripheral parts of the country with little industrial tradition. Large parts of northern Sweden are dominated by wood-based firms. The fields of application and the demand has been rather stable throughout its history. The branch is however in a phase of structural transformation. The reduced demand for new houses has influenced many firms very negatively. At the same time however the demand for repairs and rebuilding has increased in a corresponding proportion.

The electronics industry on the other hand has a short history and obtains most of its development prerequisites from abroad. The development within the branch is very fast and turbulent with many kinds of innovations. The limits for technology and its applications seem still to be far from reached. A new branch like this is characterized by a rapid renewal of the stock of firms through new establishments, failures, purchases and fusions.

Within an industry branch it is usually possible to divide the firms into three categories: obsolete, reproductive and progressive. In a regional perspective however there can be great divergences from the dominating branch pattern in the country as a whole.

The official statistics is not the best

tool for illustrating the competence profiles of different branches. It is however possible to make some interesting observations of differences between woodbased industries and electronics industries. Within the woodbased industry the proportion of white collar workers is around 20%. Such a low proportion of white collar workers will only be found in another branch with old traditions - textile/readymade clothing. Within the electronics industry the proportion of white collar workers is around 40%, which is only surpassed by the graphic industry and the chemical industry. Within the woodbased industry a rather large proportion of the white collar workers are supervisors, while the proportion of engineers is lower than the average for the industry. Within the electronics branch the proportion of engineers on the other hand is higher than average for the industry, while the proportion of office personnel and sales representatives are lo-

wer than the average for the industry (table 1).

The degree of concentration on competence development in different branches can also be estimated by comparison of costs for investments in real capital and investments for obtaining a more skilled or competent staff. Also here there are clearly notable differences between the woodbased industry and the electronics industry. The former branch, of great importance for the northern part of Sweden, has a rather low ambition when it comes to investments in competence development - only a third of the ambition level within the electronics industry, which is underrepresented in the northern part of Sweden.

Branch specific criteria for success in a peripheral region

We have explicitly studied the competence aspects discussed above in the

Table 1. White collar workers in different fields of profession within different branches. August 1981.

Branch	Number of white collar workers	Proportion in the fields of profession				Sum %
		Office, sales %	Engineering %	Supervision %	Other %	
Industry and mines <i>out of that</i>	248000	48	30	18	4	100
Woodbased industry	11000	50	14	31	4	100
Electronics industry	29000	38	49	10	4	100

Source: Statistics Sweden.

periphery of Sweden - the county of Norrbotten. This region is dominated by a small number of large companies within the mining, steel, sawmill and pulp industries. A dominant pattern among these companies is that they are more product oriented than market oriented. The complexity and dynamics of the environment has been and is still to a great extent rather small. The development has however turned towards an increased global competition with increased demands for efficiency and capacity for reorientation. Due to the slowness in organization structures and the spreading of information concerning changed behaviour on management level within the large companies, the regional organizational prototype can be characterized as relatively mechanical with an experience based management behavior - stable or reactive management behaviour (compare Ansoff 1978). This is however an organizational prototype that is not good for new independent smaller firms and for established firms who must meet high and rapid demands for reorientation in different respects, e.g. new products and/or new markets, to increase their economic efficiency and reduce biased and therefore vulnerable dependences upon individual companies. They need to develop an organic decision structure with investigating and partly creative management competence which correspond to the dynamics of the environment.

The long range problem for firms of today is to handle increased uncer-

tainty, use available resources better and to survive. The increased uncertainty concerns the development of technology, changed market conditions and economic-political activities that result in a changed demand for different kinds of products.

Many firms, especially in mature branches and in peripheral regions, either branch firms or subcontractors to one or a few firms or companies, very seldom have a formulated long range strategy. Activities are initiated only in situations when something absolutely must be done, e.g. when subcontracts are cancelled.

The prototype for a successful strategy under extensive uncertainty conditions seems to be (Ansoff 1978, Shtogren 1980, Peters & Waterman 1982):

- short-term planning,
- concentration on *one*, preferably a unique, business idea,
- development of an organic decision structure within the firm that encourages creativity among the employed,
- investments in competence and efforts for a good spirit of co-operation within the firm,
- development of an external competence network in fields where the firm cannot afford to recruit people or where competent people are impossible to recruit locally and/or the competition with other firms is hard,
- stress on tests of business ideas, strategy decisions and attempts to realize ideas that seem realistic.

If we go deeper into this discussion by putting the woodbased industry and the electronics industry in the peripheral Norrbotten region in focus our empirical results show the following differences in success criteria for the two branches.

Within the successful woodbased independent firms stress is put on activities which aim at good profit. More effective production by a more motivated staff and more advanced machinery that gives increased flexibility to meet the customers wishes seem to be the main strategies. At the same time they are striving for maintained or successively increased volume of production. The latter requires actions both to compete with other firms to get more raw material and to find new markets. Skilled workers are a key resource for these firms. As most of the job is routine production it is important to motivate the employees by making obvious the connections between different factors of production which make the final result a positive one for the firm. An important part of the competence profile for those firms is also to use the possibilities within the regional aid system in an effective way - support to investments in buildings, machinery and for expanded labour forces.

The successful entrepreneurs within the electronic industry in Norrbotten have a good technical competence and direct relations to people at R & D centres both in Sweden and abroad, especially in the USA. They have often developed their competen-

ce at another electronics firm in the central parts of Sweden and they have built up the firm in Norrbotten on the basis of a complete business idea and established relations to customers. These entrepreneurs are not especially interested in expanding their firm. Due to their technical background they put stress on market niches they have found through their contacts with customers. Our conclusion is that every firm needs a well developed external network that is oriented both towards new technology and towards different markets. The traditional regional aid is not so well suited for development of that kind. The most serious disadvantage for firms in peripheral regions is the travel costs both for themselves and for (potential) customers who will make personal visits. Instead of regional aid for buildings, machinery and expanded labour force they demand support for product development and marketing. It is also their wish that public authorities make purchases of electronics in such a way that the regional competence within the electronics sector will be developed.

In summarizing we can note the following differences between the two branches concerning the success image of the firms:

Woodbased industry

- High quality products, good capacity for designing products according to customers demand.

- Fulfilled delivery agreements.
- Experienced personnel with good knowledge of the characteristics of wood.
- Modern machinery that makes efficient use of raw material possible.
- Successive increase of production with good liquidity, solidity and rentability - the bigger, the more successful.
- Well established in the local society.
- National and international market orientation by well established contacts with customers or through agents.
- Efficient use of regional policy aid for buildings, and machinery and for expanded labour force.

Electronics industry

- Stress on technical competence.
- National and international contacts with firms and centres for R & D concerning product development and co-operation.
- Well established contacts with customers or market oriented affiliated firms for sales.
- A few key persons with high competence.
- No special interest for increased production, but good liquidity, solidity and rentability that makes it possible to go on with development projects.
- Good bank relations, for instance a banker on the firm board, for good possibilities to borrow money for

development projects and to realize business ideas.

Branch specific symbolic success criteria in a peripheral region

The success criteria presented above are of somewhat an objective character. By this we mean that they are not only expressed by the entrepreneurs themselves, but also by other persons in the local and regional environment of the firms. These criteria are also, more or less, possible to measure. The degree of success a firm has in its environment, both on the market and with contacts with the authorities, depends however on how decision makers in the environment of the firm regard it, its entrepreneur and its future. These evaluations depend both on how the firm actually succeeds compared with other firms in the branch, but also on the position of the firm in the local society. Qualities not only in the single firm, but also in the environment and the attitudes of the interpreters together form the symbolic picture of the firm. This means that to understand the firms position we have to place the objective success criteria in the sociocultural structure of the local environment. We shall not discuss all the criteria mentioned above but just mention those which, in our point of view, are of great symbolic significance.

The criteria connected with the woodbased firms are all according to the recommendations in the text

books. They are also relevant in a region like Norrbotten. By old traditions in the region the woodbased industry has a labour force with well developed competence and also a rather good management competence in the independent firms. The firms we have studied differ however in one important aspect from the local norm, namely size. All the firms we have studied have less than 100 employed. In Norrbotten the big companies are associated with success and safety. This is of great importance, the result being that the studied firms, despite the fact that they are objectively successful in several respects as mentioned above, are almost disregarded both by authorities and ordinary local people.

What about the electronics firms? Are they not small, too? Yes, they are. They are even smaller in average than the woodbased firms but are still looked upon as successful. What do they express that is interpreted as successful managing? Our point of view is that the electronics firms just by being in a new branch in a region with large traditional companies succeed to mediate a global connection. The very active entrepreneurs

are very much «strange birds» where they live. They are rather young, well educated and skilled in languages. They have all worked in other parts of Sweden. They make journeys to other countries in Europe, but also to the USA, in their effort to apply the development in the branch and to lead their firms forwards. In these small societies everyone knows about their journeys which appear exotic and strongly different from what other entrepreneurs of small firms in the society are doing. The symbolic value is created by the character of the region; peripheral position and employment problems dominate the local debate because the unemployment rates are the highest in Sweden. In the Stockholm region hardly no one would notice these entrepreneurs - in Norrbotten they differ strongly from the local norms. This interpretation is confirmed by the fact that the electronics firms, despite their small size, are very much noticed by the authorities. These entrepreneurs can, by an unusual choice of branch and activities that are interpreted as symbolisms for success be looked upon as successful despite their not following the local conventions.



Using Skills for Research Purposes

Analysis of skill has stressed the sense of action in organizational life. Data to legitimize discovery and the spontaneous acknowledgement of skill have been illustrated in this analysis of the symbolic reasons for acquiring skills and of the symbolic positions of skill in working life, in the corporate culture of an organization, in the social negotiation of the legitimacy of the courses of action of an individual organizational actor, of workers and managers within an organization, of entrepreneurs within the environmental socioculture, of professionals and consultants acting individually or through agency. The skills of 'getting by' in the initiating rituals of occupation and career socialization, the skills of discursive symbolization by use of crucial explanatory variables, the skills of exploratory analysis of a course of organizational action and its nature and boundaries, and the skills of experiencing them by reflecting feelingly have been described. The methods and the techniques of acquiring rich data on the topic of skill, of analysing and communicating them have been those of sociological, anthropological and psychological research in the field of organization studies.

The attempt of studies and theories of labour and of organization to understand skill objectively, by providing a rational-technical and functional account of its operations, has been analysed by using data gathered in organizational settings that have been distant in place and in time from the researcher, and in organizational settings that have involved the researcher, such as in the course of introspective, psychoethnographic and speculative studies. Such analysis has thrown light on the issue of the use of skill for research purposes and, thus, of the acquisition of a language in which skill can be adequately dealt with and its richness captured - that is, the acquiring and developing of skills in research that allow the experiential process of action in organization to be grasped, analysed and expressed; and

not only justified in the conventional language of scientific discourse and in organization theory's own frames.

The boundaries and the limits of the language of justification that lend legitimacy and theoretical body to skill as an organizational topic, without succeeding in describing it, have been discussed by means of an analysis of skill whose methods and techniques do not belong specifically to the organizational symbolism approach. The processes of symbolic representation and interpretation of skill have been described in terms of their involvement in a simultaneous process of mythical language and mythical thought. The relevance of acquiring, developing and using proper skills in order to understand and communicate the existential level of action of skill, which is experienced by the organizational actors in their relations with one another, has been featured.

Robert Witkin and Robert Poupart present a method for obtaining qualitatively rich data at an early stage in the operation of the research. This is based on the theoretical distinction between the language of justification and the language of action for research. The purpose of this method is to acquire rich data, and it is also designed as an exploratory instrument in order to begin to formulate some needs and hypotheses for the construction of an investigation which includes a variety of distinct methods instead of having to wait a considerable length of time and having to go through participant observation procedure. To obtain qualitatively rich data in this way, they have rejected ordinary interviewing techniques because this way of framing questions and putting them to participants is an invitation for them to use the language of justification in which they have already been trained.

Although the technique in itself is very simple, and the informant only has to talk through a given experience and re-enact it by using the present tense(s) of the verbs, the present tense does convey justifications. But the process of achieving the action that the informant is also going to shape theoretically, and the training of the subject in using this method are a different issue.

This method and technique of interviewing, by asking for the use of the present tense, requires a development of skills related to the method in both researcher and informant which stresses the sense of researching with people rather on people. The co-operation on the part of the subject, which is generally required whenever the analysis concerns cultural issues such as organization and work life, is reinforced in this process of playing together by the aesthetic mode of symbolizing a course of action, and by the researcher's skill in keeping the process going in the present tense, in participating feelingly in this kind of mental journey, and in providing feed-back to the informant. In other words, expressing trust, setting a scenario, and not asking for information seem to be of great significance for the purpose of using the researcher's special capabilities in gathering rich data at the initial stage of understanding skill.

Running a commentary on imaginatively re-lived events a method for obtaining qualitatively rich data

ROBERT W. WITKIN and ROBERT POUPART

In the present paper we discuss a method for obtaining qualitatively rich data at relatively little cost at an early stage in the research programme. The method can also be developed for more comprehensive in-depth research in social settings. Our account of it here will be illustrated by our own use of it in a pilot study which formed a very small part of a larger project researching front line community 'social work' groups in Quebec, known collectively as the CLSC. The pilot study referred to was concerned with abortion work in a CLSC clinic.

The method replaces the normal interview with one in which the researcher encourages and assists the subject to develop a 'commentary' in the present tense on imaginatively re-lived events that are deemed to be of significance in the life world or work world of the subject. Literally, the subject is asked to imagine that these events are happening *now* and to run a commentary on them so as to make them 'visible' to the researcher.

The idea is based on the simple observation that this is frequently what good story-tellers, poets, orators and comedians do when they want to

intensify the intimate present-centred quality of the events they are communicating. Slipping into the present tense and taking the listener into the heart of the scene, providing him with a ringside seat, is an important communicative device in everyday life, particularly when one seeks to communicate directly the sensuous and affective dimension of lived experience. Such present-centred communication can and does take place, of course, without use of the present tense. However, the use of that tense does tend to heighten the present-centred quality of the discourse and to focus the speaker's attention on the here-and-now aspect of events. It is this compelling focus that we seek to stimulate by requiring the use of the present tense by our subjects in obtaining present-centred utterance from them.

What we mean by present-centred utterance, is utterance in which events are seen in the very process of being occasioned. By an event we mean any occurrence, be it a thought, feeling, action, movement or whatever. When we say that something happened, we abstract the event from its occasioning. When we speak about it happen-

ing now, and we seek through speech to show its happening, we are showing it in the whole context of its being occasioned. There is a certain quality of tension in this occasioning which is made visible.

The most sophisticated exemplar of present-centred communication is to be found in Art. Normally when a subject is invited to reflect on his own actions, it is Science rather than Art which provides the exemplar. The assumption is often made by the subject that he is being called upon to act as a lay scientist and to consider his actions in the context of some objective theory of action. What he says about his actions can be perceived both as an indicator of his knowledge about the objective world and of his adequacy in meeting its demands. From an early age the education and socialisation of young people in our society is dominated by scientific rather than artistic exemplars in discourse. This process extends to the modes of discourse in which the subject reflects on his own actions. It is for this reason that traditional questionnaire and interview methods were thought to be inappropriate, unless used in conjunction with a technique for generating present-centred discourse, when one is seeking to obtain qualitatively rich data.

We have been primarily concerned with the development of this technique as an instrument of research. The use of the technique, however, can have both therapeutic and socialising effects. More will be said about this

other dimension below. Certainly it is the case that similar techniques are used in psycho-therapy. For example, a patient may be asked to re-visit the house of a friend in imagination and to describe everything that he can actually see, smell, taste, touch and so forth.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that such an instrument is capable of playing an important part in programmes of education/training.

We begin with an account of the technique of the 'running commentary' as illustrated by our use of it in the pilot study referred to above. The results of that study are presented elsewhere. We conclude with a brief general discussion concerning the interpretive problem.

Developing the skills of a 'native informant'

In a standard interview, the skill of the interviewee is more or less taken for granted. In the use of the technique of the running commentary (TRC) we make no such presumption concerning skill. The technique comes quite naturally to some but is more difficult for the majority of subjects. To ensure that commentaries have sufficient 'colour' and 'texture', sufficient richness, the subjects require an opportunity to practise the technique and to develop their skills. We divide the stages for developing the technique into three introductory, intermediate and final. The division into dis-

crete stages is somewhat arbitrary and is made primarily for the purpose of exposition.

Introductory Stage

We begin by telling the subject about the technique we are using and explaining the rationale for such a technique in terms of the richness of detail that can be obtained from such descriptions. We illustrate this by giving a demonstration of the use of the technique. The researcher selects a slice of his recent past, for example, «the ten minutes after closing my front door and leaving for work this morning». Precision about time and place is very necessary in the use of this technique, as is the selection of events which have actually occurred. It is preferable, too, in making the demonstration, to use events that are more or less mundane and undramatic; the more ordinary, the better. Having selected an historical sequence, the researcher re-lives it imaginatively, running a commentary on it in the present tense, commenting on whatever occurs to him as he goes through. This is done spontaneously and without rehearsal (which is what the subject is required to do). Naturally, this requires that the researcher has, through prior practice, become skilful himself in this way of describing events. We seek to reinforce through the demonstration, the practice of including everything that occurs to one no matter how trivial, irrele-

vant or boring it appears to be. If it comes to mind it should be part of the commentary. The term 'commentary' is used here with a broad meaning. It includes, as we shall see, not only what is said to show the researcher what is happening, but even involuntary instances of thinking aloud or holding an internal conversation.

Following the demonstration we invite the subject to practice the use of the technique. We select the sequence of events to be re-lived, taking care *not* to select 'encounters' in which the researcher is interested or events which are emotionally difficult or threatening for the subject. The *practising* of the technique should take place with material far removed from that on which the researcher requires the subject to exercise his skill at a later stage.

Even with the account offered by the researcher, and the demonstration of the technique, many subjects begin their accounts using past tenses. Once they have got going, it is necessary for the researcher to bring the subject into the present and prompt the use of the present tense. Prompting of this kind should be used *sparingly* and with *sensitivity*, so as not to interrupt the flow too much, or to undermine confidence. Once the skill has been developed and is being used fluently, with sufficient richness of detail, the need to insist on the present tense can be dropped, *so long as the discourse remains present-centred*.

In the following example, our subject, a woman doctor in an abortion

clinic, runs a commentary on her journey by Metro to the place of the interview. The commentary was in French throughout and has been translated for the illustration provided here. Only two brief excerpts are used. In the first attempt, the account totally lacks present-centred content.

«I got out (of the train). I looked for the exit sign to the escalator. I found it. I got onto the escalator. I arrived at the next level. I looked around again for the exit to the top (street level). There it was, by stairs you have to climb. On arriving at the main hall of the metro, before going through the turnstiles, I looked for the direction to go. Then I caught sight of "Vicky", the clothes shop, and I remembered that I always went past there and I knew that it was in this direction that I must go.»

At this point we interrupted, emphasising the *nowness* of the events. «I am here in the metro...» The subject gathers her thoughts for a moment and begins again.

«I leave the train. I think to myself, there's such a crowd here. My first thought is to look for the exit and I make my way towards it. I get onto the escalator and I'm thinking about someone I saw on the metro a short while ago when I entered the station. I ask myself, "Did she recognise me?" In the end, I didn't speak to her. I wanted to quicken my pace to catch up with her. Our paths crossed but, as she walked more quickly than me, she went on ahead and I remained behind. After some time, I asked myself if I should, perhaps, have tried to catch up with her. I wonder if she recognised me. I always have the impression that

people notice me because I am so tall. I always sense that once they have seen me, they will remember me even if our eyes don't meet - but, I ask myself why, in the end, I did not speak to her. I should have done so. There, I see the sign for access to the top. I climb the stairs. I look around to get my bearings, although it's an environment that is quite familiar to me. Several years ago I took this exit from the metro quite often. I see the clothes shop "Vicky", then I move towards the turnstiles. I glance at the window. I remember that the last time I came, it was to a conference on Sexology here at the University of Quebec, and, on the way out, I stopped at the little clothes shop. There were some winter hats reduced in price. I bought one, a little hat in blue angora wool with a little flower on the side which I found fun.»

In the first attempt there is virtually no use of the present tense and the account is really a bare linear sequence linking statements of the «first this happened then that» type. There is a lack of detail, of contour and texture to the account. In the second attempt, however, the subject is more successful in providing a more present-centred account although her use of a recollective device enables her to escape the present tense restriction to a considerable extent. The second attempt covers the same temporal period as the much shorter first attempt. The linear structure is still visible but it is very much overlaid with the extra detail offered by the subject about her thoughts concerning the woman she saw on the metro; her thoughts about herself; the impression she creates;

the last time she visited the University; the blue angora hat with the little flower on the side, and so forth. In this introductory stage, the subject's account continues with promptings (occasionally) in respect of tense use for some time. What we aim for is not simply more detail in an account, but the picture of events in their being occasioned. It is this, rather than detail which we take to be the *principal* criterion of qualitative richness.

The Intermediate Stage

Once the technique has been more securely set, the researcher can go on to recover material closer to the encounters which are his principal interest, although still preserving some distance; that is, not going to the heart of the matter. In the first of the two excerpts illustrating the intermediate stage, the subject is in her car having decided to cross a certain bridge. Between making that decision and crossing the bridge, she changes her mind about her destination. She was on her way to the abortion clinic but she now decides to visit the CLSC in another part of town. The process is described as follows.

«The Bridge A on the Boulevard B - close to the CLSC. I am going to make a detour in order to present myself at the abortion clinic. Then I have to return after that to the CLSC. Not to mention that I have to return again to the clinic to do the abortions in the afternoon. Then I have meetings in the evening. So I must return

again to the CLSC. Quite frankly, as I take the Bridge A, I am going to content myself with just going to the CLSC, then telephone them (at the clinic) to tell them I am at the CLSC. I am not going to the clinic this morning. I'm going to be there for the abortions this afternoon. But with the gang you are - there's already a doctor and two nurses, I think you are quite capable of managing the two groups ... so I think you are quite capable of organising it yourselves. I mentioned it briefly last week. In any case you won't be put out too much. I am going to be there for the abortions this afternoon. It's guaranteed. Jean and I, we're going to share them, taking turns. I'm going to be there for that - but for the group - I need time to prepare for a meeting in one of the primary schools. I say to myself "Good"! I'll tell them then by telephone - still, it would be kinder to go in person to explain. But at the same time I realise that it's going to be easier to telephone. Perhaps if I am in their den, it's going to be more difficult to extricate myself. It's going to take more time. I shall have to speak to everyone. I shall have to show myself to the girls. I'm going to save some time.»

In this short excerpt from an extended account of her whole journey to work on a particular day, the doctor runs through the reasoning involved in effecting a change of plan whereby she will not attend the abortion clinic in the morning, as she had originally intended, to reassure the women who were due to have abortions in the afternoon. The content appears unexceptional. What is of interest here is that she communicates directly her unease about the decision itself and

how to effect it, her hesitation in securing her decision and something of her relationship to others in the work process, as well as her sense of the excessive demands being made of her. She is now far more fluent with the technique. At one point she leaves the commentary and begins to address herself directly to her absent colleagues.

In the second excerpt from the intermediate stage we approach the central interest of the research in dealing with a meeting of the abortion team. These planning meetings are key encounters in the cultural life of the clinic. In this excerpt, the doctor has just heard at the meeting that a close colleague with whom she has worked for five years has decided to stop carrying out abortions. Her sense of betrayal, of upset and anger, as well as her tense relationship to the abortion work itself, emerges quite clearly at this point. We would, no doubt, be able to discover this tenseness in a conventional interview. Here, however, we see it fully situated and occasioned by a particular event in the context of the total situation of the doctor in respect of abortion work. As it happens, there was much in this excerpt which interested us from the point of view of our study of the abortion clinic. Here, however, we simply use an edited excerpt to illustrate the live contact with the affective dimension in the work process that can be elicited in this way.

«Helen announces officially that she will not do any more abortions from

now on. She is getting off and I react very negatively. I feel like I am being abandoned. I also often think of stopping, but I was never able to do it, and Helen does it and stops. I tell everybody that I accept it but it is obvious that I don't accept it... I am mad. I am disappointed, I am aggressive, and I have a lot of sadness, and it's all these feelings at the same time. I am really upset. I can feel my heart beating ... It confirms that I was working with her side by side without knowing what was going on in her head. We were there physically side by side but that's all ... I feel a lot of resentment, there's all this thing about our fighting together for abortion and a lack of communication, and we did not share all the road she has travelled mentally. It's like a lack of trust and a lack of confidence, and suddenly "bang" she says she is quitting. An abortion is very heavy for me. I want to go into 'mini-aspirations', my own practice, right out of my office.»

Final Stage

In the final stage we brought the subject to a 'critical encounter' in which we were centrally interested. By a 'critical encounter' we mean an encounter which renders the work process most problematical. Not just one which disrupts or frustrates the work process, but one which threatens it at a fundamental level.

In the case of the doctor and nurse in our study, we reasoned that a critical encounter would be the 'advanced' termination. The normal limit observed for abortion in Quebec is three months. We asked our subjects to take us through an abortion which

was very much over the limit. Although they were interviewed independently, without an opportunity to communicate with each other, they both selected the same abortion, indicating that it was either an extremely unusual occurrence for them, or that there was something special about their experiencing of this particular abortion. Both the doctor and the nurse became extremely upset during the course of their commentaries. The doctor elected not to continue at a certain point. The nurse continued until she broke down and wept.

The Doctor

«We are looking down in the sieve because we always look after the abortion what came out in the debris, and then we see. Maybe it's because it's just bigger than usual, we see the limbs distinctly, the head, the eyes of a foetus. Denise who always reacts more strongly because of her personality, she takes my arm, tells me to look, speaking in a very low voice of course because she does not want the patient to hear. Look, take a look at what we can see in there ... she takes my arm and insists with her theatrical accent, and it gets on my nerves ... I am closing off, I am retreating, it's a block. I tell her to move away from me, give me some breathing room. I think it's what I see and also her reaction that disturbs me, it's all exaggerated; it's the remains of a life in a sieve ... it's all flashbacks that I have all the time. I have a lot of them. My daughter got a hamster for her birthday and the thing is pregnant without us being aware of it; a week later there are twelve hamsters in the

cage and the mother decided to eat her youngsters, and I see one and she is gnawing on it, and I immediately think of myself and the abortion, it's like flashbacks all the time ...»

The subject chose not to continue.

The Nurse

«But the job we have to perform is to dig in there as soon as possible to relieve the woman, make sure we have everything, remove the speculum and let her go. And now Julie decides to take a paper towel, part the pieces out and recreate it as though she was drawing it. In other words, put an arm here, a leg there, another arm, the other leg, the head, the limbs, and I am nauseated. Julie is nauseated too; my stomach hurts, my stomach and everywhere, and I remember, but maybe I shouldn't say that. I crossed my legs and pressed them hard against my vulva and it was hurting. We do it quickly so as to get the girl out as soon as possible and right when she was out we fall into each other's arms with a lot of powerlessness, a lot of sadness. I wonder if I feel guilt in all of that because it is all so advanced it just too much. I don't want to relive situations like that. It turns me inside out. It's horrible. I don't feel good. It reaches my own values, mixed values. I am not sure whether they are moral values or religious values because like all Quebecers I was raised in religion, in values for life and I am wondering if I will keep on doing this. I don't think I will be capable of doing it any more. And I am crying and I am very emotionally taken. Julie gets out of the room to a little side rest area. She is looking outside and it is springtime, with flowers, leaves in the trees, growing and I see her crying.»

The subject starts crying and sobbing.

Discussion

Our purpose has been to explore a technique for producing a certain type of reflection, a present-centred reflection, one in which thoughts, feelings, actions and observations are disclosed in the very process of being occasioned. In this type of reflective act, events are seen in their sensuous and sinewy aspect, in their being seen, felt or brought about. We might have asked our subjects questions about what they felt during the abortion and they might have spoken to us about feelings of grief and powerlessness etc. Such judgements and thoughts about feelings, no matter how valuable in the research context, are secondary cognitions, essentially similar to those produced by the researcher himself. Our concern in this pilot study was not with the fact that the subjects experienced sadness, but with the 'to-

pology' of the feeling itself in its being occasioned by the elements of the situation.

One point requires clarification, however. The fact that the subject produces a present-centred reflection, imaginatively re-living certain events, does not mean that he reproduces the same consciousness with which he lived these events at some earlier time. We make no claim that we are recovering the very thoughts and feelings which took place when the historical events took place. Such a claim would be quite unjustified. There is a real difference between living a set of events and re-living them in the presence of someone else for whom one is providing a commentary. For one thing the subjects are clearly selective in what they bring to mind, about aspects of the situation they attend to, how they condense time etc. Nevertheless, it is the same person re-living the events, and we believe that the very selectivity and focus of the commentary discloses the structure of fundamental relations in the life world of the subject.

Conclusions

Giving a running commentary on imaginatively re-enacted courses of organizational action leads to the awareness of skill, and if reflected feelingly may symbolize the metaphor of the conclusions of The Symbolics of Skill. The conception of strategy in organization theories may be seen as a process of mental rehearsal of the skill that organizational actors display in order possibly to acquire it and position it in the inter-organizational network and within the organization itself, and the skill that they can imagine as distinguishing their activities from those of other organizations and individuals.

Thus organizational strategy highlights the character of skill as an instrument for the exploration of the nature and the boundaries of the chosen courses of action in an organizational process that enables them to be reflected upon deeply and to be experienced before action is taken by the owners of the organizational process. Skill needs to be imagined in order to exist, and this fantasizing enacts the social negotiation of the generative characteristics of such a skill through the rhetoric of persuasive accounts and through images synthesizing higher orders. Moreover, skill needs to be elaborated in a specific set of organizational performances and in relation to specific audiences.

Skill is an instrument for the exploration and the understanding of organization strategy and of the pragmatic dynamics of organizational life, stressing the sense of performing chosen courses of action and simultaneously conveying the opportunity to communicate as part of itself. In its requirement for being communicated in order to have meaning, skill proves to be an appropriate tool for acquiring knowledge by the organizational actor in context.

In organizational activities, skill may highlight the distinct components that constitute a course of action. This is the case, for instance, of work-life, where being skilled in one's own activity is not grounded in the shared beliefs, purposes and meanings of the activities as such; it does not lead to its awareness, however, unless the skills of communicating skill are acted out.

This analysis of the symbolic representations and interpretations of skill, therefore, demonstrates the relational nature of skill as a tool for understanding organizations. Skill is a trait d'union between feelings and the production of organizational realities, which may appear more fertile ground for organizational metaphor than those metaphors which refer to Newton's clock, or to the organism, or to cultural man.

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