The Material Life of an Office

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Submitted for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This ethnographic account of a London office seeks to make three contributions to the anthropological debate on organisations, bureaucracy and work. First, it takes an as yet untried methodological approach to the study of this field setting by relying on in-depth observation of material culture. Broad classes of office objects are considered in order to reveal unspoken norms, strategies and ritualised responses of the workers concerning their condition. The first ethnographic chapter considers communication mechanisms, contrasting formal decisions against informal gossip to provide a framework for the later discussion of material culture. The discussion then moves to consider the manipulation of objects and pseudo-objects such as paper, dress, space, furnishings and time. Second, this study provides much greater detail on an aspect of office work that has been raised only briefly in the anthropological literature to date, namely the tension between the individual worker as a bureaucrat as opposed to the individual as an idiosyncratic being. This duality is explained through an examination of contrasting roles and identities that the workers adopt in situationally relevant contexts. Finally, it is a study of power, hierarchy and strategy, making the explicit assumption that whilst power and the ability to control the actions of others normally begins with those holding formal positions at the pinnacle of the bureaucratic hierarchy, influence and manipulations also come from the lowest placed and least powerful workers.

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Chapter One: Material strategies

This is a study of power and hierarchy in a suburban London office. Unlike other studies of a similar subject, this draws no generalised conclusions about the place of office work in society, it is not an economic analysis of the service sector, nor a management text, nor even a study of organisational behaviour per se. This is above all else a study of strategy: how individuals seek to impose their beliefs about what is right upon those with whom they interact. The study explores a number of behavioural inconsistencies. The first is that the featured workers are organised in a formal and legitimate bureaucratic power hierarchy, the validity of which all accept, yet which each subverts in their own way as they attempt to exert their own autonomy. The second is that each worker seeks, through various expressive means, to demonstrate their individuality, yet they do this within the context of a coherent team strategy and expend much time and effort producing a joint appearance to the outside world. Methodologically, this is a material culture study. The focus of the analysis is upon objects and how these are used to express social, moral and ideological concepts. The strategies discussed are therefore largely "material strategies". The study is based on four years of intense participant observation. I am an office worker with a professional qualification in my field and I intend to live my working life as a practising bureaucrat. This study is therefore more than anything an exploration of my own working environment, one that I hope will be of interest and relevance to the very large employment sector to which I belong.

Background to the study

In this first section, I set out the basic principles I have adopted in the execution of this study and why it goes beyond what is offered in the general literature of office work. This section is followed by a discussion of the methodology employed in the study. The chapter is completed with an introduction to the actual office setting and introduces the individuals who will populate the remainder of the work.

The context

Over the past century there have been many studies of work settings, including offices, discussed in the social science and popular literature. At the broadest level, these can be broken into two main groups. First, and most prevalent, are writings on work as a general condition of modern life. Examples of this type of analysis are too numerous to name. A number that will be discussed in more detail in this thesis, and in particular in Chapter Two and other related works are: Adair (1983), Albrow (1970), Bernard (1961), Blau (1961), Blau and Scott (1963), Braverman (1974), Douglas (1987), Gouldner (1961), Gutek and Cohen (1992), Handy (1986), Hearn and Parkin (1992), Herzfeld (1992), Hofstede (1994), Kerfoot and Knights (1994), Perrow (1986), Pugh and Hickson (1989), Raelin (1991), Ramsay and Parker (1992), Savage and Witz (1992), and Selznick (1961). The subjects of these works are highly diverse and span the consideration of gender, technology, organisation, and management theory to name but a few topics. What they share is a general perspective on labour and working, discussed in the abstract and based upon the rarely articulated assumption that all work is much the same and that there are a number of overarching cultural and ideological structures and principles such as "paternalism" or "alienation" that guide all work-based behaviours whether in insurance offices or grocery stores. These are to greater or lesser degrees what have been termed "meta theories", described by Harvey (1989) as "large-scale theoretical interpretations purportedly of universal application". This approach, which considers the "big" picture in order to identify overarching similarities across all work settings, has been widely rejected by "post modern" writers (see

Eagleton 1987) who celebrate the "pluralism of the post-modern" (quoted in Harvey op. cit.). Whilst the identification and exploration of heterogeneity has long been a core concern of the social sciences, the point that may be drawn from Eagleton's comment is that in many instances, the general approach is not satisfactory because its power to describe and predict the reality as experienced at the individual level is limited and can only be used as a guide to the coarsest of behaviours. It therefore can only be used to set out basic principles.

There are many instances when social researchers choose to take a finer grained view of their subject. This is the case when the condition of social sub-groups is explored, for instance, categories of persons such as "women", "managers", "shop-floor workers", or representatives of a certain "class". The exploration of specifics in circumstances and situations that are common but not universal adds value to the debate on work because it hones the general argument. Again, there are numerous examples of this genre. Some of those that I will discuss later are: Attfield and Kirkams (1989), Crozier (1964), Kanter (1977), Pringle (1989), Roy (1973), Turkle (1985), Westwood (1984), Willis (1977). What sets these writings apart from the general texts is that they focus on discrete sets of people. The former generally rely upon reviews of existing literature as their primary data sources, whilst this latter genre undertakes primary research and in so doing, reveals some of the detail of interaction only alluded to by the generalists. These writers rely upon various research methods, but in all instances have actually sought the views of individuals participating in work activities. These writings can be sorted into more or less context-sensitive analyses, for instance Crozier and Kanter cover relatively broad-brushed categorisations of types of office workers within large work contexts, such as corporations or government offices, and Willis and Turkle have taken their analyses down to the more intimate level of specific named individuals.

It is perhaps not surprising that the more detailed the scale of the research, the fewer publications are available. Whilst general studies of office work abound, there are only a tiny handful that view office workers in their daily setting. This present study addresses this particular problem. It adds to an area of the literature on work were few studies at the micro-level have been undertaken. It therefore has an important contribution to make to the wider consideration of work. This is a study of 24 individuals in a specific London office. It is what Geertz (1973) has described as "thick description".

Material culture

Even the most "thickly" described ethnographic analyses of work have relied upon interviews, surveys and limited participant observation. The unit of analysis has in almost all instances been the word, either written or spoken. Kanter (1977) for instance used a postal survey, structured interviews, content analysis of performance appraisals, group discussions, participant observation in meetings and perusal of published documents. This varied approach led to a richly textured analysis of gender expectations in a large corporation and also provided tremendous insights into daily interactions of different classes of workers.

Another approach, more closely approximating that which I have adopted here, was taken by Turkle (1985) in her study of computers. Her analysis focused upon the computer as a type of material object that bears a certain type of relation to society. By, for instance, taking computer toys to a children's play group on a daily basis and watching children interacting with these physical objects, she was able to draw conclusions that the children would have been unable to reveal if only asked what computers meant to them. Children lack the intellectual complexity to be able to articulate how they feel they are impacted upon by objects or social forces. Turkle therefore circumvented this difficulty by not relying upon what the children said but by observing what they did in interaction with their material environment. What sets Turkle apart from Kanter therefore, is that she focused upon an object, the computer, to reveal ideological and psychological patterns of behaviour and response. Kanter, as an example of a more traditional social scientist, used observation and interviews of one sort or another to achieve the same end. However, there is a tangible difference in the results due to the methodology chosen.

Turkle's work reveals a level of detail about what computers mean to individuals that finds no parallel in Kanter's study. The consideration of objects allows intangibles such as feelings and moods to be revealed where they may otherwise not be described in words. Objects have an immediate impact upon their consumers and they often represent a psychologically opaque relationship with the world and society that cannot be easily articulated (see Miller 1987: 208; and Miller forthcoming).

There has been a growing interest is social anthropology in recent years in the observation of people's interaction with objects. There is in fact no discipline called "material culture studies" but rather a multi-disciplinary interest in the relationship between people and things (Miller and Tilley 1996). One of the primary aims of the present study is to describe how individual workers feel about themselves and their status as workers. Unlike other studies of offices referred to above and discussed in greater detail below, here I am attempting to take the personally penetrating approach to the extreme. I seek evidence of individual emotional response and expectation of how one's self is received by others in the work setting. Much of what is documented in the following chapters involves non-verbal reactions to formal structured situations. This level of intimacy is difficult to identify when traditional research techniques such as interviews or surveys are used. In many instances people do not wish to reveal their feelings to observers. Another level of analysis is therefore required. Observation of the unspoken exposes much about how stereo-typical and patterned social interactions are interpreted by individuals and how the same interactions, as well as messages conveyed by objects, are understood differently in the various levels of the office hierarchy.

This approach has been taken in other research contexts, most notably research on the home (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg Halton 1981, Franklin n.d., Gullestad 1984 and 1992, Madigan and Munro 1990, Miller 1988, Putnam et al 1990), office machines (Forty 1986, Lupton 1993, Webster 1990) and clothing (Attfield and Kirkham 1989, Barthes 1967, Bowlby 1985, Chua 1992, Hansen 1986, Miller 1991, Triggs 1992, Wilson 1985 and 1992, Wright 1989 and 1992). Chapple (in Kroeber 1953) did a study in an office context set in the 1940s. None of these studies with the exception of the last, is however a material culture analysis of a contemporary office.

The intellectual framework

I take a Weberian approach towards bureaucracy. The writings of Weber and his followers is most in sympathy with the material ethnographic approach I have adopted in this research context. Weber's views have been elaborated in the many decades since he originally published his writings on bureaucracy in Economy and Society (1978), some of which I will discuss in Chapter Two. I have in the main returned to the original texts because their strength has in many instances been diluted by subsequent analysis. Two main points are drawn from this source. First, Weber provided a lastingly accurate outline of the ideal type of bureaucracy which provides a convenient starting place for this discussion of office work. Most importantly, he identified an underlying formal hierarchical structure that is based upon an ideology of rationalism. Second, I have returned to, and elaborated upon, his implied notion of the job description. This aspect of Weber's analysis must not be overlooked and is key to understanding how office workers interact and how their assumptions and expectations of the behaviours of their colleagues are created. As will be discussed shortly, the study considers how workers adopt strategic personal identities while at work. There are numerous alternatives available to each individual, however the key identity relating to the work context is that defined in the individual's formal job description. This more than any other characteristic of gender, class or education, limits the efficacy of the individual in any given situation, both in work and also in social situations with work colleagues outside the office.

The American sociologist Erving Goffman provides the perfect antidote to Weber's discussion of the ideal type bureaucrat. Goffman's focus is on everyday behaviours and the rituals of interaction. Whilst Weber provides the broadest framework within which to discuss bureaucracy, Goffman allows this to be refined to reveal the impact upon the individual, and more importantly, to help discern how groups of individuals define themselves against others within the same organisation. My analysis of bureaucracy is therefore tempered with an interaction-based approach.

Wright (1994) argues that most contemporary models of organizations can be divided into three components: formal systems, informal systems, and environment. In this study, I have embraced all three. The formal as represented by Weber, the informal as represented by Goffman. The "environment" here is represented by a wide-ranging discussion of aspects of the individual's culturally derived assumptions regarding work and their peers. More importantly, the discussion of the material culture of the office specifically addresses the constraints imposed upon individuals by physical environmental factors such as space, time, season, geography, the impact of competing organizations, etc., though the importance of this aspect of the analysis is secondary. What I do not do, as Wright suggests most studies of organisational studies ought, is consider "culture" in an anthropological sense. My reason for this is simple: since the group under study is extremely small, I am unable to draw conclusions that can be extended to society in its widest sense (i.e. its cultural sense). I am only able, at this level of intimacy, to draw conclusions about the assumptions that certain classes of individuals adopt. This is inevitable and as Wright notes, individuals signify their own meanings of corporate culture based upon their indigenous culture. She recognises that it is the anthropologist's task to "question the conditions under which, and the ways in which people situated differently in any sequence of events, try to make their definition 'stick', and to assert their dominance"(24) .

The flow of power and influence

The most prolific writers on offices come from the discipline of management studies, which will be discussed in Chapter Two (for instance Adair 1983; Cole 1988; Handy 1986, Mayon-White 1986; Torrington et. al. 1989; Young 1986). In this literature, the office is perceived as the locus for personal development where the individual makes a career in the world of business, with great regard paid to those in power and little to those who are not. The primary aim of management studies is to provide guidance to managers on how to carry out their duties effectively and with personal satisfaction. It further empowers the powerful. Management studies views power from the top down and assumes that the main active agents in an organisation are those with the formal authority to direct and control. The main consumers of these writings are those who seek positions at the top. In management studies, those in non-managerial positions are often assumed to be less potent and cogent, people whose thoughts are less discrete and focused, than their superiors. This assumption is carried through to the content, where the workers below the management level are often described en masse as an undifferentiated class of worker. There are some management works that attempt to acknowledge the managed individual (see for instance Handy 1995) however, the main focus of popular writings on management is managers.

Goldschmidt (1992) has argued that individual members of organisations and institutions are motivated to seek social worth and prestige in the context of the values of institutions, organizations or bureaucracies (2; 246-61). He has identified a dialectic relationship between the institutional structure and the individual actor where the individual takes cues from the structure which in its turn is responsive to the needs and desires of the constitutive members (ibid. 3). The individual maintains this relationship with the institution while seeking self-satisfaction by following a "career", which Goldschmidt defines as:

> *...the lifetime pursuit of satisfactions, both physical and social. The central feature of a career is the person's contribution to the production, protection and reproduction necessary for the community's continued existence, but it includes other valued activities that help to define the self in the context of the existing social order.(3)*

In the pursuit of career, the individual seeks to enhance "prestige" , or "the recognition of individual merit". The pursuit of prestige paradoxically gives coherence to the community as a whole, even while it is an expression of social differentiation (31). The self-centred aim to seek prestige and status is in reality a social one, he argues, because the "measures of the self are derived from the community and are validated in community approbation", ... "they lie at the base of individual motivation to perform in accordance with social needs and demands", and "they constitute the centripetal force that makes for cohesion in the community, or that sector of the community from which the values are derived" (47).

Goldschmidt's approach differs significantly from the one taken in management studies. First, it attributes motivation to all participating individuals rather than focusing attention on those in formal control (see Hofstede 1994: 134). Second, it recognises that even those with relatively little formal power will still seek to enhance their own prestige relative to the group. All individuals, not just managers, seek to enhance their career. The understanding of what constitutes a career also differs in the two approaches. Whereas in management studies, this relates to success in the work place, Goldschmidt has broadened the definition to allow account to be taken of an individual's whole life experience, including factors of class or ethnic aspiration, the wish to further the aims of the group as a whole, and the individual's life-stage.

Following Goldschmidt, rather than consider how the powerful assert authority, I seek in this study to reveal how each individual, powerful or lowly, asserts their influence over others in the construction of a team product. My stance is thus a divergence from many popular writings on office work but follows a more traditional social science vein. My key assumption is that all individuals, no matter how reluctant they may be to take command of others, or even to take command of themselves, wish on occasion to exert influence on those who surround them, to steer them in such a manner that the actor's position is protected or improved. Some people in the office context, notably those who have achieved status at the powerful end of the hierarchical spectrum, seek personal autonomy. The primary means for them to manifest this is by controlling or guiding what others do, often as a pre-emptive strategy, allowing them to feel a sense of achievement and freedom in successfully manipulating others. Many office workers, even on some occasions those in powerful positions, are for whatever reason unable or unwilling to accept complete responsibility for their own actions. At some time or another, most people seek figures of authority to follow, if only to reject them (Sennet 1993). There are circumstances when each individual seeks the safety of authority by suspending their own ability to direct and control, yet when they wish nonetheless to influence events slightly but not decisively. It will be shown that most of the office workers do not question that the hierarchy exists, nor that this is a legitimate structure. They do however continually seek to express their individuality and enjoy minor acts of subversion and insubordination. In many instances, individuals operate at split levels: they follow formal hierarchical structures without question but like to think of themselves as autonomous individuals. This behavioural dualism will be discussed further in the following subsection.

Strategic identities

It is the nature of office work that for a bounded period of time and with reference to the labour contract, the individual must suspend certain elements of their personal identity in favour of those relating to the employing organisation. Put more bluntly, the office worker must daily carry out tasks and express ideas and convictions that have no relevance in their personal lives. In a sense therefore, office work requires that multiple identities be adopted by the individual in and out of the work context. The identities that the workers in this study adopt can be arranged on a continuum where at the one end are those that derive their substance from organisational bureaucracy and at the other, are those that reflect non-work aspects of the individual's life.

The notion of identity, and in some instances formalised work role, that will be used in this thesis will be based upon the simple notion of how a person wishes to be perceived by others in the work and non-work context, and will be based upon the individual's concept of "what sort of person they are". This definition owes much to Goffman's (1967) work on self presentation. Identity is here considered to be a patterned way of behaving that is recognised to fit into the classifications of other participating actors' and is a standardised response based on belief. This definition is in line with recent studies in the social sciences which also centre around the notion of "identity", the creation of a personal definition of self by the individual, and how this is employed to create a comfortable locus in society at large (see for instance Bourdieu 1986; Featherstone 1991 and Giddens 1991).

Identity is a strategic device used by the individual to enhance or maintain their position vis a vis other actors in a given situation. It can change to fit the prevailing circumstance as discussed by Du Gay (1996). Following Leclau (1990), Du Gay shows that a contingent identity "only constitutes itself in relation to that which it is not....because that identity would not be what it is outside of the relationship with the force antagonising it, the latter is also part of the conditions of existence of that identity "(2). Leclau (in DuGay, op cit.) has suggested that if an identity is under threat, it will reassert itself by repressing that which antagonises it. This implies a power relationship - the expressed identity depends upon that which is denied.

This concept of threat, reassertion and subsequent repression of one patterned behaviour in opposition to another, will be illustrated in this study in a number of conditions. Contingency will be illustrated most prominently in consideration of hierarchy: how those with different levels of power and authority mediate their own behaviours and how others respond by using their colleagues as a foil against which they develop their personal counter definitions of the types of people they want to be. Strategic contingent identity is also evident in numerous other oppositions that will be discussed based on class, social expectations, gender, ethnicity, age and so on. The individual is continually buffeted with oppositions to his or her own chosen expression of self. In response, re-adjustments to the identity are required for the individual to remain socially buoyant. The numerous personas, built of aspirations, attitudes and standard behaviours, that the individual carries within them comprise a strategy for improving their own position with whomever they are interacting with. Each identity is brought to bear as and when necessary and these images of self ebb and flow in the individual's evident persona.

To provide an illustration from the study, one of the technical professionals had recently been promoted to the position of principal, the most senior non-managerial position, from that of senior, a lower grade. He was the youngest principle by a span of almost ten years. In many senses he had more in common with the seniors than his new peer group. He dressed like them and often joined them in the pub after work. He did not have children and so was not concerned with many of the topics of conversation engaged in by the principles. He was more interested in maintaining the interests of his passing youth: music festivals and exotic restaurants. But with his new job came new responsibilities. He had sought the promotion so that he could do more work without the interference of a superior and so that he could do it his way. He got more money which was important to him as well as enhanced status and respect.

When he was at work, depending upon the situation, he wanted to be a number of different types of people. With his former peers he wanted to be invited to the pub after work. With the typists, he wanted to be treated with respect so that they would do work for him more quickly and accurately than before. In his new peer group he wanted to be accepted as an equal. He wanted the managers to acknowledge that his promotion was accompanied by a change in their attitudes towards him and he wanted to be assured that they would give him a higher level of trust and autonomy than they had before. Most importantly, he wanted to modify his own opinion of his position. He wanted to feel like a principal.

These multiple identities demanded that he adopt as many behavioural strategies while interacting with his colleagues. With his subordinate males, he emphasised the fun side of his personality. With the typists his voice took on an authoritarian tone that he did not previously use, and he smiled less when he interacted with them. He took a new interest in the work of his new peers and engaged them in more conversations about technical issues. He acted more confidently around the managers and began to dress more conservatively. Throughout the day, he would typically deploy many versions of himself, sometimes a few simultaneously. Sitting around the coffee table with his colleagues at tea time he would tell jokes meant to appeal to the seniors whilst ensuring that they would not be deemed immature by the attendant principals. He would unconsciously straighten his slouched posture in his chair when a manager joined the group, he would ignore the comments of the typist as though he had not heard her, though he had.

This man was not a duplicitous character. He was pursuing multiple strategies for self-improvement by modifying his behaviour according to who was paying attention, or in the hope that they would, to develop their belief that he was the fiction he created. This man's actions demonstrate the many-faceted nature of strategic identities and their use by individuals.

I will argue that the office workers in this study carry out their daily activities within two overarching sets of identities: one "bureaucratic", the other "social". From these sets, individuals strategically select the contingent and situationally relevant persona or personas they wish to display and progress.

Bureaucratic identities are central to office work and life, and are concentrated around ideologies and notions of formal hierarchy, the "modern" work ethic and for some of the subjects of the study, professionalism (discussed here: Beetham 1987; Bendix 1973; Herzfeld 1992; Mommson 1974; Weber 1978; Wright 1994; but see also: Aberbach 1981; Blau 1963; Britan 1981; Crozier 1964; Jacoby 1973; MacDonald 1995). The structure of bureaucratic identities will be covered in detail in Chapter Two and will be referred to throughout the study. The bureaucratic ideology is more pertinent to the technical professional workers in this office than those specialising in administrative tasks, though both groups fall under its sphere of influence. The foundation of the selected strategic identities are the jobs that each individual is hired to do. These identities are about doing work.

A number of bureaucratic identities and related roles can be identified for professionals in this study. These are nameless patterned behaviours that everyone can nonetheless recognise. A few can loosely be described as: "the leader", "the manager", "the architect of policies", "the mouthpiece". For the professional, the bureaucratic identity is about pursuing an agreed agenda on an intellectual level, and furthering an argument by accepted and standardised methods. For the non-professional, bureaucratic roles offer something different depending largely upon the individual's position within the formally defined office hierarchy. For instance, the male office manager's work identities are: "problem-solver", "organiser of other people's work", "suggester of procedural changes". The telephonist's bureaucratic work identity is different again: "the outsider's first point of contact", "the master of invoicing and filing", and "the keeper of the stationery cupboard". Each worker has a tailor-made set of task related patterned behaviours that are predicated upon their personal job description and these are not generally adopted by those to whom they do not apply.

Bureaucratic identities are more intellectually organised, and more theoretically based, than their non-work counterpart which will be discussed shortly. Because the bureaucratic roles are synthetic, imposed by circumstance rather than "grown" in interaction, their constraints are the most obviously felt by the workers. The managers and technical staff in the study have spent years of their lives gaining specialist qualifications which enable them to execute their specified duties to an acceptable standard of performance. The bureaucratic framework provides them with the identity of professionals. As such they undertake their duties with ritualised care and are offered limited latitude for deviation in their actions and aspirations. Professionals in their field are widely understood to behave in a certain manner, to wear a certain type of suit, to have a specific range of work interests and to react to authority with obedience.

Donning the bureaucratic persona is more satisfying for the professionals than for the remainder of the staff. Non-technical staff have more difficulty embracing the notion of bureaucratic professionalism, particularly those individuals in lower status positions who are less interested in maintaining a "bureaucratic fiction" about the type of person they wish to be perceived as. Whilst the professionals may live with the certainty that they will spend their working careers in their profession, a typist can leave her job at any time and take on a completely different work identity: a cashier, a beautician, a mother. Each of these offers a different set of behavioural expectations. The non-professionals are demonstrably not as wedded to the office identity because they have personally invested less in it.

The set of bureaucratic strategic identities regulates the purposive activities of the organisation and its staff by guiding how work is done. The use of paper will illustrate. Paper holds the written word: there are two aspects to the message contained in this medium. First, there is the overt message - the words themselves. These are written by the technical staff, and checked by the managers. The words on paper are the keystone of the office's reputation in the wider world. But not all words will do and meaning is not enough - they must look and feel right as well. The way words look and feel is part of paper's latent message. The physical object that is created has meaning as well. The bureaucratic aspect of paper production is restricted to the professionals and managers, the physical aspect to the junior administrative staff. Rarely do the two behavioural expectations merge. The manager doesn't adjust margins and the typist does not alter sentence structure or word meaning. The validity of this differentiation is accepted by all the office workers - it is part of the manager's bureaucratic role that he works with words. He obtained specialist knowledge so that he could judge those word meanings. The Typist has specialist knowledge of another sort: it is related to keyboards and software.

Office work and corporate goals are informed by concepts of rationality and formalism governed by bureaucratic procedure and rituals. The individual is required to apply rational principles in the aim of achieving corporate goals. Having taken on one or more identities derived from the bureaucratic framework, the worker must think clearly and logically, and put the aims of the employer above personal opinions and aspirations.

The second set of strategic identities that will be discussed are what I term "social". They are informal in nature and highly emotive in contrast to their rational bureaucratic counterparts. Office work may on the one hand provide the individual with a full social identity and an accompanying sense of achievement and importance. On the other, it may be perceived as boring and personally unsatisfactory (Handy 1995; Herzfeld 1992). The work is often routine, scheduled, set out in advance. Bureaucratic roles are appropriate in only a limited number of circumstances. In many instances, particularly when the execution of work is not the core matter of interest, factors such as age, class, gender, position within one's family, personality, ethnicity, education, sexual attractiveness and so on are much more relevant in defining who one is than one's job description. In this framework the individual seeks to express his or her humanity.

The difference between the two sets of strategic identities is perhaps best illustrated in consideration of the purpose of office gossip. It will be shown that gossip is an informal activity. It has no ties to bureaucracy and in a sense is invisible to anyone considering the bureaucratic aspects of the office. Functionally, however, it is what allows the workers at the lower end of the hierarchy to maintain and improve their lot. Gossip is a means for them to manage their own reputations and damage that of their rivals. They gain access to information not revealed by their managers and exert influence upon their managers without their knowledge or agreement. In this sense, gossip allows the juniors to turn the bureaucratically defined power hierarchy upside down, without in some cases the awareness of their superiors, by allowing those with less power to form a group consensus on how to deal collectively with management. These subversive tactics are as ephemeral as the spoken word. Unlike the bureaucratic word, that is saved on paper for later reference, gossip disappears as soon as it is conveyed.

The bureaucratic and social frameworks can be effectively contrasted when considering how individuals seek to influence and manipulate others. The manager's ability to do this is based on bureaucratic principles and his or her position in the formal power hierarchy. Rules and codes are stored in files and are circulated to staff on memos sent from the top of the organisation to those beneath them. Bureaucratic influence is thus by nature authoritarian. Contrast this against social influence. The social hierarchy is based on personal qualities of the individual as these augment their formal position. Wit and physical attractiveness count for a lot and a junior office worker might, because he is pleasant to look at and entertaining to hear, be more influential than an older, but less attractive officer. Social influence persuades and manipulates others where it cannot force. It relies upon memory rather than files and comes from the bottom as often as it comes from the top.

There are instances when the individual's chosen identity of the moment is at odds with the prevailing situation (see Hofstede 1994: 121-23). This is the point of inception of contingency where the individual must adjust expectations and their social expression in an attempt to reconcile circumstances with self-conception. Office workers on the one hand adopt the impersonal aspirations of rational bureaucracy in collective behaviours and on the other, they are unique, sometimes irrational and emotional human beings with their own expectations and agendas. The one set of identities requires the suppression of the idiosyncratic self, the other its expression. The two sets overlap and each determines the content of the other. It is the nature of bureaucracy to create stratification, and inflexible role demarcation. The structure of the hierarchy does not allow the same expressions of self for each individual. Herein lies the conflict and source of ambivalence that will feature heavily in this study.

Bureaucrats are often represented as unfeeling, uncaring automata - people who do not think for themselves since all that is required of them is to follow set procedures (Herzfeld 1992). This is not a very flattering image to embrace as one's guiding principle and perhaps understandably, the office workers do not wish to be associated with it. Whilst most of the workers in the study are actual bureaucrats, people who administer and develop policy within a profession, and the remainder are non-technical administrators of internal office policy and may thus also be classed amongst bureaucratic workers, none are happy accepting the title of bureaucrat nor wish to consider themselves in that light.

One evening in the pub I asked some of the young professional men from the office how they would define the term "bureaucrat" and if they felt that this applied to them. I received various definitions. The first was consistent with the bureaucratic identity: "someone who facilitates due process set out democratically". This didn't inspire much debate. A more emotive definition was then offered as "somebody who's over eager to push paper." This was met with the nods and laughter of recognition. The men were very quick to point out however that they were not bureaucrats: they were "technocrats". They had professional training which they relied upon while undertaking their bureaucratic duties. That was different. They believed that they put more creative thought into their work than a straightforward bureaucrat and this was therefore a more acceptable identity to adopt.

This example illustrates my point quite well: even though they considered themselves to be bureaucrats, they wished to be seen as something else. Something that wasn't quite as bad. This "something else" is a mixed identity which is not expressed in any one behavioural response but is an amalgam of many.

The exotic and the mundane

Anthropology, since its early beginnings, has kept its focus upon the exotic, the non-western, the distant, and the different. The search for the alien and the challenge of knowing what is culturally foreign is for many what sets anthropology apart from other social science disciplines such as sociology and psychology (see Jackson 1987: 1-10). The "natives" have in general been culturally, materially and ideologically different from the "researcher" who enters "the field" and learns to take part in their foreign society with sufficient ease and empathy that he or she can discern exactly what is going on, and the assumption is, do this more clearly than the natives themselves.

This scenario does not always prove the reality. As Clifford Geertz (1983) noted, even anthropology's great ancestor Malinowski had his problems co-existing happily with the people he studied. His posthumously published diaries revealed that he sometimes didn't like them very much at all. Another now famous example is Margaret Mead in Samoa who did not take the native's viewpoint into account as much as she claimed. It all became confusing enough for Geertz to ask: "if it is not, as we had been taught to believe, through some sort of extraordinary sensibility, an almost preternatural capacity to think, feel, and perceive like a native,...how is anthropological knowledge of the way natives think, feel, and perceive possible?" (56)

In asking this question, Geertz was making the assumption that the native was so culturally different from the anthropologist that it is difficult for true understanding to develop between them. This may indeed be a problem in anthropology as traditionally undertaken, though less so in this study.

Anthropology has made a "two pronged promise" (Schwartzman 1993) to first, salvage distinct cultures before they are lost to global Westernisation, and second, serve as a critique of our own culture. In the past, the bulk of the work carried out under the discipline of anthropology is done in foreign cultures, though this is now changing and European and Western contexts are being examined[1]. Anthropologists are switching their attention from the exotic to the familiar, in what is perhaps a realisation that that which is intellectually alluring only becomes so with reference to the judgement and predilections of the observer. The switch is also in great part due to the current grant regimes which make distant studies increasingly more difficult to fund. This changed perspective puts millet and sorghum on the same footing as cheese and pickle sandwiches, and the Potlatch alongside corporate entertaining as legitimate topics of study. Since the writers of anthropology are generally Westerners, and the readers the same, the case for searching for the exotic close to home may be favoured due perhaps most to the relevance such study has for the daily lives of the academic consumers.

To undertake a study of office life is to become immersed in a discussion of how the familiar is exotic. By looking at the everyday and taken-for-granted from a new angle and with a new agenda, what once seemed known and understood takes on new interest as it is viewed afresh.

The relevance of the study of office work cannot be underestimated. The national economic restructuring for the UK as a whole over the 1970s and 1980s which entailed a switch away from manufacturing in favour of services has hit London, the location of the office under study, particularly hard. The 1991 Census indicates that office-based employment makes up almost half of the Capital's total employment.

I was an office worker before embarking on this study in the capacity as a student of anthropology. Before formally undertaking this research project I worked for approximately six years in various offices as a qualified professional in my field. As such, in my own personal work identity, I am an office worker first and a social scientist second. It is for this reason that I chose the setting of my own job as the source of information for this study because I felt that my own familiarity, indeed what amounted to complete absorption in this particular social environment, was such that I would have sufficiently in-depth material and inspiration to produce a robust piece of work. I have therefore never been a

1 See Jackson 1987 for a discussion of European contexts and Messerschmidt 1981 for the North American.

foreigner where I was an anthropologist other than being an American in London, never culturally at odds with my subjects. I argue that despite Geertz's implied assumption, shared by many practitioners, that the anthropologist as a non-native can more clearly comprehend events in the research setting because he or she lacks the emotional encumbrances of life long habituation, familiarity with the culture in question need not be a disadvantage. Jorgensen noted that "there is no necessary conflict between personal, subjective interests or values and the scientific goal of truth" (1989, 27). He found that his own interest in the occult was invaluable in his study of the phenomenon. He wrote:

> *The difficulty I experienced with becoming a practitioner of tarot had nothing to do with overidentification with occultisms or occultists. Just the opposite, I had difficulty in even temporarily suspending my scientific identity and viewpoint. Although I tried earnestly to become an occultist, I was unable to accomplish this awesome feat.*

In this study I have faced the opposite problem: my difficulty has been to suspend my "native" identity and to replace this with that of the "anthropologist". Throughout the course of the formal data-gathering period of this research, I continually had to remind myself which role I was fulfilling at any particular moment: the office worker or the academic.

I have in the main relied upon participant observation to obtain my data. My use of this methodology has been slightly different from its usual practice. Participant observation as traditionally undertaken is described in the following quote by Russel Bernard (1988):

> *It involves establishing rapport in a new community; learning to act so that people go about their business as usual when you show up; and removing yourself every day from cultural immersion so you can intellectualize what you've learned, put it into perspective, and write about it convincingly. (148)*

The intellectual distinction I could draw between the exotic (the world viewed from the perspective of the anthropologist) and the familiar (my role as an office worker) became crucial. I acted as an observer in that I analysed the social system around me, but was also a dedicated participant, since my own life chances were materially affected by what went on around me. Because of this, I did not need to "establish rapport" per se since I had already been a member of the “community”; I did not need to "act" in any special manner for people to "go about their business as usual" and removing myself from "cultural immersion" was problematic as I was virtually no different from my informants, being just as "exotic" (or not) as they. This raises the issue of how, in a situation such as mine, the anthropologist should best differentiate between the participant and the observer in his or her own self: Jorgensen (1989) noted that the "participant role may be conceptualised on a continuum from a complete outsider to a complete insider" (55).

The value of using participant observation is that the anthropologist can get a glimpse of the "native's point of view" as an insider. The less well the anthropologist is integrated into the society under study, the fewer such glimpses he or she will catch, and also, the more likely that what is observed is not natural but acted out for the anthropologist's benefit (see for example Bernard: 1988, 271; Schwartzman : 1993, 53). By being a functional member of the group on the other hand, I was able to draw on my own native perceptions. Having worked in the office for a total of four years, I hope that I gained an intimate understanding of a richer texture than with other research techniques or even participant observation of a shorter duration.

I undertook what Strathern (1987) refers to as “auto-anthropology”: “Anthropology carried out in the social context which produced it”. She suggests that the anthropologists whose field setting is “home” develop greater awareness of themselves as they become in part their own object of study, i.e. use their own experience as primary data. However, whilst the anthropologist may have a heightened sensitivity to native ideologies and understandings, these ultimately do not provide the framework for the final analysis. This methodological approach, it is often assumed, can lead to both greater understanding and to unnecessary mystification of what is already common knowledge. But, she writes, the anthropologist should not be solely concerned with personal understanding, but with above all, the nature of productive activity.

There is an additional issue raised by doing anthropology at home. This is one of subjectivity. Increasingly, the problem of studying one's own society has been seen to include issues of emotional engagement and political loyalty of the researcher. It is now seen as necessary to understand the standpoint of the individual anthropologist in order to better understand the outcome of their research. The approach is now, more than in the past, to allow a certain degree of subjective interpretation in the aim of producing a richer final ethnographic product. The illumination of the individual anthropologist's own background is therefore deemed to be an important element of the overall research project as this highlights and clarifies why a particular perspective was taken.

The question of the relative importance of objective and subjective stances in the undertaking of anthropological research may be seen to be particularly acute in my case since this is a study of my own personal social environment. In as much as my identity is derived from my work situation, then I could be said to be writing about a context with which I am identified. There are many points which may be drawn from the acknowledgement of this relationship. It will become clear in the enthographic chapters of this thesis that the workers in the study adopt various strategies to achieve a distance between their work and non-work activities and the identities associated with them. As already has been discussed, they work in a bureaucratic occupation but do not wish to view themselves as bureaucrats. It will be shown that they use numerous strategies to re-write themselves as people other than bureaucrats because they perceive that an over-identification with that style of interaction is somehow inhuman or otherwise undesirable.

The same logic can be turned to me as the author of this thesis. I also habitually adopt strategies to distance myself from the bureaucratic work identity that I must employ nine to five. I have gone a step farther than my colleagues however. I have effectively used this study and thesis as a vehicle for my own distancing: I have turned my own experience into the object of study. This study has been a means for me to stand back and look at my daily work setting and to understand it from a more objective standpoint since here, I am not considering how my colleagues' behaviour affects me, but rather how their cumulative behaviours form a larger system of power, hierarchy and self-expression.

My identification with the study context, my office, has however prevented me from approaching the thesis from the perspective of a pure anthropologist. I have not reworked my experience with conventional anthropological theorising or perspectives as others might have done because given my level of identification with office work, I wish to preserve the integrity of the experience itself. This has resulted in what is above all, an ethnographic account, a "thick description". I use anthropology to shed light on the office experience and provide insights into it that could not be derived from other literatures, notably those on organisational behaviour or management studies.

In this study, I only very rarely refer to my own place in the office, or my own feelings. I have attempted to view my own world from a distance but I was able to understand what I observed as a native. Though I used various tools to achieve intellectual distance, such as my notebooks and my discussions with colleagues, my most effective tool was my focus on the mundane aspects of office life and in particular, on the objects that create the office environment. I attempted to do what Hastrup (1987: 104) described as overcoming the "tricks played by the mirror of fieldwork", by learning to distance myself from what may have been overly personal perceptions. Rather than consider office work and life from an organisational perspective that sought primarily to identify structures, or to describe my own experience as an office worker, I focused first upon the most trivial components of the office context: paper, gossip, ties and bookshelves. By initially targeting the things I habitually ignored, I was able to gain a new perspective on my daily environment. This method has allowed me to perceive behaviours in a new light, Strathern's "productive activity", while the use of my own experience as data for the study has allowed me to discuss it with confidence

I informed my colleagues when I began, which was an announcement met with very little initial interest. As time went on, and my colleagues noted that I would periodically stop what I was doing, pull out my notebook and start writing, they became more aware. I was met with a mixture of emotions ranging from incredulity that I would waste my time on such a boring project, to effrontery that I was prying into their private lives. Most people wanted to read what I had written about them, but I kept my notes to myself. A few colleagues threatened to look up my PhD in the library when I finished. Eventually they became inured to my scribbling and would sometimes even make suggestions of what I should include.

My observational techniques were fairly rudimentary. I sat, I listened, I took occasional notes, I remembered. I attempted to extend my repertoire to tape recording conversations and asking specific questions but found that the responses were self-conscious, and as a result stilted and uninteresting. The office paperwork was also useful to me in my investigations. Office memos, rule books, reports, agendas and minutes are produced in great profusion.

To test my ideas I would occasionally read a paragraph to the person or persons in question. Sometimes I would try to discuss my ideas. When I did this, I was often told that my conclusions were wrong. Strathern (1987) had a similar experience in Mt. Hagen, Papua New Guinea: she caused irritation to villagers when it became clear that in her work, her version of events supplanted theirs. Her usurpation of the narrative was perceived as exploitative. I also encountered occasional hostility when my understanding of events did not coincide with that of my subjects. Where I felt it justified, I took their criticisms seriously and if I felt that I had misunderstood or omitted something, I would re-evaluate my conclusion. In doing these things, I attempted to discern three things: what my colleagues did; thought they did; and, thought they should have done. Looking at each situation or conversation from these three perspectives served as a check on my conclusions but also on my own motives, hopefully striking a balance between "emic" and "etic" stand-points (see Pelto and Pelto 1970: 54-64).

Harold Garfinkel's (1967) "ethnomethodological" approach provided useful guidance. It allows the researcher to better grasp what the subjects really do and what they think they really do. Garfinkel sought to understand human interactions by taking the "seen but unnoticed" understandings in their everyday occurrence. These are the "natural facts of life" which are moral in character in that they are widely understood by an interacting or culture group though they are so deeply imbedded that they are difficult to identify. Because they are expected parts of interaction, they become moral and the "common sense facts of social life" become "institutionalized knowledge of the real world" (35,53). Each person has a set of expectations shared within the group that he or she regularly interacts with.

Erving Goffman's (1959, 1967) method, which focused upon how the individual and the group choose to present themselves to each other and to the world beyond the group, was also a key research model in this study. By using props and performing roles, the individual or group presents a view of what they think they really do and what they think they really ought to do. By assuming that many actions, particularly those which have an audience, are a "face" or projection, the observer can attempt to discern deeper motives and beliefs.

And ultimately, it is personal motives that generate the behaviours the researcher observes (Douglas 1987: 9), particularly the participant observer. Walter Goldschmidt (1992) made the point that despite the cultural or historical context, each human being is pursuing his or her own career. We each live our life within our native cultural frameworks but we also each try to make the most of it in our attempts to sate our "affect hunger". Thus, the role of the individual as a motivated actor must always be fully considered when group interaction is studied.

My own place within the office hierarchy must be clarified. My position, defined by my job description, was "senior tech". I was in a median position in the overall hierarchy according to the nomenclature that will be outlined in the following section. This position is the largest factor limiting the access that I had to the social interactions around me. Since the office was broken into self-segregated groups of people, I had the deepest familiarity with my own: the technical staff. It was with these people that I socialised most frequently and whose frustrations I understood the best, since their frustrations were my own. I also formed friendships with people from other groups, notably the junior administrative staff, who spoke freely of how they felt their office lives were going, and to some of the management. While I tried to circumvent the fetters of hierarchy, I was probably not completely successful, since they all still saw me as a worker foremost and any other role that I chose to adopt was ancillary. My limited access has been reflected in this study which has greatest detail concerning the lower ranks of the staff and the shallowest concerning the managers.

In closing, this study represents a development in anthropology by adding a new dimension to what has heretofore been understood as the participant observation method. Rather than enter the field as an anthropologist, I functionally created the field setting from my own daily life. In doing this, I was able to rely upon my own experiences as a native office worker with a career to progress. Acting as my own primary informant, the genuine friend and colleague of my fellow workers, and by using my own emotions and understandings as primary data, I hope that I have been able to write convincingly about office life. I hope also that I have simultaneously created sufficient distance from my own experience to produce an objective work.

The office and its workers

One of the main accusations that has been levelled against the discipline of anthropology in the last few decades is that in its more classic form, it has tended to reify its object of study, whether "tribe" or "village", as an example of a timeless and essential tradition. In this form, anthropologists used their ethnographies of tribal or peasant societies as a simple contribution to a generic category that stood outside of time and place. A similar dilemma needs to be acknowledged and addressed here. On the one hand, much of the introduction and the following chapter is concerned with a literature on a generalised phenomenon called bureaucracy, as analysed in particular by Weber, and then by many others. It will become clear that I regard my case study of this particular office as contributing to this general literature. On the other hand, it will also become clear that my study was undertaken in a particular time and place.

The office in this study is located in a suburban town centre in London. It provides technical policy advice to local authorities in a specific public service sector. The office's contact with outsiders is effectively limited to that with local authority professionals across the Capital, civil servants, officers from related special interest groups and perhaps most importantly, its Committee of elected Members. Policy reports are prepared by the staff and considered by the Committee at its quarterly meetings. Reports form the basis of the output and are the primary means for the office to achieve its aims. An executive sub-committee meets more regularly to keep the momentum going.

This office is a "think tank" set up as an experiment by the Conservative Government in the 1980s as part of a new form of governance. Its existence is due entirely to Thatcherite policies of the mid 1980s that sought to reduce the influence of the Opposition in the capital city by abolishing the Labour controlled Greater London Council (GLC). The 1985 Local Government Act abolished the GLC and simultaneously made provision for a number of new, and less powerful, bodies. The Act also returned key functions to London's 33 Boroughs. The principle aim of these policies was to break the back of Labour opposition by devolving power to smaller units that had no history of concerted strategic action with other bodies and Boroughs. They had previously relied upon the overarching GLC to do this form them. The office in this study was one such body. At the time that the fieldwork was undertaken, the office was a few years into the process of justifying its existence, because the provisions of the Act were only that some form of organisation was required, not that this specific organisation was to exist in this form. Unless two thirds of the Boroughs ratified the annual budget, the office would be wound down. It had to fight hard to establish its position on the London government scene.

There were no pre-existing examples for this organisation to model itself against. Its actions were primarily intended to both prove its continuing relevance to other organisations in London and to establish for itself a reputation based on a rapidly conceived "tradition" of excellence. This impacted both formally and informally on the structures, operations and individuals in and of the organisation and led them to modify themselves to maintain the organisation's position over time. The situations that the organisation found itself in, and its consequent responses, were in perpetual flux. The need to build and maintain a corporate reputation, to give the impression to outsiders that it had existed for longer than it actually had and that it was therefore a force to be reckoned with, led to what was perhaps an unusually strict adherence to rules and procedures in an effort to maintain a particular style of corporate identity.

A number of years have now passed since the fieldwork was undertaken and the employees' actions documented. The office's position in the scheme of London government is now assured. Rather than focusing on developing first principles and a new London-wide strategic bureaucratic process, the organisation is able to take on issues that would have been frivolous before, and is able to develop new policy stances that are influential nationally and in some cases, internationally. It is a quickly evolving organisation, its work areas diverse and regularly changing. In addition, each election brings about changes in the composition of the Committee of elected members who ultimately control the organisation so that changing political stances also affect the content of the office's work.

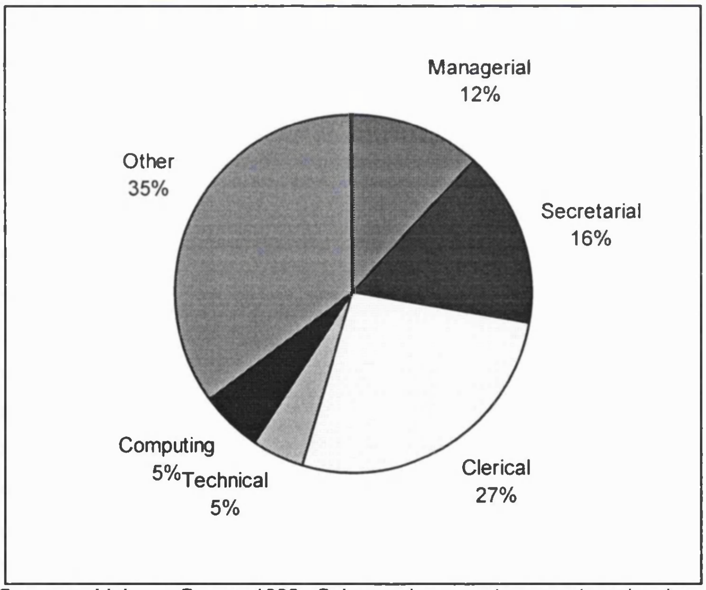
However, no matter how the output changes to fit circumstances, certain aspects of the office remain remarkably stable and can be generalised to other offices. Behaviours regarding the use of space or paper for instance are similar across many offices, and though what I describe in the ethnographic chapters is based on the observation of specific individuals, lessons can be learnt about office based behaviours in general.

Therefore, though it would be possible to criticise this study as being of no general relevance because it focuses upon a small group, I must reject this stance. In reading the wider literature on bureaucracy and office work, books written now over a century of study in several different countries, it becomes clear that the changes and dynamics I will describe in the following pages follow normative principles set out in wider society.

The remainder of this section will describe the setting for the research. Before doing this however I will digress briefly and describe in statistical terms how this office is similar and dissimilar to other offices in London.

Though the actual compliment of the employees fluctuates slightly as the years pass and people come and go, the general configuration of jobs remains quite stable. Because of the organisation's very specialised nature, its employee make-up does not neatly conform to the statistical profile of the majority of UK offices. Most importantly, this office has a disproportionate number of technical professionals whose strength is in policy development. The office comprises 20% managers, 30% administrative staff and 50% technical specialists. Most UK offices have a lower level of technical professionals in favour of a category of workers not found here: general office workers and service providers without technical qualifications. A survey by the Link Up Group (1993) of 226 office workers in the North of England showed that within their sample, the largest single occupation was secretarial/clerical, at 43%, as illustrated in Figure 1. The next largest group was indeterminate in its characteristics ("other" at 35%). Managerial workers and technical workers comprised 12% and 5% respectively.

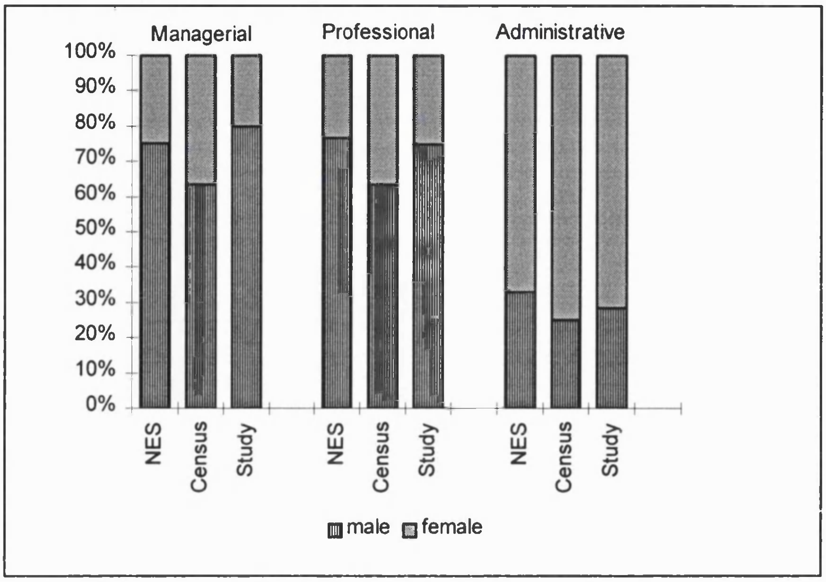
Figure 1: Task Specialisation in UK offices



Source: Link up Group, 1993. Sales and accountancy categories have been excluded from this Figure.

The proportion of men and women in various job categories in the office under study is very similar to other London offices. Figure 2 compares statistics on gender from the New Earnings Survey (NES) and the 1991 Census (Census) with the office under study (Study) for the three general work categories of managerial, professional and administrative. In all three samples, men dominate the managerial and professional work areas, women the administrative side.

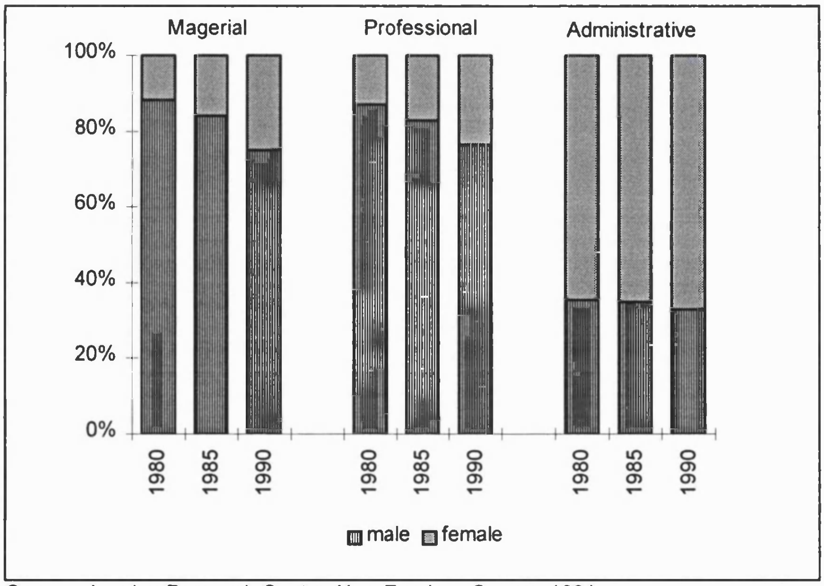
Figure 2: Comparison of occupation by gender



Source: NES = London Research Centre, New Earnings Survey, 1991; Census = OPCS 1991 Census; Study = 100% sample of the office in this study in Autumn 1993.

Male dominance of managerial and professional work areas has marginally decreased since 1980 in London, as illustrated in Figure 3. Female dominance of administrative jobs has remained more stable.

Figure 3:Changes in proportion of gender by occupation since 1980 in London



Source: London Research Centre, New Earnings Survey, 1991.

Taken together, these data show that despite the highly specialised and unusual nature of the office's work, traditional stratifications are shared with other London offices. The managerial stratum is the smallest and is male dominated, the administrative and clerical stratum the largest and dominated by women. Technical professionals are more abundant in the study but as with the larger office sector, this is also dominated by men. In all cases, women's participation is growing slowly but proportionately.

Figure 4: Organisational Chart

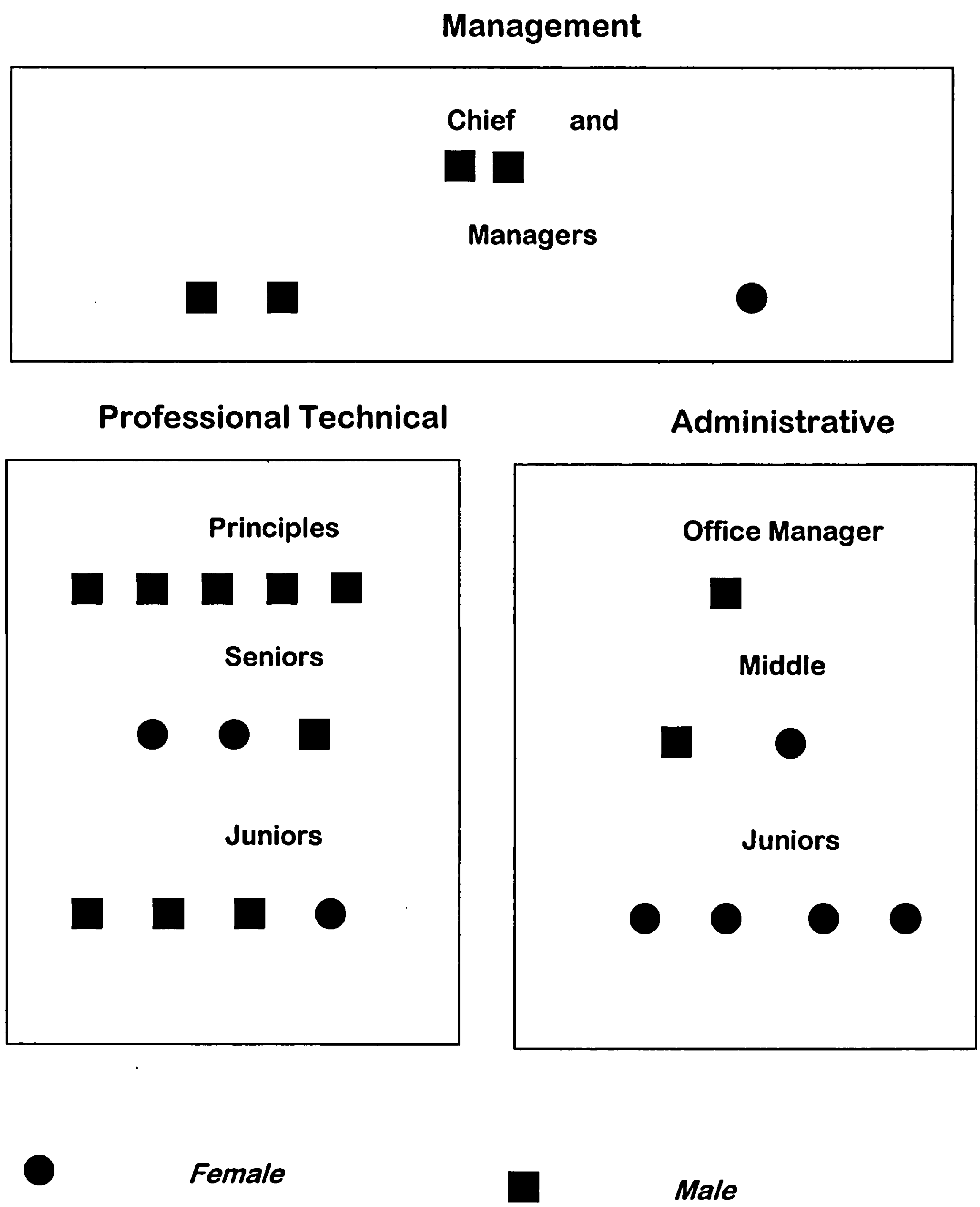


Figure 4 shows the hierarchical structure of the office in this study by main job category and gender. The figure is the basis of the characterisations of workers made throughout this study.

Each of the 24 people under discussion has their own strategies, motivations and assumptions regarding work and what they hope to gain from it. In order to disentangle the individuals' actions and reactions from the web of behaviours, I will throughout this study refer to three main groups (management, technical and admin) and in some instances, their sub-groups (e.g. junior and senior). My interest here is to compare the strategies of each group against the others in order to reveal how they function and play against one another. A certain degree of generalisation of the groups has of necessity developed in my descriptions and analysis, and it is more than likely that any implicated individual would not be able to identify completely with my claims of what one particular group is up to. My generalisations will serve two useful functions here. First, they will simplify my argument. Second, they will help to maintain the anonymity of the individual people who have been observed. In the remainder of this section, I will briefly introduce the groups.

The managers, including the chiefs, are the most senior in the organisation in age and status. Theirs is the highest salary band and the most highly paid takes home over three times what is paid to the lowest paid admin worker. They drive to work in company cars. Having been in employment the longest of all the workers, they also have the most paid leave. They are responsible for the office and all that goes on within it. Committee reports are stamped with their authority and are representative of their ideas and opinions. No major change occurs in the office unless under their direction. These people range in age from mid 40s for the managers to mid 50s for the chiefs. All have specialist educational qualifications and are members of at least one professional chartering body. All are men except for the admin manager. Only one of the managers has what can be termed a traditional family life - a partner with children. One has a partner but no children and the remaining live outside permanent relationships. As a group, they tend to work significant amounts of overtime. However, they all take their holidays and generally travel out of the country on journeys that their staff could not afford, and to more exotic places than they might choose. Though they have well formed outside interests, the managers do not have any absorbing hobbies or avocations.

The managers receive a great deal more from their work than their salaries. Most importantly, they receive respect, status and prestige that can, and is, traded freely outside the office. They are invited to regular events and meetings of the great and the good, and can count amongst their acquaintances local government leaders, senior civil servants, even cabinet ministers in some cases. They socialise in circles full of people of influence like themselves, and when they congregate with the powerful, they introduce themselves by their job titles. Discussions centre around comparing notes on their latest achievements and the issues they believe will move to the fore in the near future. If they lost their jobs they would be excluded from these gatherings and they would loose many of their contacts. The managers rarely meet with the leaders of outside organisations for purely social reasons. Business is always somehow involved.

The technical staff ("techs") are similar in many ways to the managers. The techs haven't yet reached the managers' level in the hierarchy and many won't ever progress that far. There are three strata within this job category: principles, seniors and juniors.

The principles are all men. All but the youngest are in their mid 40s. They earn approximately two and a half times what the most junior admin worker receives. They are not allocated company cars. They have responsibility for discrete project areas and manage junior staff. Their work is checked by the managers but rarely changed. Their educations are much the same as the managers and they also belong to professional institutions. These men have been in work for around 20 years. Most have wives and families and they do not tend to work overtime, rather spending time with their children. They have hobbies that they mention from time to time, but the main non-work focus of their attention is what awaits them at home. They derive less personal status and fulfilment from their jobs and profession than their superiors because they are not managers and are therefore not yet considered by their peers to be truly successful in what they do. They rarely mix with the great and the good, mainly because they are not invited. They aspire to be managers.

The senior techs have around 7-15 years of work experience. Their university educations are fresh in their minds and they try new ideas that would not necessarily come to mind for the principles. They have more limited project responsibility and in most cases their work must first be cleared by a principle then by a manager. They earn about twice as much as the most junior admin worker. Whilst some of the principles have developed the opinion that their career progress has stalled and they don't try hard to impress as a result, this hasn't yet occurred to the seniors and they believe that they have a good chance for career advancement if they work hard and occasionally dazzle somebody in the right place. Women have been entering the profession steadily in the past decade and it is no longer exclusively male. It is at the senior level and below where past equal opportunity policy begins to change gender proportions. Two of the seniors have permanent relationships but no children. The other is still looking for a partner. They all hope to become principles soon.

The junior techs are either finishing or have just finished their university training. Their chartering institution requires that they work four years after receiving their post-graduate degrees before they can become members. Only half have achieved this and the remainder are still qualifying. One man is still on a day-release scheme completing his studies. They earn approximately one and a half times the salary of the most junior admin worker. They are all single, most live in group houses or have room-mates. They socialise with friends regularly and never work overtime unless forced to do so. They are still learning their profession and are given very little responsibility. Only the oldest are allowed to draft reports which are typically changed dramatically before they go to Committee. Their main tasks are to do the indispensable but monotonous research that the principles and seniors rely upon to inform their own work. They are grateful to have jobs since many of their friends from University are having trouble finding work or are working for less money. They are having a good time. They want to progress their careers but not just yet.

Admin have to work as hard as their professional colleagues but they are treated as less important to the organisation, are not allowed the same type of responsibility in that they are not encouraged to think creatively unless specifically directed to do so, and they receive less pay. The main exception to this is the office manager who is paid and has responsibility on the same level as the senior techs. Admin workers who are below office manager level but higher than the most junior, such as the chief's secretary, have responsibility for certain areas such as setting up some computer or filing systems, but it is difficult for them to initiate tasks. They are expected to wait to be instructed. All three of the senior admin have qualifications but not university degrees. Two have partners but none have children. They have hobbies and interests that they carry on with dedication but do not discuss much with their office colleagues. They work hard and feel that they are not appreciated. They want either to be given more recognition and more responsibility in this office or they want to leave it altogether for work elsewhere.

The junior admin (the telephonist and the typists) are the lowest paid workers and receive very little satisfaction from their jobs. They are all women though at the end of the study period a 17 year old male was taken on for the most junior position. The opinion of their colleagues is that they lack intelligence and are incapable of accepting responsibility. Junior admin do not agree with this assessment - they believe that they could do much more if only given the chance. They have no qualifications and though they have been working since the age of 16 they have not been significantly promoted. The oldest has a lower position than she once held because she was over 45 when she began looking for work after a career break. The admin women are allowed to show no initiative and though they occasionally receive training, it is generally so minimal that they cannot learn enough to improve their job performance. Their jobs entail typing, filing, answering the telephones, photocopying, stuffing envelopes and franking post. They all have active and satisfying family lives: two are married and one lives with her parents and brother. They all have hobbies which they pursue avidly. They hate their jobs and only work to earn enough money so that they can do what they really want after work. They can never hope to reach the job status of the office manager.

These groups are extremely heterogeneous for all that they spend the majority of their waking lives together. Class expectation, experience, or education prevent them from ever seeing each other's position with complete clarity. Peers tend to keep their focus inside the boundaries of their own group and exclude non-members. They may therefore understand each others' strategies and even help develop them, but misinterpret the actions of members of other groups. They may also seek to undermine the strategies of non-members in the pursuit of their own.

Conclusion

The two main strategic identities described in the beginning of this chapter will be discussed in the following chapter. Max Weber was perhaps the most astute analyst of bureaucracy and his work will form the basis of the notion of the bureaucratic framework adopted here. It will be shown that in this framework, the individual is overshadowed by his or her functionary persona. There follows a discussion of non-bureaucratic aspects of work where it is acknowledged that any individual can only be a bureaucrat some of the time. For the rest of the time, perhaps best described as "when nobody important is looking", the individual office worker pursues personal aims and expectations. The individual expresses many separate selves, each of which exist as layers of personality and personhood, which take on greater or lesser importance as the situation demands.

The remaining chapters provide the substantive evidence for the theoretical arguments put forward in the early chapters. Though each chapter centres around a separate issue, together they illustrate the function of hierarchy, how status is achieved and displayed, and how identity is developed and manifested to achieve the aims that occupy the individual's attention moment to moment.

The first fully ethnographic chapter is the only one which does not focus on material culture. The discussion of gossip provides a clear introduction to the manner in which informal social strategies are developed and enacted. It is therefore a good beginning for the ethnographic portion of the thesis and acts as a counterpoint to the more theoretical chapters preceding it. The workers use office gossip for personal ends as well as a tool for the maintenance of group structures. Gossip delimits the individual's room for manoeuvre but it also allows its practitioners to manipulate the power hierarchy while codifying rituals.

Paper is the first material subject of analysis. Paper is the most ubiquitous, yet simultaneously ignored, class of office object available, and is the basis of office work and a material embodiment of office life. It is revealing of how social and bureaucratic identities are represented in objects where only certain classes of people in the office have rights to manipulate paper in certain ways. Managers are limited to the meaning of the words on the surface - paper's overt message - while typists are restricted to the physicality of those words - the latent message. The chapter also examines how office paper is used to convey a corporate identity to the outside world and a difference between how paper is used internally and externally becomes apparent. Many tasks and related identities are brought into play in the production of a paper object, a letter or report, that are hidden in the final product that is meant to portray the whole group in a favourable manner. The analysis of paper reveals office ideologies about what is appropriate for inside consumption, what for the consumption by outsiders, as well as ideas of professionalism and preparedness.

The construction of an appropriate form of individuality given the adopted identity is the subject of the following chapter on dress. Clothing is used by workers with different organisational roles to mark their status. Those in the lowest power position, the women from admin, use fashion flamboyance to make their presence felt, in the hope that once attention has been gained, they will be successful in influencing others. Managers, who rely upon their reputations as professionals and whose words and deeds are more important than their appearance, adopt a bland and standardised code of dress. Dress can also be used to subvert authority or show willingness to be a member of a group.

The following analysis of space and office furnishings is the best means of demonstrating how many cues to behaviour are non-verbal. Space provides the context for the object and strategic identity and yet is virtually never explicitly discussed by the office workers. Work areas bear the stamp of their occupants. The work area is examined in terms of various categories of spaces: those illustrating class distinctions, exclusion of strangers and inclusion of insiders, and personal spaces. Personal space is created with personal objects and expressions of power may inverted spatially.

The final ethnographic chapter considers various means for measuring time in the office, each with its own implications on the workers' roles, personas and status. The experience of time is one of the clearest indicators that several strategic identities can be adopted simultaneously. It is therefore a suitable final ethnographic chapter.

The thesis concludes with a summary of what has been learned by reviewing two continuums discussed throughout the study, that relating to hierarchy and the other relating to strategic identities. Finally, a few methodological points are drawn in evaluation of the research technique employed.

The thesis concludes with a summary of what has been learned by reviewing two continuums discussed throughout the study, that relating to hierarchy and the other relating to roles. Finally, a few methodological points are drawn in evaluation of the research technique employed.

Chapter Two: Theoretical approaches to bureaucracy

Introduction

This chapter begins with a discussion of various approaches to bureaucracy adopted in the social science and management theory literature. It also elaborates the notion of identity introduced in the last chapter. Though a differentiation between the two predominant strategies is made, in daily practice, bureaucratic and social identities are joined seamlessly. My distinction is one of convenience only, made to delineate the argument, and is therefore not a true representation of office interactions.

My discussion begins with Max Weber. Weber was the first social scientist to analyse modern bureaucracy and remains a seminal thinker on the topic today. His conception of the ideal type bureaucrat is easily recognised in the office under study but is open to criticism when social factors are taken into account. In essence, Weber's ideal type represents the theoretical and formal roles available to the office worker and is of greatest value when taken in conjunction with other factors. The discussion therefore moves on to consider another strain of literature on office work, deriving mainly from American and Non-European sources. These writers, who incidently were active many decades later than Weber, had other research concerns that help augment the discussion, shedding light on the social aspects of office work. There follows a full discussion of the job description and how this element of the bureaucratic identity is the single most limiting factor in the worker's self-presentation and behaviour. Whilst social factors can have a powerful influence upon the worker's ability for manoeuvre, the job description sets the final boundaries. For the job description to fully capture the individual, he or she must be socialised into the bureaucratic world of work. Most office workers have learned to use bureaucratic roles through their wide-spread appreciation of management theory which provides a prevalent and accessible model for behaviour.

Max Weber on bureaucracy

The clearest description of bureaucracy was given by Max Weber at the turn of the century. Though he wrote in a political, economic and social climate dissimilar to the one providing the context for the present study, much of Weber's work remains valid in contemporary contexts and his thinking has had enduring relevance which has recommended his model to present-day theorists who rework and update it. I will accordingly use Weber as the spring-board for my own understanding of the bureaucratic framework.

When he wrote of bureaucracy, Weber (1978) was not using the term as it is commonly understood today: his was not the conception held by my work colleagues (described above) of narrow-minded petty paper-pushers, forms made out in triplicate and senseless obstacles to progress in streams of endless ribbons of red tape. In fact, he used the term "red tape" in another meaning altogether: red tape in Weber's time was used to bind official government documents, and it was a symbol of military efficiency and control, not inefficiency and waste. Bureaucracy's reputation has clearly suffered in the ensuing decades. As industrialisation began to dominate Europe and America, bureaucracy became a natural accompaniment to modern mass democracy with its "abstract regularity of the exercise of authority" (Weber 1978: 983). This requires that millions of people are each able to receive equal treatment under a set of laws, policies and programmes. In order to achieve this end, a large administrative system is required to regulate the system and manage services. In a Weberian sense, bureaucracy is a very specialised order for the efficient running of a particular form of government. Whilst much of his thinking can be generalised beyond the governmental sphere, and indeed, Weber did on occasion stray from this and speak of capitalist enterprises, it is this understanding of administration of services, and technical expertise in them, that underpins his work.

Weber's bureaucrat is a technical specialist who provides a particular service within a large organisation. His description does not therefore apply to every office worker. Beetham (1987) has noted that in reality not everyone is actually a bureaucrat who co-ordinates and executes policy; there are chiefs above and front-line workers below. Weber drew a sharp distinction between the staff and the actual organisation. The corporate group, whether a government department or a profit-making firm, has a governing body which manages its affairs and employs administrative staff to carry out its policies. It is this administrative staff, not the general employee group, that actually conforms to Weber's ideal type of bureaucrat. The governing body's function is to formulate broad policies for the organisation to follow, be these corporate or political. The governing body, whether elected politicians or a board of directors, is accountable to something or someone outside the organisation, whilst the bureaucrats on the other hand, are appointed by these people and they are accountable to the governing body rather than directly to outside ruling interests. At the bottom end are production workers, for instance secretaries and typists who maintain the files. Since this latter group does not exercise any authority, they are office workers and not officials in the Weberian sense (Beetham 1987: 12-13). A direct parallel can be drawn here to the office in the study. The governing body in this case is the Committee of Members who give instruction and provide corporate goals for the senior managers and with whom ultimate responsibility for the office lies. The technical professionals are the true Weberian bureaucrats and the admin section are the other workers described by Beetham.

The main elements of Weber's model of bureaucracy were presented in *Economy and Society*, composed between 1910 and 1920 (Mommsen 1974: 16; Weber 1978). They are succinct enough to allow me to quote them at length. It is important to note first however that when Weber used the term "office" he referred to what would now be called a "post" or "position" and not an office in the sense that I use the term throughout this study, i.e. as a group of people working in a particular organisation.

In Weber's model, bureaucracies are led by a Head whose position of dominance is bounded by a "sphere of legal 'competence'". This applies to the Chief and his deputy in the study who were chosen to fill their positions because of their long experience in their profession and their specialist expertise. In their capacity as the Chiefs, they direct the entire organisation and have special liaison arrangements with the Committee not enjoyed by their staff. Under the Weberian Head is an administrative staff of individual officials who are appointed to their functions according to the following criteria which I quote at length in italics. Weber's points are followed by my own observations of their relevance for the office under study, shown in brackets.

1) *They are personally free and subject to authority only with respect to their impersonal official obligations.*

   (Each of the workers in the study applied for a job in this office of their own accord because something about it appealed to them. In the main, they saw and answered a job ad.)

2) *They are organized in a clearly defined hierarchy of offices.*

   (The chain of command is clearly set out verbally, in writing and can be described diagramatically as I have done in Figure 4. Each worker knows precisely to whom they answer and who answers to them. This arrangement of formal domination and subordination, what I refer to in the study as the "job hierarchy", can only be overcome in relation to work matters through a formal change in the job description, promotion or by leaving the organisation.)

3) *Each office has a clearly defined sphere of competence in the legal sense.*

   (The office workers cannot provide a service outside their professions unless they receive appropriate training and qualifications. Their area of expertise is highly constrained by their qualifications and they are not able to represent the views of any organisation beyond their own. This sphere of competence as it relates to the individual is what I refer to in the study as the "job description". This will be dealt with fully below.)

4) *The office is filled by a free contractual relationship. Thus, in principle, there is free selection.*

(Workers are hired, leave to take other jobs or if their personal circumstances change, and on rare occasions, are formally asked to leave. No worker is bound to remain in the office if he or she chooses not to, though if their exit is contingent upon finding a suitable and desirable job elsewhere, this may be practically problematic.)

5) *Candidates are selected on the basis of technical qualifications. In the most rational case, this is tested by examination or guarantied by diplomas certifying technical training, or both. They are appointed, not elected.*

(All of the technical professionals in the office have a recognised professional qualification from their chartering body or are working towards this. "Amateurism" at work is not condoned, by the professionals, and it is made impossible for admin workers to undertake the duties of the professionals, even if they were capable of doing so. In fact, if a non-qualified person were to do work on behalf of the organisation, it would be conceivable that their decisions would to be subject to legal challenge in the courts. Their appointments to fill particular jobs are related to their proven ability to undertake the tasks required. Demonstrated ability is thus the key in determining who fills a position.)

6) *They are remunerated by fixed salaries in money, for the most part with a right to pensions. Only under certain circumstances does the employing authority, especially in private organizations, have a right to terminate the appointment, but the official is always free to resign. The salary scale is graded according to rank in the hierarchy; but in addition to this criterion, the responsibility of the position and the requirements of the incumbent's social status may be taken into account.*

(There is a defined pay scale covering a range of approximately 60 "spinal points". Each job description has attached to it a range through which the worker may progress over the years as he or she gains experience and responsibility, earning more with each step. Each job has a "bar" beyond which progression is impossible without changing the job description. Each job is therefore only worth a certain maximum amount of money to the organisation.)

7) *The office is treated as the sole, or at least the primary, occupation of the incumbent.*

(The workers are all full time, contractually committed to do 37 hours of work per week. Upon signing their employment contract, they must agree not to take additional employment or to accept payment for other work. Infringement of these rules is sufficiently undesirable to make either a "sacking matter". In most organisations however, the reluctance on the part of the employer for staff to take on other paid work is due to suspicion that the employee will take home-grown knowledge outside the office for profit - a profit that should by rights remain with the employer.)

8) *It constitutes a career. There is a system of 'promotion' according to seniority or to achievement, or both. Promotion is dependent on the judgement of superiors.*

(Most of the technical professionals hope to continually take on more responsibility as they expand their expertise in their discipline. None has ever expressed to me the intention of leaving the profession for another. This is not the case with the admin personnel who in a number of cases tried and sometimes succeeded in doing a different type of work after leaving their jobs in this office.)

9) *The official works entirely separated from ownership of the means of administration and without appropriation of his position.*

(The office building, its furnishings, the computers and photo-copiers, stationery and telephones are all purchased from the office's operating budget. Employees have no legitimate claim to any of it and are not allowed to take objects in office ownership off site except by arrangement with their superiors.)

10) *He is subject to strict and systematic discipline and control in the conduct of the office*

> (Not only is there a code of practice for the profession which deals primarily with ethical issues, there is a manual given to all employees in the office which describes all procedure not related to the specific job task which is covered in the employment contract and the job description that the employee must adhere to, covering everything from working hours, arrangements for sick leave and maternity payments, policy on alcohol consumption during working hours, appropriate modes of dress, and so on.)

(Weber 1978: 220-21, emphasis his).

Behavioural control within the organisation works at two levels in Weber's model. First, there is a universal system of legal authority upon which are based the laws that bind all of society. "Legal norms" are imposed upon people within an organisation and apply to each person equally and impartially. The superior is subject to the impersonal code of rules in the same way as the subordinate. These rules are part of a larger abstract system of rules that have been intentionally established to meet objectives that are rational in character (Weber 1978: 217-218).

At the other end of the spectrum is the influence that operates within the organisation itself between superiors and subordinates. "Power" in Weber's terminology is the ability of one person to impose his or her will upon another or a group of persons "regardless of the basis on which this probability rests." Thus an army or despot uses power to force compliance. This sort of influence is not generally, and certainly not in this particular study group, used to secure co-operation in a bureaucratic office setting. "Domination" on the other hand is more subtle in that it requires that those who comply respond to the specific content of the order. "Discipline" is used to illicit obedience and there will be a habitual response to obey (Weber 1978: 53). Authority implies a belief that the command, and the commander, are both in a legitimate position to make an order and it is tempered by personal influence and persuasion. Blau and Scott (1963) elaborated on this when they distinguished two criteria for authority: voluntary compliance with legitimate commands and the suspension of personal judgement in advance of a command being given (27-3). Members of the organisation obey the commands of their superior only insofar as the superior represents the organisation itself; the superior is not obeyed for personal reasons but in contexts specific to his or her prescribed role and duties (Weber 1978: 218). Translating this into the study context, the Chiefs do not use force to ensure that their orders and suggestions are complied with by their staff. Office subordinates accept, in most instances, that their superiors have good reason for requesting what they do. If they do not comply, they know that they may face formal disciplinary proceedings against them and the possible subsequent loss of their jobs.

Within the bureaucratic organisation, Weber specified the following categories of authority. Again, I will quote him at length.

> 1) *A continuous rule-bound conduct of official business.*
>
> 2) *A specified sphere of competence (jurisdiction). This involves:*
>
> a) *A sphere of obligations to perform functions which has been marked off as part of a systematic division of labour.*
>
> b) *The provision of the incumbent with the necessary powers.*
>
> c) *That the necessary means of compulsion are clearly defined and their use is subject to definite conditions....*
>
> 3) *The origination of offices follows the principle of hierarchy....There is a right of appeal and of statement of grievances from the lower to the higher....*
>
> 4) *The rules which regulate the conduct of an office may be technical rules or norms....It is normally true that only a person who has demonstrated an adequate technical training is qualified to be a member of the administrative staff*[2]*....*

2 This text applies to what I refer to as technical professional staff, not administrative staff as I use the term which, the reader is reminded, is absent from Weber's analysis.

5) *[T]he members of the administrative staff should be completely separated from ownership of the means of production or administration. Officials, employees, and workers attached to the administrative staff do not themselves own the non-human means of production and administration. These are rather provided for their use....*

6) *[T]here is also a complete absence of appropriation of his official position by the incumbent....*

7) *Administrative acts, decisions, and rules are formulated and recorded in writing, even in cases where oral discussion is the rule or is even mandatory....The combination of written documents and a continuous operation by officials constitutes the 'office' which is the central focus of all types of modern organized action.*

(Weber 1978: 218-219)

Rational bureaucracy was the most efficient means of administration in Weber's view. He wrote that the primary source of this superiority "lies in the role of technical knowledge which, through the development of modern technology and business methods in the production of goods has become completely indispensable" (Weber 1978: 223). Laws and machines, the abstract rules governing administration, and the separation of official from the means of administration, all require technical expertise that can only be achieved through occupational training. Bureaucracy is predicated upon the specialisation of tasks, so that as the whole system becomes more complex, so the tasks become more discrete, and each job position requires a more specific knowledge (224). In effect, bureaucracy leads to "domination through knowledge" (225).

Because of the costs of education, Weber believed that the bureaucrats with specialist technical skills typically come from socially and economically privileged strata (Weber 1978: 960). However, educational qualifications also act as a form of "social leveller" where the role played by ancestry or birth as a means of access to an administrative position is now overtaken by the use of education, ostensibly available to all equally (998 ff.). This is an area where Weber's model has become somewhat dated. He meant that the technical expert is chosen for particular skills that relate to the job. This is in contrast to other social systems where for instance, a person is put into a position of responsibility because of birth rank or personal connections. But bureaucracies have evolved into more complex beasts since Weber wrote. Now, educational qualifications are necessary for a wider range of posts.

Weber's model should ideally be considered in relation to the historical time-period within which he worked. Peter Blau (1961) noted that the strict hierarchical controls observed by Weber were more important at a time when authoritarian relations prevailed within social and family relationships, or when lack of educational opportunity might put a premium on qualifications. In such circumstances, rigid hierarchical control may be the most efficient means of bureaucratic operation. However, in other historical periods, Blau used the example of 1950s United States where the equality of social relationships was valued and where popular education had reached a high standard, junior officials may be given far more discretion that in Weber's time (344-345).[3]

Almost without exception, the employees in the office from the study have specialist training or qualification of some description. This is most true of the technical professionals who all have a Bachelor of Arts degree, a post-graduate diploma and have passed the entrance qualifications for the chartering body. In order to ensure that their knowledge remains current, there is a requirement on all the chartered members to undertake 25 hours of Professional Development experience over every two year period, where they must be able to prove to the Institute that they have participated in events that help to broaden their expertise beyond what they normally would do in their own jobs. Many of the technical professionals have additional educational and professional qualifications, for instance doctorates or membership in other institutions. Most of the senior admin personnel also hold diplomas in administration. In addition, as part of staff development, a great deal of ad

3 This caution is appropriate, but much of what Weber outlined at the turn of the century is still valid today. It is because of this that nearly every recently written book on the subject makes reference to Weber's theories (see for instance: Albrow : 1970; Beetham : 1987; Blau and Scott : 1963; Crozier : 1964; Kanter : 1977; Perrow ; 1986.)

hoc on site training is available, though it is geared more towards those in middle positions than the most senior (who are expected to know enough already) or the most junior (who are expected not to need, or want, additional training). Examples of this additional training are first-line management courses, computer training, counselling in making effective presentations and first aid courses. Notably, nearly all of these ad hoc training courses provide the successful participant with a diploma or certificate of achievement which can, and occasionally is, referred to later, for instance in a CV or when making an argument for job regrading.

Bureaucracy developed hand in hand with the modern capitalist state predicated upon capitalism's basic ideal - seeking profitability through rationality. Modern communications which allow for the speedy travel of decisions and goods (Weber 1978: 973-974), the separation of the worker from the means of production and administration (130-131), and a money economy that makes the individual dependant upon a salaried or waged job (964-965), all work together to make bureaucratic forms of administration a highly efficient means of mass control and organisation. Weber saw modern state bureaucracy as a basic component of contemporary western society and as the most effective means of exercising authority: "the whole pattern of everyday life is cut to fit this framework" (223).

> *Once fully established, bureaucracy is among those social structures which are the hardest to destroy. Bureaucracy is the means of transforming social action into rationally organised action....Where administration has been completely bureaucratised, the resulting system of domination is practically indestructible....The individual bureaucrat cannot squirm out of the apparatus into which he has been harnessed (987-988, emphasis his).*

This quote illustrates that Weber took an ambiguous stance to bureaucracy and rationality. On the one hand, he saw bureaucracy's efficiency and effectiveness as preferable to more traditional forms of administration in the same way as the machine is preferable to non-mechanical modes of production. In terms of "precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and material and personal costs" it is clearly superior (Weber 1978: 973). However, he was also concerned about how this rational structure was threatening to personal, emotive and traditional human qualities. He felt that bureaucratic domination leads to a "spirit of formalistic impersonality...without hatred or passion, and hence without affection or enthusiasm. The dominant norms are concepts of straightforward duty without regard to personal considerations" (225). He wrote: "bureaucracy develops the more perfectly, the more it is 'dehumanized', the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation" (975). Weber assumed that there was an overall historical trend that bureaucratic forms of social interaction would inevitably overtake systems based upon mutual social agreement between parties (Mommsen 1974: 15). It is this view, that bureaucracy has no human side, that I will explore and to some extent refute, in this study.

A social critique of Weber

While the maze of rules in many organisations may have a dehumanising effect, personalities prevail, even if only at an "unofficial" level. Peter Selznick noted that formal organisations are co-operative systems, where the control of the superior is responded to with consent from the subordinate, as functions of each of their roles in the organisational structure. However, "individuals have a propensity to resist depersonalization, to spill over the boundaries of their segmentary roles, to participate as *wholes*" (Selznick 1961: 21, emphasis his). The importance of the individual within an impersonal power structure of a bureaucracy was a major concern of later theorists.

The best means of analytically reconciling the problem of the individual and the impersonal organisation is to deal with them separately within the argument. Selznick distinguished between two analytically distinct stand-points which had reciprocal consequences - organisations can be viewed as economic structures and also as adaptive social structures (1961: 20). This is the approach adopted here. Unlike Selznick however, I am not considering types of bureaucratic organisations but types of roles and identities available within them.

As Weber clearly outlined, rules and routines are necessary for the functioning of large organisations: they increase efficiency by allowing each person's behaviour to be predictable. But the reliance on rules within a bureaucracy can have its dangers as well. Over-compliance can lead to dependence, conservatism and an inability to react flexibly to new situations. Robert Merton wrote that this is due to the development of an esprit de corps amongst the workers. Because they have adapted their thoughts, feelings and actions to the organisational structures within which they function, a sense of common destiny develops between co-workers and they can actually focus their attentions more upon defending their own entrenched positions rather than responding effectively to their clients or superiors (Merton 1961: 55).

Weber's writings were undoubtedly influenced by the prevalent *zeitgeist*. The extreme disciplined rationality of the Prussian military, and Taylorism's [4] reduction of work into discrete and sometimes disassociated parts, probably had a strong influence upon Weber's thoughts. According to David Beetham, these influences added to the mechanistic quality of his model. Weber expected the worker to hide any part of the personality that did not coincide with the goals of the organisation. Since that time, it has become clear to social scientists that people bring their own needs and personalities to the workplace so that Weber's ideas of depersonalisation are not found in real situations. Even in a bureaucracy, management cannot force the workers to perform, to be efficient, to work with commitment. These things actually

4 Frederick Tylor proposed a system of the scientific management of work. His studies, which dated back to the 1880s, though his major work "The Principles of Scientific Management" did not appear until 1911, sought to increase worker efficiency by eliminating wasted movements wherever possible. His elaborate time and motion studies proved to have a dramatic effect upon office routines and equipment. For more information, see: Forty 1986; Harvey 1989; Atfield and Kirkhams eds. 1989).

require the workers' co-operation which is a matter for informal negotiations (Beetham : 1987, 16-17).

The highly idealised nature of Weber's model can be illustrated with the experience of the workers in the office under study and other work situations generally. The contrast between the theory of bureaucracy and the practice of work in this office will begin to show how tensions between artificial bureaucratic and organic social identities begin to evolve as the workers' expectations based on the ideal are met with the sometimes confusing, sometimes welcome, counterpoint of reality.

In the remainder of this section I will discuss how Weber's idealised model of bureaucracy is counter-balanced by social aspirations. I will briefly discuss some issues raised by the Weberian model of bureaucracy, referred to hereafter in this section as "the model". The discussion goes beyond that of Weber's "pure" bureaucrats and takes account of all office workers.

In Weber's model, power moves downward only. The superior can control the subordinate but not vice versa. However, people who occupy positions of lesser power don't enjoy that condition, and they, being people just as interested in self-determination as the most senior manger, will do what they can to retain some control over their own and perhaps others' lives. If the management of the organisation lays down a new edict for the workers and they do not accept it, they will subvert it in order to avoid carrying out the unwanted action. Even if they are not entirely successful, recalcitrant juniors will at least gain some satisfaction that their disobedience has confounded their superiors' intentions. In another vein, subordinates may actively seek to guide their superiors into behaviours that they believe are best. For instance, the personal assistant to the chief, whose job it is to organise his work, may delay him from seeing some incoming post while promoting in importance something else.

The model implies that people are completely bounded by their areas of jurisdiction. It is true that the phrase "Sorry, its not in my job description" can be heard from an office worker who is trying to avoid doing an unwanted extra task, and while job descriptions are important in letting a person know what is expected of them, most people working in offices do much more than is formally required. Most importantly, taking on extra work and gaining added responsibility is the best way of getting a promotion, so the ambitious at least, will welcome straying from the confines of their formal jurisdictions. Exploitation in offices is also common where people are forced to take on extra work that is beyond their job descriptions. Even if they do not want to go beyond it, they feel obliged to do so because they do not wish to curry the disfavour of their superiors in the chance that some treat or benefit will become available in the future.

According to the model, people will not change profession and the profession that they have chosen will occupy all their time. This may apply to most office workers but not all. While it is somewhat difficult to switch to another profession of equal status from one year to the next because of the long lead time required to gain the requisite knowledge needed in a responsible post, lateral moves are common and the shift from one occupation to another can take place over a number of years. Occupational shift also commonly occurs within organisations as people take on new responsibilities and areas of expertise. The most common of these is the shift away from technical expertise to management expertise as people progress up the hierarchy.

Workers should be selected for their posts on objective criteria according to the model. This is partly true, and is at least what people sitting in a job interview hope, but interpersonal skills are what really count in an interview situation (Herriot 1987). The ability to argue effectively and to overcome shyness while extolling one's own virtues are equally persuasive in an interview as work history and the clarity of the job application. Nobody wants to choose a work colleague that they fear will be unfriendly, unkempt or annoying. It is also sometimes the case that organisations will actively recruit personnel according to criteria that are wholly unrelated to technical qualifications to enhance the organisation's public image (Cole 1988: 106-112). Most receptionists are attractive and well-spoken young women. Urban local authorities actively recruit women, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities for their vacant positions in the interests of "equal opportunities considerations".

Promotion is also assumed to follow seniority or technical ability. This is also usually the case, but being on friendly terms with the boss doesn't hurt. People who have insulted or displeased the people who grant promotions rarely move up the ladder as quickly as they might (The Independent, 1/9/93). Thus, when office workers complain about their bosses they do it out of earshot. It can be assumed that people who have worked in a particular job for a long while will have learned all that there is to know on a technical level. The reason that some of them have not moved on while younger people have overtaken them in the progression is because the younger ones have shown something non-technical that they lacked such as imagination, the ability to organise and manage, new ideas or personal charisma.

The worker does not appropriate the materials or means of administration of the office in the model. This is true in a legal sense but not a literal one. Yes, the office worker should not take advantage of his or her position for gain that he or she would not normally be entitled to, for instance the policeman should not release a prisoner that is a personal friend, allowing him to run free. The banker should not transfer funds from other accounts into his own and the cleaner should not eat the cakes produced in the factory where he works [5]. But beyond these quite gross offences lie a plethora of little ones that can be overlooked or even deemed to be almost acceptable. The boss can ask the secretary to type a short personal letter, the typist can take an envelope to send off her gas bill, the professional can make a personal telephone call on the office phone. These small transgressions are perfectly acceptable under most circumstances, but they are guided by the norms of the particular organisation and some are more lenient than others. The actual

5 A cleaner in a cakes factory was fired for hiding Genoa sponge cakes down his overalls for later transfer to a secret stash under a sink. Company policy at that factory is that no staff may eat the products (Daily Telegraph, 12/4/94).

limits that a person does not dare to cross will depend upon what all the workers have collectively decided is acceptable.

Similarly, workers in the model are expected to restrict themselves to official business while working. This will usually be the case, but time is also wasted doodling, falling asleep, "looking busy" while not doing anything constructive, gossiping and reading newspapers. These are all activities carried out regularly and invisibly, so that when the supervisor comes within eye range, all is designed to look well. Beyond this are more drastic deviations from the work at hand. Personal business letters can be written at work, computer time used to compose a church newsletter, telephone conversations about the mortgage somebody is trying to arrange are also things that are done by office workers and hidden from view.

These are but a few examples of how the formal bureaucratic structure in the work context is augmented by social processes.

Later theories of bureaucratic organisation

During the early part of this century, the theoretical understanding of what a complex modern organisation was, bureaucratic or otherwise, went on apace in America with little regard for Weber. It was only in the 1930s that Weber's work on bureaucracy had even been translated into English, and it only became influential towards the end of the next decade (Perrow 1986: 63). A separate strand in the debate developed in America in the late 1930s begun by Chester Bernard whose work would later prove to be equally influential in theoretical understandings of work. Both Weber's and Bernard's views were to become cornerstones of later work but never were they fully integrated into a single argument.

Weber's model emphasised hierarchy, legitimacy and power as bureaucracy's main foundations. Terrence Hopkins (1961), in a comparison of the two views likened Weber's to a pyramid and Bernard's to a wheel with lines of communication radiating from the decision-makers in the centre to the remaining workers at the periphery (83). In contrast to Weber, Bernard looked at organisations as co-operative systems and he defined the "formal organization" as "a system of consciously co-ordinated activities or forces of two or more persons" (Bernard : 1961, 17). [6]

Bernard's model described a co-operative system where the group was more important than the individual and group objectives where what the individual strove to achieve. Since individuals were subsumed into the collective, he concluded that organisations themselves were non-personal in character. The way the individual functioned within this structure by adopting a dual personality: the organisation personality (where group objectives were pursued) and the individual personality. Bernard's distinction is very close to my own between bureaucratic and social identities. Individual behaviour is not logical in Bernard's model, but as Perrow noted, is "rationality only in the *leaders'* terms" (1986: 68). Thus, it is the centrally placed decision-makers who identify and promulgate the overarching organisational objectives. This they do by indoctrinating the members of the organisation into the institutional ethos. Weber and Bernard concurred on the problem of authority. Both saw this as being one of achieving of compliance. In Weber's version, the worker's compliance was achieved because he believed in the superior's legitimacy. In Bernard's, compliance was achieved because the workers were indifferent of the outcome. Both men had a concept of shared values: legitimacy for Weber, indoctrination for Bernard. Hopkins went on to compare the two in terms of the structures of authority. Weber attributed status to the unit of the administrator or the "office". Bernard attributed authority to the position a person or sub-group of persons has in the chain of communications within the organisation. Bernard used the concept of "unit of organization" which consisted of one superior and several subordinates, and these were arranged, like Weber's offices, in a hierarchical structure. All activities in the organisation took place within at least one of these units and therefore, all people in the organisation were accounted for. A single position in a unit could serve multiple functions. Hopkins used the example of the foreman who is simultaneously located at the lower managerial level and the work

6 Perrow criticised him when he noted that Bernard "emphasises co-operation almost to the exclusion of such things as conflict, imperative co-ordination, and financial inducements." (1986., 64).

level. All relations within the organisation constituted the communications system of the whole organisation in what may be viewed as a network. "In effect, authority here "flows" to those subject to it through the communications system. It is not exercised "over them" by a well-defined administrative staff" (Hopkins 1961: 92). Central to Bernard's view of "co-operation" was the assumption that management knew best. His co-operation was a lop-sided affair where the communications structure originated at the upper echelons of the organisation and filtered down. The implication of this is that the management level was most rational since they were the people who set the organisation's agenda.

What we see in Bernard is the beginnings of a strain of theory that can address some of the problems of Weber's model outlined above. Here, there is a fuller view of all the personalities that populate a bureaucratic organisation since all players have a stake in the "units", albeit of relatively greater or lesser power. We also see that people in an organisation can adopt a number of strategic identities simultaneously.

In the years that followed the publication of his thesis, Bernard's countrymen began to reject the idea that management was rational and the worker was not (Perrow 1986: 82). Many writers started taking the view that instead of a co-operative relationship between rational management and irrational workers, there was actually frequent conflict between them. Very influential here was the work by Roethlisberger and Dickson in what later became known as the Hawthorne studies. This research of the Western Electric Hawthorne Plant, undertaken in the 1920s and the 1930s was finally published in the book *Management and the Worker.*[7] A series of experiments were carried out by Roethlisberger and Dickson which evolved from the original goal of testing the principles of Taylorism's Scientific Management (and their subsequent rejection) to a new method of organisational research based on intensive observation and interviews and a new concept of formal

7 Published in 1939.

and informal social organisation within a work setting (Schwartzman 1993: 5-17).

The first Hawthorne experiments were designed to test the relationship between illumination and productivity. The results were confusing however, because no matter how the experimenters changed the level of light available to the workers, productivity increased. The experiments were extended to provide more control. One of the primary findings at this stage came to be known as the "Hawthorne Effect" where the workers being studied were responding more positively to the experimenters than to the experimental variables. Thus, in the illumination experiments, productivity increased independently of light or darkness because the workers were responding to a new and interesting situation, that is, being the subjects of experiments.

Roethlisberger and Dickson later reviewed their research techniques under the influence of anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner who suggested that the work group could be examined as a type of small society. The new method involved an investigator to act as a "disinterested spectator" in the work group and another to do interviews who remained distant from the study group. It has been noted that this was the first systematic description of social organisation in an industrial setting (Schwartzman 1993 : 9).

In the later experiments and observation, it was concluded that the workers were regulated by both formal and informal social structures. Roethlisberger and Dickson [8] were pioneers in that they went amongst actual workers and conducted unstructured interviews to discover their opinions and concerns. They were among the first to realise that cliques and informal groups played an important part in the functioning of organisations and that these groups could regulate such things as the speed of production, and the over-riding importance of loyalty to each other, rather than to the organisation. The emphasis in this line of argument was on the development of group

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8 The Hawthorne experiments were criticised from many quarters (see Acker and Van Houten, 1992; Clegg and Dunkerley, 1980; Perrow, 1986; Schwartzman, 1993; Blau and Scott, 1963). However, Schwartzman noted that it is important not to overlook the importance of these studies because Roethlisberger and Dickson allowed their research methodology to evolve during the course of the investigation from controlled experiments to something approximating participant observation in order to answer questions and meet new situations as they became apparent (15-16).

norms and customs and not on power or conflict between groups. There was still an emphasis on the irrationality of the worker *vis a vis* the rational management. Despite their efforts to be dispassionate scientists, the researchers adopted the management's viewpoint, for instance, they did not assess work slow-downs as a means for the workers to ensure that they all kept their jobs by not being over-productive, but as irrational group behaviour (Perrow: 1986).

The human relations school arose out of these studies, and organisational theorists were mainly concerned during the 1940s with finding a relationship between worker satisfaction and productivity. In the mid 1950s, studies started to question even this and noted that though people may be satisfied with their social networks on the job, they would not necessarily also be motivated to be productive. The only thing that really seemed to be effected by worker satisfaction was the rate of turn-over and absenteeism.

In 1964, another influential study was unveiled by Michael Crozier who did large-scale surveys of two examples of French bureaucracy. In one, he looked at a Parisian Government administrative organisation that had 4,500 mostly women employees. The work they did was monotonous and repetitive and the "girls" [9] were under pressure to be accurate. In this study, Crozier looked at a number of social variables such as age and class, but as it was later pointed out, not at gender which was unfortunate given the sexual composition of the work force (Acker and Van Houten 1992). Amongst his conclusions, he found that the women tended only to register job dissatisfaction in areas where there was some hope of change, such as the pace of work rather than its nature. Older people were generally more satisfied with their jobs. Middle class women tended to be happiest when in supervisory positions and he concluded that job satisfaction was related to the match between personal status (outside the workplace) and job status (in the workplace). Again, the literature points to the differentiation between

9 The field work was carried out in the 1950s at a time when all females were apparently deemed to be forever young.... This represents an instance of what Pringle calls "en-girl-ment" where the proletarianisation of women is hidden in their reduced status as "girls" rather than "workers" (1988: 200).

bureaucratic and social identities. Not surprisingly, one of the main points of dissatisfaction for the women was shown in their complaints about their bosses. Three major themes ran through these complaints: supervisors have no skill in human relations, they don't like responsibility, and they don't carry out their jobs competently (Crozier 1964).

Crozier did another study of the development of group strategies and the nature of power in organisations where he considered a large nationalised French manufacturing firm. Like some of the studies already discussed, Crozier came to the conclusion that workers create their own sub-culture within their work groups and that these may exist in opposition to the sub-cultures of other groups in the organisation, particularly management. These group cultures then formed the bargaining platform that workers use against their managers in order to vie for resources and power in the organisation. Crozier noted that within the rationalised system of the organisation, there was a continual process of bargaining between individuals and groups for power, for resources, for tasks to be done by somebody else. The predictability of one's behaviour was a test of one's inferiority (Crozier 1964: 158). Uncertainty was juxtaposed against rational predictability, and Crozier noted that there was an ongoing battle between subordinates and superiors. Subordinates were continually trying to increase the amount of discretion, as marked by unpredictability in their jobs, and to oblige the management to pay for co-operation. Conversely, the supervisors tried to limit the power of the subordinates by exerting pressures through new rules (160-61).

Here arises the very important point that seems to get lost in much of the theory on organisations. Power is not just something that comes from management. It is continually being asserted from below. Weber partially acknowledged this when he wrote of the necessary legitimate authority that those in power must achieve within bureaucracy; Roethlisberger and Dickson missed the point. Subordinates also have their power and are able to exert it, but it may not be a "legitimate" form of power in the eyes of the management. Subordinate power can be exhibited in subtle ways that circumvent questions of legitimacy, for instance by bending rules but not breaking them, or by acting in accordance with one's peer group but against the unstated expectations of management.

In the 1970s and 1980s, theories of bureaucracy had a change of emphasis. Feminism led to a complete re-evaluation of the way that large organisations, especially offices and manufacturing firms, functioned and how power worked within them. Rosabeth Moss Kanter's study "Men and Women of the Corporation" (1977) is generally regarded as a principal work in the area of gender relations in large organisations. Kanter was influenced by Michael Crozier, and like him, focused upon power relations between groups within a large organisation. Her work was richer however, mainly because her research methodology, which encompassed a wider range of techniques than Crozier's, allowed her to gain a more informal understanding of the interactions that were taking place. Along with Crozier, she wanted to show that "everyone within an organisation, no matter how silly or irrational their behaviour seemed, was reacting to what their situation made available, in such a way as to preserve dignity, control, and recognition from others" (Kanter 1977: 291).

Kanter considered the relations between male executives, their wives, their secretaries, and also somewhat peripherally dealt with women in relatively powerful positions within the corporation. Her conclusion was that while men were in a stronger position than women in the corporate structure, this was due more to differences in power than to sexual discrimination. She identified a great deal of pressure for complete conformity amongst management where they were expected by each other to have the same tastes in dress, in hobbies, in political opinions and such. Her implication was that this conformity is implicitly enforced by management as a means of social control so that there could be a high level of predictability in one another. This not only allowed them to be able to quickly anticipate the objectives and motivations of their peers, but also gave an indication of loyalty to the organisation. If managers were willing to conform in dress and taste to the informal rules set out, this could be taken as superficial proof that they were also willing to conform to the objectives of the organisation. Women managers, who were assumed to be different by the predominantly male management layer, were difficult to fit into this paradigm and were thus marginalised. Women were often relegated to positions where their status derived directly from the men they worked for.

Kanter described power as the ability to get things done, and to mobilise resources to achieve personal goals. Only a very few people in her study had access to this power, and it was an access which they guarded and restricted (ibid. 166). Office gossip was often centred around the power plays taking place amongst peers and superiors. People who had exhibited that they were in the realms of decision making and control of resources were generally better liked as managers, though they were not necessarily also nicer people (169). Personal status was increased by associations with people in more powerful positions, whether this meant a secretary with a highly placed boss or an aspiring young executive being on friendly terms with a more senior person. Kanter, (and Crozier) concluded that those who feel that they do not have the power they need or deserve tend to become bossy and restrictive of others. Managers in this position gave little freedom to their subordinates and would not allow them to make decisions or not allow subordinates to speak freely in outside forums (190).

The beauty of Kanter's book is that she looked at all aspects of organisational life, including the daily interactions that are so small that they may seem meaningless, and pulled them together into a wider understanding of how a hierarchy functions. In addition, she examined power from a number of angles, most importantly by looking at hierarchy *per se*, assumptions concerning gender-based behaviour, and briefly, at the material environment. Kanter's location of gender within a wider non-sexual structure is something that unfortunately other writers have failed to copy. By focusing on gender alone, that is looking at how women relate to men while ignoring larger relations between male and female superiors to male and female subordinates, research results cannot be as rich.

An example of an approach which considers women in detail and men as abstract concepts was undertaken by Sally Westwood in her book "All Day

Every Day" (1984). Her interest was to consider women's subordination in the work setting within a system of overriding paternalism and patriarchy. Westwood purposefully took an extreme feminist stance and while she carefully considered how women's domestic roles as mothers, wives, fiancées and daughters effected their expectations of work, she never spoke to any of the men in question (sons, fiancés, husbands and fathers) possibly skewing her conclusions. Westwood went amongst women factory workers and informally collected information on their daily interactions and common sense understandings. She succeeded in illustrating, within a Marxist context, how gender identities are reproduced on the shop floor.

Much more satisfactory is the work by Australian Rosemary Pringle in her book "Secretaries Talk" (1988 and see also 1994) which focused on the job role of "secretaries" as an example of on understudied and primarily female occupation. Her methodology involved extensive interviews with secretaries and their bosses, whether either group was female or male. The main focus of the book was "on the relationship between secretaries as an identifiable social group and the discursive construction of secretaries as a category; on the relationship between power structures and the day-to-day negotiation and production of power; on the connection between domination, sexuality and pleasure "(x). Pringle's approach was refreshing in a number of ways; first because of its emphasis on how the individual seeks personal gain and self expression in the forms of pleasure and sexuality; second because of her rejection of the feminist assumptions that female secretaries are somehow not living up to their potential to be complete and autonomous human beings; and third, because of her consideration of how material culture in the form of office technology, impacts upon social relations in the office. Amongst her conclusions were that the secretary may construct her relationship with her boss and her job in such as way that she can build self-respect (1988: 33) and she also devises means of resistance in order to preserve some of her autonomy (47). A spill-over of roles and identities from outside contexts such as those that define family relations, sexuality and gender, social protection and support, fed in as a means of defining their work selves. Women bosses also related to their male or female secretaries within a sexual discourse. Women relating to women developed this and devised narcissistic pleasure from one another since, Pringle noted, women are encouraged to see themselves and each other as men would see them. The work environment, while seemingly rational, does not "actually manage to exclude the personal and sexual" (89).

A number of points can be drawn out of this review of the literature. First, and most importantly in terms of how this thesis is structured overall, the bureaucratic framework described so well by Weber is in daily practice augmented by social and group behaviours that have very little to do with the task at hand. They have much more to do with interaction and personal satisfaction. Second, legitimate power flows from the top down, but influence can also rise up through a formal hierarchy. Those in subordinate positions may use subversive strategies and to sway the management trajectory. Sub-groups in the work situation develop common norms and corporate manoeuvres to do this. Third, the status that an individual achieves outside of work relating to gender, age, or social expectation, influences their behaviour and satisfaction while on the job.

The job description

The job description is the single most limiting factor affecting the worker's behaviour. It sets the parameters of task specialisation and defines clearly the degree of autonomy that the worker may exhibit. Each job description has its own place embedded within a hierarchical chain of command and the worker must be subordinate to particular specified individuals within the organisation. Salary is determined by the job description as is the employee's social status inside and outside the organisation. I will therefore describe this feature of modern work in some detail.

The job description is an entirely impersonal, and in some senses fictive, description of a person, the germinal worker, that is then "filled" by a real person. It's impersonality is what makes it functional: if the person cannot maintain the fiction he or she can be replaced with another who can, leaving the whole structure intact at all times since a "vacancy" does not mean that the job doesn't exist but that there is nobody to do it. The hierarchy of job descriptions can be modified as the objectives of the organisation or the exigencies of external realities bear upon it. These may lead to the trimming away of redundant posts, allowing for the growth of new ones. Jobs may be held in a kind of suspended animation, for instance in a "frozen post", which is a vacancy that will not be filled unless some pressure, such as manpower constraints or finances, is relieved.

While the job description says nothing of the personality of the worker, personal qualities are nonetheless important in making a good employee. The job descriptions are in theory written in a context separate from the people in the office but the job advertisements will usually be at least partially written by those people who are actually working in close relation to the vacant post. Thus, the job advertisement is a means of interjecting the personal into the impersonal, in the aim of attracting "suitable" applicants, and provides only a glimpse of the job description. Job advertisements for professional posts will seek people who are "responsible", who will need to "meet demanding deadlines", have "excellent communications skills" and are "self-starters". These characteristics are useful in jobs where the individual will have a relatively high level of autonomy. In jobs where autonomy can detract from the post-holder's ability to do the job, for instance in routine clerical jobs, the qualities that are sought in the candidate are that they are "enthusiastic", and "young", who are "seeking challenge" and willing to "learn the ropes", such people will willingly take direction.

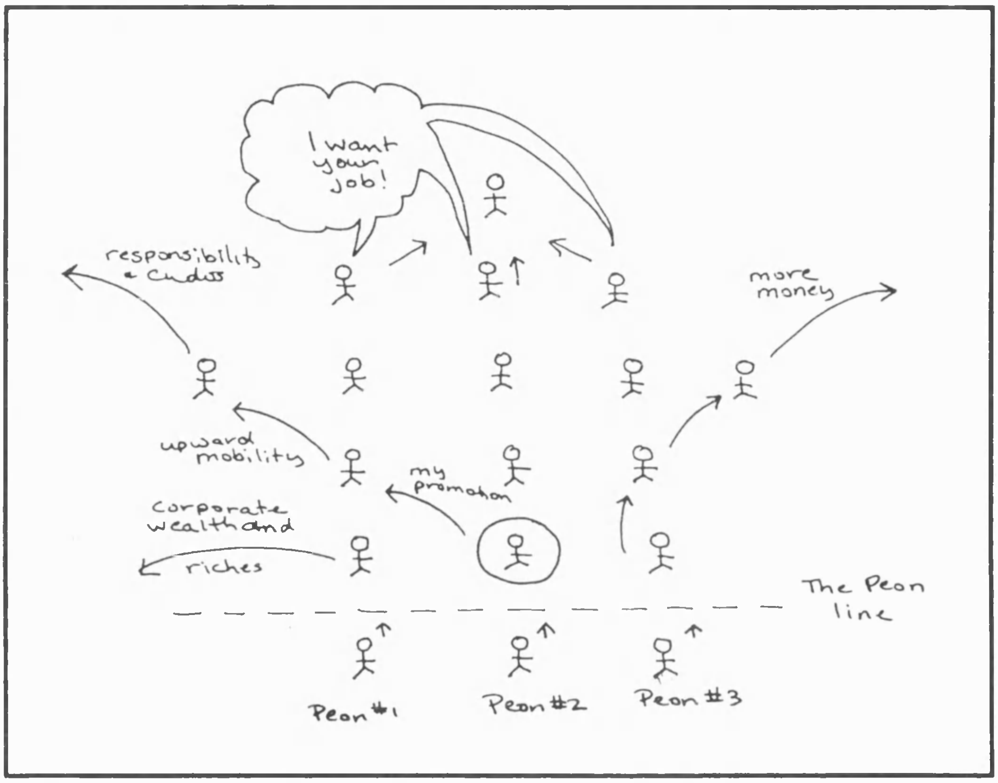
The job interview is used to select personalities appropriate for the job description. The applicants take great pains to be an impersonal ideal: they dress conservatively, use their best grammar when answering questions, and maintain good posture. At the same time however, they try to be pleasing to the interviewers: they try to be witty, to show their intellect or that they are pleasant people who will make acceptable colleagues. The interviewers try, on the other hand, to identify whether the applicant is able to fulfil the impersonal specifications of the job description and if they have the right personal qualities. It has generally been my experience that it is the impersonal characteristics of the applicant that is the predominant consideration when deciding on who to hire for an office job, at least at an explicit and verbal level, but the "feel good factor" is also taken into account.

Despite its generalised nature and bureaucratic aims, the job description nonetheless goes far to define the individual's social remit. It provides guides for behaviour such as the level of autonomy that is permissible, the amount of direction that can be given to other's office behaviours and the degree of respect that should be awarded to the post-holder by others. People take on the characteristics of the job and internalise them in terms of the expectations they have of themselves, the level of self-confidence they posses, the status position they obtain. They are judged according to the job description they have. These expectations also apply to other members in the group and wider society. In the office under study, a clear case of this occurred. A junior tech was given very little autonomy during the course of his work and was treated with some disdain by his managers who clearly felt that he was too inexperienced to be given a higher degree of responsibility. One day he found another job. His new position was markedly more senior than his old one - it also paid about 20% higher salary. People's attitudes towards him changed almost overnight: whereas before he was treated as someone who could not be trusted to make even the most basic decisions unguided, suddenly his soon-to-be-former colleagues learned new respect for him and began to believe that he was clever and professional. The only thing that was different and that changed the group's views of him was that he had a new job description.

It is difficult for the individual to extend their remit of activity and influence beyond what the job description allows. Indeed, it is the job description that provides the best mechanism for Management to curtail the aspirations of the workers. Bureaucratic social relations are characterised by the application, acceptance and rejection of power, or otherwise put, the ability to direct and control the actions of others, power in the Weberian sense. The job description provides an effective way of limiting an individual's room for manoeuvre in power politics. If a junior person shows a threatening level of ambition or a canny political flair, the more senior can, and do, invoke the constraints of the job description to render that person's position ineffective. The file clerk who wants to be trained on the new computer system so that she can move on to more interested work is prevented from doing so because her manager doesn't think that computer skills would be necessary for filing; the junior technical staff member cannot sign his own letters to colleagues in other offices but must have it be signed (and checked) by his manager; the principle man cannot sit in on weekly meetings of management in order to make a bid for a project.

The constraints posed by the hierarchy of job descriptions on an individual's aspirations can be clearly illustrated by Figure 5. This is a copy of a sketch done by one of the junior techs from the study, who while sitting in the pub after work one evening with his junior colleagues began to fantasise about how he could improve his situation. He wanted better pay, more interesting work, more responsibility over his own actions, and to be allowed to make some of the decisions that affected his work product. He realised however that as long as he was classed as a "junior" he would not be given the opportunity to do any of these things. His colleagues around the table were in a similar position: they were also at the bottom of the pile. In his fantasies he began to improve their lot. First he drew the hierarchy as it existed and then he began moving people to and from positions, like chessmen on a board, freeing up slots for himself and his mates, allowing him to enter the slots that would grant them their wishes. He started by poking fun at the managers who wanted to be a chief. Then he got rid of two strategically placed Principles, who left for other, better jobs. These vacant positions where then filled by two seniors (also sitting at the table in the pub) allowing him to be promoted into their positions. Another of the juniors had had enough of the office and had taken another job, freeing another position at the junior level. The fantasy was completed when three new "oiks" were recruited to take the place of the now promoted juniors: three new people who were lower in the pecking order than the real juniors, which would allow the current incumbents the opportunity to give orders rather than receive them.

Figure 5: "Everyone's a Winner!"



Management theory

There is no "subordinate training" to mirror management training. Nobody is taught how to be the subservient oik, to be controlled, or to be obedient. While socialisation through the education system, wider society (Goldschmidt 1992; Willis 1977), and on the job, will instil a sense of legitimacy in the superior's motives and actions, those in the subordinate position do not always wish to comply, and in some cases, the managers do not want to fulfil their roles either. The very existence of management theory highlights this problem: despite its focus on creating an acceptable and meaningful set of parameters for managers and workers, its basic aim is to exert control and modify behaviours (Sennett 1993: 112). It is therefore implicitly acknowledged that the subordinate is not always satisfied with that role and that he or she on occasion will want to exert self-direction and autonomy.

Management Theory serves as a means for the worker to become socialised into this system of power and submission. In this section, I will briefly review where the workers learn this theory and I will mention a number of the models of management behaviour that are typically put forward. The purpose of these models is to describe to students and managers alike what their own behaviours might be in order to make them more aware of the impacts of their actions.

One particularly well known model is McGregor's "Theory X and Theory Y". The Theory X Manager looks down upon his subordinates with disdain, finding them lazy, lacking in ambition, selfish, resistant to change and stupid, making the management response an autocratic one where motivations are seen to be derived from monetary gain, worker behaviours are modified to fit the organisation and are otherwise strictly directed and controlled. The Theory Y Manager, on the opposite end of the continuum, sees resistance in workers as a result of past bad experiences, and that people will try to do a good job, indeed will want to, if only given the chance. This manager will respond by arranging the working conditions in order to enable the workers to use their own efforts towards organisational objectives (Cole 1988; Handy 1986; McGregor 1960: 47-48). The ideal for the manager to attempt to achieve would be nearer to Theory Y than X with democratic and open leadership style, however, the situation might in some cases dictate a less lenient manner.

A second oft-quoted model is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs which identifies two types of needs in all individuals: primary needs which relate to basic animal drives such as those for the need for food, air or sex at the low end, graduating to safety needs, and secondary needs such as the social needs for affection, ego needs for recognition and achievement, and finally, at the top end of the hierarchy, self-actualisation needs for personal growth and self-fulfilment (Maslow 1973) The hierarchy is based upon two assumptions.

First, that once a need is satisfied, it is no longer a motivator, and second, that as soon as one set of needs is satisfied, the next set becomes dominant (Torrington 1989: 249). The manager is advised to be aware of this hierarchy by not attempting to use an inappropriate set of needs in order to motivate staff.

The final model that I will note to serve as an example of this kind of theory is Adair's model of leadership with its three main components of group needs, task needs and individual needs, each fulfilled in the context of the whole leadership situation. An effective leader in this model is one who will be able to balance the relative importance of group, task and individual needs in every situation, making adjustments in order to achieve optimal results. Training tasks associated with this model encourage the manager to learn to define the task, plan, brief, control, evaluate, motivate, organise and set an example (Adair 1983).

Management texts such as "Effective Management", (Torrington et. al. 1989) take this further by providing practical examples of how working managers cope with the problems of their jobs in aiding the manager to decide how to cope with the responsibility of co-ordinating staff and addressing senior management concerns while simultaneously handling their own workloads, examples are given of best practice.

Management texts and methods can be generalised to the specific locus of work. They are not meant to be used like recipes in cook books but are *aide memoirs* of potential contingencies and appropriate solutions. But many managers are not by preference academically minded and would rather not waste time learning about obscure models. Their impatience is rewarded with another type of management theory, which offers succinct practical advice that can be easily learned and applied. This is what the bulk of management training consists of.

The underlying philosophy behind *The Manager's Handbook: The practical guide to successful management* (Young 1986) is to impart a concentrated list of problems and solutions upon the student (or manager) who does not want to waste time reading theory but wants practical tools to obtain solutions with the minimum effort. Concern for the emotional make-up of subordinates is acknowledged but only as a secondary priority to the book's main focus of how to get the job done. Even the book's format is geared towards easy consumption and each pair of facing pages deals with a distinct problem. For instance, in the area of informal communication, the advice is as follows:

> *As a manager you will never have control of more than a part of the communication process. Paradoxically, the part to which you have direct access diminishes as you rise in the organisation. Your subordinates will begin to tell you only what they think you wish to hear....To communicate effectively, you should have reliable two-way access to the grapevine, via intermediaries. Through 'moles' and 'mouths' you can test reaction to ideas, receive information on others and control rumours helpful to your objectives. (Young 1986: 142-143)*

The implication of the above passage is clear: the manager should use whatever means are available to achieve personal work goals. This approach is much closer to the reality presented by the day-to-day interactions of office workers than the idealised advice offered by the Maslow or Adair models. It takes an offensive approach and acknowledges the manager's own ambitions in the "dog eat dog" world of work.

Management theory is promoted with an almost evangelical zeal in the work world and in my experience is the single area of professional thinking that most workers have received training in. Management theory will surface within the training careers of office workers in a number of situations. The most obvious and precise of these is "doing a management course" whether this be a qualification such a Diploma of Management Studies or a Master of Business Administration. Those who undertake such training are the best versed in the subject and have the roundest understanding of the theoretical background and practical applications. Other avenues of learning management theory are open to those who are unwilling to concentrate their efforts to this extent. Many firms or organisations will send senior personnel on short courses designed to hone their management skills without becoming mired in the academic theory underpinning them. The purpose of these is similar to that of Young's handbook described above: they provide the student with a range of possible solutions and practical advice for common situations.

Even less structured or informative, management theory can be learned in a form so digested that it bears little relation to the original subject, for instance in the press in articles such as "Law change for staff rest areas" (Financial Times, 14/12/92), or "Cuts in sick pay considered by employers" (Financial Times, 29/6/93), television sit-coms such as "Drop the Dead Donkey", movies such as "Working Girl", or novels such as "Babbitt" and "The Mezzanine" (for a complete resume of novels containing reference to office work, see Lewis 1992). Every office worker, typist or senior manager, has some experience of management theory, no matter how diffuse and informal their indoctrination might have been.

The explicit reference made to management theory in the office under study varies according to age and experience. Those in the least powerful positions and who have also received the least amount of formal education learn mainly from their colleagues what is "right and wrong" and learn their expectations mainly from the responses they receive to complaints made in the forum of office gossip. Theirs is an understanding based on past practice. Those with the most finely tuned understanding are those who have recently completed their educations. Those people who are most senior while still not being within the management cadre have generally laid aside the theoretical basis of management theory and have retained only selective bits which they can produce to illustrate to listening peers what they would do if they were given the opportunity to manage. Finally, those who actually do manage rarely if ever make any explicit reference to management theory. Though they may have internalized some of its assumptions, they are in the daily position of having to deal with subordinates and have learned their skills largely through trial and error. The managers also believe, and here they are explicit, that since they are the only people in the organisation who have actually "managed", they know best, assuming that they are doing the job correctly.

Controlling potential clashes between the manager and the subordinate is a primary aim of management theory - a less often discussed problem is the difficulties that managers can have managing professionals. In some offices, professional workers may experience difficulties, especially early in their careers, in taking orders from managers who may have less formal education and a more generalist background in problem solving. Professionals are socialised in their peculiar work culture, one that emphasises specialised training, autonomy in problem solving, and professional standards. Part of the professional work culture is a commitment to, and identification with, the profession above that to the employer (Kerr et. al. 1977). Management culture is characterised with performance, seeks efficiency, and is competitive. The professional only becomes so when recognised to have mastered particular specialised knowledge. As such, they are socialised by their professions not to allow themselves to be compromised by their employing organisations. There may result a dilemma between the professional's need for autonomy and the management's need for control (Raelin 1991).

A perversion of this problem arises in organisations such as this which have organisational objectives aligned with a profession and which are relatively small in size. It is often the case that professionals become managers as they progress in their careers and that there are few if any people in senior positions who have been fully and formally trained in management techniques. People in this situation are not always equipped to control people in group settings and have a tendency to learn their management techniques through reference to how they themselves were treated in past jobs. This results in a muddled set of management objectives that may not be able to stand up to sustained criticism from unhappy subordinates. Management techniques learned *ad hoc* are informal and as such may be perceived as illegitimate.

Top-down power is implicit in almost all examples of Management Theory, whatever the specific form. It is therefore most useful to those who hold power. It can however play a part in the strategies of subordinates. Most importantly in this regard, it provides a calibration against which subordinates judge the efficacy and legitimacy of those to whom they must answer. It is when the lowly spot inconsistencies in their superior's behaviours that they most enthusiastically counteract with subversive strategies.

Conclusion

Bureaucratic roles and identities relate to tasks and hierarchy. They are in effect artificial since they are adopted according to a framework that exists prior to the individual's entry into the work situation. Though the individual may have a stake in them, particularly professionals who sacrificed time, effort and money to obtain qualifications, these are not the most natural or even satisfying available for the individual to adopt. As was shown with the critique of Weber who wrote solely of the bureaucratic, there are social forces in the work setting that significantly impact upon how behaviours are played out. It was also shown that management studies implicitly acknowledge that non-formal structures are important, hence their focus upon providing tools to handle subordinate, and in some cases superior, colleagues. These tools would not be required if the chain of command was as clear as the job descriptions and hierarchy would imply.

Bureaucratic styled behaviours are turned "on" whenever work is involved. They ease interactions in the execution of tasks that involve a number of workers by clarifying the flow of command through ritualised responses. When an individual interacts with a person whose job description is higher in status, they show respect and compliance, and with the less highly placed, with authoritarianism and even attempted intimidation. There are many instances in the work day that the behaviours are turned "off", for instance when non-work matters such as the daily afternoon coffee break are being attended to, or non-work situation such as lunch or the Christmas party.

The suspension of bureaucratic roles can be mutually agreed between individuals out of friendship or in an attempt to foster team working. In these instances, social strategies are more effective and appropriate.

Bureaucratic roles are summarised in words, and behaviours are formalised in contracts and manuals. There is a right and a wrong way of doing things, and the boundaries for behavioural improvisation are generally very clearly defined. Since so much of Western society is dependent upon bureaucracy, its related roles and identities can be used in multiple situations and they provide a predictable and reliable context for a range of interactions. They are especially useful when dealing with strangers about whom the individual has no knowledge or shares no mutual obligation. In the formal setting of an office, they are pre-planned, and usually the identity precedes the individual, so they are rational. And because of their rational nature, they may be generalised and make a convenient and fairly accurate yardstick for the assessment of behaviours. These are behaviours "by the book".[10]

The disadvantage of bureaucratic identities is that they are rigid and make it difficult for the individual to improvise in unexpected situations. Since they are task oriented, they are not always applicable in purely social situations. They are much more useful for those to whom they give power than to those from whom power is denied. The people who complain about bureaucracy are not those sitting behind the desk but in front of it.

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10 It may be argued that bureaucratic roles provide certainty in a modern world characterised by change. For a discussion of modernity and how this impacts upon the individual see Berman (1982), Harvey (1989) and Featherstone (1991).

Chapter Three: Office gossip

Introduction

In this first ethnographic chapter, I will not focus upon a material element of office interaction but upon decisions and information. I begin here because this will provide a clear introduction to the manner in which the workers structure their bureaucratic and social lives. This chapter sets out the difference between formal and informal power. The argument is cast in the contrast between bureaucratic decisions and information, and the persuasion and informal communication system provided by office gossip.

The formal information network contains dry information. More important to the daily interactions of the workers however is the information of who is doing what to whom: the machinations of the hierarchy. This is not dry information but juicy gossip. If the workers are to pull together as a team, if the many personalities are to be suppressed to allow the constitution of a single functioning unit, each individual must know the agendas and methods of the others. This must occur alongside the formal hierarchy.

Information is power and the office workers in this study seek both. I rely upon the definition of power provided in Chapter Two by Kanter, as the ability to get things done and to mobilise resources to achieve personal goals. Under this wider rubric, two distinctions may be made in the means that allow this power to be wielded. The first is reflected in the earlier discussion about Weber. Weber's *legal-rational* authority implies a belief in the legitimacy of those in power. Information is released within the formal bureaucratic mechanisms in the office. The managers posses the most information and also that of the highest quality. They are in the position to hold and control this information, they have the power to use it as they see fit. In this formal system, the remainder of the staff see only what they are shown and know only what they are taught.

In the work situation however, a real leader's ability to direct the behaviours of others is not necessarily due to a belief that his or her position is legitimate (Sennet 1993). The boss often receives respect by being coercive and punitive because there exists a split between functional authority and personal authority (ibid. 37). This suggests that social or personal factors play a part in determining how power is wielded in office politics. Gossip is an informal mechanism used by the office workers in this study, particularly those with the least amount of legitimate authority, to gain information and to influence those around them. Unlike legitimate or formal power that is ultimately based upon words on paper, informal power is often based upon the spoken word only. Nowhere in the office files is it written that a particular person is trustworthy, clever, ineffective, cheerful or quarrelsome. These characteristics are deduced by informal means without words on paper. Gossip also allows the relatively powerless to gain access to secrets and to devise mutual strategies within a group. Gossip is committed to the memory of the individual and the collective memory of the group. The workers have developed a mythology about those who populate their lives, assigning each person a saga and a quest. It is an oral history that is revised daily.

There are a number of commonly understood definitions for the term gossip. Two broad approaches can be identified in the literature. There is nothing in this literature relating specifically to the problem of office workers. I therefore draw my examples from general anthropological texts. In the first approach, gossip is viewed simply as interpersonal discourse. This approach is best applied when the content of communication is the focus of research or when the consideration of conversation figures heavily in the research methodology. Paine and Haviland will provide examples. Robert Paine (1967) wrote that "Gossip is, first, a genre of informal communications and, second, a device intended to forward and protect individual interests."(278). His working definition of gossip included first, "talk of personalities *and* their involvement in events of the community"; and second, "talk that draws out other persons to talk in this way" (283) . Haviland on the other hand defined gossip as "conversations about absent third parties" and in so doing used the term as a gloss for many disparate types of conversations (1977: 28) . He also noted that gossip tended to contain "useful information" which may or may not always be obtained in neutral contexts (39).

The second approach considers gossip to be a particular style of interaction - a sub-set or style of interpersonal discourse. In this approach, gossip takes on negative connotations. Haviland used gossip as his primary means of collecting ethnographic information in a Mexican village, and he therefore needed to view the phenomenon broadly. Bailey (1971) on the other hand, in considering gossip generally as a means of managing personal reputations, broke informal communication into various specific types. He wrote that "chat" is story-telling with no moral content; "scandal" is a "gross breach of widely accepted norm[s] of conduct"; "rumour" is like scandal but the bearer takes no responsibility for its content; "open criticism" is offered where the bearer takes explicit responsibility; and finally "gossip" is about "persons and their conduct" and contains "an overt moral evaluation" (1971: 287-88). Other writers also make distinctions between different elements of gossip. Heppenstall (1971) found that the people in a small Austrian mountain farming community distinguished between *plaudern* (chatter) and *tratschen* (gossip with malicious undertones) (1971: 139-166). Blaxter (1971) found something similar in a small French mountain village where the villagers distinguished between *bavarder* which is "good" or "natural" gossip, and *mauvaise lange* which is "bad" (1971: 119-138). Looking at it from yet another angle, Tannen (1990) made a distinction between male-style and female-style gossip in England and America, when she wrote that there is a difference between "talking about" (what men consider to be gossip with a related sense that it is undesirable) and "talking against" which is the only sort of gossip that women tend to find objectionable (96, 110).

It will be the purpose of this chapter to consider "gossip" as a means of identifying the social structures and motivations in the office under study in their widest sense. I will therefore adopt a strategy sympathetic to Paine and

Haviland though having done this, I will consider the phenomenon from a number of perspectives in parallel with the second identified approach. For my purposes here, gossip may be defined as "all informal communication" in contrast to the formal and bureaucratic communication of written reports, office memos, talk that occurs during meetings, or explicit instructions issued between colleagues about what should be done in a particular situation. Gossip in this sense is characterised by its spontaneity and its non-bureaucratic goals - it is communication, whether spoken or merely composed of gestures, that is about the unofficial aspects of office life, and is "inside" communication as opposed to communication that is open to scrutiny by the "outside".

It will be shown that formal decisions are made by the managers, or line managers who have legitimate power. The more important a decision is to the office as a whole and the more closely it relates to the outcome of organisational aims, the more likely that it will be made by those at the top of the formal hierarchy. Almost without fail, formal decisions are ultimately committed to paper or other forms of hard copy and are stored for later reference. The history of a decision must be preserved with accuracy since it may be called into question at a later date and the process must be defensible to prove its rationality.

In contrast, an informal decision typically does not derive from organisational aims but from personal interaction. Decisions, communications and pieces of information that do not relate to the job or the hierarchy of the job description are much more loosely structured. They are emotional (and it may be argued in some instances irrational) responses to individual interactions. Informal persuasion has no respect for hierarchy and is often used to subvert its structures. Informal communications are not committed to any form of storage except that of memory and the words are spoken, virtually never written. These are communications that influence personal reputation without concern for the impact on the organisation. These distinctions are summarised in Figure 6.

Figure 6: The nature of communication

Bureaucratic	Social
formal	informal
legitimate	illegitimate
hierarchical	non-hierarchical
written	spoken
uni-directional (top down)	multi-directional
group reputation	personal reputation
rational	irrational

Gossip will be considered in this chapter in a number of forms. First, in its purest social form it is as an entertaining means of passing the time and forming social bonds between colleagues. This is only a relatively small component of gossip's overall function in the workings of the office. It is also a crucial means for those in relative positions of low formal authority to gain access to information that they need in order to carry out their jobs and to survive in the social hierarchy. A contrast between formal and informal information is given in the following sections which explores the different means of gaining information. Gossip, unlike bureaucratic information, is the means for the individual to manage their own reputations, to damage the reputations of their rivals and enhance those of their champions. This is a social function that affects an individual's ability to wield formal authority - it can enhance the status of the lowly and reduce that of the highly placed. The discussion concludes by considering how gossip is used by the individual to set their own behavioural standards within the group, augmenting or circumventing formal rules of behaviour and how gossip defines group boundaries.

Idle talk

Without intending to cast the featured office workers in a disparaging light, in its most informal incarnation, office gossip bears a somewhat disconcerting resemblance to the grooming behaviours of baboons. Chatting and picking lice may serve similar functions in these dissimilar communities, primarily to foster a feeling of togetherness and bonding while passing away free time. This similarity between higher and lower primate social behaviour appears to have a phylogenetic origin. Dunbar (1992), and subsequently Duncan (1992), posited that gossip in humans is a direct outgrowth of social grooming in primates. Gossip is a "cheap" means of forming and maintaining social ties because a number of people can be addressed simultaneously while the one who gossips is free to do something else (The Guardian, 7 August 1993). There is a correlation in primates in the amount of time invested in grooming and the willingness of a pair to support one another, thus indicating that grooming can help foster social loyalties (Duncan 1992: 5). However, grooming is difficult in human groups because of their size so that, it is hypothesised, a more efficient means of creating bonds would be called for (11).

Grooming by gossip can thus be said to have the aim of forming social bonds. Idle talk could not be said to be a purposive activity in itself however. The very fact that is it "idle" indicates that it is undertaken in a low value time frame[11] and as such is an activity that is so informal, so far removed from organisational objectives, that it can be regarded as subversive behaviour in is very execution. Forming social bonds takes an inordinate amount of time, especially in the context of "work time" and must be carried out piecemeal between concentrated bursts of fixed and formally determined tasks. The office employee is under a contractual and moral obligation to carry out

11 See Chapter Seven for a discussion of the value of time.

specified work, but as was noted in the previous discussion of bureaucracy, he or she tries to boost personal satisfaction within the formal structures of the office hierarchy. One means of achieving this though idle talk is to form friendships. Another is to counteract apathy and listlessness through chat.

Work can be both boring and stressful. Every worker occasionally experiences times when he or she is simply not motivated to do what is expected, though they are motivated enough to be on the job in order to accrue time towards pay. It may be the first thing in the morning, and the unpleasantness of the journey to work must be overcome by taking time out for a cup of coffee and friendly word, or it may be near the end of the day, and there is neither energy nor interest remaining to "work" the remaining hours. Work can be avoided during statutory coffee, tea and lunch breaks. Little times out are created while passing in the hall-way or on the stairs, and during chance meetings over the sink in the Ladies. Nothing is more diverting than idle chat. Gossip is a favourite form of entertainment for those who are avoiding work. It is easy to do and easy to hide, may be done in large groups or between two individuals, shrink and expand to fill vacant time, cover any topic and so be interesting to anybody. It can be adjusted to fit any mood. Different configurations of people tend to cover the same ground again and again each time they engage, elaborating favourite themes as they go on. As each participant becomes more familiar with the subject, creative evolution can exhibit social skill and wit.

There is a ritualised flavour to these interactions[12] and a relationship between topic and time of day[13] can be identified. Over the years that I worked in the office, I observed the following ritualised interactions. In the morning, almost without fail, as the numbers of those present grew, the young men would congregate into a small group to discuss sports scores. They

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12 See Goffman (1967: 33-40) for a more detailed discussion of ritual rules of talk in situations such as those just described.

13 Roy (1973) noted a similar phenomenon in his own fieldwork where one man ritually produced a banana from his lunch bag at a certain time every day, proclaiming to his co-workers that it was "banana time" to justify a break from his labours.

were typically thus engaged for 5 to 10 minutes before they began to work, and before the managers arrived. The talk was predictably along the lines of "my team is better than yours" and "I would rather die than associate with those losers the way you do." This would then be countered by some retort, some excuse. Jokes would go back and forth and scores of other teams would be compared. The conversation would drift to what each person had done the night before, and what they planned to do by way of after-work entertainment for the rest of the week. Nobody was actually interested in what was discussed. They would not have missed these standardised interactions if they had had the day off, and they probably would not be able to remember what they had discussed the previous morning. Their daily reiterations of the same conversations are evidence that this was only their means of winding up for the day, getting ready, and getting used to being together again.

The next ritualised time-bound interaction was the morning tea break. Each day, everyone worked until about 11.00 a.m. when it was at least an hour until it was time to leave for lunch. It was mutually understood that a break was called for. Somebody would walk over to the kitchen area where these interactions invariably took place[14] and would begin the preparations. In a few minutes, after it was certain that somebody else had gone to the trouble of boiling the kettle, cleaning the dregs out of the pot and taking a bottle of milk out of the refrigerator, the remaining staff would gather around the table, cups held in expectation. They talked about making the tea, asked whether there were any good biscuits in the tin, somebody would mention something about work, they would discuss it, asking questions even if it wasn't their project because it was vaguely interesting and they may have needed to know about it at some later date. The talk filled the time and was a good excuse to be away from work. A telephone would ring, and somebody would leave the table to answer it. They would all soon drift back to their desks.

14 Chapter Six discusses these ritualised interactions from a spatial perspective.

The same thing happened at about 3.00 p.m., but by then, everyone was tired. There were nonetheless two hours to work before leaving the office. This was the time that a diversion would be most welcome. So, somebody would offer to make a pot of tea, and again, they would congregate around the table, managers, professionals and admin alike. By this time, they were too tired to talk about work, so that was not a favourite topic at this time of day. Instead, they would begin airing complaints and theories about the efficacy of their superiors (provided that they were out of earshot). This was closer to the popularly understood meaning of gossip as they discussed others who were not present with at least some malice. It was vastly more entertaining than what awaited them at their desks. If they did not talk about things directly related to their jobs and the people who made them work, they would discuss topics designed to maintain interest such as the sexual exploits of previous employees who were not there to defend themselves, or speculation about how much money a former colleague was earning. Sports scores were not compared at this time of day: something stronger was called for.

Idle chat to pass the time also occurs outside these highly ritualistic situations. Each day upon first meeting, it is common for people to ask questions from those they are friendly with such as "How are you today" or "What did you do last night". Just as with the exchange of football scores described above, these questions are meant to illicit conversation though not necessarily meaningful responses. They are questions designed to open up the floor to grooming by gossip and are generally reserved for situations or times when informal behaviours can be acted out with impunity. Busy people do not make small talk and can resent the intrusion that is presented when a colleague attempts to initiate it. Office chit chat is markedly reduced during busy times or with groups of people who habitually work hard. Because of this, the propensity to talk idly is considered by the managers as proof of a lack of commitment since it is surmised that having the time to talk is due to low motivation in the employee. It therefore becomes necessary to hide these social activities. There are a number of methods used to hide gossip:

outside the coffee areas, it can be done in a secluded place such as the toilets or behind closed doors; whispering and lowered voices draw little attention; people pretend to discuss a paper held in hand while their conversation bears no relation to its contents.

In contrast to the time-filling sociality described thus far, gossip can help to form social bonds between co-workers of a stronger sort. The people of the office only spend time together because they must. The traditional cohesive ties of blood or obligation are missing from their relationships. They are there to work, and if they wished, they could do their jobs to perfection and never speak a casual word to anybody throughout their careers. They are not required to make friends with their colleagues but choose to. Making friends requires a great deal of knowledge. They find friends by talking around, by asking questions and showing interest. In conversation, they can discuss the person addressed, or talk about somebody or something else. During the course of the speaking, the personality emerges[15]. Once they are on the firm ground of understanding, their talk can venture into unknown territory. They can begin to speak about things that have nothing to do with work and build knowledge of what they have in common in areas where the commonalties aren't necessarily direct and obvious. But to reach the point where casual conversation branches out into the personal requires trust. One means of earning this trust is by participating in the act of gossip itself. Gossiping bears with it an element of danger. Social information is very valuable and hard to come by, in some cases forbidden. There is a risk in passing it and a risk in hearing it. It is black market news. One must therefore be careful who one gossips with and only when there is a fair chance that some form of reciprocation will be offered. By gossiping together, people establish that first, the others who gossip are endangering themselves as

15 Gossiping as self-revelation can be a sincere means of forming social bonds. Tannen noted that women tend to discuss personal problems with many other women, be these problems large or small, and they do so continuously. Men, if they discuss their problems as all, will either discuss them with women or with a very limited group of men. Much female bonding is based upon the sharing of grief (1990: 96-122).

well, and second, that they won't pass on what they know to those who don't, without risking their own positions.

Gossip is a means of forming social bonds and of providing subversive entertainment *in lieu* of working. Most of the office workers do this in the ritualised situation of the coffee or tea breaks but the activity is limited to those in lower status positions outside them. Those in lower positions have more time available for this sort of activity and are less socialised into bureaucratic identities. The only relationship between this form of gossip and formal bureaucratic structures is that it is hidden from persons who are adopting bureaucratic identities.

Information flow

The bureaucratic and social channels process information in very different ways. Distinct patterns can be identified between how information is learned, how it is characterised, and the evidence that is left behind. The contrast between the formal decision and informal persuasion will be discussed here. In practice there is a blurring between the bureaucratic and the social: formal rules affect personal behaviour and official decisions are influenced by the manipulation of information in the office grapevine.

A bureaucratic decision or piece of information can be identified as such according to one main criterion: where it is stored. For the purposes of this chapter, I will characterise as bureaucratic anything that is finally stored in the office files. Bureaucratic decisions and information will therefore include anything that affects the organisation as a whole such as its aims, interactions with outside groups on an official level, formal interactions with the committee, committee reports, press releases, etc. Those bearing upon how the office operates and how tasks are carried out are also included: memos, minutes of meetings, personnel matters and background information to inform report such as consultants reports, statistical and other data, and printed matter concerning other organisations. Spoken communication can also be classified as bureaucratic when it is an instruction, command or discussion that relates to organisational aims.

To make a bureaucratic decision, two things are required: authority and a command of the facts. The first of these is a product of an individual's assumed position in the formal hierarchy and for this reason, most decisions are made by the managers. However, their impact is limited to what occurs within the office itself. As described in the Chapter One, the office exists to serve its committee, and ultimately, all decisions originate there or with the committee leader. Other influences must be taken on board by the managers, such as the output of other related organisations, trends and events as portrayed in the press which may bring certain issues to the fore as they engage the popular imagination. Information emanating from these sources tends to be aimed at the most senior of the managers and, particularly when this information is passed on at a personal level, these are the only people who may gain access to it since only they attend high-level meetings. One of the managers' primary tasks is to use their professional judgement and experience to evaluate these various potential calls upon the organisation's time. Their positions justify their shared belief that they are best able to make decisions in the organisation and that all decisions of import must be made by them. This is a view that it will shortly be shown is open to some dispute.

The chief's personal preferences and style has largely determined the manner in which bureaucratic decisions are made. Unlike his predecessor who was autocratic and somewhat secretive, this chief attempts to take reasonable steps to seek the views of his staff, particularly the techs whose specialist knowledge may provide invaluable input, alongside the discussions he regularly holds with the other managers. However, the views of subordinates, after having been sought, are not guaranteed to be taken into account. Final decisions are made behind closed doors in management meetings and are discussed at length. All non-managerial staff are excluded from these deliberations with the exception of the office manager who takes the minutes but does not actively participate. The outcome of the decisions are recorded on minutes, and these are circulated to the staff in most instances.

The minutes are a short précis of what the decision was and how it should be taken forward. Minutes exclude many details that are deemed important by those who were not allowed to take part in the meetings such as the nature of the debate that led to the decision, the underlying personal philosophy of the debaters, and which of the managers lost or gained ground. The managers do not often tell their staff in any systematic manner what occurred in these meetings. Though they occasionally hold a "de-brief", they often say nothing because after having spent the time in the meeting they feel pressed to get on with their work. Since the majority of the staff are not allowed to participate in the formation of decisions they often feel frustration, either that they were not there when issues affecting them were discussed or because from the outside, it appears that the decisions are too slow in coming.

The ability to make bureaucratic decisions is reflected by the individual's position within the power hierarchy. Amongst the technical staff, the principles are able to make many decisions on the content of reports and the direction of the work programme. Amongst the admin staff, the office manager makes daily decisions on work priorities and devolution of responsibility. Below these levels, however, there is little opportunity for staff to make formal decisions and their command of the information used to make these decisions becomes less complete as status decreases.

Bureaucratic information and decisions are different in character from their social counterpart which is dependent on the spoken word and is stored in memory. Written information is impartial in its delivery - at the superficial level at least, its message must be the same to all people who read and can understand it. Gossip works in stark contrast to this. It is not open to public scrutiny but is kept secret since it is restricted to certain hearers. The gossip grapevine cannot be traced back to its roots at any official or bureaucratic level. Though disciplinary action can be taken against someone who produces a document that is at odds with the organisation, gossip cannot provide sufficient evidence upon which to base a reprimand. In this sense, it is not "hard" information but "soft". Because of these characteristics, it is the safest means of manipulating colleagues and situations or gaining information because there can be no reprisals. It is an ideal way of forming a democratic consensus, in contrast to management decision making. Whereas the latter is a decision imposed from above to be applied indiscriminately across all strata of the office, gossip is used to build common judgements that are developed through constant reiterations and personal internalisation. The legitimate management decision is impartial in its effect while gossip is egalitarian in its development.

Since the distribution of information from the managers is controlled or even purposefully obstructed, it is through the informal channel of gossip that people below their level may learn what they need to know. Slipped in amongst the tea-time comments that are idle or entertaining are serious questions and answers about processes, events, and how to do the job. For instance, seemingly innocuous questions are asked about what happened at the last meeting between the chief and the council leader or between the managers. These are small questions requiring small answers, but they are continually asked. Small amounts of information are exchanged, speculated upon and remembered.

There are distinct themes in the information that is gleaned in the course of gossiping. On the work-related level, people learn how to more successfully carry out their duties. Though each person was hired because it was believed that they had within them certain skills and knowledge that would be useful to the office, most hadn't received detailed training for their specific job tasks. It was assumed that they would pick up the nuances as they went along, and if they missed something important, it would be brought to their attention, either as a friendly piece of advice from a superior, or as a mild reprimand. This is not the optimal solution for the employees, however, who seek to avoid the embarrassment that this might cause. They prefer to find out for themselves what they feel they need to know. Gossip comes useful in this respect: there are no risks of seeming ill prepared since the questions are asked within the context of idle chat. If a junior had been given a task that was complex and for which he had received inadequate instruction from his line manager, rather than ask directly what was expected, exposing in the process the fact that he did not understand, he could, over the course of a few days, approach people at a similar level to his own and begin asking casual questions in the guise of gossip. He could start by complaining about what a hopeless manager he had: he couldn't make up his mind and his instructions conflicted. His peers would nod their heads as a sympathetic response was illicited. They had all received similar treatment and they knew what it was like. Stories would be exchanged. It would become clear, after much piecemeal debate, what everyone else has done in similar circumstances. The right answer might take days to receive, and with the risk that it may be wrong, but at least no direct questions had to be asked.

It is sometimes assumed by those in ignorance that information that is not passed through formal channels is being actively suppressed. "Classified" information of a bureaucratic nature originates from a number of sources. Everything of importance is processed by admin, particularly the typists, in the form of minutes, memos or reports originating from management desks. The women who type for the chief and his deputy see countless confidential messages as they do their work. For them, gossiping is a means to exercise power over their colleagues, reversing in some instances the pervasive power relations. Whereas they may not deemed by their more senior colleagues to hold any information of value, they on occasion come into possession of something that could be of use to others. They may not always recognise this, however, because they lack the specialist knowledge needed to understand its significance. Though the typists have access to raw classified data, it takes somebody with experience to interpret it. Those who are best at doing this, the principal techs, are however farthest removed socially from the typists. The typists are unlikely to approach a principal directly because he may let something slip to her manager and get her into trouble. Instead, she will mention something to another person in admin, who lets a comment slip to a junior tech, who brings up the subject to the principal during the afternoon tea break. It is discussed, and the information eventually finds its way back to the typist. It is a roundabout route and one that is very inaccurate but again, it bears no risk.

Another example of how classified information is obtained by those outside the management circle can be drawn from the debate surrounding the possible relocation of the office to Central London. The office is located at the edge of London in a rather bland suburban area. Most admin staff live within a few miles, but the majority of the techs and managers live more centrally. Since the organisation was first established, it was always the intention of the managers that the office would move. There were a succession of technical and administrative blockages and though the relocation was eventually achieved, it took many years.

Each employee was given slightly different information concerning the future office location when they were hired. Admin, who because of the general nature of their job skills, can find similar work in most parts of London and with relative ease, were told little of possible future changes. They were comparatively easy to replace if they chose to seek employment elsewhere. The professionals had relatively few alternative jobs available to them. It would also be difficult to fill vacancies left by them. When they joined, they were told about the possible future move. This was not done in order to keep them abreast of what might happen to them, but as an incentive to consider the job offer: they were in effect being offered a job with a future desirable location.

The office move came and went as a major topic of casual discussion for a number of years. At the time that this example took place, the managers had become optimistic that they had finally devised a workable plan of how to make the move. They honed their strategy for months but kept much of their planning secret from the staff. Naturally, the non-managerial staff wanted to know what was going on: they had a lot at stake. Not only would a move mean that their daily commutes would be changed, advantageously for some, the opposite for others, but there would be the opportunity for deals to be made as contracts were renegotiated. To prepare for the managers' decision, the remainder of the staff needed to be in possession of the maximum possible amount of information. The managers, however, were not forthcoming, and the remainder of the staff turned to the only information source available to them. They began to gossip, speculate and compare opinions amongst themselves. They would get together in small groups, and regroup continually throughout the week. Little talks took place here and there. Occasionally, they would have a major recap in the pub: everyone would tell everyone else what they had heard and what they thought.

This was an unusually cumbersome means of exchanging information and making plans, but despite its ponderousness, it was perhaps the best way of arriving at a truly democratic consensus that was well considered and where the strategies for the whole non-managerial group were firmly planned out. Since the information was changed and exchanged so frequently, opinions became built in as part of the message. With each retelling, the message became accepted by each hearer who became a consequent speaker, rendering the final message internal and acceptable to all participants. Since the group decisions were transmitted through gossip, there was no authoritarian expectation that the values and ideas would be accepted. The ownership of the information and strategies became theirs.

In the end, the managers told their staff through bureaucratic channels only of the process that they were following, dates of various meetings where the move was to be discussed, and brief details of the progress being made. But had any member of staff been asked for an accounting of events, they would have been able to provide specific details on which managers were for or against the move; how they were behaving towards each other when the topic was being discussed, what the gist of each of the meetings had been, that one of the managers had been spending too much time looking at alternative accommodations and that he had been reprimanded by the chief, that each manager was trying to get the new location as close to his or her own home as possible, and that there were precedents which they could use with the Union's backing to get more favourable terms in their contracts. They knew all these things, but were expressly told very little of it.

There is significant cross-over between the bureaucratic and the social in the preceding discussion. Even at its most formal, decisions and the control of information has a social element, for instance the managers must take account of external events and opinions and take political pressures into account when arriving at their bureaucratic solutions. Socially derived information about bureaucratic processes is highly respective of hierarchy, and information is decoded more accurately by the principle,, who is friends with the chief, than by his secretary who has access to the content of his written words but may not understand their real meaning.

For the sake of the argument however, I wish to draw a distinction between the two types of information and decisions because, in principle if not practice, real differences exist. These distinctions are set out here in order to inform the remainder of the chapter. First, in terms of where and how information is obtained, and how the individual learns to gain access to it and manipulate it, the bureaucratic is obtained through formal education, from official rule books and on the job training. The social counterpart is learned from colleagues and peers through observation. Second, bureaucratic information is task oriented, concerned with facts and furthers the aims of the organisation. Those with legitimate authority posses work-related information of a higher quality than those who do not. Socially derived information embraces "politics with a small 'p'" and is about individuals more often than about abstract concepts. Team members' histories, roles, strengths and weaknesses are explored and remembered. Finally, the evidence left by these processes differs. The bureaucratic is open to scrutiny, often written and is stored or filed for later reference. The social is spoken and untraceable. These oppositions are summarised in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Identities and the nature of information and decisions

Bureaucratic	Social
education and on the job training	learned from colleges
rules	observation
tasks and facts	characteristics of team members
high quality information	low quality information
filed and stored	untraceable
hard information	soft information
formal process	interpersonal manipulation

Managing the hierarchy

Gossip can be used to manage personal reputations. It can also act as a social mechanism for defending and subverting the power structure. If it is to function smoothly, the formal hierarchy of job descriptions is dependent upon the support of those who participate in it and, at the social level, it is supplemented by personal and group reputation. In the earlier discussion on Weber, it was shown that the participants in a formal system must believe in its legitimacy. Belief however, even in something formal, falls within the realm of the social and personal. Therefore, anything that threatens or manipulates this belief has the potential to undermine the formal hierarchy. Gossip has a palpable influence on the individual's status within the organisation. It is used by individuals to legitimise their own formal positions, as well as to improve their social standing so that they are treated as though they have greater formal status than is actually the case. It is also used to manipulate the reputation and standing of rivals, enhancing or damaging the social support available to them.

Everyday life is based upon "face-to-face" interactions where there is a "fund of common knowledge about all members of the community" (Bailey 1971: 1-25 following Goffman) whether in small communities where most people know one another, or in this case, in an office amongst co-workers. Reputations are based on people's opinions about an individual and it matters who those people are. The greater the importance placed upon reputation in a community, the more people are likely to interact and to gossip. While life in the modern city is sometimes characterised as lacking in community feeling, "those who live the so-called anonymous life in the facelessness of urban surroundings, nevertheless derive their identity, find their reputations and so find themselves within interaction with a circle of people who know one another, who talk about one another and who therefore matter...to one another" (ibid. 5).

In the battle for reputation, community may be viewed as composed of individuals seeking to "advance their separate causes against their ostensible friends who are their enemies." (Gluckman, 1963: 312). Gossip can be used by the individual to disseminate information about him or herself that is deemed to be socially desirable (Cox 1970; Heppenstall: 1971; Paine 1967: 283). This can take the form of pure bragging, the dropping of subtle hints, or confession. Self-revelation is often complemented by a similar attempt to down-play negative personal features.

The use of gossip can extend beyond the elaboration of individual reputations to that of the entire group. An example of this can be drawn from a non-office context. Amongst Hopi Indians, disputes between Councilmen and Traditionalist factions were carried out by attacks on reputation, largely within each group to emphasise their difference from their rivals. The factions tried to attach stigmatised terms to their opponents in an attempt to limit their access to political power. In discussing how these factions used gossip as a form of competition and to degrade the credibility of rival groups, Cox (1970) employed the term "impression management" derived from Paine (1967) and Goffman (1967). This is the means that the individual or group uses to emphasise certain desirable traits and characteristics while simultaneously playing down the importance of others.

Gossip also serves to maintain hierarchical and power structures within a group. Hutson (1971) found that in a small French alpine village, the degree of formality in interaction depended on factors of ascribed status such as age, sex and kinship. In this instance, differences due to achieved status were played down and people were unwilling to take on leadership roles since these set them above the other villagers. Despite the assumption of equality however, villagers appeared to rank one another. Criticism and evaluation of others was the chief pastime observed by Hutson who noted that the criticism given behind peoples' backs was in contrast to the assumed politeness between equals in open interaction. The chief situation in which ranking occurred was when the ideology of equality was challenged. In this situation, the gossiper usually tried to reduce the status of the target while simultaneously raising his own. The status positions of both were thus equalised, at least in the opinion of the gossiper (41-68).

The office workers also use gossip to defend their own positions. Whilst the managers do not tend to gossip negatively about others, particularly juniors, they talk about themselves. They do this to put themselves into a favourable light to gain respect from their subordinates and perhaps also to justify their positions of greater relative power. This is a purely social mechanism that augments existing formal relationships. Within the course of informal office interaction, distinct themes can be identified. I will give three examples where managers attempted to earn the (social) respect of their juniors in what can best be described as boasting. Various managers elaborated the same themes, at different times and to different audiences. Perhaps the same ground was covered by all because they had proved successful in the past, perhaps only because they had become habituated topics of light conversation that were satisfying to the tellers.

The first theme of reputation defence regards the manager's destiny. The theme is that they achieved their status position against all odds and that the individual had to overcome almost impossible obstacles in order to achieve their present position. There are various purposes to be served by this sort of reputation management. First, to demonstrate character in having moved beyond one's station in life. Second, to serve as an excuse for any failings, since those would only be a residual effect of the bad beginnings. And finally, to foster a sense of camaraderie with juniors - i.e. that they grew up in scarcity of poor and humble parents with few modern conveniences and that they, through sheer determination, left all that behind and have achieved their present career status. They would imply that they are still humble at heart and can therefore understand the difficulties faced by those less fortunate than they, notably their juniors.

Second, those who have been doing office work for many years attempt to instil a sense of history in their juniors. The purpose in this case is to demonstrate that they should be listened to and that their advice should be followed because it is based upon wide and varied experience. The story usually starts with "When I was in my former job" and ends with a flattering tale of how the story teller achieved amazing results, usually by thwarting some former boss or aspiring colleague. These stories are often offered by someone in a senior position to firmly establish to a junior that no matter what is going wrong under his supervision, things were much worse when he was himself a junior. If the current junior complains that the word processor is not working properly, expressing his frustration that he cannot complete his report by that afternoon's deadline, the manager will reply that in his last job he had to send entire documents back to an incompetent typing pool in order to correct a single mistake. The underlying message to the junior is that he should stop complaining because there are always problems to overcome with the implication that the senior is handling the situation quite well compared to how it could be with someone else in charge.

Propinquity to people of greater status is a final theme, as managers and others in senior positions name-drop to show that they are within a glamorous inner circle. This is a device employed by those who wish to retain or supplement their status by showing that they are accepted by, and are therefore themselves part of, an elite. The usual avenue is to mention who was spoken to in a meeting, on the telephone, or at a luncheon. These are causally dropped remarks, dissemblance meant to feign inconsequentiality, yet the message is clear: "I know somebody important that you don't and I know what they are thinking."

These status ploys are usually aimed at juniors by seniors, and are meant to defend power positions. The juniors however do not wish to be kept in their places, and while they appear to accept the stories to the tellers' faces, conversations out of the senior's earshot would belie their credibility. The stories are subverted, turned on their heads, and made a mockery of by those who were supposed to be impressed. Junior pub-talk will be carried out with much hilarity with ripostes such as: "He wouldn't be happy unless his father had died in a pit - too bad he's still alive and is a solicitor!", or "Of course they had to send it back to typing - that was so long ago they hadn't even invented computers yet!"

Attacks on reputation and ranking to equalise status are often the symptoms of frustration. People who are subject to character assassination are those who are preventing others from getting what they want, such as acknowledgement of achievement, help in times of need, or doing as one wishes. The catalyst for gossip of a vicious nature can be thwarted desire. By engaging in the act of gossip, and in some cases slander and fantasy, the speaker is able to pervert existing power relations by inflicting damage to esteem in a safe and "faceless" manner, usually without fear of retribution. Since gossip cannot take place in a social vacuum, the participation of others temporarily enhances the position of the speaker and simultaneously hardens the participants against the offender. Group loyalties can be formed within this context which will then serve as an emotional aid for the participants in the present and the future. Vindication against the villain may only be a willing delusion and may serve no tangible goal, but it is comforting. Fantasy therefore is another important catalyst for gossip.

To illustrate, I will use the example of a former manager. He was universally hated by all his staff. Their shared antipathy for him was a strong bond. It seems that they gossiped about him when they worked for him and those who suffered most continued to do so for many years after he left. Staff who had never met the man listened, fascinated, as they were told of his misdeeds and outrages. Over afternoon tea, I observed a large group of techs engaged in an animated conversation about the man. At that time, he had been gone from the office for over two years. The conversation was animated. A principal stated with a wicked grin on his face that he had bad news for everyone: the former manager was doing well and quite liked his new job. I heard some snorts. He then asked the gathering if it really was true - had he been having an "intimate personal relationship" with that woman consultant that had done some work for the office years ago? The man who had worked most closely with him and who despised him most intensely shuddered at the suggestion and stated with vehemence that he simply couldn't imagine anyone having an intimate relationship with that man - except perhaps a rabid rotweiler. There were some chuckles. Tea was sipped. The conversation drifted. First there was idle speculation about how he could have such a perfectly presentable wife. Nobody could understand why she would tolerate him. That being a dead-end, they switched to his sideline business of selling antiques brought from exotic ports of call which he then sold for an enviable profit closer to home. Both main gossipers became engrossed in fantasies where they watched drooling as he "emptied his bank account to buy a precious Ming vase and then dropped it." Their laughter continued as they went back to their desks, satisfied that if they hadn't been able to best him while he was actually a daily fixture in their lives, at least they could inflict humiliating punishments in their daydreams.

But gossiping about him has lost many of its satisfying qualities since he was no longer around and his authority could not be undermined. A more immediate source of frustration came from one of the managers who was strong willed, highly intelligent and headstrong. The principals in particular favoured him as a topic of discussion though the junior techs also had difficulties with him because he had referred to them as "interchangeable cogs", implying that they were not as intelligent as they believed themselves to be. Admin complained about him because he was inconsiderate and wanted work done by them with insufficient warning and would not follow office procedures. Because he was a continual annoyance to so many of the office workers, there were frequent and detailed discussions of his shortcomings, always outside of his hearing, between various groupings of office workers. Even if two individuals had nothing in common, complaints about him would almost always illicit a response. Gossip about him was therefore a safe topic - conversation would never run dry. Over the years, I listened to many discussion of this particular manager. It emerged when he blocked other people's aspirations, or when he succeeded in being an unusually successful rival or a disorganised manager who blamed his staff for his own shortcomings. He was rarely discussed when he was behaving in a manner in which the others approved. His defamation was a means for his staff to fight back in a way that he could not counter, no matter how formally powerful he became.

Maintaining group loyalties

The contest of reputations has a rotating set of champions and villains, and at one point or another, everyone becomes the source of another's annoyance and is moved into centre arena. The office workers do damage where they can, but they also learn about opponents and devise strategies, "mapping out their territories" (Orbach 1994). These people will have to work together for the foreseeable future and if they cannot get along, it helps if they have a thorough understanding of their co-workers methods and agendas. By knowing about each other, they know how to successfully get what they want and how to keep relations at least superficially harmonious.

Gossip is a means for maintaining group mores and defending boundaries. Whether this is done by the group or the individual is a matter of debate. Gluckman wrote that gossip and scandal "maintain the unity, morals and values of social groups", are used to control the behaviour of competing groups and to curb the ascension of certain aspiring individuals within a group. (1963: 308) "The more exclusive the group, the greater will be the amount of gossip within it" (309).

Paine (1967) criticised Gluckman on this issue because his analysis was centred upon the idea of "the community". On the contrary, Paine believed that the focus should be upon the individual. He accused Gluckman of over-emphasising the importance of maintaining community unity, whereas he believed that gossiping individuals "regulate their gossip, to forward and protect their individual interest". (280) While Paine agreed with Gluckman that gossip is informed by the contextual norms of society, he disagreed that these norms are what gossip is about. It is the individual who gossips - "what he gossips about are his own and others aspirations, and only indirectly the values of the community." (281)[16]

The debate between Paine and Gluckman highlight two further functions of gossip not yet covered in this chapter: the maintenance of group boundaries and the defence of morality. Since morality is often unique to a particular group of individuals and may even be a criterion of membership, it is appropriate to discuss the two together.

Office mores are developed and maintained through office gossip. Though everyone is familiar with the formal rules of employment, the common sense rules that help the workers to co-exist harmoniously on a day-by -day and minute-by-minute level are unwritten. In fact, they usually are unspoken, and if any of the people in the office were asked to define a few such rules, they probably would find the task extremely difficult even though they execute them flawlessly. One such set of rules regards work. How much, when, and the required frame of mind while doing it. The job contracts give explicit though bland descriptions of what employees are expected to achieve. These descriptions often do not provide clear guide-lines however. For instance, they do not say "The employee should not distract fellow

16 In a subsequent retort, Gluckman (1968) noted that while the individual may be the one who gossips, he only does so within social relationships - not alone.

employees and prevent them from working" or "The employee should not read materials that do not relate specifically to assigned duties". These rules exist nonetheless and are followed or subverted depending upon the moods of the workers. Since the rules are unwritten, they are difficult to enforce. There is little here that could be taken up with formal disciplinary proceedings. Yet all agree most of the time to follow them by way of an unrecognised mutual collusion.

An example of this collusion can be drawn from the experience of one young man who found it very difficult to adjust to the work routines of the office. Intolerably so. Though he didn't realise it at the time, he discovered while working in this office that his former job had been preferable to the one he had now. He had taken the present job with the expectation that he would have all the benefits of his last one with more beside. All he got however was the salary. Not only that, but he and his line manager found that they did not much like each other, the senior of the two continually assigning him work that he wasn't interested or experienced in doing. As time wore on, the young man began to hate every moment of his job. The evidence was clear to see. He read his newspaper from cover to cover at his desk throughout the day, read comic books, held innumerable and raucous conversations with his friends over the telephone. His work was slipshod and poorly conceived. He came in late and left early and his colleagues suspected that he was only able to do this because he lied on his time sheet. His behaviour became increasingly unacceptable to those who worked with him. They didn't always like their jobs. They too thought that they could be doing more interesting and challenging work if only given the chance. But they still came in and worked regular hours, still did the best job they could, still tried not to waste too much time, and kept their personal phone calls to a minimum. They became frustrated that he was not dealing with his disappointment in the same manner as they. They started gossiping about him.

Over the period of about three months, common perceptions of this man changed from that of an acceptable colleague to that of a perfect example of the skiving cheat, a person to be looked down upon and to shun.

The telephonist complained that she was sick and tired of passing through all his personal calls. His line manager complained that his work was of poor quality. His colleagues from nearby desks were distracted by the way he freely turned the pages of his newspaper. His peers were annoyed that he came in after them and left before them, so obviously not doing a full day's work, and evidently getting away with it.

They talked about him constantly and devised a series of standard jokes and stories about him that could be pulled out in any social setting and were guarantied to get a laugh. Through the process of talking about him, they became increasingly convinced that they would not behave like that. They weren't going to let people think about them in that way. Nobody was going to be telling any jokes at their expense. And so the less he worked, the more they worked, or the more they thought they were working. The worse he became, the better they became. Because even though they may not have changed their habits to any great extent, they grew self-righteous in their conviction that they knew what was right and what was wrong.

The preceding is an example of how one individual was excluded from the "in crowd" because he failed to follow their moral code. This is one important means by which gossip forms group boundaries. A more subtle moral code can also be identified that also serves to mark group boundaries, in this case, the manner in which it is executed. Put another way, different office groups gossip differently. The social structure of the office is accurately expressed by the use of gossip and the forms that it takes. Each group gossips about certain things and at certain frequencies. More importantly, the subject of gossip is typically restricted to certain classes of people.

I will begin with those with least status and power: the women from admin. When the typists and the telephonist gossip they demonstrate that they know what's going on, know who is receiving calls from whom, see all secret memos, file everything. They enjoy discussing the managers but there is a tinge of respect in their voices as they consider their personal quirks, and how they are not in the office again, and the fact that they have missed the deadline for typing, and used the wrong format. Their gossip takes on a different tone when discussing the junior technical staff who, though they are their formal superiors, are nearer to them in status and power. Here the women show less respect when gossiping and let go their reserve. "He spends more time doing his personal finances than his work." And, "she's been looking a little fatter lately - she must have put on some weight". But these women close ranks amongst themselves. Only a typist that has been severely crossed will say a bad word about another typist. They usually only have complementary observations to offer, even if these are sometimes tinged with bile.

The more senior members of the admin team differ in their styles of gossip. They may know less in quantity than their junior sisters, they may not know all the whats, but they know more of the whys. Senior admin tend to be the ones who are in the decision-making forums as the silent witnesses: they make sure that there are enough photocopies of papers at the committee meetings, they take minutes, they are sent on errands. They have access to a higher level of information than the junior admin women. When they gossip about other people in the office, they tend to focus their attention upon the managers. They gossip less frequently about their admin colleagues. They do not often gossip with the junior techs who are on their level but in another discipline.

Beside the junior admin, the most florid gossipers are the techs, probably because they have the strongest bonds of pure friendship as a group. The junior techs spend hours in the pub analysing what everyone else is up to, either in their personal lives or at work. They criticise the people for whom they must work, they praise those for whom they do not, invent elaborate humorous stories about the admin's incompetence. They discuss any absent member of their own peer group. But their main focus is the managers, as they try to find out what they are up to, and how they will react to upcoming situations.

The managers keep their gossip amongst themselves and do not share their observations with the rest of the office. Their staff know that they are the subject of discussions because the managers know things about them that they were not told. But these discussions are not overheard because the managers are discreet. Managers who on occasion say something uncomplimentary about one of their staff in general hearing are censured by their subordinates. It is deemed to be inappropriate behaviour for a senior to speak ill of a junior, a violation of trust and a petty manoeuvre that is closer to bullying than entertainment. It is however entirely appropriate within office custom for the managers to gossip about their peers. It is therefore acceptable to gossip about those with equal or greater status. As with the admin women, the barbs the managers send towards the chiefs have a softer point than those they aim at each other, but the implied criticism is sharper. They fear to say what they want to, they hide behind gentle words. The others can feel their frustration however, and their suppressed energy. They sense the tone of the gossip if only the words would be spoken.

The chiefs are never heard gossiping,[17] at least not about anyone in the office, though they may tell the occasional story about the quirks of a colleague from long ago. If they are approached directly with a complaint or challenge from one employee about another, they will gloss over the accusation, they will say that the problem is temporary, or that they will try to do something about it. But they will never agree, never say anything to reinforce the accuser's views, never overtly gossip.

Since those at the top make all the decisions, and what they know is what it is important to know, or at least all they need for their decisions, they do not need to explore through gossip what is happening. At the other end of the spectrum however, the office juniors don't know much, either through their own inexperience or because information is simply not made available to them. They need to know about the personal motivations of others in order to better predict what they will do and to manipulate their colleagues into co-

17 Lest the reader find this too difficult to believe and conclude that I merely did not have access to them while they were gossiping about the office, I wish to clarify that I was in situations alone with both the Chiefs where I tried to initiate gossip and they would not oblige. This was unfortunate since gossip was my main research tool! I have concluded that these two men did not gossip about their subordinates as a habit. It may be expected that at least in some other institutional situations however, gossip amongst senior managers takes place, for instance at golf clubs or amongst Free Masons.

operation. There is therefore a direct relationship between power and the amount of time spent gossiping. Those who are most secure tend to do it least.

Conclusion

Office gossip proves a versatile tool which allows the office workers, from whatever position within the formal hierarchy, to advance their personal strategies of self-betterment. Depending upon what they seek, it serves a number of functions. It enables the overall functioning of the system by providing the workers with information networks and sources of aid that are absent from the formal system, allowing them to approach their work and their relationships with greater flexibility and resources. Conversely, it enables some members of staff to subvert that system when they choose, gaining access to information that their superiors would prefer to keep hidden, or making a mockery of their superior's attempts to maintain legitimate control. It also allows them human relief from their sometimes uncomfortable bureaucratic roles.

The bureaucratic and the social, the formal and the informal, the high and the low, are all relatively easy to identify when considering gossip. It is for this reason that I have begun my ethnographic examination here. In the following chapters, these issues will continue to be explored, but will also be more difficult to identify. Rather than focus on the communications and social relationships themselves, the focus of the following chapters will be upon the material world and how objects are manipulated in aid of communication and relationships.

Chapter Four: The message in paper

Introduction

In any list of essential office components, paper must take a prominent place. Office work is paper-based, and paper is an integral component of both process and product. It is used by the office workers to develop and record their ideas, the medium by which they create their own history, and forms part of their strategies to protect themselves against unforeseen contingencies. The workers don't think much about paper however. They are continually holding it, reading the words upon it, crinkling it up into tight balls and throwing it into plastic bins, putting it in piles and putting it away for safe keeping. But its importance is lost to them. It is so much a part of mundane existence, as necessary for their work as air for their lungs, that they pay it virtually no attention. It is simply there for them, like air, the unnoticed compliment to their thoughts.

As overlooked as paper is to the workers themselves, so is it equally invisible in the literature of offices. I have not found a single analysis of this, the ultimately mundane and ubiquitous office object, in all of the literature reviewed in this thesis, a pity since such an analysis can reveal much about the underlying process of social organisation there. Departing from the earlier chapters, this will be wholly concerned with the analysis of a class of material object in an ethnographic context. I will approach my analysis of this object, and therefore the social relations in which it is embedded by first considering its physical nature and how it embodies ideas of professionalism and competence. I will then move on to consider how its use is limited by formal role in the hierarchy. I will conclude with a brief insight into how it fits into the daily lives of the office workers.

Paper

There are many forms of paper in the office, each serving a certain set of functions. The most important, most often used, is "blank" and white. It feeds the photo-copying machine and the printers attached to the computers. It is delivered to the office in bulk, and every three months about 22 boxes arrive on the doorstep. Each box contains 5 reams of paper which are composed of 500 individual sheets. From this it can be calculated that this office consumes over 4000 sheets of blank paper each week. The bulk of the white paper is stored in the paper closet, unpacked from its boxes, the reams stacked two deep on the shelves. People take one or two reams at a time as they fill machines, dispersing it throughout the office. White paper is everyday and common. It is nothing special and is used for nothing special. It is routine and unthought of.

White paper and its sister lined paper, which differs from it in that script is not applied mechanically but manually to its surface, is typicaly reserved for "inside" purposes. Most of this paper never leaves the office except as photo-copies. More often than not it is either used to progress an idea and becomes "scrap" paper after a short time, or it is stored for later reference. A different calibre of paper is used to visit the outside world. Like children dressed by their parents in their "Sunday best" when they are taken to church where they will be seen by other parents, so the office's letters are dressed in fine inks and textures designed to reflect well on their authors.

As the name implies, letterhead stationery is used for correspondence sent officially from the office as an entity to other offices or individuals within them. Personal communications do not find their way onto these sheets because what is official is also public. Letterhead forms part of the office's wardrobe. Just as every individual has his or her own unique and often recognisable taste in dress, so every office has its own style of letter and printed report, a "house style", made up of grain, quality, logo, text and colour.

Each firm or organisation, and sometimes departments within them, have their letterhead that it is hoped will not be confused with that originating elsewhere.

Letterhead fosters recognition in regular recipients of written communications from the office. As will be shown presently, most of what is received in the post by an office is first distributed to individuals then somehow acted upon, and finally in most instances, put into storage. If a letter is easily identifiable as coming from a particular place or person it is easier to locate. When people try to find a piece of paper, they try to match what they imagine its sensory qualities to be against the real qualities they encounter. People remember what letter "looks like" not because of the words written on it, which are so small, numerous and regular as to require slow concentration to make distinctions between them, but by impression. Therefore, what a letter looks like is determined by its colour, the way light bounces off its surface, the shapes of things that cover part of its surface with a colour different from the paper itself, and the amount of printed area. The way a paper feels to the touch also helps it to be distinguished from other papers in a file or pile and thus makes it easier to locate. Each office's written communications thus manipulate the human senses slightly differently and leave their own traces on memory.

Enough of the surface of letterhead stationery has nothing printed upon it so that significant numbers of words can be applied. The office workers thus consider them to be another form of "blank" paper. The paper is high quality bond that is slightly closer to the colour of cream than white: it is thicker than the paper used for the photo-copier and has tiny bumps and ridges along the surface. Everything about it says "special purpose": it doesn't flop around as much as other papers and the little ridges make it feel rough between the fingertips that hold it. The printing upon it is olive green, a colour that most of the workers find unappetising, but even though they are usually eager to offer advice on how the office should be run, nobody ever suggests a change to another hue. The recognising and remembering has been going on in other offices for a long time and it is assumed that the outside recipients have come to expect it.

The form that the letterhead takes has been adapted to fit the prevailing office technology. The first page of the letterhead is printed with the office logo and in small lettering, the name, professional qualifications and job title of the chief, the address, telephone and fax numbers. The upper right corner was the chosen position for this information since it was assumed that letters are fastened into files by holes punched in the left side: the upper right corner would thus be most likely to catch the eye of somebody searching a file. Words are applied to the surface of the paper via a word processing software package which electronically translates codes on the screen into a physical placement of the words on the sheet of paper. The letterhead has printed upon it in green pseudo-questions that can only be answered through the computer such as "Date:", "Our reference:", "Your reference:" and "Contact name:". The computer system was set up with a standard template that allows the author to supply this information with keystrokes, which then perfectly align with their green printed mates. Likewise, the keyed address aligns with a tiny green triangle printed on the letterhead that is 14 lines down on the word processor screen. This little marker in its turn aligns with a "window" in the envelope, saving the extra step of typing or writing the address for the second time on the outside of the envelope. Finally, along the left edge of the sheet are printed two tiny green marks, each the width of a hair and 2mm in length, that divide the sheet into even thirds. These marks are so small that they are unnoticed most of the time. However, their purpose becomes obvious when a letter is folded to fit into the envelope. Folding a letter into equal thirds so that the address fits squarely into the window in the envelope requires practice. By using the little marks as a guide, the letter can be folded correctly the first time, obviating the tell-tale creases of mistakes.

Once all the words have been printed on the page in all the right places, using continuation sheets as necessary which are the same quality of paper as the cover, the single outstanding element is the signature.

Signatures are the what render the standard office letter personal. They are often executed in ink that differs in colour from the printing on the page. People develop their own signatures and often reserve specific pens for writing them. It is not unusual for those who sign many letters and have an image to maintain, to buy themselves or receive as gifts pens which are used almost exclusively for signing letters. These pens are "special", perhaps being distinguishable from others in that they are heavier to hold or encased in expensive materials such as metal or enamel. Their tips are usually also considered to be something different from "ordinary" pens, for instance they are "roller balls" or "gold plated medium width nib fountain pens", as opposed to "felt tips" or "ball points". These pens leave their trails of ink in a different manner: more expensive pens do not leave indentations in the paper and there may be some variation in line width.

The signature is proof that the letter is one of a kind, or at least is being sent to a specific individual or for a specific purpose. If a signature is put onto a letter in any other way, this individuality is lost, and the letter becomes impersonal. A photocopied signature is stale in comparison with a fresh one from a pen and the letter is accorded less attention by the recipient. A letter with an artificial signature, for instance one that is printed onto the page with a rubber stamp or is computer generated, is even easier to disregard. Signing a letter by hand is an act of courtesy which indicates that the sender has some personal regard for the recipient - it is a social act in a bureaucratic context.

From a purely physical stand-point, a letter is "finished" and ready to be sent into the wide world as an emissary of office politics, when the words are all printed in the right places on the special letterhead paper, the margins neat, the paragraphs clearly defined, the salutations properly executed, the bottom signed, the folding at the marks on the edge, the address in the envelope's window, the stamp or franking mark on the envelope. It becomes a tight little package, full of detail and information, easy to recognise, easy to use, discrete in its anonymous envelope, its message hidden from eyes not meant to see it.

Blank white paper and letterhead are the most important types of paper, but not the only ones by any means. An example is the "typing form". Specially printed on blue paper, held together with a gummed hinge to form a pad, these are the forms that need to be filled in when something is to be processed for typing by admin. The form is stapled or clipped to the top of a pile of writing or revised typing to be put into the senior typist's in-tray. There are numerous sections where information is required such as who the author is, when the work needs to be finished, the date it was submitted, if it is required urgently, and where it is filed in the computer system. Most people don't bother to fill in all the sections but supply only as much information as they believe is necessary. The most important message to be obtained from the form by those who will be on the receiving end will be that it is blue and says who wrote it. The former is important because it is easily identifiable as something that must be processed by the typists, the latter so that they can prioritise which request gets done first. There is a positive correlation between author's salary and turn-around time.

Sometimes the most important quality of a piece of paper is that it is not white. White paper is for ordinary work. Paper in a colour other than white stands out and people use it for special purposes to indicate that whatever this piece of paper is associated with should not be considered a part of mundane office functions. The most important colour in the office is blue. Every official letter that leaves the office is copied onto this paper and kept in a filing system separate from that for the white paper. Blue copies are referred to whenever there is some question of when a letter was sent or if it was sent at all. Light green paper is used to summarise the main points of the committee meetings and is sent out to individuals who need to have a quick overview of what the office's main output has been. Yellow paper is used for a form that is a check-list of steps towards completion of public relations procedures. Some members of staff use salmon paper for certain memos and reminders in the hope that their colleagues will notice these messages and not loose them. The problem with coloured paper is that everyone who wants to make something stand out uses it, and if too many people are using it at once, the uniqueness is lost and it might as well be white.

Everybody's favourite office paper would probably have to be post-it-notes™: little pads of yellow paper with a light adhesive strip along the top of one side. A sheet can be ripped off the pad and stuck anywhere: on telephones, in diaries, on papers, in books to mark pages, on a colleague's back. They are very small, either two inches by two, or two inches by four, so using them does not seem wasteful. They are sticky so they do not need to be stapled onto things in order to get them to stay, but they are not sticky enough to damage what they are stuck to. Because they are yellow, they are easy to see. They are used to make notes to oneself or to give short messages to others. Most of the short messages that are sent around the office are on this form of paper. They have an air of informality and friendliness; they are for jotting not writing. They are to letterhead what a casual comment to a friend is to a speech in front of a large group of people.

Carrying the message

"Paper" is a class of object that is imbued with meanings that are manipulated within the social discourse of the office. It is used by the workers to codify their disparate and individually developed thoughts into unified mutual understandings. By and large this is not done through any process of purposive symbolic attribution. Rather paper is given meaning because it is a convenient means of associating certain concepts and acts with a ready and malleable material object. Paper becomes an artefact of mind.

In one of his best known works, *Mythologies*, Barthes (1967) explored the way in which mundane objects such as soap powders and cars can bear messages as "signs". Following Saussure, Barthes developed semiology to explore the modern myths of society as conveyed by the object environment. Every thing serves as a sign when used socially. The sign is a symbolic representation of a referent: it is the conceptualisation of an idea which is based on its two component elements, the signifier or the object, and the signified expression. Barthes' "myths", following Marx, are the dominant ideological underpinning of the hegemonic elements of society that are virtually taken for granted by its participants (Olsen 1990: 167). Signs are often themselves composed of other signs and meaning can be peeled away to reveal other significations beneath: Barthes used an example of the second form pupil being given a sentence of Latin to read which could be taken as both a message or as an example of a grammatical construction, either interpretation of the same object (the sentence) being correct.

Jean Baudrillard (1988), also attributed sign-like qualities to objects. Objects of mass production were the focus of his attentions as well as the manner in which things which were incarnated in multiple exact copies could nonetheless be used by individuals to convey a sense of individuality. He argued that this individuality was in actuality only allowing individuals to be classified as a category of a certain type of person. Objects by their nature have a greater internal coherence, he argued, than human needs and desires which were more difficult to cognitively define (Baudrillard 1988: 15). Products of serial production create a "lexicon of forms and colours" which can approximate speech, but speech that lacks a true syntax. Baudrillard's thesis continued that in contemporary society, particularly in America, the sign (the commodity) has taken on greater importance than the signified (the original social relation) and that the important element of the commodity is not its object self but the image or meaning it portrays (see Baudrillard 1988; Featherstone 1991: 68; Harvey 1989: 287-88).

Both authors relied heavily upon a linguistic metaphore, attributing objects with units of meaning. This will be discussed in some detail in the following chapter. Barthes took this to its logical extreme in his book *The Fashion System* (1992) when he considered the implicit meanings of elements of clothing as presented in the pages of women's magazines, so that for instance "raw silk = summer" and "a thick wool sweater = an autumn weekend in the country". Semiotics provides a useful model for evaluating the intimate meanings of objects and as Barthes noted, and I will elaborate below, the message attributed to an object may appear in various sub-forms yet within an overarching and coherent total message. Using this approach with a class of object such as paper in the office can only be taken so far however, and where it perhaps fails is when objects are considered within their total socio-cultural environment.

These writers over-emphasise the importance of the end product, the sign, and pay insufficient attention to how the sign was developed, or how the meaning became attached to the object. Baudrillard's critique of contemporary society as being concerned more with the image than the relation is clearly not robust when, as has been shown above, an object is used not to convey an image, but to perform a task or facilitate a social relationship. The post-it-note™ is not selected by the office worker because it conveys a sense of informality, it is selected because it is convenient to the purpose of writing a short note, and it is that purpose which is informal in character that has become associated with the object through habitual reiterations of the act.

The approach taken by Barthes and Baudrillard is therefore most useful in critiquing objects that are purposefully selected by those who manipulate them, or what could be termed commodities, whose defining feature is their socially relevant exchange value (Appadurai, 1986).[18] But not all things that bear meaning are commodities. Some are merely used, either by a single individual, or within social transactions, not as the transaction's focus but only as an element of it. It is difficult to use the semiotic model of commodity value in regard to a class of objects that is not selected but is available in what is virtually an endless supply and at no cost for those who use it, such as paper in the office.

It is therefore necessary to temper the sign/signified/signifier relationship with arguments concerned with the social production of meaning. In order to do this, it will prove useful to examine the critique of Berger and

[18] A good example of how this model can be applied in the evaluation of ethnography would be Keane and his analysis of symbolic exchange amongst the Anakalang (1994).

Luckmann (1966) by Miller (1987). Berger and Luckmann posited that there are three moments in the generation of cultural phenomena: externalization, objectivation and internalization (149). Their argument is that the collective and the socially defined world interact upon one another in a kind of self-affirming loop. The subject externalizes a given relation into some objective reality and this in its turn acts back upon the subject and is internalized (78-79). Miller argued that Berger and Luckmann considered the existence of society to occur prior to the conceptualisation, so that the social relation exists and this is then somehow cognitively linked with an object (65). Miller argues that there is "no subject prior to the process of objectification"[19] implying that any meaning derives spontaneously at the time of attribution to the symbolic carrier, the object. Miller wrote:

> *Objectification describes the inevitable process by which all expression, conscious or unconscious, social or individual, takes specific form. It is only through the giving of form that something can be conceived of" (81).*

Unfortunately, the use of paper in the office would support either thesis. On the one hand, using the Berger and Luckmann model, if society preceded objectivation, then we could expect to see examples in practice of a social relation being codified symbolically in an object. This was indeed the case with letterhead paper which was specifically designed by the office workers in order to present their unique group identity to the outside world. Objectivation can also be identified in the preparation of a report which will be described shortly which is meant to give an impression of professionalism to the outside. In both these examples, the concept of the relation existed first, and was expressed within a material medium. But the model put forward by Miller works equally well, albeit with a different set of examples. For Miller, the message would be created by its attribution. Going back to the post-it-notes mentioned above, post-its were not specifically designed to mean "this

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19 Note that this term differs from that used by Berger and Luckmann.

is informal" but because they are used informally, they have become associated with that sort of social liaison. It is the social context in which the message was developed, in conjunction with the use of the object, that led to the understanding amongst these specific people that post-its are for informal communication.

What we are beginning to see here is that there are a number of ways in which the message bearing qualities of an object can be viewed (see Csikszentihalyi 1981: Chapter 2) and I would argue that it is futile to devise a single model by which to analyse the significance of objects. Each class of objects, and the sub-sets within them, are disparate in character, impact and use so that the place to begin the analysis of a non-commodity object within a social context is with the thing itself. It then becomes necessary to move on to an examination of how that thing, with its unique qualities, is manipulated as a simple tool of expression.

In her article on the use of white cloth by the Banu Yoruba, Renne (1991) demonstrated how the physical quality of an object lends itself to certain symbolic uses. White cloth amongst these people is used to denote various relationships and states of being. She wrote:

> *In Banu society, the particular qualities of white cloth - for example, its colour, its absorbency and its susceptibility to decay - make it an evocative symbolic vehicle for mediating relations....white cloth's opacity and impermanence also suggest less benign associations, such as hiding and desertion (710-11).*

This would indicate that the unique physical qualities of white cloth are interpreted in the Banu culture to meet the needs of certain forms of social expression. Direct correlations of this example can be identified with the use of paper in the office. Thick, creamy coloured, textured and expensive paper is used to lend and air of professionalism to business letters, and coloured paper indicates that what is on its surface is an extraordinary type of communication.

Battaglia (1994) has suggested that human reality is a material reality, and sensual stimulation should be the starting point for any analysis of material culture. She wrote: "the real is distinguished from the thought and imagined...in no uncertain terms... physicality has priority and its value is positive and absolute (369). She suggested that anthropologists should "get real" by considering the role of objects in social relations and thus gain access to indigenous processes of valuation and knowledge (639-40). This is the approach that I will adopt here. Paper as a message system can only be understood in terms of the thing that is paper: the type of message that it can or cannot convey is limited by its physical attributes. Before continuing with my discussion of the physical aspect of paper's message however, I must make clear that there are two sorts of messages can be identified from this particular example of material culture.

The message that the workers create and disseminate with purposive intent, and for which they employ paper as a tool, is what I term the **overt** message. Paper is only used by the office workers to bear writing on its surface: it is not used to decorate the walls or make collages. The writing, or text, is the actual focus of their attention, and the paper itself is given only passing consideration. Indeed, whilst different sorts of paper are available, letterhead or blank white paper for instance, once these have been sorted and assigned a certain purpose, categorised as "for" letters or making photocopies, each type is used automatically, and its physical nature is virtually ignored. Beyond the actual words that have been applied to the surface of sheets of paper, examples of the overt message can be extended to include letterhead which contains pattern, text and the office logo, to foster recognition in recipients; and the house-style, which is consciously created and defended in order to make the office's work easier to digest. The overt message in paper finds its parallel in the bureaucratic role of the individual.

The overt message is complemented by the **latent** message, and it is the latter that is determined by physical and sensory qualities. The content of the overt message can be easily discussed and analysed by the office workers, it can be changed, modified and refined. Since the overt message is composed of words and rules, the units of meaning are discrete and identifiable. They provide something distinct and bounded for the mind to latch onto, and can be easily discussed and analysed.

In contrast, the content of the latent message could probably not be easily described by the office workers. They would sense that these meanings existed, yet be unable to define them. Whilst the overt message is purposive, the latent message is incidental. It is an almost emotional and primitive response to something that provides a sensory stimulus and is characterised by unformed perceptions and assumptions; it is what "seems right" or "feels wrong" in the social and material context of a situation. Miller's (1987) work would also support this notion of objects as carriers of unspoken meaning. He argued that objects have "a particularly close relation to emotions, feelings and basic orientations to the world (107). A good example can be drawn from the signature on the letter: the recipient can discern the ink laid down from a cheap or expensive pen and it is sensed that a signature in blue ink with a line that varies in thickness as it traces the curves of the letters is somehow better quality than one that is black, of even line width, and follows scratches in the surface of the paper caused by a minute metal ball. Another example can be taken from the folding of a business letter: tiny marks are provided on the left margin of the cover sheet so that the letter can be folded perfectly the first time in order to fit the address squarely into the window in the envelope. A letter that has two sets of folds, or folds in places where they should conventionally not be, indicates that a mistake was made in production, and whilst this has absolutely no bearing upon the overt content of the letter, it may detract from the overall impact by rendering the entire package "shabby" or "unprofessional". In either case, the recipient of the letter is unlikely to actually comment on the pen used for the signature or that there are more than two equidistant creases on the letter, but the feeling of "wrongness" will remain.

Latent qualities could otherwise be regarded as akin to the concept of "keys", defined by Goffman (1974) as "the set of conventions by which a given activity...is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else" (43-44). The physical qualities of paper are used to indicate the framework for the discourse at hand. Using the example of colour, white indicates that the message on the surface is "ordinary" and "everyday", salmon indicates that it is "extraordinary" and blue indicates that what is at hand is an official replica. Size is another key to the type of discourse at hand and A4 paper is for formal situations where the overt message is standardised and bureaucratic whilst smaller papers such as post-it-notes are for more informal situations. Keys such as colour and size are used to set off contrasts and to indicate internal relationships (see Bateson 1979: 67-68): they indicate the character and flavour of a communication, usually interweaving and complementing, the overt message.

The latent message is restricted by the physical qualities of the object. Moreover, certain objects are only used in certain ways and this also acts to restrict the impact that they may have. Because of this, only certain types of messages can be put across with any class of objects. Barthes (1967) identified a number of latent messages in clothing[20] what he termed "semantic units" (191-199) which act as keys so that with fabric as an element of clothing, flowing = elegant and grey worsted wool = business-like. Clearly, these latent messages of cloth cannot be applied in any strict manner to paper. Cloth is related to the body and thus its latent messages are concerned with personal identity. Paper is used for another purpose, to facilitate overt communication, and has different defining qualities. Whereas paper can give messages about office identity as was shown by letterhead paper, more often it is used to frame communication, and to prepare the recipient to receive it with a certain set of expectations.

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20 See Chapter Five.

A useful way of summarising this idea of the latent message is to draw a set of contrasts which show how paper is perceived by the office workers. Broadly, it can be argued that there are two main types of "primary frameworks" (Goffman 1974) for all office activities: the formal, characterised by the bureaucratic theory and aimed at "outside" consumption, and the informal, characterised by personal relationships, the actual practice of daily working and geared towards "inside" interactions. Taking these two frameworks as a table heading, a typology of paper types and characteristics can be drawn as shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8: The physical nature of office paper

FORMAL	INFORMAL
outside consumption	inside consumption
letterhead paper	blank white paper
A4 size	other than A4 size
signed	unsigned
typed/mechanically printed	hand-written

It will be shown in the remainder of this chapter that this can be extended to relationships, emotional responses and assumptions made regarding paper's physical qualities. The ideological underpinnings of how paper is perceived are summarised in Figure 9.

Figure 9: Some ideological assumptions regarding office paper

BUREAUCRATIC	SOCIAL
bland and standardised	idiosyncratic and personal
group/corporate	individual
professional	unprofessional

Latent messages can thus act as keys for the genre of expression linked to the physical thing that is a piece of paper. Specific situations dictate that papers with particular characteristics are employed in order to increase the order of the whole communication system and to allow the participant to categorise, and thus mentally sort into neat and manageable piles, the wealth of information that is received daily.

Producing the overt message

Conceiving and disseminating information that furthers a particular political and ideological stance within a profession is the mission of this office. To do this as effectively as possible the workers believe that they must develop a reputation for the group that will make their audience respect and follow their recommendations. Any overt message that the office produces, for instance policy advice in a report or a press release commenting on Government programmes, also conveys other abstruse messages to do with reputation.[21]

[21] See Chapter Three for a discussion of how personal reputation is formed and maintained via the informal communications of gossip.

The release of the overt message from the office into the outside world in a paper-based medium is generally restricted to two main categories: the business letter and the committee report.[22] The committee report provides the best illustration of how the overt message is carefully dressed to visit the external world and how its latent qualities are manipulated and new levels of meaning are added to create the best possible impact on outsiders. Reports are prepared for the committee's quarterly meetings and for the executive sub-committee which meets more frequently. The content of these reports is highly standardised and, to be very simplistic, consists of an introduction, background to an argument, the development of the argument, and a recommended course of action. The reports are in the public domain once they have been considered and serve as the basis for the office's ongoing work. They are thus the very heart of office activity.

A final committee report, itself only a few pages, is the culmination in a production process of many steps and each report that is held in a committee Member's hands can represent hundreds of sheets of paper.

Committee reports are initially conceived in management meetings, most typically in response to some interest expressed by the Members or from some high-up person in another office. Once the topic has been decided, it is assigned by a manager to an appropriate tech. Instructions are usually delivered orally and because of the spoken word's ephemeral nature, there is no means of going back and verifying what was actually said should a misunderstanding between manager and subordinate later emerge. It is because of this potential problem that one party or the other might decide that there is need to record the decision in a memo. When this occurs, it is almost always the result of mistrust: either that the instructions will not be heeded, or that what was expressed will be transformed by synaptic malfunctioning from today's instruction to tomorrow's gaff. Memos often arise at this stage, passed in photo-copied triplets across the in-trays and desk-tops of the office. They

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22 There are of course others such as the newsletter, survey forms, published reports and press releases as well as those that are not made tangible such as words spoken in meetings or over the telephone.

go in multiples of three or more so that the originator has a copy, the recipient has a copy, and the witness has a copy. A canny office worker will always have a witness.

The "expert" then begins the process of writing the report. Reference to other paper-bound information is critical in the preparatory stage of research which requires that other previously released reports have been checked thoroughly for background information, and other relevant information is gathered. Authors have been given lengthy instructions on the precise format of each report, complete with font style, line spacing, paragraphing conventions, heading style, and order of presentation, together composing further elements of the "house style". If each report is structured in like manner, the habitual reader, that is the committee Member, will know which pre-defined sections might be of interest - it is hoped therefore that this repetitiveness of structure will lead to at least certain parts being read. The author of the first draft tries to follow these conventions even at this early stage because these are the bones upon which the flesh will rest, it is easier to follow the conventions in the first stage than to change it later, and most importantly, if anyone else sees the draft and it is not in the required format, it will seem incomplete, amateurish, and runs the risk of not being taken seriously. If the author is in any way unclear as to what the exact formatting requirements are, there is of course a paper copy of the set of instructions that was circulated to all members of staff for reference.

Once complete in concept if not presentational form, the first draft is an emerging "professional" document. If written by hand, it must be "sent down to typing" to be made neat and have any outstanding elements of the format put into place. Nobody ever, ever, shows a superior a copy of a draft report that is not typed, though such a report may be passed to more junior staff. There is a real anxiety that if the boss sees anything that does not look final, the author's credibility will suffer. Even if the author is certain that the superior will change the contents dramatically, the draft is clothed as the final, almost as a dare to spot the mistakes or differences of view.

Sending a draft down to typing is thus very important for a person who is not able to command a word processor through either physical access or technical skill. The draft is taken by the author, photo-copied at least once (in case anything happens to the draft), a blue typing form stapled onto the front, and is dropped into the special in-tray reserved for typing processing. This is a crucial link in the paper chain since the drafting process cannot continue until this step has been successfully completed. Tempers may flare. It is at this stage more than any other that the author is vulnerable. All reports go to the same meeting and all reports to the same meeting must be despatched together. It is not uncommon for 18 reports to have the same deadline. Admin give ample warning of what these deadlines are, particularly when draft reports should be put into the word processing in-tray if there will be sufficient time to type them all. However, it always seems the case that each author only regards it as a deadline for their own report, and they are want to push that deadline to its very limits. About a week before every despatch of papers, admin, and particularly those involved in typing, are subjected to a little hell on earth as papers come pouring into the in-tray in frightening bulk. It is here that the blue typing forms become important. The office manager must decide what gets typed first, and the more senior staff take priority, though all papers must be typed in time for the despatch. The juniors' work will also be typed, albeit the last of the lot, but their work, suffering under the exigencies of hierarchy, will be met with knitted eyebrows and tut-tutting since it is late. Some of the junior techs complain that they must wait for days to get a two-page letter typed.

Not only is there a distinct pecking order regarding whose work gets typed first, there is also the potential risk of having one's work typed by a typist who hates to type. As in most other offices, typing here as a specialist job task is reserved for women. Poorly paid, doing this work because they do not have the necessary educational qualifications or desire to do something in their work lives like the technical staff, they carry on their job tasks with resigned boredom. They are not required to think for themselves and are often discouraged from doing so, and the work they do is repetitive, uninteresting to them, and they know is regarded as menial by the technical staff. When they type what somebody else has given them they focus their attention upon words, letters and punctuation marks, on how to get it into the word processor so that it will look good on the paper when it is printed. They do not pay attention to what they are typing, and usually refer to things they typed not by its content, but by who wrote it and when they did the job. The words as meaning do not enter their thoughts. The words as characters on a computer screen do. Because they look at letters and words and not at sentences and arguments, the typists make errors that are incomprehensible to the technical staff. Techs can often be heard muttering under his or her breath that the typing service is deplorable, wondering incredulously how the typist could have made errors that so obviously do not make sense in the context of the sentence or paragraph. Just as often, these complaints come from people who have never typed something that somebody else has written.

Once the typists have converted the draft into something more tidy and presentable, they print a copy onto paper and give it back to the author with the now redundant blue form and original draft attached. The author then re-reads it, makes changes by scribbling in the margins, curses the typos, and returns it again to typing for a final brush-up where the cycle repeats itself. When the author is satisfied that this is a final draft, the report is photo-copied again to make a personal copy, one for the chief and other copies for witnesses or referees as necessary. The chief checks it, making sure that it is what he thinks the politicians want to hear, then returns it scribbled upon to the author. The author makes the changes, sends it down to typing again, and then, at last, the report is finished. After this stage has been reached, the report is assigned a unique number which refers to the date of the meeting and the report's agenda item, a reward for having successfully negotiated the many and varied hurdles of its production.

Paper generation has not ended yet. Once the report is final, it is bundled with all the other reports for that particular meeting and photocopied many, many times. There must be a copy for the file, a copy for the records of the meeting, copies for each of the Members, copies for all managers, for relevant people in other offices, for the author, and there must be spare copies for just in case.

The women of admin reserve a half day for each despatch knowing that it will take them that long to make the copies and distribute them as required. A table is set up in the middle of their work area next to the photocopier and each report is placed in copied stacks around the table's edge in the same order as they appear on the committee agenda. The women walk a continual loop around the table, again and again, picking up each report and adding it to those they already hold in their hands, finally bundling them with a rubber band, putting the bundle in the pre-addressed brown envelope, and putting that in the post-bag. Often after a very large despatch the admin manager will buy cakes to indicate her appreciation for a job well done. The women from admin are pleased that none of the techs are invited to share in their treat. Relieved that their task is completed, they forget that their technical colleagues also worked hard.

Paper and status

The committee report is a collaborative construction and the overt message is presented to the world in a way that shows off the office as a group of people with a joint reputation. The accuracy, style and competence of the delivery of the message builds their professional identity and is confirmation of their unique place in the world. They, like their rival offices, are elbowing for a place at the front where they can influence those with the power to bring about change. The spoken word is too informal, too ephemeral and fleeting, to bear lasting testament to their corporate character. The inchoate meaning of thought must be developed into something that conveys the public message and this they do together. But their joint face is only for the benefit of those not employed in the office. What is co-operation in the final result is achieved only through fractured component roles where each contributor's position is regulated by their social status.

The key feature that links social role to production role relates to the type of message that the individual has rights to manipulate. In the production of a report, the formalisation of the overt message (the text) precedes the application of the latent (the formatting and text processing). Much more effort is put into finalising the overt message and a report must pass under the eyes and red marking pens of a number of people before it is considered acceptable for public release. Successive refinements of the latent message are applied after each of the iterative corrections to the overt, but these are seen as mechanical, and the changes deal with eradicating typos and adjusting the margin so that it equals exactly one inch in width.

The overt message therefore proceeds the latent in the production process. It has a more prominent place in the minds of the office workers and is a "high order" or high status element of the final total message. Also, the overt message, subject to precise definition and scrutiny, is assigned commensurate higher status and is reserved for those with personal status to match.

It comes as no surprise then that the overt message can be identified most strongly with those highest in the office hierarchy. The job of the managers is to initiate and finalise the process by which a committee report is produced. Only they are in the position to identify a topic and assign a technical expert to begin the drafting stage. Their opinions are always sought on the emerging report and their concerns take precedence over those of their juniors. Theirs is the realm of the overt message - they need not be too involved with the details of the latent. They are responsible for the complete impact of the message on the audience but their focus is on the words on the paper and the ideas that these convey. The managers can afford to be somewhat cavalier with the latent message because they trust that their juniors will apply it in the end.

The latent message gains in importance as an individual's status decreases within the organisation. This was illustrated when the technical person passed on a draft to a superior for consideration only after it had been typed, i.e. the latent element had been put into place, whereas it was of no great concern to a superior whether a junior saw something in hand-written form. This would indicate that whilst the primary status attributable to the object is based upon its overt content, additions of the latent can increase status, by for instance taking a good argument and adding a layer of visual professionalism in order to strengthen it. Taking this one step farther, typing transforms the technical expert's hand-written prose into a higher order product but the manager's status is that much higher that his or her hand-written comments scribbled illegibly in the margins of a draft report take precedence over that which is typed.

The production of the latent message requires the least amount of concerted thought or skill since this is applied by following mechanical processes and pre-defined conventions and routines. This, added to its undefinable qualities, makes it very low order, low status. The final placement of the latent message onto the overt is reserved for the least powerful people in the office: the junior admin staff. Within the production process, they are restricted to the lowest status elements such as transcribing the handwriting of their superiors into typed letters, photocopying the reports for the despatch, packaging the reports into bundles with staples and rubber bands, and putting copies in the filing system.

Only the audience as the recipients of the report, are able to fully and objectively judge the final efficacy of the office group's efforts. Only they can appreciate the coherent, total, message. They make their judgements on the basis of how well the overt and latent messages dove-tail together. Despite the fractured and in some cases opposing roles inherent in the production, the final message as received by the audience reflects more upon the office group than any individual. They work as a team to defend their corporate reputation. If any part of the production were ineptly executed, for instance if factual errors were identified in the overt message, or if the latent message were marred by too many typos, all are branded as "unprofessional" or "amateurish" by the audience. The outsider does not care who the typist was, and only considers the annoyance caused by misspelled words. Equally, the telephonist will be treated with marginally less respect when taking the irate call of somebody expressing a complaint about an inaccurate statement, though she did not write it.

But with all this effort, the final product is standardised and bureaucratic. Like their speech, attire and posture, they clothe their written message in blandness, their group reputation based on the impersonalism of the formatting functions on a word processing package. True bureaucratic professionalism is devoid of human frailty. The blandness sets off the precision of the words. As one of the managers once said to me, for an Englishman to be a genuine success, all his achievements must seem easy: "It must seem effortless".

Saving paper

Paper provides tangible evidence of the passing of office events. It can be viewed as a sort of archaeological artefact embedded within the strata of files, bookshelves and in-trays. Every file is a history book with time inverted so that, like the archaeologist, the office historian must start at the bottom and work forward to the present, to the top, in order to learn what has happened. The history that is recorded in files is a selective one however, since only certain things are saved in the filing system. It is comprised of carefully prepared recordings of events and thoughts where only what was deemed as significant by the participants is included. The paper filing system therefore presents an entirely different office history from that discussed in gossip. The former is staid and formal but also reliable; the informal communication of gossip is much more entertaining and in constant flux. Just as paper differs from cloth in the type of message it can convey, words on paper differ from spoken words in the type of history they represent.

Paper is also the best means of storing "facts", the command of which transforms the ordinary technical officer into an "expert". The technical staff keep files at their desks to ensure that the placement of paper from them is executed properly and so that no unwanted sheets should stray within their spring-clipped order. A person's effectiveness as an expert is diminished if they are unable to lay hands on the precise piece of information required. Files, bookshelves and desk drawers are used to expand the mind, to make it bigger than it could possibly be within normal physiological parameters, by allowing huge amounts of information to be appended in paper form. Facts can thus be disregarded or forgotten as long as there is a systematic means of finding their paper recordings again. This is why the technical staff show such evident fear when handing their selected pieces of paper into the hands of disinterested filing clerks. Once something is misfiled, it is effectively lost and can never again provide input into the preparation of the overt message.

This self-enlargement is evidenced by other office procedures. Papers are photocopied in order to make access to information even easier - identical copies can be found in both the main and personal filing systems. Photocopying also ensures a semi-egalitarian system of access to information, provided that juniors can lay hands on paper bound information for a short time, even if only a matter of minutes, they can make a copy for themselves and thus have the potential to command the same facts as their superiors. Filling bookcases also makes the individual technical expert larger than what life would otherwise have. By compiling a bookcase relating to a specific job task, and by knowing the contents well enough to find the relevant volumes and references, the expert is able to command facts that he or she has prevented colleagues from having since they are on "my bookshelf" where they will remain unless stolen.

A key component of the idea of professionalism is accuracy. Reports and letters, indeed all messages that are sent outside the office, are checked that they are actually correct. Validating facts has become habitual in all elements of work and carried over into non-work spheres. Even non-experts feel the need to be accurate and to have command of the "real" facts. Beside the obvious example of thoroughly research a report, this pre-occupation with facts can also be identified in the saving behaviours of office workers. There is really no reason for instance to save all the past drafts of a report as it progresses towards formalisation except to guard against some contingency such as an argument over where a change originated. All other "just in cases" fall neatly in line here too. Memos (in triplicate), photocopied time sheets, logging post in the book before it is distributed to the addressee, all are mechanisms of ensuring that validating proof will be available if and when needed. Paper furnishes the past and provides for the future. It is an ever present embodiment of office politics and protective strategies.

The dispiriting reality for most office workers, particularly the professionals, is that a large bulk of the words they so painstakingly produce are never read by the people they are aimed at. A number of strategies have evolved in this office, with their parallels in other offices, designed to coax the reader to pay attention to the printed words they receive. The dilemma for the office workers is that the writing and presentation is purposefully made bland because this is perceived to be professional, and yet, if they are too successful, they run the risk of being given only the minimum attention by their target audience because the report is boring.

Knowing full well that the politicians rarely have the time, energy or inclination to read every word written for them, the managers decided to begin producing a "digest of reports" that is sent out with the bundle of committee papers. It summarizes the main issues of each item on the agenda and a "Summary of Decisions" is later sent out to record in shorthand what was finally agreed upon. These are both limited to two sides of a single sheet of paper, regardless of how packed or empty the agenda might have been, have a large and bold heading to make them stand out, and most importantly, are not printed on white paper but green.

Though all words of an official nature are committed to paper, those that are spoken often inspire the most immediate interest. Meetings with people from other offices provide the opportunity to orally rehearse the arguments from the printed page, and telephone speech can offer a potential reader a synopsis. Another approach to ensuring that the message gets out is to use the press to transform what is dull into the more absorbing form of a newspaper article or television commentary. If the office workers have been exceptionally successful, the words that were sent out printed on paper will be translated into the spoken word of the broadcast media. In this manner, they send out words on paper and get them back again.

There are a number of sources of words from other offices but most comes in the daily post. Each morning the office receives a heap of post between five and six inches thick: after each piece is opened by someone in admin, logged in the post book, the recipient's initials written neatly in the upper right corner, it is finally deposited into the appropriate in-trays across the office. Some of the papers must be dealt with immediately but more often than not, the in-trays are filled with large bundles of documents from meetings held by other organizations, as bulky and boring as what originates here. Not only do the techs have to write intricate reports, they must read, or at least browse through, even more. The state of their in-trays is testimony to how futile their own report writing actually is: how can they expect somebody else to read what they've written when the reciprocal courtesy is so clearly impossible? And the more important a person is, the more their words are committed to paper, the more they require information, the more time is spent writing and composing, and the more post they receive.

It is virtually impossible for most office workers to keep up with the reading requisite to maintain the piles of paper in their in-trays at a low level. Instead, with good intentions, they organize their incoming paper by subject and priority. Most have managed to amass too much post have adapted various storage regimes. One is building paper skyscrapers. Information can be accessed from these teetering piles by estimating the striation corresponding to the date of the document sought, or alternatively, by going through the pile sheet by sheet relying upon luck. Another is to assemble a collection of little piles, clipped or banded together sometimes in plastic or paper folders, and sorted by priority. Often, once they are so sorted and separated, the piles are perceived as old post that can safely be ignored. If something is ignored long enough, its holder might do what he or she had really wanted to on the day of receipt and throw it away.

And what happens to all this paper that is bought, written upon and received? Only rarely is it thrown away as waste: more often it is stored. Great importance is placed by the office workers on saving things squirrel-like for the future. All this paper - too much to read, too much to remember - is put away safely for later reference. It is kept just in case: in case it needs to be reread; in case it will provide useful evidence in an intellectual or professional debate; in case of a false accusation; in case there will be time to give it the attention that it deserves now. Only the very brave or very rash dare to throw it away.

Photo-copying machines facilitate saving paper more than any other device. By making a "personal" copy of a report, note or article, a piece of paper can be saved without the knowledge or inconvenience of anyone else. For many, photo-copying is an automatic and habitual companion activity to writing and reading. Everything seems to get copied at least once as the workers keep records for themselves. I would estimate that around three quarters of the paper that passes through the offices' in-trays is photo-copied and a higher proportion than that fills the files.

Paper is stored in many places and saving paper is something that is done in degrees of privacy. Desk drawers are reserved for papers of a personal nature, for instance regarding the conditions of employment, copies of memos, the aide memoir that prompts the author to use the proper formatting rules, copies of time-sheets in case the originals get lost by admin. Things are kept in drawers to keep secrets from colleagues and to prevent them from knowing that the resident owner can't remember something or doesn't trust someone. Desk drawers are highly personal. Looking in somebody else's desk drawer is considered to be an offence equivalent to rummaging through a lady's purse.

Less distant and personal are the bookshelves that accompany each desk and are classified as "my book shelf" and "your book shelf". The only collective book shelves are in the technical library where nobody hunts or in the reception area where nobody reads. Personal bookshelves are repositories of knowledge built up over years by their owners and contain much of the technical references needed to write a report that will impress and influence. Much of what is on these shelves has been requisitioned from the main technical library on the grounds that the owner "really" needs the materials and that it would save time since they must refer to the texts so often. If something is required from somebody else's book shelf, permission must first be obtained and the owner will usually personally retrieve the necessary item, extracting promises that it will be promptly returned. Much effort is put into filling a book shelf: plunder it and the same will happen to the owner's ability to do the job.

The computer system is another place for electronic paper storage. Computer filing requires sophistication and the unskilled can loose documents, sometimes forever. That's scary. While the resident experts (who incidently set up the system) may find the computer filing conventions both logical and simple, those who do not fully understand how computers function are often left to struggle with forces beyond their comprehension. These people may leave their computers in frustration, complaining to colleagues "it's broken!" as they go off to console themselves with a cup of tea. People who are accustomed to using the old-style paper filing system know that with it, if at first they do not succeed, they can try, try, again and that eventually they have a fair chance of laying hands on what they are seeking. They can rifle through many files until they find what they are looking for. This process is dependent upon seeing what is there and unfortunately, the skills learned while mastering location in a paper system are not transferable to the computer. Unless one knows the commands, one cannot "look" easily into the computer system's storage facilities. It is virtually impossible to discern one person's documents from another amidst the plethora of 8-digit filenames and myriad sub-directories. Put something in the wrong place in here, and one must be prepared to start typing again from scratch!

The main filing system in the office is a paper one and is fully public. Even documents from the computer are stored here as copies in their hard form. Paper is the filing method of preference because of its practical qualities. Five hundred sheets can take up a space as small as nine inches by eleven by three. So many words stored in so little space: and it can all be seen, all smelled, touched and leafed through, photo-copied and saved for later, just in case. The paper filing system is the biggest thing in the office in any physical sense. There are seven metal double-doored filing cabinets six feet high devoted exclusively to paper storage. Within them are virtually thousands of sheets of paper each organised according to main topic, sub-topic, and temporality. Seven file cabinets all in a row, providing the comfort of orderly structure for the history of the office.

Each office worker, particularly the techs and the senior admin, are responsible for marking important documents with the correct filing code and putting them into the specially marked "filing tray" in the admin area. There are 641 separate files, arranged in 18 main branches or topic areas. Each employee has a 29 page photo-copied list of all the file codes. It is the job of the most junior admin staff to match the codes with the correct files. Everyone forced to do this menial job hates it but it is done regularly nonetheless because of the importance accorded it.

Many of the technical staff have the same opinion of the quality of the filing as they do of the typing. Mistakes are made that don't make sense and they don't like it. Papers are put into the wrong files and are "lost". Some people have sought to remedy this problems by taking the files that they habitually work with and keeping them on their own desks, putting papers into them themselves. When they do this, they are expected by admin to fill out a "filing check out form" which states the officer's name and date the file was removed. This then is placed into the slot where the file is no more. Admin loose patience with the technical staff because the latter make such stupid mistakes: they do not fill out these forms properly or do not fill them out at all. The women of admin find it difficult to believe that their colleagues can be so sloppy and thoughtless and wonder why they are unable to follow such simple procedures. How can they be expected to maintain the filing system if the technical staff take away the files and do not put the correct codes upon the paper to be stored and sorted?

At the time my observations were made, the office had been saving paper for almost six years. During that time the workers and their predecessors managed to save many, many sheets - more than the filing cabinets and the hanging sleeves within them could safely hold. Indeed, some files were near to bursting and it was felt that no matter how many "just in cases" there might be, enough was enough, and admin decided that the system needed a good clear out. And so the first "Filing Day" was announced. With full management approval memos announcing the event began circulating. Three weeks in advance everyone was instructed to keep Friday the third of April free in their diaries. No subsequently booked leave or meetings would be allowed. The memo made it clear that all unnecessary paper would be cleared from the files and that it would be fun (a pizza lunch was planned to break up the day). Casual attire was acceptable.

The day arrived. Even those with pressing work to do were not allowed to do it. Files were to be thinned and that was that. As penance for saving too much paper for too many unrealised contingencies, each person was assigned a two-foot thick pile of papers with the instructions to start sorting. Everything that was not reasonably needed would have to be thrown out. Some people became very enthusiastic cullers, pulling out sheet after sheet, having contests with their colleagues to see who could accumulate the largest pile of scrap. Others were more cautious and threw out only duplicates. Everyone threw away something. By the end of the day, and they hadn't managed to go through all the files, the newly defined waste that had been vital documentation only a day before, climbed in precarious stacks in a mountain before the door. It was a glorious sight and everyone, most notably those who had spent years putting all those sheets into their allotted slots in the first place, felt a great surge of pride. Look how much they had thrown away! All that paper would leave the office forever.

The managers declared Filing Day to be a "resounding success". This decision was minuted after the management meeting that was held a few days later and a copy was circulated to all the staff. It would become an annual event. With pizza.

Conclusion

Unlike in the other ethnographic chapters, this one can reveal little about the difference workers make between their bureaucratic and social roles with one important exception. The rights to manipulate paper in certain ways are intricately tied with the individual's position in the formal hierarchy. The more involved in the bureaucratic role that the individual is, the more that he or she can manipulate the overt aspects of paper production. Conversely, those with less formal power and less bureaucratised roles are restricted to manipulating paper's latent properties. Clothing will be the subject of the following chapter. In this, the various roles that the workers adopt are more clearly identifiable. This is because an object such as paper is manipulate by virtually all the office workers and they work together to produce a complete paper product. Clothing is associated with the person - its relationship to the individual is intimate. It therefore can reveal more about roles and status.

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Chapter Five: Dressing for work

Introduction

Clothing tells much about the wearer. It is perhaps for this reason that much of the study of material culture focuses upon it.[23] Unlike paper, it is an obvious ideological and social carrier of information. As with the preceding ethnographic chapters, this will focus primarily on the individual office worker's position within the formal hierarchy and how they attempt to improve their positions. In this case, it will be shown that clothing acts as an important element of the worker's strategies for self-enhancement. They use it to exhibit their membership in a peer group with specific ideological associations or alternatively, use it to display individuality in their own right. Clothing is used to convey specific identities related to working and can therefore indicate when bureaucratic or social identities are at play. It is therefore an ideal means of adding to the discussion of hierarchy in Chapter Three. The message in formal and informal communications between employees is augmented by the message they convey in their dress.

[23] See for instance Ash and Wilson (1992) but also Atfield and Kirkham (1989) and Barthes (1967).

Clothing is a complex communication system and I will therefore adopt two approaches in considering its impact. First, I will carry forward the method used in the analysis of paper and consider the physicality of clothing. By breaking clothing into its component elements, the means by which the message is expressed is revealed. The ethnographic evidence that follows takes a different approach when it considers how the workers use clothing in their strategies of hierarchy.

Elements of Dress

Very broadly speaking, everyone in the office dresses much the same. Everyone wears shoes, some form of stockings, men and women both wear trousers. Men's shirts and women's blouses are very similar in construction and function. Jackets and jumpers add warmth for young and old, men and women. There are however numerous distinctions between these articles of dress that say much about the individuals wearing them. Though all office workers wear shoes, the style and physical make-up of the shoes they choose to wear help define them as individuals, and as stereotyped members of groups. The manner in which these distinctions are set out via dress is complex. As stated in the introduction above, there are more than one ways of considering the problem.

In this section, I will examine one perspective on the analysis of dress: how distinctions are made regarding the physical object class that is clothing. This mirrors the approach taken in the last chapter on paper, where paper's physicality was the starting point for its later consideration as a social facilitator of office life and tasks. Clothing provides an even more important social function because unlike paper, it is intimately associated with the individual. To begin this exploration of the physicality of dress, I will provide examples of how distinctions are exhibited by the office workers.

One of the managers wears the office's closest approximation of the "classic" suit. He wears the sorts of suits that "men in suits" wear. His newer examples (he has kept some older favourites from another fashion era) all look very much the same and it is difficult to remember how one varies from another as the garments are exhibited in succession throughout the week. They are all wool, fine weave, an indistinguishable dark colour such as navy or charcoal. They are just a little tight fitting because he does not wish to admit to himself that he needs a slightly larger size.

A junior member of the technical staff, a young man in his twenties, is tall and slender. He "looks good in a suit". He is rarely seen by outsiders during working hours because he is too junior to attend meetings, so in theory at least, he may dress relatively casually. Nonetheless, he owns a number of suits which he regularly wears. He has clear ambitions to progress his career and suits complement his strategies. None of his suits are charcoal grey: they are in shades of green and blue. None are worsted wool in fine weaves: they are linen and silk blends. None of his suits are more than a year old: he keeps up with fashion and the width of his lapels vary accordingly.

The Telephonist also wears suits into the office on occasion. Her favourite suit for work is lime green. The jacket is tight fitting and darts and pleats absent from the cut of the men's suits hug her figure. The skirt is closely fitting and stops just above the knee. The buttons down the front of the jacket and on its two front flap pockets are shiny and gold coloured, formed in the shape of complex knots. The fabric is a blend of polyester and linen. The zip of the skirt is in the back, not the front in contrast to the men's trouser fly.

I would be most surprised if any single member of staff would not be able to identify the owner of any of the three styles of suits just described if presented only with an unidentified (and we'll assume never before seen) garment and a choice of names. They would not make the connection between the item and the wearer by its size: they would know because of how the garment itself is constructed. This indicates that the match between identity and clothing is not related to the article of clothing (whether it is a jacket or shoes) but to its characteristics (whether it is grey or green, wool or linen).

Every garment is composed of a number of elements, attributes which together comprise its make-up - the total "image" that it presents within social discourse. The type of the garment, its cut, the fabric from which it is sewn and its physical condition, are the features that help make it discernible from other garments and are used to convey meanings about the person wearing it. In this section's exploration of the physicality of clothing, I will base my argument upon a literature which has recently lost popularity. It is very closely aligned to that already put forward by Baudrillard and Barthes where characteristics of a consumed object, either the "sign" (Baudrillard 1988: 10-28) or the "semantic unit" (Barthes 1967) take on communication functions. This semiotic approach, developed in the late 1960s, has received much criticism of late because it is felt to have relied far too heavily upon the linguistic model where material goods were too literally taken as elements of an unspoken language. It is wrong for present day academics to dismiss this literature out of hand. Some of the ideas put forward remain useful and can provide a constructive input into understanding material culture. I will therefore revive this half-forgotten debate and act as the champion for these discredited ideas. The debate between Jean Baudrillard and Roland Barthes, proponents of the semiotics approach and a later criticism by Grant McCracken will provide the historical context.

Baudrillard wrote: "In order to become object [sic] of consumption, the object must become a sign" (ibid.: 22). An object of consumption, he focused on media images, becomes a representation of a feeling or ideological construct and thus becomes external to the social relation that it signifies. Objects become visual and or sensual markers of meaning by providing a physical and non-verbal means of describing a relation: the object embodies ideas of the relation. Baudrillard himself admits that the manipulation of objects as signs is similar to language but that it lacks a "true syntax". His is a highly impressionistic interpretation of the linguistic qualities of objects and his unwillingness to take the analogy too far by denying the existence of grammar in his "system of objects" is clear indication that he uses the analogy to illustrate and is not claiming the discovery of new types of language.

In *The Fashion System*, Barthes took a far bolder approach to the analogy of objects as language. This has already been discussed briefly in the previous chapter. It was a somewhat unfortunate methodological decision that he focused entirely upon the representation of clothing rather than clothing itself (he considered clothing only insofar as it was pictured and described in the pages of fashion magazines). As a result, his analysis is more applicable to the fashion industry and their marketing strategies than to the manner in which clothing is used in daily social discourse. Unlike Baudrillard, Barthes took the linguistic analogy very seriously and went into a rather fruitless deconstruction of how clothing is described, trying to find the syntax that Baudrillard had missed. His adopted approach can do little to shed light upon the social uses of objects however, and the looser interpretation taken by Baudrillard is more successful in this respect.

McCracken (1988) examined and subsequently rejected the use of the linguistic analogy to describe clothing (63-70). Following Jakobson and Halle (63), McCracken identifies two principles that operate in real, spoken, language that find no parallel in clothing. The first of these is that of selection. The speaker selects interchangeable and thus equivalent units from a series of paradigmatic classes to fill slots within a sentence. The second is combination, where the speaker forms a syntagmatic chain as a composite of the selected units to create unique meaning. His research, where he showed his subjects pictures of people and asked them to describe those pictured using their clothing as cues, showed that clear messages can only be conveyed when a widely understood and socially delimited "look" applied to the "clothing outfit". His research subjects were unable to come to clear conclusions about those pictured when they did not conform to a look, because the clothing elements did "not really go together". For instance, when shown outfits that were a combination of many elements that derived from a number of types of outfits departing from a prescribed look, the subject was confused and unable to determine what sort of person was pictured. From this, McCracken concluded that elements of an outfit could not be freely combined to create a unique meaning: the more the principle of selection was used in the construction of an outfit, the more confused the message became. He concluded that the message in clothing could only be understood if it already existed and was therefore incapable of creating new messages. "Clothing is a conservative code" that can only give information that culture already wishes to make public (68).

McCracken noted that with clothing as a unique type of code of meaning, there are no "rules of combination for the manipulation of paradigmatic selections to semiotic effect." He wrote, "The combination of clothing elements is, therefore, not a crucial part of the creation of clothing messages. In short, the code has no generative capacity. Its users enjoy no combinatorial freedom(66)." With regard to this statement, I must disagree with McCracken and come to the defence of Baudrillard. McCracken's own data showed the falsity of this statement: very strict rules of combination exist, but freedom of expression is allowed, and I maintain that these are indeed analogous to linguistic syntax. The rules of combination are what McCracken's own subjects identified. Combinatorial freedom comes not from mixing types of garments but by varying the composite elements or physical qualities, within them. The missing syntax, conservative though it may be, is indeed precisely "what goes together" to make an identifiable "outfit" but there is more to an outfit than a prescribed set of garments. The difference between the Telephonist's suit and that of the receptionist is how it is made and what it is made from.

Bearing McCracken's mainly justifiable criticisms in mind, I would like to revisit the linguistic model and rework it here as the basis of my physical analysis. I will follow a semiotic approach similar to Baudrillard and Barthes and use sentence structure as an convenient approximate model of how the physical nature of clothing is developed by the wearer and the audience into a means of communication. Accepting that the message system provided by clothing cannot be strictly compared to spoken language and that the ability to express oneself through this medium is extremely limited[24], it would be wrong to wholly reject the similarities between the two systems. Different groups within society have widely varying notions of exactly what this "going together" actually is. Clothing can therefore best be understood within its own social context. In the discussion in following sections of the relationship

[24] McCracken pointed out that emotion or spontaneous and immediate communications are difficult to express through the clothing medium

between status and style of dress, the admin women use relatively flamboyant dress components to be noticed and to add strength to their views. The managers do the opposite and the more conservative their dress and the less noticeable, the greater they believe the impact of their ideas and words will become. Lime green linen does not "go" with a white shirt and tie and cannot be worn into a board room by a man.

What the "syntax" delineates is a particular identity from a finite set of identities that exists within wider society and is modified by the individual. It was proposed by Wilson (1985, 1992) that modernity forces the fracturation of identities within the individual and that one person might be a number of alternative classes of people during their lives or even during a single day. Clothing is used by the individual to lend support to the strategic identity that he or she is participating in at any one time. This view would be supported by Chua (1992) who noted that people dress for an anticipated audience for a particular event: the audience is a normative community and appropriate dress is "pre-figured"(116). Group membership is also expressed through dress: it is used to identify who does and does not, belong to a group - the key to membership is successful manipulation of the mutually understood codes (Douglas and Isherwood 1978: 89).

The "outfit" is composed of elements that "go together" and there are only a very limited number of appropriate choices. Whether using these outfits for reasons of building a personal or group identity, showing loyalty and a willingness to participate in the group's activities, or as a strategy for gaining recognition, the outfits support a coherent set of identities and provide cues to others how to treat the individual at any given time and in any given situation. These identities are the meanings protected by the syntax of "going together" and they can be easily manipulated. For instance in the earlier example, the young ambitious man wore suits to work though he was not required to because this gave the impression that he was something that he was not: a "player" in the political arena. Likewise, lawyers carefully dress their clients for court in order to steer the judge's or jury's opinions in a given direction using clothing to make them appear to be something that perhaps they are not (The *Guardian, 9/6/94: Style 10-11)*. In the business world, professional women dress soberly in the face of male scrutiny and "They have learnt that looking too fashionable may prompt the label "lightweight"; too sexy, "executive tart"" (The Guardian, 3/2/94: Style 16-17).

If the syntax is what goes together to form the identity, the "outfit" is the "sentence" or "phrase". It is the case however that only a few sentences are ever understandable at any one time and place. Within this, the principle of selection comes into play as selected units, are combined to produce an overall message. The selected units, or clothing lexemes, are the articles of clothing: shoes, socks, skirts, trousers, shirts, belts, jewellery, etc. Just as in a sentence, where there is only one subject, so in the outfit there is only one pair of shoes. This is of course an imperfect analogy, because many subjects can be combined in many sentences to tell a story, a man can only wear only one pair of shoes at a time! Nonetheless, there are different types of shoes that a man can choose: sports, dress, leather, plastic. All mean something different in the outfit. And each element can only be combined in a certain manner within the parameters of the identity syntax: stiletto shoes are not worn with gym gear nor are sports shoes worn with a formal suit and a black leather belt is not worn atop a white wedding gown. Only certain elements can be combined with others for the message to remain intact. The lexemes (garments) are themselves given meaning by their physical qualities. Just as a lexeme is composed of phonemes, distinct sounds that distinguish one word from another, so a garment is distinguishable from others by the physical qualities that it has.

These physical qualities of a garment, its status as a lexeme, and its qualities as defined by its phoneme-like attributes, are the elements or “components” (Wright 1992) of dress. These will be discussed in the remainder of this section.

The garment's type is its primary defining feature. As has already been demonstrated, a "suit jacket" differs from a "sports jacket" and a "skirt" from "trousers". Each type of garment is interpreted to connote a certain status for the wearer, the suit jacket implies professionalism; the skirt, femininity. This is the most salient level of social differentiation that clothing allows and therefore the one most readily explicitly referred to by the office workers. "What are you going to wear tomorrow" will be answered with "A suit", or "My green skirt and a blouse". Discussions about clothing are not generally about the quality of the garments but rather their type. However, when people choose garments, either to purchase or to put on that morning, more finely tuned characteristics are used. In the example above, the Telephonist and the manager made qualitatively different choices in their definition of what an appropriate suit should be: she would never wear grey pin-stripe and he never lime green linen.

Distinctions are made between types of clothing based on classes of qualitative features, each one appropriated by certain groups to be emblematic of their chosen identity. A type of garment such as a jacket can therefore be interpreted to indicate a certain type of wearer, depending upon which elements it is composed of. These elements are highly sensitive to fashion and interpretations change within popular culture at a rapid rate: an element may be attributed with one meaning one year, and another meaning the next or may be interpreted differently by two groups at the same time. This makes any analysis of how these elements function problematic and I will therefore speak in generalities.

The most salient element of a garment beyond type, is cut. Features such as tight fit or loose fit can, according to how fashion has been appropriated, give indications about the wearer. As an example, women's office clothing adhered to the norms of "power dressing" in the 1980s which was to a large part based on cut rather than other elements of colour or fabric. The power suit was defined by shoulder pads, and a tight fitting form. In contrast to the post-war Utility Suit which attempted to match cut with an economical use of fabric, the Power Suit of the affluent Eighties was constructed in such a manner to hug the figure from bodice to bum, shaping the garment with numerous darts and tucks, using the bias of the fabric to force any diagonal wrapping into elastic curves, with the result of an inefficient use of the cloth. The Power Suit was cut to show off a woman's figure at its curvy best and in addition, to add man-size shoulders with careful upholstery. Cut was used to produce a "woman who was a man." It was therefore the perfect addendum to the image of many women who were taking advantage of the new freedoms allowed by the success of the women's movement, as they attempted for the first time to find a place for themselves en masse in the previously male-dominated realm of office work.

The next most salient feature of a garment is the cloth used to make it. In a very real sense, the cloth determines what sort of garment can be constructed from it. A fine silk cannot be used to make a tailored jacket, a heavy wool tweed could not be used for stockings. The fibres themselves determine physical qualities of the garment such as light reflexivity (silk is shiny, cotton dull), transparency (Indian cotton is slightly see-through, cotton canvas is not), drape (viscose is soft, wool stiff), surface texture (a boucle yarn will produce a rough texture, fine cotton two-ply will produce a substantial but soft fabric), weight (light as silk or heavy as cashmere), and weave (a twill weave will give a somewhat elastic, moveable fabric, a knitted garment will allow much more movement and stretch, corduroy is stiff because of its very rich surface texture).

The qualities of the fabric are used in the construction of the garment's overall message. An obvious example is the manner that fabric is used to display gender. Women's clothes tend to be constructed of fabrics that are finer than that for men's clothing: more transparent, better drape, greater light reflexivity, and a wider range of textures. These elements of cloth have become associated with ideas of femininity, relative frailty, prettiness, and most important, sensuality and sexuality. The fabrics have become analogous with the qualities of the women who wear them - a silk scarf hanging from the neck flows with the woman's movement, is uncontrolled; a rayon blouse hangs in somewhat heavy folds revealing the shape of the arms and breasts, a light wool suit still allows the body's form to show through. Male gender in office clothing is expressed with fabrics that are tough and stiff, inflexible in relation to the women's clothing. Suits are always of opaque and tightly-woven fabrics, shirts are made of cotton and polyester woven tightly enough to produce a substantial fabric that does not drape but rather puckers where it hangs slack. A tie is constructed in such a manner that whilst the outside covering of light silk, cut on the bias, has the potential to flow, this movement is prevented by the stiff and heavy wool underlining which keeps the tie straight and angular no matter how it is scrunched and twisted in the process of tying the knot.

Colouring is applied to the surface of cloth in the form of printed patterns or, in the case of knitted garments, can be worked directly into the fabric. Stripes and plaid patterns can be woven into cloth. Pattern is highly sensitive to fashion and probably changes more quickly than any other elements of clothing. Perhaps it is because of the inherent conservatism of office clothing, or the fact that most people cannot regularly replace every item of work clothing each time the fashion changes, that patterned fabric is not overly important in the office dress dialogue. The most ephemeral type of clothing are ties which go in and out of fashion within six months. Pattern can therefore give a good indication of the "currentness" of the wearer and an "old tie" can be emblematic of an old fool.

A final element used to judge a garment, and therefore what it means about the person wearing it, is its physical condition. Office clothing is at its most effective when in its pristine condition and a shabby suit is as powerful a symbol as one that is new. Cleanness and crispness of the fabric is compatible with ideas of efficiency and correctness. Clothing that has been spotted with drips of food, splashed with mud, soiled with work, can be as unacceptable as wearing a garment that has been made from an unsuitable fabric. Gravy splashes on a tie might be taken as evidence that a man's argument is equally sloppy, a wrinkled shirt that he was too lazy to get out of bed at the right time for work, unpolished shoes that he is careless. The formality of the office is carried through to the condition of the cloth on the office worker's body.

In this section, I have examined one means of analysing the material objects of dress. This approach considers clothing as a number of elements that together convey specific meanings. The variation and combinatorial freedom is limited by a "syntax" composed of an idea of "what goes together". Clothing stereotypes can convey messages concerning individuality or group membership by allowing the individual to display visually the widely understood clothing type which denotes a recognisable person type. The distinctions which provide clues to the audience between types of clothing are very fined grained and embrace a number of elements. I have begun this chapter with this argument because I hope that in the following sections, the reader will not loose sight of the importance of the physical qualities of clothing. This is the starting point from which judgements about the person are made. Whilst it can convincingly be argued that clothing is an impoverished message system in relation to spoken language, it can equally be argued that clothing can provide more information about the individual. The spoken word is fleeting: it fades immediately upon being uttered, only to be recorded in memory and in writing. Language in this sense is very much a thing of the moment. Clothing can give a more lasting message, as can other articles of material culture, by conveying meaning as long as it is discernible by the senses. Once on, an outfit or even a single garment, can continue to convey meaning as a beacon of identity, while spoken language can add another layer of meaning. The individual can therefore be saying many things simultaneously through different media: spoken language to express ideas, body language to express emotion, clothing language to express identity.

The semiotic approach should not been seen as the only one to take in the study of material goods. Too often, those writing about material culture rely upon this sort of argument, reducing the object world into a neat material taxonomy. However objects derive their meaning from the social relations in which they are imbedded. In the remainder of this chapter I will call upon another approach, considering how clothing is used as a social strategy. In this case, the elements of dress do not serve as signs of a relation but actually deliberately further that relation. However, the semiotic approach can provide some of the tools required to understand the significance of dress because only by understanding how clothing is constructed can its full impact be understood.

Clothing, status and personal identity

There is a distinct "fashion continuum" in the office and certain groups of people dress themselves in a recognisably different style from others. "You can easily tell the professional women from the secretaries by their shoes" (quoted in Kanter 1977: 37). The differences between the dress of the secretary and the boss are matters of taste, preference and the construction of personal identities, and not so much the result of salary differentials. Clothing choices bolster personal strategies of self expression and power

Workers of different status in the office make dissimilar clothing choices and judgements about what they wear reflecting their group associations. The relationship between status, both formal and informal, and dress style will be explored in this section. It will be shown that dress is used as a means of manipulating power and that it is used differently by those whose work identities are more or less bureaucratically grounded.

Though they have the most money to spend on clothes, the managers probably spend the least. It is certain that they do not buy new clothes to wear to work as often as either the women from admin or the junior techs. Their shopping philosophy contrasts with that of the junior admin women and their definition of quality differs. The managers tend to opt for "classic" garments that do not vary from season to season. The in-built conservatism of these clothes obviates the need to continually replenish wardrobes. In contrast, quality to the admin women means "fashion" which is to great measure dependent upon up-to-dateness and variety, so what is "good" must not of necessity be expensive. These women do not like the clothing worn by their technical counterparts. One of the junior admin women once commented to a female Senior tech how she pitied her: "You have to work with all those stuffy men. Even the young ones don't have any dress sense!"

The junior admin women are the most careful dressers in the office. Though they generally have the least amount of spare income with which to buy clothes and jewellery, they take the greatest pains to be fashionable and attractive. Their wardrobes are more varied and colourful, have a wider range of styles, are worn at more precise "seasons", and with a greater range of extras like special matching jewellery and scarves, than any that the technical staff could boast.

Clothing is a very important feature of these women's self-definition. Their personal finances are such that the men in their lives (or in one case parents) have clear responsibility for paying the major bills relating to the household, such as mortgage and electricity bills[25] while they are responsible for the day-to-day running of the domestic sphere and thus they do most of the shopping for food and household items. Also as a generality, they maintain what can be considered "traditional" relationships in their families where they are considered to be at least slightly intellectually inferior to their male, or older, cohabitants. As such, they do not in most cases shop for non-food items for anyone but themselves or children, unless for gifts, since to do so would impose their subordinate tastes upon the superior household member.

The traditional subordinate role is manifested in a number of ways in the construction of their personal identities while at work. First, they habitually defer to males, though they might not feel this is entirely justified for some men. Second, they accept their reduced level of power in the office hierarchy. They are not surprised that they are at the bottom of the power pile, and do not expect to be elevated to positions of high status, nor do they aspire to call the shots or to take on new responsibility. What they want however is to influence those with power, to bend fate according to their own judgements and to have things done their way. But they want to be noticed. As was shown, they use gossip to persuade. They manipulate other people's work in the typing pool to ingratiate themselves with some and annoy others. They also dress to make an impression. In order to offset the disadvantages

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25 See Lunt and Livingstone (1992) for a discussion of gender and household finances.

that their job descriptions pose, they try to look good, assuming that personal attractiveness will add strength to their expressed views.

Acquiring clothes and dressing themselves captures their imaginations and is a focus for their energies. They surreptitiously pour over women's magazines and mail-order catalogues when they should be working, comparing styles and commenting to one another on their likes and dislikes over lunch. Shopping for clothes is a favourite activity, and beside relationships and events, is one of the most popular topics of conversation amongst them. Love for clothes is something that they share as a common bond. Each clothing purchase is either described in detail, or actually exhibited for comment, and information on where the purchase was made, and what it cost, is given. Often, these purchases are made at the risk of feared or actual financial hardship, and with this element of risk comes a significant amount of guilt. They feel that they should not be buying themselves clothes, but are compelled to do so. Their wardrobes are augmented by donations from girl-friends, sisters and daughters, who pass on to them unwanted garments. Clothing is exchanged in an unending cycle, and the goal is not to build up reciprocal obligations, as with standard gift giving, but to help one another to improve their image and to have as much variety and style as possible. Quantity takes precedence over quality, and they would rather have many inexpensive things than only have a few more expensive items.

Beyond clothing, the women from admin manipulate the appearance of their bodies far more than any of their colleagues. Conversations often stray away from articles of dress to how these "fit". Slight variations in weight are monitored with precision: proud proclamations of weight reduction are countered with dismayed admissions of gain. Dieting methods are compared and critical comments passed if somebody is no longer within acceptable limits of ideal slenderness. Make-up is more important to these women as well, and they habitually improve the impact of their facial features with eye-shadow, mascara, blush and lipstick. Toning and moisturising is *de regeur*. Shaved legs are slipped into tummy trimming control-top tights and aerobics firm unwanted blubber. Fingernails glimmer in unnatural shades of crimson and in summer match pedicured toes that emerge from open sandals. The ladies' toilet is redolent with perfume that has been applied by them in the morning and after lunch.

Their "fashion look" is more individualistic than other people's in the office, including other women. In making themselves attractive, they manipulate a number of images, drawing on non-office sources for inspiration. Adjectives that could be used to describe the images they wish to create could be "feminine" in the traditional sense of softness of character and pliability, "sexy" by being physically attractive and displaying the body and its form within acceptable limits of office decorum, "traditional" by wearing dresses, or "modern" by wearing leggings. They mix and match these styles more than their senior colleagues and display a wider variety throughout the week. Their daily choices are based upon activity, if for instance they will have to meet outsiders that day, or how they are feeling.

The women of admin have a specific fashion trajectory that they faithfully follow. This is only one genre of dress in the office however. Other office identities are expressed differently.

When I first began doing this fieldwork, the junior techs were all men in their early to mid-twenties. My observations progressed over four years, and during that time the way they each dressed changed dramatically as they shifted their references from their past lives as University students to their current status as young professionals. There were three when I began. They had all done first degrees in university and had either completed or were working towards specialised post-graduate degrees in their profession. Their wages were high in comparison to the junior admin women, and unlike them, they had very good prospects of earning significantly more in the future as their careers progressed. They had varied jobs and worked on a range of projects under the supervision of their line manager. Their level of responsibility was significant, and this has grown.

The youngest was only 23 when he joined the office. His transformation was most dramatic since he literally had the most to loose and to gain. He left University at the age of 21, worked in another office for a year and then took up a position here. In order to earn his professional qualifications, he spent one day a week attending a University course on "day release". When he first began working in the office his dress could only be described as "student-like". Though he did not wear jeans, his thin cotton trousers were unlike anything that any of his colleagues wore. The condition of his clothes was affected by the fact that he shared a house with a group of young people like himself, mainly graduates in their first jobs. His clothes were hung on banisters and radiators immediately after being taken from the washing machine, so that they could dry before the next person had their turn. Strange cross-ways creases where sometimes to be seen on the legs of his trousers. These were never ironed out because he thought that ironing was "a waste of time". His shirts were bought cheaply or inherited from an uncle and the fabric had a high enough polyester content to prevent creases from developing. His ties were bought at street markets and department stores and were out of style. He spent the greatest amount of his work clothing budget on his shoes which also doubled for leisure wear since he felt that his "Greasy Docs" were fine as a complement to his "work trousers". His social life centred around meetings with his friends in the pub out of office hours. He often went home and changed clothes if he met them on a week day.

Within about a year of starting work in the office, though still studying one day a week, his style of dress began to change. The trousers became neater, and though they were still cotton, they were of a heavier fabric and an iron was occasionally applied to them in an attempt at crease control. He avoided wool or dress trousers however since these conjured visions of "flash" businessmen in his mind and were the epitome of "yuppiness", both being identities that he did not wish to be associated with. He discarded his old shirts and replaced these with shirts made of more cotton than polyester, or in some cases 100% cotton, in shades of pale blue or green and of course white. He didn't own a sports jacket, though he did posses a grey pin-stripe suit from Marks & Spencer which he had had for years and had only worn three times. His biggest clothing purchase was made approximately two years into his time in the office when he bought a leather jacket. He had been wanting one "for ages" and finally could afford it. It made him feel "cool". He recently bought two new ties which he considered to be of "good quality": they were silk rather than polyester, and were in the current style, that is, wide and colourful. He still wore Doc Martin shoes which were greased rather than polished and had yellow stitching around the sole.

The change in his clothing was the result of two factors. First, he was spending a lower proportion of his time around students, since his course was only one day a week, and their influence on his taste was progressively declining. This was augmented by his growing habituation with office work. Second, he was earning more money and could afford to buy things that were beyond his means a few years before. He finished his course when he was 26, but his dress style continued to evolve. University norms gave way to office norms and his salary took up the slack. To see him today, his taste in clothing is almost unrecognisable. His trousers are now wool, though he has one pair of neatly pressed cotton trousers. His shirts are fine and high quality cotton and always pressed. His ties are pure silk. He has separate shoes for leisure and work and those that are worn in the office are either sober brown or black: there is no yellow stitching.

The remaining two men were older, in their middle late twenties. They both had completed their Master's degrees, were on a higher salary scale and had more responsibility. They did, and continue, to dress very similar to one another. This is the style that the younger man just described had moved on to. They wear wool trousers in tight weaves in either tiny cheques or plain cloth with pleats in front and sharp creases down front and back that can only be achieved by a dry cleaner's press. Their ties are silk and fashionable, they both wear sports jackets into the office, which they take off as soon as they reach their desks, placing them on the backs of their chairs or in their lockers, only to put them on again when they have to attend a meeting or when they go home at night. Their shirts are fine cotton in fabric of either white, light blue or with very narrow coloured stripes. Their shoes are soft black polished leather, free of ornamentation.

It is mainly because of these older junior technical men that the young one modified his dress. They would gang up upon him over morning coffee and make snide teasing comments about the inappropriateness of his clothing. Within a week of one incident, the young one broke down and went shopping for new clothes that he did not at that time particularly want: two pairs of trousers and a sports jacket. After this spending spree, he admitted he "realised" that how he dressed affected the amount of respect people showed him. On another occasion, one of the same older men arrived wearing a dark red sports jacket. Immediately upon his entry into the office he was greeted with a chorus of jokes, "He thinks he's a bell-boy!", "No, he's an usher in a theatre!", "No, I know! He looks like an airline steward!" Anything but a young professional office worker.

The managers' style of dress is very different from that of the younger members of staff. They wear wool suits, and have a number of sports jackets apiece, often a few years old. The female manager also tends to wear suits though she can be seen in wool skirts and blouses, the female equivalent to the male trousers and shirt. The men always wear ties, the women does as well on occasion, looking decidedly "mannish" to use her own term. The suits, trousers and skirts are made from tight weave wool or wool blends, in summer this might be exchanged for cotton/polyester blends, in colours of navy blue and charcoal grey. Their shirts are fine cotton, she sometimes wears silk, in white, pale colours or narrow coloured stripes. Their shoes are black and soft, and always polished.

Taking these examples, the office fashion continuum follows the trajectory of power: those with the least power and the least bureaucratised work identities spend the most time developing their personal appearance and those with the most formal power do not care much about what they wear, provided of course that this fits squarely within their mutually understood sartorial norms. Clothing is used by the office workers to add to themselves, to make themselves into something more than just the people who fill the job descriptions. It is used as a cue to others that a person is of a certain type and bears a matching level of influence. It also serves as part of their strategies to increase their own relative status. Within the office, there is a high correlation between real power - measured by responsibility, autonomy, and the ability to direct the actions of others - and style of personal appearance. Those who feel the most secure because they are satisfied with the level of formal power that they command, and who are the most satisfied with their positions, tend to be content with the standardised and conforming appearance of their peer group while those who feel most at risk or are lowest in the hierarchy can at times be extremely concerned about their visual impact. Feelings of personal ineffectiveness and low self-confidence are sometimes addressed literally cosmetically as fashion flamboyance is used to camouflage insecurity.

A parallel can be drawn between this argument and one put forward by Simmel (1971) in 1904 regarding the relationship between stylistic fashion flamboyance and status. Simmel couched his arguments differently from what is presented here. He identified fashion as a means of demonstrating class differentiation, or "class distinction"(297), where the fashions of the upper classes are never identical to those of the lower. Fashions, according to his argument, are set at the upper strata of society in order that people within it can demonstrate that they are materially different from those in the lower classes. The styles of the upper classes are adopted and imitated by the lower classes, though imperfectly, and once this has occurred, and the power of the fashion medium to differentiate groups has diminished, the upper classes abandon that fashion and opt for another. This particular argument is not of great relevance to this discussion of dress in the office except when Simmel takes it to a non-class-based level.

He wrote that women as a group are relatively insensitive to the differentiation of class structure. As such, they tended to be much more concerned about fashion detail and effect than men because of "woman's" "weak social position" (308) which tends to lead to imitation at the expense of personal individuality.

> *It seems as though fashion were the valve through which woman's craving for some measure of conspicuousness and individual prominence finds vent, when its satisfaction is denied her in other fields (309).*

The importance of this quote is not that it explains why women are more concerned with fashion, though in the case of the office this often happens to be the case. The lesson to be learnt is that the person in the relatively worse power position relies upon the medium of fashion as an extension of the self in order to enhance the impact of their personal expression. If Simmel's argument is modified to replace references to gender with references to relative power, and class with status, many of the clothing choices made by the office workers can be explained. I will do this in the following quote:

> *In a certain sense fashion gives [the lower status person] a compensation for her lack of position in a [status] based on a calling or profession. The [person of higher status] who has become absorbed in a calling has entered a relatively uniform [status], within which he resembles many others, and is thus often only an illustration of the conception of this [status] or calling....To his individual importance is added that of his [status], which often covers the defects and deficiencies of his*

purely personal character. The individuality of the [status] often supplements or replaces that of the member. (310)

Simmel proposed that fashion is used by the relatively weak women (i.e. those of lower status), because it allows them to take on a group individuality since they are incapable of being individuals in their own right. It is at this point that my argument diverges completely from Simmel's: I do not see fashion flamboyance, at least in the office context, arising because the powerless cannot devise their own individual self-representations nor that the lower status person imitates the higher status person. My argument is quite the opposite. The powerless use fashion flamboyance as a form of enhancing their individual impact in an effort to be perceived singularly by those with greater power. It is a strategy for being noticed. On the other hand, those with greater power, as Simmel also noted, derive their individual identities from their class (or by my rewriting, status) or calling. The profession of the managers and the technical staff, with its special educational qualifications and chartered standing, provides ample material for the construction of an identity in the work place. Using elaborate fashion strategies would set these people apart as individuals, exactly what they do not want, since their goal is to be seen as competent in their discipline above all else.

To bring this argument back to the descriptions of office dress at the beginning of this section, the women from admin, sometimes referred to as "girls", are in the financially worst position within the office yet are rarely seen wearing the same outfit within the space of two weeks. They are careful about how they look because looking good gives them confidence. Bright colours, trendy cuts, light and sensuous fabrics speak to other people in the office that they want to be recognised. These women could easily be ignored as unimportant by more senior members of staff, or be given only cursory notice when something is required of them, if they did not make an effort to join in. But their identity is distinctly their own, or belongs to their own social group. They do not try to look like managers. Here Simmel's argument holds partially true: their individuality is constructed within norms relating to images of "traditional women" from the "working class" who seek to be "feminine" and "attractive" or "sexy". Bringing in the earlier debate on strategy, the women from admin who are the office workers with the least bureaucratised work identities, rely upon social mechanisms such as dress and manipulate non-bureaucratic dress images.

At the other extreme in the power hierarchy are the managers whose dress conforms to their professional identity and is bland in comparison. They do not seek to display mood or sexuality through clothing. There is little variety in the work wardrobe of either sex. Dark colours, uniform cuts and styles, and predictability exemplify the dress of all the technical staff and these characteristics become more exaggerated in relation to seniority. Unlike the junior women in the office, the technical staff, mostly men, do not want to be noticed visually. Their survival depends upon being recognised for their ideas and how these are presented to other professionals in written and spoken form. Unlike the admin women, these people have highly bureaucratic roles and power increases within the organisation in relation to the individual's position in the formal hierarchy. In dress, they avoid the non-office images adopted by the admin women. For them, to use flamboyant social referents on the job would belie the formal power they have achieved. Dress amongst professionals can also be a means of showing corporate loyalty and mutual commitment (Kanter 1977: 48) If their dress became the focus of attention, their professional work message would loose force and their credibility would be slowly eroded. Clothing would become a distraction. They would be fighting their battle in the formal arena with social weapons and they would be doomed to failure, their ideas and words forgotten. This was brought forcibly home to me when one of the managers told a story over the afternoon tea break about a former colleague of his. All he could remember about this man was that he regularly wore red leather trousers in the 1960s and that he had a very long beard. This man's professional achievements were not mentioned. All that remained of him was the memory of his inappropriate trousers.

The Bureaucrat's restraint

Office clothing in general, and the suit in particular, embodies ideas of personal restraint that are compatible with the norms of office working. Any natural propensity that an individual might have to express themselves as a unique personality with personal motivations can be dampened with the application of clothing and the expectations that arise from it. Clothing can therefore be used to convey basic assumptions about the workings of a social setting. The focus of this section will be upon bureaucratic roles and related assumptions and how these are expressed in office wear.

Anthropologists have provided numerous examples from other societies how clothing is used to express very basic normative assumptions. It is one means for the individual to demonstrate that all is well with the world and that he or she is participating fully in it. Concepts of propriety and emotional status can also be demonstrated through dress. Miller (1991, 1994) identified a use of clothing in Trinidad similar to that described for this office. The concept of transience, associated with individuality and the here-and-now, is demonstrated by the "stylist" who is continually seeking to be at the vanguard of fashion and who bests social opponents on the sartorial field of battle. Concepts of transcendence, associated with the multi-generation family and the interior of the home, are also demonstrated with clothing through wrapping and layering but more importantly through other media such as home decoration. In Singapore, clothing conveys images of formality and informality, as the individual anticipates the "imagined stages" upon which the costume will help add conviction to the acted social strategy(Chua 1992).

Clothing is used as reminder to the self, and a cue to others, that a particular individual is fulfilling a particular identity at any given time and that the assumptions associated with it are appropriate for that individual. Clothing can be likened to the frame surrounding a painting (Gombrich 1963, Triggs 1992, and Miller 1987: 100-102, Simmel 1971: 297): just as the frame indicates that the painting in it is a work of art, so the suit reveals the bureaucrat. This concept of framing identity was most elaborately developed by Goffman (1974)[26] where clothing is used by the office workers as "keys" to indicate that a set of assumptions, or what Goffman termed a "primary framework" was in operation. In essence, the category of clothing gives indications of the strategic identity that the person wearing it has adopted, and the activity that they believe they are carrying out.

Everybody in the office "dresses for work". Each has specific items of clothing in their wardrobes reserved specifically for that locale, or at least designated as being appropriate for it though the garment in question might serve in non-work situations as well. "Work clothes", particularly for the professional staff, are characterised by notions of conservatism and formality, constraint and restraint, quality and professionalism. And though the manager's suit may differ dramatically from what the Telephonist would also classify in that category, both suits are mutually recognised as not being appropriate for grocery shopping on Saturday morning or going to see a film on Saturday night. This archetypal element of office clothing, the suit, is perceived by the wearer to dampen down the individual's social side in order to foster the standard face of the bureaucrat. The very construction of the garment holds the person in.

A suit is tailored to fit closely against the figure, accentuate parts of the body that are associated with power and hide those associated with the idiosyncratic social animal inside the costume. Shoulders are broadened with

26 Also discussed in Chapter Four.

padding, squared and levelled. Arms are covered with three layers of cloth (the suit sleeve which is usually lined and the shirt sleeve which is closed at the wrist with a buttoned cuff) and become a muscle-less tube of unknown strength or girth. The torso is regularised, especially when the suit jacket is buttoned, and made to appear to descend in a straight line from the overhanging shoulders. Lapels, whether the current fashion is narrow or wide, add a further layer to the covering provided by the suit, pointing to the shoulders, making the chest appear broader. Women's breasts become flattened, almost corseted, revealing only a hint of the curves that would be exposed under other types of garments. Men's expanding middles are hidden under the button closure on the front of the jacket which, open or closed, rests immediately over the belly, making it difficult to discern the shape beneath. The suit has an external breast pocket on a man's suit, but often not on a woman's. This pocket is for small flat things so that the intended form cannot be contorted, and usually remains empty. The two front pockets are usually also empty. The inside breast pocket might hold a diary or file-o-fax - things that are flat. Women do not rely upon their pockets at all - they carry purses - thus keeping the shape of their suits correct. The man's tie, whilst lending colour to the suit, also acts as a constraining closure, a "sartorial noose" (Esquire, April 1991) at the shirt's neck. It seals the space between the face and the body in a hermetic air lock.

The trousers on a man's suit are tight fitting at the waist, held together with a button and fly zipper, and though there is rarely an example of suit trousers that are at risk of falling off the body because the waistband is too loose, there are invariably loops along the waist band to hold a belt neatly in place. These loops are more often than not filled with a leather belt, tightly fitting around the waist, adding another layer of restraint to the body. The man's suit trousers are fitted with two pockets with a diagonal opening at the front where keys, loose coins and a handkerchief rattle about: these are the man's most personal possession in the office, those objects that bear most closely upon his intimate needs, kept in the pockets closest to his body, farthest from the outside world. The back pockets of the trousers contain wallets, often breaking up the smooth shape of the tailored shape with a rectangular bulge. This is however covered by the jacket. Women's skirts or suit trousers have comparatively smaller pockets. A man's "best" feature is his upper torso whilst a woman's is the area between breasts and thighs. Pockets at the waist of a woman's skirt or trousers add extra bulk of fabric and the contents of pockets would accentuate hips and would distort the elongated hour-glass image of the ideal woman. Lest the temptation become too much to load the hips, tailoring for women keeps the pockets small. Trousers are sharply creased down the front further hiding the shape of the legs underneath by forcing the fabric to hang tent-like down the length and over the knees rather than along the side of the leg. The hem of the trousers nearly brushes the surface of the floor and is meant to cover the tops of the shoes. The socks under the trousers ensure that no skin on the ankle is revealed. Only the woman's skirt reveals part of her natural form - legs are exposed more or less according to the length of the skirt.

Office workers wearing suits are a completely different sort of category of individual from people wearing jeans and a T shirt. Their bodies have been standardised with a stiff fabric covering. Their shapes obscured. Their skin covered. All that is exposed of their bodies is their heads and their hands. Heads for thinking, communicating, and sensing the environment. Hands for writing, gesticulating, holding, writing. Women's nylon mesh covered but exposed legs can demonstrate another type of power: controlled sexuality (see Pringle 1989). The observer, the other, the social participator, is not allowed to see the sexual, sensual, corporeal entity, but only to guess about it. Sloping shoulders, flabby belly, wobbly muscles are all hidden from observational discourse. A suit can obscure most physical irregularities other than those relating to girth and height. As such, the suit provides the perfect physical shell for the bureaucrat: since it is so standardised in its physical construction and so completely covers the animal self, it allows an impersonal identity to be developed within its tailored shape.

I suggest, that in a very personal sense, the suit makes the office worker. The bureaucrat "feels" him or herself to be de-personalised and therefore able to hide idiosyncratic flaws and short-comings, feels that strangers see the suit first and the person second. The suit is office armour that will deflect the deadly missiles of critical opinion and personal judgements.

Virtually all office workers own at least one suit. Suit ownership increases in relation to the need to present an impersonal outward face, so that the most junior of the office workers in this particular office who do not often stray from the confines of its walls may have only one or two suits, and those in the most senior positions who can expect to be on show most days at least once, wear suits habitually, and own a number. Those who own only a few often express discomfort when they wear a suit. This unease has both a physical element, since the garment is more constraining than other types of clothing, and an emotional one, since they feel that they are not being "themselves". Regular suit wearers have become inured to these feelings of unnaturalness and have ceased to think much about their suits, donning them daily like a uniform, accepting the restrictions they impose.

The suit is the traditional costume for men attending job interviews. Wearing one displays the applicant's willingness to partake in office functions while simultaneously hiding personal physical, intellectual and social imperfections. Young men in particular employ the suit in their job seeking efforts and these garments are such a widely understood practical aid that merely wearing one raises suspicions. All the young men in the office have at least one "interview suit" hanging in their closets, though they are rarely worn. The young men, unlikely to receive a quick promotion in the organisation because it would be predicated upon a more senior person finding a job elsewhere, look for new jobs periodically, and often discuss whether the job market looks good at any one time. They do not however tell each other when they are called to an interview in the hope of not being found out if they are unsuccessful. This poses something of a dilemma for them. They have to wear a suit to the interview, but that only takes part of the day. If they work part of the day, and they usually do because they are saving their leave and feel unjustified calling in sick, at some point they have to wear the suit into the office. This is evidently embarrassing for them, judging from their blushing discomfort when asked by their peers: " Why you are so dressed up? Do you have a job interview today?"

For those more junior and less likely to be seen by outside eyes, dress is more informal. Rather than a daily suit, they are allowed more flexibility in the pieces they wear. A certain air of formality relative to their other clothing is maintained however, and they still wear "work clothes" at all times. These clothes are chosen to fit this category because of their relatively greater formality which itself arises from their restraining features. The young men wear trousers that are cut similarly to those worn with suit jackets, and the informality they represent derives only from the fact that they do not match the rest of the costume. These young men's shirts are exactly what would be worn with a suit jacket, thus equally cuffed, buttoned and covering. They may wear suit-style jackets but again, because they do not match the trousers they are interpreted as being less formal. These "sports jackets" are determinedly more formal than a jumper however which, because of its knitted structure, allows for free movement of the arms and provides a warm covering over all parts of the torso.

Women's office wear is acknowledged to be less formal than men's and more "stylish", that is, more idiosyncratic and offering greater variety. Women are, even when wearing suits, allowed more freedom in texture, colour and cut than men, almost in an open acknowledgement of their license to express their emotional and sensual selves. But the clothes they wear at work still function as restraints. Blouses are buttoned at neck and wrists and are obscuring, hiding sexuality under soft folds of cloth. Women are more likely to wear knitted fabrics which allow for freer movement but are more bound by "accessories" such as belts, necklaces, ear-rings, and scarves. Shoes force arches and toes into shapes that differ from the sports shoes that are not worn into the office (see Wright 1989).

Even the most rigorously bureaucratised dressers have certain constrained opportunities to exhibit individual choice. Men, who are the most standardised in their opportunities, are allowed two main outlets. Ties and socks are the only part of their dress that allow them to express humour and colour without outstepping the bounds of office etiquette. Ties are used to brighten up an otherwise dull suit, socks are hidden under trouser legs only to peep out when legs are crossed over knees at coffee breaks or under tables in meetings. Fancy socks in-knit with little elephants, *fleur-de-lis* and golfers are a favourite of the younger technical men who still wish to be silly on occasion but not flagrantly so in front of their superiors. These young men also tend to spend a relatively high price for their ties which can cost more then the shirts that they complement. They tend to own a variety which allows them to be fully contemporary and to wear some element of clothing that changes from day to day. One of the managers, a man in his late 40s who professes to have strong liberal views but is also an avid reader of the conservative magazine "County Life" expresses his contradictions by wearing green-grey tweed suits with rather battered shoes, thus getting three messages across simultaneously: he is a serious office worker with a country flair who is not over concerned with material possessions and who will wear something until it needs to be replaced. Some people express their individuality by default: they simply do not care, or do not notice, the office's fashion norms.

The restraint afforded by office clothing is at odds with non-work notions of physical representation which are based upon looser and more comfortable motifs. Leisure time is characterised by clothing that is opposite from restraining. Away from work, people begin to relax and looser fitting, more comfortable, clothing is chosen. It is as if the restraint of office wear is a psychical reminder of the restraint that an individual must exhibit during work hours, the discomfort of the tight cloth bindings serving as a reminder that one's self must be likewise kept under control. The dichotomy of tight/loose is readily illustrated. When doing thought-provoking and intellectually taxing work, professional men often, having removed their jackets, roll up their sleeves, freeing up their wrists and minds for the task at hand. When they are interrupted in what they do, the sleeves are rolled back down and the cuffs buttoned in an almost unconscious action of collecting themselves back into order. It is as if they are unable to discuss serious matters with their cuffs unbuttoned. A more obvious example of "loosening up" is the change in dress code put into operation when the work setting is exchanged for that of the pub. Upon arriving from work and settling down for a few drinks, the young men peel off their clothes layer by layer, unceremoniously dumping them in a collective pile on a chair or corner bench. Ties are taken from necks and folded up into fist-sized rolls as they are wound around fingers then removed and put into pockets or briefcases. Cuffs are unbuttoned, sleeves sometimes rolled up. Collars opened to allow for easy breathing, swallowing and gossip.

Men tend to wear the same thing into work every day. Women make adjustments if they know that they will be "going out" after work and will modify their daily dress in anticipation, for instance they will wear clothing to work that they believe will be more "comfortable" or "fun" or "good for the pub". One of the most junior admin women, who incidentally was also one of the least likely office workers to be seen in a suit, was particularly concerned about matching garment and occasion and would begin to quiz her colleagues sometimes weeks in advance of an office social event to see what they were wearing. Those most bored with her questioning were also those in senior positions for whom dress accompanied work and who knew with certainty that they would be wearing the same dark clothing that they always wore. They found her questions irrelevant, she thought they were too serious.

On some occasions the office workers use informality to imply disassociation from the office, showing with material goods that they are "not there". One afternoon, one of the managers arrived in the office wearing jeans, brown lace-up shoes and a jumper. I said to him, "I need to talk to you" but he replied "I'm not here - I just stopped in on my way to the dentist". His tone of voice was indignant, indicating that my question was inappropriate. Clearly, I should not have asked him a work-related question when he was dressed in a non-work costume. On another occasion, the youngest tech described above, dressed for his day at University in jeans and a thick woolly jumper. He decided not to go in to the University however, choosing rather to come to the office to use the computers since he was writing a paper. He commented, "I hope people don't come up to me asking me to do things. Oh well, they should notice that I'm wearing my jeans and leave me alone!"

Organised informality in clothing can be used as a means of subverting power. A fashion insurrection was carefully staged by the junior people in the office against the managers which poked fun at the conservative dress code and also demonstrated a common bond amongst the juniors in opposition to their superiors. One day, the youngest principle commented during the afternoon tea break that all the young men were wearing green shirts, a colour that was identified with the office since it was used on the printing of the letterhead stationery. It seemed that green shirts were particularly fashionable at that time. He and the office manager began joking about it and it was suggested that all the young men should wear their shirts at the next staff meeting, just to see the chief's face. On the day, the principle wore a blue shirt because he thought it was all only a joke. But the young men all wore their green ones: the youngest had gone around the office the day before to remind everyone. The Telephonist borrowed a green shirt from her husband along with a matching tie. She laughed when I saw her and said, "I'm takin' the mickey out of management".

Grey suits and green shirts are used by the office workers to provide cues to their colleagues of their states of being, or otherwise put, the condition of their current identities. Clothing is used as a frame for experience to remind themselves and others how their actions are to be interpreted at any given time. A man who was a conservative bureaucrat delivering a professional product one minute is transformed by the action of rolling up his cuffs and sleeves into a thinker who is not to be disturbed. The tie is physically constraining and is emblematic of self-control and formality and therefore is removed and hidden away in a briefcase when in the pub where formality is abhorred. Clothing becomes an extension of the body which is itself only the creature of the mind.

Conclusion

The uses of clothing in the office can be summarised in terms of how it is applied to the workers' contingent identity. When a person is enacting the role of a bureaucrat, his or her clothing demonstrates membership in a peer group which is represented by a standardised and bland appearance which de-emphasises the individual. Those most closely aligned with the bureaucratic identity maintain work references in their clothing and have special garments restricted for the work place. When out of the work arena, their clothing changes are more dramatic than those less involved in this social identity. Their clothing is slow to change across time, is conservative and shows little variation when the changes are made. This clothing is relatively insensitive to changes of fashion. Most importantly, clothing acts as a physical reminder to the wearer and a cue to the audience that the actor is restrained and that his or her individuality is in check in the execution of work. Those in the office with less invested in the bureaucratic identity and with less formal power use clothing to different effect. Their dress is individualistic and they seek to be noticed as unique and idiosyncratic actors. Their style is flamboyant and quick to change. Their clothing refers to non-work contexts even while on the job, and unlike their bureaucratic colleagues, they can and do wear looser and more flowing garments into the office. Women in particular will try to circumvent the restraining qualities of formal work attire. These relationships are summarised in Figure 9.

Figure 10: The expression of identities through dress

Bureaucratic	Social
peer group style	individualistic style
work references	non-work references
conservative	flamboyant
slow to change	quick to change
restraining	loose
professional recognition	visual recognition

Chapter Six: Making space

Introduction

Spatial arrangements are another type of guiding principle that provide cues to the worker. Like the physical qualities of paper, they allow the individual to understand which identity or activity is called for in a particular situation. As with clothing, where the individual chooses garments that are appropriate to demonstrate group membership, activity state, or social aspiration, the office workers create spaces around themselves that give messages about their hierarchical status, states of mind and personal identity. Following the example set in previous chapters, I begin here by examining the physical characteristics of the spaces available in the office but more importantly perhaps, I discuss how spaces in the office under study can be distinguished in a typology of areas related to specific activities, tasks, power strategies and ideological positions. In this discussion of space, I include office furnishings and other objects associated with spatial configurations.

Making space

There is no space, except in the imagination, where a person is able to carry out every conceivable act with impunity. Behavioural norms regulate how space is used and only certain acts can be carried out in certain places. For instance, norms regarding privacy and hygiene keep activities segregated that are cognitively and ideologically separated in what Gullestad described as "zones of activity" (1992). In the home, food is not prepared in the bedroom; the morning toilet is not carried out in the front garden. The fact that bedrooms and front gardens are named something different suggests the power behind the cognitive segregation that spatial categories represent (see Tilly 1994: 18). Spaces can be viewed as settings for activities (Harvey 1989: 222-23; Levi-Strauss 1963: 289). The inverse to this principle is that behaviours are regulated by the spaces in which they occur: people execute certain acts to the exclusion of others, using the category of space as a cue. As Tilly noted, space should not be viewed as a "container" for action but as its "medium". "Space does not and cannot exist apart from the events and activities within which it is implicated" (10). The social and cognitive demarcations dividing vastness into intelligible spaces may be more important from a human standpoint than the physical barriers that make this possible. Humans create space and then are controlled by it.

To be understood and conceivable, social spaces can be said to be defined in relational opposition. One space exists with its resident activities, regulative norms and conventions because it is different from other spaces, which in their turn have their own rules for use. In Chapter Four, I discussed a process of category generation where keys such as colour and size of pieces of paper highlighted contrasts between types of paper, thus providing cues on how the paper should be used. A similar principle can be applied to space. Gregory Bateson (1979) noted that "things" are semantically produced as separate and distinct from other "things" and are made "real" by their relation to them (67-68). So too are spatial classifications created by contrasting one type of space, or one means of experiencing it, against others. The meaning of space can be explored by considering spatial oppositions which encode social categories such as front/back, right/left, inner/outer etc. (Waterson 1991).

The social science literature on space also, in order to make its own semantic categories stick, relies on setting one type of space against another, indicating that even on a theoretical level, space cannot be conceived of, nor explained, except in relation to what it is not. Most writers handle the issue of space differently and as Harvey (1989) has noted, there is no "universal" language of space (216). A brief resumé of the literature will demonstrate this point.

Augé (1995) described two types of space in our "Supermodern" society: "place" and "non-place". Supermodernity is characterised by an "overabundance of events" where there is too much time, too many destinations, and varied experiences available to be meaningfully consumed by the individual before they are superseded by things on an even grander scale. This overabundance generates "non-places" which exist in opposition to the "place" of the ethnographer where meaningful activity occurs. They are characterised by the experience of transition and are intermediate in character. For instance one airport lounge is much like any other no matter where it is located. Towns and villages are experienced only as a series of way marks on the motorway journey as the long distance traveller speeds past. A non-place is a space that is not defined as relational or concerned with identity. In them, people are solitary and waiting to be someplace else. The movement through non-places is not mediated by human relations but by printed or recorded words and texts, instructions for use which engage the individual in a "silent dialog".

Goffman (1959) considered space from a different perspective. Developing his dramaturgical approach, his contrast was based on "front" and "back" regions, like the regions on a stage. "A region may be defined as any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception" (109). "Performances" are acted out by the individual or group in spaces that allow for certain levels of formality and acknowledgement of being watched by the normative community. "Front regions" are those places where the actor(s) plays a role for the benefit of an audience. "Back regions" are where the audience is absent or where the normative community has mutually agreed that standards can safely slip. It is also in the back stage where preparations are made for the performance that goes on in the front. The settings themselves become major factors in explaining social behaviour (Lawrence and Low 1990: 480).

Gullestad (1992) provides a final example. In her work on the Norwegian home, she noted that activities are arranged in a hierarchical order from public to private. These transitions are expressed through interior decoration. The movement from the public "outside" to the family and private "inside" is most clearly symbolised by the door through which the individual must pass from one category of space into another. The entrance hall and the living room are the most public spaces in the house. The living room is for display. It is the place where guests are entertained and where the family relaxes together, containing the best furniture and ornaments. The kitchen, despite the architectural limitations placed upon it, is the pivotal part of the home and is where nature is transformed into culture. This is the place where the women cooks, applies her make-up and does her hair. The bedrooms, particularly the parent's, are the most private. Strangers show reluctance to enter and will typically hesitate outside the doorway before entering.

Another means of illustrating the principle of opposition is to consider how movement through space effects perception and use of it. Time can be one means of limiting access to a certain space (Tilly 1994: 11). Giddens (1993) has coined the term "time-space paths" to mean that when moving through space as part of the *durée* of day-to-day existence (202) individuals visit only certain places. These visits are themselves regulated and limited by temporal factors. The character of a given place changes through time, either a day or a lifetime, so that the place where one lived as a child may seem to be wholly different when revisited as an octogenarian (see Augé 1995). We therefore have, according to Giddens, individual schedules or paths that we follow to the exclusion of others. He used the example of upper class people whose time-space paths generally avoid slum areas leaving some of them unaware that such places exist and without the ability to image what a life there would involve (184). Access to space can be limited by urban design and the conventions surrounding the segregation of land uses. Goodall (1983) observed that spatial distributions of dwellings in relation to other urban forms is a means of keeping women bound in the domestic sphere by decreasing their opportunities for access to other places, such as the commercial and civic sectors of urban areas. She describes urban spatial organisation found in Britain as and "instrument of control" in the maintenance of existing hierarchical and economic social relations (50). When an individual's or group's access to space in place and time is restricted, they are only able to develop certain ideas about the place since they are denied the experience of alternatives.

At a more practical level, movement through space and thus experience of it, is moderated by its physical outline and characteristics. Bordieu(1977) speaks of the "body as geometer" where the understanding of space is learned and re-enacted according to its sensual experience. Within the built environment, movement is carefully directed by walls, storeys, stairwells, doors, and even patterns in pavement and on floors. The layout of space effects the relations that occur within it (Madigan and Munro 1990). Grajewski (1993) concluded that the spatial configurations of barriers and furnishings in a room structure a natural use pattern which occurs largely independently of the individuals within it (29). But physical barriers do not affect all social relations in the same way. Grajewski also noticed that in offices, for formal interactions that are pre-planned, such as meetings or lunch dates, the space for the interaction is determined in place and time, and there is little room for manoeuvre in where the interaction is staged. Informal interactions on the other hand are highly sensitive to factors of office layout. "Unprogrammed" interactions, those that are informal and casual, are shaped by the physical configuration of the office barriers and its furnishings (59). People who move around as part of their work, or who are moved past, for instance because of the location of their desk in relation to a hallway or passage, have wider social networks than those who are more spatially restricted (415-16).

To summarise, space is created by the erection of physical, nominal or ideological barriers and is understood in its relation to other similarly created spaces. The meanings attributed to spaces reflect the wider cultural context of the people who have made, and who use, the spaces. These made spaces in their turn provide cues regarding how individuals should behave whilst in them. These basic principles can be applied to the office. The manipulation of the spatial meanings plays a part in the negotiation of status.

Office spaces

Office decoration and layout has developed over the past century as a means of controlling workers' output and social interactions and to segregate activities. Walls and furniture serve as barricades between workers, and between the powerful and those lacking power, in strategies of surveillance and concealment. Surveillance by the high, of the low, is a means of maintaining control (Giddens 1991: 149-51). Managers use sight and sound to monitor staff and use their own physical presence as an unspoken reminder to their subordinates that they must keep to the rules of work. In response, subordinates may erect barriers to avoid being watched too closely. Some groups hide from others in order to maintain appearances and prevent one from observing how another really operates. Spaces are created in the office that are used for only specified purposes and some activities are only carried out in some spaces.

Interior decoration as a tool for the control of office workers began to be developed over a hundred years ago (Forty 1986). In the late nineteenth Century, the office was a small affair with only a few workers per enterprise. The standard clerk's desk had a high back with pigeon holes and drawers in it, sometimes a roll top. A clerk at such a desk could see his work before him and had only a limited view to either side, so that the room was hidden by the furniture. The desk made the clerk difficult to supervise because of the screen afforded by the desk back. This concealment was lost with the introduction of new "scientific" desk design.

Before the turn of the Century, Western office work areas were designed along the principles of "scientific management", which was an approach originating in the 1880s with Frederick Taylor (see footnote 3 in Chapter Two). The office was laid out much as a factory would be, relying upon an industrial design paradigm. Desks were arranged in neat tight rows utilising space at maximum efficiency (Forty 1986; Lupton 1993). Design was marshalled to improve surveillance of the worker. These changes coincided with the entrance of women into the clerical work force who were in any case a social group subject to greater control than the former all male clerical work force. The result was the removal of the back of the desk. This opened up the clerk's space to full view of the supervisor and also allowed the clerk to see the remainder of the office clearly. In theory, scientific management should have applied to all grades of workers. In practice, managers were allowed to break away from the uniformity and control imposed on the juniors and had more space and more privacy (Forty 1986).

The design and overall environment of most offices underwent a radical change in the 1950s and 1960s. The office came to take on the characteristics of the fashionable home as a result of competition for labour within a tight market. As the service sector increased, so too did the demand for clerical workers. Offices came to be in direct competition for the same relatively low-paid work force as the industrial sector. Factories tended to respond to labour shortages by increasing wages. Offices did this by providing a higher status and more comfortable environment. The old factory inspired designs were discarded in favour of new domestic referents and the office furnishings became more comfortable and attuned to fashion (Forty 1986). The office became a prestigious work site for women seeking to assert middle-class status (Lupton 1993: 45)

The service sector continues to grow in importance in modern economies. Automation and bureaucratisation have led to a standardisation of tasks within the office work programme where more and more workers become specialised in low-skill tasks (See for instance Braverman 1974; Webster 1990). Forty noted a relation between the growing impersonalism of office work and the improvement of its the environment. The "Bürolandschaft" concept, developed in Germany in the 1950s, rejected the rigid standardisation of interior design of scientific management and the somewhat impersonal "open plan" schemes of the time (See Delgado 1979: 98) The grid layout was replaced with a more natural arrangement that was meant to reflect working and personal relationships (See also Grajewski 1993: 24). Using quality carpets, sensitive lighting, potted plants and upholstery to give a domestic feel to the office environment, the overt physical references to hierarchy were removed. "For a manager anxious to prevent his staff from feeling that they had become a clerical proletariat, the landscaped office was a valuable innovation" (Grajewski 1993: 143). In fostering a feeling of "openness" and democracy, many employers encouraged the workers to add individual touches such as pictures on the walls or small objects. However, no matter what the changes, managers remained in enclosed spaces while subordinate workers were located in "open plan" arrangements. In the 1960s, in order to accommodate the needs of emerging new professional high status groups such as computer and technical specialists, screen-mounted furniture was introduced. This created low walls which afforded visual but not sound barriers and allowed hierarchy to be reasserted.

Many of these historical points find close parallels in the office under study. The organisation had only come into existence a few years before this fieldwork began and therefore the history of the layout was easy to trace. When it first came into being, the office began with only three people: the chief, the deputy and a secretary who served them both. The chief found the building and signed the lease for space on the third and fourth floors. As is often the case in London, the two floors that had been let by this organisation at the time that the contract was signed had no internal dividing walls. The managers were left to customise the space in the manner that they thought most suitable for the needs of the employees and the work that was to be done.

The chief made plans with building contractors and fitters to have walls, phone points and kitchen areas put into place, but before he could bring his plans to fruition, he chose to take another job and the task of designing the office space was left to the deputy. The deputy had his own ideas about office layout. He was an avowed fan of modern design and preferred open plan over many small compartmentalised office spaces. Whereas the departed chief had wanted a number of walls and separate offices to mark out working areas, the deputy believed that the fewer walls the better. He explained to me that open plan offers a number of advantages. It fosters a sense of teamwork. It also allows managers to see what staff are doing, or more importantly, to hear if there is a "happy buzz of work". By not having to come out of his office in order to be seen to be supervising, he believes that his influence is more pervasive yet also more subtle, and therefore less obviously threatening. He also believes that it is unwise to overtly express, or at least to make too much of, hierarchical differences. He showed great offence at my suggestion that there was a relationship between who had a private office and who sat in the open area. He emphasised to me that power differentials were unimportant, though as will be described below, this is patently not true. For him however, an open plan arrangement for non-managerial staff facilitates a set of relationships that are based on team-work and sharing, where there are no secrets and no obvious material differences between team members. He also admitted that his choices of layout were highly personal: if another manager had designed the space, the result would probably have been dramatically different.

When it fell upon him to arrange for the accommodation, the first thing he did was to modify his predecessor's plans by "taking out a few walls". The work had progressed to the point however where he could only make minor adjustments - he could take away but not add. The resulting layout consisted of a number of small offices for the managers, a conference room for meetings, two small utility rooms, and a hodgepodge of other spaces broken up with room dividers, book cases and filing cabinets. He opined that he regretted that any of the small personal offices remained and claimed that he would have preferred an entirely open plan - he took advantage of his access to his own office however, and when he needed to work uninterrupted, he would shut the door, thus having the best of both worlds.

A number of spaces have evolved over the years of the office's running. Instead of describing each room, I will focus upon types of space, each one reserved for specific activities and modes of behaviour. The relational oppositions that were identified in the literature above find their expression here.

The first type of space that I will identify is geographical space identified with class. The office is located in a suburban town centre on the outskirts of London on the borders of Essex County. All of the admin staff, but only a small proportion of the Professionals, live within the area. The remaining techs and managers live in London and commute by car or train. These demographics have not developed by chance but can be largely accounted for by job status. The admin staff, or more accurately the junior admin staff, have relatively little specialist training and their skills as typists, telephonists and file clerks are plentiful in the local labour pool. Because of this they do not need to travel far to find paid employment. Local house prices are lower in this outer sector of London then in its centre and these people are able to find suitable living accommodation within their comparatively lower budgets. Those with technical skills have different characteristics. They have university training and compete in a small national labour pool for a limited number of jobs. They also command higher salaries and can find houses in more desirable residential areas nearer to Central London.

The workers' different understanding of this part of town has taken on a class cant. The admin staff have for the most part, lived their entire lives locally. For them, this is home with all the safety and convenience that this implies. For the professional London residents, this is too far from central London where they expect that high calibre and prestigious jobs should be located. They visit colleagues in Central London offices where the streets are paved in York stone and the buildings are Georgian, the brass fittings polished and the glass tinted, and they feel dissatisfied that they must work in a squat four story 1960s block located within metres of a suburban railway line. They express their frustration with their surroundings by glossing the area as the heart of "Essex Culture", making unkind comments about the local population, the "Essex Man" and "Essex Girl", the Darren and Tracy, who drive a mid-range flash Ford, he drinking lager and she in an endless comic quest for sexual gratification. These mythical characters were particularly enticing to those with educations from Oxford and Cambridge who felt that they were destined for more select and elegant company while taking their daily lunch-time stroll about the town centre. The admin women in particular were most insulted by the insinuation that anyone who was local born was socially inferior or common. These women did not consider themselves to be Essex Girls.

Another type of space is related to membership in the office group, which is also expressed spatially. Office workers and strangers have differential rights of access to office space. People not employed in the office are allowed access to only a few areas. Even at the most basic level of gaining physical access, only those who work in the office can get through main doors once they have stepped out of the lift because the office doors are shut with a combination lock. Those who do not know the correct numbers must ring the bell and can only enter when somebody from the inside has released the lock.

The "reception area" is located on the third floor and a sign in the downstairs lobby directs strangers there. This is where outsiders must be vetted by the receptionist for their suitability to be allowed further into the office. Many offices with bigger budgets have reception areas that are physically separate from the office areas where work is undertaken. These are typically expensively furnished and have as a focal point in the "reception desk" which is unlike a "work desk" since its main function is to act as a physical barrier to stop the stranger from proceeding into the back spaces. In this office, the furniture budget did not extend to this, nor was there space for a separate area. Physical barriers and imposing office decor were replaced in this instance with the more immediate attentions of the Telephonist who manually did what the absent furniture could not.

The space immediately around the entrance door is where those who have no business in the office are confined. This is where the postwoman waits at 4.55 every evening as the post bag is put into her hand. The milkman comes on Wednesdays to collect his money but is only allowed access on instruction. Salesmen sometimes come to the office trying to sell cookbooks or personal diaries but leave disappointed when they are not allowed to proceed to the inner sanctum. Most of the strangers who come into the office however are there on business and they may penetrate further. They come to the third floor door and tap on the glass or ring the bell. The Telephonist looks up from her desk which is situated within sight of the door, sees the stranger, and reaches for the button behind her chair to release the door. The stranger enters and sees her desk and those of some of the admin staff. Far down the building, other desks can be seen with people working at them, but these are obscured behind file cabinets and overgrown Spider plants. On first entry, the place looks professional. Smooth. There is a large white plastic tub of plants with big shiny green leaves. The Telephonist's desk, and the two bookcases that she uses to mark off her area, are tidy but are clearly the place where she does her work - she has a larger than average telephone with more buttons and a computer. Her shelves are filled with labelled binders and papers. No papers are laid out in view except perhaps those that she is occupied with at that particular time.

As the stranger would notice if he or she were allowed to become more familiar with the office, this area is subtly different from the remainder of the office. Professionalism is more on show here then elsewhere and appearance takes precedence over functionalism. The plant tub is bigger and the plants are cared for by a contracted firm. Other office plants are watered by the staff. The desks in the area near the door are neater and the workers there take more care to put things in their places and to only work on one thing at a time in order to avoid clutter. There are also more barriers to vision in this part of the open plan than elsewhere, and the view of the stranger is guided to what is deemed by the office workers to be appropriate for presentation. The stranger will not have time to make a conscious note of these things on entry however. As soon as one foot is through the door, the telephonist will step into action. Up she will get from the chair in front of her desk, over she will walk, smile on her face, question on her lips, seeking information about who, with whom and when. Then she will extend an arm indicating both welcome and an instruction to follow, leading the way to the left side of her desk where three brown chairs are lined up neatly in a row, their backs to the window. The stranger will then wait until she has found the person that the stranger came to see, only then abdicating her responsibility for controlling the stranger's movement.

The stranger sits there and looks around, taking it all in. There is a small table placed approximately nine inches from the edge of the chairs. The arrangement is reminiscent of a sofa and coffee table. But domestic reception rooms are bigger than the four by five foot space that was carved out in this area near the door. Sitting in the chairs is uncomfortable because the distance away from the table is barely enough to accommodate a set of knees. It is cramped for three sets of knees. The chairs and table are flanked by the telephonist's desk on one side and the white plant pot on another. On the table top lie a sample of the office's most recent publications, proof that its reputation as a professional organisation has been earned. Strangers rarely look through these documents however, and if they do pick them up, they only flick nervously through the pages. The books lie there for show only. More likely, the stranger will look around to see what is happening. The hum of office activity can leave the stranger feeling uncomfortably like an outsider since he or she is so clearly penned in from - and being kept out of - everything that is going on. It is disturbing to be ignored or invisible to the people who move past, speaking to one another, carrying things, going in and out the door. But soon the rendezvous will be complete and an insider, an office worker, will come. The stranger will be officially acknowledged, greeted and asked after. The impersonal spell will be broken and the stranger is allowed entry.

All the office workers were strangers once. As they came for their job interviews in the hope of becoming insider members of the group, they were ushered from beyond the reception area and led to a second, more internal, waiting area. This is located on the fourth floor and is between the conference room, the chief's and deputy's offices and their secretary's desk. This is also known as the technical library and is where documents are stored that are no longer in use but may be referred to again. In the centre of the technical library are more brown chairs. The atmosphere here is more formal than the main reception area downstairs with its placement amidst the work bustle. Because of its proximity to the senior management and the conference room, this area is only used to "hold" people who have come to the office for high order tasks or meetings. Though the office workers may know otherwise, for the stranger, the technical library is more evidence that the office workers take their jobs seriously and that they are in command of their facts. The only person who shares this space, the secretary, a woman who is traditionally chosen for her composure, efficiency and physical attractiveness, offers the stranger a cup of coffee or tea as he or she waits, a courtesy that is not always extended to those who are left waiting downstairs.

The conference room is used in ritualised ways. Only one activity occurs there: meetings. There are many sub-sets to this category of interaction, each requiring certain forms of behaviour. Meetings are held around a table because they are dependent upon face to face contact. There are five multi-purpose tables, or "spreaders" in the conference room that are usually arranged in some form of rectangle. Approximately 20 chairs are placed at the table's edge and against the wall. Meetings include job interviews, interviews of consultants, discussions with representatives of other organisations, and those between all the staff or managers only. There is a gradation of formality accorded to these meetings, and those involving outsiders are more sombre in character than those attended exclusively by office workers. The positions that people take in the room can be related to the emotional flavour of the event. In a formal meeting between members of staff and outsiders, the furniture is used to create a barrier between the groups so that office insiders sit on one side of the table, visitors on the opposite. This allows everyone to look their opposing numbers square in the face and study their reactions whilst sitting next to their colleagues whom they trust, and with whom eye contact is less important.

Segregation to mark group alliance is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in the job interview. The interview panel is seated facing the door so that their imposing presence is felt as soon as the stranger enters the room. They demonstrate that they feel comfortable with one another by making inconsequential comments to each other, not looking the interviewee in the eye until the interrogation begins, allowing their papers to spill rather messily across the table top, whilst the interviewee sits alone at the opposite end of the table, only the coffee cup served by the secretary to provide a screen. At the staff meetings, the arrangement is equally formalised though behaviour is more relaxed. The chief, or his deputy if he is not in attendance, sits at the head of the table. There is no official seating arrangement, but without fail, it is the techs who take the limited number of table-side seats. Admin tend to sit in the seats along the wall and the junior admin women sit in chairs nearest the door so that they can leave to answer telephones and also be the first to escape once the meeting is over.

The managers all have their own offices, though one has willingly chosen to remain in the open area. They are the watchers and not the watched and are able to carry out their work behind closed doors. If they chose, they are able to leave their doors open to "join in" with the rest of the office. Their high level of control over the space they work in contrasts starkly with the remaining staff who are forced to work in open plan parts. Higher status individuals are able to fight for the right to place obstructions around their desks such as bookshelves, room dividers, extra tables and filing cabinets. When they make their cases for why they need these extra pieces of furniture, they generally give functional explanations, such as they need more space for storage or their desk area is inadequate. They do not ask for walls with which to mark out their personal spaces though once the furniture has been allocated, they are careful to make an area for themselves that provides the most privacy and floor area possible within the constraints imposed by the managers. The least powerful in the office, secretaries and the junior women from admin, have the least control over how they make their space. They are all put directly outside the offices of their superiors, within a visual and audible catchment area that allows the managers to call upon and control them with ease.

Privacy is a scarce commodity in an open plan office. What is a convenient surveillance tool for the managers can force office workers to expose elements of their lives that they would prefer to keep hidden from their work colleagues. Discussing personal matters on the telephone is for instance problematic. Workers at times need to keep private papers away from the eyes of others. Spare shoes worn for lunch time sport cannot be kept at the desk because trainers have no relation to personal computers. Money or medicines is not left lying in full sight.

It is acknowledged by all that every person requires some means of distancing themselves from the group, and a constrained number of opportunities are provided where the self can be sequestered. The large spaces of open plan are considered public and the more intimate a space becomes, and the more closely related with an individual, the more privacy it provides. Therefore, the spaces between desks are fully public and it is difficult to hide anything, either word or object, there. As the desks themselves are approached, the degrees of privacy intensify. The desk top is open to all, but once an object has been obscured by another object it is less open to public manipulation. A single sheet of paper lying on the desk top is not private but once paper is stacked in a pile, the contents are somehow more personal, and the visitor is hesitant to rifle through and read. A pen may be borrowed from the centre of the desk-top but if it is stored with other pens and pencils in a cup or a basket, it has stronger associations with the person who put it there and is less tempting to the passer-by. Desk drawers not only hold objects, they provide physical barriers to view and touch. Most people show evident discomfort, perhaps displayed for the benefit of onlookers, when opening a colleague's desk and rummaging through the contents. Usually, they prefer to wait until the owner has given permission or has gone into the drawer him or herself. There are other places that are inviolate and fully closed to others: lockers, briefcases and toilets. These are fully personal and private.

Communal spaces exist in direct opposition to private spaces. Not only do they exist for group activities of an informal nature, they are open equally to all as the office "common areas." Many of these spaces have been generated incidentally as unused remnants of the other spaces that carved up the wider floor area. Hallways and spaces between desks have been created in this manner. Informal and unplanned actions take place here such as the casual remarks of passing colleagues.

The office is broken into informal zones which regulate interaction. Speech conventions can illustrate this: only certain types of conversations are undertaken in certain areas, the spaces themselves providing cues to the norms at play. The coffee area is the place for group gossip. Polite and superficial chat is reserved for the reception area. Discussions are held in the conference room. Subordinates speak quietly and seriously in the chief's office. Outrageous dirty jokes are told in front of the sinks in the toilets.

For the majority of the workers who sit in the open plan area, the most important space is that which they make for themselves. It was a series of management decisions that initially determined the arrangement of the desks, chairs, coffee area and photo-copiers. But as time progressed, those without walls and doors to hide themselves behind made small adjustments to the layout of the furniture that incrementally but dramatically changed the way that space was allocated between individuals. A neighbour was too loud on the telephone and a desk was turned. Two people had to share a computer terminal between them and a table was moved to join their two desks. The traffic around the photo-copier became unbearably distracting and a screen was appropriated from across the room. There was no place to hang calendars and photos and a desk was turned to face the back of a filing cabinet. In building their encampments, they each take as much space as their will and status will allow, coming to a mutually agreed array of territories in much the same way that commuters on a train will occupy seats as distant from other commuters as possible so that first, alternate rows are filled and then alternate seats, nobody willingly sitting immediately next to a strange passenger unless there are no more alternatives. These strategies will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

Distinctions reflecting the concept of relational opposition introduced in the first section of this chapter can however be identified, as set out in Figure 11. These distinctions represent a number of different and unrelated social relationships. London/Essex embodies conceptions of higher and lower levels of education, of in-migration and living life near to one's birthplace, of middle class as opposed to working class. Stranger/Insider indicates a person's status with relation to the group and the rights of access to certain spaces with or without accompaniment. Formal/Informal interactions are normatively restricted to certain areas: meetings are held in the conference room, gossip is most florid in the coffee area. The open plan office arrangement is a tool for management surveillance. Personal spaces around desks built from furniture is a means of circumventing surveillance and maximising personal territories and therefore the control that the individual has over their own activities.

Figure 11: Examples of spatial expressions of social relationships

London	Essex
Stranger	Insider
Formal interaction space	Informal Interaction space
Open plan	Private space

The social meaning of space, like that of paper and dress, is best revealed when physical characteristics are considered relative to the social context. There is nothing inherent in the shape of the conference room nor its compliment of furniture that renders is a necessary locus for meetings yet this is where this activity invariably occurs. Equally, three chairs, a small table and a plant pot would not be an obvious material deterrent sufficient to prevent a stranger from wandering about in the main office area. Yet these objects provide a sufficiently strong cue that it would be a mistake to leave the small confined area they demarcate. In the following section, the manner in which meaning is attributed to anonymous spaces and objects is discussed in greater detail.

Customising the standard

One of the myths that is periodically retold at tea-time is about an office without personal desks. Somebody had a friend who knew a man who worked in a prestigious consulting firm in the private sector. The building was supposed to be very nice - high tech and high status. The listeners imagined grey-blue unstained carpets, high ceilings and impeccable wood details. But in this office, personal space was outlawed - management had done away with it. Instead of each employee having their own desk, chair, bookshelf and computer, each was allocated a locker which was the only space that they had entirely to themselves. They were expected to pack and lock away all their personal effects and work whenever they left the office. This is called "hot desking". Nothing was to be left exposed to spies and cleaners. This was done in the name of security. No competitors would be given the opportunity of discovering what the firm was up to. These workers had no spaces of their own. They floated in anonymity.

The myth was contemplated with horror. Those who stood there, eyes wide over their tea mugs, imagined being forced to give up their private desk areas. They couldn't do it. They wouldn't do it. They were proud of what they had so carefully constructed from the bits and pieces they assembled around them. Their work areas had personality. They were private islands in the open plan.

While the home is controlled by the individual or family, for the majority, work space is controlled by others (Putnam 1990). The office space and furnishings are allocated to the employees. They are the property of the organisation and the managers are the caretakers. The work environment is pieced together with standardised components that the employees did not choose, and probably would not have had they been able to do so. The workers only unwillingly accept these constraints of imposed impersonalism, and as they make their space by erecting barriers and investing emotional and behavioural responses in them, so too do they decorate these in order to emphasise their personal territorial claims.

Objects often have associations, and when they are moved into new spaces, they carry those associations with them, colouring their new surroundings. The individual's relationship with the object is mediated by where the object is located, how it is used, and how the individual can demonstrate his or her "competence" with it (Goodall 1983: 54). The spatial context is therefore as important as the object in it. And whilst the telephone, as an object, can be said to be the embodiment of girlish femininity because of its design and history (Lupton 1993), the fact that it is in the office rather than the bedroom is more significant to how it is interpreted. Office telephones are also usually of a different design than those in the home.

There is a tension for the worker between the need to use the standard issue furnishings along with the rest of the group, and the desire to demonstrate that he or she is separate from the group. Standard issue objects are not chosen, no volition or taste is expressed when they are used and unlike domestic objects or clothing, are not expressive of the individual but of the organisation. These objects have as much relevance to the employees as do their job descriptions. They are therefore alienated objects - objects that do not derive their meaning from a personally generated historical association. They are objects associated with bureaucratic identities. It has been argued that alienation is an intrinsic condition of mass industrialisation - in response, people appropriate the objects available, re-socialise them and bring them back into a context appropriate to their own lives (Miller 1988). In the office, appropriated objects become associated with those who use them but the bond lasts only as long as the job. Once a person leaves employment, ties to the objects are severed and passed on to replacement staff. The effect of the standard issue is counteracted with the introduction of personal objects that act as visible icons of identity. The workers bring their own things - things that are not shared by colleagues and that are different from what their colleagues bring in - to stamp ownership on the areas around their desks and to express their social selves.

Because of their walls and doors, the managers can most clearly use personal objects to brand their spaces as their own. All the manager's offices are in principle much the same, though the chief's is larger. The managers share a common style of furniture by way of desks, bookshelves and chairs with their subordinates. Each office is nonetheless clearly identifiable with the individual inhabitants.

The chief's name is on his door. This is only because he put it there. No other doors show who is behind them. He was given a large paper name tag at a conference - green printing in block letters on white - which he propped in the glass transept window over his door. His desk is neat with only a few loose papers on it because his secretary sweeps away any strays if he leaves them unattended. His chair is bigger, nicer and newer than any other chair. He ordered it specially. Its back is so high and wide that it artificially inflates his outline into a shape larger than human. In addition to his desk and chair, he has an extra table with chairs for small private meetings. He has a standard grey locker for his coat, but unlike all the other employees, his stands alone in his office and is not one in a long line of many down the corridor. The impact of his four standard bookcases is improved by a fifth that has a glass front, the latter being a type of furniture that no other room can boast. He is the only manager with his own white planter tub filled with professionally tended leaves. There are only a few personal objects in his room: Pyrex dishes holding paper clips and rubber bands, a small enamelled dish with a picture of an owl, a calendar, a coffee mug embossed with the name of his home town.

The deputy's desk is not neat. He is a "creative person" who thrives on mess. A pen is picked up and thrown down with a thump as his hand reaches for the bottle of white-out fluid. It rolls under some papers that lie about and is hidden. A drawer is pulled open with a curse and another pen is fished out from amongst a tangle of post-it-notes, rubber bands and old bank statements. Current work, old work, other people's work are all jumbled on the desk-top. Two mugs with chipped rims sit in the mess, one holding tea that has gone tepid, the other full of the shallow remains of yesterday's coffee, brown stains hardened on the rim. He is a man with distinct aesthetic tastes. His desk may be a mess and he may be disorganised, but the bag on the spare chair is black leather styled in Italy. He brings posters from art galleries and hangs them on spare walls in the main area of the office. He likes Canelletto and Turner and has prints hanging on his own office walls. He has brought house plants, mostly Spider Plants and Wandering Jews, that he started with cuttings many years ago. Those plants that outgrew his own tiny space have been moved out into the main office.

The chaos that the deputy finds so comforting became too much for the his secretary. Her trade is to keep men like him functioning rationally by organising his diary and papers and reminding him when he needs to read something. He thinks big thoughts and she keeps track of the little ones that he doesn't have time for. She struck when the deputy went on holiday. It was inconceivable to her that a mess like the one in his office could serve any benefit. She reorganised all the papers on his desk, put away all the pens and paper clips, cleared the dead leaves off the table top, threw away what was clearly waste, went through the in-tray that hadn't been emptied in over a year. She sorted the papers and labelled a number of ring binders according to work areas, punched holes and clipped them into the appropriate binders, and put the binders on the shelves. It took her longer than she expected and it was only three afternoons later that she was finished. She was obviously pleased with her work and felt that she had done the deputy a great favour. The deputy's reaction on his return was not what she had hoped for. He was aghast. Her disorder was his filing system. He claimed that he had known were everything was (though he was notorious around the office for loosing things). He couldn't cope with somebody else's logic. He set to work immediately to put things right. Though he left a small portion of her system intact, most of it was quickly obliterated by his habits. The mess returned.

Another of the managers also had a messy office. His clutter did not derive from sprinting creativity but from a need for total self-determination. The untidiness of his desk and shelves is a symbolic residue of his heavy workload and his intellectual investment in it. He is a man obsessed with getting the job done as quickly as possible, and with all thoroughness, without wasting time or movement on anything as insignificant as changing the blotting paper or tidying the jagged disarray in the in-tray. His drive for self-determination leaves him not wishing to rely upon the filing or computer systems, the technical library or the stationery cupboard. If he had his way, he would work completely alone and be entirely self-sufficient. He puts papers into the filing system because he is forced to. First however he will always make his own photo-copy. He only puts things into the technical library when he knows that the documents can serve no possible purpose for him. He keeps stacks of blank paper and pens in his drawers. His bookshelves and desk top surfaces overflow with files and books and papers. His in-tray is toppling over, papers thrown in in haste, the stack's layers periodically memorised to aid in paper retrieval. He has two art prints hanging on his wall. He brought in a Spider plant cutting that he attempted to grow into a plant, but he immediately forgot about it and it died within a few weeks, the small new roots and young leaves turning to brown straw, welded onto the sides of the Tupperware lunch bowl by brown crust.

The admin manager's office is comparatively nondescript. She has hung some prints of the English countryside on her walls. These are in wooden frames which contrast to the make-shift clip-frames used by her male managerial colleagues. Her desk is always clean and free from obstructions. A computer terminal sits on the corner of her table. On the corner of her desk is a small ceramic bowl containing healthy and delicate house plants that she received from the women who work for her as a Christmas gift. She knows exactly where everything is in her neat desk drawers and clearly labelled shelves.

Like the managers, the remaining staff adorn their spaces to make them their own reflecting their personal work habits. In so doing, they defy the regimentation of the standard issue furnishing. Nick-nacks and privately owned accessories proclaim boundaries. The telephonist has a range of photographs of her family on the top of her bookshelves: she and her husband at a golf club dinner, Christmas with her daughters, various snaps of grandchildren as they develop into adults. One of the typists has her desk covered in pictures and greeting cards of teddy bears. Teddy bears adorn the jar that she uses to hold her pencils and pens and a teddy bear calendar hangs on the wall next to her computer screen. The other typist is fascinated by the World Wrestling Federation and pictures of shining muscle-bound men in skimpy bright-coloured lycra outfits snarl alluring at her from their perch on her wall. The senior typist has six perfectly symmetrical purple African Violets precisely spaced across the top of her window-sill. One of the principles who is interested in photography has hung two of his own prints on the wall behind his desk. Another Principal has a paperweight made of glass with swirls of black, white and turquoise colour deep inside - it never holds down paper. These are small token of their lives outside, a means of outlining their social selves in the bureaucratic sphere.

The workers customise the communal and in so doing, lay claim to it. They must use shared resources and standardisation is the norm, but they seek to at least have some control over what allocations are available. If there aren't enough resources to go around, they seek to acquire the best for themselves within the parameters set by their positions within the power hierarchy. Having more, and more that has not been used by others first, is a sign of status. Those with the highest status usually have first choice and can lay claim to the best.

An illustration is provided by the red chair. One day it was brought to the managers' attention that new chairs would be required for everyone who regularly used a computer to reduce the risk of back and neck strain. This was to bring the office into compliance with new health and safety regulations. It was not because of the health benefits that everyone was excited about the prospect of getting new chairs however. Everyone wanted to part forever from the tired old grey chairs they currently used and to replace them with something that had a more contemporary look. The new computers that sat on everyone's desks required a more modern seating complement.

A sample chair arrived in the office. It was insect-like in comparison to the former square 1970s chairs: the seat was suspended over a single pedestal coated in a grey rubbery material that expanded and contracted in accordion folds, its four feet had silver rolling balls on the ends, its back was hard moulded plastic. No-one would have chosen such a chair for their homes. It would have been considered too ugly. But in the office, it was a delicious temptation. It was red. Management had years before issued an edict that all chairs would be charcoal grey. This chair, the colour of Eden's apple, was different from any other chair that had ever sat before a desk in the office.

Immediately upon its arrival, the telephonist claimed it. She said that she needed it because of her history of back trouble. The deputy did not want her to have it. He needed to test it himself before he would authorise its purchase in multiple copies. He said that he'd keep it until Friday when he would make his decision. He instructed one of the young men to reclaim it from her desk on the third floor and to bring it to his office on the fourth. The chair was moved while the deputy was out of the office in a meeting and put next to his desk, not in front of it. The young man, apparently inspired by moving the red chair, decided that his chair was actually quite uncomfortable. His office neighbour, a principle who had a relatively new chair, was on holiday in Hong Kong. He would be away for two weeks. The young man decided to borrow the principle's chair.

The next morning, the telephonist noted that the red chair was at the side of the deputy's desk. Since he hadn't sat in it, she assumed that he didn't want it after all. Her back was hurting that day so she asked another of the young men to bring it back to her desk on the third floor. The deputy returned from his morning meeting to find that the red chair wasn't there. "It's mine until Friday!" he said with annoyance and demanded that the first young man bring him the chair immediately. But he didn't want to wait as long as it took to retrieve. He didn't want to sit in his old chair either. He therefore took the chair that the young man had exchanged for the principle's chair and sat in that. The red chair was then returned to the deputy's office. He was too distracted with work and didn't move into it. He pushed it into the corner of the room with his foot. He didn't sit in it until Friday, when he returned the young man's chair. The deputy took the principle's chair to test that. The young man took the red one. The telephonist never sat in it again before it was sent back to the supplier and she complained for a week. The red chair passed the test and new chairs were ordered. They were charcoal grey.

Inversion spaces

Space can be defined by the people who use it: their presence within it sets the parameters for how it is experienced and interpreted. Furthermore, a person may be dominant in one space but subordinate in another (Ardener 1993: 3-4). The office is a place to do business: the spaces made within it are for work and are defined by work relations. There are spaces however where the social intervenes, spaces whose otherness and divorced status are defined by differences in convention, time and decoration. If the office's work areas can be said to be governed by norms of hierarchy, assumptions geared towards protecting the office's reputation from outsiders and providing a spatial tool for undertaking the actions of bureaucracy in the same way as Le Corbusier's modern home was a machine for living, social spaces within the office set the scene for other activities altogether.

The coffee area is used for companionable mixing to the exclusion of work activity. As such, it presents an inverted platform where alternative rules of etiquette, status and hierarchy prevail. I draw a parallel with Adam Kuper's analysis of Christmas as an inversion of mundane sociality (1993). Kuper, following Van Gennep and Leach, writes that rituals are used to demonstrate values that are in opposition to what is considered "normal". Decorations and decorum are used to provide cues to show that special values are being demonstrated and acted upon. At Christmas, families that have suffered emotional fission or physical separation come together in a symbolic reunion. The Christmas ritual is emblematic of the family, the Holy Family, the Royal Family, the lived-in family, which is in contrast to the reality of many peoples' actual experiences. Christmas in effect takes the everyday and transforms it into something special, something traditional and something largely fictive.

The coffee area and the tatty decorations hung from the ceiling of the office at Christmas are spatial inversions that ban the ethics of work and embrace those of camaraderie and leisure. In these areas, it is the young people with their enthusiasm and animated story-telling, that take primacy over their more serious elder colleagues. Job descriptions loose much of their significance in these social spaces and new patterns of dominance emerge: having a good laugh becomes temporarily more important than having a high salary.

There are coffee areas on both floors, each one the home of a "club" that are physical extensions of the people who use them. Long ago, as the result of some joke, the two areas where given their own names. The joke has been forgotten and so too would the names, "Café Londres" and the "Transport Café", but for the two tired and water spotted paper signs taped securely on the tiles over both the sinks. The two coffee areas are perceived by those who use them to be separate places, each having its own character. A rivalry has evolved to defend one from the other.

The Transport Café on the third floor is dominated numerically by female admin staff. In addition to the standard issue sink, counter-top, refrigerator, table and chairs, those who use it have added either as joint purchases or individual donations, items such as a kettle, a teapot, a coffee maker, plastic cutlery and individual tea mugs. The Transport Café is always very neat. The women from admin don't like dirt. The counter top is cleared and wiped, the refrigerator has a showroom sparkle and even the stainless steel sink is polished and without stain. A small blue plastic label over the counter area warns "Please leave the coffee area as neat as when you found it especially at night." The women police the area and bring transgressions to the attention of any mess-maker. Even those techs who do not clear rubbish from their own desks comply with the decontamination regime.

Café Londres is by comparison a shambles. The women from admin come up and are left with no words to express their distaste at this level of filth, adding emphasis by running their fingers over sink or table, grimacing at whoever they are talking to. This coffee club is dominated by the managers and the majority of the techs. Only one women from admin uses it and she is so clearly outnumbered that she must go along with the group's decision to take a relaxed stance about food hygiene. Whereas mess is instantly dealt with in the Transport Café, in Café Londres the coffee machine only gets cleared when a new pot is made, cups are never put into the cupboard but are retrieved directly from the draining board, clean spoons are never used to stir the tea.

Post-cards are sent to the office and find their way to the coffee areas. This social area seems to be the most appropriate location for these reminders of leisure travel, both having non-work themes. When any member of staff is away on holiday for a suitable length of time (the rule of thumb is more days than it would take to buy a stamp and post it back to the office) they are expected to send a post-card. This is always delivered to the coffee club where they are a member and is left on the table-top for enough days to ensure that every other member has had a chance to read it. The post-cards are sent for two reasons. First, they reassure colleagues that the sender is having a wonderful time, that the weather is hot and sunny and that the money on air fare and hotel were well spent - all circumstances that will lead to a more relaxed and happier returning colleague. In their second function they act as a reminder to the holiday-makers that they are part of a team that continues to work while they play. The messages on the post-cards virtually invariably refer to some feature of the office life. For instance, a photograph of a sunny Greek Island is graced with the message "We have to ride mules here which is a form of transport that is only slightly faster than British Rail". These messages are proof that work-mates are still a subject of contemplation despite the physical separation. Post-cards are saved for years. Occasionally, they are pulled out from under the piled defunct memos that litter the coffee areas and their messages re-read.

The main activity that is carried out in the coffee areas is "taking a break" which is comprised of food preparation, eating, drinking and light discussion not usually related to work topics. As discussed in Chapter Three, the office hierarchy is subverted in these areas. This is not the domain of management but of the lowly. The typists and the junior techs can be fully at ease while sitting around the tables as they make and drink their tea. Managers come into these area and make tea as well, but if a conversation is underway, they do so quietly and do not always enter into the discussions. Some of the managers display slight but unmistakable discomfort when faced with a large group of their more junior subordinates and will, after a short amiable comment, affect a quick exit. The managers can be openly teased and questioned when they are in the coffee areas, provided that this is done in a light hearted fashion and they can only smile in retaliation. The coffee areas are visually and acoustically cut off from the rest of the office by the cabinets that surround them. The work environment and its trappings therefore do not intrude into them. The workers talk, joke, exchange insults and console in these special places. They discuss their holidays as they finger the post-cards, wishing that they were elsewhere again. They talk about their children, parents and lovers - their other community. They complain about the managers when they know they will not be overheard. And after they are finished with their break they return to their desks and become serious and professional once again.

The coffee areas provide a specific space, by virtue of the sinks, appliances and cabinets that make them, where an inverted set of social relations are acted out. In this instance, the cue that sets off the inverted relation is mainly spatial. Inversion spaces can also be created out of the normal space with the application of non-spatial cues such as those provided by Christmas decorations.

Some Christmas's are more fun than others and the workers show a fitting level of gregarious feeling. On a good year, Christmas cards are distributed to colleagues with tremendous enthusiasm. Well before the actual day arrives, almost every person in the office has distributed cards to everyone else. On a good year, there are at least 20 cards on each and every desk, making it difficult to work with so many capering reindeer and ice-skating teddy bears fighting for space. On a bad year, the mood is far less generous. When the workers are feeling grumpier, stingier and busier, not as many cards are spread around. The women from admin and a few of the Christmas die-hards from the techs give out cards the second week of

December on the assumption that their paper gifts will be reciprocated. Usually they are. These people receive the full complement of greetings, one for one. But on a bad year, the remaining staff hoard their packets of unaddressed cards and wait for somebody to put one in the in-tray first before they will commit one of their own with a name on the outside of the envelope and a signature under the message printed inside.

On the Friday afternoon before the Christmas break, and with much laughter, work stops and the trimmings are put up across the office. Bought with a combined pool of remaining cash from the coffee clubs, personal donations and petty theft from petty cash, they manage between them to buy enough tinsel and foil streamers from the local street market to transform both floors of the office from a place of work to one of festivity. The people from each floor take their shiny green, red, silver and gold garlands and hang them in lazy drooping zigzags from make-shift paper-clip hooks stuck into the acoustic ceiling tiles. Tinsel boas are taped to the frames of the doors and over the bookshelves. Broken ends are used to frame computer screens. Two-inch remnants are taped to telephone receivers. The tackiest bits are saved to put around the desk of one of the principles who revels in being the office Scrooge, and in an inversion of the inversion, places a paper sign on his desk every December declaring his area a "Christmas Free Zone".

The Christmas season is crowned by the Christmas Dinner. Though on occasion this is held in the office, it is collectively agreed that the space afforded there is unsuitable in character, and they all go elsewhere, usually a restaurant, to take their ritual meal together. The day of the Christmas dinner is planned months in advance - surveys of suitable locations are made, money collected and the ethics of work and sobriety temporarily suspended. And the day arrives. They are determined to do it right. One of the young techs knows of another office that had a breakfast party at a pub in a meat market with special licensing hours. A group of young people, all technical, meet at 7.30 for ham, eggs and Guinness. Three hours later they arrive late at work. Nobody cares. At noon they, along with the rest of the office, board a train for London. Before they leave the office, the men produce bow ties in bright colours from pockets and briefcases. Women wear silks and jewellery. Fabrics are more fluid, skirts shorter. At the restaurant, everyone eats too much. Party gags involving Santas on springs pop across the table and the staff all wear paper hats that they pulled from their party favours. The chief is the first to leave, the deputy the second. The young ones call out to say that they are leaving too soon and the deputy laughs as he replies, "You should be glad I'm leaving. Now you can get on with it" and the party continues in a nearby pub.

After Christmas everyone's enthusiasm evaporates. The inversion has been restored to normalcy. The decorations seem tatty and cheap. They are the residues of last year. But nobody can be bothered to clear them away. Even superstitions are not enough to cajole work-mates to be the ones to take down the streamers. "It's the twelfth day of Christmas tomorrow you know. It's bad luck to still have the decorations up." But they cannot decide who would suffer the bad luck - the people who hung the decorations or those who sit beneath them. Finally, stubbornness gives way to annoyance and each person takes something down. The garlands sit in piles on the floor where they have fallen after they had been yanked from the ceiling. I am not sure who finally picks them up and puts them in a box for the next year.

Conclusion

Bureaucratic and social identities find their counterpart in spatial strategies. Certain aspects of office furnishings deal specifically with the perpetuation of bureaucratic ideals: hierarchy, control, communal ownership, etc. Objects such as desks, computers and telephones are used to delimit areas and imbue them with purpose, so that the conference room and the technical library are used only for work. The Christmas party, a social event, is not held by choice in the conference room, because it feels wrong, and is moved out of the office altogether. Most of the objects available to the workers, especially those in sub-managerial positions, are not chosen by the workers and control over access to them and their use is constrained by hierarchical factors. The workers nonetheless wish to express their social selves in the areas immediately associated with them by bringing objects into the office associated with other non-work spheres.

In actuality, it would be impossible for the office to function completely at the bureaucratic or corporate level. Individualism must be expressed if only because it would be impossible for the management to anticipate every material, interaction or task-oriented contingency. The workers must have a degree of flexibility if they are to operate at their best. In their own strategies for self-betterment, the workers (including the managers themselves) seek to maximise this flexibility in order to increase as much as possible the amount of control they have over their own activities. They therefore, in certain circumstances such as those outside of corporate ritualised situations, resist the managers' control over them. They seek to obscure themselves visually and audially behind purloined furniture. They bring personal articles into the office to decorate and lay claim to their areas and to express their own personalities. They grow their own plants because these represent an extension of their non-corporate lives outside the office. They create spaces where formal hierarchical structures can be subverted, thus allowing them some relief from managerial control.

These relationships are expressed, as in previous chapters, as a set of oppositions reflecting the dominant strategic identities outlined throughout this study. Figure 12 illustrates how spatial arrangements, augmented by furnishings, is yet another material means for the workers to provide cues to themselves and each other on the behaviours most appropriate for the moment and the reactions that are expected.

Figure 12: Characterisation of spaces by strategic identity

BUREAUCRATIC	**SOCIAL**
Public	Private
Standard issue furnishings	Personally owned objects
Formal hierarchy	Inverted hierarchy
Designed by management	Designed by users
Hired Plants	Home-grown plants

Space's materiality is generated by its users who make it from nothing, investing it with their beliefs and patterned behaviours and so giving it form. This will find its parallel in the following, and last, ethnographic chapter. Time is also boundless until cognitively separated, dismantled and categorised, its form and meaning derived from use.

Chapter Seven: Keeping time

Introduction

In the previous chapters, particularly those discussing material culture, I began by considering the physical nature of the object class under consideration. Time is a particularly non-physical example of material culture and it is therefore difficult to adopt this approach here. Nonetheless, even as the physical nature of objects can provide cues to behaviours, so can the perceived differences in the type of time being lived through be demonstrated to bear a relationship to the individual's adopted identity. I will show that even though time cannot be broken into discrete attributes as was done for paper and clothing, there remain perceptually discrete characteristics of time that allow the construction of a typology of times. This is an approach similar to that taken for gossip and space, also arguably non-material in their sensory impacts.

A number of examples of how office workers divide and structure time are presented in this final ethnographic chapter. I begin with a broad review of how other anthropologists in other field settings have identified various understandings of time. The discussion will then move on to the office under study where four separate understandings of time are identified amongst a single group of people. These examples demonstrate that time perception is multi-faceted contradicting the commonly held notion that there is only one time: the one on the clock.

Even at the individual level, time is perceived many ways simultaneously, depending on what the individual is doing in a given situation and the sort of temporal structure that they require in order to function there with greatest ease and common sense. Time perceptions are also closely akin to social strategies, not because they guide behaviours, but because they are situationally determined. By demonstrating that he or she is following a certain perception of time, the individual also embodies a particular identity. An example that I will give will be the bureaucrat who keeps accurate records of time because time spent correlates with job performance and salary. But the same office worker who diligently counts her minutes towards pay may have a different perception of time when on her lunch break or on holiday.

A number of ways to perceive time are discussed throughout this chapter and these are related to social strategies and identities. Bureaucratic identities are closely aligned to what I have termed "contractual" and "managed" time, where time is measured in relation to office work and payment for that, and more social or idiosyncratic perceptions of time in what I have termed "seasonal" and "moral" time.

Time lines and social strategies

The anthropological literature that will be reviewed in this section identifies two types of time, one of a cyclical and repeating, the other of a linear and unidirectional, nature (Elias 1992; Giddens 1993; Munn 1992). Though there is some discussion of whether these two are perceived separately or in a combined manner, the common thread between all arguments is that the perception of time has depth and layers and that time cannot be considered one-dimensionally. These various understandings in non-office contexts illustrate that a multi-level perception of time is widely found in human society - its occurrence in a London office therefore comes as no surprise.

Evans-Pritchard (1940) observed that the perception of time is based amongst the Nuer upon a non-calendrical system: time is perceived as "a relation between activities" (100). He identified two notions of time, "oecological time", which is cyclical in nature and aligned to the environment, and "structural time" which is linear and aligned to the social relations of the group. Oecological time, defined by the activities associated with it, enables the Nuer to control the natural environment. This sort of time relates to growing things, and the needs of cattle and their care: it follows the natural cycles of day/night, the seasons and what the Nuer must do within these to ensure their own physical survival. This time is marked by the "cattle clock" and the movement of people across space.

Nuer structural time has a different pattern, moves in one direction only and is not perceived to return to the same logical point as with its cyclical oecological counterpart. It reflects changes in the individual's status as a member of the group, for instance in the age-set system or in marriage. It only moves forward.

Geertz (1973) identified similar notions of time amongst the Balanese who have two calendars running concurrently. The "lunar-solar" calendar is uni-directional; the "permutational" is based upon religious categories, and continually repeats itself as the lunar-solar years pass. The latter is based upon a series of independent cycles of day names, each with its own ceremonial meaning, so that this complex calendar cannot be readily used to tell what time it is, but rather what kind of time it is. Geertz developed the much discussed notion of the "motionless present" to characterise Balanese conceptions of time which depended more upon the qualitative aspects of temporality at the expense of the quantitative reckoning used in our own Western notions of time. The permutational calendar orders time qualitatively into "full days" and "empty days" and time within this context has no climax, just as Balanese social life lacks it.

Both Evans-Pritchard and Geertz identified two distinct notions of time that were culturally unique. It is something of an oversimplification however to hold that there are two distinct notions of time in each culture that are perceived separately, which is what these anthropologists may have implied. Bloch (1977) criticised Geertz on this account and held that the Balanese non-durational time (the permutational), was a sub-category of time reckoning that is reserved for ritual contexts, but that the durational (or lunar-solar), time is used in carrying out practical activities. Block maintained that the ritual notion of time is likely to be culturally defined, while the durational notion is not (287).[27] Howe (1981) rejected the notion of cyclical time altogether and noted that each repeating point in any cycle still takes place in a linear, non-reversible notion of time as a staged event. He asserted that both the cyclical and linear notions of time exist simultaneously within a single broader notion of time which encompasses both the linear and cyclical elements (231). Though time might be perceived as cyclical, it must of necessity be linear, because it is possible to distinguish the occurrence of an event from subsequent re-enactments of the "same" event in the next cycle (Gell 1992: 34).

The obvious conclusion to be drawn is that time, no matter how it is dissected, still marches forward: the question is how exactly it gets there within a particular series of cultural references. That these are cultural references is demonstrated by Burman (1981) who showed that on the island of Simbo, where the traditional notions of time reckoning, with their accompanying social relations, were changed in practice and perception by the introduction of the Gregorian calendar: the conquest of one set of dominant cultural symbols and mores by another altered the notion of time for the people concerned.

So in the sense of its irreversibility, the literature would indicate that time is the same for all people. The difference between culture groups is how this is used and interpreted, broken up into meaningful bits of temporal understanding that relate to the specific social structures present. For the Nuer, the most useful means of interpreting time is the oecological time of cattle tending and the structural time that enables the individual to grow up as a Nuer. For the Balanese, time is "motionless". For the Simbo, the incoming Western culture brought with it its own temporal structures which fit in well

[27] Geertz' own understanding of this seems to be quite clear, rendering Bloch's criticism somewhat inappropriate. When discussing the problems faced by the anthropologist who must sort out a staggering amount of symbolic data, he noted that "certain sorts of patterns and certain sorts of relationships among patterns recur from society to society, for the simple reason that the orientational requirements they serve are generically human. The problems, being existential, are universal; their solution, being human, are diverse." (363).

with its system of bureaucracy at the expense of the traditional one. Perceptions of time can thus be said to be manipulated situationally, depending upon the needs of the people concerned.

If time is composed of perceptually separate categories that work together but function separately to meet different socially defined ends, a comparison can be drawn to Goffman's "lines" of social interaction, which are the verbal and non-verbal acts adopted by an individual to express his or her preferred image or self-definition in relation to others (1967: 5). To recast Goffman's argument, *time lines* can be defined as the version of temporal structuring adopted by an individual to meet any particular social situation, and each line will be adopted by the individual or the group according to how they wish to present themselves. In other words, time lines are cued by the prevalent identity. As with a social identity, a time line will fit in with expectations about hierarchy, mores and purpose.

In offices, the primary use of time is as a means of controlling the actions of the individual, as is common practice in most formal Western work situations (see for instance Braverman 1974, 319-326; Jay 1981; Pronovost 1989: 76-80). There is a unique use, understanding and manipulation of temporality that can be extracted from the relations in this particular office, and examined as part of the larger system. The remainder of this chapter will examine a number of time lines employed in this office. Certain situations demand specific understandings of what time is, and how it should be put to use. All of these understanding, or time lines, are experienced simultaneously by each individual, but are given greater or lesser importance as the setting dictates. Time is used by the office workers to facilitate power relations as they act out their roles and identities: time lines are extremely important means of differentiating and protecting social status.

Contractual time and own time

At the most bureaucratic level, the perception of time aids the physical control of the individual. Time bears directly upon the contract made between worker and employer, ensuring that a specific amount of labour is exchanged for an equally specific amount of money, and carrying with it benefits to the worker for specific amounts of time off for leave, sickness or childbearing. The labour contract is predicated upon the assumption that "time is money" and while the employer doesn't buy the time of the man, but the right to control his labour for a particular length of time (Gell 1992, 212), it is more convenient to monitor time spent in the workplace than to control work output while there. I will call this **contractual time** because it is a conception which reflects the agreement made between worker and employer on the precise exchange of duration at the job's locale for a set monetary payment. This sort of time, with the peculiar characteristics that are shared across virtually all Western work settings, is codified in law and widely accepted norms and expectations. This time is glossed as "working hours" or "the working day" which falls within "the working week" and is wholly distinct from what the worker does in his or her **own time** when they are off duty and when social concerns prevail.[28] This is the time of Weber's bureaucrat and is situation specific because it is tied to formal work settings. It is also one of the defining characteristics that will allow the distinction to be made between the identities of the autonomous social individual and the bureaucratic office worker. "The time to go to work" in the morning turns this time perceptually "on" for the office employee. It is turned "off" again when it becomes "time to go home" at "the end of the day" though of course, the day has only just begun in terms of one's own time.

Learning to tell contractual time is an important element of the individual's inauguration on the first day at the new job. Once the new

[28] There are two primary sorts of own time. First, and this is the more important understanding in the context of this discussion, own time is the time when the individual is free from the constraints placed upon his or her choice of activities by the employer. This can be illustrated by the phrase "Do it in your own time, not on the office's". The second kind of own time is not relevant here, which is the time of the individual's body clock. See Folkard 1971 for a discussion of diurnal rhythms on the job.

employee has been shown where to sit and how to use the photocopier, instruction begins on how to tell time office style. Each employee is given a specific set of time drills that must be punctiliously followed: each employee must work 36 hours per week; there are a minimum of 20 paid holidays (two floating, one fixed at Christmas) with additional holidays depending upon length of service and grade; statutory or "Bank" holidays are fully paid; time off sick is also paid but if more than four days are taken consecutively a note from a doctor will be required; maternity leave is available for women with newborns but not men. The office works under a "flexi time" arrangement where any hours worked over the standard 36 can be put towards a "flexi day", which is an additional holiday. This must be taken within each monthly "flexi period". The office building is open between 8.00 a.m. and 6.30 p.m. and "core time" is from 9.30 a.m. to noon and 2.00 p.m. to 4.00 p.m. during which all employees must be in the office. A minimum of 30 minutes must be taken for lunch.

Monitoring these time rules is the key to their successful functioning. The newcomer is introduced to a form called the "flexi sheet", so named in the optimistic assumption that it could be used to justify a flexi day. On this form, each employee is expected to log the precise time when work began, time out for lunch, time back from lunch, and the time when work ceased in the evening. Hours and minutes are tallied at the close of each week and the resultant figure is subtracted from the standard 36 with the debit or credit carried over in the next column for the next week. If sufficient time credit has been earned, a flexi day may be taken. Since every minute counts when saving for that cherished flexi day, all workers pay close attention to the minutes worked. Creative rounding techniques have been developed by those trying to subvert contractual controls and entry at 8.03 a.m. can be safely recorded as 8.00 a.m. with a saving of two minutes. Some people save more minutes, sometimes five or even ten at a time. Since time is recorded four times daily, five minutes at each instance, five days a week and four weeks a month can amount to sufficient time over the period to equal to an entire flexi day. Artful liars who would rather be in bed in the morning or out playing golf on a Friday afternoon, use this strategy to its fullest effect. Management are aware of the time gifts that their subordinates bestow upon themselves but since they cannot keep precise track of everyone's movements, they can only check for obvious gross miscalculations when they clear the flexi sheets at the end of each month.

The "leave card" is issued to each employee either at the start of work in the office or at the beginning of the financial year. The yearly leave entitlement is written at the top of this form. Each following line is used to record the leave taken with a space for the supervisor's initials. The number stating the days remaining is precious to the owner: it is a passport to freedom. The leave year, it is explained to the initiate, runs from April 1 to March 31, and all allocated days should be taken during that period. If for some reason however, the leave is not taken, a maximum of five days could be carried over into the next year but would have to be taken in April. This is cause for a recurring problem, because most people hoard their leave like children hoard pennies, and everyone has something left at the end of the year. The result is that in March and April, the office is depopulated as people use the time they've been storing, desperately trying to prevent their employers from confiscating that valued time when they can leave their desks behind and be fully autonomous people once again.

The office workers have developed tactics that are within the parameters of the contractual time system to maximise their own time within office time (de Certeau 1984: 39-40). The most obvious example is the right to be "off sick". On asking a colleague if she had recovered after a day's absence from the office because of illness, she replied, "Oh yes, I'm feeling better now. Actually, I wasn't that bad." She then lowered her voice and added, "I just couldn't be bothered coming in yesterday." Other tactics used to "be in the office" in body if not in spirit can be the justifiable causes of going to the library to collect a book that would be too expensive for the office to purchase, stopping in a shop to pick something up on the way back from a meeting, reading a newspaper on the train between meetings, etc. In some instances, the management will make allowances for special occasions where people are still logged in on the flexi sheets but where no work is expected to be undertaken, for instance a birthday or the Christmas party.

The office workers make clear distinctions between what they believe they should be doing while simultaneously protecting their own free time by undertaking careful calculations designed to ensure that their time will not be eaten up by office activities. They subvert office rules where feasible. Contractual time epitomises time rules that come with most formalised employment in the Western work setting. If the managers are dissatisfied with a member of staff because of their performance within the framework of contractual time, they are within their rights to exercise discipline. Likewise, if a member of staff feels slighted because the calls upon their time are in excess of what the contract stipulated, they may seek outside aid. Unions and labour tribunals can be turned to in order to settle disputes. Contractual time is sufficient to keep the employees within the office for enough hours in the week to achieve meaningful results but managed time, described below, is used to define how this time is spent in relation to particular areas of work.

Managed time

Managed Time is closely aligned to contractual time since it also relates only to working for pay. The difference is that this perception of time is not based upon a contractual agreement between worker and employer but upon a more tailor-made understanding of the hierarchical working routines of this particular place of employment. This notion of time is purposefully developed by those in senior positions to control their own labour and that of their subordinates, and to synchronise their collective daily and yearly activities. The grounding ideology extends beyond "time is money" to "time is work" and since a manager's efficacy will be judged on the criteria of work output, controlling the time of others is regarded as a means of boosting personal power and influence. Time in this sense is managed to control labour output within the power hierarchy and is therefore bureaucratic in nature. In this office, a specific system of reckoning time has been developed, the "work programme", that all within which tasks are planned and worked to completion. It is monitored through a management tool called "project control" that keeps effective tabs on how work progresses. There are similar systems in place in other offices. Though they may be treated slightly or radically differently, the purpose of all is the same: to regulate what the worker does and how quickly the worker does it.

In the Autumn of each year, the managers begin to formulate the "work programme" that will determine the tasks that the office will undertake during the next financial year and will eventually have to be cleared by the committee. The managers write reports suggesting work for the coming year but do so in the most general terms. Though they must bow in the face of pressure from Members, there is a general feeling that the politicians are unschooled in the art of research and office practice. In a reversal of the normal identities surrounding work, the managers have become the staff, the politicians those with the power to delegate. The managers must thus do as they are told, though their professional experience allows them to make proposals and suggestions. If however, management recommendations are not in accord with the political agendas, they will be denied.

After the work programme has been cleared, the delegation of work and the control of time is handled internally. There will be no more interference from the outside except perhaps when the final work has to be cleared, and the implications of the conclusions are fully considered. The managers' next job is to translate the generally sketched objectives into discrete pieces of work. At this stage, they write reports for each other making bids for projects or project areas. Each report outlines the need for a particular piece of work as well as how it might be undertaken. These proposals are discussed in management meetings, and the bartering that goes on there, as each member tries to address their own priorities at what must be expense of the others, is kept veiled from the rest of the office. Only cryptic references to decisions on the work programme are minuted and made available to the rest of the office. Much of the bartering is however undertaken piecemeal through casual encounters between the managers: snatches of conversation in doorways, heads stuck partially into offices; on the way to meetings; in the coffee area when no other members of staff are within earshot.

The rest of the staff know what is going on. They see the managers meeting, hear fragments of their deliberations, see papers being prepared, but are never told explicitly what is being decided. They have a general idea of who is winning, who is loosing, in the battle for their time. They can do little to sway the trajectory of the emerging work programme, except perhaps to try to persuade one of the managers that a particular project deserves attention, giving them concise details why, hoping that their views will be taken into the management forum. But their efforts are largely peripheral and the final decision of what work gets done does not lie with them.

The work programme only sketches out the objectives of what will be done: it says little of how, or who will do it. Project control deals with the specific time allocations needed to complete a task. It is a complex system within which all members of the office may, in theory, make bids for time to carry out specific tasks, where time is allocated for specific pieces of work, and through which each member of staff's progress towards completion of work is monitored. It is also the means for management to make the most of their greatest resource: their staff's time.

Like everything else in the office, project control works differently for all groups of people. The main target for the system is the technical staff. While it was originally intended that admin would also fit into this system, it was found to be impracticable. Time for specific tasks could not be allocated to admin, since all planned uses of time would inevitably be over-ridden by the demands placed upon them by managers and techs. As the system progressed, admin only monitored their use of time, faced with the futility of trying to determine it.

Project control runs in parallel to and compliments the work programme. Each project is allocated a certain number of person-days within which it is intended that a certain amount of work will be completed. The time allocation for each project may involve a number of people, each one chosen to give input according to the skills they can offer and the amount of time they have available in relation to their other responsibilities. It is in the project control system that the lines of responsibility within the office are most salient: it is the basis for many of the power relations in the office.

Managed time has its own set of monitoring practices. All managers and techs are expected to keep track of the work they do on a "project control form". The results of each weekly form are entered into a database and reviewed every four to five weeks within a quarterly cycle of reassessment. Everyone gets the same form, which is designed to meet all contingencies. Down the left hand column is a list of all active projects, across the top are the days of the week. Professional staff are expected to give a day by day account of how time was used on each project in tenths of days.[29] At the beginning of a quarter, each person is told exactly haw many days should be spent on any particular project. Since the point of the exercise is to prevent time wasting, all must prove on these weekly time-sheets they have been operating within the parameters set for them. If people have indeed been working on areas where they shouldn't have been, or have spent too much time on one project at the expense of another, they will "cook the books" and claim time where it should have been spent to hide their disobedience.

These forms are then collected and summarised in a memo called the "work programme review". This is a complex table similar to the project control forms. Down the left column are all the projects, headed by a section on "management" categories such as leave, sickness, miscellaneous and training, followed by the complete list of projects. Across the top of the form are the initials all managers and techs in order of rank and importance. The

[29] Marking the passage of time in tenths of days rather than the more conventional hours can prove problematic, because a tenth of a six-hour day means something very different from a tenth of a nine hour day when measuring work output.

chief is listed first, the junior techs last. The next columns show the actual number of days that had at that point in the Quarter, been spent on each project, and by whom, set against the time allocated. As part of their profession, these people work with numbers. They feel comfortable with them: safe and accurate. The work programme review table fits onto a single sheet of A4 paper and is densely covered in the numbers that they so dearly love and trust. There are 893 numbers in any given review, taken to one decimal place accuracy. If they choose to, they can interpret all these numbers as showing a realistic map of what they have achieved. Cynics believe those numbers are a means of fooling the managers into thinking that work is being done. This level of precision would undoubtedly seem superfluous in another office, one that did not deal with numbers on a daily and sustained basis, but here it seems natural that progress should be charted in this way.

Four, eight and twelve weeks into each quarter, the project control team, including the management and techs, meet to discuss the work programme review. The manager who chairs the meeting goes down the list of projects, first naming all those that are taking too much time, then those that are "under budget". All present are asked in turn why the discrepancies exist. It is also in these meetings that new projects for a new quarter's work are bid for.

Interest in these meetings is directly related to the level of responsibility for projects. Project leaders are enthralled and enthusiastic because they can monitor (with numbers!) the progress that their juniors have made and bid for more of their time. It is also at these meetings that project leaders can see how successful other project leaders have been in securing the work of the juniors. Often, comments are made by managers and principals, as they point to the numbers on the paper, that their own work is not getting done because their colleagues have been taking too much junior unallocated time. The senior techs, who have a significant level of responsibility and who may be project leaders themselves generally receive large chunks of time for each project because they are expected to do "thinking" work. They are allowed to make certain decisions in the absence of management involvement, and are to a large extent self-directed. Junior techs are not allowed this luxury. They are not trusted to do more than they are told. Their tasks are to do the "donkey work" that is too time-consuming for the senior techs (whose time costs more), and for which the need for specialised expertise is less important. When the final quarter allocations are made, the most junior often feel dissatisfied. Not only do they find themselves shifted around from project to project each quarter as one or another project leader has succeeded in prising them away from somebody else, but it can happen that they are given such tiny allocations that they can never become intellectually involved in anything.

Managed time is perceptually different from contractual time because the individual, especially one who is not in a proactive role, is being continually manoeuvred as a pawn in somebody else's power play. Contractual time is in comparison relatively straightforward since once the rules have been set, they will never vary in their operation. The amount of control that the individual attempts to apply responds accordingly, and while contractual time is accepted as something that cannot be altered, managed time is continually subject to tampering, whether this is to bring benefits to the office as a whole or to feed individual desire. The social identity of the individual is also modified according to the time line in operation, and while he or she might happily accede to being in the office for a standard 36 hours a week, spending time on unwanted project work might be actively avoided by attempting to bend the trajectory of the work programme.

Seasonal time

Unlike the other time lines discussed in this chapter, **seasonal time** is experienced in much the same way by all the members of staff. It is an almost subconscious perception that reflects the rhythms of the changing seasons. Hierarchy has only a very small part to play though some groups may feel greater or lesser pressures at various points in the cycle. Activities in the office change speeds at different times of the year. There are fast times and slow times, and these cycles occur at 12 month intervals. Different calendars leave their imprints on personal rhythms, and these overlap. There is the "calendar year" that starts in January, the "financial year" that starts in April, and the "academic year" that starts in September. There is the "natural year" that doesn't start on any particular date but which affects light and dark, warmth and cold, and how energetic people feel.

In early January, the office workers return from their holidays. Since the office is for all intents and purposes closed over the holidays, most people stay away, thankful for the prolonged break that Christmas and the New Year provide. Since there are a number of bank holidays as well as an extra day granted by the employers, it is possible to take a few weeks off while not biting too heavily into leave allotment. Some people who like the solitude of an empty office, who have used their holidays too quickly, or who would like an excuse to avoid their visiting mothers-in-law, may come into the office, but they don't expect to get much work done. The Christmas holidays are a time removed from the rest of the year, one of the few times when enjoyment is expected to prevail over work, and consequently, there is a general sense of slowness and frivolity.

But in early January, they all, one by one, enter the office again at what is a symbolic start to the new year. They clean their desk drawers out, they learn to write a new number for the new year, they have clear diaries next to their telephones and put the diaries that they used to mark out important events and meetings only a few months ago onto their bookshelves, out of site except for the occasional reference that needs to be made to them. They are rested and refreshed after their breaks. They don't bicker as much as usual because while they were gone, they forgot what the major issues in the office gossip were. There is a stillness inside which is reinforced by the cold weather outside and a feeling of newness as they forget the projects laid to rest in the year gone and as they plan for those of the year ahead.

The pace speeds up as the months advance towards Spring. The weather is still cold, and people come in each morning dragging heavy layers of wool off their shoulders to stuff them into lockers, revealing lighter layers of wool underneath. The days are short but are getting longer: they feel that they should be more prolific. People work harder than at other times of year, partly because they are rested, partly because of the optimism engendered by the feeling that this is the beginning of the year.

March draws near. This is the most hectic month because it is the end of the financial year. All leftover money must be committed before the clock runs out on March 31, and accessible budgets are turned to worthless numbers on a page, confiscated and lost forever. The work programme must be finalised, projects must be completed and the annual report cleared. This is the month where the past year's work is judged by the committee, and where the office's future work will be decided. There is so much to do, so little time to do it - no day seems to hold enough hours for the plans made in the morning. Though it's cold outside, they are working up a sweat inside as they run around with papers in their hands, hurriedly speaking instructions to colleagues. They are Mad as March hares. It is probably the managers who feel the pressures of March with the greatest intensity although the admin staff must react and serve with equal vigour.

This is also the end of the leave year. If people want to take their remaining holidays, they have to do it now. So much to do, and so little time to do it, and they still have to make time to relax. They rush even more to get their March work done, and then, with a huge sigh of relief, they escape into their holidays. One week there is a buzz of activity, the next the place is deserted. Those few who remain are glad of their colleagues' absence because they are allowed a short period of relative calm.

And then in May and June, as the days grow even longer, and the hope of summer becomes a reality, the workers roll up their sleeves. The little lamps get pushed onto a corner of their desks behind in-trays and telephones and gather dust. The windows are opened and air ruffles their cotton shirts and pushes paper onto the floor. Their clothes are lighter and brighter and are not as stiff. They are feeling energetic and shift from drinking coffee to drinking juice and water.

Summer comes. They are planning their holidays - the real holidays that they have saved their money and leave for. They finish their projects so that they can leave with clear consciousness and clear in-trays. They have a hard time concentrating, thinking about the heat in the room and the coolness of their escapes. Fans hum and create a mess of swirling paper. They are irritable because they are hot. They don't want to be there, and plan fun things to do after work. The fiddle their time sheets so that they can leave early. They resent being inside when the sun is shining and feel as yellow as the office plants. They want the sun. They want out.

And sadly, they see the approach of Autumn. Those who are still studying, or those who have recently left the academic world, see this as another beginning of the year. This is the time of new notebooks and new pencils. A time of cool mornings, and dulling light when green turns brown. A time for getting down and getting serious again. The fans are silent, the windows close. The pace picks up after the vacancies left by the Summer holidays have been filled again. The days shorten and they begin to journey on trains in darkness as they come and go from the office. The lamps are dusted off and put where they can be used. They stay at their desks later into the evening because there is nothing inviting to leave for. They admire the sunsets, pink and orange, that shine through the car park outside their windows - their only enjoyment of nature. Their bodies slow down. Their clothes are heavier. They work. And at last, the end of the year approaches. There are more holidays to look forward to. They make plans to see their families and make plans to do things with one another - their day-time kin. They have the Christmas party and stop working though they are in the office and are being paid. They take their Christmas holidays and say goodbye to each other at this, the symbolic end of the year.

The work programme is only artificial: it is this seasonal time that has a stronger emotional effect upon the worker though it goes largely unnoticed, at least at an explicit level. This is a time line unrelated to status or objectives but to body tempo and learned expectations.

Morality and values

The morality of time relates to the individual and the work ethic. Because time is used to mark the progress of the labour contract, and time becomes equivalent to levels of productivity and effectiveness, people's use of time is monitored by other workers and normative judgements are made. These judgements are themselves the product of where the judge and judged stand within the power hierarchy. Unlike the certainty offered by the labour contract, or the power plays used by management, the moral rules of working are nowhere codified. They do not exist except in looks between workers or the indirect judgements offered by gossip. The morality of time is based upon shared understandings of what is fair and what can safely be circumvented. How the individual uses time will infringe upon how others may use their own time. If one person "wastes time" by playing computer games, her colleagues will have to work harder in order to pick up the slack - providing that they believe that a certain amount of output is required for a certain duration of time. The morality of time also has hierarchical elements, a social value that will be discussed more fully below, where the value of some people's time is different from others, depending on the amount of power they can command.

Time lines are context sensitive but they are also value laden. Values developed within the office group's frame of reference will inform individual's behaviour and also their expectations about the appropriate uses of time by others. This becomes very important in non-codified time practices, because it is only through the consensus of the group that the various time lines can run concurrently and fit smoothly into place side by side. Most anthropologists who have considered the social implications of time have noted that it is structured in terms of pivotal activities which can be recognised by their symbolic content or periodicity (Pronovost 1989: 40-41). Time "flies or drags, depending on what one is doing, i.e. on the functions conferred on it by the activity in progress" (Bourdieu 1977: 105).

Values related to activity can be illustrated by considering the difference between meaningful time and "killed time". Goffman (1967) gave perhaps the best introduction to killed time when he posited that it is inconsequential and is bounded by other, meaningful time-based activities. Killed time is characterised by problematic activity, since it is unimportant in the individual's grander life-scheme, and decisions on what to do with it must be made in light of this; it is unorganised in comparison to the time of "serious work" which is programmed in advance, is predictable, and is therefore not problematic (ibid. 161-164). Giddens (1991) added that this sort of time is often "free time" which needs to be "filled in" (113). Gell (1992) however questioned this argument and came to the conclusion that killed time is not inconsequential, it is merely "surplus" to requirements and that this time rather than being "killed" is spent doing some unsatisfactory tasks or activities: "'surplus' time is simply time which we have to spend doing X when we would rather be doing Y" (211).

These two alternative views on killed time can be resolved when killed time is considered in terms of the value placed upon it by the person experiencing it. Like time lines, these values will be situation specific and will relate to the action and purpose. As these purposes change, so will the value attributed to the time doing them, so that time may be more important in relation to a specific activity (e.g. having a discussion with the boss) in certain contexts (getting a promotion) than in others (discussing the weather). Time will thus be more or less valued according to purpose though it may be spent on the same general activity, and will stretch and shrink correspondingly. To illustrate, a typist is given a very large hand-written report at 2.00 p.m. with the instructions that it must to be ready first thing in the morning. She considers the report with some apprehension because she will be meeting her husband outside at 5.30 and she doesn't want to be late. She therefore rushes through the first two hours of typing, the time flies by and she is not aware of it. So intent is she on getting the work done, that she does not notice that she is working too quickly. There is a letter that she must type when she is finished with the report and she would rather put if off until morning - her eyes are tired and she doesn't want to force herself. She doesn't get paid enough for that. She continues typing but at a slower pace, making sure that she finishes at 5.10. Now, she has 20 minutes to kill and it is clear for anyone who might notice that it is not worth beginning the letter. She can therefore do nothing in particular, apply her make-up in the ladies toilet, chat to her friend in the next desk, put away her pencils. Time is slowed until 5.30 and then speeds up as she is again fully occupied on her evening out.

While killed time might be bounded off (and it may be intentionally orchestrated to do just that) from other time which is filled with meaningful activities, it might also have a value attached to it. In the example, killed time was used by the typist as a means of subversion - its duration was carefully constructed so that she could do activities that were more to her liking than what her supervisors would prefer. This killed time was not filled with meaningful activity within the context of contractual or managerial time but was very meaningful in the context of her own time and her ability to control her independence. This does not imply that Goffman was wrong, only that he failed to consider the importance of value alongside activity. Different tasks are attributed values accordingly so that time spent on the necessary activities of travelling to meetings or turning on the computer in the morning, is not valued as highly as the time in the meeting or using the computer. Time's value can also be couched in terms of the amount of time available and the corresponding amount of work that needs to be completed within that particular timescale. The pace shrinks and expands according to expectations, or "opportunity costs" (Gell 1992: 211ff). Thus, people in the office can feel "rushed off their feet" or as though they are "taking it easy" depending upon the match between purpose and period.

There is also a social side to value. The status of the individual has an influence upon the status of that person's time, and social characteristics such as gender (Bourdieu 1977: 163; Burman 1981: 266), age (Hazan 1980), belief (Hart 1992) and social class (Pronovost 1989: 31, 65) all contribute to its value. The formal hierarchy also affects time's value. The person becomes the job, and different jobs are accorded greater or lesser value by members of the office group. The social identity that reflects upon time's value corresponds to the expectation that a person of certain status will use time to certain effect. A person who has internalized this expectation will attempt to use time in an appropriate manner. Working slowly, that is at a pace that does not suit the status, can become a silent protest that is subtle enough to be virtually unreproachable in any explicit sense, but opinions about the rebel will be formed which may lead to later repercussions. An example of this was where a newly appointed member of staff felt that he was not being given enough responsibility consistent with his job description. He worked, but he did so in a desultory fashion in order to demonstrate his displeasure. His managers never told him to work faster, but their opinion of his abilities continually deteriorated. They gave him less and less work because they did not feel that they could "trust" him. Eventually, he had no work left that he could use to show his dissent.

The social value of time is particularly relevant in the development of the morality of time. Where it can be taken as read that the management will monitor time use, subordinates may actually expend greater effort in monitoring the time of their superiors without any functionally legitimate reason for doing do. This has to do with a sense of "fairness" where those in a relatively worse position of lower pay and less power judge the effectiveness of those in more fortunate circumstances.

Community policing is the most important means of controlling time, and a great deal of effort is expended by individuals in monitoring their own activities in relation to the reaction they receive from others. A favourite topic of office gossip is how some people are not using their time well. The more a person gets paid, the more that their use of time is the subject of bad-tempered discussion. If time is money, then those earning more should be doing more. In theory anyway. It is not however the amount of time that is spent, but the importance of the work that is being done within it that is of interest in this context. Different tasks bear different levels of status. "Important" work may not actually take much time to carry out, while "mundane" work may take a lot. It may seem to those doing the latter that those doing the former are "skiving", and they become frustrated that they have to work continuously while those with positions of prestige are never at their desks. What is deemed to be the legitimate use of time functions differently, depending on who is being watched.

The tasks that the managers do in their work time are the most valuable to the office. They are the spokes-persons and decision-makers. To do this, they spend little time at their desks. When they are speaking, they do it outside the office, at meetings or in interviews. When they are making decisions, they do it inside, at internal meetings or in casual conversations amongst themselves. They spend less time than all the others in the office actually sitting at their desks doing things with paper. Visually (as perceived from inside the office) they spend the least amount of time doing work. What they do when they are away from their desks seems "fun" to the people who must sit down and keep busy. Managers can talk, discuss, travel to other parts of the city, see other environments outside the office walls. When they are in their meetings, they are talking too. Talking is much more fun than writing and filing, and those who write and file talk when they take a break. Of course, there is a difference between what managers and what the junior admin women talk about, but that can be regarded as irrelevant by a disgruntled typist. Those who must sit and work envy management their freedom to leave their desks. Management always seem to be away at meetings. The more senior a person is, the more meetings they may legitimately attend. The chief spends a large proportion of every day in one meeting or another, while the most junior admin staff only go to the staff meeting once a month.

All these meetings attended by the managers take hours especially if they are not held in the office and time must be spent travelling to them. Management's time is worth more money than anybody's, but they must waste much of it on trains. They often take along papers to read while they travel, but there is a limit to the amount of work that can be done. Meetings cannot be rushed. Time is cheap there. Topics must be discussed at length, all points to an argument heard. Meetings are where information regarding opinions, hopes and fears are discovered and were rivals are assessed and challenged. Add to these hours the travel time, and one meeting can take up the best part of the day. Because time is cheap in meetings, it becomes very dear when the managers are in the office. When they finally get back to their desks, they work. They work hard. They look around them and expect everyone else to work as hard as they do, forgetting that the others haven't been spending cheap time in meetings that has to be made up with extra work packed into office hours. They frown on chat, though their meetings offer them the opportunity to chat themselves. Their chatting time over, they see their desks as a symbol of productivity: the altar of work. For them, anyone sitting at a desk should be down to business.

The rest of the people in the office who do not go to as many meetings don't see it that way. Management has low-productivity time offset by high-productivity time. Everyone else has hours to fill, during which productivity is closer to a steady equilibrium. The other people in the office work a few hours, take a break, work a few more hours, take lunch, come back, work some more, break for tea, work some more and go home. Every day. Unless they have meetings to go to themselves, they do not have management's troughs and peaks. They like it when no managers are around. They still work, but do so in the knowledge that they can do it at a pace that is comfortable.

Time is judged differently for the managers and techs. Time is money, and the technical staff are relatively well paid. They have their duties clearly spelled out in the work programme, and they know when they must get them done. They function with a great deal of autonomy within the parameters set for them, but there are many calls upon their time. The ability to retain autonomy while meeting the demands of others varies according to status. For the more senior techs, their freedom of self-determination is fairly assured, though they will be regularly asked to support managers, and, if the techs are project leaders, will be expected to give direction when it is needed. When they are interrupted from above, they generally respond immediately, and drop what they are doing. If they are approached by juniors, or if juniors need to speak to them, the interruption is postponed. This is done by arranging a suitable time for a mini-meeting, a business-related chat. The purpose for the mini-meetings is to arrange a mutually suitable time for all parties concerned: a time that is programmed and that will not act as an interruption. But instead of saving time, these mini-meetings often waste it.

Just setting the time for the meeting can take more time than the meeting itself. Diaries must be checked, small-talk made. Then there is the dead time just before the meeting is scheduled to commence. There always seems to be ten or fifteen minutes before the meeting starts when there is nothing to do, and the actual time of commencement. They should be productive minutes, the problem is thinking of something appropriate to do within them. Start another piece of work? Make a cup of tea? Call somebody on the telephone? Clear out the in-tray? And then the mini-meetings happen, when time is cheap. They are either so short that they did not need to be scheduled, or they are so long that when they are over, everyone who sat as a willing participant rushes back to their desks aghast that so much time has elapsed.

The junior techs are continually interrupted. Their time is not considered to be important. It can be broken up. Their superiors assume that their work does not require much concentration. Managers and principles go to the junior techs when they have a small task they need to have done, but upon which they do not themselves want to spend time. The juniors can become so burdened with these small one-off jobs that they can not do their allocated work. If they have no allocated work, this is not a problem, but if they happen to be in a busy phase, they can be put under considerable pressure.

Admin time functions quite differently from that of their technical counterparts. Whereas the techs go to great lengths to plan their time a year in advance, admin have to wait for demands to be put upon them before they can react. The only certainty that admin have is that the scheduled committee meetings will take place on the dates arranged. Working back from there, they know when they must have everything ready and photo-copied for despatch. Working back still farther, they know when they will have busy times and slow times, and when to expect a deluge of demands from the techs. But that is all they can know in advance. Admin time is less valuable than technical time. This is something that everyone tacitly accepts. Technical and admin staff may attend to the same duties, or the same meetings, but admin will be there first, setting things up, and admin will be there last, putting things away. When there is a staff meeting and the telephone rings, it is somebody from admin who must leave the room to answer it. When the work comes in late for typing, it is not the techs who must work extra hours in order to get the papers finalised for the despatch but the typist. There she sits, "slaving over a hot word processor" often with an agitated man sitting in a chair next to her, explaining where to put the apostrophe.

As with the senior techs, the senior admin have a higher degree of autonomy over their time than do their juniors. They are also allowed to delegate, which is something that is done only by managers and principals on the technical side. They delegate work to their admin subordinates in order to keep their own desks clear for contingencies like a flooding toilet, bad news from an incompetent printing firm, or demands from managers or techs.

The most junior admin women have little control over how to use their time. They may only do as they are told. If they should find themselves with too much work to do and not enough time to do it in, they are not allowed to make decisions regarding what is and is not to be done, and when. They must go to someone more senior, explain their problem, and wait for instructions on how to resolve it. They resent that they are treated like the real donkeys in the office. They see managers out of the office attending meetings. They see the techs having meetings and coffee breaks. They see the senior members of the admin team delegating work to them. They are the only ones who cannot choose how to spend their time. They sit at their desks, and are expected to get on with it.

It is no surprise therefore that it is the most junior admin who watch everyone else's time most vigilantly. Though managers also watch how time is spent, as long as they see product at the end of the day, they are not overly concerned. But the junior admin watch like eagles. They are chastised if they spend too much time talking, or are away from their work areas without a proper excuse. They see the freedom that everyone else has and then compare it to their own lack of it. They are paid much less than anybody else and yet are expected to work steadier hours. Even their lunch breaks are more constrained. While everyone else can take as long a lunch break as they like, provided that they are back in the office by 2.00, the typists and the telephonist have to take their lunches in strict rota, one hour for the first shift, one hour for the second. The phones must be covered at all times, and if somebody from the first shift is not back in time, someone from the second must wait. If a person from the first shift comes back late, they know that the one waiting will have a shorter lunch break.

Conclusion

How then are these time lines interwoven into a holistic time strategy by the individual? It is not done consciously nor with any predefined purpose. Time lines are mutually understood means for the office workers to synchronise their activities and rhythms. Only in the case of contractual time and management time are they anywhere explicitly codified. Time is fashioned by the people in the office from something that is nothing and is then used as the basis which guides many of their interactions.

All time lines are ever present in the minds of each of the office workers but are given precedence depending upon the identity they are enacting in that situation. Time lines are used to control the individual, whether willingly accepted or imposed from above. The office worker is in many instances virtually compelled to undertake subversive activities in order to express personhood. It may be argued that of the material strategies and constraints described in this thesis, time is the most immaterial yet exerts the strongest controls.

I once found a photo-copy of a joke that had been passed around from office to office. It was tacked onto the wall above one of the manager's desks. He had himself received it from another manager. It is reproduced in Figure 13.

Figure 13: "Hold a meeting"

> ***Are you lonely? Work on your own?***
>
> ***Hate having to make decisions?***
>
> ***Rather talk about it than do it?***
>
> ***Than why not***
>
> ***"HOLD A MEETING"***
>
> ***You can get to see other people,***
>
> ***Sleep in peace, Offload decisions,***
>
> ***Learn to write volumes of meaningless notes,***
>
> ***Feel important and impress (or bore)***
>
> ***your colleagues.***
>
> ***And all in work time!***

Acceptance of time lines is also a means of expressing the self. Self-definition as a professional, as an office worker, as a good person, all contain elements of using time well. It is believed that efficiency is a virtue that will be repaid with enhanced status and people are proud when they can show that they have accomplished difficult tasks despite tight schedules. There is a clear ideological assumption that time-wasting is wrong. This is a stance that is generally accepted by all the office workers.

The consideration of time perception is a suitable place to finish the ethnographic portion of this thesis. Time is as immaterial as gossip, as potentially undefined as space and yet in many respects as closely tied to the expression of the individual's identity as with genuinely material objects such as clothing or things to be found in the office such as paper and furniture.

Chapter Eight: Conclusions

Introduction

Belief and action may differ dramatically. Most people are not as "good", effective or powerful as they prefer to believe. The office workers in this study have been observed to use multiple strategies to improve their positions and conditions but the means they used to do this were not those that could explicitly be identified and described by them. Their strategies involved small manipulations of their colleagues over an extended period of time and most changes wrought were incremental in character. The gain or loss of power is not achieved in a single act but in many. It has been shown that these incremental acts are seemingly insignificant: the choice of a tie, the positioning of a table, the tone of voice, the signature on a letter. Each action gains significance only within the context of all other actions. It is for this reason that other social science techniques such as interviews or surveys cannot yield the results given here. The office workers cannot describe how years of cumulative small doings and decisions change their lives in an hour long interview or 100 point questionnaire. The observation for this study was carried out over a period of four years and by an "insider". I hope therefore that the results are sufficiently different from what has been undertaken elsewhere that new questions will be raised about office work.

The focus of this study has been on the materiality of office life which reveals actual, rather than intended or preferred, rhythms and rules. This approach could legitimately be criticised in studies that are concerned with how to get the job done, how to be efficient, or how to use the formal power hierarchy to best personal effect. However, my interest has not been office work but office life. This has not been a study of task and procedure but of interaction and power. I have therefore paid little regard to what work was done but to how it was done. In doing this, the impact of support staff is more satisfactorily revealed and intermediate and senior workers take on finer definition. The office could not function without the junior admin and junior tech staff, yet their contribution could easily be overlooked as unimportant where the analysis was concerned with the generation of the organisation's end product. The junior tech's inability to determine what work he does on a project, or the typist's forced compliance with the formatting dictates of the office manager, are best understood not in terms of the aims of the committee report but through consideration of the process in which it was produced.

In concluding this thesis, I wish to summarise two main themes that have been dominant throughout this study. The first relates to the strategies that individual office workers have adopted in order to function satisfactorily in a formal bureaucratic environment. The second relates to the methodology I have employed and its theoretical implications.

Office continuums

Two continuums can be identified from this study: one relating to power and hierarchy, the other to bureaucratic and social identities and strategies. In either, individuals move in and out, up and down, from one end to another, as the situation and their own inclination demands and insofar as they are allowed by the structural limits on their room for manoeuvre. In this section, these continuums will be reviewed alongside the main findings of the study.

Unlike the bulk of writings in management theory where it is assumed that in an office setting, power flows from the managers through processes of delegation to subordinate staff, relying upon a top-down approach to status relationships, I have taken the view that the will to exhibit influence and to therefore have power over others, often occurs in the opposite direction.

Following Goldschmidt (1992), whose concept of "career" extends beyond work to include "the lifetime pursuit of satisfactions", I assume that the individual is judged in the context of the group, and that prestige is achieved in a relative battle for recognition. All individuals are thus motivated to leave their mark on group normative and moral processes. Management theory tends to rely upon a definition of power that is based upon formal control and legitimacy. Borrowing from Kanter (1977) I have adopted a different definition of power. By considering power to be the ability to get things done and to mobilise resources to achieve personal goals, power and influence can be demonstrated to flow in all directions though not necessarily in equal amount. It can be argued for instance that the managers are generally more successful in getting what they want than the typists, but this has been shown not invariably to be the case. The reasons for these differential success rates is due to the prevailing formal hierarchical system. Management theory is therefore not to be wholly rejected. It must however be remembered that this strain of literature presents an incomplete picture of the real situation on the office floor.

Managers have legitimate power that typists lack. This gives them an advantage so great that the latter class of worker only rarely succeeds in initiating change or securing resources. Our understanding of this power system harkens back to Weber (1978) who characterised legitimate power indelibly in the literature. The manager's position is due to a number of inter-related features of his or her job: a clearly defined hierarchical position; specialist knowledge; a meritocratic selection process that justifies that position is equal to incumbent; all members of staff are subject to strict discipline and control and all follow the same rules. These features are consolidated in the job description which formally defines the parameters limiting the potential success of each individual's political strategies. The key to the entire system of formal control and subordination is that this is itself accepted and fully understood by all involved. The participants' assumptions that this system is natural and their unquestioning acceptance of it is the ultimate source of its legitimacy. A corollary to the fact that position delimits legitimate power is that position delimits access to resources and provides rights to undertake specific tasks and duties.

Hierarchy, access and rights give each participant in the office system a different job package and a specific experience of office work. The manager and the typist occupy the same space, are in the office at the same time and drink tea from the same pot, but their understandings of and emotional responses to most situations are dramatically different. These differences are expressed in the types of persona they develop and employ and also in their strategies. I will summarise the notion of strategic identities that has been used throughout this study shortly, here however, I wish to review how hierarchy provides restraints to the individual and how these are responded to with personal strategies of power.

In the discussion of gossip, it was shown that the managers were to a large extent able to control the flow of information relating to the running of the office. They had sole access to the committee members, they made decisions in meetings behind closed doors, they were in no way compelled to consult with their subordinates, they checked all outgoing communications from letters to reports and even edited the minutes of their meetings before allowing their staff to read them. In effect, they were the masters of the stored written word - the ultimate bureaucratic tool. At the other end of the power spectrum, there was no control over work-related information. Juniors could not formally initiate processes and if they developed innovations to office practice or output, this was so muddied by layers of management intervention that the final product was not deemed to be theirs. Their power positions did not allow them to control the written word - they were restricted to the control of the spoken word which is stored in memory.

Juniors made much better use of gossip and informal chat than did their seniors. Informal decisions and information did not derive from organisational aims but from personal interaction. The development of this sort of information took place in a relatively non-hierarchical forum and was often perceived as irrational in the face of mechanistic bureaucratic processes. Gossiping, which usually occurred in low value time frames, was carried out more often by those with lower status than high.

Gossip was "soft" information as opposed to the "hard" words stored in files, which provided a safe means for juniors to gain and spread information without trace and thus without reprisal or risk. But gossip was an imprecise tool and when its subject related to what the managers sought to keep veiled, it was in some cases impossible for the juniors to decipher. The typist who gained access to classified information required the aid of a person in greater proximity to management to decode the stolen message. The more the constraints of hierarchy were applied and individual desires thwarted, the more gossip seemed to erupt amongst the juniors as they sought to develop their alternative informal information systems. Even the topics of gossip were restricted by hierarchy: Juniors were free to gossip about anybody but tended to focus most upon those closest to them in the hierarchy or one step higher. Conversely, it was regarded as highly inappropriate for seniors to discuss or criticise their subordinates when they were not able to defend themselves.

The business letter was a joint production which demonstrated the group's coherence, yet discrete and competing roles reflecting formal status were evident in its production. Classes of individuals had rights to manipulate specific elements of the message. The managers and professionals as higher status people used the higher status word: the word that was written and stored for later reference. Individuals filling low status jobs manipulated a correspondingly low status element of the message. The junior admin staff only had rights to deal with the routine and static elements of the message and worked with the word's packaging.

A hierarchy of clothing choices reflected that of status. Low status women considered clothing to be an important factor in their strategies of self-presentation. They accepted their subordinate positions, particularly if this related to their bureaucratic office roles, but they assumed that personal attractiveness would enhance their standing in the office group, or at least ensure that they were noticed. They therefore expended relatively great effort on adjusting their appearance, adopting individualistic and varied representations of their imagined selves. Managers expressed themselves differently because they were hierarchically allowed to do so. Their reputations and their impact relied upon authoritative command of facts and ideas. Clothing could potentially act to dilute and confuse the impact of these things. They therefore chose conservative clothing in sombre colours that represented their self imposed constraints to their idiosyncratic selves.

Historically, office furnishings have developed to allow surveillance of the low by the high as a strategy of control. The overt symbolism of social control in furnishings was softened in the 1950s onward with the new "open plan" layouts, however, evidence of the relationship between hierarchy and control of space remains evident. In the office under study, a manager laid out all the spatial relationships according to his ideas of status and control, providing walls and doors for the managers and an open plan for the remainder of the staff. Whilst all workers were allowed some degree of spatial privacy, the managers had the far greater share. For all the office workers, rights to privacy increased with proximity to their personal work areas. However, this was tempered by status. The managers had whole offices that were their private domains. The techs had their desks and lockers, but they also had bookcases and certain work-related equipment that they could claim to be private. The junior admin had the fewest rights to privacy - not only were they overlooked directly by their manager as they sat at their desks and lockers, they only had their desks as their private areas. These prevailing spatial status structures were inverted and the rules of hierarchy subverted in two special circumstances: when a group was gathered in the coffee areas and at Christmas. In these circumstances, those who were normally dominant took subordinate positions.

Status also impacted upon the ability to express personal style by the display of furnishings. The managers had the greatest opportunity to create idiosyncratic areas in their offices while the lower status workers had less control over what was purchased by way of furnishings and relied more heavily upon personally owned objects arranged in smaller spaces to achieve the same end.

The ability to control how much time one was allowed to undertake a task was also directly related to hierarchical position. Through their management systems and tools, managers set the time rules for all the office workers to follow. They used these tools to monitor how subordinates used their time and to ensure that the work they, the managers, held to be important was satisfactorily completed. Juniors influenced the production and application of these time management techniques but were more likely to be reactive only.

Juniors also monitored time use, but used different methods. They relied upon moral norms devised amongst themselves to count the time of others. The status of the person reflected upon the value attributed to their time. Low status work was often time consuming and low status people worked steadily to complete their assigned tasks. Prestige work could often be completed in relatively short periods of time and high status people did not need to work as steadily to get their jobs done. Managers tended to have short bursts of high status output broken up by periods of insignificant activity such as travel. They therefore experienced peaks and troughs in the value of their time while juniors worked steadily through time on consistently valued projects. As a consequence, managers and juniors were sometimes at odds in their understandings of the ethics of time use.

The ability to protect one's time from interruptions was also related directly to hierarchy. Managers and senior staff were able to ward off interruptions and would accept interruptions from seniors while postponing requests for time from juniors. Very junior staff had no defence against interruption.

The second continuum that can be identified amongst the people in this study was the number of identities that were available to each individual. These ranged from the highly bureaucratic with all its implied restraints, formality and predictability, to those that I have termed as social which were their antithesis. Individuals moved from one extreme to another, limited primarily by their hierarchical positions, as the situation dictated. No-one was a pure bureaucrat, nor was any office worker wholly divorced from the bureaucratic mind set.

The bureaucratic identity proved very useful in certain situations. This identity worked well for those who sought unquestioned compliance from subordinates. Those with the greatest formal power in the office adopted bureaucratic justifications for their strategies for exerting control most frequently. Their formal positions in the hierarchy provided them with the perfect vehicle for this in social interactions. However, their adoption of bureaucratic roles went much farther than this. Those in the most senior positions enjoyed control over others that went beyond what was outlined in the formal job description. Their authority did not merely involve the ability to delegate tasks to others, they could control such things as how their subordinates used space, how they dressed, and the topics of conversation they felt safe engaging in when in public spaces. Those at the top of the formal hierarchy accepted bureaucracy as a necessary and useful guide to behaviour. Those who were not in pinnacle positions often found its restraints unbearable.

Bureaucratic roles and methods were extremely valuable to people who did predictable work. Problems were worked out once and then adapted to numerous situations. This required less thought on the part of the worker, particularly as this related to formulaic elements of the job, and also left less room for error. For instance, committee reports were prepared for quarterly meetings. Their format and much of the content was made relatively standard in each iteration. This allowed the authors to concentrate their thought on the particulars of an argument without distraction but the standardisation also allowed the committee members to quickly identify the main issues in the report so that they could safely ignore what was not of interest. This would not be possible if every report were structured differently. Routine methods for working reduced the risks of making mistakes. If all facts were stored in designated repositories, files or specific book-shelves, they could be easily retrieved and referenced. Arguments were structured similarly throughout the report, the same "angles" considered for each, and the likelihood of missing an important aspect of an argument reduced. Routines extended to task specialisation and if the typist was the person to input the final editing changes to a report, it was more likely that the correct latent message would be applied because the word processor was her speciality.

A final means in which the bureaucratic identity was useful to the individual was when interacting with strangers. By adopting a job description as a person's personal work identity, for instance a "chief" or a "secretary", the individual was able to use a form of short-hand role when interacting with strangers. The chief was introduced to outsiders as such and they knew immediately that they were expected to show him a certain degree of respect or deference. Many of the office's most important interactions were carried out between office workers and people from outside. Work identities allowed those with the greatest formal power to focus upon their equals outside, using all their time most efficiently. When strangers entered the office area, bureaucratic behaviours allowed unwelcome individuals to be ignored.

Bureaucratic identities were a hindrance in other circumstances. Social strategies were most beneficial for those who lacked formal power and whose position within the hierarchy was unsatisfactory. The telephonist put photographs of her husband, daughters and grandchildren prominently on her desk top to demonstrate that her life outside the office was more important to her than her job as a telephonist and file clerk. She used gossip to find out how the managers were planning to move the office further away from her home, potentially causing her significant inconvenience. Social strategies such as these provided her with a more powerful tool than she could gain from anything official or bureaucratic. Social strategies were also preferable in circumstances where the actors did not have the intellectual capital to make the most of a bureaucratic identity.

The choice of dominant identity in the office was largely dependent upon how much the individual had invested in gaining access to it. Self-selection occurred when individuals sought the education required for the specific status. Defence of bureaucratic identities and techniques was therefore most important for those in the highest positions. However, people who had personally invested little in a bureaucratic identity, for instance the junior admin staff, followed the example of their better endowed colleagues and adopted the strategy if it served. The telephonist who was responsible for ordering supplies for the stationery cupboard suddenly became very concerned with office procedures when she realised that her colleagues were taking all the black pens and that she would have to order more.

Throughout this study, I have used a series of oppositions to illustrate the extreme ends of the bureaucratic/social continuum. I have not followed Levi-Strauss (1962, 1963; Pace 1983) who saw oppositions as cosmologically fundamental, but rather I have reduced these oppositions to a methodological tool. The principle of categorical opposition was also found in DuGay (1996) who noted that identity was contingent upon what it was not, Bateson (1979) who showed that cognitive categories were generated when one thing was set against another, and Tilley (1994) and Gullestad (1992) who both demonstrated that space was best understood when one type was viewed in relation to another. The oppositions represent extremes that were rarely if ever evidenced in the acting individual. They were in effect as ideal and unrealistic as Weber's bureaucrat. As an illustrative tool however, oppositions of this sort can prove extremely useful in developing an approach which focused upon relationships rather than entities.

I will close this section with one final set of oppositions, in Figure 14, which illustrate the strategic identities' impacts upon the individual, and summarise the foregoing discussion.

Figure 14: The Bureaucratic/Social Spectrum

Bureaucratic	Social
Impersonal	Personal
Controlled	Autonomous
Standardised	Idiosyncratic
Certainty	Flexibility
Conformity	Subversion

Towards a theory of material symbolisation

In this study, I developed "thick description" (Geertz 1973) in a social context in which I was personally very familiar, as a long-time participant. Because of my familiarity, I was able to use a version of what Garfinkel (1967) termed the "ethnomethodological approach" by seeking to document and subsequently draw conclusions from the daily and often unnoticed occurrences of daily life. In doing this, I drew very heavily upon the writings and techniques put forward in Goffman (1959; 1967; 1974) which allow the researcher to understand individual and group interaction and the presentation of self to others. Most importantly, I was influenced by my fellow post graduate students at University College London in our monthly discussions of methodological approaches to the study of material culture and its interpretation as a social phenomenon (see Miller forthcoming). I concentrated upon social behaviours from an object-oriented and material perspective in the belief that this was indeed the best means of realising Garfinkel's approach. I was admittedly liberal in my definition of what could be considered material and included intangible "objects" such as time and space. In addition, my discussion began with the wholly non-material topic of office gossip which provided a context for the later chapters. This closing section will review the main methodological lessons learned from this study and will suggest a way forward for future research using techniques which focus upon the material aspects of a social context.

I began the study by observing certain broad categories of objects and allowed refinements of these to emerge through the process of ethnographic observation. It was impossible to approach all categories in an identical manner because of their divergent nature (gossip and paper share few common characteristics), but attempted to adopt similar techniques to each. I began by identifying sub-classes of the object or pseudo-object and then moved on to consider their physical or sensual characteristics, as summarised in Figure 15.

Figure 15: Object categories and characteristics from the study

	Sub-class examples	Characteristics
Paper	Blank Letterhead and stationery Office forms Post-it notes™	Texture Colour Size Used or unused
Dress	Suits Shoes Ties Shirts Dresses Tights	Cut Cloth Colour Pattern Physical condition Fit
Space	Reception areas Conference room Coffee areas Managers offices Halls and incidental spaces Personal spaces and desks Open plan	Decoration Size Types of furnishings Lines of sight Privacy Openness/Confinement Sound penetration

Time	Contractual time Own time Managed time Seasonal time Morally regulated time Killed time	Perceived speed Value of activity undertaken Type of control implied Emotional response

I have shown that certain objects are bound to be interpreted in certain ways because of their own physical qualities. These qualities limit the impact of an object and determine what sort of message could be attributed to it. For instance, furniture and office layout are well suited to bear messages concerning control, time lines are well suited to determine emotional states of being and personal rhythms, while clothing is related closely to the personality the individual. Conversely, desks will have little potential to express mood and paper cannot easily symbolise privacy. I have also shown that objects must be viewed within their context. Space and time provide specific associations for objects, modifying people's understandings. For instance, a sports shoe means different things at 10.00 a.m. in the conference room than at 7.30 p.m. on the badminton court. A desk in the home is not an "altar of work" as it is in the manager's office. Sports shoes and desks coax specific responses depending upon where and when they are displayed. Therefore, social context is the key feature of any analysis of how objects are employed to convey meaning and act as cues to social relations.

The consideration of the physical aspects of objects has never been more than a first step, since I have always then gone on to consider the various ways in which objects take on meaning in social interaction. People use objects continually as a means of augmenting their social interactions. When objects and material phenomena bear messages, these are usually not describable with words except in the most roundabout terms. They take on meaning according to how and why they are used in a social context, whether one is able to use the concept of objectivation (Berger and Luckmann 1966) where the human relationship or concept exists prior to its assignment to an object as its symbolic representative, or objectification (Miller 1987) where the meaning of an object is generated through its use. It was shown in the discussion of paper that either process of attribution of meaning could occur, depending upon the context and the happenstance.

It is the context and happenstance that has been the main methodological focus of this study. The meaning of objects develops and evolves in an extremely localised set of interactions. Whilst there are broad cross-cultural understandings of classes of objects, it is only at the relatively intimate level that the meanings become acute, authentic and specific. This is perhaps the area where the early works of Barthes and Baudrillard discussed here were farthest from the mark. Whilst the critique of their linguistic model could in some cases be defended, their belief that there are widely understood meanings for objects probably cannot. To take an example from the study, there is a cross-cultural understanding of "the suit", but in this office, it was employed, and understood, differently by different workers. The chief wore a dark grey wool suit, the telephonist a lime green linen suit. The garments were both in the same category, but because of the way these people worked together, because of the limitation of their local hierarchy as well as their structured relationships with outside organizations and people, these suits meant very different things, whether perceived as "stuffy" or "tarty".

In conclusion, to move towards a theory of material symbolisation, I would offer only this advice. Material culture's impact cannot be revealed without understanding two things. First, the researcher must understand the physical limitations of the object or material phenomenon. I have done this by identifying sub-classes and elements of type of objects. Other means of doing this must also be possible. The physical limitations will determine what sort of message can be conveyed and therefore demarcate the arena of the object's message. Second, and more importantly, the local social context must be explored. It is futile to attempt to draw universal conclusions regarding material culture. Since the message is attributed by use and changes as quickly as the context shifts, "true" meanings of specific objects do not exist except in a single moment, as understood by bounded groups of participating individuals. This is the problem of unspoken messages - their meanings fade quickly. Therefore, what is of interest to the anthropologist is not the material object, but its interpretation and message. Objects take on symbolic status because they augment existing or anticipated social relations. They are only tools of expression and their manipulation in social situations is highly revealing but also of secondary importance. The social relationship is the primary point of interest.

The social context is revealed by considering how the object (or pseudo-object) is used and how it is immediately understood. Rights of access to, and manipulation of, the object are other aspects to be taken into account. As was shown in the previous section, factors such as hierarchy or other social delimiters can have tremendous impacts upon who manipulates which objects and how they do this. Only in so doing can the object's full impact be discovered. Just as the object's physical limits determine what sort of message can be borne, so too do people's intentions and patterned interactions guide what is given expression and what remains undefined.

My commitment to material culture has been intended to enhance rather than detract from the central concern of the thesis which was to develop the analysis of bureaucracy as a living and experiential part of social life rather than merely a discussion about classifications and identities. The emphasis has been explicitly concerned with the material environment and objects within which and through which bureaucratic life operates as practice.

As such, this thesis lies in the direct line of interest of a number of theoretical and practical approaches to the discussion of bureaucracy and office work, beginning with Weber and growing to encompass works in the areas of organisational studies and management., and which has in recent years attracted the attention of anthropologists and sociologists such as Kanter, Pringle and Wright amongst others. The interest by anthropologists has introduced a new emphasis on the place of the individual in the organisation and upon institutional mechanisms. Clearly, this thesis can make a contribution by adding a perspective that has as yet been left unexplored in the debate. This is threefold. First, the argument presented here examines power and hierarchy in terms of personal strategy and assumed that informal power can be free-flowing and multi-directional. Second, this study explores claims made elsewhere that office workers tend to exist emotionally and behaviourally at two levels, one devoted to the aims of the employing organisation, the other to their personal lives. This has been amplified in the discussion of contingent identities and the depth of this divide has been demonstrated in the ethnographic detail of the work. Finally, a new methodology has been applied to the study of the office work setting, considering human relations in terms of material culture. It is hoped that this Thesis will open up new avenues in the study of this dominant employment sector and will reveal new means of considering the problem.

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