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# Apple-Polishers, Ass-Kissers and Suck-Ups: Towards a Sociology of Ingratiation

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## Apple-Polishers, Ass-Kissers and Suck-Ups: Towards a Sociology of Ingratiation

### Abstract

In this paper we use one form of communicative action, “brownosing”, as a social lens for understanding power relations in both formal, organizational contexts and interpersonal relationships. We investigate this phenomenon by assessing processes of ingratiation at school and work settings. We do so using data collected from over one hundred student respondents to ascertain the meanings, uses, and outcomes of brownosing. The study finds that members of the “millennial generation” develop skills in both the act of brownosing and the detection of this form of communication as they participate in a variety of contexts, including family, school, work, and interpersonal relationships. Utilizing power-dependence models for analysis, our data suggest that brownosing, as an organizational resource, commonly reflects the structural arrangements of both school and the workplace. We draw upon organizational and exchange theories in the interpretation of the data.

### Keywords

Ingratiation, Organizational Culture, Hierarchy, Power, Power-Dependence, Brownosing, Qualitative Research

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## **Apple-Polishers, Ass-Kissers and Suck-Ups: Towards a Sociology of Ingratiation**

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*In this paper we use one form of communicative action, “brown nosing”, as a social lens for understanding power relations in both formal, organizational contexts and interpersonal relationships. We investigate this phenomenon by assessing processes of ingratiation at school and work settings. We do so using data collected from over one hundred student respondents to ascertain the meanings, uses, and outcomes of brown nosing. The study finds that members of the “millennial generation” develop skills in both the act of brown nosing and the detection of this form of communication as they participate in a variety of contexts, including family, school, work, and interpersonal relationships. Utilizing power-dependence models for analysis, our data suggest that brown nosing, as an organizational resource, commonly reflects the structural arrangements of both school and the workplace. We draw upon organizational and exchange theories in the interpretation of the data. Keywords: Ingratiation, Organizational Culture, Hierarchy, Power, Power-Dependence, Brown nosing, Qualitative Research*

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Among sociologists, the topic of power in the workplace represents a longstanding interest (Blauner, 1964; Braverman, 1975; Gouldner, 1954; Grenier, 1988). However, while studies of both micro-structural relations (Collins, 2004) and organizational culture (Morrill, Zald, & Rao, 2003), have added to our understanding of workplace inequality, studies of power in formal organizations commonly locate it within existing complexes of rules, resources, and relations (Perrow, 1986; Pfeffer, 1981). Much less scholarly attention has been paid to how people, in the course of daily interaction within organizations create, *in situ*, “idio-cultural” strategies (Fine, 1979) that can be employed in efforts to gain favor. Two such strategies are “bullshitting” and “brown nosing.” In a previous article (Martin & Wilson, 2011), we examined how “bullshitting” is used in negotiating relationships in interpersonal, social, and work contexts. We now turn our attention to another implement in the “cultural toolkit” (Swidler, 1986)—“brown nosing.” We assess this phenomenon by using a sample comprised of members of the Millennial Generation (i.e., those born between 1982 and 2000) who were college students at the time we administered our survey to them. Using this data, we interrogate the ways in which students both understand and attempt to shape the structure of power relations in the work place, looking at a specific form of interaction—brown nosing.

Research studies carried out by organizational psychologists have identified an array of behaviors through which individuals attempt to increase their attractiveness in the eyes of others as “ingratiation” (Linden & Mitchell, 1988, p. 572). These studies commonly identify ingratiation as a micro-political resource used by subordinates in navigating strictures in the workplace—strictures that reflect the hierarchical arrangement

of work relations. Previous research suggests that when managers in the workplace face contestation from workers they more readily cede rewards to ingratiating subordinates (Kipnis & Vanderveer, 1971). This observation is consistent with findings from experimental research studying the ways in which workers draw upon “influence tactics” in efforts to garner favor from supervisors. This research demonstrates that workers who are successful in securing rewards strategically exhibit a deferential demeanor once their reading of the boss reveals him or her to be “in the right mood” (Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980, p. 442). Ironically, however, this same study also discovered that it is managers and supervisors (rather than subordinates) who routinely engage in ingratiating behaviors.

Classic studies in organizational sociology have observed the ways in which workers attempt to curry favor with management by shaping the definitions and perceptions that management holds of them (Bramel & Friend, 1981; Homans, 1941). Recent research has examined the verbal strategies used by workers to cast themselves in a positive light (Hall & Valde, 1995; Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984; Tedeschi & Reiss, 1981). In line with this research, we have adopted Tedeschi and Melburg’s (1984) conceptual definition of “ingratiation,” vis-à-vis “...a set of assertive tactics which have the purpose of gaining the approbation of the audience that controls significant rewards for the actor” (p. 37). In their research, Tedeschi and Melburg (1984) identified four ingratiation strategies, including: (a) the use of statements in front of the boss that are self-enhancing; (b) complimenting or flattering one’s supervisor; (c) making statements indicating similarity in belief or attitude with one’s manager; and (d) doing favors for the boss (pp. 38-40). While these observations are both insightful and significant, there is still much to be said concerning the values, culture, and work-orientation of Millennial workers. Our objective in the present article is to describe and theorize the ways in which students, as present and future workers, conceptualize and engage in brownnosing as an interaction strategy. In the following analysis we observe how the hierarchical arrangement of school, work, and everyday life constitutes the primary condition under which ingratiation presents itself as either an organizational tool or as an obstacle and source of annoyance. We focus, in particular, on how respondents use this form of interaction in negotiating inequality in micro-structural relations.

### **The Study**

We came to the study of ingratiation as sociologists with longstanding interests in symbolic interactionism, a field of study that is both a method and micro-perspective for understanding the organization of society (Blumer, 1969). As faculty having dual roles as researchers and teachers, daily contact with students has always provided ample opportunity to observe the ways in which students creatively “work the system.” The present project finds itself perfectly situated at the confluence of our respective interests; that is, the study of power in organizations and the historical experience of different generations. In both areas of research, as well as in the present study, understanding how individuals make sense out of situations, create strategies for negotiating social contexts, and give presentations of self in shaping the “definition of the situation” (Thomas & Thomas 1970 [1928], pp. 571-572) remains a primary goal.

Our sample included college students (ages 18-25) enrolled in sociology classes at two different Midwestern universities to whom we administered open-ended surveys through e-mail (N=110). At both institutions where data were gathered, approval was sought and granted from the Human Subjects Review Boards. The survey featured questions about the meanings and uses of two types of communicative strategies—bullshitting and brownnosing. While the former is the focus of a previous article (Martin & Wilson, 2011), here we shall focus only on brownnosing. In the survey, we asked participants about the circumstances and social contexts where they had heard the term “brownnosing” used, *how* the term had been used, and to provide us with real-life examples where they had either been the initiator or recipient of it. Following Geertz’s (1973) prescriptions for “thick description”, we essentially asked our respondents to tell us about the “native use” of brownnosing, providing us with detailed, rich descriptions of situations in which they encountered it. We began our inquiry by having our respondents provide their own definition of the term, recalling for us activities, contexts and interactions where the concept was used or was operable. Secondly, we asked them to share their own experiences, feelings, and cognitions as brownnosing took place. Thirdly, and finally, we asked students to tell us how they came to learn about brownnosing, asking them about how their knowledge and experience with this cultural form might shape their work experience after they graduated. Students provided rich examples of interactions with employers, family members, friends, romantic partners, and strangers, talking about the experiences they had and what lessons might be drawn for their roles both in future jobs and everyday life.

As described in our previous study on bullshitting (Martin & Wilson, 2011), we utilized the qualitative data software program *Atlas.ti* to expedite the coding and analysis of our data. Following David Altheide’s (1987) prescriptions for “ethnographic content analysis” and prescriptions within *Grounded Theory* that data be analyzed in a “constant, comparative” fashion (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), we proceeded, line-by-line, to open-code all of the data provided by our informants, attempting to discover emergent patterns within them (Blumer, 1969, p. 148; Glaser, 1992, p. 56; Strauss, 1987, p. 55). Through this process, we searched for dominant themes in the narratives and accounts of respondents, assessed common strategies among students, and ferreted out the deviant cases in the data. We did so in an effort to develop conceptual categories as these categories, in part, broadly represented the ways in which student workers identified communication as brownnosing, used the term itself in conversation, and talked about the dynamics and social contexts in which they encountered this form of interaction. We found that our respondents wrote lengthy responses to the open-ended questions on the survey. Data were open-coded independently of one another, achieving inter-coder reliability slightly over 90%. While our sample was not achieved through random selection, the ethnic composition of the sample represented both the schools and the regions in which the data were gathered, with the majority of respondents (91%) identifying themselves as white (see Table 1).

Table 1. Student Demographic Characteristics.

Ethnicity	Male	Female	Total
White	36%	55%	91%
African American	2%	3%	5%
Native American	1%	1%	2%
Hmong	1%	0%	1%
Latino	0%	1%	1%
Total	40%	60%	100% (N=110)

Our analysis begins by looking at the various meanings student informants associate with the folk concept of brownnosing, and attending to the contextual uses of the term. In the following sections, we interrogate brownnosing as a form of strategic interaction (Goffman, 1969), observing the ways in which this interaction is constructed. We begin by looking at how students define and use the phrase, ascertaining the ways in which students acquire knowledge about brownnosing. In assessing the experiences of students as both initiators and recipients of this interaction, we then evaluate its use in school, family, and interpersonal relations as well as in the workplace. Finally, we provide commentary on the consequences of these interactions for organizational culture, student identity, and a changing workplace.

### Some Noses are Browner than Others

The primary image that is typically conjured up when considering brownnosing is that of “the teacher’s pet.” According to the *Oxford Dictionary Online*, the locution is derived “from the implication that servility is tantamount to having one’s nose in the anus of the person from whom advancement is sought, chiefly U.S. slang, [it means] to curry favor with, to flatter” (Dictionary.com, 2012). Thus, the brownnoser is the person who says flattering things about another, with the intent of receiving something favorable in return. Numerous phrases were provided by our respondents as synonyms for the term brownnosing, including the phrases “kiss ass,” “kiss butt,” “suck up,” “apple polisher,” “teacher’s pet,” “goodie two-shoes,” “buttering up,” “sycophant,” and “schmooze.” While students provided a variety of other tropes commensurate with “brownnosing,” we found less variability when we asked students to define the term:

Tyler: The way you get to know people and become popular is by being friendly, complimentary, polite, and courteous. Even if you aren’t these things, the trick is to act like you are and make people believe you are. This is the essence of brownnosing to me: telling people what they want to

hear, or doing what they want you to do, in order to gain favor with them and get what you want as a result.

Jennifer: To me brownnosing means sucking up to an authority-type figure like your supervisor at work or a teacher. You always volunteer to help, compliment them, laugh at all their jokes; you basically are really interested in everything they have to say, whether or not you actually care—your objective is to get on their good side or become almost like a friend to benefit yourself at your job—a promotion or a raise, or at school—maybe they will be more lenient when they grade your papers or something.

Josh: Brownnosing is the easy way to get ahead. There are two different kinds; one is a sleazy cheap way of wooing your boss that everyone hates. Whereas the second way of helping and taking extra work is the best way to get ahead.

The data above reveal exaggerated politeness as a “control move”—that is, “an intentional effort on the part of an informant to produce expressions he [she] thinks will improve his [her] situation if they are gleaned by the observer” (Goffman, 1969, p. 12). In the students’ accounts, exaggerated politeness is used to manipulate the definitions of both the initiators’ and the recipients’ selves as well as the situations in which interaction occurs: navigating hierarchical social relationships in the workplace. As one student cogently pointed out:

Josh: Everyone is looking for the extra edge on the other person, if you and a co-worker are equally as valuable and skilled at your job and only one of you can get a promotion who do you think your supervisor will pick? Obviously he is human and will favor the person that he likes better, sounds unfair but it is reality.

In light of performances by workers that are designed to secure favorable evaluations, Hall and Valde (1995, p. 402) posit that “[b]rown-nosers are taken to be presenting an artificial rather than genuine self.” To this observation we would add that such actors are not simply presenting an artificial self but a highly idealized one, facilitated through “taking the role of the other” (Mead, 1934, pp. 160-161). Specifically, actors are delivering performances and presenting selves imagined to be prized by organizational superiors. As our student-respondents observe, use of such an artifice demands attention to detail:

Mike: I’ve learned that brownnosing works in the workplace and that many times the “model employees” in the mind of management or authorities are those who brownnose. So I guess I’ve learned that brown nosing can be an effective tool to promotion if you use it correctly and the authority figures don’t realize that it is brownnosing... I’ve learned this primarily through previous jobs.

Margaret: I believe that a little tactful brownnosing once in a while is a good thing. It shows that you are respectful and that you are also humble. When it gets to be too much and way over done then it becomes annoying and can be a problem. I have learned that a little flattery goes a long way when trying to get along with your co-workers and those superior to you.

It is important to point out that two identities are crafted through ingratiation—those of both the brownnoser and the recipient of the brownnosing communication. The relationship between these two actors bears resemblance to Georg Simmel's (1950a, p. 312) remarks concerning "The Lie": "Its specific nature is not exhaustively characterized by the fact that the person lied-to has a false conception about the topic or object; this the lie shares with common error. What is specific is that he is kept deceived about the private opinion of *the liar*" (emphasis in the original).

### Performances

The "lie", in processes of brownnosing, exists as performances which flatter the boss or other superiors, even though these acts may be at odds with the performer's private sentiments. The "lie" may also exist in the performances' overly dramatic qualities that the ingratiating actor either does not possess or possesses in disproportion to their claim:

Nichole: I think of someone starting a new job. They always put on their best presentation and sound interested in what you have to say. They can put on a different face to seem likeable. I've been able to catch it a few times.

Sarah: I think it is always a good idea to make a good impression to someone who is above you, such as your boss. However, because I have been in a position of power, I have learned that many people can over do what they say to try and impress someone.

As brownnosing actors deliver presentations of self, their performances are "purified" as lines of action, speech, manner, and contents of communication are culled, tailored, and pieced together in accordance with idealized images they imagine superiors hold of "model" workers. While such performances may appear idiosyncratic, they are constructed in direct accordance with the normative demands of the workplace. Performances appear to be embellished where workers apprehend each other as competitors for scarce resources including jobs, promotions, raises, bonuses, or "status rewards" based upon social recognition. Observe the following:

Malcolm: People who work at Wal-Mart do a lot of brownnosing. I used to work at Wal-Mart and when they trained you in, and in all their meetings, they try to tell you about all these stories of how a person pushing shopping carts became a district manager or how some cashier



became a storeowner. They were basically trying to instill a goal to motivate people to work harder than they should for seven dollars an hour. So every day I would see employees trying to brownnose the manager—by either doing more than they needed to or by helping out with other departments when they finished their major tasks for the day—because they wanted a raise or wanted to move into different departments. It would work if the person was able to brownnose for over a few months when either someone got laid off or quit.

Both Etzioni's (1961) and Kundra's (2006) analyses of organizational culture suggest that imperatives within this culture compel workers to demonstrate deference, identification and commitment. Kundra argues that the performances of workers are expected to embody the normative prescriptions found within corporate worksites. A primary element of this culture is "normative control," whereby workers conform to managerial expectations for production, effort, and time at work, by virtue of the fact that they "...are driven by internal commitment, strong identification with company goals, intrinsic satisfaction from work. These are elicited by a variety of managerial appeals, exhortations and actions" (Kundra, 2006, p. 11). According to Kundra (2006, p. 11), workers come to be evaluated favorably as "part of the team," as members of the in-group, through ritualistic displays of commitment:

Thus under normative control, membership is found not only on the behavioral or economic transaction traditionally associated with work organizations, but, more crucially, on an experiential transaction, one in which symbolic rewards are exchanged for a moral orientation to the organization. In this transaction a member role is fashioned and imposed that includes not only behavioral rules but articulated guidelines. In short, under normative control, it is the employee's *self*—that ineffable source of subjective experience—that is claimed in the name of corporate interest. (p. 11)

Workers, in a context such as the one discussed by Kundra (2006), might logically be expected to construct and present a "purified" organizational identity displaying both commitment and identification to the company<sup>1</sup>. Such expectations are part of the "facilitating" structural conditions of work that give rise to ingratiation—a product of hierarchical social relations and norms of appeasement that may be present but hidden in encounters between superiors and subordinates. As Hall and Valde (1995) note, stylized presentations by brownnosing workers, offered as authentic representations of self, commonly appear to bystanders as both obsequious and artificial. Where self-presentations delivered by an ingratiatory actor are experienced as inauthentic by the actor him/herself, such performances constitute a ritual sacrifice of the *self*. This sacrifice is carried out even as the *self* of the boss or superior is elevated in the transaction, enhancing a superior's sense of power:

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of purified identity is one we have borrowed from Richard Sennett's (1970) work, *The Uses of Disorder*.

Gayle: I was a supervisor at the place I used to work at last year. Part of my job was to suggest to the head supervisor who I might think deserves a raise or maybe a promotion. I found that once the employees found out I had this power, I noticed I started to get a lot more compliments and people brownnosing me. I knew that this new, better treatment by the employees was because of my job title. *I actually felt more powerful* because I knew I had some type of power over someone. I also didn't really believe many things that they were saying because I knew they were bullshitting me to try and make themselves look better. (Emphasis added)

The datum above suggests that interaction episodes between superiors and subordinates constitute complex transactions where subordinates engage in the simultaneous construction and purification of two identities. In exalting the social image of their superiors, subordinates may embellish their own occupational skills and competencies, hoping to deploy a norm of reciprocity that will be honored by the superior. If honored, such transactions may at least temporarily result in *courtesy status*. We use the term “courtesy status” to denote the prestige that people draw from their visible association with high-status individuals. The concept is developed in direct distinction to Goffman’s (1963) creation of the term “courtesy stigma” (pp. 30-31). That is, workers may share in the prestige of their superior by virtue of the superior’s recognition and validation of the relationship. Of course, a variety of definitions might be constructed by organizational superiors about brownnosing subordinates—including definitions that identify subordinates’ behavior as “reprehensible” or “pitiful brownnosing” (Hall & Valde, 1995, pp. 404-408). As one of our respondents (Marshall) stated: “It is meant to be degrading toward the person doing the sucking up. It shows a definite imbalance of power in the relationship, and I would guess it would be not a healthy thing to engage in for your self-image.”

### **The Hammer in the Cultural Toolkit Just Hit my Thumb**

Bowles and Gintis (1976), in a classic treatise on education, argued that the structure and experience of schooling in America shapes students in accordance with occupational and work demands sustaining a broader system of inequality. They postulated that while the culture and normative structure of top preparatory schools and colleges molds students for leadership roles encouraging creativity, independence, and identification, students at institutions lacking prestige are taught labor discipline. From our view, the effects of class location in shaping school and work experiences are undeniable. However, they are also variable. Agentive action in the laboring process may take several forms including passive resistance, sabotage, protests, strikes, direct action, conformity, and brownnosing. While there may be an “elective affinity” (Weber, 1946 [1922], p. 284) between ingratiation and certain occupations, brownnosing appears to be a ubiquitous cultural tool in the repertoire of most students, regardless of class-standing. Consequently, the ability to detect brownnosing by others is deemed a valuable skill. Respondents in our study observed that skill in the detection of brownnosing is a requisite for achieving entry and efficacy in their respective professions:

Winnette: I have seen students brownnose, so I've learned how to recognize it so I can tell that student to stop. I don't think brownnosing will affect me as a teacher. I don't believe you have to brownnose to a teacher to get your point across.

Maggie: In the workplace, it will be helpful to be able to recognize when other people are doing it to me or each other.

Lucas: When I enter a career I will hopefully have learned enough to know when someone is brownnosing and not being honest. I learned what to look for in school, as well as from the writings of Nicolo Machiavelli.

It is telling that manuals and websites for professional advancement now unabashedly include guidelines for brownnosing as well as provide instruction in the art. Sites such as "The Art of Brownnosing" (Miguel, 2006) suggest that readers strategically deploy phrases such as, "Wow! What a great idea!" and "Really? That is *such* a great plan" in interaction with superiors. Brownnosers are also admonished to "Orbit senior staff or any persons of influence at every given opportunity. You never know when a chance to jump in and pucker up will occur." According to this blueprint for advancing up the corporate organizational ladder, subordinates should

Mimic the mannerisms and personalities of senior staff. This will help them recognize you as 'one of them' and will raise your standing in the natural brown nosing pecking order ... The difference between brownnosing and being genuinely submissive to your boss is that the first one is 'eye-service' and the other one is 'sincere,' doing it from the heart. (Miguel, 2006)

Drawing upon Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical analysis in which self-presentations embody varying degrees of cynicism or sincerity (See Andrea Fontana's (1980, p. 65) analysis of Goffman's "enigmatic self"), Arlie Hochschild (1983) distinguishes between "surface acting" and "deep acting" (p. 38). As Hochschild notes, alienation from emotional labor—labor that is at the heart of service economies—has perhaps the most profound effect on workers. It strips workers of ownership and control over that element which is quintessentially human—i.e., emotion. In *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Karl Marx (1959 [1932]) equates the commodification of labor under capitalism with prostitution. Hochschild's (1983) analysis suggests that beyond the physical activity of work under capitalism there is a new element in whoredom: "Seeming to 'love the job' becomes part of the job ... The company lays claim not simply to her [the worker's] physical motions ... but to her emotional actions and the way they show in the ease of a smile. The workers I talked to often spoke of their smiles as being on them but not of them" (pp. 6-8).

Web-published essays, manuals, and materials on the use of brownnosing suggest that the rewards of brownnosing can be maximized with calculable efficiency if workers pay fastidious attention to the status and composition of the audience for whom the performance is given. One essay observes:

If your boss is only a step above you on the corporate ladder, the most potent brownnosing techniques are flattery, agreeing with his or her opinion, and doing favors. If your supervisor is many rungs above you, however, paying compliments is by far the most effective strategy for getting him or her to like you. While conforming to a high-status person's point of view won't win you popularity points, it may help you get a raise. Less is more. Using several brownnosing methods at once isn't as effective as concentrating on one good one. Brownnosing in front of a group is more efficient--if the observers are women. Men who witness a compliment directed at a third party tend to like the flatterer less afterward. But female onlookers are just as impressed as the person being sucked up to. (Doskoch, 1996)

Brownnosing shares much in common with other self-presentation strategies. In short, all are employed as strategies for winning rewards--those rewards may include social inclusion, achieving an objective, securing a favor, or a myriad other possible outcomes. It appears that much of the brownnosing that people do would fall under the rubric "surface acting" (Hochschild 1983, p. 37); that is, delivering a deferential performance while disguising what one *really* feels. This is revealed in the datum of a respondent who reported:

Cynthia: A girl I work with, for example, tells me she can't stand one of our managers. But, she will go out of her way to talk to her and pretend to be interested in what she says, because she is trying to get on her good side--because she needs to ask for two weeks off during our busy sale in January.

Arguably, for the server in a restaurant, taking a customer's order and delivering the meal is not what garners a bountiful tip. Rather, it is the server's demeanor and affability, their ability to flatter customers in the hopes of receiving a good tip without seeming to do so, that is potentially repaid. As our respondents talked about their work experiences, it appeared that workers who compliment their supervisors are given the desired shifts, are allowed to work extra hours, or are given time off. Of course, such activities are not without consequences for the *self*, as the following excerpts from the data illustrate:

Lynn: I have brownnosed a teacher or two in my life. I usually do it if I need extra help with a class. The teachers usually are used to people brown nosing them. I really don't like brownnosing, it makes you feel like less of a person I think.

Luke: My boss! She is not a nice lady! And everyone told me that the only way to be on her good side was that if you kissed some ass. Well I knew that I wasn't going to resort to that so I opted out. Well I was wrong. Not more then a month later I was on her shit list, and I soon figured out that

the only way for me to get off that list was to kiss ass, so I soon started and was surprised how pleasant she was with me. I hated it! It was dehumanizing, it took everything for me to bite the bullet and brownnose.

Beverly: I was doing poorly in a class and figured a good way to raise my mark would be to act overly sincere, speak out more than necessary, and support whatever the teacher said. Looking back at it, I'm disgusted by it honestly. There's nothing genuine about. Your grade doesn't go up and you look like an ass. Maybe I was doing it wrong.

The data above suggest that, as a cynical performance given to either avoid punishment or reap rewards, brownnosing is commonly experienced as a form of "ceremonial degradation" (Garfinkel, 1956). In such cases, the reflected appraisal by an actor acknowledges that the compliments paid to a superior comprises surface acting (Hochschild 1983, p. 37); that the actor is in fact incapable or unwilling of achieving recognition upon his or her own merit; and, that the end result includes feelings of dehumanization and disgust. However, while feelings of humiliation, degradation, or embarrassment were expressed among some respondents in our sample, others talked about feelings of achievement they experienced after brownnosing authority:

Hannah: It was a teacher and I was trying to get a better grade...My English teacher. It was getting close to the end of the semester and I needed a better grade so I started to answer questions and do extra. The teacher liked it and I think I got a better grade because of it. It made me feel good once I got my report card.

Lori: Well, I like to be a brownnoser when it comes to trying to get money from my parents. I am sure I am not the only one that does this. Well usually I get the money because I have become pretty good at it. Well it made me feel pretty good that I got the money.

Most of the Millennial Generation workers in our sample cautioned that ingratiating performances must be strategically delivered and that the most effective performances are those the recipient and broader audience naturally come to regard as authentic. This demands that performers take a reading of the context and intended recipient that is discerning and adjust their performances so that compliments directed toward the person are seen as genuine rather than effusive and containing an ulterior motive. As one student/worker stated:

Ethan: I learned that if you do it [brownnose] too much the person will stop caring that you are doing it and thereby losing the effect of trying to gain something from them. Do it only when you really need something that way it seems more sincere, I learned this from experience.

It appears that in the delivery of an ingratiating performance, the self-feelings that workers experience after brownnosing vary, ranging from a sense of control and efficacy

to feelings of degradation. As respondents reflected upon how superiors might experience brownnosing as *recipients* of such a performance, they drew upon stories from their autobiography to demonstrate the variable nature of this experience. As recipients of ingratiation, some respondents underscored that status differences in the ritual-order are created through brownnosing:

Thomas: In high school this guy wanted to hang out with me and my friends. He told me he considered me "cool" and "different", and was endowed with my own style. I reacted by saying thanks, and offering a time to hang out. It felt good to have someone compliment me, even if it was simply to gain entry into a group that had no entry requirements.

Nathaniel: Women do it all the time. They may do it because they need help with something or just want me. It makes me feel needed and useful.

Isaac: Last year I had extra tickets to the Minnesota Vikings game. It seemed like all my friends were nicer to me and told me nothing but positive things. They were all trying to make me think it would be more fun to go to the game with them than anyone else. I reacted by keeping them around to do more nice things for me until I decided who I wanted to take. It made me feel good about myself, like I almost had control over them.

The statements above allude to dimensions of power/dependence that brownnosing is strategically designed to overcome. In their accounts, students indicated that, as the target or recipient of brownnosing, attempts at ingratiation by others left them feeling in "control over them" and "needed and useful." Yet, the interactions that are cited above appear to take place within the context of friendships where recipients may already regard the brownnosing performer with a modicum of esteem. Where the situation is not defined through the primary frame of friendship, respondents experienced ingratiating others in qualitatively different ways:

Rodney: My younger teammates would always suck up to me at practice. It made me feel superior at times but also a little embarrassed. It also makes them look stupid.

Peter: Brown nosing makes you feel important and special when you don't realize it's brown nosing; when you do realize [that you are being brownnosed] it makes you feel manipulated and you question your self-worth.

Vince: I won \$100 from a lottery ticket, and somehow one of my ex-girlfriends found out. Now this is a girl who would never accept any fault and that was actually the cause of our break-up. Well she called me up apologizing for everything and saying she wanted to hang out sometime soon. It was obvious by the tone of her voice that she was not being

genuine or sincere, but merely wanted to hang out to reap some of the rewards. I felt appalled and disgusted.

In the accounts above, students observed that brownnosing may result in unanticipated consequences. When ingratiating interaction is not recognized as deference but as *surface acting only*, it is experienced as usury that brings with it feelings of embarrassment and disgust—feelings invoked by the prospect of being manipulated. That this occurs suggests that there may be consequences for the primary targets of ingratiation above and beyond whatever emotional or symbolic rewards they reap.

### Cultural Correspondence

In writing about the “correspondence principle” (p. 131), Bowles and Gintis (1976) observe the ways in which the structural arrangements of schooling precondition students to accept and reproduce social relations within the workplace. In both contexts, hierarchical authority-structures provide both an ideological and organizational blueprint reinforcing a broader system of inequality. To quote Bowles and Gintis (1976, p. 131): “The structure of social relations in education not only inures the student to the discipline of the workplace, but develops the types of personal demeanor, modes of self-presentation, self image, and social class identifications which are crucial ingredients of job adequacy.” As an implement in the cultural toolkit (Swidler, 1986), brownnosing presupposes hierarchical relations found both in the classroom as well as the workplace. Its precise use is for ascending hierarchy, *not* disassembling it. Students themselves, of course, recognize the proximate, structural features of both school and work in relation to this cultural tool:

Drury: The classroom setting definitely has the biggest concentration of brownnosers. Since they aspire to raise their grade or leave a greater impression within the teacher, schools have an effect that warps some people. They [students who brownnose] become infatuated with this conception that if they brownnose, they’ll do better in school, get a good job in the future as a result of their sucking up, and get fat off of all the money they’re making. It’s a pathetic ideology to operate off of. The workplace, too, has countless brownnosers with the same intentions and ideology of “making it by faking it.” People brownnose to achieve some level of success or receive some sort of positive reinforcement. Just like a dog, they repeat their actions if rewarded.

Drury’s quote above suggests a kind of cultural “spillover” wherein some students learn and hone skills of ingratiation while in school, taking those skills with them as they enter into the world of work. While school may provide the context where students learn and practice brownnosing, it is certainly not the only context in which students may first observe its use:

Jeremy: I learned from my dad to be in my superior’s favor. They [supervisors] are my key to upward mobility in a job.

Robin: I think that from what I have learned about brownnosing I will be using it a lot with the clients and colleagues I will have to be working with. I think I learned it from my parents and the way they talk to some people.

The experience of the above students indicates that familial contexts offer the first glimpse into the dynamics of ingratiation as children learn about relations of dependency, power, and the ways in which such relations can be negotiated. More than simply a context for *observing* the meanings, rules, and strategic uses of brownnosing, our respondents indicated that family life was one of the arenas within which they took opportunity to *practice* them:

Willow: Sucking up to your boss can be a good thing because it will help move you along. I learned this through my own jobs and from dealing with my parents.

Terry: I just bought a couch from a friend but didn't have a vehicle to transport it. I asked him to hold on to it for me till I could find a way to transport it. So I began brownnosing my mom so I could use her Chevy Tahoe. I was doing the laundry and dishes and cleaning up the house for her that day before she got back from work. As she got home all the cleaning that had went on amazed her. Then I asked her if I could use the Tahoe. She said she appreciated the gesture, but that no one other than *her* can drive her car. She would not allow it. So I was pissed about it, but I knew that by doing all the stuff around the house I still wasn't guaranteed the Tahoe, so I wasn't too pissed off after awhile.

In the data provided by our respondents, students revealed that lessons concerning ingratiation are learned not only vicariously, but from direct successes and failures. The data also suggest the ubiquity of brownnosing as a form of communication that might be found wherever people negotiate social relations marked by power-dependence. It is not surprising, then, that our respondents also talked about its use in intimate relations. Observe the comments made by students below:

Janice: I think that, for the most part, many girls do the brownnosing. Girls will pretend that they like guys in order to get the things that they want at that certain moment in time. Girls will try and stroke guys' egos so that they will do something that the girl wants at that time.

Stan: Guys brownnose girls all of the time, trying to hook up. Sometimes it works when drinking is involved.

Lee: The other night a girl brown nosed me to make me think she wanted some French fries but when she got closer she started kissing me. I pushed her away and said, "I already chewed those fries, you can't have them."



Max: Well I guess I constantly brown nose girls. It's a lot like bullshitting in a sense. I'll get them a beer at a party, or buy them a drink at the bar. I may hold their bag or tell them that I like their friends, tell them they look pretty. I suppose it can get real embarrassing if someone saw me, like my friends.

Ingratiation as a form of interaction may be distinguished from sociability. "Pure sociability," as Simmel called it, is a "play form of sociation...its aim is nothing but the success of the sociable moment and, at most, a memory of it" (Simmel, 1950b, p. 45). In the interview data above, sociability appears as a tactic in the interpersonal repertoire of respondents who regard it as an instrument for acquiring some social, sensual or personal end. As such, it is not sociability at all but a form of ingratiation. As students talk about their experiences with intimate others, it becomes clear that the myriad of social contexts within which students participate may serve the purpose of cross-pollination. That is, within each context, experiences, information, and lessons are added to the stock of knowledge students have about constructing and adjusting lines of ingratiating action. In adopting the metaphor of "cultural toolkit" (p. 277), Swidler (1986) indicates that such stocks of knowledge can be both transported and shared, leading us to expect that they are culturally as well as contextually ubiquitous.

### **Conclusion: Kissing is Serious Craft**

While some forms of interaction such as joking or bullshitting can be done *across* status lines, brownnosing commonly flows *up* the organizational structure. As an organizational resource, ingratiation is used as a strategy by lower-organizational participants to either enlist the support of those in power or to appease them. Research on organizational culture has observed the ways in which this culture exists as an elaborate system of control, rife with micro-politics (Morrill, Zald, & Rao, 2003), claims for allegiance (Graham, 1993), and "moral mazes" (Jackall, 2010). More than an individual worker's idiosyncrasy, this suggests that patterns of ingratiation found in the workplace reflect its structural arrangements—arrangements that are only occasionally met with collective, overt resistance (Fantasia, 1988) and more often by "secondary adjustments" (Goffman, 1961, p. 54).

Research on the Millennials suggests the possibility of change as Millennial Generation workers occupy the workplace in large numbers, observing that this cohort is relatively unwilling to commit their loyalties to the boss. Yet, in the face of a severe economic recession, anecdotal evidence from our students contravenes this picture. When jobs are plentiful, Millennial workers do, indeed, appear to be less willing to stay in unpleasant, conflict-filled, or boring workplaces and more than willing to change jobs when something better comes along. Under this condition, the propensity for Millennial Generation workers to leave undesirable work circumstances may necessitate that employers, themselves, engage in status-deference rituals. In their recent book, *Why Work Sucks and How to Fix It*, Ressler and Thompson (2008) advocate for a "Results-Only Work Environment" that allows employees to deviate from the traditional 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. work schedule, miss meetings, and simply spend less time at the workplace –

changes accommodating the cultural preferences of Millennial workers. However, under conditions of severe recession—where employers gain control over employees by heightening workers’ concerns with job security—a premium may be placed upon the observance of “status rituals” (Goffman, 1967, p. 57) favoring the boss. In such circumstances, deference exhibited among employees may be treated as something that is not only expected and obligatory, but, in its absence, cause for sanctioning.

Our observations reveal that students *qua workers* learn the rudiments of ingratiation not only at school but early on within the social context of the family. At home, school, work, and in interpersonal relationships, it would appear that Millennial Generation workers learn the myriad meanings, prescriptions and uses of brownnosing both vicariously and through trial and error. Beyond the social context of schooling it would appear then that the structure of most social relations are at least occasionally marked by the dynamics of dependence and power. That this is the case would seem to indicate that while schooling structurally preconditions students for the world of work it is not the only context that does so. The network of interpersonal relations found in schools, families, and friendships may culturally spill over into the world of work; such spillage is reciprocal and dynamic, if socially unpredictable (See Stevens, Minnotte, Mannon, & Kiger, 2007, for a discussion of reciprocal, family-work spillover).

While we are concerned both with the immediate employment prospects of our students and the culture of individualism that seems to shape their responses to employers, we are nevertheless encouraged by their propensity to disavow the structural arrangements of work which they see as oppressive. It is clear that brownnosing is a skill that workers draw upon in a variety of occupational settings. Making this folk concept the focus of empirical study moves us closer towards a sociology of ingratiation. It is our hope that fellow scholars will join us in investigating the ways Millennial workers experience, shape, and contest the social conditions of work they face, observing the ways in which Millennials hone both new and old cultural tools even as they do so.

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