

WORK PRESSURE SIMILARITY FOR HOMEMAKERS, MANAGERS & PROFESSIONALS

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For most Americans, their work roles constitute an important part of the self-image and an important basis of self-esteem. Typically, for men, their labor force occupation provides not only the financial resources which shape their material life style, but gauge their degree of success as human beings. For women, work in the labor force and as a homemaker, or exclusively as a homemaker is central in defining how successful and who they are as women, and as human beings. We judge others, and are judged in terms of value of work performed. This results in self-judgment highly colored by performance in work roles.

In the last decade, some social scientists have belatedly begun to pay attention to household tasks as *work*, and to compare this type of work with paid labor roles. We will compare practices of full time homemakers and those of certain white collar workers which, on the surface may seem quite different.

In the United States, about 40 hours per week constitute the *minimum* time investment required to convince oneself and others that one is fulfilling a work role adequately, and that visible, socially desirable products or services issue from the endeavor. In closely supervised work roles, including most manual and white collar jobs, real work will tend to fill the full work week. After all, the purpose of close supervision is to ensure that workers continue to work, and their tasks usually are well-defined and unending.

However, in many work roles in managerial, administrative, and professional positions, and in homemaking, direct supervision is absent. Task definition and accomplishment are left largely to the worker. Norms concerning the amount of work to be accomplished, and even the level of the accomplishment are often ambiguous. In such cases, developing and maintaining self-esteem require that the worker fill at least the socially defined minimal hours with activities than can be *legitimated* as real work, and that there be acknowledged products, such as clean clothes, meals, reports, and records of clients served or treated. These must be credible both to others and to the worker as worth the time investment. Thus, the unsupervised worker must

find enough *real work* to fill at least 40 hours per week, or create enough activities which can be justified as *real work* to fill the hours. It is not simply a matter of convincing others that one is doing a week's work. After all, without supervision, how is anyone to know if one is faking? The real issue is that in such a situation, one's self-esteem requires convincing oneself that one is *really working*. One may do that best, not merely by filling in the minimum hours defined as a work week, but by expanding the work week to 60 hours or more. The legitimizing techniques of full time homemakers and those of unsupervised labor force participants are very similar.

SOCIABILITY ON THE JOB

People appear to need sociability to enjoy their work roles. They may or may not need to interact with others, actually to accomplish the tasks associated with their work roles. Management and professional work roles are often characterized by extensive committee work. Consider the endless number of committees found in university and corporate settings, and the long hours the members spend in committee meetings. Then think about the actual policy changes and operational changes, and the real impact resulting from the committee time expenditures. Attendance at committee meetings is a legitimate use of *work* time, in the sense that nearly everyone recognizes this behavior as part of the work role. This is true regardless of the accomplishments or lack of accomplishment of the committees. Therefore, the individual can fill up considerable amounts of work time with meetings whose real function may be more one of sociability which goes under the mask of legitimate work activity. Indeed, committees issue reports, the function of which is at least partially to justify to the members and others that *real work* was done, and that the time investment was legitimate.

The often-ridiculed *koffee klatch* of homemakers represents essentially the same phenomenon, lacking only the high level of legitimation which is accorded to committee meetings. Homemakers often legitimate such meetings in terms of getting their children

together for necessary interactive play. Such legitimation probably fails to convince people who are not full time homemakers. Nonetheless, it can serve to help housewives maintain their self-esteem, since they validate each others' definition of the function of their meetings as child-oriented.

Committee meetings and koffee klatches not only provide at least partially legitimated settings in which to fill sociability needs. They also provide the very important work-related function of information exchange. While a committee may actually accomplish nothing, information exchanged by committee members may help each to fulfill the work role requirements more successfully. Likewise, information exchanged on child-rearing practices, recipes, labor-saving methods, and cleaning products may help homemakers perform their work roles better. Lacking clear norms specifying the type and quantity of work output, they are developed informally through personal interaction in such settings.

USE OF LEISURE

If there is need to extend work roles to perceive oneself in a more positive light, then we might expect that some part of what is defined as *leisure* will be legitimated as work-related. Managers, administrators and professionals often organize leisure activities such as golf games, parties, luncheons and dinners around work related functions. They justify this in terms of competition: "When our competitors entertain clients and subordinates, we must do the same." If none did, clients would buy from someone and subordinates would not be unhappy because of the perquisites available to others. We suggest that the extension of work into leisure helps one to convince oneself of one's genuine commitment to the work role, which makes one a highly worthy person.

Homemakers similarly extend work activities into leisure, in excursions to the zoo, museums, movies and other enrichment activities *for the children*. Instead of relaxing, they convince themselves that all manner of structured leisure, which is scarcely relaxing for the parent, is necessary for the proper development of their children. Just as a male sales representative convinces himself of the extent of his work commitment by using

leisure in work related ways, so does the homemaker mother convince herself of the extend of maternal commitment by such activity. For older homemakers, community volunteer work provides the same legitimation of self as a worthy and productive person.

Cocktail parties and golf games also serve another purpose. In such settings people attempt to redefine group boundaries to facilitate future personal and corporate gain. A client who regularly golfs with someone is more likely to place the order with that person rather than with a competitor. A subordinate who dines with the manager is likely to support that person in situations of office conflict. Individuals are likely to consider such leisure partners as friends too valuable to betray, cheat, or subvert. Sometimes the koffee klatch serves a similar function. The more mothers incorporate into the circle, the more prospective playmates for their children, the better the exchange of baby sitting services, and other perquisites for each member.

WORKER COMPULSIVENESS

The need to fill hours with legitimated activity can result in a lot of makework. Managers, administrators and professionals may draft many unread memoranda and reports, clean data decks endlessly, do a few more computer runs, "just to be sure," or make another round of patient calls "just to be safe." They may redo, or do to excess tasks that are legitimately part of their regular work in order to expand the hours they define as necessary to maintain their self-esteem. Such tasks are inherently legitimate: hence the excessive doing of them also appears legitimate.

Similarly, homemakers may do the laundry daily, dust, mop, vacuum several times weekly, or cook elaborate dinners on a regular basis. These are tasks that must be done more or less regularly, and they are intrinsically legitimate. However, as most homemakers who take on a full time job in the labor force soon discover, these household tasks can be performed far less frequently than daily or several times weekly. These household tasks, even when done to excess, seem to use time legitimately, maintaining the homemaker's self-image as hard-working and worthy.

WORKER INDISPENSABILITY

Perhaps the biggest boon to self-esteem is to be found in convincing oneself that one is personally indispensable — that one's absence or failure to accomplish a given task at a given time will seriously affect the ability of the larger organization, client, or family and household to function. Rarely are people really indispensable, and rarely will the failure to get something done now, rather than tomorrow really do more than create a minor inconvenience for others.

The scholar who works extra hours to complete a paper for publication is self-convinced that the work must appear in the earliest journal issue. The physician who works extra hours to see a few more patients may assume that other doctors are less competent. The manager who takes a report home to read must believe that there will be major organizational problems if the report were left for later reading. The homemaker who stays up late to finish the laundry must think it vital that her family have clean clothing to wear tomorrow. In each case, the person is convinced that spending more hours is necessary because no other person can do these extremely important tasks soon enough or well enough. That is potent balm to self-esteem.

The process by which workers come to define themselves as indispensable can be suggested. In social settings, workers and those with whom they interact share a common set of understandings about the criteria for evaluating work. In highly supervised work roles, there may be training periods, an apprenticeship, clear job specifications, and even contractual agreements involving both the worker and those specifically charged with supervision and evaluation. However, homemakers and many professionals cannot apprentice with those who will later serve as evaluators, but did so with an earlier generation who can rarely render judgments after apprenticeship is ended. Thus the worker and evaluator are less likely to share a set of rules for judging performance. The homemaker apprentices with her family of origin, but is judged by her family of procreation, and by friends. The professional apprentices with an earlier generation at the professional school, and later works in other institutional settings.

When the worker creates both the norms and

the justification for an adequate performance, shared understandings may not be adequately articulated to the evaluator. In turn, the evaluator and observer becomes an outsider who is assumed not to understand the one *correct* way to perform the task, as established by the worker, and yet is expected by the worker to accept all the worker's criteria for task performance. In cases where the observer has to fill in for the worker who is temporarily unavailable, it is likely that the task will be performed in a way which differs from the worker's understanding of the *correct* way. This serves to heighten the worker's perception of self as indispensable, and the only one who can perform the task adequately. The worker may so severely criticize the work of the substitute who filled in, as to extinguish the substitute's future willingness to help. With no others available or willing to perform the task, the worker creates a self-fulfilling prophecy of being indispensable.

Unsupervised workers are also often unwilling to delegate authority or even specific tasks to others so as to lighten their work load. To do so would reduce the amount of available *real work* to fill in the time. Moreover, delegation of part of the task by definition declares that the worker is not indispensable. Finally, as suggested concerning the way in which workers come to see themselves as indispensable when authority or tasks are delegated, their performance usually disappoints the delegator. When a homemaker delegates some aspect of child care to her husband, she is likely to find that he accomplished the work differently than she would have done, and incorrectly, by her standards. Henceforth she may not readily ask him to help again. An irony of the homemaker's refusal to delegate authority or tasks is that the observer may never come to discover that homemaking tasks involve *real work*, by which the observer would become more willing to accept the homemaker's definitions of adequate performance of the role. Similarly, the manager may delegate responsibility for a report to a subordinate, only to feel compelled later to redo the report to meet private expectations. Unsupervised workers often expand their work and feelings of indispensability beyond the work they actually must do, by discouraging or denying others the opportunity to participate.

TECHNOLOGY DILEMMA

We have argued that occupations in the professions, management, and administration, along with homemaking share three characteristics: 1) their work is not subject to close supervision; 2) norms for adequate performance are largely self-created, subject to challenge, and problematic; 3) there is often less *real work* than can readily fill a conventionally defined work week. Such occupations have two needs: 1) fill the time with activities to be busy or apparently busy; 2) define to oneself and others that those activities are important, profitable, and a wise use of time.

Technological innovations make work easier, less tedious, and faster. In turn, these innovations tend to decrease the amount of *real work* time needed to produce a given quantity of quality products. As a result, the technological innovations often serve to increase the need to fill the time with work, as well as to alter definitions of adequate performance and productivity. Computers and word processors make the creation of reports and research articles more rapid, and hence increase the number produced. In addition they provide users more time to recheck findings or to do more complex analysis. Thus they raise expectations of quality. In the same way, the micro wave oven, food processor, and automated washers and dryers increase the need of homemakers to justify to themselves and others that they worked long enough. These devices serve to change expectations regarding quantity and quality of the products of labor. Gourmet meals are more expected, and less appreciated than before advent of the professional kitchen equipment. Standards of cleanliness have risen because of technological innovation. Dishes cannot be just clean — they must be sterile, mirror-like, without water spots. A century ago, ring around the collar was of small concern to the homemaker.

The very devices created and sold to reduce the tedium of work and to enhance work quality cause stress for the unsupervised worker, often forcing more time-filling and more labor on more creative products which take as much or more time to produce as the same product of an earlier time, preceding the new technology. Where they fail to create new time-filling activities, and fail to heighten role performance, unsupervised workers may

actually experience diminished self-esteem, and come to view their performance and themselves as inadequate.

CONCLUSIONS

In work settings where people are not closely supervised and work-related norms are ambiguous, self-esteem is fragile. It depends at least partly on filling the hours one is supposed to be working with tasks resulting in products which can be defined by self and others as legitimate work. It is further enhanced if the hours can be extended with legitimated activity, and especially if one can convince oneself that the extra hours are required on the basis of indispensability.

Homemakers do not differ from professionals, managers, and administrators in the types of mechanisms they use to attempt to legitimate their activities and maintain self-esteem. They differ only in one important way. People within and outside of the labor force tend to legitimate the techniques employed by those whose labor is *paid*. Committee work, and business-related use of leisure time, work-related compulsiveness, and indispensability are generally widely perceived as part and parcel of upper-level white collar jobs. Koffee klatches and housework compulsiveness are the butt of jokes by those who are in the *paid* labor force. The fact that homemakers often forego real leisure in an attempt to enrich the lives of their children is scarcely perceived, to say nothing of being respected as a work-related and helpful activity. Lip service is given to the indispensability of the homemaker, but no one equates that to the indispensability of the work of the physician or the accountant.

The fact that the homemakers at best legitimate one another in these ways suggests that the result is lower self-esteem for them than their counterparts whose salaried techniques are more generously and more richly legitimated in a social sense. This may explain why, when asked what they do, homemakers are inclined to say: "I am *only* a housewife." Her professor husband, who spent the day at a meeting of the Academic Advisement Committee, and in cleaning his data files for a study of attitudes toward the use of guns in neighborhood crime would never respond: "I am *only* a professor of sociology."