

1989

Workplace Boundaries: Conceptions and Creations

Cynthia Fuchs Epstein
CUNY Graduate Center

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

Follow this and additional works at: http://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_pubs

 Part of the [Work, Economy and Organizations Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Epstein, C. F. (1989). Workplace Boundaries: Conceptions and Creations. *Social Research*, 56(3), 571–590.

This Article is brought to you by CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@gc.cuny.edu.

Workplace Boundaries: Conceptions and Creations*

BY CYNTHIA
FUCHS EPSTEIN

SOCIAL ANALYSTS have long been concerned with the changing workplace and its consequences for society and for individual workers. Today as well, under conditions of global technological and organizational transformation, work and its contents and discontents pose new questions for research and social policy.

The social movements of the past three decades have raised value questions about work as well, and the traditional division of labor has been subjected to new challenges. Many, for example, hoped that equality was attainable once policies were put in place intended to provide access to economic and social opportunities for members of minority groups and women. More recently, programs to institute workplace democracy would, it was thought, diminish hierarchy and domination. And advances in technology raised hopes that the means would be created to eliminate the most alienating jobs.

But we have found that there are constraints on equality and change. They go beyond, or are irrelevant to, prejudice or mean-mindedness. Such constraints are rooted in cultural and ideological definitions of gender and class, in the social arrangements dividing society and in the identities of individuals. These boundaries, which define and separate people into classes, communities, working groups, genders, and other classifications, act as constraints on change.

Individuals acknowledge boundaries as part of their acceptance of the way the world is ordered, and of their notions of self and other.

How Do Boundaries Get Set?

Social ordering is created and maintained by both conceptual and structural means. Sometimes we can clearly identify who is responsible for social arrangements, but often it seems as if such arrangements are the work of an invisible hand, or the collective behavior of individuals acting in patterned responses. According to Gerson and Peiss, boundaries mark the social territories of human relations, signaling who ought to be admitted and who excluded. Moreover, there are rules which guide and regulate traffic, and they instruct on the conditions under which boundaries may be crossed.¹

The boundaries that order individuals, organizing them into categories, are persistent. And those defining gender work roles have been among the most persistent. Women are assigned child care although there are some variations by social class. Women's jobs are often paired with men's jobs—as nurses are paired with physicians—although women's jobs are ancillary and of lower rank.² Work that is associated with autonomy, prestige, and authority is usually labeled men's work. When a woman is in a position of authority it is typically over persons of low rank—children, other women, or men of subordinate status.

I have outlined elsewhere³ circumstances in which sex status becomes less salient in work settings and is less a criterion for a

¹ Judith Gerson and Kathy Peiss, "Boundaries, Negotiation and Consciousness: Reconceptualizing Gender Relations," *Social Problems* 32 (April 1985): 317-331.

² Cynthia Fuchs Epstein, *Woman's Place: Options and Limits in Professional Careers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970).

³ *Ibid.*, and Cynthia Fuchs Epstein, *Deceptive Distinctions: Sex, Gender and the Social Order* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

boundary distinction. This may occur when work is well defined and objectively evaluated or when formal sex designations alter.

Often the real boundaries of sex, class, or age change, but the conceptual boundaries remain, as when women take jobs nontraditional for their sex and the jobs remain labeled as men's. After all, individuals develop investments in boundary distinctions. Boundaries define who they think they are. They set the parameters of what Markus and Nurius call the "possible selves" that determine motivation, decision-making, and behavior in the day-to-day and long-term aspects of our lives.⁴ Boundary distinctions that come from the culture often are regarded as normal, necessary, and just. Ideology accompanies experience. But it may reflect it, lead it, or contradict it.⁵

Distinctions created by the culture need not logically lead to invidious comparisons but nearly all inevitably do.⁶ Male/

⁴ Hazel Markus and Paul Nurius, "Possible Selves," *American Psychologist* 41 (September 1986): 954-969.

⁵ The boundaries of groups, like those of communities, perform the same function as the boundaries of all categories of knowledge. All such categories are marked by symbolism, as Rodney Needham, in *Symbolic Classification* (Santa Monica: Goodyear Publishing, 1979), has alerted us. The symbolism may be explicit through rituals which discriminate between social roles, life and death, stage of the life cycle, gender, and the pure and the polluted. But much symbolism, as Anthony Cohen points out in *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London and New York: Tavistock Publications, 1985), does not have a special vocabulary or idiomatic behavior: it is part of the meaning we ascribe to pragmatic and instrumental things such as words.

Words both denote object and convey attitude. For example, words such as "freedom" and "democracy" do not merely describe forms of government and legal status, they also tell us the attitude to take toward these forms. Similarly, "woman's work" does not merely tell us what women do; it tells us it is not for men; and "unskilled" work clearly connotes a form of work inferior to that which is "skilled." Thus words used to make distinctions may be regarded, according to M. Cranston in *Freedom: A New Analysis* (London: Longman, 1954), as "hurrah" words or "boo" words.

Mary Douglas, in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), further shows the implicit directives lodged in certain words. For example, she points out, the use of the word "dirt" does more than signify the particles under the fingernail. It also expresses an attitude, "ugh," and prescribes a remedy, "scrub!" Thus a "wimp" is not merely described; he is advised to stand up and be a man.

⁶ Cynthia Fuchs Epstein, "Ideal Roles and Real Roles or the Fallacy of the Misplaced

female is one such designation, and obviously there are many more: black/white, young/old, dirty/clean, skilled/unskilled, informal/formal, workplace/home.

From an enlightened perspective, these might be regarded as continual or overlapping phenomena rather than absolute designations, but that is not the most typical response. For example, black and white people come in all hues, but there is a demand that they choose (and, of course, we help them choose) for what are deemed to be very practical purposes such as whether they should or should not reside or work in certain places, associate with others, or participate politically. In fact, hue may not count at all. The historian Philip Foner recounts the racism of a group of union leaders in testimony to Congress in 1912 in which "a number of A.F. of L. leaders referred to themselves as 'white men,' lumping the Italians, Poles and Negroes, as 'non-white.'"⁷

Lay persons and scientists alike gravitate toward dichotomous classifications in the organization of their thinking—for example, the physical and social sciences; hard and soft data; qualitative and quantitative. Some people are attracted by the conceptual economy dichotomization provides for analytic purposes. Others have a stake in distinctions that have real-world implications. This is particularly so with those who maximize the interest of one social category to the disadvantage of another, such as "upper class" and "lower class." Concepts can be translated into real behavior; ideas can be turned into reality by means as disparate as the self-fulfilling prophecy and executive fiat.

Yet there is not always consensus on what a boundary encompasses, or on the designation of specific categories. Anthony Cohen notes that since boundaries are conceptually

Dichotomy," in Robert Robinson, ed., *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 4 (1985): 29–51, and Epstein, *Deceptive Distinctions*.

⁷ Philip Foner, *The Policies and Practices of the American Federation of Labor 1900–1909* (New York: International Publishers, 1964), p. 256.

set, they may be perceived in rather different terms, not only by people on opposite sides of them but by those on the same side.⁸ All social categories are variable in meaning, according to his view, and often the contents of a category are so unclear that it exists largely in terms of its symbolic boundaries. Such terms as "just" and "unjust," and perhaps "masculine" and "feminine," may be impossible to spell out with precision. However, the range of meanings of these terms (which are, of course, symbols) can be glossed over precisely because they allow their adherents to attach their own meanings to them. This allows for social change to occur while concepts remain the same.

However, there are collective agreements about certain connotations that are culturally persistent, and no matter whether or not the definition of a category makes sense, gatekeepers of the traditional view will do all they can to make a boundary impassable.

The means for maintaining boundaries may be mechanical and physical. But they may also be conceptual and symbolic. They may be engineered with grandiosity by highly visible leaders or, as Ivar Berg observes,⁹ through lower-level tyrannies. As Harry Braverman warned,¹⁰ they may be the intended policies of capitalists optimizing their advantage or, as others have documented, they may be the response of low-level workers seeking a rationale for their situation. Boundaries may also be reinforced in the unnoticed habits and language of everyday life, vigilantly attended to by family and friends, business associates and colleagues.

Control, then, may be exercised at the personal level and not always perceptibly, although it is true that individuals often may be aware that words are tools to erect walls or bring them down.

⁸ Cohen, *Symbolic Construction*.

⁹ Ivar Berg, "Deregulating the Economy and Reforming Workers: The Eclipse of Industrial Economy," in R. Mulvihill, ed., *Reflections on America 1984: An Orwell Symposium* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1986).

¹⁰ Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974).

I am not suggesting that cultural designations are more powerful than structural ones or social psychological ones, but rather that there is interaction among all three. Perhaps people cling to certain designations because their identities are at risk, or because they are embedded in a belief system that convinces them these distinctions are natural and normal or God-given or devil-driven. Such convictions may be held by both those who are served by the distinctions and those who are not.

As individuals have interests in the material conditions of their lives and fight to maintain their advantages and their territory, they also have an interest in preserving their identities. As we shall see, people become invested in boundaries because their sense of self, their security and their dignity, all are tied to particular boundary distinctions, and these personal investments are bound up with authority and hierarchy.

The same forces affect social scientists who study these processes and who also become committed to particular distinctions, treating statuses as if they can always be measured independently when, in fact, they may seep into each other. Some social scientists also believe that categories are as distinct in life as in analytic exercise. This is true of a number of labor-process theorists, exemplified, for example, by the work of Michael Burawoy,¹¹ who insists that "consent" behavior at the workplace is produced independent of schooling, family life, the mass media, and the state.

It is unlikely that behavior in any realm is independent of what is going on elsewhere, although the strength of influences may vary considerably.

Gender Boundaries

The social ordering of the workplace by sex of worker is a persistent phenomenon, often explained by reference to

¹¹ Michael Burawoy, *Manufacturing Consent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

market forces, personal choices, and so on. But there are distinct social controls that maintain gender distinctions at the workplace. This was illustrated in interviews that Kai Erikson and I conducted during a study of communications workers in recent years.

Following a 1973 consent decree with the U.S. government, AT&T instituted an affirmative-action program to desegregate job categories. As a result, numbers of men and women were placed in jobs not traditional for their sex. Thus men became telephone operators and women were given opportunities to apply for jobs as installers and repair personnel.

But long-standing expectations of what men's and women's jobs ought to be, both within the company and outside, among the families of workers as well as in the general culture, were violated by the new policy. Thus, as might have been expected, both actual and symbolic behavior was used by company personnel to defend or restore traditional gender boundary distinctions.

A female telephone operator reported her son's opinion of the male operators she worked with (and who was sitting by her side during her interview):

I have a 23-year-old son and last year he lost his job. I said to him, "Why don't you fill out an application for the phone company?" . . . He said, "Ma, I think if they offered me \$1,000 a week tax-free, I wouldn't take that job. When I go up with you now [to visit the telephone company] and I see those guys sitting in there I wonder what's wrong with them. Are they pansies or what?"

Some male operators felt the heavy hand of boundary control from outside the workplace, from the customers who called them and got a man on the line instead of the expected woman operator. Male operator (same office):

I got people calling me a "tinker bell," and "Oh, you're one of them gay bastards . . ." See, the ladies, they get perverts and they get the impatient people and the real scuzz that everybody gets.

But the guys—I get males who expect to get females, so when they get me they go right off the wall. . . . They figure I'm in a female office so I must be queer. I've had a guy a couple of times—six months later he remembers me. He's coming out here to take me out to tea.

I'll get a call. A guy, he'll have a friend in the background. [He's saying] "Tell that broad to get her ass going." Then you'll hear the guy who asked for the number saying, "It ain't a she it's a he. Oh, one of them faggots."

Or controls enforcing boundary distinctions at work are generated in the family. A male operator:

My father [who works for the phone company] bet my mother anything she wanted that I wouldn't be here three months after I started. Either I would be fired because of the customers and the way they talk to you or because I was working under all ladies in a female job that I would have lost my temper . . .

Or a man's own view about the inappropriateness of being in a "woman's job," insisting (even though he was doing the job) that it was not suited for a man:

I would rather be doing manual work if I had to outside instead of sitting in here. I feel like a bull in a china shop. And I don't like it. They have these keyboards and they say use all your fingers. And the ladies are going like, my God. And I'm sitting there—I'll hit a key and I'll hit two keys and then I'll have to erase it.

Q: The equipment isn't made for a man?

It's designed like a typewriter. It's not designed for a guy.

It's a seat that's more designed for women—it's not a big seat. It's not designed for somebody who's 6'2", 240 pounds. Especially now that I don't have patience.

Cynthia Cockburn¹² and more recently Patricia Roos¹³ have

¹² Cynthia Cockburn, *Brothers: Male Dominance and Technological Change* (London: Pluto Press, 1983).

¹³ Patricia Roos, "Hot Type to Cold Type: Sex Differences in the Impact of Technological Change in the Printing Industry," paper prepared for presentation at

shown how male printers scorn typesetting by computer, regarding it as women's work. Cockburn found that male compositors' ability to operate a Linotype machine under printing-shop conditions was a boon to their sense of manliness. The trauma inflicted by technological change for these men came not only from deskilling but also from the change from a craft workplace with a long tradition to a white-collar environment. In the words of one printer:

I don't know what it is. It just isn't masculine enough to satisfy me.

Another commented that automation

may make softies of us . . . I feel it may make us, I don't know if this is the word, "effete." Less manly somehow.

Entrenched stereotypes that pair sex of worker to job are shared by managers in the telephone company. Even after the 1973 consent decree they showed resistance to changes in company policy. In one office, charm bracelets were given to the men as well as to the women who had perfect attendance. This not only reinforced the definition of the operator's job as woman's work, but heightened men's discomfort at doing it.

As for women recruited into work formerly reserved for men, they faced the ambivalence generated by men's investment in the masculine image of their job as a source of identity and reward and their insistence that women were incompetent to do the work. Many of the men expressed the view that women would be welcome, but they undermined this by emphasizing the qualities of endurance, strength, and mechanical capacity required to deal with dirty and dangerous work.

Gender Ideology and the Reward System

Male workers in traditionally blue-collar occupations accentuate their manliness by distinguishing their work from women's. But among men, those who regard themselves as most manly derive a sense of identity and the attendant rewards by referring to men in other craft jobs and to managers as effeminate. In the telephone company, splicers' work is defined as the most manly; splicers derive comfort and affirmation by setting up a boundary between their work and that of installers and repairmen, who are also "outside" craft workers regarded highly in the company. Some splicers refer to installers and repairmen derisively as "women," signifying their "softer" job.

In their interviews, splicers enunciated a sense of pride, valuing themselves more favorably than men in other jobs, and as more macho.

They're [splicers are] more loyal to each other as opposed to repairmen/installers . . . they're more loyal to each other in a gang and to their foreman and to the job.

[Why?] Because we're both out in the rain and the snow and the sleet and the garbage.

I've worked in manholes . . . I've gotten my hands dirty. We've all come from the same place. We've all paid our dues.

We're not as gentle with each other and we're not as picky with each other and what we have to do for a living. We're a little thicker skinned.

We work outside in all types of weather, down manholes which some repairmen and installers won't come within 25 feet of . . . I think that they think of us as animals really.

Splicers have a big truck that's worth about \$25,000 and they carry equipment upwards of \$10,000 on their truck; electronic testing stuff and things like that.

I think they can get hurt more seriously than an installer/repairman because the job is more physical; it's more physically demanding.

Yea, they [installers and repairmen] won't go into basements because it's too dark and dirty. They'll call for assistance because they don't like the looks of the neighborhood. I mean, we're allowed to do the same thing but it seems they'll flag a job a lot faster than that.

This gender ideology and sense of collectivity experienced by splicers feeds into their self-definition. Here occupation and self-image merge so that the boundaries of the occupation (the job description, as it were) become the boundaries of the self. This is expressed in the comments of several splicers that follow:

There used to be a commercial on television. It was a family decorating a tree and then it was good night time. The husband and wife had gone to bed, the children in bed, now the lights are out and the phone rings. The guy answers the phone and he gets up and gets dressed. He goes out to his car and he drives to a Telephone garage. He gets in his truck and he clears a failure. He was a splicer . . . The idea was that *we, the telephone company* are willing to work under any conditions at anytime to give *you, the people* service. I appreciated that commercial. I don't think too many other people really remember it but I do because that's what we do. *Being a splicer is us.*

In my heart I'm a splicer, that's who I am.

I think a splicer is willing to go a little bit further . . . he's willing to go down into the mud a little quicker than someone else and I think that leads over into your personal life.

[It makes us] a little more aggressive in our personalities; quicker to make decisions . . . that's what a splicer does, he makes decisions. A splicer, I think, has a good sense of balance, a good sense of balance of his job and of his life.

Gender Ideology as a Means of Securing Compliance at Work

Managers may reinforce cultural views about men's work and women's work because such views seem reasonable, but they may also manipulate gender ideology because heightening gender distinctions sometimes provides a means of

controlling workers, of undermining their resistance and maximizing consent on the job.

A foreman of a group of switchmen interviewed by Steven Vallas for his study of class consciousness among workers in several locals of the Communications Workers of America (CWA) related how he used the culture of manhood among craftsmen to humiliate them in a grievance over the quality of toilet paper the company provided (part of a larger group of complaints). The foreman, resorting to gender ideology, "admitted" to his switchmen that there had been a mistake. The toilet paper they had received really had been ordered by the splicers who naturally were tougher and more manly than switchmen. As he related it:

. . . the workers knew I was telling them they couldn't take it . . .
I never heard any more grievances about toilet paper again.

Gender differentiation may enhance or diminish the ranks and power of labor. Traditional craft unions used a macho ideology to organize and retain membership loyalty. Vallas was told by managers that union militancy was directly related to the physical strength manifested on the job. But unions resisted recruiting women workers, partially because they were women; partially because they were unskilled. As Brooks points out,¹⁴ the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) didn't want to unionize women telephone operators because they feared their votes as members might require "men handling the sting of electricity to submit forever to the rule of telephone operators."

The union halls of the CWA I visited in my ethnographic explorations were decorated with gun racks and pinups, not a hospitable environment for women. Language was also coarse in the slogans and signs displayed, among them the classic and sociologically astute "If you've got them by the balls, their

¹⁴ Thomas R. Brooks, *Communications Workers of America: Story of a Union* (New York: Mason-Charter, 1977).

hearts and minds will follow." Yet CWA faced a diminishing recruitment base because of the reduction in the number of traditionally male craft jobs, and some union officials were becoming more receptive to organizing women. Furthermore, because many of their members were facing job conditions that were similar to those in women's jobs, they were learning to appreciate problems formerly dismissed because they were problems of women's work.

Culturally determined boundaries served male unionists' interests in the British Stichco hosiery company studied by Sallie Westwood.¹⁵ In one conflict the unions supported large differentials between male and female wage rates, defending their decision on the basis that men's work was skilled while women's work was not. This illustrates, according to Westwood, that the fight against low pay is crucially bound up with a struggle against sexist ideologies in the trade-union movement.

In his work on coal miners in Appalachia, Michael Yarrow has noted management appeals to values placed on male physical strength, competition, and courage as a means of obtaining worker consent to arduous and dangerous work:

A coal miner was assigned with two other men to lift heavy steel rails. A miner remarked that it looked like a four-man job. The foreman asked, "What's the matter? Aren't you man enough?"¹⁶

Since miners derive psychic rewards from identification with manly work, and managers derive economic benefit from appeals to this identity, both groups react hostilely to the intrusion of women in the mines. Foremen fear a loss of productivity and miners a loss of dignity. If women can do

¹⁵ Sallie Westwood, *All Day, Every Day: Factory and Family in the Making of Women's Lives* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

¹⁶ Michael Yarrow, "Class and Gender in the Developing Consciousness of Appalachian Coal Miners," paper presented to the Fifth UMIST-ASTON Annual Conference on Organization and Control of the Labor Process, Manchester, England, April 22-24, 1987, p. 9.

men's work, then the prestige accorded to male work declines. Although some women have been integrated into these settings, they are not treated like the men. Women miners may be given especially difficult work to prove they are incompetent. Or men may go out of their way to help them in order to show they cannot do the work.

Women who became coal handlers in a power plant studied by Reskin and Padavic¹⁷ complained that men created bonds by discussions of sex which excluded them, and further that they were the butt of pranks such as being tossed back and forth by male workers as if they were children.

Men's controls over women are also achieved by isolating the women from the informal camaraderie of the workplace by the use of sexual bantering or innuendo. Sexual harassment is another means of highlighting the salience of gender on the shop floor. Recent studies have consistently found that about 30 percent of women blue-collar workers interviewed report such harassment.¹⁸ However, findings suggest that it is most severe for the first women in the job or work group, those who have crossed a formerly unbroken boundary line, and it appears to lessen over time. Gruber and Bjorn found that sexual harassment in nontraditional jobs was most severe for women who were unmarried or young, black, or in lower-status jobs.¹⁹

Men punish women, but women also punish themselves and each other, for moving over boundary lines. Women engage in brooding or accusations of failure to conform to traditional sex-role behavior.

¹⁷ Barbara Reskin and Irene Padavic, "Male Plant Supervisors' Resistance to Sex Integration," paper presented at the annual meetings of the American Sociological Association, Atlanta, Ga., 1988.

¹⁸ Brigid O'Farrell, "Women in Blue-Collar Occupations: Traditional and Nontraditional," in Ann Helton Stromberg and Shirley Harkess, eds., *Women Working: Theories and Facts in Perspective* (Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1988).

¹⁹ James E. Gruber and Lars Bjorn, "Blue Collar Blues: The Sexual Harassment of Women Autoworkers," *Work and Occupations* 9 (1982): 271-297, cited in O'Farrell, "Women in Blue-Collar Occupations."

To counteract the negative consequences of violating boundaries, either in the assault on their identity or in response to men's punishing behavior, some women engage in symbolic behavior to highlight gender distinctiveness. In the telephone company, women engaged in both traditional and nontraditional jobs organized celebrations at work with homemade cookies and cakes. Even in the mines, Yarrow reports, women in the pits set a table for festive occasions.

These women do not want to become "men" and lose their "femininity" because they would be punished by men's refusal to regard them as "real women"—as dates, for example—outside work, as one divorced woman miner complained to Yarrow. Furthermore, because cleanliness is as much a mark of womanliness as dirt is a mark of manliness in mining communities, doing dirty work was a threat to their identity. Women in other occupational spheres, even in white-collar and professional work such as trial law and financial mergers and takeovers, where coarse and bombastic language often is used as a symbolic representation of assertiveness and competence, also worry about their identities, expressing concern that they have become "men."²⁰

Westwood's women hosiery workers engaged in a workplace culture infused with emphasis on traditional priorities for women. Through rituals and ceremonies commemorating engagements and pregnancies, as well as by their choice of workplace attire (slippers and homemade aprons), women's roles as wives and mothers were emphasized over their commitment to the workplace.

The Boundary Between Workplace and Home

The boundaries that set the home apart from the workplace in modern society are obvious. Many mechanisms accomplish

²⁰ See my *Women in Law* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

separation. But it is useful for the analysis of boundaries to consider the overlap and connections that exist between the workplace and the home.

Yarrow points out how miners' dangerous work legitimates their patriarchal and authoritarian behavior in the home. No one questions their behavior because of the sacrifices they are presumed to make for the family. But when miners are laid off, they can no longer depend on this legitimation, and rising levels of family violence follow, ascribed by Yarrow in part to the miners' attempts to preserve eroding patriarchal positions.

Yet many men exhibit more positive responses. As it becomes more usual for wives to go to work because of economic circumstances, miners take on new family-work responsibilities without much resistance. They are, of course, supported by a changing ideology and media messages that "helping out" at home and with the kids is a reasonable activity for red-blooded American men. Blue-collar telephone-company men prefer their wives to stay home (because of the value they place on traditional family life), but many of their wives nonetheless work and they do not see this as incongruent with the preferred model. Some rationalize it by defining their wives' employment as something they do for their own enjoyment, or for "extras" they could otherwise live without. But the men's greater participation in household responsibilities, which may be seen as a change in boundary distinction, may not seriously alter ideological divisions in the household. A number of studies of middle-class managerial men and of blue-collar men show that a good proportion see themselves as devoted family men. Breadwinning is the kingpin of this model, but "pitching in" is also regarded as the family way and the American way.

Although men may participate more in the home, many are not eager to relinquish their authority by doing so. This is especially the case if they lack authority on the job and can exercise authority only in the home. If men face problems in maintaining authority at home because of an altered situation

at work, how does gender ideology affect women who have acquired authority at work?

The telephone company, as a result of the 1973 consent decree, was forced to promote more women to supervisory roles. Women supervisors interviewed fifteen years later in a commercial representative's office reported that they found it difficult to maintain the home/work boundary; their new selves were activated at home. Yet they reported that husbands and male companions tried to reinstate the traditional pattern if they could, and sometimes they did act as a constraint on women's behavior.

One talked about how the air of authority she had cultivated at work to "get things done" was rebuffed at home by such comments as "You're talking to your husband, you're not talking to your employees" or "A guy I was dating . . . said to me . . . 'I don't work for you!'"

The fear of upsetting the authority structure at home affected the way women perceived opportunity. Often their fears stemmed from past experience and anticipated problems. The rumination of one operator was representative of many others:

I worry about what would happen if I work my way up and become a supervisor . . . some women can do that—they figure, well, women's lib: they worked their way up . . . I don't think I could do that to him [my husband] as a man . . . every week my paycheck is a little more than his because of all the time he takes off. I know it aggravates him—if I make a dollar or two more, he's frustrated that I'm making more than him.

Both separation of home and work and gender ideology are important in defining the goals of work for men and women. Male incomes have long been justified as "family wages." The perspective that men are the breadwinners in the family led, in the past, to defining women's wages at work as "pin money" or second incomes. I found, however, that the definition of work according to gender boundaries leads to some interesting paradoxes and consequences.

Many married women workers also regarded their wages as second incomes. Yet surveying their contributions to family income in one rural community showed that typically they earned more than their husbands, who often were seasonal workers such as fishermen and carpenters. Thus definition of their employment as secondary acted as a control on the women's aspirations, because they looked forward to a time (perhaps only in fantasy) when they would leave work and be supported by their husbands. It made the women feel more feminine to believe they were being supported even when they were providing the most reliable income in the family. Management also accepted this definition, and it figured in their encouragement of men to seek transfers to better jobs and their lack of concern about upgrading women.

The specific effects of gender ideology thus may have multiple and even contradictory consequences. Working men may take pride in their ability to withstand harsh and debilitating conditions; and women may accept less pay or advancement because they believe that women deserve less or because it makes life less difficult at home.

Gender Ideology and Worker Resistance

However, gender ideology may stimulate worker resistance, as when miners deride management supporters as "company sucks,"²¹ or when the development of a woman's work culture reinforces the boundary between women workers and male managers. Cynthia Costello's study of clerical workers²² showed how concerns about family duties (such as being a good mother) provoked a group of women workers to

²¹ Yarrow, "Class and Gender."

²² Cynthia B. Costello, "'WEA're Worth It!' Work Culture and Conflict at the Wisconsin Education Association Insurance Trust," *Feminist Studies* 11 (Fall 1985): 497-518. See also Louise Lamphere, "Bringing the Family to Work: Women's Culture on the Shop Floor," *Feminist Studies* 11 (Fall 1985): 519-540.

collectively protest the rigid policies of management through a successful strike. In fact, labor history is replete with examples of women workers' activism in the name of family needs.

As Westwood's Stitchco factory, the women came together to fight targets and rates. In discussions about layoffs the women emphasized "an injury to one is an injury to all," and insisted that whatever work was available should be shared by all the women. According to Westwood, "solidarity and sisterhood marked the struggles around economic issues on the shop floor. . . ." ²³

When Gender Becomes Less Salient

Of course, gender is not always activated nor is gender ideology always the most powerful determinant of workplace relations. At the telephone company we found that many women and men managed to cross sex-defined and class-defined boundaries to make use of opportunities, and they often experienced changes in their identities as a result. Many women who were given more responsibility at work became more secure about their competence and exercise of positions of authority. Typically, but not exclusively, these were women who were free from strong community ties and integrated family networks which could act as controls on behavior nontraditional for women. Men's identity seemed more at risk when they took nontraditional roles. They could assume them when they felt they were detours in an otherwise male career line.

Men's acceptance of their female partners' nontraditional roles often depended on the security of their own jobs, the nature of the work setting, and the community in which they lived. For both men and women, however, economic pressure gave impetus and justification for stepping out of line when

²³ Westwood, *All Day*, p. 234.

opportunity was available, as long as harassment, psychic or physical, was not a major problem.

There are many other boundary issues to contemplate in looking at the experience of workers at all levels of the stratification system. Boundaries in the workplace and in other parts of the social system are formidable barriers to change even when change is mandated by the ideology and policy of the larger society. This paper shows how cultural and structural factors interact in the creation, maintenance, and dissolution of boundaries.

* The research on which this paper is based was funded by the Russell Sage Foundation. The author is grateful for the comments of Charles Tilly and Steven Vallas and for the editorial hand of Howard M. Epstein.

Copyright of Social Research is the property of New School for Social Research and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.