Chapter 4
Dependency and Worker Flirting

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> This heart is sore and sad. Crossed in love?
> — James Joyce

4.1 Introduction

The problem of structural dependency in a formal organization and the shape of this dependency, as it emerges from interaction, is created in the particular culture of the organization. Structural dependency means that one worker or group of workers is dependent on other workers because the second group has some special power originating from the organizational hierarchy or from the system of work and production which enables them to influence the behavior of the first. Every organization creates its own specific way of using this power, with practices specific to the organization. Moreover, each organization creates its own culture.

In the following account the culture of an organization is viewed as a 'family of concepts,' made up of such ideas as symbol, language, ideology, beliefs, ritual and myth. Symbol is the most inclusive category (Pettigrew 1979: 574), but language permeates all categories. Try as we might to change it any analysis of symbolism is usually made through an analysis of language.

Interaction is the sphere in which symbolic meanings are realized on the level of language. The meanings are strictly combined, according to relatively durable interactional rules, which are worked out in particular social groups. Hence they are common social artefacts of the culture of the organization. The rules are frequently unconsciously applied and difficult to observe. Nevertheless, they govern the social life of the organization. They are implicit rules since many of them are inscribed into the colloquial language which is the main safeguard of social order in worker groups and formal organizations. The rule matrices become explicit whenever new workers or 'strangers' make interactional errors. New workers are entering a culture which is made up of many interactional games, such as, for example, those connected with the sporadic face-to-face contacts described by Turner (1971: 62—63) in terms of the so-called norms of 'continuity of contact' and 'establishment of common ground.'

Turner is mainly concerned with explicit rules of interactional behavior such as the 'norm of reciprocity' (op.cit.: 63 — 68), as he speaks of the necessity of paying back when something has been intended, with full awareness, as a gift (op.cit.: 64). Moreover: "Some continuing reciprocal relationships may be attached to a job-role rather than to a person, and in these cases it then becomes necessary to induct the new incumbent into the rights and duties which he has acquired in this regard" (op.cit.: 68). The same deliberatedness is connected with the norms of 'continuity of interactional contact' (op. cit.:62—63) and norms of' establishing common ground' (op.cit.: 63). Generally, however, people are not fully aware of these norms because the norms of language are taken as a *matter of course* (Wittgenstein 1953). There are many rules in language which we are made to 'follow.' Yet following a rule implies meaningful action:

Our language and our social relations are just two different sides of the same coin. To give an account of the meaning of the word is to describe how it is used and to describe how it is used is to describe the social intercourse into which it enters .... The use of language is so intimately, so inseparably bound up with the other non-linguistic activities which men perform, that it is possible to speak of their non-linguistic behavior also as expressing discursive ideas (Winch 1967: 123, 128).

Moreover, "understanding rule involves understanding contradiction too" (op.cit.: 65). Intersubjectivity is connected with the evaluation of an event and, at the same time, with the application of a rule in a given context. Norms, in this sense, exist only if in applying them we can observe, reflectively, their alternatives. They exist only in action strictly connected with the usage of language or talk.

Thus, norms are especially visible in the difficult situation of a new worker joining the game of 'the interactional ritual of ridiculing.' Since he or she does not recognize the rules of ritual linguistic exchange and reacts to them in an incompetent way (not to be confused with Chomsky's usage), he or she will therefore frequently 'lose face' (Goffman 1967; 1971). The newcomer rarely perceives 'deceit through insinuation,' one of the linguistic devices of ridicule, and even if it is perceived, the newcomer is unable to react to maintain or to regain face. The situation is similar in another form of ritual, a ritual which we will call "worker flirting."

The present paper concentrates on 'worker flirting' as one of the forms of interactional ritual in the culture of an organization. It is thus *only an illustration* of the interactional dimension of the culture of an organization.

The paper[1] deals with interactional ritual in an industrial organization and is based on an

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[1] A version of this paper was presented at the 'Standing Conference on Organizational Symbolism (SCOS) in

empirical study carried out in a radio-electrical plant, "Z," which employs 1,500 workers. The author carried out a period of three-months covert participant observation and recorded 139 free-interviews. These were supplemented by three months of covert participant observation by the author's collaborator, himself a worker at the plant. The study also included 21 one-week periods of covert participant observation in other plants.

The research and analytical procedures utilized in this study have been taken mainly from the work by Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967; see also Glaser 1978; Turner 1981; and Martin and Turner 1986).

4.2 Flirting

Our observations in Plant Z revealed the frequent occurrence of parasexual interaction between men and women workers, most frequently in the production units, but also among clerks. Its non-verbal aspect consisted of the pinching of women workers by men, mutual embracing between men and women, flirtatious self-exposure by women, the simulation of sexual behavior or of sexual intercourse in close contacts, and the undressing of women by men, with the women's passive or active consent. The verbal part consisted of veiled or open references mad to the sexual life of a particular person, making sexual offers or asking questions about a woman's menstrual cycle. The language of flirting is saturated with vulgarisms, especially in the production units, and makes use of a specific sexual vocabulary. Both men and women are initiators of this kind of interaction irrespective of age in a given sex category or of age differences between sexes[2], so that we are justified in concluding that relations within this ritual interaction were, for the most part, symmetrical.

It should be noted that the behavior in question has a jocular character. It is not serious, but

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2 Cultural anthropologists have pointed out that flirting and joking among men and women in primitive societies are accepted only when the persons are potential sexual partners, i.e., they are not bound by some prohibition of contact, taboo, restriction, etc. (Brant 1948: 160; Lowie 1949: 97; Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 100). A different situation was observed in an industrial plant, a printing house, in Glasgow, Scotland, by Sykes (1966) where flirting, usually obscene, occurred most frequently between older men and women, who were not potential sexual partners. Obscene jokes were made also between old women and younger men, though it was the women who initiated flirting, and no physical contact (or petting) was possible. Here flirting was a sign of exclusion from potential sexual relations. Jokes with sexual overtones occurred also between old men and younger women. As in the previous case, the jokes precluded any serious sexual relations between these social categories. On the other hand, public flirting or petting between young men and women was entirely prohibited. Modest behavior of the women was a sign of sexual availability (Sykes 1966: 188-193).

We have encountered a quite different situation in Factory Z, department F-l and F-2, where the flirting relations were symmetrical with regard to social and age categories. This situation is best accounted for by the structural relations described below.

is full of coquetry and its sexual content is not taken literally. We have, therefore, called it *'worker-flirting."* The 'worker' part refers to the contextual aspects of work-situations in which flirting occurs — the description below refers mainly to the mechanical department F-1 of Plant Z.

Parasexual interaction was observed between:

1) Press operators (women) and fitters (men);

2) Press operators (women) and internal transport workers (men);

3) Press operators (women) and quality inspectors (men);

4) Press operators (women) and other workers (men).

Figure 4 represents a diagrammatic representation of these types of interaction. [3]
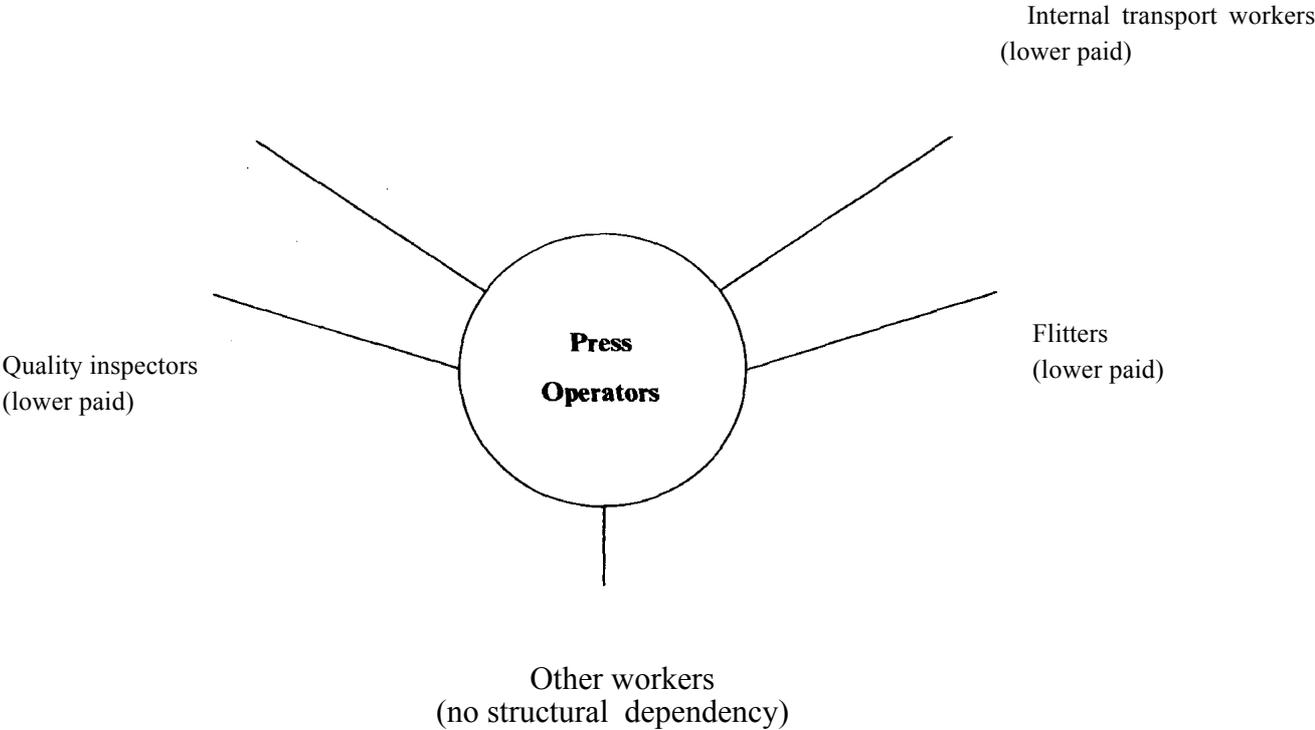

Figure 4. l Diagrammatic representation of the main actors in the flirting
ritual and their relations

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3 I should like to thank B.A. Turner for this suggestion.

Flirting occurs mainly between those occupational groups whose relations to each other are determined by the technological process, and whose interactional contacts are most direct. Thus the flirting which we observed is all a property of an occupational group, and not of a couple of people engaged in the game of coquetry at any particular moment. Worker flirting always takes place in the presence *of* other workers who form an audience. That is, the *rule of observability by others* is an essential part of it. Workers flirting away from the group in dyads were negatively sanctioned by their co-workers. Another rule of the ritual seems to say that *flirting cannot continue outside the workplace.* If it does, it is sharply branded with humorous comment and malicious gossip. Certainly there were cases when flirting continued outside the plant, but it was sanctioned negatively and the audience refused to accept it unless it ended up in the marriage of the flirting couple:

"They got married because the machine broke down." Flirting which went on outside the plant threatened yet another rule of worker flirting which can be put as follows: *worker flirting has its limits —* it does not lead to sexual consumation.

Worker flirting may occur where there is a *hierarchy of power and dependency* of one group on another. In our case it was an informal power relationship in which the press operators' flow of work depended on the previous performance of other groups of workers, as described below. These groups had a discretionary power over the press operators (Crozier 1964). The structural relationship, a necessary condition for flirting, became in this case one of the rules of flirting, since its recognition was essential if both parties to the interaction were to participate smoothly in it.

4.3 Parasexual Behavior in the Relations Between Press Operators and Fitters

The women press operators, who work at air-operated and circular cam presses, make various parts for transformers and stabilizes. Their flow of work and their wages - they are paid on a piece-work basis — depend on the other groups of workers. Their dependency upon the fitters arises from the frequent need to fit new jigs to their machines due to mechanical wear, and to the technical requirements of different parts. For the sake of simplicity we shall initially concentrate on this particular relationship with the fitters. The nature of the relationship can be expressed in the following hypothesis:

The more resistance there is from the women to the flirting of fitters, the less likely the fitters are to deal with their machines quickly. Or, conversely:

If flirting proceeds undisturbed, the fitters get to work immediately after receiving information from a press operator about the need to change a jig.

We have thus seen that worker flirting has a structural basis and that it is performed relative to a particular technological cycle and a particular system of paying the press-operators (by piecework) and the fitters (by the hour). Moreover, the fitters' wages are lower than the women press operators', even though their flow of work depends upon the fitters. We may then be seeing the consequence of a desire on the part of the fitters to compensate for their lack of status, most frequently manifested in direct interaction on pay-days, when women boast of their higher wages. The men may try to win back their status through the degrading practices which sometimes occur in worker-flirting, and which symbolize their discretionary power over the press operators.

In the factory units observed, matters of sex, prevailed in break-time conversations. At the foreman's table workers constantly talked of the past, about "what fine women they used to have in the unit, and what they used to do on the night shift!" They often cursed and swore and supplemented their stories with gestures which symbolized sexual intercourse. The main story-tellers at the table were the fitters, then the foreman, then the transport workers.

The themes of physical force and fights, together with sex reflect a 'macho' ethos cultivated by the male-workers which emphasised physical and sexual ability as factors of male supremacy over women. Dependency flirting becomes more understandable against such an ideological background. Moreover we should add that the workers mainly come from the country or are first generation industrial workers of peasant origin.

The problematic side of the press operator's situation at work is well indicated in the following excerpt from the researcher's notes:

(Some) women (press operators) were complaining again that they had no work to do. One of them ... was crying because a fitter was so slow in fixing her machine that she had to be transferred to another one (which reduced her output below the daily rate, since she rarely worked at the machine and was not used to it). In the end the fitter fixed her machine but some other woman was assigned to it. When E. refused (weeping) to work at the other machine the foreman cursed and scolded her. After ten minutes of 'sitting' protest E. went to the new machine. Yesterday she didn't manage to reach her daily rate again.

This woman was sometimes opposed to the flirting practices. The fitters and foreman disagreed with this ambiguous attitude to flirting and tried to punish her for it. Thus we come to worker flirting. Below are some examples from field notes:

I noticed later that all cart drivers (transport workers) were drunk. A few fitters and women press operators were drunk, too. The fitter M. started flirting with the press operator E. and two other women (press operators). E. was lifting her dress and showing her thighs and the fitter looked at them expertly and made comments. ... He told me later that he would go to bed with her if she bought him a bottle of vodka.

I once saw a press operator come to a fitter asking him to fit the press at which she was working. She started by embracing him by the neck and hugging him. After a short while he went to fit her machine.

Below is a quotation which clearly points to the structural interrelation between the work of press operators and the work of fitters:

When I was sitting with other workers (fitters among them) at the junk-yard — they had called me there — "Come and have a rest" — two press operators came running and urged two fitters (without cajoling or courting them) to fit new jigs on their machines. "We're coming," they said. But they did not go for the next ten minutes. In the end the foreman came and said to the fitters: "The women are yelling. Go and do those jigs for them". They did not go for another ten minutes and commented that those particular women were always in a hurry and yelling. Others were much better. You could go an hour and a half later and they would be there, sitting quiet and saying nothing.

The structural dependency was most frequently manifested in the contexts preceding the fitting of new jigs by a fitter, or the mounting of a new belt by a transport worker. However relative, the compulsion to engage in the flirting ritual by both parties of the interaction, and especially by the women, seemed to be a principle. Only a few women did not participate in this ritual and they were excluded from the communication network of the worker group.

Nevertheless, flirting also occurred in other contexts which did not immediately precede the changing of jigs by a fitter, for example at the foreman's table at break time:

One of the fitters pressed one of the operators hard with the front of his body. The 'Big Girl' laughed flirtatiously — it looked as if she was enjoying it.

Sometimes in the course of the coquetry-game, the degrading aspects of flirting became manifest:

I've got a loose pin. Come and fix it." "What have you got loose?" asks the fitter. "Well, that thing on the side of this ..." says the woman. "Then what do you call it?" asks the fitter. "Well, the screw-thread, I think ..." answers the press operator. "That's a different story" said the fitter and winked at us workers sitting at the foreman's table. Only then did he go to fit the machine.

The fitter took advantage of his superior qualifications and his superior technical knowledge. This component of work organization, the technical qualification, is manifest in the above interaction and changes its character.

However, worker flirting may also have an integrating function in the worker unit (see the first hypothesis above) as the following note suggests:

This morning O. came to a fitter and asked him to fix her machine. The fitter who serviced her machine (he was also her charge-hand) immediately went to fix it ... Later I noticed that the fitter was feeling up' O. The press operator was laughing (she seemed to enjoy it).

In some respects, flirting reinforces the internal bonds of the group and creates a good atmosphere for work. Many workers (men and women) expressed such an opinion during

interviews and confirmed that flirting had such a meaning for them: "We are one family, so that we can behave like that".

Similar patterns of behavior, in accordance with both of our hypotheses occurred in the interaction between press operators and *internal transport workers.* The transport workers' job was to supply the strip and to mount it on a reel from which it was fed into the press operators' machine. Whenever a press operator is reluctant to engage in coquetry the transport workers seem to be slow to do their work.

In some ways the press operators were also dependent on *quality inspectors.* This dependency rested on the inspectors' freedom to refuse a quality pass to parts made by a particular press operator. The formal quality standards could not always be used by the inspectors in their work because of the low quality of metal strip supplied by the foundry and because the quality of production was generally sub-standard. As a result the quality inspectors applied their own kind of quality standards in order to satisfy the need to 'keep the production going.' This may well influence their behavior since they have a ready way to participate in worker flirting, arising from the possibility of using their discretionary power.

There were also instances of flirting between press operators and *other categories of workers,* from other departments or machine bays. These were, however, isolated cases which took place mainly at break time, unlike the cases previously discussed, when flirting occurred mainly in the machine bays, during work-time. It seems that flirting with other categories of workers was not structurally based and could be interpreted in two ways, either as an activity which might break the monotony of work or as part of a more general pattern of sexual harassment.

4.4 New Workers and Worker Flirting

New workers must become fully aware of the rules of flirting before they can enter the system of communication of a given working group. For a new worker, worker flirting sometimes looks like sexual foreplay which leads up to a culmination in the form of intercourse. Many new workers were caught in this trap, by getting involved in the perplexing affairs which entail a loss of face and which often place them at the bottom of, or even outside the social hierarchy of the group:

A new transport worker (two weeks of work) was making a pass at one of the press operators by painfully hitting her on the back and feeling various parts of her body. It went on for some time with tacit acquiescence from the woman. At one point, however, when his behavior became more intense the press operator asked him to stop. Suddenly, she hit him hard in the back and kicked him below the waist saying: "F... off". She later added: "It's a pity I didn't get him in the balls".

In the above case the structural basis was present but the new worker did not recognize the essential feature (one of the rules) of worker flirting: that is, that 'flirting has its limits.' The initiator of the flirting episode was too aggressive, his flirting lasted too long and the balance of acceptance and rejection was then unsettled by the total rejection given by the press operator. Its meaning was misinterpreted by the new worker.

A second observation:

I talked to a new worker (aged 21, 1.5 months of work in the transport department) about an incident on the second shift when he had been beaten up by a woman-worker (an assembler in another bay). "What have you messed about with that woman?" I asked. He said "Well, it went all right at the beginning, but then she went nuts ..." "Were you pressing her too much?" I asked. "Well, you see, I could have hit her, even killed her, but what for? ... Anyway, she was stoned too".

It would seem that this new worker did not recognize another rule of worker flirting, according to which the work of the assembler should have depended on his. It did not: the assembler worked in a different bay and had no reason to accept his passes or to participate in the game of flirting with him. It is difficult to be definite about this, but it seems probable that we see here a breaching of the rule of the common pattern of behavior.

The flirting of new workers with press operators refers not only to transport workers but also to quality inspectors:

I noticed that a new quality tester was taking a liking (reciprocated) to some press operators. He is especially close to one of them. Their conversations are saturated with erotic allusions. The tester once said to me, "She is that kind of girl that if I pressed her a little harder she would go for it".

Here again the new worker fails to recognize one of the rules of flirting, namely that 'flirting has its limits', although he did not go on to breach this rule in action.

A further quotation from my field notes:

I saw how a new transport worker (5 weeks at the plant) who was mounting the strip, delicately hit the press operator above the hips with the fingers of both hands. The woman sprang up and squeaked. They were both happy (laughed). Other men and women workers who saw the incident were also laughing.

In the above example the flirting followed all of the rules. There was a dependency of the press operator's work upon that of the transport worker. The flirting was a public fact, since it was observable by other workers. The essential features of flirting are recognized and the flirting is performed in the workplace.

Getting used to the worker flirting ritual is an important element in the initiation of new female workers who are employed as press operators. This is especially true with regard to the touching of their bodies in public. The male workers accomodate the women (both mentally and physically) to the novel situation. They introduce them to the new intimate spheres, those

which the women have previously treated as inaccessible to others but which are now made accessible. The social delimitation of the new spheres of intimacy frequently comes as a shock to the neophyte, since particular regions of the body have strictly defined meanings, which may have to be reinterpreted when the cultural milieu or context is changed:

A press operator once told me that men were harassing her a lot when she first came to work here (they would pinch and feel her up, etc.). She couldn't stand it and she would often go to the ladies room to cry. In the end she gradually got used to it and changed her tactics. She started behaving in the same way, 'snapping back' at them and using the same kind of language (vulgarisms) in order to survive and bear up against her situation in the plant.

Getting used to worker flirting is thus associated with the socialisation process for newcomers: "A sexualized workplace may depress the number of behaviors labelled as sexual harassment because workers may become habituated to sexual behavior at work due to constant exposure" (Konrad and Gutek 1986: 424).

Women in our case study may, of course, be accustomed to such a pattern of behavior in the factory but outside the workplace they are still likely to treat such behavior as sexual harassment. The general perception of worker flirting in Factory Z is a male 'perception'. Men usually have different orientations than women to sexual behavior and they may not perceive many of these activities as sexual harassment (Konrad and Gutek 1986: 430—431). If women accept the male interpretation of these behaviors they will suppress their own interpretation desired from a more ideal world and will move to behave according to the male definition of worker flirting, in which 'worker flirting is not sexual harassment'. But this shift of perspective, that is the redefinition of parasexual behavior, is made under the pressure of the male definition of the situation. Real sexual harassment may thus sometimes be hidden under the surface of a male definition of flirting as normal behavior, or, alternatively, as appeared at many points in our case study, it may also develop into a pattern which takes on the appearance of a normal mode of cooperation at work.

4.5 Conclusions

Worker flirting has all of the features of a dependency ritual, since it reflects the direction of dependency and the presence of social distance (Turner 1971: 23 — 26). Its form is the result of negotiation and adaptation on both sides of the interaction, a negotiation to which the various parties bring differing types of resources. It is a product of interaction which takes place in given working groups. It is not 'forced upon' workers by the organization or executed according to formal rules. The only 'forced' part is the condition necessary for the occurrence of the ritual — the structural dependency. This holds true not only for the technological

dependency which we have seen in worker flirting, but also for formal dependency, associated with, for example, 'informing', 'making gifts', 'manifesting discontent with a subordinate' and other forms of dependency rituals. Nevertheless, this condition of dependency must enter the interaction as an 'interactional resource' related to the will and tendencies among the working groups concerned. Sometimes workers do not want to participate in the rituals, but in such a situation, they are excluded from the social network and become marginal to the group. Hence the dependency ritual, treated as an element of the culture of an organization, arises 'from the ranks' as an outcome of shared subjective interpretations of members of the formal organization.

Observing the interactional rules of the dependency rituals helps all participants to maintain face once such a system has been established. Those who do not observe the rules usually lose face, and this frequently has far-reaching consequences for their participation in the every-day life of the working group, for persons who have lost face may be excluded from the group and become outsiders.

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