Discourses on Downsizing: Structure and Sentiment in an Organizational Dispute

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Abstract: Downsizing, sometimes accompanied by staff amalgamation, has become a grim but pervasive cost-cutting device in Western societies of the 1990s. This article focusses on two hospital-based nursing schools, in an economically marginal Maritime community, that faced merger and the loss of a number of much-prized teaching jobs in the early 1990s. Although both staffs approved, in principle, of raising educational standards for nursing employment, they held distinctly different positions on how educational qualifications should figure in the layoff formula. Downsizing provoked a discourse that unveiled the significance of interpersonal loyalties and work-group identities

Résumé: Réduire le nombre des employés et parfois fusionner le personnel sont de dures mais fort répandues mesures de réduction des coûts dans les sociétés occidentales des années quatre-vingt-dix. Cet article se concentre sur deux écoles d'infirmières affiliées à des hôpitaux dans une communauté dans les Maritimes à faible rendement économique. Ces deux écoles ont dû faire face à une fusion ainsi qu'à la perte d'emplois fort prisés dans le domaine de l'enseignement au début des années quatre-vingt-dix. Bien que les employés des deux écoles aient approuvé, en principe, la hausse des standards pédagogiques de la profession d'infirmiers(ères), leurs opinions divergeaient en ce qui concerne la place des qualifications pédagogiques dans la formule de licenciement. La réduction du nombre des employés a provoqué une réaction qui a révélé la pertinence des loyautés interpersonnelles et l'identité des groupes de travail.

The case presented here concerns cultural activity played out in a formal-organizational setting. Concretely, the study compares the way nursing instructors in two hospital-based training programs (in "Stelton," a small Maritime city) differentially and creatively interpreted job qualifications in a situation of competition for continued employment. The conditions that provoked competition—program amalgamation and staff downsizing—were ultimately rooted in forces of political economy and mediated by formal-organizational factors. The study is thus set against a sketch of that backdrop. But these contextual features are not determinative. Rather, I focus on how the instructors acted as human agents, responding in terms of their grounded (i.e., localized, day-to-day, direct) experience. With respect to layoff criteria, each staff generated its own position, which reflected interpersonal loyalties and in-group identities. These polarized positions will be analyzed as a discourse, generated in terms of interpersonal dynamics and personal meanings that played themselves out in the narrative context of everyday work life, one in which extra-organizational roles figured.

The case analysis arises from a prior critique of the popular notion of "organizational culture."[1] Specifically, organizational culture (OC) is a misnomer disguising cultural variation within bureaucracies. Secondly, as a reification, it glosses over cultural process and, thirdly, it creates artificial boundaries between intra- and extra-organizational statuses that are relevant to the way cultured actors interpret structural principles (values, norms and institutions). That critique highlights important methodological issues and creates an alternative framework that is used here for the analysis of organizational behaviour.

Cultural Complexity in Organizations

Anthropologists have noted that the burgeoning OC literature from management studies mishandles intraorgani-

zational cultural complexity (e.g., Gregory 1983). It does so largely by conflating the *organization's culture* with the business ideology of senior management. It is, in brief, "managementcentric," and has been rigorously taken to task for it (Alvesson and Berg, 1992; Baba, 1989; Davis, 1985; deRoche, 1997 and 1994; Gamst, 1989; Hochwald, 1990; Kunda, 1992). The critique does not suggest that subordinates reject all bureaucratic authority. The nursing instructors I studied do not contest the hospital administration's right to make budgetary decisions that effect layoffs. This does not mean, however, that they agree with officially sanctioned decisions about layoff criteria. Nor does it mean that each staff's perception of these decisions is uniform. On the question of educational qualifications, in fact, the women employed at each of the schools ("St. Martha's" and "Stelton General," respectively) differed dramatically.

The OC literature gives some limited attention to professional subcultures within organizations (see, among others, Deal and Kennedy, 1982: 150 ff.; Kilmann, 1985: 352; Kilmann, Saxton and Serpa, 1985: 11-12; Schein, 1989: 7). It does not, however, examine intraprofessional differences in the workplace. It also recognizes that subcultural variations arise through mergers, which bring together separate organizations and thus "cultures." But these treatments suffer from the same analytical difficulties that plague the literature as a whole: cultural variants are generally seen as "deviant" or "countercultural" manifestations of organizational culture. According to OC writers, these variants can and must be subordinated to a broader cultural consensus that flows down from management. By analyzing the perspectives of two groups of nursing instructors, this article presents a very different model of organizational and occupational culture. It is one that acknowledges culture, even in hierarchical organizations, as the natural precipitate of group interaction among human agents (deRoche, 1997 and 1994). As Hamada puts it: "Organizational goals are never accepted or appreciated uniformly by individual members. . . . [The] study of organizational culture is in a way *an inquiry into the political processes of social relationships*" (1989: 6; emphasis added).

In *Occupational Subcultures in the Workplace*, Harrison Trice (1993) does not fall prey to the "managementcentric" oversimplification of culture that is common in the OC literature. Using Mary Douglas's grid/group dichotomy, he tries to identify the circumstances under which occupational groups can resist the firm's management subculture. In doing so he provides an analysis of occupational structure and culture. Occupations, he explains, vary in the degree to which they emphasize hierarchical authority and reward structures, as well as normative formalization (the grid dimension), on the one hand, and communal self-interest (the group dimension), on the other (Trice, 1993: 42-43). These dimensions vary independently, so that an occupation can be characterized by any one of four combinations. The strong grid/strong group occupation, for example, is internally hierarchical but seeks the interests of the collective (as a whole) vis-à-vis occupational outsiders within the organization. (1993: 43-44). The provincial Registered Nurses Association (RNA), to which the Stelton nurses belong, falls into this category. It is attempting to serve the interests of its constituency by legislating a higher minimal educational standard that, it believes, will raise the status of nurses in the eyes of the public, as well as of doctors to whom nurses feel unjustly subordinated. The instructors to whom I spoke agreed with this policy in principle. The two staffs differed, though, in their beliefs about how that policy would best be put into practice.

Trice's training in anthropology and the title of his book promise an in-depth analysis of employees' experiences. But his treatment does not adequately acknowledge the ways bureaucratic structures impinge on the lived experience of workers. Official positions taken by professional associations do not fully represent the complex and diverse perspectives of their memberships. Local understandings may deviate from those formally espoused by authorities. Ultimately, understanding the experience of work in bureaucratized settings requires an analysis of how localized groups deal with policies of both professional associations and employers, as well as other formal structures such as unions. In contending with super-local and superordinate forces, social actors are governed, at least in part, by informal, collective interests that operate at the microlevel, within small coworker units. The dynamics of localized solidarities and collective self-images affect responses to bureaucratic pressures. These factors are crucial to understanding how nursing instructors in Stelton responded to downsizing and the role of educational qualifications in layoff decisions.

Social scientists fundamentally recognize that the quality of interpersonal relations must be understood socioculturally. The capacity of women to bond (to identify and co-operate) is not in question here. The women's movement (Cassell, 1989; Miles and Finn, 1982), as well as the literature to which it gave rise, has put the lie to writings (such as Tiger, 1969) that elevated (or reduced) Western gender stereotypes about organizing and bonding to the level of natural fact. Women, no less than men, are subject to both large- and small-scale pressures, and

they experience these positionally, in terms of the statuses they occupy. When women enter paid employment, they are drawn into an arena which is a "male sphere" dominated by certain values—sometimes labelled patriarchal—that are generally associated with modern formal organizations: instrumentality, universalism, achievement, competition and the like. At the macrolevel, professional associational hierarchies (irrespective of gender composition) are prone to accept these larger-scale values, in their efforts to achieve collective goals within a wider arena of status competition. These may be accepted or contested by their rank-and-file members. But it behooves us to query the complex processes by which ideological systems become reproduced, reconstructed or resisted in concrete circumstances. It is important to ask not only "Whose ideology?" but also "What is the relationship between ideology and lived experience?"

Formal organizations are socially differentiated, and status distinctions mark out stakeholder groups. Various factors can differentiate rank-and-file groups. Stakeholders may be aligned by occupation (Bartunek and Moch, 1991; Kunda, 1992), work assignment (Van Maanen, 1991) or in terms of security of tenure (Kunda, 1992). Stakeholder populations, within the rank-and-file, develop understandings of how they place vis-à-vis one another, and their claims can be conflicting (see, for example, the altercasting between full-time and casual garment workers discussed by Young, 1991). Note, though, that the case at hand involves two groups of women who share a profession (nursing) and a job classification (instruction). Most share the status of permanent employee. Before the process of amalgamating began, their nursing schools were structurally similar and functionally equivalent, as were the hospitals of which they were departments. Each staff was small (composed of fewer than a dozen women), and working relationships within them were close; the women developed a sense of loyalty to one another and to their respective institutions. These factors amplified the magnitude of small differences in the educational backgrounds of instructors at each school. Thus, in the competition into which they were thrust, each staff functioned as a stakeholder group that developed its own strategic symbolic construction of layoff policy. Their competing constructions were formulated as part of a micropolitical process. This observation returns us to the question of process and agency.

Human Agency

Anthropological critics of popular OC literature reference important issues in the theory of culture when they argue against cultural reification and determinism. The contrast between OC authors and their critics parallels what Carrithers (1992: 18) defines as a transition from an earlier model of culture as a causative and conservative *thing* (metaphorically, Benedict's "cups" or Radcliffe-Brown's "sea shells"). The light of theoretical critique has now been refracted to create an image of culture as a precipitate of social events in which culture is itself implicated. Here, culture loses its externality, objectivity and independence; instead, it becomes conceptualized as intersubjective and interdependent, a system of meanings that is open to the implications of its own use as a social instrument (Bailey, 1969; Carrithers, 1992; Giddens, 1984; Murphy, 1971; Sahlins, 1981). The cultural dupes of more traditional (and more recent structural) theory are replaced by inventive social actors who "construct, reconstruct, and dismantle cultural materials" (Wolf in Carrithers, 1992: 27) and thus "make history" (i.e., both cultural reproduction and change). Significantly, a human-agency perspective sees culturally driven thought and action as indeterminate (or underdetermined), since cultural signs are polysemic, and all societies are at least minimally differentiated and thus constituted of varying stakeholder groups. Even if widely accepted, ideals cannot explain the multiplicity of concrete interpretations, much less their relationship to social action. The production of "real" culture is not random, of course, given the limiting effects of received categories and of power.

In other words, people use cultural resources, but do not do so passively. Their active involvement may be more or less creative. Anthony Giddens helps us illuminate this point. As a corrective to "objectivist" views, he offers structuration theory, a conceptual toolkit from which we can borrow the distinction between "practical" and "discursive" consciousness. The former is not to be understood as a-cultural, "practical" reason, but rather as cultural reason. It comprises "all of the things which actors know tacitly" (Giddens, 1984: xxiii) and act upon. Humans, as reflexive beings, use this knowledge in a continuous monitoring of others' actions and expectations. Giddens is therefore arguing that social life is routinely interpretive. Actors need not explicitly articulate their understandings, carry on a discourse about it, or enter a discourse with it. Practical consciousness does not always become discursive, but there is "no bar" between the two (ibid.: 7).

Carrithers (1992), like Giddens, argues that the same capacities that allow routinization also permit mutability: inference, higher-order intentionality, abstract thought. But he does not illuminate the conditions under

which these alternate, cultural-life courses occur. Sahlins also understands that social events are at once both conservative and innovative. He argues that cultural transformation is most clearly identifiable in conditions of culture contact, where there are clashing "cultural understandings and interests," but also that these motors of change exist within societies, "so long as actors with partially distinct concepts and projects relate their actions to each other" (Sahlins, 1981: 68). It seems reasonable to argue that practical consciousness becomes discursive, when routine breaks down and threatens "ontological security"—that is, trust in the way the world works (Giddens, 1984: xxiii; see also Bailey, 1977). Under these conditions, discursive consciousness is likely to be creative. Creative interpretation is most likely where claims for resources compete, since the contest requires that claims be legitimated. That is precisely the type of circumstance in which the Stelton nursing instructors were operating when amalgamation and downsizing occurred. The nurses created a discourse, though they did not challenge authority or try to change the system.

The process of creative discourse must be distinguished from the related questions of cultural and social change. Murphy (1971) argues that the dialectic between the mind and supra-individual ideals can serve to preserve those ideals. This may be effected by polite fiction, by convenient memory gaps, or by ideologically congruent reclassifications. Ideology "misapprehends" the operation of more complex and contradictory principles resident in overt and covert action, and in so doing may permit their continuance. Human creativity, further, occurs in the context of power. Microcultural reworkings of polysemic, received categories may neither convince nor even challenge those with power. Power involves control of resources to which subordinates need access, and it is, after all, often protected by authority, which is itself grounded in intersubjectivity.

Creative discourse need not be revolutionary, but it can serve important intragroup and personal functions. The latter, for example, are amply demonstrated by Kunda's (1992: 160ff.) description of the "continuing dialogue" between workers' understandings of themselves and the roles defined for them by management. In examining the ways that high-tech employees both identified with prescriptions and distanced themselves from them, Kunda sought to illustrate how they interpreted and made "meaningful their situation . . . within socially imposed constraints" (ibid.: 161). As will be shown, the Stelton instructors did likewise: while providing no challenge to authorities, they interpreted official policy in terms of their own *Gemeinschaft* interests. Their interpretations preserved their sense of interpersonal loyalty, small-group solidarity and group superiority, while protecting the principle of profession-wide status-seeking through educational upgrading.

Finally, we can draw a highly useful methodological note from Carrithers' notion that "narrative thought" is crucial to understanding how people experience and manage their social lives. Narrative thought rests on the "capacity to cognize . . . many-sided human interactions carried out over a considerable period . . . [to understand] complex deeds and attitudes" (Carrithers, 1992: 82). He points out that social agents act not only in terms of structural principles, but also in terms of real ongoing relationships with particular people. Carrithers argues for grounded micro-analyses of sociocultural process, and he suggests that abstract principles, even when complex, do not predict process.

Case Parameters

Micropolitical process is at the heart of the case events described in this article. This process is played out within a larger sphere of external conditions and pressures, about which a few words are in order. The context for the case study presented here involves the fiscal crisis (O'Connor, 1973) that has been experienced of late by industrial nations and that has led to budgetary pressures on publicly funded institutions, including hospitals. Two small hospitals in "Stelton"—a pseudonym for a de-industrialized city of approximately 30 000, in an economically marginal Canadian province—have undertaken an amalgamation to achieve, among other things, staffing efficiencies.[2] To cut costs further, the administration of the amalgamating hospitals also decided to decrease enrollment in their new, joint, nurses training program from 70 to 50 students, virtually 30 percent, over two years. According to the standard 8-to-1 student-teacher ratio set by the provincial RNA and accepted locally, this would legitimize 12 teaching positions, down from the 17 that were occupied, in the 1990-91 academic year, by 19 women (because of job-sharing schemes). The teaching staff was expected to decline by two positions during the initial year and three more the next.

The question of criteria for layoff led to conflict between the instructional staffs of the two hospitals, in which the role of educational credentials versus job seniority became a serious bone of contention. Notably, attitudes to education were complicated by events arising from the provincial RNA, which sets standards for education, certification, practice and access to ranked job

statuses. That association has accredited hospital-based training programs that prepare nurses for the provincial certification exams. According to that body, the basic qualification for teaching is an undergraduate degree. The local nursing-school administrations have conformed to that standard, though not as a rigid prescription, but rather with a modicum of flexibility due to local contingencies. Historical practice has, in effect, created conditions that challenge the application of present ideals by laying bare the contradiction between credentials and performance (see below).

Professional-association policy had affected the local scene in another respect. In an effort to raise its professional profile, a "group" strategy, the RNA bureaucracy is modifying its professional grid by making a university degree the standard for "entry to practice" (i.e., the minimal requirement for entry into the profession) as of 2001. It is fostering educational inflation. Instructors at both schools accept the professional association's "group" efforts in this respect. They value increased educational credentials in the abstract, despite the implications for their own employment and educational futures. The new standard will erode the status distinction between themselves and floor-duty nurses. It, furthermore, sounds the death knell of their institutions, and pressures them to safeguard their instructional status by attaining graduate degrees, which will be possible only at significant personal and domestic expense. Some refused to believe in the proximate demise of their programs; others coped with a threatening future by believing that clinical-instructional positions would be made available for them, as bachelors graduates, in a new, local, degree program.[3] More importantly, at the historical moment under investigation, the new entry-level standard carried implications for those making claims to continued employment in the short term. In other words, the degree devaluation implied by the emergent policy increased the importance of the degree as an absolute minimum for instructional positions. Simply, the fact that their "inferiors"—practising nurses—were soon to have degrees suggested a decreased tolerance for anything less.

Perceiving the Stakes

In short, downsizing was hierarchically mandated in response to conditions beyond local control. Contesting that executive decision was hardly a realistic possibility for the instructors, who accepted the inevitability of job losses. Management devised a process whereby instructors would be ranked for rifting. Neither its right to do so nor the process it designed was challenged. The instructors were, however, directly and immediately concerned with how that process worked and with its outcome. Alternate forms of discursive consciousness, informed by professional-associational ideology, emerged in reaction to the ranking formula, and engaged each other dialogically. Before investigating that response, however, we should examine the instructors' evaluation of the jobs under threat.

Among the concerns voiced in 14 semistructured interviews undertaken (in spring 1991) a few months before the first joint academic year, job insecurities loomed large. Virtually every respondent noted fear of layoffs, if not with reference to herself (since some were secure in their positions), then as a group concern. No one, except the one single parent of two children, was especially fearful of her own unemployment per se. All felt the need to contribute economically to their households. Though virtually all were married to men with middle-class jobs, and while the degree of their families' dependence on their incomes varied, they wanted to maintain their families' living standard. However, the probability of alternate employment had been assured, since, as union members, laid-off instructors would have the right to claim the jobs of less senior practising nurses, and incumbent income losses were not judged significant. Job *changes* were seen as worrisome, however. Instructors noted, for example, that securing an appropriate post is complicated in a field of differentiated practice, where recent experience is so important a determinant of competency and self-confidence.

The instructors were more concerned still about changes in working conditions. They favoured their relative independence and control over concrete labour. Their real distress, however, can be understood only with reference to the standards against which they evaluate their jobs, and these norms bear the mark of extra-organizational, non-professional statuses. In other words, while a bureaucratic role *per se* is unitary, each incumbent holds many roles at the same time. Grounded analyses of work roles must take into account the demands of extra-organizational ones. As noted, the OC literature gives little attention to how extra-organizational statuses affect the development of work-group orientations. Its goal is rather to suggest means for controlling extra-organizational role demands (e.g., Pascale, 1984). While this may be desirable from a management perspective, it is unrealistic and analytically misleading to argue that these demands can be written off.

The instructors pointed out that not only is floor-duty nursing very hard work (cf. Greiner, 1991; Growe, 1991), but it is difficult to integrate with family life, and

only one (a quite secure) instructor was beyond her childrearing years. It was this scheduling advantage of their current jobs that the instructors overwhelmingly favoured. They worked regular hours and no overnight shifts, though some did periodic evening shifts. They were not required to work on public holidays, and, though arrangements at the nursing schools differed somewhat, they tended to have free time during public-school holidays.

Accordingly, teaching jobs were premium ones. Reassignment represented real loss. Instructors accepted the inevitability of some job losses at each school. Very little competition occurred within either staff, but the schools aligned themselves against one another. Finally, it is important to note, at least in passing, that the competitive attitudes surrounding downsizing took place in, and were perceived in terms of, the context of amalgamation. Amalgamation raised issues of managerial change and consequent changes in policies governing the concrete labour process, issues that would affect those who survived the downsizing. A detailed exposition of these issues is impossible here—they have been the focus of a separate analysis (deRoche, 1994)—though I can briefly remark on how they formed part of the narrative context that provoked interstaff conflict: while most instructors tried to present a perspective on change that balanced fears with hopes, those on both staffs were acutely aware of problems of distributive justice. As it became increasingly clear that the director of one of the schools ("St. Martha's") would head the amalgamated unit, both groups concluded that her subordinates would face less disruptive change than would their counterpart group (at "Stelton General"). This fed a sense of grievance that was emerging over the issue of job loss, the issue which is our prime concern in the discussion that follows.

Contests and Discourses

The case analysis examines how real-life players cope with institutional pressures and in so doing actively construct, or reconstruct, collective representations. In the conceptual terms introduced above, two groups of instructors ("Stelton General's" and "St. Martha's," respectively) generated alternate forms of discursive consciousness centring on the meaning of "job qualification." Each interpretation reflected its creators' communal interests, which they sought to validate ideologically. The layoff policy was devised by a union committee, empowered by the organizational hierarchy of the amalgamating hospitals. In accepting bureaucratic authority, as well as traditional domestic roles, the instructors engaged in social and cultural reproduction. That is to say, practical consciousness was also at play. Both discursive forms also instantiated a cultural valuation of primary relationships (though not necessarily its prioritization over impersonal standards in the matter of job allocation), and both nourished small-group solidarity. Both ideological models reaffirmed "ontological security," by reinforcing trust in the microcommunity of coworkers and by legitimating its collective self-image. In this sense, and because in so doing it offered a microlevel defence against a perceived injustice, the "deviant" (non-authorized) discourse is not to be dismissed. Rather it functioned as a form of collective disengagement from the oppression of power, like the disengagement on the individual level discussed by Bailey (1993), or, in other terms, as "a weapon of the weak" (Alverson, 1978).

The substantive content of the analysis involves conflict between principles and persons. In actuality, the case is constituted of different but related levels of "conflict": one at the level of ideology and the other on the plane of interpersonal experience. At the former level, there is contradiction between credentialism and role performance. Credentials are meant to testify to performance capacity, but incumbency in their absence reveals their political nature. This places a wedge between ideals and actuality, providing an opening for contestation. This wedge is driven by loyalty. Instructors are faced with a potential contradiction between interpersonal loyalties, on the one hand, and professional-educational ideology, on the other. As noted, abstract ideological principles are expressed by the instructors' professional association and prescribed by its hierarchy. But prescriptions aimed to benefit the collectivity are not necessarily unadulterated goods. Benefits do not accrue to all alike, and they carry costs.

At the level of lived experience, each of the two small groups has interpreted their common profession's educational ideology in a way that seeks to erase the conflict between it and the demands of intragroup loyalty. That loyalty does not represent simple altruism, an identification of the self with the concerns of valued others. Indeed, altruistic acts are not direct expressions of human nature or personality dispositions, but rather are complex, socially constructed acts. Claims of legitimacy are implicated in loyalty here, and legitimation of the group entails personal justification. Organizations demand loyalty, not just overt compliance. This is, in fact, the managerial goal underlying organizational-culture building (deRoche, 1997). The "dignity of the firm" (Bailey, 1993: 24), its capacity to inspire reverence or commitment, entails the dignity of the work group,

though the two can conflict (Roy, 1954). Each set of instructors takes pride in its school (hospital department) by taking approving notice of its collective effort. Each individual can take pride in herself as part of that collective. Group dignity, its claims on its own behalf, also implies conflict, that is, claims against the other (Bailey, 1993: 40ff.). In its alternative interpretations of qualification, each group makes claims for itself and contests the other's. It is the collectivities of coworkers that are opposed, and it is intragroup loyalty and need for legitimacy that fire the opposition. Finally, recall that role-conflict enters the contested terrain in another way. All instructors are women who well understood the countervailing demands of market- and domestic-sphere duties. As noted, the jobs for which they competed were valuable as a means for controlling conflict, between work and familial roles, that formed part of their practical consciousness. But these extra-organizational role considerations do more than explain the stakes; they also form part of the ideological backdrop for assessing claims and evaluating the outcome of the ranking process.

The instructors' discourse on ranking encompassed a commentary on action that took place in a structured organizational context. Ranking criteria were set in terms of an authorized division of labour in which unions figured centrally. Given its minimal attention to productive workers and its lack of class consciousness, the OC literature ignores the role of unions in sub-cultural processes, and even Trice's remarks are peripheral. In Stelton, nurses at each hospital were organized into a separate union representing both floor-duty nurses and instructors. The task of ranking instructors' claims to continued employment fell under union jurisdiction, and the hospital authorities thus delegated it to a joint committee of the two unions. Instructors were in a minority in both unions, and they were not directly represented on the committee. In other words, the committee comprised representatives of a different stakeholder group than that for which it was deciding policy. In this locale, floor-duty nurses are typically not university trained. The group dimension of the committee's mandate was further complicated: the committee could not represent the interests of the instructor constituency as a whole, but rather had to devise a grid that would differentiate claimants. The focus of the current analysis, however, involves less an unweaving of the grid/group dimensions of union-committee deliberations, and more an assessment of stakeholders' interpretations of those deliberations. This committee's calculations—most especially regarding the factor of education—had practical, micropolitical and symbolic consequences for the instructors. In operationalizing criteria and establishing a formula by which instructors would be ranked for layoff, the committee originally set out to consider three factors: experience (including both staff and instructional nursing), seniority (in the respective hospitals) and education. The first two are complicated, at least in part, by society's double standard of work responsibilities. Some instructors had resigned previously held positions for domestic reasons, while others had taken maternity leaves, allowing prior experience to count for seniority. The typical instructor did not have on hand the amount of detailed data required to assess the strategic value of alternate positions on this issue. The question of education became the most controversial one, polarizing the two staffs and crystallizing seniority issues.

Late in its deliberations, the committee decided to discount educational credentials in its ranking scheme. It did so by identifying a cultural contradiction alluded to above. The point of institutionalizing educational standards is to ensure job capacity. However, the committee argued that anyone who had been successfully filling a position must, by definition, be sufficiently qualified to do the job. The decision provoked a discourse within and between groups in which two forms of discursive consciousness emerged to confront one another.

Despite their common acceptance of the value of increased education, the local groups diverged on the question of qualification at the concrete and immediate level. They differentially interpreted the relationship between job experience and credentials. For the Stelton General instructors, credentials should be the basis for the first cut in the current layoff scheme, the gateway to claims based on seniority. And their definition of the credential supports their own competitive claims making. In contrast, the St. Martha's instructors disputed the primacy of the degree credential, arguing instead for the committee position that job performance proves qualification, and thus that seniority should be the only consideration in the current situation. That is to say, they and the committee discovered, at the level of grounded experience, the debate about credentialism argued theoretically by Marxist educational critics such as Bowles and Gintis (1988 and 1976) and other "conflict theorists" such as Collins (1979). In brief, ideological consensus on educational inflation does not translate into agreement about how to proceed with grounded activity.

Microlevel factors were implicated in the two staffs' respective ideological analyses. The educational profiles of the two staffs illuminate the way microlevel forces informed the discourse. Though a Bachelor's degree had become the basic requirement for teaching by the time

that current instructors were hired (in or after 1976), three instructors were without nursing degrees. Two were at Stelton General and one was at St. Martha's. At first glance, group image and *Gemeinschaft* factors seem to predict that the General's staff would be more favourable to the layoff formula that was generated. But it was the General staff that disparaged it. Instructors there firmly argued that a university degree should be a basic criterion for continued employment, while the St. Martha's instructors generally opposed that stance. Yet, as the situation was perceived from the ground, it was indeed group self-image and primary relationships that predicted attitudes. In terms of local-group status claims and primary loyalties, the General's staff had more to gain and less to lose by espousing the value of education; St. Martha's had nothing to gain and something to lose by the same posture. These reactions make sense so long as one understands the alternate interpretive frames generated for the evaluation of credentials.

Credentialism as a Tool

Among Stelton General instructors, education was said to be paramount. It was synonymous with qualification. One instructor summed up her colleagues' attitudes on the issue of instructor ranking: "At our school, qualifications [credentials] is [*sic*] number one and seniority" is second. Her summary is accurate; there were no dissenters in this group. For them incumbency and performance were insufficient measures of qualification. They typically objected to the argument that educational achievement is made irrelevant by role performance, i.e., that occupancy of a position is *de facto* qualification, since it indicates the ability to do the job. This respondent noted that educational qualifications were supposed to rank higher than seniority in the unions' formula, but by redefining qualification in terms of incumbency, "seniority was the only thing left to go on."

The formulation of this position was made possible by the way the Stelton General staff capitalized on an ambiguity in the degree policy of its professional association. They defined it as referring to any degree, not just one in nursing *per se*. Two of its instructors lacked degrees in nursing, but both were university graduates. Each, in fact, held both Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Education degrees (the latter of which are awarded, in the province, to degree-holders after another year or two of specialized training). Both were also registered nurses, with diplomas from hospital training programs. These women, in other words, each held three credentials. By interpreting the degree requirement broadly, the General's staff could claim credentialist superiority over its competition.

Indeed, some of the Stelton General staff claimed the superiority of the B.Ed. for the job of teaching. Notably, however, the two women in question were also low on seniority. No one suggested placing them above holders of a baccalaureate in nursing, a move that would create intragroup contests and seniority grievances. Sacrificing one of these women to the immediate rifting process was relatively painless, since she had been hired with the understanding that her job was temporary. (All other instructors held permanent positions.) The other woman, having resigned earlier for traditional domestic reasons, had been on staff for only a couple of years. These two would go, irrespective of degree status. To defend them symbolized group dignity, but it was materially and micropolitically cost free for the group as a whole. However, one of the staffs would eventually lose a third position; thus sacrificial imbalance was built into downsizing. In this context, the union position meant that the General would not only lose university-trained staff but also more staff members than the other, and the system would protect a St. Martha's instructor who held only a diploma.

One staffer at the General noted how the union position unfairly discredited her colleagues. In effect, it meant that:

> People with Master's degrees in adult education are bumped to the bottom, and those with no degree, but working on them, is [*sic*—clearly, the speaker had the one case in mind] put high on the list.... The difference between a Bachelor's in nursing and a B.Ed., to me she's *much* more qualified than someone who doesn't have any one.... I don't know what could be done to be fair, but I really feel an education is important in an educational institution. That's our specialty [after all].

This woman spoke for herself with some bitterness, noting that she has been given no rewards or recognition for a Master's degree in Education. (In fact, a Master's in Nursing raises one's annual salary by only $300, and until recently was not rewarded, on the assumption that it was not necessary and thus not utilized on the job). But for her and her colleagues the most contentious issue was the bachelor's degree versus diploma-plus-experience. She went on to rationalize credentialism in terms of culturally rooted values: "What bothers me most is that [there's] no respect for what a person does to help improve herself or the place she's working for."

This argument does more than voice a personal complaint. It asserts the superiority of the speaker's staff and

that group's sense of injustice. It raises the stakes in the educational competition. No one in the rank-and-file of the other staff can claim graduate training. More fundamentally, by underscoring the relevancy of degrees held by her school's two lowest-ranking instructors, this view sets the whole General group above a woman, from St. Martha's, who ranks second in the committee's list of job claimants. In arguing for the displacement of this high-ranking individual, the commentary also addresses a sense of grievance, felt by the General staff, concerning seniority, for which that woman was an especially clear symbol. That instructor's role as target—or scapegoat in the minds, though not words, of her own colleagues—can only be understood narratively, in the way life was experienced and interpreted by the agents of each discursive stance. This instructor had been working at St. Martha's continuously since graduating from that school itself in 1974. She was a part-time floor-duty nurse at the hospital, for seven years while her children were young, until she was invited to teach part-time in its training program. On becoming a full-time instructor, two years prior to the conflict, she had enrolled in an external degree program on a part-time basis, thus studying without resigning her position. In brief, the seniority system rewarded her for not having a degree, for not sacrificing the additional two to three years required to upgrade her diploma to a higher credential. Measuring her seniority by "date of hire," without differentiating full- and part-time status, she came to outrank all Stelton General instructors. Even if her part-time work (until 1981) had been discounted, she would still place rather high on the joint seniority scale, as rival instructors were well aware. (That method of calculation, to add insult to injury, was the standard in the General's union.) However, it is not surprising that the issue of part-time status remained beyond contention. Well-established instructors in both groups would be disadvantaged by any discount on part-time work, and it would create internal rivalries. The education issue more decisively polarized the two staffs and served the collective interests of each.

According to the established layoff formula, the General's third-least secure instructor would lose her job in the second year of amalgamation. She held a Bachelor of Nursing degree but had relatively few years of continuous service, because she had left work when her last child was born. Her colleagues' concern centred on her status as the only single parent in either group. In fact, they were acutely aware of her unusually great fear of unemployment *per se* and that, under the stress of financial vulnerability, she had begun a search for alternate employment. She was also a member of the team of second-year teachers at Stelton General, a group of women who were relatively status-conscious and especially cohesive.

Perhaps the most interesting and ironically corroborating remark comes from a woman who had worked on the provincial association's "entry to practice" committee, the body that recommended the new standard for entry into the profession. As she said:

> I was one of the people that felt education is a definite requirement. It's not fair that someone who didn't even have a degree would be placed higher. It's *not personal*. I know the person, she's really nice. It's *the principle* of the thing. . . . You have to be at least one degree higher than the people you're going to teach. (Emphasis added)

Her denial of particularistic (*Gemeinschaft*) motives and collective self-interest is revealing. Her judgment is not personal in the conventional sense. She was not arguing that a universal and instrumental standard should be abrogated for reasons of taste. Her remarks assert that personality preferences are irrelevant and extraneous. Principle is prioritized; the General's stance appears objective or disinterested. By implication, the other staff violates principle by advocating favouritism. But the ability of General staffers to put principle first reflects the absence of personal loyalties. Their relationship to the woman at issue is indeed *not* personal. In actuality, that group's interpretation of the educational criterion favours those with whom these staffers have personal ties. In the case of each of the two staffs, differentially constructed principles served personal relationships.

Performance as Proof

For St. Martha's staff, the case of the absent degree was very personal, but they did not construe their position as unprincipled. The instructor who lacked a degree had a larger-than-average family (four children). Her husband had returned to work only a month previously, having endured eight months' unemployment after a layoff from a job he had held for only four years. In accepting the unions' argument, her colleagues came to her defence. They questioned the university degree criterion as a valid indicator of ability to do the job. Thus, they critiqued "credentialism" in a way that is reminiscent of theoretized offerings (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Collins, 1979), by arguing that formal credentials are essentially an artificial device for legitimating claims under conditions of oversupply of qualified labour. They emphasized that incumbency proved qualification. One St. Martha's

colleague (who ranks in the middle of the seniority scale) indicated an ambivalence that is inherent in her group's position. She began by noting that she values education, that "a university education is important for anybody." When pressed to judge its universal applicability in the real situation at hand, she waffled:

> My original thought was that a degree was a basic requirement. I'd have to say I still think that [but] . . . these people [*sic*] were hired, given these jobs, [they're] very experienced. I don't see how they can go back on their decisions to hire . . . and [you] can't say they're [those lacking degrees] not as good to teach. *I couldn't pick them out if I didn't know.* (Emphasis added)

Notably, she made the dangerous argument that the nursing degree provides little in the way of teacher training. Her analysis does not champion formal education but rather on-the-job training. It is reasonable to suggest that under less contradictory microsocial circumstances, this woman would not have so reworked her original credentialist position. Her school colleague, the most senior of all the instructors, was less equivocal. When asked about the seniority system, she had no difficulty aligning herself as an anti-credentialist: "I agree with years of experience. Everybody is basically equal. If you've not got the qualifications, you shouldn't be teaching here." Thus, she brings to the battle the legitimacy of past, authoritative decisions. To question the ranking would question the judgment and authority of the director (who, most believed, would head the joint school). Then she added, more frankly than most, a comment about the microsocial motivation underlying this interpretation: "You have to have that because it gives protection to people in your hospital."

Rule-Proving Exceptions

The St. Martha's staff members further displayed their motivation by differentiating between applying the standard to new applicants (i.e., those who have no place in the personal-historical narrative) as opposed to incumbents. As this same instructor articulated it: "Maybe that's all [who] should be hired [those with degrees], but people who don't have their degrees, we should look after them." Her colleagues also pointed out that the controversial woman is working on her degree. Their opponents at the Stelton General thus appear to be splitting hairs. In general, protectionist and anti-credentialist opinions were echoed by virtually all others at St. Martha's, including its lowest-ranking instructor (who is young and childless). It is worth reiterating that the women quoted—like all other respondents, in both schools—favoured the RNA policy on educational upgrading.

Notably, the Stelton General staff did not entirely deny their target's capabilities. They conceded that it is possible to do the job without the credentials. "She probably does a lovely job," one of them admits, "but you have to have some sort of basis. Someone with a degree shouldn't be displaced." For them, the issue was, as noted, one of distributive justice, which they conceived as rewards for investment and effort. St. Martha's staff could accept credentialism, but only if it were applied to strangers. *Gemeinschaft* pressures displace the application of that principle into the future, to as yet unestablished loyalties. Lacking such mediating ties, the General was unfettered in its immediate application. Accordingly, one could say that in like circumstances the two groups might well react similarly; but their circumstances differed.

To the General instructors, forgiving the degree credential permitted what amounts to a double-dipping (i.e., benefiting twice-over from the same condition). In their commentaries, some of them directly confronted that issue. One instructor specifically suggested a limit on the value of experience. She pointed out that "Over five years, you've developed your teaching skills," though she qualified this by noting that improvement does continue after the basic development takes place. Another went further. After she objected to someone's being essentially credited with a degree by being judged the equal of degree-bearers, she was asked where a nonholder should be placed on the seniority list. She suggested that "maybe they should trade three years as equivalent to one year of the degree," a formula that significantly demotes such an individual, since it normally takes three years of study beyond a nursing diploma to get a nursing degree. A third instructor alluded to the issue, though her plan for crediting experience in lieu of education was less specific.

Generally, each group presented an internal consensus. Only one instructor, from St. Martha's, admitted to a position that deviated from her group's, and her case is instructive. Her admission came in the privacy of the interview in which she, significantly, reported that she had refrained from voicing opposition to her primary group's stance. She is deviant in another important respect, one that reveals the dynamic of loyalty and self-interest. As the last of her staff to have lost seniority by resigning rather than taking maternity leave, a decision her director had assured her would have no material fallout, she felt cheated and betrayed. Three members of

her staff, who would otherwise be her juniors, outrank her. If her formal grievance is successful, she will save her job, though at the expense of one of her own colleagues (but not the one who lacks a degree). While the seniority issue has thrust her into personal competition with individuals in her own group, she managed also to use it as a device for deflecting self-prioritization, as well as for expressing loyalty through outgroup critique. She championed her colleagues, in an otherwise spurious and invidious criticism of the greediness of the General's staff for retaining their positions despite their age and their advantage in having passed their childbearing years. In point of fact, the oldest member of that staff was about 52, and, ironically, she had earlier withdrawn, for a time, from the workforce to become a full-time homemaker. This cost her 11 years of on-the-job experience.

Conclusions

As the last example indicates, seniority concerns *per se* created the potential for complex divisions within each group. Partly because it was simple and partly because of the concrete intergroup differences it marked, the degree criterion had power to divert conflict to the outsider group. The competing positions, on the degree credential, addressed issues of social justice rooted in concrete relational loyalties and self-images. Alternate grid ideologies were generated in terms of local primary-group pressures and identities that took into account extra-occupational and extra-organizational roles, but also judged historical life situations of whole persons rather than abstract role assemblages. The situation of induced competition raised some aspects of practical consciousness to the discursive level. St. Martha's availed itself of the opportunity to bend the meaning of, rather than to reject, the educational ideology of the professional association. By examining the substantive intent of credentialism, it legitimated the practice of "grandmothering" and thus promoted its own brand of narrative justice. It thus defended itself from allegations of inferiority or regressive attitudes. The competing interpretation allowed the General group to bolster its self-image by rationalizing its superiority over the other.

Under conditions of economic insecurity, the instructors accepted the material and symbolic resources of power. While one individual did contest her ranking, no one challenged the authority of the administration to constitute the committee as it did, nor did anyone challenge the authority of the committee to make the decision it did. The discourse produced by the General's staff did not save it from perceived material injustice but allowed the group to perceive that injustice. In this way, it functioned as a defensive weapon against the implied assault on its superiority, and thus it minimized loss by insulating collective self-esteem from the process. Each form of discursive consciousness involved an intragroup discourse and an intergroup one. Each developed in relation to the other. Each juggled ideological and social contradictions by upholding common ideals but contesting the manner of their proper realization.

This case study of cultured experience points toward a general paradigm of values and norms. Both groups accepted bureaucratic authority along with a gender-biased, but non-traditional, division of labour. Group members need not, however, be seen as dupes acting out cultural directives. Given the high costs involved in challenging these principles, which protect the vested interests of others who share them, acceptance indicates practical consciousness. Instructor agency is pragmatic and reasonable. Notably, however, the case demonstrates that formal or manifest consensus at the institutional level cannot predict grounded discourse. Implicit in the patterns enacted in grounded and less formal (more "private") discursive practice are norms of loyalty and desire for legitimacy. These patterns of real culture operate both as blinds and strategic resources, as is incisively witnessed by the groups' differing uses of credential versus ability or "principle" versus "personality." Ethnographically revealed discourse makes *real* culture more visible. Real culture does not belie agency. Rather, agency is expressed in it. These lived patterns become more predictable as microconditions are examined and thus unveiled. More importantly, such patterns make sense, become understood as indicators of cultured rationality, as they are analyzed narratively.

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Notes

1 I refer here to the literature from management studies, which ranges along a spectrum represented, at one end, by more academic writing generated by business professors for one another and their students and, at the other, by more journalistic pieces speaking to managers and the general public. Alvesson and Berg (1992: 25) differentiate three categories of authors: "purists" (gloss as "pure" researchers), "pragmatists" (consultants and popular writers) and "academic pragmatists" (essentially, "applied" academics), though they acknowledge the difficulty of clearly bounding the categories. The anthropological critique applies to the last two. The purist literature from the field of management—which is relatively recent and is exemplified by Alvesson and Berg's volume itself—engages in a similar critique that offers confirmation of the claims made in the current article.

2 This was an effort to eliminate the institutional duplication that followed religious-sectarian lines and that was the norm in Maritime Canada until recently. The amalgamation of two local general hospitals (along with a psychiatric centre) was meant to realize efficiencies which would permit purchase of more advanced technology, thus providing better service to a population that has had to travel some 600 kilometres for various kinds of specialty care. Gradual amalgamation began with the routing of all maternity cases to one hospital in the late 1970s. Emergency and outpatient services in one of the hospitals closed in the summer of 1991 and, at about the same time, the two administrations became integrated and the nursing schools prepared to offer a joint program to incoming students.

3 Hospital training programs are being phased out earlier than the original deadline set for the year 2001. The last local class of students was admitted to the joint (two-year) program in the fall of 1994. Thus, sad to say, the Stelton instructors lost their positions earlier than expected, and the local nursing-degree program has not, to date, materialized.

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