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THE SOCIAL DRAMA OF WORK

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INTRODUCTION

To illustrate what I mean by the social drama of work, I propose to use an example familiar to graduate students. When I returned to the University of Chicago, after having been away for quite a long time, it was as a junior member of the department. I had some ideas about courses and seminars that I wanted to introduce, and I was given freedom to introduce them. At McGill University I had taught a course on Social Movements, which had grown from Park's Collective Behavior. But Blumer owned that subject at Chicago. He and his course had become famous. I was content to absorb collective behavior into a dynamic view of work—a case of symbolic interaction.

Eventually, a student asked me to direct his dissertation in the area of professions. As you know, each student ordinarily writes only one Ph.D. thesis. He has one life to live, one dissertation to write. It does not happen to him a hundred times. But those who supervise dissertations, in time, may have supervised a hundred or more. They become pretty good at it. To the advisor, none of these dissertations is a matter of life and death, or his career. Of course, this first student was crucial for me. It was a little like a surgeon's first solo, radical procedure. But the surgeon always has the nurse there to help him, for part of the social drama of his work is that the actual arts of medicine are taught to doctors by nurses on the job, rather than by doctors in the classroom. It was rather crucial to me not only to have this first Ph.D. student, but to see that he would get along well in the exams. I observed that when a student comes up for the Ph.D. oral examination, it's the professor's work and ideas that are as much at stake as the student's. As a matter of fact, a student can act as a sort of catalyst to precipitate the conflict between the assembled

professors. So, this occasion was important to me. I take it for granted that it was important to the candidate also; we both did well, I think. My first Ph.D. candidate was E. Jackson Baur. This example may serve as an introduction to the topic of the social drama of work.

DISCUSSION

Recently, there has been a great deal of technical study of work. We have been in a period of technological change which affects the nature of work. For example, the things that a nurse does now are not the things that nurses used to do. A generation ago a nurse was not allowed to take a blood pressure. This was considered to be doctors' work, and they would see to it that the nurse did not do it. Now, after surgery, blood pressure may be taken as often as every fifteen minutes, for hours, and rather than the surgeons staying around, nurses take the readings.

There have been many of these technological changes, and we have become very adept at describing the technological aspects of work. We have perhaps been less skillful in our descriptions of the situations which arise around work; and how these situations of work are affected by changes in technology, by changes in larger organizations, and by changes in the economy of work. I would like to start with the proposition that all work involves some sort of social matrix. Work is done in a social setting. And the people in this social setting are not merely performing technological tasks, but they are interacting with one another. They are obeying rules. In order to understand the work, one must understand the roles of the various people involved in it. This was the point in my illustrations. The graduate student who is taking the crucial step of picking a thesis topic is laying his bets on a certain line of research and a certain way of thinking. He is taking part in the drama. In fact, the Ph.D. examination is what ethnologist's call a rite of transition or rite of passage, in which a man moves from a state of apprentice scholar to a full colleague. So, "right there before your eyes," he changes his social role to the one that will be the important one in his work relations.

But there's another point about social roles which should also be noted. In many kinds of work, one person may perform some operation routinely, repeatedly. This operation—in the general sense of operation—can resolve a crisis or emergency for another person. When a student reaches the end of the term, the grades he gets are crucial for him. They are of less concern to the teacher, although they are crucial for him, too. He wants the student to do well, because he likes to have a good class; for most teachers are pretty proud of how well their students do, and this is one of the great satisfactions of life for them. Or, if you take your car to the garage, its sick carburetor may be crucial to you, but it can be the hundredth one that the mechanic has seen this week. Your emergency is his routine. One can consider any number of work relationships, and find this repeatedly. Part of the drama is that what is one man's everyday, repeated work is another man's emergency.

Wherever you find people at work, there is some basic difference in the situation of the people receiving the service and the situation of the person giving it. That is an essential part of what we mean by the work drama or social drama of work. One person sees this incident as small, but part of a lifetime program. He sees it in a particular perspective. The other sees it quite differently. This makes for a potential conflict or misunderstanding. In the social drama of work, the urgency is greater on one side of the counter than on the other. It is the adjustment of these relative degrees of urgency that makes up a considerable part of this social drama of work. For one of these people, usually the receiver, this may be not only an emergency, but it can be deeply disturbing and crucial to him. To him it's unique; it isn't one in a hundred.

Furthermore, the recipient wants his case to be important to the other person. For example, when you need surgery, you want the doctor to give real attention to your case. On the other hand, you want him to be objective, and you want him to be skillful. Yet the only way a surgeon can become skillful in his operations is to do a lot of them. The more he does, the smaller your case appears in the total series. He is objective, and you may think that your case is nothing to him. Here is the dilemma; if the surgeon

hadn't done enough operations to become skillful, you wouldn't want him to do your operation. On the other hand, you suspect his objectivity, which ignores your sense of emergency. People are always caught in this dilemma. You want the doctor to be attached to your case, yet you know if he were too attached, he would be of no use to you.

This is one reason why most occupations have to have some secrets. The full measure of their objectivity has to be kept somewhat secret from the people they serve. An illustration may help clarify what I mean by secrecy. Like many sociologists of my generation, I was brought up in a parsonage, and I used to hear assembled clerical brethren talk about the problem of obituaries for "pious hypocrites." They had a series of names for these pious tightwads, people who were critics of the preacher and didn't open the pocket book very well. In fact, they had a whole series of terms for various kinds of parishioners. In order to run their churches, ministers had to talk about these things with one another, had to make these comparisons, and had to be objective. But it could be slightly hair-raising to hear about these things. If you are a minister's child, one of the first things that is impressed upon you (physically, if necessary) is that you must not talk this way before the world—you must have your secrets from the world. Your special world places a demand of secrecy upon you.

For physicians it is probably a good thing that at a certain point in their training, they learn to say, "I had a beautiful case today." This means beautiful from a standpoint of seeing it in a series; beautiful for what can be learned from it; beautiful as something from which to develop skill. But the word beautiful, if applied to a potentially fatal disorder, is a rather shocking expression. In the course of acquiring skill, physicians have a certain aesthetic about other peoples' troubles. They do recognize some as having a certain beauty and symmetry. Maybe they couldn't develop full skill if they didn't do this. Maybe they couldn't even overcome their own potential disgust of some things which they have to do, if they were not able to have a certain aesthetic attitude toward the disorders with which they have to deal.

So in this drama of giving and receiving services, the giver of the services sometimes has to have certain attitudes which he

could not quite express fully to the people outside. He has to say some things to his colleagues which he couldn't say to people who aren't his colleagues. An associate of mine in a neighboring state is studying the occupation of the undertaker, a profession in which this particular phenomenon is perhaps at its highest point. Here is an occupation in which all of us get involved at some time, and in which what was a loved person becomes suddenly a potentially dangerous, unpleasant one to be around. At this crucial point comes this man, who some people like to make fun of, to handle this situation. It is a difficult human situation to handle. And he has to handle it quickly, in a pretty wretched way, and with some of the deepest secrets that we've yet discovered in any occupation. He has the best reasons imaginable for that secrecy. People couldn't take it otherwise, at least not in our culture. I think I have made enough of this point—that where people are giving and receiving services, there is a basic difference in the perspective from which they see this situation. The receiver wants skill, but he's a little afraid of the objective, detached attitude that makes skill possible. The giver is seeing this case in the perspective of his whole life career. It is important to him too, because he might make a mistake. He might do the wrong thing.

Mistakes are worrisome. We are gathering a most interesting collection of occupational nightmares. I got one just the other day from a woman who is a director of nursing services in a large state university hospital. I was asking, "Do nurses have any nightmares?" Her nightmare was this: she has stopped nursing and has become a supervisor. This is part of the work drama—in many occupations one is considered to be successful if he stops doing what he was trained to do. Nursing is one of these. The most successful nurse is a person who is no longer a nurse, but who is an executive or teacher. This nurse's nightmare was that she was called to put a patient in a respirator. It was a new kind of a machine, different from the one she had learned on, and she could not do it! Here was the patient dying under her hands, and she was clumsily trying to get him into the machine, and couldn't do it. She kept having this nightmare for some months after she became a supervisor. Engineering is another occupation with this quality; a successful engineer is an administrator. The nightmare of an

engineer I knew who had become an administrator was that he was attending a meeting with his subordinates. They handed him a blue print to read, and he couldn't read it. The man doing the work has his anxiety pattern too, and part of it circulates around this problem of the mistakes he can make. These mistakes bother him in at least two ways; (1) his own conscience and responsibility toward them, and (2) what will happen to his reputation if he makes a mistake.

Every work group has the problem of handling mistakes. In large part, the people in any kind of work retain the right to say, inside their own group, what is a mistake. They don't yield much to others. One reason they don't is that those people who are receiving their service are apt to think in rather absolute terms. People inside a work group know that skill is relative, and that mistakes can be made. The work group may have higher standards, since they know the skill better than the layman; but in another sense they also have a more relative standard, and a greater tolerance towards the mistakes which their people make. Sometimes they may be too tolerant toward mistakes. An interaction takes place in which the group tries to define what a mistake is, and tries to establish some rules for handling it. These rules concern their relations to one another, and their relations to the outside world.

I would like to mention one other point rather briefly. You may wonder if some kinds of work have any measure of social drama at all. There are people who appear to work in isolation. Shepherds would appear to, but there is a work drama there, too. It is difficult to be really alone, in the sense that what you do has no influence on others and they have none on you. Even the shepherd out on the range has some difficult decisions to make. Suppose he is out away from the house. There is a big Kansas thunderhead coming up and he doesn't know whether there is going to be a storm, and whether he should go into the house. At what point does he decide there is really going to be a rain storm, that he's going to get wet, and maybe it will be dangerous? When does he go in? And if he goes in too soon, he is laughed at; but if he goes in too late, he is bawled out. He seems to be all by himself but he's not. His actions in this job involve a lot of people and he

can't act as if they weren't there. It is true, though, that this social drama varies a great deal according to who is present and who is not present on the scene of the work. There is not as much social drama in a shepherd's field as in a surgeon's operating room.

CONCLUSION

We live in a society in which people are often judged by their work. In the Middle Ages if you wanted to say something nasty about others, you said they were pagans—a reference to their religion. Now, about the worst thing you can say about others is that they are lazy and have poor work habits. "They" don't have our concept of work. This judgment about working quality makes up a large bulk of our moral judgments.

I think it's also fair to say that in our society, the work concept, the concept one has of his work and career, is a very large component of his self-concept. It is also a very large component of his social identification, his identification with people who are in the same situation with respect to work. We identify with those who deal with other peoples' crises in the same ways, who have the same objective attitudes, who have the same secrets, who risk making the same mistakes, who have the same aesthetic attitudes towards their work. We identify ourselves with those who occupy a similar role in the social drama of work.