



ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AS CONTESTED GROUND IN AN ERA OF GLOBALIZATION: WORKER PERCEPTIONS AND SATISFACTION IN THE USPS

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Many prior efforts have examined the personal characteristics of workers or the structural features of an organization that impact job satisfaction. By contrast, we examine organizational culture in the context of "high-performance work systems." We analyze the organizational culture of the United States Postal System, as it is presented in key organizational documents and perceived by workers. It is argued that a viable theory of job satisfaction in the modern workplace must treat worker perceptions, which spring from an organizational culture that is both prescribed and lived.

Job satisfaction is the most frequently studied variable in organizational behavioral research (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg, and Kalleberg 2000; Spector 1997). For our present purposes, we treat job satisfaction as a worker's overall evaluation of his or her job or the perceived quality of the

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work experience (Kalleberg 1977).¹ We also emphasize that job satisfaction is typically explained from dispositional, structural, or "hybrid" perspectives. Dispositional approaches focus on the individual-level characteristics that people bring to the workplace, as well as an individual's ability to adapt to the realities of organizational life.² Structural approaches, in contrast, emphasize factors that are exogenous to the individual worker, such as organizational structure, work role characteristics, job content, promotional opportunities, and type of industry.³ Hybrid arguments examine the interactions of personal characteristics, such as values, with both the characteristics of the job and the organizational community (Bokemeier and Lacey 1987; Kanter 1977; McNeely 1987; Tuch and Martin 1991).

Recently, these conventional efforts have been complemented by lines of inquiry that center on the impact of work practices, such as "high-performance work systems" (Appelbaum et al. 2000), and organizational norms (Hodson 1999a) as they relate to worker satisfaction. Both these latter approaches are situated in the paradigm of the "new workplace" that is defined by larger, global economic and technological shifts associated with post-Fordism. They jointly suggest that organizational norms and practices, as well as management behaviors are crucial to an understanding of organizational arrangements and worker satisfaction. Together, they inform our treatment of the organizational culture and worker perceptions of the U.S. Postal Service.

¹ Kalleberg (1977) defends this traditional conceptualization of job satisfaction and notes that the centrality of job satisfaction in the organizational culture stems from the many favorable effects workplace satisfaction has for human well-being. For a pertinent review, please see Appelbaum et al. 2000.

² Explanatory variables of central interest include poor mental health, introversion, neuroticism, poor coping strategies, inadequate locus of control (Girodo 1991; Judge et al. 1998; Mutran et al. 1997; Rick and Guppy 1994; Rout et al. 1996; Spreitzer et al. 1997), personality traits (Kirkcaldy et al. 1993; Organ and Lingl 1995), "burnout" (Koeske and Kelly 1995), and off-the-job stress (Ernst-Kossek and Ozeki 1998; Kemery 1991; Ray 1990; Rutter and Lovegrove 1995; Scandura and Lankau 1997; Widrich and Ortlepp 1994).

³ This line of inquiry usually posits that the structural characteristics of an organization will only be as important as the workers' disposition toward them (see Kalleberg 1977, for origins of this approach).

THE “NEW WORKPLACE” AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

The “new workplace” is characterized by increased technological capacity, “just-in-time” production, shifts in the types of available jobs, and a call for workers and management to increase levels of “citizenship” or behaviors which are above and beyond organizational requirements (Hodson 1999a:460). Some organizational researchers stress that the new workplace offers an opportunity for work organizations to capitalize on technological and market conditions by employing participatory work systems. They argue that employing high-performance work systems both improves organizational productivity and increases job satisfaction (Appelbaum et al. 2000; Berg 1985). Other researchers focus more squarely on the promise of bilateral control as a mechanism for workers to have meaningful input into decision-making processes even as they directly relate to improving job satisfaction (Hodson 1999a).

Highlighted features of the ideal typical “new workplace” include trust, legitimacy, reciprocity, and organizational justice (Hodson 1999a), as well as worker opportunities to participate in workplace decision-making, skill development, and incentives to motivate increased productivity. The theoretical argument derived from many studies (see Appelbaum et al. 2000 for an extensive review) essentially is that high-performance work practices result in higher levels of job satisfaction.⁴

A more cynical but related interpretation is that the new workplace is yet another face of capitalism that does not translate into meaningful work practice changes and worker job satisfaction. Rather, it may increase a worker’s sense of alienation as organizational culture is employed by management and elites alike to legitimate practices that appear deeply disadvantaging to workers (Besser 1996; Garrahan and Stewart 1992; Mumby 1988). Constructs of the culture, such as “employee participation,” “quality production,” and

⁴Implementation of a high-performance work system may increase job satisfaction (Appelbaum et al. 2000), but our present emphasis is that in-depth analyses of the underlying organizational culture and worker perceptions of it are necessary, but underexamined dynamics in studies of job satisfaction (see Hodson 1999a).

“horizontal teams,” are omnipresent, and are used to persuade workers of the intrinsic worth of organizational restructuring, even though actual practices may not result in benefits perceptible to workers.

These dynamics co-occur with the globalization of production and parallel a global cultural logic that creates institutional isomorphism. Global cultural values center on universalism, voluntaristic authority, rational progress, and world citizenship (Boli and Thomas 1999; Meyer, Boli, Thomas, and Ramirez 1997). When operationalized in organizations, these values translate into a host of programs that are said to promote democratic participation of workers in decision making, and worker rewards based on meritorious performance. Garrahan and Stewart (1992), for example, identify norms from the Nissan Corporation that closely parallel those identified for the global order, such as rational production, meritocracy, worker rights, and democratic participation. While such norms may appear to many as serving universal humanity, Garrahan and Stewart suggest that this is a culturally recast “Fordism” that continues to ensure the exploitation and subordination of labor, increasing social control and surveillance, and exacerbating inter-worker fractionalization and conflicts. They argue that new organizational norms and managerial features of “flexible production,” “consensus,” “teamworking,” and “quality” do not provide employees with more meaningful work lives or with greater corporate fate control (Garrahan and Stewart 1992:ix–xii). Instead, organizational elites use company-sanctioned conflicts (e.g., peer competition, intergroup rivalries) within the cultural elaboration of teamwork and consensus for “quality on the line” as effective mechanisms for the social control of workers.

These processes, more generally, revolve on a disjuncture between the appearance and reality of organizational claims (Garrahan and Stewart 1992:109). “Flexibility” in appearance masks overall mechanization and routinization that, in world cultural terms, amounts to highly rationalized production. “Consensus” eliminates challenges to what are in fact one-dimensional company views. “Quality” and “teamwork” impose an apparent working consensus with superordinates while cutting across the potential for

solidarity, by virtue of highly rationalized monitoring and continual peer assessments.

The manner in which workers view organizational claims and practices as either contributing to or detracting from their job satisfaction is inadequately understood, but when workers perceive management's call for universalistic treatment and participatory decision making as hollow, they may contest organization culture and associated management behaviors, while becoming less satisfied (Fraser 1996). Hodson (1999a) adds that more rigorous examinations of the underlying stated and practiced organizational culture may assist researchers in understanding seemingly contradictory findings on work practices (such as participatory decision making) that are presumed to have a positive impact on worker attitudes. The current analysis focuses on the narratives of workers in order to understand their everyday experiences in the United States Postal Services (USPS).

METHODOLOGY

Sample

We propose that the culture of the workplace is the foundation from which workers develop an assessment of appropriate organizational behavior and that it can be examined through the accounts of organizational members. For analytical purposes, we chose a sample that was tractable in size and would permit us to conduct in-depth interviews to accompany our more conventional survey data collection on organizational culture.

The survey and interviews were accomplished during a period of change in the USPS. In the 1990s, the USPS engaged in a long-term strategic planning process as a response to what the executive management claimed was a decreasing level of competitiveness with private corporations in its industry (USPS 1997). A new Postmaster General was hired to address this issue by developing a long-term plan for increasing productivity. The plan called for increased reliance on technology and worker input and discretion (i.e., Delivery Point System). It also called for simultaneous decreases in the USPS workforce, while broadening the potential recruitment

base through “leveraging diversity.” The plan was shared with USPS employees in several ways, including sessions conducted by managers that focused on the new plan.

Plan priorities were tied to organizational statements that apparently espoused global norms of conduct, including competitiveness, universalism, increased technological efficiency, and increased levels of worker citizenship. One of the major features of the USPS’s plan was to create a bilateral alliance with workers in order to improve workplace productivity within the context of “valuing workers’ input” (USPS 1997). Again, in principle, these stated values appear to align rather closely to worker values and the values of the American population as a whole (Huber and Form 1973), as well as the global cultural values mentioned earlier (Meyer, Boli, Thomas, and Ramirez 1997).

Within this context, interviews were conducted at the USPS sites by four trained and paid interviewers. The sampling frame was the craft workers employed by the United States Postal Service at three sites in a major southeastern city. Oral presentations were conducted at all the sites, stating the purpose of the study. Subsequently, follow-up letters were provided for each employee in the three units. The oral presentations were offered in a manner that reached virtually all craft employees, and we met personally with all of the management level employees. The craft workers completed the form in our letter, stating whether they were willing to participate in the study. They placed their completed letters in confidential boxes at the sites. Although no incentives were offered, one in six employees agreed to be interviewed; thus, our sampling method yielded 204 useable surveys/interviews. Of these, approximately 50 percent were White, (27 percent African-American), 50 percent were female, and 50 percent had worked for the USPS nine years or more.

Our sample provided us with in-depth qualitative data, which permitted examination of the stated and “lived” organizational culture of the Postal Service. The survey and accompanying interviews ranged in duration from 45 minutes to 1.5 hours, and responses to open-ended questions (Appendix A) were recorded in writing by the interviewers. The recorded data gained were extensive, although the interviews were not taped for fear that taping would adversely impact respondent candor. We do not claim results

from these analyses can be generalized to other "government corporations" in the United States or to public or private sector employee in general. Such generalizability was not our research goal. However, the narratives in principle contain much that is important to our understanding of organizational culture as stated and lived.

Content Analysis, Interview Schedule, and Analysis

We study organizational life qualitatively in a two-stage approach. First, we examined respondents' perceptions of organizational life as gained from survey questions (discussed subsequently) and particularly the accompanying open-ended interview questions which elicited respondent narratives (see Appendix A for interview questions). The authors worked independently and using the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 1967) serially "coded" all of the respondent narratives. The coders then met to discuss similarities and differences in terms of themes and possible thematic labels to categorize the narratives. Then, all three repeated the coding of each document a second time, looking for negative cases and alternative ways to interpret the narratives. The team met regularly over several months to ultimately create a story from the data. We did not conduct interrater reliability tests since we decided to engage in a process whereby each coder used the criteria of persuasiveness to come to an agreement. That said, we emphasize that "rater" categorizations were quite close from the onset, as were the prospective category labels applied to the narrative data. Certainly, the way in which the research project was conducted is constitutive of the "reality" that is conveyed through our representation. Thus, we acknowledge that, as in any research, there is a point at which we constructed the meanings of the respondents' interviews. The story we tell is only one possible configuration of the data, and we rely on its persuasiveness and parsimony.

One implication of our methodology is that the focus is on themes related to discontent with the USPS. We note that in response to the survey question, "Do you think you are treated fairly in the workplace?" 49 percent of the respondents reported being somewhat satisfied with their workplace, but these respondents essentially offered only one type of elaboration on why they were satisfied. They

simply felt they should not expect any more from the USPS than they already received, and that others complained about the USPS because of their personal problems, an insufficiency in the work ethic necessary to successfully navigate the workplace. In contrast, a wealth of information is provided by these "other" workers who, the data show, believed their workplace to be deeply disadvantaging.

In the second part of our approach, we qualitatively examined the stated organizational culture by conducting a content analysis of a pertinent executive document. This document (USPS 1997) has been widely publicized to all employees and also is available for public inspection and scholarly replication purposes on the Internet (<http://new.usps.com> 2002) as the USPS "Strategic Plan." Our analysis was of its manifest content. We focused on those sections of the plan related to employee satisfaction and worker diversity, as suggested by the themes uncovered in our analysis of respondent narratives.

One last caveat is that we do not claim that the findings from our analysis of this public sector organization are generalizable. We do note that similar qualitative analyses have been conducted of public and private organizations and they find patterns that are in alignment with many of the ones we report (Hodson 1999a, 1999b).

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Stated Organizational Culture

The USPS Five-Year Plan offers the following organizational goals as manifestations of its values: customer satisfaction, improved employee and organizational effectiveness, and improved financial performance (1997:vi). The most important strategy to fulfill these goals is use of "data and input gathered from the marketplace and employees" (vi). We examine this strategy in the context of employee job satisfaction, as suggested in our subsequent analysis of employee narratives.

Voice of the Employee

The USPS Five-Year Plan provides some detail on the "data and input" needed to be competitive in the marketplace,

with special reference to the strategic goal of listening to the “voice of the employee” (1997:vi). It would be reasonable to expect that listening to “employees’ voices” is the type of organizational value and practice that fosters bilateral decision-making and citizenship, and cultivates job satisfaction as discussed by Hodson (1999a). However, the USPS’s articulation of employee input is quite different, and closer to the interpretation offered by Garrahan and Stewart (1992). The voice of the employee essentially refers to sets of practices to implement a performance management culture, as opposed to creating a work environment better suited to employees. Indeed, a priority is placed upon creating an organizational structure whereby employees demonstrate the “required proficiencies for their assigned work” (USPS 1997:vi)! While “voice” and “proficiency” are treated as parallel in the plan, we find it difficult to develop a logical connection between these components, at least as they are conventionally understood.

The following passage, however, places legitimacy on this component of USPS norms and practices by claims making that core American values in the past have been transgressed: “The world’s largest civilian enterprise, and the country’s biggest civilian employer, the Postal Service in the early nineties found itself facing stagnation and a mind set of entitlement, a situation common to many American businesses at the time. Declining service and customer dissatisfaction had led to mounting negative equity for its owners, the people of the United States of America” (USPS 1997:7). The context of employee input (voice) thus appears to revolve to an important extent around a shift in the values of workers to improve their productivity and citizenship. These latter goals bear a detectable resemblance to globalized goals of rational progress and world citizenship (Meyer et al. 1997).

Leveraging Diversity

An overall strategy in the plan to help ensure this voice of the employee is “to establish a performance culture while improving the quality of the workplace environment” (USPS 1997:vii). A specific, central, and highlighted strategy to reach this goal is “leveraging diversity” (42). The USPS seeks to “establish appropriate representation of all groups at all levels within the organization” (42). Apparently in line with

global norms of universalism, the “management of diversity must be reflected in recruitment, selection, promotion (including succession planning and opportunities for training and development), and retention of employees” (751). In principle, valuing diversity could mean ensuring equal opportunity and cultivation of the careers of meritorious employees regardless of personal background, which is the essence of universalism. However, the new normative order of the USPS “leverages” diversity because America’s workforce and consumer base are changing “dramatically.” That is, “leveraging diversity” is disassociated from equal opportunity. Instead, it reflects a concern that, to *capture a market share* that is now quite diverse in America, it is necessary to hire, retain, and promote a diverse body of employees. The normative value of “merit” is absent from this theme.

The plan called for zero tolerance for harassment of any kind, as well as training and skill building, and research, to develop appropriate measures of workplace environment improvement. To be sure, these emphases evolved alongside “strategies and values that promote fairness and opportunities, instill pride, and enhance safety in the workplace” (USPS 1997:vi). The value of safety is particularly salient given the track record of workers who have become violent, or even homicidal at the USPS (i.e., employees who have “gone postal”).

When taken together, these tenets of the new normative order of the USPS may appear intuitively sensible, or downright necessary, as they may be for all organizations that operate in a fully capitalist world economy. What is key to our treatment, however, is the workers’ perceptions of this component of organizational culture and its relationship to job satisfaction.

Perceived Organizational Culture

The narratives provided by the USPS respondents described the organizational culture (structure and process) of the Postal Service in two fundamentally different ways. There were those who felt organizational values and practices were legitimate and fair, and those who perceived their workplace as contradictory and profoundly unfair. Respondents to the survey (available from the authors) initially were asked:

"Do you think you are treated fairly in the workplace?" (Appendix A, question 3). Those who perceived their workplace as "always" or "somewhat fair," respectively constitute 12 percent and 37 percent of the respondents. Only a handful of these respondents addressed the "explain" portion of the survey question. As suggested above, they provided like commentary in their narratives.

In contrast, 51 percent stated that the workplace was only "occasionally fair," or "seldom fair." We find that among these employees, and in contrast to the respondents, there were significant and elaborated perceptions of a normative gap between stated and "real" organizational culture. Narrative commentary centered on the lack of openness (employee input) into decision making processes at the Postal Service, the stated value of merit being replaced by favoritism (i.e., during hiring, training, and promotion), and an operationalization of leveraging diversity which is disrespectful of all groups of employees (i.e., lack of representation of minority group members in management positions, a devaluation of tenure and ability as criteria for promotion).

Embedded in the following passages are worker perceptions of the *stated* organizational culture of the Postal Service. The stated culture hinges on espoused values of consensus, merit, respect for diversity, technical competence (quality), and employee participation in decision-making. The following sections address these areas, in highlighting that the reported "lived experiences" of our respondents were in contradiction to the stated organizational culture.

Management Citizenship: Peripheralization

Large, bureaucratic organizations face the modern challenge of constructing an organizational culture that employees perceive as inclusive. Hodson (1999a, 1999b) emphasizes this construction is a critical component of management "citizenship," and it has become an integral component of global culture, more generally (Meyer et al., 1997). While many of our respondents pointed to the stated organizational values of participation and teamwork, they felt that management did not live up to this organizational value. In short, management citizenship was felt to be low.

Workers perceived themselves as distanced from organizational decision making, that is, they felt “peripheralized.” Respondents particularly felt they lacked input into the day-to-day operations of the organization, and did not receive competent responses from management. The following respondents speak to the issue of closed communication channels, which they viewed as creating a poor work environment.

There doesn't seem to be too much happiness here. Not enough communication among the employees. Everyone seems to be in their own little world because of not being able to communicate with the supervisor. They don't want to hear what you have to say.

(#88 Black, Male/16 years tenure)

Supervisors don't respect people on the floor. They don't know how to communicate. Some of them call us SOB's and dummies. They don't have a management style. No training. No skills. They don't have a college education. Supervisors need to acquire a positive communication style. These supervisors are where they are now because of the buddy system. We need better trained managers, managers who respect people.

(#10 White, Male/8 years tenure)

These responses reflect the perception of acting without a voice, as well as a sense that there is not an open channel of manager–worker communication. For these respondents, procedural operations are inconsistent with, at least, their self-interests, and contradictory to the perceived organizational values that the Postal Service espouses.

The narratives below show that some workers perceive that vertical communication is closed and that this produces normative and affective dilemmas. Many respondents made an implicit causal chain between the perceived subversion of the stated organizational value of encouraging employee input and the outcome of perceived lower levels of productivity.

It goes back to the supervisor. They do not take the time to listen to you or give you an answer. They also don't get back to you when you need information.

(#299 Black, Female/7 years tenure)

There should be more employee input in decision making. When management makes a decision, they don't even ask if we know better. We should have more input.

(#51 Black, Female/10 years tenure)

We have no say or serious input. Input would enhance our job performance.

(#295 Black, Female/16 years tenure)

They [management] are unrealistic about the amount of time it takes to do the job, and that causes many accidents. They [management] just sit in their offices. They don't know a thing about delivering the mail. They just hand out orders. They don't know how hard it is or how long it takes. They just see numbers. They need to listen more closely because they don't know, and they don't deal with the reality of the job.

(#50 Black, Female/10 years tenure)

Embedded in these comments is the notion that workers knew their opinions were not valued and that this was at odds with their view of the stated organizational culture, espousing greater employee input into the everyday operations of the USPS. At best, management created employee apathy (less citizenship). At worst, some respondents claimed that management has created a culture of silence by retaliating against employees who speak out. This culture of silence has additionally had an affective dimension. Employees shift from being job satisfied to becoming disheartened about their everyday lived realities in the workplace.

Employees have a real lack of faith or trust in management. It's due to lack of communication.

(#A-12 White, Male/7 years tenure)

Employees have little or no voice. They let you fill out surveys but won't change anything. Management doesn't listen. They only care about money. They don't care about people.

(#111 White, Male/26 years tenure)

Our opinion is never asked, and when it is rendered, they seldom take it into consideration.

(#319 Black, Female/9 years tenure)

You can talk, but it is not heard. They never use our input. They just do it their way. It is discouraging.

(#228 Black, Female/8 years tenure)

The narratives below illustrate the gap between the perceived organizational value of employee input and the culture of silence about which many respondents spoke.

If you do tell them something, they take it as a slam against them, and you pay for it. So, we don't make suggestions, and that's the past twelve years. The postmaster makes suggestions that are wrong and don't even bother to listen to the people actually doing the work.

(#332 White, Female/12 years tenure)

Improvements come from the top. Management does not negotiate. It is their way or no way at all. Carriers don't have a voice.

(#43 Black, Male/14 years tenure)

If it doesn't work, they [management] will deny it to save face. They never listen. If you work less, you get rewarded. If you are bad, they'll promote you. They say, "Make the carriers mad, it'll make them work."

(#A-4 Black, Female/18 years experience)

We note that these narratives all speak to different variations on the theme of peripheralization, stemming from employee perceptions of the lack of management citizenship. This perceived organizational practice of peripheralizing employee input despite the normative content of the stated organizational culture is manifest in those organizational interactions the employees report as having occurred among themselves, with other employees, and with management. The interactions are interpreted by the workers and form a symbolic field of meaning that surrounds the activity of "employee input." Through further social interactions between organizational members, these meanings are made concrete by the stories employees tell. This (i.e., organizational myths and history) is passed on to incoming members through informal socialization during role acquisition. Through social interactions, these stories, based on employee perceptions, create a competing version of the "true" organizational culture as practiced, and hence offer prescriptions for employee behavior: "Supervisors are petty. If you file a grievance or EEO, they take it personally and will get you eventually." And, "If you say something, you pay."

Informal storytelling is pragmatic and aids workers as they learn ways to respond to the “real” organizational culture. We consider these strategies of survival as important tangible evidence of the competing depictions of the organizational culture. The following narrative documents the primary survival strategy that respondents discussed, that is, “don’t trust management.”

A lot of management change. Seems like the people that have gone into supervision have been less qualified than they used to be or less experienced. If we had qualified, and trustworthy supervision, it would make all the difference in the world. I also think it’s important to note that we can no longer place our trust in supervisors.

(#322 White, Female/17 years tenure)

Many of our respondents felt that management’s methods of conducting the day-to-day business of the Postal Service were hostile and unfair. We note that this perception increased employee frustration and distrust. Additionally, the sets of narratives above show a sense of disfranchisement and dissatisfaction. Some of the respondents even felt that trying to communicate was not their concern, but, rather, being allowed to do their job without a high level of supervision was the minimal amount of respect they deserved from management. Despite the call for management citizenship in the modern era (Hodson 1999a), many USPS employees feel the same about their work as employees have for generations (Goldthorpe 1968).

“Valuing Diversity”

Universalism and meritocracy are central to contemporary organizational culture, just as they are to an ever-tightening world culture (Meyer et al. 1997; Boli and Thomas 1999). The following narratives address another disjuncture between perceptions of the stated organizational culture and the “real,” lived experiences of employees from all backgrounds. Favoritism, viewed by respondents as the unfair advantaging of an employee or group of employees based on criteria other than merit, was perceived as a widespread problem that undermined the legitimacy of the Postal Service’s hiring, training, and promotion practices.

Respondents acknowledged two types of favoritism we call “procedural” and “distributive.” Respondents reported that favoritism promoted non-“team” oriented relationships, fostered hostile relations between employees and management, and, we add, created hostility between employees. As with responses in our section on management citizenship and peripheralization, many respondents made a clear connection between practices of favoritism, which subverted the perceived organizational value of meritocracy and valuing diversity, and lowered productivity measured subjectively.

Leveraging Diversity: Gender in the Organization

Many respondents cited examples of their perceptions of a gender-based decision making that violated their perceptions of the organizational culture. The accounts also described breaches in cultural imperatives that employees felt were vital to the organization. A surprising finding was that there was not a significant difference in the number of female and male employees who perceived gender as a status that was “made important” in the day-to-day operations of the USPS. Nonetheless, the content of male and female narratives show that the ways in which gender status was interpreted vary greatly.

Most of the female respondents cited examples of a “good ‘ol boy” system that protected male employees, while deeply disadvantaging female employees.

Sexual discrimination. I was asked to go on a date by a union representative and said no. Management laid me off for a month, and the union representative threatened me. They were afraid I would file a sexual harassment lawsuit. They said my divorce was the reason I was a tease. There are supervisors who sexually touch female employees. Discrimination. The body as a whole was against me.

(#287 White, Female/15 years tenure)

I moved from a position because of sexual harassment. I told officials, then I didn't get to be a supervisor anymore. I was made to be uncomfortable.

(#A-07 White, Female/16 years tenure)

Around other people, the supervisor puts down the women. There is more favoritism among men. He [the supervisor]

gives the good stuff to men, and fills ladies' orders for stamp stock last.

(#158 White, Female/16 years tenure)

Many female respondents felt that the Postal Service management systematically kept them from experiencing the same level of opportunities they perceived that men, especially White men, did. The main axis of complaint was that they were made to feel "less than" their male counterparts, and that these acts of degradation were symbolic of the organizational culture. One respondent put it simply: "Management ain't thrilled about women" (#280 Black, Female/11 years tenure).

Other female respondents offered accounts that spoke to racial as well as gender status in the Postal Service. These narratives are significant because they allow us to connect perceptions of the "lived" organizational culture to stated ones in a unique way. The stated culture, as espoused in the Five-Year Plan, acknowledged that there was a need to develop "appropriate" representation of gender and racial diversity at all levels in the Postal Service. The stated culture does not delve into the specific challenges that must be addressed to realize this goal of "leveraging and valuing" diversity, but our respondents do speak to the issue.

Some of the older supervisors really resented that women were there. I feel that there is a problem with carrier managers dealing with women and blacks.

(#09 White, Female/15 years tenure)

White, male managers objectively are the most tenured group of employees, and the above respondent feels that there is gender and racial hostility emanating from them. These management personnel, by virtue of their organizational status, are superordinate organizational members and are a product especially of past organizational culture. The respondent implicitly states that the organizational culture is hegemonic, in that it has been and continues to be White men who enact the "real" cultural values through unfair promotion practices. These practices, which the respondents perceive, keep women and "Blacks" from experiencing equal opportunities for promotion, are symbols of how the

Postal Service falls far short of its espoused principle of "leveraging diversity."

One may argue these are but a few selected narratives from disgruntled employees, but the numerical *majority* of responses to our inquiries about the Postal Service resulted in accounts of a deeply disadvantaging organizational culture, whether these accounts were from White men or a range of other organizational members. The following accounts of male employees show that they felt there were relationships between male (and female) managers with female employees that were disadvantaging toward men. They perceived that the organizational culture, as dictated by elites, had turned against them.

Management favors one group over another—females over males, blacks over whites, especially females. Management plays favorites to the opposite sex because of physical attraction. There is also some gender intensity because females stick together.

(#111 White, Male/26 years tenure)

The last ten years women are treated better. They get preferential treatment especially by women supervisors. They [management] let them get off earlier. No heavy work and stuff because of women supervisors being hired.

(#44 White, Male/30 years tenure)

Too many female supervisors being hired. I want complete equality. There used to be no women workers. Now there is sexual harassment. Since women in management just promote women because they are women, men have to cover women's responsibilities.

(#67 White, Male/9 years tenure)

The system of promotion causes hostility. Females are promoted rapidly because of supervisor/employee sexual relations. This causes hostility and a lack of respect for supervisors or women. There is no meritocracy, just favoritism.

(#A-35 Black, Male/8 years tenure)

Taken together, female and male accounts about gender status in the organization highlight the negative manner in which management practices are perceived. They additionally show the clash between global-organizational cultural values and perceived organizational practices, and

the way in which respondents symbolize organizational artifacts. For instance, all of the narratives from female employees demonstrate that management makes an employee's gender status key by engaging in a range of practices that women symbolize as discriminatory. Further, these acts occur in front of, and in collusion with, other male employees. The quotes, "made me to feel uncomfortable," "the body as a whole are against me," and "supervisor puts women down," are symbolic statements that these respondents use to not only to describe situations, but of their construction of the organizational culture. It is also an example of the gap that these respondents perceive to exist between the stated organizational values, "value and respect diversity" and "teamwork," and an environment they view as discriminatory and fundamentally lacking in the respect that is part of management and worker "citizenship" (Hodson 1999a, 1999b).

The male respondents focus on a similar theme, but their symbolization defines what it means to have women in the organization. The last two narratives vividly describe the respondents' perceptions that the organizational culture with which they have been familiar is eroding due to an increasing heterogeneous environment, coupled with management practices. Clearly, these men believe that the stated goal of leveraging diversity with respect to women is a problematic goal in itself, because it subverts the global-cultural value of "meritocracy."

Both men and women perceive organizational unfairness, and both perceive themselves to be marginalized, one group by virtue of being devalued and the other by having to accept increasing responsibilities for reduced rewards. We argue that the perceived disjuncture between the stated and lived organizational culture is central to explaining the nexus of disenchantment and dissatisfaction with the workplace environment. The last Black male respondent above, who explicitly states that favoritism causes hostility, made this link.

In addition, the narratives we have presented reflect another central dynamic—fractured potential for worker solidarity. Organizational position, as an identity, has become overlaid with other embodied identities (such as gender and race) which make sorting out worker interests complex. One

theme that we continue to present is that various groups of workers have defined other coworkers as having a qualitatively different lived experience in the USPS with correspondingly different levels of privilege. Thus, we would argue that workers have come to view themselves as dissimilar in experience within the organization, precluding any uniform and collectivist solutions to the disadvantaging they perceive. We cannot, with certainty, indict the USPS with pernicious intent in this regard, but it is evident that these dynamics are effective mechanisms for management to fracture worker solidarity.

Leveraging Diversity: Race in the Organization

Respondents frequently offered their perceptions about race in the organization. They cited examples of their perceptions of unfair practices based on racial status, and again, a sizeable number centered on perceived racism or the lack of meritocracy. White and Black respondents differed sharply in their accounts.

Many of the Black respondents cited examples of promotional practices and perceived white attitudes, which for them were symbolic of an organizational culture that was unfair and deeply disadvantaging.

There are no fair opportunities to be trained in different sections for blacks. Blacks are not given the same opportunity to be trained as the whites.

(#176 Black, Male/14 years tenure)

Make it where everyone can have opportunities. It's not that I'm trying to be funny, but the black man out here doesn't get promoted. There are women who are supervisors, but it's about favoritism and screwing [the sexual connotation] people.

(#48 Black, Male/4 years tenure)

I don't know of any blacks here who are supervisors. Some names are put in a hat. Not sure why they're not given a chance yet. I hear they'll pick John Doe before they pick someone like me. Don't know why I am not just as good as the other guy.

(#170 Black, Male/14 years tenure)

Promotions historically have been about who you know. Very racist management attitude. Just look at who get promoted.

Most black employees get the midnight shift. They push back blacks when blacks get to a certain level.

(#A-08 Black, Male/22 years tenure)

Similar to the responses of women in the organization, these respondents claimed the organizational culture was not based on norms of merit and equal opportunity. In contrast to gender, they felt race was made important in the organization. Hence, they did not perceive that the stated organizational goal of attaining an "appropriate" level of racial representation at all levels in the Postal Service squared with real organizational practices. Many respondents cited perceived empirical evidence of a lack of commitment on the part of the Postal Service to promote or provide desirable shifts to "blacks." Perceptual evidence of a nonmeritorious organizational culture is clear in the words of one respondent: "Just look at who gets promoted."

Yet, according to the perceptions of some Black females, it is the intersection of gender and race that is a central barrier. The following respondent speculated as to why this seemed to be the case.

Whites probably have a problem with blacks telling them what to do. It is hard to move up in the system being black. Never give you a chance or opportunity. With black supervisors whites are quick to claim disparity of talent. Black males always start out as part-time and remain part-time for a long time. Only two blacks are in upper management. That's piss poor. Being black and female, forget it. More blacks should be promoted.

(#314 Black, Female/8 years tenure)

This narrative illustrates a salient point for our analysis of organizational culture. The stories individuals construct to explain their perceptions of the organizational environment, their interpretive repertoires, serve to make sense of their situation. In the last narratives, as with the majority of responses from Black organizational members, we recorded a range of interpretive repertoires that employed similar images and conclusions.

White respondents also spoke of race, predominantly in terms of preferential treatment by management toward

black employees. All of the White respondents who expressly spoke about racial status claimed that the organizational value of meritocracy was compromised due to race-targeted policies. For instance, one respondent said that minorities score on the "lower end of the entrance exam with little or no checks. There is a minority and handicap hiring preference." Other White respondents' replies were similar in content, in their emphasis that all applicants and employees were *not* being held to a "universal" standard. Noteworthy is that the overwhelming majority of white respondents who offered these types of narratives were men, not women.⁵

One interpretation of these findings is that older, White, males felt that women and racial minorities were actually artifactual symbols of the USPS as it compromised the integrity of the workplace. Still another way to interpret the findings is as they relate to the accounts of women and racial minority group members. We do not point toward one conclusion more than the other; nonetheless, unfairness is rooted in the symbolization process that employees used when viewing the cultural artifacts and practices of the organization. More importantly, respondents perceived race and gender to be salient identities through which organizational practices were filtered. Thus, the organizational culture was viewed as being differentially applied to various sets of workers. As we noted above, we feel this has a pernicious impact on the ability of workers to define social problems similarly, and therefore to construct common and unified solutions to the antagonisms they face.

CONCLUSIONS

Treatments of the dispositional or structural determinants of job satisfaction abound. However, recent studies of the new workplace have emphasized that organizational culture, and more specifically, normative structures in the workplace, are significant predictors of job satisfaction as

⁵ Multiple narratives are available upon request but we limit our discussion for the purposes of space. See Fraser and Kick (2000) and Kick and Fraser (2000) for in-depth analysis of the interpretive repertoires of Whites on race. For a complete treatment of the topic, see Wetherell and Potter (1992).

well as a host of other dimensions of "worker citizenship" (Hodson 1999a, 1999b). Our aim has been to explore an organization's stated values and norms and worker perceptions of the chasms between the stated norms and lived experiences.

The spread of global culture and its role in ensuring national, cultural, political-military, and economic conformity are extensively documented (Boli and Thomas 1999; Meyer et al. 1997). In the modern era, with the accompanying new face of capitalism (Garrahan and Stewart 1992), global cultural components are argued to translate into organizational culture (Boli and Thomas 1999; Meyer et al. 1997). Thus, we find that the organizational culture of the U.S. Postal Service (and possibly many other work organizations) closely parallels the global culture in its stated normative order. These cultural imperatives, in the forms of values and norms (i.e., valuing diversity, meritocracy), are being shaped by and insisted upon by executive organizational leaders in larger organizations. Thus, the organizational culture may be employed as a tool which allows management to further extract "citizenship" from workers.

Our qualitative analysis shows that the perceived gap between organizational norms and their actual implementations creates a deeply felt discontent for many workers from a number of social groupings. Our findings are consistent with the arguments of Garrahan and Stewart (1992), who find that modern organizational culture revolves on a disjuncture between the appearance and reality of organizational claims.

Further, in recent decades, the increased mobility of capital into untapped labor forces, as legitimated by norms of "meritocracy" and "leveraging diversity" exacerbate suspicions in management-worker and coworker relations. Workers are impacted by the gap between the stated and perceived operation of the organization, and they construct a host of interpretive repertoires along racial and gender lines. For example, many African-American workers stated that "Blacks" were systematically kept from training and promotional opportunities. Many women spoke of an organizational culture where men were permitted to sexualize them and devalue their work efforts. Many White males questioned the implementation of a "meritocracy"

in the Postal Service, which they saw as unfair, and an organizational culture that once systematically favored them but was now systematically favoring all other racial-gender groupings except them. We suggest that these interpretive repertoires of many workers, which focus on stories of disadvantaging, are illustrative of a contested organizational culture where race and gender status have been made important.

Our qualitative results from the U.S. Postal Service seem to be consistent with prior theorization on the hegemonic nature of asymmetrical exchanges in the workplace (Buroway 1979). Many workers contest the norms and practices of the USPS, although they often circumscribe their own acts of resistance to adverse work conditions or abusive managerial treatment by creating interpretive repertoires that blame other groups of workers in a heterogeneous work environment. While a few workers spoke with great clarity about the structural nature of the problems they experienced in the workplace, there is evidence of a "culture of silence" that limits worker identification of such issues, for fear of retribution by management.

The seemingly low manifest levels of worker resistance in the USPS and elsewhere may reflect the fact that at least some workers understand organizational rules and can dispute inappropriate applications of them by management, even if they do not know how to effectively tap into power which flows through an organization. On the other hand, workers may not resist at times because they know all too well the consequences of their actions. These alternatives suggest agendas ripe for further inquiry; future work should examine the intricacies of contest in organizations, and how seeming compliance or silence at times are effective strategies of worker resistance. At a more generic level it would be helpful to understand how organizational members derive an understanding of their position in the organization, with all of its potentialities, and the decisions they make in relation to compliance and resistance. Linkages between low job satisfaction and acts of resistance in the modern workplace are empirically uncertain, but we argue that they are empirical issues which should be addressed in a series of in-depth examinations of workplace culture, worker perceptions and job satisfaction.

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APPENDIX A

The following questions were posed to respondents in order to elicit the responses reported herein:

1. What changes have occurred in the workplace since you have been here?
2. Do employees have a say in how things go around here? Explain.
3. Do you believe you are treated fairly in the workplace? Explain.
4. Do you believe others are treated fairly in the workplace? Explain.

