

# SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES AND THE NEW DIVISION OF LABOR: ENGINEERS, WORKERS AND THE RESTRUCTURING OF FACTORY LIFE

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## ABSTRACT

*The past decade has witnessed an outpouring of theory and research on the relation among status distinctions, symbolic boundaries and the structure of social inequality. Yet remarkably little of this discussion has been brought to bear on the workplace as an arena in which symbolic boundaries are established and maintained. I seek to fill this gap by applying theories of symbolic boundaries to the restructuring of work within a small sample of manufacturing plants located in disparate regions of the United States. Using qualitative methods, the study explores how the boundary work of high-status employees has shaped the division of labor within plants undergoing the introduction of automated production systems. Contrary to claims advanced by some theorists, my analysis suggests that specifically “cultural” boundaries, based on the deployment of refined or high-status knowledge, do indeed play a salient role at work, exerting a powerful effect on the outcome of workplace change in ways that skilled production workers find difficult to contest. These findings suggest that much more attention should be paid to the*

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*varied forms that cultural boundaries can assume at work, especially in an era in which formal knowledge operates as a powerful axis of class differentiation.*

## INTRODUCTION

During the past decade scholars have shown increasing interest in the relation between symbolic boundaries and the structure of social inequality. This emphasis has opened up fruitful connections between the sociology of culture and research on social stratification, infusing new energy into the study of social inequality (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984; DiMaggio, 1982a, b; Lamont, 1992; Lamont & Fournier, 1992). Yet, surprisingly little of this scholarship has been applied to the study of work organizations and the opportunity structures they contain. Although analysts of symbolic boundaries often acknowledge the importance of workplace life, they have generally failed to anchor their research in the mundane arena of paid employment.<sup>1</sup> For their part, students of work organizations have typically embraced heavily structuralist approaches that pay little attention to the question of human agency and largely ignore the informal patterns of conflict and negotiation that unfold at work (Hodson, 1995; Simpson, 1989). As a result, we know little about either the types of symbolic boundaries that actors construct within work organizations nor the ways in which such informal practices can inform job structures, internal labor markets, and other key features of formal organizations.

This chapter begins the task of applying boundary theory to the study of work organizations. Using qualitative methods to study six manufacturing plants located in the same industry, the study brings the conceptual apparatus of boundary theory to bear on one particular axis of social inequality at work: the division between mental (professional) and manual labor. This division has of course had great resonance within industrial work organizations (Stark, 1980). It holds particular importance today, when new technologies often disrupt this traditional distinction, even making it less necessary than before (Kern & Schumann, 1992). The question at issue here is how the boundary work of high-status employees seems to shape the outcome of organizational change. Taking as its empirical referent a little studied branch of the economy – the pulp and paper industry – the present study provides a number of suggestions that, while provisional, begin to indicate how symbolic boundaries can affect the trajectory of workplace transformation.

The study's major findings hold significance for both theory and research on symbolic boundaries and the informal processes that generate or maintain workplace inequality. In contrast with claims advanced by several boundary

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