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## The Culture of Work

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I would like to begin by up-dating the question posed to this panel. What we have to consider is not whether psychoanalysis is culture bound, but what are the cultures in which it is embedded and what are the effects of those cultural locations upon its practice.

What I propose in this paper is the notion that a new culture is coming into existence as a result of a profound and all-embracing restructuring of society, that new cultural values and assumptions are coming to be developed and embraced as a result of those changes, and that, in fact, psychoanalysis has already adapted -- albeit quietly -- and will inevitably continue to adapt to this new culture, what I am calling "the culture of work."

This restructuring of society has two dimensions: globalization and stratification. Globalization refers to the fact that the familiar boundaries that have marked off our world politically and economically are being redrawn. New global structures have come into existence that are superseding them. Stratification refers to the erosion of traditional social distinctions. A new social order is coming into being based on economic advantage. Not only is the gap between the rich and the poor growing, but a new international managerial class is coming into existence as a result of the opportunities and demands of globalization. These transformations are producing new values, new patterns of relationship, new habits, new assumptions -- in short, a new culture -- based upon the centrality of work. The pressures of international competition,



increasing productivity, and economic advantage have come to infiltrate and color every aspect of life.

Let me briefly elaborate on these developments before I turn to the effects on psychoanalysis. We are all familiar by now with the notion of the global village. Technology has made instant world-wide communication available to everyone -- everyone who can afford it. First the telephone, now the internet means that we can not only communicate with virtually anyone in the world who is hooked in, but that we can also shift around masses of information instantaneously, effortlessly. So, for example, workers in Scotland are employed to work on credit card accounts of Americans, Taiwanese can process data bases for South America.

Entertainment -- "popular culture" -- is also world-wide. Movies, TV shows, songs are distributed throughout the world. There is virtually no area of the world untouched by the sounds and images of America. A TV set in a Maylasiian bus shows American movies. A villager in West Africa -- lacking the money to buy a TV or even the electricity to run one -- wears a Chicago Bulls T-shirt, and knows who Magic Johnson is.

But the most important development here, underlying these phenomena, is the globalization of business. There are no national companies anymore or any consequence. To be successful is to compete world-wide, and to find markets and resources where ever they are most efficient. The extraordinary series of mergers and



acquisitions we have been witnessing for some time -- the pace of which is, if anything, increasing -- speaks to the fierce global competition which is not only redrawing national boundaries but also changing the shapes of industries and traditional careers.

With the fall of communism, virtually the last barrier to international development has disappeared. Russia and the other components of the former USSR have now become markets. Moreover, in the absence of any competing ideology of social order, it has now become easier to strip down the costly welfare policies that absorbed financial resources and made countries less able to compete with each other. Other social services, such as schools, libraries, hospitals, are squeezed for tax dollars because high taxes inhibit business development, or they are privatized, turned into sources of profit. There is no alternative to competition, nothing that isn't a potential market or potential resource to exploit.

This has had a profound effect on individual careers, and on work life for everyone. The notion of a stable or predictable career within a company has become implausible. Down-sizing, right-sizing, re-engineering has led to millions of middle class Americans having to relocate themselves down the economic ladder, no longer figuring in the employment statistics, while it has led to the emergence of a new international managerial class and a new profession of management consultants. Top managers, vying for the positions that will give them stock options and golden parachutes, are constantly traveling to stay on top of their far-flung and constantly changing constituencies.



Many of them move from country to country, relocating from London to Bombay to Sydney to Atlanta as they develop the knowledge and skills their companies require for operating in their multinational manufacturing and marketing environments.

In a parallel development, a new consulting industry has emerged that helps to manage the transitions. They will do market surveys, strategic planning, corporate redesigns as needed, any place on the globe. They also provide the retraining of employees in their new responsibilities as authority is decentralized and hierarchies flattened in the effort to make companies more aggressively responsive to local conditions.

Society, as a result, is becoming increasingly stratified. At the top are the entrepreneurs who establish new industries or aggressively reshape old ones, accumulating vast fortunes often the space of a few years. Below them, the managerial class running these enterprises, has the opportunity to become extremely wealthy through stock sharing. Below them, an extremely large diverse group, some of whom hope to make it up, others of whom merely hope for sufficient stability in their jobs, fearful of sinking down into joblessness. Below them, a large underclass of the permanently unemployed, threatened by illness and homelessness.

Let me try to specify how these macro-developments are reflected in daily experience. Most of us work harder, and we are pleased -- and relieved -- to be able to work. These days, when I meet a friend or



colleague, in response to the usual inquiries, he or she invariably sighs and says, “Busy” -- or “I’m managing.” Beneath the complaint is a subtle assertion of success. To work hard is to be important. To work too hard is to be even more important. Not to work is to risk not counting at all.

A related effect is the loss of personal time and a devaluing of time devoted to personal relationships. Friendship is a casualty of the culture of work. Companions at work or colleagues sometimes fill the gap, but they change as work changes. Not that people don’t value leisure time, but increasingly it’s importance is in relation to work: down time to recuperate, vicariously engaging in competitive sports, family vacations to reestablish threadbare family ties, exotic travel to increase one’s sophistication.

In this emergent culture, family occupies an important but ambiguous place. On the one hand, it is a refuge, a place to retreat to in the face of the loss of community and friends. It provides the only securely stable set of relationships -- or promises to. But, in a stratified society where traditional class distinctions have lost their force, the family itself has to be mobilized to survive. It cannot be taken for granted that children will move into the social positions occupied by their parents; they have to be trained to seize opportunities that become available. Getting into the right schools, acquiring specialized skills, identifying the right professions early, correcting defects -- all these have become parental obsessions.



Cultural sophistication, cutting across traditional distinctions, is increasingly important. Today, if one reconnects with one's original ethnic or national identity or religion, it is as an act of connoisseurship; one does it in very selective and individualized ways. Moreover, it reflects the capacity to understand and value the differences of others. When it does not, that becomes unfortunate evidence of one's weakened status or lessened potential for success. A sophisticated taste in the arts means that one can move knowledgeably from what used to be known as high art, to naive art, to popular art to grunge.

The traditional authorities of church and state increasingly are viewed with ironic detachment. That is, they are respected but not believed in. Their moral force has become a factor to be dealt with, not challenged. No authority is accepted at face value. Nothing supersedes the authority of the marketplace.

Correspondingly, great value is placed on intellectual and adaptive skills, especially those required for coping with the unknown. The new international management class constantly has to make decisions in the face of turbulence and uncertainty. Traditional skills and bodies of knowledge are increasingly less helpful, often tied to outmoded assumptions about how things work.

This, I believe, is the social and cultural environment in which we work, the environment of our patients. How does it affect us?



For one thing, I believe, we have adapted more than I think we have acknowledged publicly to the changed pace and conditions of work. But let me speak for myself. I see a management consultant who often is required to spend most of his weekdays in another city. There is a financial analyst who has to make 5 or 6 trips a year overseas, a music producer who similarly records a number of times a year in England, France, Germany, Japan, Switzerland, and so forth. I see a commodities trader and investor whose deals in the past few months have taken him, often quite suddenly, to London, Houston, Kuwait, St. Louis. I also see a bond trader who is required to attend meetings at her firm often at very short notice. A struggling artist, I see, will teach workshops or give lectures throughout the country, work on movie productions or photo shoots, in order to make ends meet; he once jokingly referred to himself as a member of the “impoverished jet set.” And so forth.

Under these conditions, I frequently will conduct sessions by phone when the patient is away or I will schedule multiple sessions when he or she is available. The use of the couch becomes less frequent, and the boundary between psychoanalysis and psychotherapy -- however one is inclined to draw it -- becomes blurred.

But I also engage in other related -- or as we sometimes say -- “applied” activities. I “coach” executives, a form of psychotherapy, as I see it, that places emphasis on work roles but by no means precludes the exploration of transference or the impact of early experience on current behavior. I see people to help them focus on





career changes. And I have a practice of organizational consultation to professional organizations, a practice that sometimes takes me on the road as much as some of my patients.

These are very practical consequences of the culture of work. There are other, more subtle effects. The authority that psychoanalysis enjoyed 20 years ago is eroded, along with other forms of authority. We are responsible for some of this ourselves, as we have not demonstrated our treatment outcomes or make a convincing case for our discipline; indeed, our sectarian conflicts and arrogance towards competing forms of treatment have injured us in the eyes of the public. But we are also suffering from the loss of faith in all forms of traditional authority. Patients increasingly take a more skeptical attitude towards our work, want to know what we expect to be able to do for them, and bargain with us over the financial and other terms of our work. We cannot take professional respect for granted.

On the other hand, in a world increasingly addressing change and the unknown, there is more recognition that we know something of value -- or we may know it. The irrational is more present in the work place, as workers resist change, subvert plans, experience stress and illness. Resistance to work has become more pervasive at precisely the moment when management everywhere is relying more and more on individual motivation to achieve their goals.

But, beyond this, there is a new emphasis on the need to think about uncertainty and change. Indeed, this may become our major



contribution in the emergent world: We have come to know more than any other discipline about how anxiety impedes thought, how past experience circumscribes thought, how confusion about basic relationships mystifies thought, how thinking itself requires a psychological space in which to thrive. This, obviously, is not a matter of making transference interpretations to patients who lie on our couches four or five times a week. It is a matter of being willing to adapt our knowledge and skills for those who need to learn what we have to offer, and engaging in new relationships, developing new techniques, and, above all, accepting the social and cultural realities that surround us.

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