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Women's Work and Chicano Families

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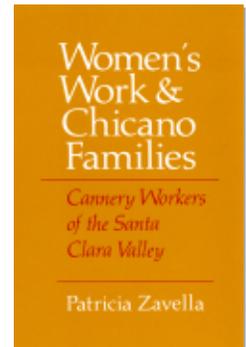
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“I’m Not Exactly in Love with My Job”: Cannery Work Culture

The question of why contemporary workers continue to labor under exploitive conditions is addressed by Michael Burawoy in *Manufacturing Consent* (1979). He contends that the capitalist labor process is defined by the dual structural imperatives of securing surplus value while obscuring its exploitive nature. Under monopoly capitalism with unionization, a hegemonic organization of work emerges in which the coercion of workers is replaced by granting them limited autonomy through collective bargaining. By accepting limited autonomy, workers consent to the restrictions of the labor process. Burawoy has found that workers often engage in the game of “making out”—working at a fast rate to exceed production quotas. By participating in making out, workers consent to their own exploitation, and the hegemony of capitalist production is ensured.¹ The value of Burawoy’s formulation here is that it focuses on social interaction among workers. The making out game is not just one played by individuals to beat the rate but one in which they gain prestige with coworkers for “playing” well. Burawoy’s analysis can be extended to social relations among workers in other areas as well, to what labor historians have called “work culture.”

1. Michael Burawoy has been criticized for ignoring evidence that economic motivations underlie the “consent” that seems socially based and that class struggle on the shop floor shapes the production process (Gartman 1983).

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Labor studies document the rich work cultures that flourish in a variety of job contexts. Work culture includes the ideology and practices of workers on the job: the “informal, customary values and rules [that] mediate the formal authority structure of the workplace and distance workers from its impact” (Benson 1983:185). Work culture is created by workers who confront, resist, or adapt to the constraints and possibilities of their jobs. Transmitted by oral tradition, work culture encompasses workers’ understandings and definitions of work and their sanctions within work groups. Workers use work culture to guide and interpret social relations on the job.²

Both contemporary ethnographic studies and the work of labor historians show how work culture operates on the shop floor. Susan Benson (1978, 1983) has analyzed the “clerking sisterhood,” which allowed saleswomen to control the work process and even provided amusement for workers at the expense of customers and management. Novices could neither make sales quotas nor endure their jobs if they were not inculcated with department lore and accepted into work groups. Craftsmen in the nineteenth century enforced a moral code, in which output on the job was regulated so as to respect other workers and protect individuals from speedups, and workers were expected to maintain a “manly,” dignified stance toward bosses (Montgomery 1979). Louise Lamphere (1985) has shown how women “bring the family to work” through socializing, joking, sharing information about family members, or celebrating domestic rituals such as weddings. Women’s networks are potent organizing vehicles for hospital clerical workers, in which “the potluck is political” (Sacks 1984). Nurses maintain a “culture of apprenticeship” in which professionalism and notions of women as nurturers have provided conflicting views of nurses as the profession has evolved (Melosh 1982).

The significance of work culture is recognized by managers, who attempt to usurp control of work groups in myriad ways: by regulating workers’ dress (Benson 1983) and scheduling workplace rituals or busting unionizing attempts (Lamphere 1985). David Gartman (1983) has suggested that Henry Ford attempted to change auto workers’ culture and even their personalities to forestall further shop floor

2. See also Melosh 1982, Gutman 1976, Montgomery 1979.

agitation. Wage increases for auto workers depended on their demonstrations of dependability and subservience, and wage policies favored workers in nuclear families who tended to acquire long-term purchases of consumer goods.

Interpretations of work culture reveal the varied consciousness of workers. Kenneth Kusterer (1978) has shown that even unskilled work includes complicated knowledge that workers must master to labor effectively. David Wellman (1984) has suggested that there is great mental labor involved in manual jobs—the “etiquette” of longshoring includes constantly figuring out how to work safely or within the spirit of the union contract. Women jewelry workers use their conceptions of fairness to accept the dictates of the piecerate system or to resist new assignments on the job (Shapiro-Perl 1979). In sum, the workplace is a social world onto itself, one in which workers create and resist within the confines of the conditions and processes of laboring.

Production and Work Processes

In examining the type of jobs and the work processes within the canneries, I describe the production process in a typical large cannery that (in 1978) canned spinach, peaches, fruit cocktail, and tomatoes. The work season for this cannery was nearly continuous from April through September. At the time of my investigation the cannery employed more than one thousand workers and was divided into several departments: receiving, preparation, canning, quality control, maintenance, warehouse, and shipping. The pace was set by the conveyor belt, which began in the preparation section of the cannery. There the produce, in this case peaches, was dumped from large bins pulled by jeeps onto “shakers,” which moved the product onto the conveyor belt. The peaches were pitted and halved by machine and then went through a lye solution waterfall. The lye solution was just strong enough to remove the peel without harming the fruit. From there, the peaches moved through steam and cold water sprays and then through a full water wash. The peaches were next inspected and sorted by hand, with only the very bad ones removed. After this, the peaches were cut by machine into slices or pieces to be made into pie. After it was sliced, the product was sorted again. The work

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processes in the various jobs described so far (except for sorting) were essentially machine tending, with workers overseeing the smooth movement of the product along the conveyor belt or operating the cutting and pitting machines. The jobs of workers stationed along the belt were unskilled and paid Bracket IV and V (\$5.88 and \$5.58 an hour in 1978). Except for the jeep handling, these jobs were typically performed by women.

Sorting was more like assembly-line work and was done almost exclusively by women. Workers used both hands to sort the produce into various grades—choice, standard, or nectar. They performed the same task all day, had no control over work pace and little control over techniques, and were confined to their stations on the line. They stood in one place, concentrating on doing the job quickly, with between six and ten workers on each sorting line and, depending on the product, between four and six lines. Workers were stationed about two feet from one another, and with the considerable background din, it was difficult to converse. Some of the shorter women stood on wooden boxes in order to reach the belt, and it was not uncommon for them to fall. Workers were allowed short breaks, in between the regularly scheduled ones, to go to the bathroom or get a drink of water, but they had to hurry since no one replaced them.

After the fruit was sorted, it was poured into cans along with the syrup or water. Most canneries have machines to do this, although in some of the older canneries the cans are filled and weighed by hand. The piece rate still existed in some departments with hand labor jobs. For example, Lisa Hernández had worked as a check weigher, placing spinach into cans by hand. She described the work process: “You take a handful of spinach and put it into the can, then tuck in the ones sticking out, and weigh it. Then you put it on the top belt above.” Lisa was disgusted at the high quota (two thousand cans a day) required for this task: “I *never* made that limit.” Her mother, with years of experience, sometimes made four thousand cans a day.

Piece rates were phased out as mechanization was introduced (Brown and Philips 1983c). The filler and seamer machines were usually attended by women workers. Some were overseers, making sure that the cans moved smoothly or checking for dents and proper seams. Lisa, who also worked as a seam inspector, described this

process: "It's hard work. You have to come out of the cookroom, check the code, see if the seams are right, make sure there's no dents. I check five cans and put them back. If they're bad I stop the line."

The supervisor or floorlady usually remained close by, checking the work or even occasionally working alongside the women on the line. Floorladies supervised between thirty five and forty five workers. The rate of pay for supervisors was Bracket III (\$6.26 an hour in 1978). This job entailed enforcing work rules (such as no gum chewing) and being constantly on the move, watching the workers, with a lot of pressure to push and instruct workers. There were floorladies for sorting, canning, and seaming lines.

The sealed cans were then loaded into huge cookers. The cookroom was by far the noisiest section of the cannery. The machines were usually operated by men, who were free to move around somewhat and could enjoy brief conversations while doing their jobs. The contrast between the women's quiet absorption in their work and the men's joking and bantering, most of it in Spanish, was highly noticeable. The men displayed boisterous camaraderie. The women, however, gave visitors furtive, resentful glances and communicated with one another nonverbally by rolling their eyes and tossing their heads.

After cooking, the cans were moved by conveyor belt to the warehouse, where they were labeled, cased, stacked on wooden pallets, and then either stored or loaded onto boxcars to be transported to market. One worker, usually a woman, checked for dented cans and moved them aside. Labeling and casing were done by machine, with male or female attendants, and the cases were stacked onto the pallets by hand, usually by a male, or by automatic depalletizers, which were attended by a man or a woman. The pallets were stored or loaded by forklift, usually driven by a male, and some unlabeled cans were stacked and stored to be labeled in the off-season with a skeleton crew.

The atmosphere in the warehouse was much more pleasant. It was cooler and quieter than the preparation or cook areas. The work pace, although still geared to the line, was less hectic. There workers, although generally stationary, could occasionally converse with one another, move around a little, and look around even while attending the label machine or stacking. The forklift drivers seemed to enjoy driving around and bantering with other workers. The maintenance

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workers, who were almost all male, were also relatively free to move around and talk, although at times they were closely supervised in their jobs.

A small department in the cannery is the quality-control section, or the "lab." There samples of cans are checked for sugar content in the syrup, and the grade of the produce pack is inspected. Most of the workers are female, and according to women, these jobs are the best ones for women in the canneries. Quality-control jobs pay Bracket III wages. The machinery for repairing equipment and making parts is located in the machine shop, and the mechanics usually work there. When I was there, all of the mechanics were male. These skilled workers were free to move around and had specific work assignments, which they completed with little supervision.

There were relatively few workers, considering the high number of cans produced per day and the size of the plant. Most of the workers were in the sorting section.

Women's views on the work process reflected their varied positions. Women who worked on the lines as sorters characterized these jobs as the most tedious and boring. Confinement in one place, endlessly repeating a single task, provided little intrinsic reward. Lupe Collosi stated: "I don't like the monotony of the belt. I hate standing all day. It's noisy; it gives me a headache. The line makes me dizzy, and sometimes I get sick." Rosa Zamora revealed the common use of fantasy in alleviating the boredom of sorting: "It's awful! You have to be constantly thinking of something, dreaming of something. I couldn't be thinking about what I was doing! Or else you'll get all down, all depressed. So I'd dream about the kind of job I'd like, or about what clothes I'm going to wear to the dance this weekend. . . . I'm always in a good mood. You can't let it get you down." Estela Gómez defensively made the point that "you do think. You have to figure out which ones to throw out." Line workers also resented that their movements were completely controlled. Blanca Ramírez deplored being confined to the "women's" department: "You can't lift your head or the floorlady comes and asks you, 'What are you looking at, what do you want?' You can't even notice who works where, who walks by, nor how they treat the others, especially the men." Over and over women noted how demanding the work was and how it strained their bodies. Lisa said, "You're just standing there moving your hands, and it hurts your lower back." Women vehe-

mently complained about the dehumanizing aspects of line work, especially the fast pace and speedups. Josie said, "I'm just like a robot, a cog in the machine. It's so unhuman to me."

More than anything, workers resented unfair and disrespectful treatment by supervisors. When floorladies seemed to push them too hard, either to keep up the pace or to conform with work rules, women criticized them severely in private. Connie García bitterly described the demeaning treatment meted out by floorladies: "We were treated just like cattle, just driven constantly. You couldn't even pick up your head a little to look around, or else there would be a floorlady right there wondering why you weren't working hard, and they'd work right alongside of you just to show that you weren't doing your job." Lisa was detached completely from her work: "I hated it! You had to kind of just ignore the fact that you were there, do your work, and try to pass the time as best you could." María López disliked her job, angrily concluding: "Canneries are the *worst* places to work! They work you like a slave. They don't treat you with respect, like a human being."

The women articulated the alienating nature of their work. They believed that supervisors' disrespect was an insult to their dignity. Furthermore, the work itself had little intrinsic value. Most women were not publicly critical, however, for fear of losing the job.

Other women were much less critical of the work process. Vicki worked as a floorlady and supervised predominantly Mexican women sorters. She appreciated the fact that she could speak Spanish in her work and took pride in the responsibility of teaching workers: "I'm happy with my job now. I like working with people. Especially the younger girls that come from Mexico, they don't know how to speak English. So I have to explain everything to them. That's very important." One of the reasons Vicki appreciated her floorlady job so much was because she also worked on the line as a sorter during the beginning of the season. It was only during the peak of the season that she was in charge of six lines of workers. So during her stint as floorlady, Vicki empathized with her subordinates: "I like to feel comfortable; I want my girls to feel relaxed and do their work. You kind of have to pamper them: 'now girls . . .'" She seemed an exemplary supervisor, but she acknowledged that her work was difficult: "There is a lot of pressure; you have to push people." Estela enjoyed the independence of a quality-control job: "I'm my own boss. I walk

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around outside and all over the place, and check the lines, and train girls if they need to be trained.” She also appreciated that she was not often required to work overtime. Cristina, who had worked for three years as a seamer, found it challenging: “You have to keep up with the men to get the job done, but I’m strong enough to do it porque soy muy macha [because I’m tough like a man].”³

Women who received promotions, either through the pilot training program or the Affirmative Action Program, were generally pleased with the work. They adapted to and accepted the new rigors of their jobs and sometimes even took pleasure in them. Certain aspects of their jobs were highly valued: a measure of independence, freedom of movement, responsibility, and opportunities for interaction with other workers. Workers who had these kinds of jobs were relatively satisfied. Celia had a former “man’s” job as an oiler-greaser: “My job is dangerous, but I love it. I work on my own. No one supervises me; no one bothers me. It’s not hard. You need to be fast and agile so you can climb up and around the machines. You’re on the go all day. I like the independence.” A former sorter, she believed that mechanization relieved the difficulty of the work: “Now everything is done by machine. It’s easier.”

Connie worked in the shipping department as a shipping clerk. She supervised a crew on the railroad dock in the loading and unloading of boxcars, and she worked alongside them. Her job also included stacking cases onto pallets and driving a forklift or tractor. Her job was strenuous and difficult, and she got dirty from climbing around the boxcars. but she believed it was easier than “women’s work”: “Ever since women have been able to do “men’s jobs,” we have it easier! It’s not standing on a line eight, ten hours a day anymore. I drive a forklift; I sit in an office and write up tally sheets. We’re coasting!” These women considered their jobs as challenging and rewarding work.⁴

3. The term *macha* is the feminine form of *macho*, a Spanish word that holds complex meaning in Mexico and in the United States. In the United States, *macho* (male) or *machismo* (maleisms) implies male dominance and, especially in popular feminist parlance, has come to connote expressions of patriarchy. In Mexico, depending on the context, a *macho* is a man who has courage, integrity, strength, or is a good family man; it can refer to a man who holds his liquor well or is a philanderer; or it can refer to a male animal.

4. Women who are highly satisfied with their jobs tend to appreciate both the nature of the work itself, as well as “extrinsic” features such as the quality of interpersonal relations with others (Andrisani 1978).

Working Conditions

Working conditions in canneries seemed bad, especially to the novice. My field notes describe my first plant visit:

It was incredible. The whole plant was extremely noisy! Our tour guide had to yell the whole time. Even though we were standing right next to him, I still couldn't hear most of what he said until we got to the warehouse. Most of the noise was in the cookroom where the canned fruit is cooked in machinery that is *very* loud. The clatter of the cans crashing against one another as they moved along on conveyor belts above us added to the noise of the machines. The whole cookroom area vibrated. The interior of the plant was dark, hot, and humid, and water was everywhere. The cement floor was essentially wet all over, with puddles of water and piles of garbage (fallen fruit) left lying around. Several times we literally walked through the garbage and puddles as we toured the plant. The metal walkways were narrow and slippery. I almost fell several times. In the peach-washing area the lye solution was so strong it made me nauseous. It was so humid in that department that my glasses fogged up. Afterwards I had a splitting headache and felt dizzy. It made me wonder: If this is how they treat guests, how do they treat the workers?

Some of the newer plants were not as bad as this, but it was fairly representative according to workers' comments and my own observations.

Since most cannery workers are employed seasonally, they experience these harsh conditions in short, intense bursts. Work seasons usually ran from June through September, with the peak of the season in July and August. Some canneries processed spring fruits or vegetables and had a short work season then. During the peak of the season, workers put in as many as ten hours a day and often worked six days a week.

The physical toll of such working conditions was great. Workers came home exhausted, dehydrated, and suffering from swollen feet or varicose veins after long hours of standing. Blanca echoed others in explaining: "On weekends I just lie around and try to recuperate so I can go back to work on Mondays."

The women considered the working conditions to be difficult and physically demanding. Common complaints included work during the summer vacation months, heat and humidity during the summers

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and cold during the winters, inadequate ventilation, and excessive vibration from the machinery. Women complained that working on the line left them wet and dirty. Along with the tedious but fast-paced work, there was also the unpleasant nature of the food itself. The women who actually handled the produce indicated that the sight and smell of so much food could be sickening. In addition to considerable amounts of rotten produce, sorters working on the line also had to face assorted dead bugs, spiders, snakes, mice, and even rabbits. Lisa made a face: "It's gross!" After a season of intense exposure to these sights and smells, many workers felt a distaste that lasted for weeks. "After the season I don't even want to look at a tomato," Rosa declared.

Canneries are not merely uncomfortable work sites but also one of the most dangerous industries. In the period from 1958 to 1970, canneries averaged nine work-injury rate points higher than all other manufacturing (U.S. Department of Labor 1971:361). In 1976 the food and kindred-products industry had the second highest rate of work-related injuries in California, after the lumber-manufacturing industry. At that time, all California industries (including state and local government) averaged ten occupational injuries and illnesses out of a hundred full-time workers, whereas the canned-fruit and vegetable industry averaged eighteen injuries and illnesses per hundred full-time workers (Department of Industrial Relations 1978:7).

Historical trends show that the number of injuries have declined since 1970 (Brown 1981:62); yet workers perceived them to be on the rise. One informant had four fingers severed, and his was the third such accident in the same factory. Tony DiVencenzo believed that accidents had increased dramatically since the early seventies because there were more Mexican workers who did not understand the safety instructions. He said, "I don't know how they work in Mexico. It isn't a language barrier. You tell these people to be careful, and they just don't pay attention." Yet later he theorized that "ninety percent is supervisory: They get a new person; they just say 'you run that.' They're not trained on the danger."

Chemicals used in processing the produce provided another danger. Women reported that they missed work because the lye solution made them nauseous. Informant Randy Wilson noted that there were no warnings written in Spanish about chemical dangers or listings of

the chemicals in containers stored in his plant. Chemical spills occurred regularly. At one plant a chlorine accident in 1978 hospitalized seven women working on the line sorting tomatoes. A worker in the sorting department told me that management turned off the flow of chemicals, but the water was recycled. "They never closed the line down and we worked up there, and we finished our shift." She claimed that no one advised her of the problem or explained why it occurred.

Loss of hearing was an occupational hazard since few workers wore the company-provided earplugs.⁵ Workers were lax about wearing earplugs because they were uncomfortable. Some workers such as forklift drivers did not wear earplugs because they needed to have their hearing unimpaired for safety reasons as they drove in and out of the plants. In 1978 workers filed a complaint with the California Occupational Safety and Health Commission to have canners reduce noise through engineering changes in the plants.⁶

Informants claimed that it was commonplace for workers to slip and fall, lose fingers, strain their backs, get hit by falling cans, have hands caught in conveyor belts, or receive chemical burns. One worker provided me with minutes from the safety committee in her factory. This plant averaged 1,779 injuries per year in the three-year period between 1974 and 1977. The safety-committee minutes confirmed my informants' reports about accidents in grisly detail.

Workers were bitter about having to tolerate such conditions, and they considered the callousness of company officials to safety issues to be a denial of human dignity. Connie complained: "They don't relate to cannery workers as people; they try to work us like animals. There are little things they could do to make working conditions easier. But it costs money, and they don't want to put out any more money than they have to." Workers continually fought with management to have these conditions changed. For example, Connie refused to become certified to load a butane tank because she believed it was unsafe. She had witnessed an accident in which three persons were

5. OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) regulations give preference to noise elimination through engineering solutions and consider ear protectors to be least effective. Engineering solutions to cannery noise were in the pilot-demonstration-project phase as of 1977 (Department of Agricultural Engineering 1977).

6. The ruling was in favor of the workers, but the company appealed because engineering changes would be too costly. See *Petition for Reconsideration*, 26 July 1978, a document in my possession.

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burned and wanted guarantees that she would not be jeopardized by the carelessness of another worker. Tony DiVencenzo got into numerous arguments with management, finally complaining to OSHA. He said: "Anytime anything breaks down you try to keep the thing going by any means. They're more worried about production than safety."

The union's laxity on health and safety issues was an important organizing issue for cannery workers. One of the leaflets of the 1978 election campaign demanded to know: "What have the union officials done to eliminate dangerous working conditions in the plant?" It provided a reply "NADA," and criticized the fact that the chlorine accident was ignored. Randy was part of the opposition in the election campaign. Concerning health and safety issues, he said: "I've worked in other factories before, and canneries are by far the most dangerous." Other workers agreed with him. In a survey of cannery workers taken in 1978, 33 percent of the workers believed that there were safety hazards; 37 percent complained about excessive noise (Brown 1981:425).

Work-based Networks

The lack of a sizable administrative and clerical staff compared to the production work force indicated that there was a limited emphasis on "industrial relations" and bureaucratic personnel practices in canneries. Most plants, even the larger ones, had a minimum number of administrative employees. Some of the larger companies and multinational corporations had personnel departments and affirmative-action programs, but they were centrally located and covered a number of plants. The directives and procedures are left up to the plant managers, administrators, and supervisors for interpretation and enforcement. In addition, the informal hiring practices allowed considerable discretion to supervisors regarding hiring. Therefore, the informal organizational practices—the work culture—were significant. Cannery work culture involved informal work-based networks, which operated beside the formal division of labor. The composition of these networks generally consisted of friendships or acquaintanceships developed among employees at work.

Two types of coworker networks were particularly important. One

set of work-based networks consisted of those with positions of authority—foremen, floorladies, or administrators. Since most of the supervisors were male, these networks were essentially “old-boy” cliques that did not include line workers. The other type of network was worker based. Membership in both types sometimes cut across ethnic or gender lines, but worker networks were usually composed only of members of the same gender and ethnic group, for example, Italian males. Women usually did not participate in men’s work-based networks, perhaps because women and men rarely worked together. Some networks also included kin, since a number of workers had relatives working in the same plant. Seasonal workers tended to make friends with other temporary workers, whereas full-time workers had their own networks.

Mexicans and Chicanos often belonged to different networks, since the difference between them diminished ease of interaction. Chicanos often speak a different Spanish dialect than Mexicans or use slang terms, and *mexicanos* deride them for this. Blanca, a *mexicana*, believed that Chicanas were too docile: “They are ignorant of their rights. They go to school here, where they don’t teach you anything, and they don’t know that they have rights. And I, what little I know, at least I know that I have rights.” Blanca believed that Chicanas “se olvidaron de su país, de su sangre” (have forgotten their country, their blood). Chicanas also had their criticisms of Mexicans and may view Mexican men as being of lower status or too old-fashioned. Connie believed that “mexicanos are really hard to work with,” whereas Chicanos “aren’t quite as ‘old country,’ ” because they show more respect for women. Chicanos often resented the competition for jobs from Mexicans who migrated seasonally to work in canneries. Estela, for example, wished her son could get a cannery job but believed that Mexicans were favored in hiring: “I felt resentful that my son had to wait. Here he was going to school, and we were paying taxes; he has the right.”

It became evident that, from the workers’ viewpoint, three major groups were competing for entry-level jobs in canneries: native-born Chicanos, Mexican settlers, and Mexican migrants.⁷ The status of the supervisor seemed to be crucial in terms of who was hired, with

7. Workers reported that a few Vietnamese had begun entering the canneries in 1978.

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Chicano supervisors hiring people referred to them by other Chicanos, and Mexicans hiring members of their own networks.⁸ Whether Mexican migrants were in fact displacing U.S. workers is impossible to ascertain.⁹

There were important differences in the way that supervisors' and worker-based networks operated in the plants. Supervisors could assign workstations, provide information on new jobs, or help workers qualify for promotions. In other words, supervisors had a lot of control, and they often favored members of their own ethnic group. The operation of work-based networks created ethnic conflicts not only between Mexican-Americans and other groups but between Chicanos and Mexicans.

Supervisors had discretion in deciding where to place a worker not only with respect to the job but across pay brackets. This created some abuse and irregularities, such as ignoring seniority. Workers reported that there was widespread favoritism and even discrimination in work assignments. Relatives would get jobs that were easier or cleaner or for which there were better working conditions; friends were allowed to work overtime; or sweethearts moved into higher-paying jobs suspiciously fast. Luz fumed: "The foremen place men where they want, because they know each other or are related." Lupe recalled that when she first started work, there was a Spanish floorlady who had so much control that "she had a dictatorship; she had too much power." Blanca explained that "even among sorters there are fast belts and slow belts. All the Italians work the slower belts while the *mexicanas* have to work a belt that is so fast you have to grab four apricots at once to keep up." Blanca described a fight she had with an Italian floorlady who called her a "stupid Mexican" because Blanca

8. There is evidence that Mexican migrants tend to establish "niches" in particular industries (nurseries, for example) or occupations (busboys) in northern California (Cornelius, Chavez, and Castro 1982). Mexican migrants use social networks to find jobs and housing and help other migrants adapt to life in the United States (Cornelius 1982). In the citrus industry in southern California, there was a division between established settlers who were former *braceros* (Mexican contract laborers who came to the United States between 1942 and 1946)—who had better, more stable jobs—and seasonal, migrant Mexican workers. See Mines and Anzaldúa 1982, cited in Cornelius 1982

9. The U.S. Select Commission on Immigration and Refugee Policy studied current national evidence on this issue and concluded that there is no strong evidence to support the position that undocumented workers displace U.S. citizens or take jobs that native workers do not want. See Cornelius 1982:30–31.

arrived early and the floorlady thought Blanca had misunderstood her instructions. Blanca responded:

“Cuando tú naciste, no tenías toda esa ropa de floorlady, tú naciste sin la ropa, sin las papeles, encuerada como yo. ¡No me debes de tratar así, de hablar en esa manera!” Todas me dijeron después: “¡Qué bien dicho! ¡Tú le dijiste bien!” (“When you were born, you didn’t have on those floorlady clothes; you were born without the uniform, without papers, naked as I was. You shouldn’t treat me like that or talk to me that way!” All the women told me later, “You said it well! You told her off good!”)

Lisa discussed her understanding of how supervisors “picked on” the Mexicans: “When my mom started working, it was the Mexicans against the Italians. See, there are professional cannery workers who know how to steal. There’s a way in which with the machine, with one can you can mark three cans. The Italians were giving them [their friends] the cans. But right away they pick the Mexicans’ cans to check. We all knew, because when you work on the line you know who’s working.” Lisa herself was able to get off the line for two weeks because one of the “head honchos” put in a good word with another foreman. Luz observed how these abuses were kept quiet: “I filled in for a sick timekeeper, and that’s when I learned a lot about the unfairness that goes on. I complained with the personnel man cause I saw Bracket III people doing Bracket V jobs and getting paid for Bracket III. I brought this to his attention, and he told me that I was paid to keep time and not ask questions.” Luz said questioning these practices caused her problems: “This is where I had most of the conflict.” She was eventually returned to working on the line. Connie observed that instances of ignoring seniority in work assignments had increased. Women believed that there was little use in complaining about favoritism in work assignments.

Undocumented Mexicans were even more vulnerable than other workers, and supervisors took advantage of this through their informal practices. Cristina, who had permanently settled in the U.S. from Mexico, was angry at how foremen used Mexican migrants:

Los mayordomos, ni Diós no los quiere. Tienen una preferencia a los que vienen de Mexico, que les traen tequila o les dan dinero. Por eso permiten que trabajen sin señoría [*sic*]. Pero nosotros pagamos

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taxes, hemos pagado para los derechos de estar aquí. (The foremen, not even God loves them. They prefer those who come from Mexico, who bring them tequila or give them money. That's why they let them work without seniority. But we pay taxes; we have paid for the right to be here.)

Teresa Maldonado, who was born and raised in Mexico but had lived in San Jose for twelve years, disliked the way younger Mexican women were treated: "Those mexicano foremen favor those who come from Mexico over us." Chicanos perceived these practices as favoritism. Foremen could use Mexican workers in these ways because of the threat of deportation.¹⁰

But race or ethnicity was only one way in which favoritism flowed. Gender was an important basis for providing access to resources or denying it.

Supervisors influenced the decision about who got information regarding promotions. To get a promotion, workers had to sign up or "put in a bid" to the personnel office. Those women with high seniority could "bump" the present jobholder, that is, take his or her job. Women often had an unclear picture of what a higher-paying job actually entailed, however, especially the specific work process. When they inquired about new positions, they were rarely given a written job description. They had to rely on their friends and co-workers to figure out what the job specifications were and, if they were eligible and had enough seniority, whether to apply or to bump the present worker. Women, particularly Spanish speakers who did not have access to this information, were often discouraged from even applying for better jobs. Vicki explained that before the affirmative action program, "just the supervisor and foremen did the placement. You never had a chance to better yourself because you never heard about the jobs."

A Department of Labor study evaluated job training in canneries and found that only 19 percent of trainees knew about the bidding process as a way of advancing. Under these conditions: "one of the biggest barriers to the advancement of women was their lack of knowledge about the jobs, and the rules and processes for advance-

10. Informants reported hearing of instances in which Mexican nationals were allowed to work longer hours in exchange for one hundred dollars to a particular supervisor. The Cannery Workers' Service Center was investigating such allegations.

ment” (U.S. Department of Labor 1978:20). Fifty percent of the Mexican-Americans who received training that provided such information advance one pay bracket the following season (U.S. Department of Labor 1978:26). Martin Brown (1979) argued that this training program did not necessarily cause these workers’ advancement, but rather the increase in job advancement was a result of the elimination of dual seniority lists and the incumbency rule in the contract, which allowed a worker to return to his or her job each season.

Supervisors’ work-based networks were also critical for women passing job trials. The highly developed internal labor market had no clear lines of progression and had limited entry points. To qualify for better-paying jobs, workers had to pass job trials, which tested their qualifications. Since the collective-bargaining agreement allowed outside contractors to be hired if there were no qualified high-seniority workers, outside skilled workers or people with low seniority were often hired. There was no training program to help unskilled workers gain the skills necessary for promotions. Open entry from the outside routinely permitted men to enter at the higher-paying jobs, and there was little mobility for women. Those few job openings were awarded informally before bidding for jobs started under the collective-bargaining agreement of 1970 (U.S. Department of Labor 1978). Again Vicki explained the former process of gaining promotions: “You didn’t apply; they just gave jobs to people.”

A pilot training program, conducted between 1972 and 1975, was designed to improve the employment status of women by training them for semiskilled positions. Forty-seven percent of the trainees advanced one or more pay brackets the following season. But only 21 percent of the trainees received the job for which they were trained—the rest of the successful trainees received higher-paying jobs for which they were not trained. Limitations in plant turnover and low seniority of the trainees did not explain this pattern. Rather, the happenstance selection process, particularly the attitude of the supervisor or foreman, was the critical factor. A significantly high proportion (71 percent) of the trainees who passed job trials gave a favorable rating on their foreman’s attitude, whereas 51 percent of those who failed gave their foreman the most negative rating. These factors were more prevalent in some plants than in others (U.S. Department of Labor 1978:64–67).

As a supervisor, Vicki observed male supervisors helping their

friends qualify for better jobs. She stated: "It's who you know; that's how the girls get into these positions. That's what the big fight is over there at work, because lots of times it's the girls' boyfriends that want them to get in there, and they show them. They want them in there, and they give them the chance." Cristina recalled how tomato sorters had staged a work slowdown in protest when a qualified Mexican woman was not given a supervisory position: "The majority of the floorladies are Italian. This woman wanted the position; she knew everything, she deserved it, and she had struggled with the union to get the position. They didn't want her because she was Mexican, I think." The Mexican woman was eventually appointed as floorlady. Nevertheless, Connie believed, as other Chicanas did, that "they want to keep all the cushy little jobs for their relatives, their girlfriends, and other Anglos." Blanca had no respect for Italians, whom she perceived as clannish: "There are a lot of conflicts between the Italians and the Mexicans. The Italians always stick up for their own race and are very money hungry." To explain this view, Blanca related an incident in which she had observed an Italian-American floorlady, who had supposedly retired, at the unemployment insurance office. This indicated to Blanca that the floorlady was employed at another cannery, since she still qualified for unemployment benefits. Blanca surmised: "She probably quit [the first cannery job] so another Italian could have her place and it not go to a Mexican." Blanca implied that by quitting and working surreptitiously at another job, the floorlady had been able to circumvent the normal process of posting a new job opening, and that management was in collusion by giving the job to another Italian-American. Blanca was convinced that favoritism was rampant.

Whether or not one ethnic group discriminated against another, women perceived ethnic discrimination. The fact that supervisors' work-based networks often were of a different ethnic group from workers made the conflict over jobs and wages seem ethnically biased, and in some instances it may have been. However, these tensions were reflections of the underlying conflict over the scarcity of jobs: there were a few promotions to be had, and all workers with high seniority could apply for them. Connie phrased the conflict this way: "Because of the seniority system, if somebody gets a better job than you, it means more money. If that person doesn't have as much seniority as you, you're going to take that job 'cause, hey, money's

the name of the game. And you're always competing for your money. The competition is always there." The operation of supervisors' work-based networks was more than just capricious behavior by supervisors, although this occurred too. More analytically, it was a system of allocation in which access to scarce resources was channeled through informal means. In this regard, cannery work-based networks were a means of "simple control," which allowed supervisors to reward some workers and discipline others and which operated alongside the bureaucratic system sanctioned by the collective-bargaining agreement.¹¹

Women were aware of the importance of being in the good graces of supervisors and how the networks operated. Luz, a floorlady, recalled her instructions when she started her job: "She [her supervisor] told me 'if you ever become floorlady, always be nice. You get more work out of people when you're nice.'" María observed: "A lot of times they give a little gift, and they get good little jobs." Blanca derided the "kiss-ups" who "bring the floorlady little gifts, call her sweet names, and tell her how pretty she looks." She refused to do it: "I'm not hypocritical; I'm paid to work, and that's all I do. I'm not paid to kiss up." Women perceived that individual supervisors developed power, particularly through their ability to hand out work assignments. Lisa recalled when a supervisor had refused to allow her to work in the warehouse: "He took my name and yelled at me. They are just trying to enforce respect for authority." Over and over women expressed their intimidation by supervisors and how difficult it was to get around their power. María succinctly summarized women's views: "Es siempre una batalla" (It's always a struggle).

The work-based networks of women workers functioned differently. Coworkers taught new employees how to perform their jobs so that the work was easier. When women first obtained jobs in canneries, they were not formally trained (Brown 1981:81). They were immediately placed on the job and learned by watching coworkers, with on-the-job instruction from the supervisor. New workers were often overwhelmed and felt dizzy or nauseated. Coworkers advised new sorters to adjust to the movement of the conveyor belt by con-

11. Richard Edwards (1979) has distinguished between *simple control*, whereby supervision is personal and extreme; *technical control*, which stems from the technology itself (such as an assembly line); and *bureaucratic control*, whereby unions and management negotiate how production is to be organized.

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centrating on individual pieces of produce. Training by coworkers was informal, often given during breaks, since talking with coworkers was prohibited, and mandatory earplugs made it difficult to converse anyway. But coworkers found ways to get around this rule. If they talked too much, though, or the floorlady thought they were “playing around,” they would be fired. Coworkers also pointed out that keeping up with the fast pace was not possible or even necessary.¹²

Other jobs such as check-weigher allowed more flexibility. Women who were experienced learned to gauge the proper weight with their hands, enabling them to bypass the weighing operations. Since they were paid by the piece-rate, this helped considerably in making more money. Skipping the weighing task also provided a momentary break from the fast pace. Women learned these tricks from experienced workers.

Coworkers also acquainted women with the authority groups. Lisa noted, “It’s a big soap opera at the cannery. You know who hangs around the bosses and who makes the cans.” Gossip provided important information about who belonged to different cliques. Euleria smiled as she said, “You always know something about everybody.”

On the line, women were able to cooperate with one another, and this made the job more pleasant. Connie recalled: “We all got along; you have to when you work that kind of work. We used to sing, make jokes.” Furthermore, women could anticipate staying on the line with many coworkers for long hours. Lupe observed: “Usually people in the cannery are good natured; people have no problems. They’re all so used to working hard that they don’t complain.” Workers tried to keep their differences in check because of the constant menace of supervisors and the fear of losing their jobs. Vicki used to work as a sorter and apricot cutter. She noted, “I got along pretty good with everybody. I wanted a job, so I made it a point.” Luz said, “If you want to be working, you can’t be fighting.” These statements contrasted with the antagonisms among women workers when they competed for line positions in the 1920s. The hourly pay, coupled with pressured working conditions, fostered camaraderie among women in the 1970s.

12. There is evidence that the canners encouraged this method of informal training and recognized that it created a relatively skilled work force. See the interview with Mike Elorduy, secretary-treasurer, California State Council of Cannery and Food Processing Unions, cited in Brown 1981:83.

Informal groups socialized women into the work culture. Yet most women claimed, with disgust, that "I trained myself." Although they had help, women did not view their coworkers as constituting a group. The term *work-based networks* better characterizes informal relationships with certain, not all, coworkers. Women's work-based networks usually were social forums too, and women socialized with one another during breaks and lunch.¹³

By contrast, women with relatives in the same plant had ready-made training teams. Lisa, a third-generation cannery worker, described her first season on the job: "It's hard work, but I can't say I didn't enjoy it. Everywhere I looked I knew somebody; I had relatives to talk to. They baby me, give me cans." She went on and described her parents' participation in a work-based network: "My mom and my stepfather live in the same world, the cannery world with all the chismes [gossip]. In the cannery you can see them sitting together talking with all my aunts and their friends. My mom is on a high during the season." Other women initiated friendships with coworkers through the informal training process. Connie observed: "You get to know all these people. You have this intimacy because you work with them at least eight hours a day." Vicki believed that work friendships detracted from the monotony of the job: "You get to know everybody's little problems. It's interesting." Another woman characterized work friendships in a more cynical manner: "You have this *abnormal* intimacy. You make friends with people who are totally different from you, just because you work together." Nevertheless, many women believed they never would have stayed on the job without the help of coworkers.

The ethnic cohesiveness of networks reproduced and perpetuated the ethnic segregation of the work force. Gloria characterized Mexican-Anglo friendships as appearing "weird." One hapless Portuguese-American informant described her social isolation until she made friends with other Portuguese women: "I used to sit with some Mexican women, but they would only speak in Spanish. I felt so left out! I think it's only courteous to speak English." Starting to work on the line, this woman received little help from her coworkers. "I don't know a lot of people; in three months' time you don't get close. This

13. Rafaela Castro (1982) has analyzed the sexual jokes of Mexican women who worked in food-processing plants. Women who worked in fish canneries also made sexual jokes, in this case regarding the fish loins (Garson 1972).

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Spanish lady who works across from me doesn't speak English. So all we do is say hello or goodbye and smile." After twelve years of work, this woman was promoted to swing-shift floorlady. Her Spanish-speaking cohorts with greater seniority remained behind.

Women tended to distance themselves from those who left line work and no longer socialized with network members. After Connie took on a man's job, she missed the friendship of her former coworkers: "It just seems like everytime that someone gets an advancement, there's a lot of things said. Petty things, like 'she thinks she's too good' because she does all this stuff.' A lot of it is just jealousy."

Working on the line, women established friendships with one another. Yet because of the working conditions, relationships were difficult to sustain at the cannery. During the peak of the season, workers were on the job six or seven days a week. Breaks were only twelve minutes long, lunches a half-hour. There was not much time to socialize. Besides, women occasionally preferred a silent retreat from the commotion inside the factory: "Sometimes I need to be by myself for that half hour," Vicki observed.

The potential cohesion of work-based networks was undercut further by conflict over promotions and the chance for better wages. As long as women were in the same positions, it was easier to cooperate. Friendships developed through work-based networks enable women to bear the difficult conditions of their jobs and added solidarity with other workers. Yet working conditions were not conducive to the development of meaningful relationships at work, so women built their work friendships outside of the factories (as discussed in the next chapter). The changes in work organization mandated by the Affirmative Action Program would disrupt the informal organization as well.

The Affirmative Action Program

Women had contrasting views about the Affirmative Action Program, but generally they supported the principle of equal opportunity for women. Cristina noted, "It was about time. We should be equal with men in everything." Lupe believed that "it's really good. Women are going into mechanics, forklift driver, regardless of their race. Everybody in the U.S. should have that right." Vicki agreed with the notion but had questions about whether women could handle

men's work: "I'm all for it if you're capable of doing it." Vicki's job injury, incurred while she trained for a man's job, no doubt led to her caution. A woman entering a man's job created a stir. Lupe recalled the first time a woman went to work on the seamer machine: "Everybody was flabbergasted. They said, 'What's the world coming to?' 'This is terrible, a woman doing a man's job!' I was shocked." Workers referred to the program derisively as "women's lib."

There were many reasons why the changes ordered by the Affirmative Action Program would be slow in coming. Most women indicated that they were not adequately informed of the proposed changes and had to rely on rumors. As a floorlady, Luz had not had much direct experience with the program. She shrugged: "things haven't changed that much. I don't think there's too much to it." Gloria, who worked in the lab, also saw few changes. Connie was dissatisfied with the training program because it focused on job bidding: "The affirmative-action training program is a farce." She explained her dissatisfaction:

The first day we toured canneries. I had them come to my plant and took them all over, even in the basement where the women work and there are all the rats. The head of the training program told me, "you'll do anything to make a point." I told her, "You're right." Then they showed us slides of different jobs, which were right out of the Appendix A book [of the union contract]. [She rolled her eyes.] Next they were going to show us a videotape of how we look when we put in a bid for a job to management. I told them to forget it. I didn't give a shit how I looked when I put in a bid. What really mattered was if I was qualified, if I had the seniority for the job. I refused to participate.

By contrast, Lupe had a positive experience in her plant: "She [the personnel officer] explained it real good, with everything in Spanish and English. She told us about the different positions that would be opened, how you were hired, what wages and health benefits, everything. I was pleased; they had never done it before." Lupe hoped that she would qualify for a promotion in the near future and believed that the Affirmative Action Program was "the greatest thing that ever happened to the cannery." Luz had problems with the training program also: "They don't allow a person to learn the job unless they want that particular person."

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Some women did not support the notion of women taking men's jobs. Estela, for example said: "I don't go for that. Those jobs should be for men; they have a family. I don't like to work hard anyway. I wouldn't take a man's job because they're harder. It's good for widows and divorcees, but if we have our husbands, why bother?" Lupe concurred, believing women are physically weaker: "I myself wouldn't want to work that hard. We can't handle it; our bodies can't handle it." Yet she observed women successfully performing men's jobs: "Women drive semis, work on axles." She had a look of amazement. "Some of them are pretty and are not built that big." Celia felt guilty because she had taken a man's greaser job. "Sometimes I feel bad because I've taken a man's job for the last five years. And I figure we women with hard hats, we took men's jobs." Celia also did not like to see men in women's jobs: "It's unusual for men to work on the line. But when they do, they have to wear a hair net, the women's aprons, gloves, like a woman. It makes me feel kind of funny. To me, they must feel kind of, you know . . ." She couldn't bring herself to conclude her statement, that men in aprons are emasculated. She stammered a bit longer and then pronounced that at least she would not take a warehouse job, "because those are men's jobs."

Vicki believed that conflict among workers was precipitated by the Affirmative Action Program: "Yes, there is competition because of women's lib." Celia did not like the program: "There should be something different." She hoped that "women's lib" would remain confined to the job: "Women should get paid if they work a man's job, but I don't believe in all the other stuff. I like to have my door opened and other things."

Connie, on the other hand, did not support the view that women and men should be confined to certain jobs: "We have families, too, that have to live. And I don't feel like I'm hurting any man by supporting my own family."

The men also apparently believed that women should remain in women's jobs. This can be seen in the harassment women received when they got promoted. Women clearly had difficulties in using plant seniority as a vehicle for moving up the job ladder.

Men were sometimes temporarily assigned to women's jobs, but women had to fight through a series of steps to gain men's jobs. First they had to put in bids, since a man's job almost always meant a promotion. Workers did not wear badges with their seniority numbers

on them; the only way women could ascertain another worker's seniority was through gossip networks or a visit to the personnel office. Thus to bump someone took initiative and nerve. Women were discouraged not only by supervisors but through fear of the possible repercussions by their coworkers.

Once they succeeded in getting new jobs, women were often subject to devastating harassment. Supervisors insured that women received inadequate training. Vicki, for example, almost burned her face with acid while working with a cleanup crew because she was not advised of the dangers: "They don't teach you; they're in a hurry, and they don't go for women up there." Women would fail their job trials or receive job-related injuries and get discouraged. Familiar with this scenario, the bold Connie anticipated her treatment when she was promoted to shipping clerk. She told her supervisor and union representative alike: "I want it to go on the record that I have been told already that I'm going to be disqualified. But the only way you are going to disqualify me is to run me over with that boxcar. I am going to make it." She described her training period:

I learned to stack cases, which weigh up to a hundred pounds, and put up bars to the box cars, which weigh about twenty-five to thirty pounds, and you must lift them over your head. I wasn't taught to drive a forklift until I'd been there about six months. It would have made my job a lot easier, since I have to go up and down the dock, which is about two-and-a-half blocks long. But the boys there weren't allowed to teach me. They were told "definitely not; teach her to hand stack and put up bars." I used to come home so tired I'd just flop out on that bed, and I was out until the next day. I was *completely* exhausted!

Supervisors would add tasks to jobs and even assigned one woman work that formerly had been split between two men's jobs. For example, four-foot-nine-inch Maricela Hernández had to climb a ten-foot ladder to check temperature gauges, a task never assigned to the prior male worker. Lisa observed about her mother's experiences: "They used to hassle her! They turned her meter back; she knew because she wrote the numbers down before she left. It was like a ritual: Every year they'd try and take her job away; she'd call in the union." Lupe observed: "The foremen were really upset because they had to train this one girl. They felt men should have the job because of the prestige; that's mostly what it was."

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Patronizing comments by supervisors were commonplace. During her interview for an oiler-greaser job, one woman was told, "We don't want you using your sex appeal to get the men to do your work." Connie observed: "Most company people are male Anglos, and for some asinine reason they don't like working with women. They just don't want to give you the chance to advance."

Women's new male coworkers were also a source of irritation or outright harassment. On a new job, women were alternately ignored and taunted. They were admonished for depriving a man's family of its support, accused of being "man chasers," or called "uppity" or "loud-mouthed bitches." Men made fun of women's awkwardness in a new job with comments such as "leave it to a woman to do that" or teased them with statements such as "you wanted a man's job, now do it." Connie's coworkers were explicit: "They said, 'You're going to learn the hard way. Then its up to you to learn the easy way.'" Luz, who worked temporarily in a higher-bracket job, said, "I know I sound paranoid, but those men who are fair are moved; they were very biased as to who you are. Men assume women can't do it with no testing." Cristina was upset: "They tell us vulgar things; all of this is very bad. It's discrimination, and sometimes even your own race is the worst." Celia had what seems to be a unique experience. She found her coworkers to be "real nice, very helpful. If I needed anything they helped and didn't make me feel like I took a man's job; they made me feel at ease." The fact that her husband, a Portuguese-American, was a foreman in another department in the same plant may have contributed to the cooperation she found from male coworkers.

Even subordinates discouraged the entry of women into better-paying jobs by refusing to respect their authority as supervisors. Connie supervised three crews of workers as part of her job. One of the new male workers refused to follow her directions on how to load the boxcars properly. This was during a rush period and created a lot of tension until she finally confronted him, demanding to know why he refused to work for her. According to Connie, he had responded: " 'It's just that I'm not used to a woman telling me what to do, much less yell at me. That made me mad.' " Connie observed: "I get my biggest problems from Chicano men. Any time I get a new worker out there, if he's Mexican or if he's Chicano, he's the one that gives me a hassle." I asked, "Why is that?" "Because Chicano men, Mexican

men, have always dominated their women, and they don't want a woman to tell them what to do," she replied. She found it easiest to work with black men: "They have more respect for women." The fact that Chicanas were often placed in men's jobs in which they competed with Chicanos probably made these women more sensitive to slurs from them.

Furthermore, Chicanas may have responded differently to Chicano men because of their prior experiences with them. Connie described her own response to being in a man's role:

It's just like in your home. Women are much more liberated now; we dare to answer back, but still a lot of times you feel guilty. There's times when I feel guilty, when I have to tell a man "you must do this because I'm telling you to do it." I revert back to when I was a child, and you didn't dare tell Daddy that. And you grew up, and you didn't tell your husband that either. It's just another male you're talking to, but it's the whole mystique of being a man: "you're so big, and you're so strong." Women are supposed to be intimidated by men.

Apparently, male intimidation carried more force when the men were Chicano, because Chicano men conjured up images in Chicanas' minds that were more personal.

Women's complaints did not change things. Vicki noted, "Personnel could care less." Hence besides experiencing the difficulties of learning new jobs, women often felt humiliated and frustrated. Liz said: "I'm surprised I didn't get an ulcer. It was too much: I felt discriminated against as a Chicana and as a woman." Lisa observed, "My mom was a nervous wreck." Connie stated: "Everytime a woman goes into a 'man's' job, she's harassed to the point that some women say 'you can have it.'"

The frequency of such harassment is subject to debate. A U.S. Department of Labor study (1978) claims that only one-quarter of the women they interviewed received such treatment. But every one of the women I interviewed who was working at a "man's" job had received patronizing treatment in one form or another and knew of other women who had also. Almost all of the women I interviewed had heard of such incidents. The consequent "spillover" effect of such intimidation went far beyond the individuals who faced it directly.

Women witnessed management practices that flouted the new system of promotions. Job openings were not posted; a foreman would

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inform friends of coming job openings so that they could apply first and so on. Connie worried because the incumbency rule was being used again. Luz believed that she could get promoted faster if “they ran the whole place fair; if jobs were openly and honestly available.” Most women who were Spanish speakers believed that they needed more education and a command of English to move up. Lisa instead recalled the significance of work-based networks: “I’d have to be related to somebody important, to have the right friends and more contacts.” Women clearly understood the stakes involved if they tried to move out of the “women’s” departments.

The Meaning of Cannery Jobs

Women chose to remain in the cannery for varied reasons. The relatively high hourly wage compared to that for other unskilled jobs was a primary one. Also, seasonal workers are eligible for tax-free unemployment benefits if they cannot find another job. Most women were often unable to find another job during the off-season partially because of their age and lack of skills but also because they were cannery workers. Women believed they were passed over for other jobs because “once they see you have so many years in the cannery, they figure you’ll go back,” Lupe explained, “so they won’t hire you.” The probability of receiving unemployment benefits provided an added incentive to remain as cannery workers.¹⁴ Lupe mused: “Sometimes I wish there was no unemployment. A lot of us would have steady jobs. Because you know you are going to have a steady income coming in all winter, you keep going back.” Combining wages and unemployment benefits, my informants earned between three thousand and seven thousand dollars in 1978, depending on how many hours they worked. This was always a substantial contribution to family income.

Women preferred seasonal work for another reason: once they

14. In 1976 even the lowest paid cannery worker could qualify for unemployment insurance by working slightly more than one month. About 75 percent of cannery workers were eligible for unemployment benefits (California Employment Development Department 1976, cited in Brown 1981:238). The average level of unemployment benefits received by California cannery workers in 1976 was \$1,128. Brown calculates that the lowest paid workers who worked a typical season of four months would receive a subsidy of about two thirds of earned income (1981:240).

adapted to it, it was only a temporary infringement upon their lives. Vicki, with thirty-one years in the industry, shrugged: "You get used to it; it becomes routine. The time goes by fast. Before you know it another season is over." Women learned to *aguantar*, to bear the conditions of their work with patience, strength, and, one hopes, vigor.¹⁵ I asked Cristina about the possibility of seeking a full-time job elsewhere. She shook her head. "I can't, it would be too hard. I don't have enough energy for that." Lisa was stark in her appraisal of seasonal cannery work: "You go through hell for three months. All you think about is your own time, what you're going to do when you're through." These women had only two years of seniority each and had not yet learned to endure, to *aguantar*.

Full-time cannery work had a different meaning for Connie. As a single parent, she had little choice. She struggled to get and keep a man's job because she needed higher wages: "I work because I have to!" she said. "I'm no glutton for punishment. I'm not exactly *in love* with my job." In addition, Connie did not want to seek welfare: "I want to be independent. I don't want to have to accept charity from anybody. And I am willing to work for it." Connie had another reason for persevering despite the obstacles she found on the job: "I wanted to show women that it could be done. And when other women saw that I could do it, I mean I'm not too big, and if I could do it, why couldn't they do it? And I didn't dare not make it!" She laughed as she concluded, "I would have cut my own throat!"

Conclusion

Work-based networks were a central aspect of cannery work culture. Supervisors' networks functioned to channel resources, and women supervisors were in positions to do this also. Participants in male supervisors' networks no doubt also developed camaraderie, but they usually did not include women production workers. Work-based networks, then, expressed the occupational segregation of the canning industry and contributed to the lack of job mobility by women.

Women workers' own networks usually remained fairly exclusive,

15. Ernesto Galarza (1977) has discussed how farm workers take pride in their ability to *aguantar*.

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with networks being composed of members of the same ethnic or racial group. This stems in part from the fact that women were segregated on the job, and white ethnic women often worked separately from Mexican and Chicana women. Language barriers also prevented closeness among many of these women and even distanced Chicanas and *mexicanas*. Furthermore, Mexican and Chicana women observed their ethnic female supervisors helping members of their own group secure higher-paying jobs or easier working conditions. For this reason, white ethnic women had an edge in the competition for better jobs, and Chicanas could find little basis for solidarity with them. These ethnic and racial conflicts contrast with the situation of Lamphere's (1985) informants, who included Portuguese and Colombian immigrant women working in textile and apparel factories. Lamphere's informants used women's work culture, particularly short, on-the-job celebrations of domestic rituals such as weddings, to bridge language and cultural differences. Chicanas' cannery work-based networks reflected the structural changes occurring in canneries as women started moving into men's jobs, and Chicanos and Mexicans replaced white ethnic workers. Yet Chicanas and *mexicanas* were also rivals with one another, and this exacerbated the cultural and language differences that already existed between them. Work-based networks served to fragment workers, who focused on antagonisms based on ethnic differences and gender-based discrimination. These antagonisms undermined the potential for collective struggle.

The women I interviewed considered the conditions in which they labored as hazardous, foul, rife with discrimination, and, in a word, oppressive. Women with jobs on the line found the work itself boring, tedious, confining, pressured, but, most of all, difficult. If they were closely supervised, these jobs were considered demeaning. Close supervision and dirty conditions of work violated women's sense of self-respect. Their vulnerable positions as workers often meant that they were unable to challenge or change the affronts to their personal integrity. In the face of these conditions, my informants learned to endure. The relatively high wages, along with the unemployment benefits, were the main reasons women on the line chose to bear through cannery work. When women were able to get off the line and gain some autonomy or responsibility, they found satisfaction in their jobs. These women found the difficulty and independence in their work as challenging.

Although women may not have been thrilled with their jobs, they found many aspects of the cannery “world” to be satisfying. Chicanas’ own work-based networks were an important contribution to women’s job satisfaction, bringing the camaraderie and sociability women valued highly. Women were also able to support one another in their individual battles to get better jobs. Chicanas’ work-based networks functioned in a manner similar to the work groups of sales clerks (Benson 1983, 1979) by inculcating women into job practices and social relations. As Barbara Melosh (1982) has shown for nurses, Chicanas’ occupational segregation ironically allowed them to initiate meaningful relationships with other Chicana workers, and work-based networks functioned to “humanize” the workplace. Yet cannery work-based networks could also be a means through which women consented to their own exploitation, for network members made the job seem better and even pressured others to acquiescence.

Cannery jobs held complex meaning for women workers—*aguante* and friendship, difficulty and challenge, struggle and consent— notions that came to be accepted in the role of cannery worker. Apart from the economic incentives, cannery-work culture provided sufficient social reward for women to stay on the job.