

Work as family: The workplace as repository of women's unmet emotional needs

Author: Ilene Philipson

Persistent link: <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/4118>

This work is posted on [eScholarship@BC](#),
Boston College University Libraries.

Berkeley, CA: Center for Working Families, University of California, Berkeley, 2000

Use of this resource is governed by the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons "Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States" (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/us/>)

**Work as Family:
The Workplace as Repository of Women's
Unmet Emotional Needs**

*Ilene Philipson, Ph.D.**

Working Paper No. 13

*Ilene Philipson is an Affiliate at the Center for Working Families and a sociologist and clinical psychologist.

©2000 Center for Working Families, University of California, Berkeley

The Working Paper Series is intended to report preliminary results of research in progress. Comments are welcome.

Work and family. Family and work. Autonomous spheres. Polar opposites. Production and reproduction. Public and private. Heartless world and haven. How to balance them, combine them, negotiate their obdurate boundaries. Although the tasks, roles, and participants in each may be changing rapidly, we do not question that they bifurcate our existence.

If we allow for any kind of transit between the two, it is often in the form of observing the ways in which the “public” has invaded the “private”: The demands of work shape the contours of family life; increasingly intrusive forms of technology fill our homes with the insatiable exhortations of the market economy.

A recent exception to this traditional way of thinking has been sociologist Arlie Hochschild’s reevaluation of the relationship between family and work in *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work* (Metropolitan Books, 1997). In her carefully presented case study, for both women and men “home” is increasingly an arena of tension, chaos, unmeetable demands, and little space for relaxation, meaningful, connection, or appreciation. “Work,” conversely, seems to offer a certain calming predictability, the opportunity to be recognized for a job well done, and the chance to develop human relationships that are not only reaffirmed on a daily basis, but enlivened by the challenges and rewards of working on a shared task. Hochschild follows executives, middle managers, and factory workers as they circumnavigate the changing worlds of work in a globalizing marketplace and of home in an era of unprecedented divorce, remarriage, and the creation of “blended” families. From her vantage point, work seems to offer a haven from the chaotic tumult of home: “Nowadays, men and women both may leave unwashed dishes, unresolved quarrels, crying tots, testy teenagers, and unresponsive mates behind to arrive at work early and call out, ‘Hi, fellas, I’m here!’” (p. 39).

Hochschild’s fresh perspective begins to reimagine the boundaries between work and family life. Her study pushes the discussion beyond the prosaic questions of how dual-income families combine the demands of child rearing with earning a living or how employers can accommodate the needs of working parents. Instead, her investigation exposes the ways in which we have identified the fulfillment of certain psychological needs with particular spheres of life, an identification that appears to be increasingly under attack in the lives of Hochschild’s subjects. “Home” bears remarkably little relation to the besieged haven Christopher Lasch

extolled some 20 years ago, while the “impersonal,” profit-driven world of work appears to offer far more emotional sustenance than heretofore imagined.

The recognition that work is increasingly the sphere to which many people are pinning their most basic emotional needs – formerly met within the confines of family – merits closer scrutiny and greater understanding. The continued academic focus on the relationship between family and work in single-parent or dual-career families with children assumes that “family” continues to be the locus of our emotional lives that has to be combined with the (unfortunate, but necessary) “demands” of work. But what of the people for whom “family” exerts little emotional pull and often few time demands – single men and women, single mothers with older children, often married couples without children, and sometimes even parents who find their workplaces more emotionally alive and engaging than their families? How do we explain Americans’ growing infatuation with paid employment as represented in more hours worked, fewer vacations taken, a decrease in leisure, and a lack of interest in part-time work, flextime, and jobsharing when offered? Is the balancing act of combining work and family tilting in a particular direction?

I have come to these questions not out of choice. As a clinical psychologist, I was trained to closely investigate the inner workings of family life in order to understand personality formation, to see how people replay childhood dramas in their adult lives. Work was an epiphenomenon. Insofar as it had any psychological meaning, it was as an empty arena in which people could play out unresolved conflicts, conflicts entirely rooted in the family. Thus I was woefully unprepared when I took a position in a large group practice that services the mental health needs of most of the HMOs insuring patients in the Berkeley-Oakland area. Previously, I had seen a predominance of seriously mentally ill and drug dependent clients in community mental health settings. In private practice, I met with people who wanted to improve the overall quality of their lives, overcome lifelong, self-destructive patterns, or unearth the causes of their pain founded in unhappy or abusive childhoods. But in this new group practice setting in which working people accessed their HMOs to see a therapist, I began hearing about work – not as background, but as the focus of distress, hope, longing, and simply interest. It is the lives of these clients – revealed, examined, puzzled over in psychotherapy – that has wrested my attention

away from the family as the emotional hub of life and redirected it toward the workplace – the workplace as the repository of many people’s emotional needs.

Although I have met with a wide variety of clients who have come to therapy in order to talk about work, what has compelled me to examine our emotional investment in the workplace is those clients who have been suddenly and dramatically dislodged from the labor force. Theirs, however, is not the story of downsizing and ensuing personal crisis, the all too familiar narrative reenacted daily in our globalizing economy. Rather, theirs is much more a tale of emotional betrayal at work, a betrayal that results from psychological investment in the workplace not in order to escape the emotional entanglements and chaos of family life, as Arlie Hochschild describes, but in the absence of a family or community life that exerts any emotional pull.

Encountering the Betrayed Woman Worker

The paths these demographically diverse women took to my office were relatively uniform: They were referred by their primary care physicians after repeated visits to their doctors’ offices complaining of diarrhea, headaches, muscle tension, insomnia, heart palpitations, nausea, high blood pressure, numbness, uncontrollable crying, and/or irritable bowel syndrome. Having ruled out any clear physical etiology for these problems and/or met with a total lack of success in treating them, the physicians urged these women to seek psychotherapy and referred them to the group practice where I work. Upon arriving at my office, most seemed to be suffering from a major depression or panic disorder. They spoke in big voices with alarm, announcing that they couldn’t believe what was happening to them, that their worlds had turned upside down. Or their voices were locked inside them, and they choked off little bits of words informing me their lives had ended; they had no futures. They sobbed and shook or appeared numb, motionless. Their stories contained few relatives, social friends, spouses, children, or clergy. Home life simply did not appear in their renditions of the tragedies that had befallen them. There was a single subject that dominated their thoughts and their words: Work. Betrayal at work.

I cannot describe the wonder with which I initially regarded these women. After having had largely consistent and unremarkable work histories, each described experiencing some kind

of insult, anger, or lack of empathy from her supervisor or coworkers (e.g., she was yelled at, questioned about her ability to perform a task, asked to work overtime when returning to work from an illness, not invited to a coworker's lunchtime birthday party). With often great affect, she explained how her employer "turned against me," "knifed me in the back," or "didn't even care." She often expressed amazement at being treated coldly or harshly by a supervisor or coworker whom she had been considered a friend, fictive family member, or idealized parental figure: "She treated me like a sister." "He always talked about us being one big family." "I looked up to these people!" "I knew I was his favorite secretary." "I thought the world of my boss." From where I sat, the seeming devastation each felt was radically out of proportion to the injury she had sustained.

Apparently my initial response mirrored that of these women's families and friends. Although many reported that they had told no one about their employment tragedies, those who had were typically greeted with exhortations to "just get over it and return to work." Husbands, mothers, girlfriends, even doctors didn't understand why these women continued to be symptomatic and virtually unable to focus on anything other than the betrayal at work. This lack of understanding served to underscore a tremendous feeling of isolation and hopelessness. No one could know what this was like; no one cares; they (betrayers at work) don't care; I am utterly alone and without hope.

This sense of emotional disconnection was magnified by these women's inability and/or refusal to return to work. Most were far too physically and emotionally disabled to do their jobs. Their diarrhea or headaches or sobbing prevented them from leaving their homes. Their depression or anxiety impeded their concentration, short-term memory, and capacity to engage in social relations. So they left work on short-term disability, they stayed at home all day, and their sense of isolation and disconnection from the world of work, that is, the world of the living, escalated.

My bewilderment at their plight only increased as I learned more about them. Most had weathered numerous stressors in their lives: single motherhood, divorce, deaths, alcoholic parents, poverty, childhood sexual abuse, rape, but nothing seemed to compare with the current pain, that is, the pain of being shouted at or ignored by the people at work.

So, at a loss to help them and because each seemed to feel so utterly alone in her suffering, I decided that these betrayed women workers might be able to help each other. Therefore I started a group that I advertised simply “for women who are unable to work due to problems with their supervisors or coworkers.” Since its inception in February 1993, 110 women have participated in this group program. And it is through facilitating these groups that I believe I have found a window into understanding how work has not merely exchanged emotional places with home for overtaxed and time deprived parents, but has become the only source of connection into human community for many people in our society.

Admittedly, a nonrandomized sample of 110 women who end up in a psychotherapist’s office due to being betrayed at work may not seem representative of much. But because of their diverse backgrounds, the remarkable similarity in how they conceptualize what has happened to them, and their common form of suffering, I believe their story is an important one. Their investment in work in the face of having little or no family or community life to support, preoccupy, or even escape from seems to me as relevant to understanding the relationship between work and home as the wide array of inquiries into “balancing the demands of family and work” for dual-income families. As living alone, single motherhood, divorce, the decline of public or civic life, and the continued disappearance of any kind of community for most nonimmigrants are all on the increase, life at work is becoming life. Needs once met by families, neighbors, churches, volunteer organizations, and communities are being directed to the workplace. The stories of the betrayed women workers that I have listened to in weekly group sessions for the past five years demonstrate, however, just how impossible it really is to have these needs met in the paid labor force.

Investment and Betrayal

The 110 women I have seen in my groups have ranged in age from 26 to 62, with the average age being 42. Forty-seven percent have been black, 36 percent white, 12 percent Hispanic, and 5 percent Filipina immigrant. Thirty-eight percent are single without children, 21.5 percent single mothers (that is, with children under 18), 18 percent married or partnered living without children, and 22.5 percent married or partnered and have children under 18 living with

them. Out of the 110, 3 women openly identified themselves as lesbians. None of these 3 women had children living with them, but 2 were living in long-term relationships with their partners.

How different this sample of women is from that studied by Hochschild is striking. Only 22.5 percent of the women I have seen occupy the demographic grouping that she uses as the basis of her argument about work and home. Fully 56 percent of the women I have studied have no children under 18, and 38 percent live alone, without children or partners. Only 1 single woman lives with a family member, her aged father. Equally different is the racial diversity represented in these groups. Blacks constitute nearly half of the women in the sample, with this overrepresenting their overall percentage of labor force participation in the greater East Bay area from which the groups draw their members.

Most of these women have come to the groups as clerical workers (e.g., receptionists, billing clerks, bank tellers, personal secretaries), but the groups have also included middle-level managers, social workers, computer programmers, manual laborers, saleswomen, electricians, teachers, and rehabilitation counselors. The average time on their most recent job (the one at which they felt betrayed) was 6.6 years, ranging from 1 to 27 years.

Each of their stories is unique; yet each is constructed around a certain thematic: There is work that is life, connection, recognition, and identity. There is betrayal. And there is the void, the sense of amputation from not only the specific job, but from human community and one's sense of place in that community. The following four stories capture the kinds of narratives I have listened to over and over. Each is disguised to respect the confidentiality of the group members.

Brenda is a 35-year-old white woman who has been divorced for 7 years. Although her father was an alcoholic and she was one of six children who received little attention from either parent, Brenda graduated high school with honors and immediately began work as a receptionist at age 18. During her 14 years in the labor force, Brenda steadily worked her way up the clerical hierarchy, becoming an administrative assistant/legal secretary for a small, very prestigious law firm, earning almost \$40,000 a year.

Brenda idealized the attorneys for whom she worked. Their upper-middle-class lifestyles – season tickets to the opera, weekend homes in the mountains, active involvement in the alumni

associations of their alma maters – brought Brenda into intimate contact with a world to which she had had no former exposure. “These guys didn’t care about money. They assumed it. They cared about better things. They had ideals.” One of their “ideals” was continual self-improvement, and to this end, they paid for Brenda to attend weekend seminars in the Napa Valley once a year to learn how to become “self-actualizing” and more effective at work.

In response to this kind of interest in her, her relatively high salary, and her involvement in a workplace that to her seemed “about as posh as you can get,” Brenda happily worked overtime, ran personal errands for her employers, and always spoke of the law firm in the first person plural: “We’re going to court on Monday.” “We had the office painted.”

After working in the law firm for four years, Brenda had to miss the annual company Christmas party because her mother had a stroke two days before the party was to occur. It was Brenda’s responsibility to plan and execute the party, a task she readily assumed even though it had not been part of her job description. After quickly making arrangements with the other two secretaries to handle her responsibilities for the party, Brenda flew home to be with her ailing mother. When she returned to work one week later, it was as if “my whole world had collapsed.” Her employers were very upset with her. There had been a number of foul-ups at the party and they blamed them on her ill-timed departure. The attorneys appeared cold and unresponsive in all their interactions with her. They began asking another secretary to do their errands, and Brenda’s favorite attorney gave this same secretary tickets to a soldout play in San Francisco that he couldn’t use and that Brenda longed to see.

Brenda developed insomnia; she stayed awake at night ruminating about what was happening at the office. She went over and over how she had handled arrangements for the party and blamed herself for the problems that had occurred, for leaving to see her mother. She developed migraine headaches for the first time in her life, frequently felt nauseated, and began to lose weight. Increasingly, she cried at work. She would sit on the toilet in the women’s bathroom and sob. Gradually, she could not keep from crying while at her desk and began to take time off. There were days when her headaches were so incapacitating she called in sick. After two months of enduring these symptoms, Brenda went to her doctor, who signed her off on short-term disability and referred her for psychotherapy.

When I first encountered Brenda, she spent our entire session sobbing. She stated clearly that she felt she had “nothing to live for” and that she had “ruined” her life. She was not eating or sleeping and had cut herself off from both her boyfriend and her family because she felt profoundly misunderstood by them. None of them could grasp why she was so upset. Her boyfriend repeatedly suggested she get another job, but for Brenda, there were no other jobs. Nothing could compare with the one she had, and she had destroyed it.

Grace’s story appears quite different from Brenda’s on the surface. Grace, a 47-year-old black woman, grew up in the inner city, the only child of a single mother who worked as a cook during the day and a janitor at night. Grace dropped out of school at 15, had her first child at 17, and has worked at a variety of fairly menial jobs since that time. At present, she lives alone in a one-bedroom apartment. Her youngest child is 23. Her one son is in prison. Grace hasn’t heard from one of her daughters in years after throwing her out of her house for refusing to give up drugs. Her other daughter joined the Navy and visits her mother whenever she has leave. Grace’s own mother died some years ago, and she is not close to her aunts or cousins.

For the past nine years, Grace has worked as a clerk in a large discount supermarket. Her immediate supervisor, Tanya, is ten years younger than Grace, but someone whom Grace admires: “She has style, you know, and a sense of humor! That girl can think on her feet, always has a comeback, don’t let anyone put her down.” Grace feels that she and Tanya became good friends. Tanya often would call Grace at night, telling her her problems, asking for advice about how to handle employee problems at work. The two would occasionally take their lunch hours together, walking around a nearby park and gossiping about other employees. Grace felt that her coworkers envied her relationship with their mutual supervisor, Tanya.

Around the time Grace turned 46, she began experiencing some gynecological problems that caused her to repeatedly see her doctor. She had to have numerous tests, and eventually a hysterectomy was recommended. This frightened her because she had never had surgery and made her anxious because her doctor could not assure her that the hysterectomy would absolutely eliminate the pain and bladder problems she was experiencing. But none of the feelings about her health compared to the sense of disappointment Grace had in regard to both the seeming lack of concern Tanya showed for Grace’s medical problems and the lack of interest

her coworkers evinced when hearing the details of her upcoming surgery. Each time Grace returned to work after a doctor's appointment, neither Tanya nor her coworkers said anything. In response, Grace became sullen and withholding. When Tanya would talk with Grace about other employees, Grace remained silent. She couldn't believe Tanya "cared about that stupid stuff, when I was looking at surgery!"

Grace's overall health began to decline. She was placed on blood pressure medication and constantly complained of pain and numbness in different parts of her body. Believing that Grace was overly concerned about the impending hysterectomy, her physician referred her for psychotherapy to help her cope better with her anxieties about surgery. But once in therapy with me, Grace spoke almost exclusively of Tanya and her coworkers. Each day at work seemed to bring yet another instance of someone's disregard for Grace's feelings. Although she could talk openly about her fears of surgery, these became the backdrop for the interpersonal saga that dominated Grace's feelings and thoughts: "I thought they were my friends. I thought they cared."

Six weeks into our therapy, Grace returned to work from a doctor's appointment and met Tanya as she walked into the store. The first words out of her supervisor's mouth were a request for her to work overtime that evening. This was simply too much for Grace to bear. She turned away from Tanya, walked back to her car and drove home. She called me soon thereafter, crying, saying she could not return to work. Would I take her off on disability because "I'm no use to anyone anyways."

Unable to go to work, Grace isolated herself in her apartment. She did not tell her daughter in the Navy about what had befallen her because she felt this daughter had her own life and she didn't wish to "burden" her. Grace stated repeatedly that she felt she had no one with whom to share her feelings because all her friends were at work and they had turned against her. None of her coworkers called, and Grace assumed that they had rallied around Tanya and couldn't understand the emotional pain Grace was currently experiencing.

A different variation on workplace betrayal is offered by Patti, a 39-year-old black mother of two who lives with her boyfriend, a high school math teacher. Patti spent much of her early life on welfare, but in spite of her modest beginnings, she has been able to complete college, buy a home, and work as a bookkeeper in a growing manufacturing company. This

position has been her favorite. The company emphasizes “team spirit,” and her boss, a vice president, repeatedly talks about the company being “one big family.” The company’s unofficial anthem is “We Are Family” by Sister Sledge, a song that is played at company picnics and parties.

Patti’s boss, Bill, always struck her as an extremely ethical, fair-minded man whom she often turned to for advice about problems at work. Although she did not believe Bill favored her, she did think he respected her and always was extremely laudatory in his evaluations of her work. Because she admired Bill and trusted his judgment so completely, Patti made him the executor of her will. “He sort of reminded me of Marcus Welby. When he was around, you knew things were gonna be okay.”

After Patti had worked at this company for three years, a new computer system to handle accounts receivable and accounts payable was introduced. Patti found the new system difficult to work with and believed it was much worse than the previous one. She voiced her concerns to Bill and was surprised that, rather than welcoming the feedback, he seemed annoyed. Gradually, her boss’ calm, benevolent mien changed. He became more critical and sharp. As Bill’s impatience with Patti grew, her ability to work with the new computer system floundered. She often stayed after work trying to make up for how long it took her to process accounts on the new system during working hours. She increasingly got headaches and began seeing her doctor for what was later diagnosed as irritable bowel syndrome. When Bill asked her for a report she had not completed, she states that she felt herself “sinking. It was like my identity was being taken away. I could tell he thought I was a fuckup.”

Finally, Bill came into Patti’s office one day clutching a handful of her billing statements, his face red with rage. “Are you the person for this job? Are you the person for this job?” she reports his shouting at her. He threw the papers at her and stormed out the door. “That was it; I knew that was it. It was over.” Patti has some amnesia for what happened next, but is able to recount that she found herself at a hospital emergency room that evening complaining of chest pains, believing she was having a heart attack.

Patti’s primary care physician immediately took her off work and referred her for psychological assessment. When I met with her, Patti was clinically depressed, with slow

mentation, dulled to the activity around her. “I have no identity. My work was everything and I blew it. It’s over.” During the next few months, Patti grew distant from both her boyfriend and children. Although she repeatedly acknowledged that her family was worried about her and she felt some guilt in connection to this, she insisted her “other family, my work family, is gone.” Bill had been her main conduit to that “other family,” and his unhappiness with her seemed to sever the tie that bound her to the larger community of the company family. Patti recounted that her anxiety about learning the new computer system had been fueled by her belief that if she was unable to master it, her employment with the company would end. “And that would be it. No more having a reason to get up in the morning.” Curiously, in this equation, Patti’s children, boyfriend, or recent purchase of a home did not seem to beckon her out of bed.

My final example is that of Rosella, a 32-year-old Hispanic, divorced mother of an 8-year-old girl. Rosella had moved to the Bay Area with her husband from New York City. She quickly got a job teaching third grade, and within 2 years of her relocation, her husband left her for another woman. Alone with a small child, Rosella relied on her fellow teachers and her principal for emotional support. Given that her family and friends were all in the east, she felt that it was her coworkers who kept her going through a particularly bitter divorce. Rosella used her lunch periods and phone calls after work and on weekends to talk about her feelings and the logistics of her divorce with other teachers, a particularly sympathetic secretary at the school, and occasionally her principal.

Four months after her divorce was final, Rosella was informed that she was being transferred to another school. Her principal insisted that this decision was being made by the “higher-ups” and she was powerless to alter it. Rosella was given a huge party on her last day of work and broke down crying in appreciation of her coworkers’ kindness and in anticipation of losing them.

Rosella describes being astounded at the new school to which she was assigned. Upon arriving there, she realized she was the only Hispanic teacher, and the largely black faculty was not welcoming to her. Her students were more challenging than those in her former school; yet there was little support or understanding for what Rosella felt was an extremely difficult transition. When she voiced concerns in faculty meetings, Rosella believed the other teachers

perceived her as a “whiner” and “entitled.” She found herself becoming increasingly apathetic, sleeping more, gaining weight, and being irritable with her daughter.

Rosella spoke with her former coworkers a great deal. Initially, she would talk to at least one each night on the phone and even kept her daughter in day care longer hours in order to meet with a friend from her old school after work. Over the course of the semester, however, Rosella reports that this contact diminished. “I don’t know why, even to this day. I think because I wasn’t there every day like I used to be. They saw each other every day; they talked about the school, the kids, the politics; they planned parties, you know, that kind of stuff. I just wasn’t a part of it anymore. And I think they got tired of hearing me complaining about my situation, how the other teachers treated me. I became an outsider, really.” As contact with her former coworkers diminished and no new connections were built with teachers at her new school, Rosella became increasingly depressed.

One week before the second semester was to have begun at Rosella’s new school, she found herself unable to get out of bed. For an entire weekend, she remained in bed, leaving her 8-year-old daughter watching television in the living room, eating cereal out of boxes. When it came to taking her daughter to school Monday morning, Rosella somehow summoned the strength to drive her to school and then drove herself to her doctor, believing there must be something physically wrong with her. When the doctor diagnosed depression, Rosella broke down sobbing. After being referred to me, she recounted how she “had been holding everything inside, not wanting to admit how much it hurt that the other teachers never called anymore.” The pain of her divorce had been mitigated by the daily presence of the other teachers with whom she could “just touch base. Knowing I was going to see them helped. I didn’t feel so alone.” Her new assignment revealed her true lack of connectedness to anyone in the Bay Area. “I didn’t realize how truly alone I was until the phone calls stopped coming. It hurts to think that it’s out of sight, out of mind. But I guess that’s just the way it is.” Given her inability to connect with any of the teachers at her new school, Rosella feels as though there are no opportunities in her life for making new friends, and certainly no friends like those she found at her previous school. Working at a job that is not embedded in networks of caring coworkers leaves Rosella with a profound feeling of emptiness and disconnection.

Brenda, Grace, Patti, and Rosella have no prior psychiatric histories, and none had ever been to a psychotherapist. Except for the births of children, since entering the paid labor force, none had taken time off from work other than routine vacations and sick days. All had experienced less than ideal childhoods and real adversity in their lives; yet none of them had ceased to function due to any psychosocial stressor. In each of their cases, however, a “betrayal” at work overwhelmed them and prevented them from being able to function. When each of these women entered group therapy, she was on disability – either from workers’ compensation or the state—treated with antidepressants, thinking vaguely about suicide, plagued with a host of psychosomatic symptoms, and alienated from whatever family or friends had occupied her world.

I have come to believe that these women’s problems – so extreme and so difficult for others to apprehend – are embedded in the hugely important, deeply emotional meaning of work in people’s lives, a meaning that is often overlooked, denied, or trivialized in our society. The women in the group implicitly rail against this denial and trivialization. Their experience is so acute, so dramatic that it has compelled me to thoroughly rethink the psychological meaning of work in all of our lives. And I believe that if we look at the women with whom I meet every week as unique, as forming a distinct syndrome or disorder rather than representing a pole on a continuum of emotional investment in work, we miss what their experience can teach us.

From a purely clinical point of view, it is possible to see these women as having fragmented, incohesive selves that are dependent upon external sources for mirroring and esteem. Identification with the job itself, the company, or a supervisor may provide substance, a way of anchoring the self in a more firmly established entity or person. “It was the first time I ever had a business card. There I was in black and white: Marion Richards, Bookkeeper,” one woman reports. Another asserts that “I finally felt I belonged. I was a part of this company, and we were all in it together. I really believed this ‘team’ thing.” And another said: “When I was around Louise [her boss], I felt safe.” Many of the women idealize their supervisors or employers. Brenda’s enlightened attorneys, Grace’s supervisor, Tanya, and Patti’s boss, Bill, represent idealized figures who – temporarily at least – may permit their employees to experience a sense of merger with their power, assertiveness, goodness, and/or authority. When

the relationship with these idealized figures ruptures, it is as though the employee's sense of self deflates and fragments. They are left with feelings of emptiness, self-blame, depression, and diffuse physical symptoms that may be seen as preverbal manifestations of psychological disintegration.

But to view these women's distress in a purely clinical fashion can obfuscate what their experiences may reveal about the larger meaning of work in our lives. If we assume that Brenda, Grace, Patti, and Rosella represent a point, and perhaps an extreme point, on a continuum that measures our dependence on work for the satisfaction of many of our most basic emotional needs, then they may provide insight into our more general infatuation with work outside the home. Just as the plight of Freud's hysterics shed light on the conflicts of middle-class Victorian women in general, the extreme reactions of the women I have seen in the group may illuminate more widespread conflicts and problems in our relationship to work in society at large.

In Freud's treatment of hysteria, his consulting room became a locus for those experiencing the brunt of Victorian mores – economically privileged women who were expected to suppress and repress sexuality, ambition, vitality, aliveness. Their multiple, often bizarre symptoms acted as physical, nonverbal protestations against their confinement, against their oppression as women. In similar fashion, I believe, it may be those most vulnerable to our society's obsession with work who have come, their symptoms in tow, into group therapy: predominantly people of color, most without husbands, women who have struggled economically for parts of their lives and who seem to have accepted whole cloth the American idealization of work as a panacea for moral and financial ills. Their naivete about labor relations, their sincere belief in just rewards, and their almost Calvinist approach to work fills many of our group therapy hours. They gave their jobs everything. For them, work did not “become home,” as Arlie Hochschild has asserted; work became life itself.

Linda, a 46-year-old, forceful black woman, told the group, “I was not going to live in poverty like my parents. I was going to work. And I did – since I was 15. Never fooled around, came to work, and did my job. That's what we're suppose to do, right? Now what I got? . . . We thought they cared. They don't care. We thought, go to work, do good, get promoted. Yeah,

unless you do too good, or make someone jealous, or your boss turns against you. Then what? Now what we got? ... We've spent so much time making a living, we've forgotten how to live."

Unlike the white, two-parent families Arlie Hochschild has studied, the largely single and predominantly minority women I have met with over the past 5 years do not seem to be suffering primarily from the results of not having enough time to invest in family life. Some undoubtedly experienced this when their children were younger. But rather than complaining of chaotic, tension-filled homes cramped with disgruntled mates, stepchildren, and unwashed laundry, most of these women speak of living quarters that feel empty, devoid of energy and life. Fully 44 percent of the women have children under 18 in the home, and 40.5 percent live with a partner or husband. Yet even for these, there seems to be little vitality or emotional pull at home. Children of working women raised on outside child care seem to learn how to take care of themselves from early on. Family dinners are the exception to the rule, while television entertains, comforts, and calms.

When I asked Patti why her boyfriend and two children seemed to offer so little as she mourned the loss of her job, she explained, "I taught my kids from the get-go that they had to be independent. When I was putting myself through college, they had to take care of themselves. So I guess I kinda feel they don't need me.... And Warren [her boyfriend] has his own thing going on. He's never been one for talking much." Linda lives alone with her 15-year-old son and states, "At night, I watch my shows in the living room, and my son stays in his room talking on the phone. That's what we do." And Rosella tells the group, "Cook dinner! Gosh, I haven't done that for so long. Without a husband, it just doesn't seem to be worth it just for me and Julia [her 8-year-old daughter]. So we snack or get takeout and eat it in front of the TV."

A defining characteristic of all the women is that they have worked their whole lives. Paid employment has allowed them to weather divorce and relationship breakups and avoid the stigma of welfare. But this strong work ethic has seriously impeded investment in any life there might be outside of work. Extended family ties and community, civic, or church involvement require attention and time, and these women's immersion in their jobs seems to have precluded such investment.

Grace, whose only real human connection outside work is through phone conversations with her daughter in the Navy, explains: “My mother always worked, but her people and my father’s people [were] always on assistance. My mother taught me pride in myself. Her side of the family is pretty tight-knit Yeah, they see each other a lot. But you see my mother worked and I worked. We never did take part in their goings on. I think the family was jealous. ‘You too good for us’ kinda thing.”

Work sets Grace apart from the family and community that may be available to her. But for most in the group, working has not removed them from intact extended families and vital communities. For the majority, extended family is a mother or sister nearby, other siblings in surrounding areas or out of state, and gatherings of relatives on Christmas. Community has no meaning. About 20 percent of the black women attend church regularly on Sundays, but only 2 of these are active in the church. One woman out of the 110 belongs to a sorority that meets monthly, another participates in a woman’s softball team, and 1 Filipina goes regularly to a cultural club with her husband. None talks of neighbors, ongoing contact with other women, or non-employment-related activities requiring working in common. Bereft of their jobs, they literally do not know what to do with themselves. Most spend their days watching television, often too filled with shame to venture beyond their front doors.

“Everybody in my building works,” Rosella reports. “I don’t want anybody to know I can’t work. So I keep the drapes closed all day.” Forty-year-old Pia has not been able to return to work since her supervisor falsely accused her of stealing from the office, an office she often worked in up to 60 hours a week. “Where would I go? Everybody works, and if you don’t work, something’s wrong with you. I don’t want people to think something’s wrong with me, so I don’t go out, and they don’t know.” And Brenda states quite simply, “Work was my life. I left my job and so my life is over.”

Compared to the emptiness and colorless quality of their “home” lives, work for these women was a place awash with vibrancy, engagement, and activity. It was a place of intrigue and gossip, friendships and jealousies, comfort and hurt. It seems to have provided an emotional landscape more real than the television-dominated existence at home. As they saw coworkers each day, chatted over coffee on breaks, gossiped about the latest office news on e-mail, often

ate together elaborate lunches brought from home and warmed in microwaves, work life took on the needs once satisfied by family and neighbors. At their jobs, these women were feted for filling quotas, getting promoted, having birthdays. They were often recognized by coworkers and supervisors for unique characteristics or ways of working that made them feel special, that made them feel seen. A 44-year-old Latina says, “My nickname was ‘the horse’ because of how hard I worked. It sounds silly, but I kinda liked it because it meant the company saw how hard I was working.” Another woman reports, “Everyone always teased me about my getting to work at six when everyone else came in at eight. But people were nice about it. They’d bring me tapes of programs that were on late ‘cause they could imagine how early I went to bed. And I know the boss trusted me. He wouldn’t have let just anyone come in that early.”

They planned office parties, bought cakes for other employees’ celebrations, and arranged for gifts to be purchased. They often worked in teams or units or departments that were in competition with one another and were rewarded as a group if they succeeded. They developed identities not only as employees of the larger company, but as members of a specific team. They purchased lottery tickets as a group and spent time dreaming together of their soon-to-be newly acquired wealth. The annual Christmas party or summer picnic was anticipated and served to shape the employees’ sense of time, much in the way community festivals functioned for people in the distant past.

It appears that many women’s needs for personal recognition, affiliative ties with other women, and a sense of belonging to a family or community were transferred to the workplace. And as women’s participation in the labor force grows, this kind of women’s culture seems to be more accepted. Thus for many, it is not hyperbole to feel that severance from the world of work is exile from life itself.

Reinventing Community

This transference of unmet needs onto the workplace can be seen as having enormous social ramifications. If the family, community, and/or organized religion form the sources of our values, providing us with meaning, then work relations can be seen with greater clarity. When institutions outside of work anchor our identities, they directly or indirectly offer a moral vantage

point from which to evaluate the workplace. Earlier in this century, the place of employment was not flooded with people's unmet emotional needs for meaning and belonging in quite the same way as it is today. People worked for others in order to earn a wage to support themselves and their families. Typically, they did not look to work as their fundamental means of accessing human connection, social support, guidance, community, aliveness. Therefore I believe employees could identify the nature of work situations more accurately and because of this were more open to seeing exploitation, corporate greed, and the ways in which their needs were counterposed to those of their employers. In the absence of countervailing institutions that provide a vision of how life should be led and for what purposes, corporations offer a sense of belonging, personal identity, and slogans that are often all an anomic individual has to cling to. As one of Arlie Hochschild's corporate employees told her in *The Time Bind*, "In America, we don't have family coats of arms anymore, but we have the company logo" (p. 21).

Benevolent vice presidents become fatherlike figures to dote on and please, coworkers become one's family and community, and the company or corporation feeds the longing with countless exhortations: "We Are A Team!" "We're Number One!" "We Are Fam-i-ly!" Undoubtedly, having employees conflate the profit-driven corporation with family and community can only serve corporate interests.

The *New York Times* (8/10/97, p. 10) reports that in a recent attempt by Wal-Mart workers to unionize in Merrill, Wisconsin, "The store's new co-manager showed anti-union videos to employees, who are known as associates, and she cried as she begged the workers not to 'invite a third party into the Wal-Mart family.'" After staff meetings focused on the "Wal-Mart cheer" ("Give me a W. Give me an AL . . ."), the associates, nee workers, rejected the union's bid.

The women in my group program appear to have no countervailing institution in their lives from which to view what happened to them at work. The voices of boyfriends, husbands, or mothers telling them to "forget it, move on, get another job" seem weak, barely audible above the tapes playing in their heads of "We Are Fam-i-ly." No one in their lives outside of work knows that they are "the horse" or 'Sherlock" (so called because she is the one person in the office who can find missing files). The business card with "Marion Richards, Bookkeeper" lies at

the bottom of the drawer, and as Marion tells me, “You know when anyone meets you, they ask ‘what do you do?’ So that’s why I don’t leave the house. I have no answer.”

Not that long ago someone like Marion would have been happy to answer “I’m a mother” or “a homemaker” or “vice president of the PTA.” Or she might have belonged to a union and spoken with anger or contempt about the bosses of her company and their unfair labor practices. Or she might simply have said she was a bookkeeper, something she did to put bread on the table, and one job was just the same as the next.

The women in my group want only to work again. They are fearful of investing so much, of trusting again. But for them, there is no alternative. When I suggest volunteer work, they cannot imagine what they would do. If I recommend taking classes, they can think only of courses that would improve their job market skills. The idea of spending more time with family or friends meets with the retort “They all work” or “They have their own lives.” Children and their needs seem to take up little energy. As working mothers, they are so accustomed to tending to their children in the few hours they can squeeze in around work that they don’t seem to be able to imagine what involvement with their children on a full-time basis might entail. And of course civic life, political work, and, for most, even religious involvement cannot be seriously imagined.

The success of the group program I run can be measured by the degree to which group members can form a community for one another and I become a caring figure of authority. After spending two and one-half years in group therapy – a long stay, given an average course of 11 months – Brenda found a new job working as an administrative assistant in a science department at the nearby university. At her last session, she summarized her treatment succinctly: “When I first came here, I felt like killing myself. I loved my job, and it still makes me want to cry when I think of it.... The group gave me hope; I couldn’t have survived without it. I knew I wasn’t alone anymore. I really felt that you became like sisters to me.... I feel like I went from being the most crazy one [in the group] to being sort of an inspiration: If Brenda can make it, then anyone can! [laughs]... I’m never going to look to a job for my identity, and I’m never going to let anyone I work for have that kind of power over me. I know it’ll be hard, but I know all of you and Ilene will be here rooting for me.”

Whether or not Brenda is truly successful remains to be seen, given that little has changed in her life outside the group to support her resolve. But she has learned from the group that jobs alone cannot provide identity and that boundaries and limits must be set so employers do not become pseudoparents, to be pleased. But even more important, Brenda has internalized some sense of a community of support that she can imagine “rooting” for her as she faces the travails of reentering the labor force.

Grace, Patti, and Rosella continue on in the group. Their ties to other members have deepened. Often after our sessions are over, many of the women have lunch together at a nearby Mexican restaurant to continue talking. We have instituted a phone tree so that members can call each other if one of them is particularly depressed or in need of support. At the request of the women in the group, I collect canned foods at each session so that we have a reserve of food for any member who might be especially down on her luck. Many of the women carpool to group therapy together, and some have started helping each other out by typing resumes, babysitting, and, in one case, providing shelter to a woman who found herself without a place to live. And for the last three years, I have organized a holiday party in the conference room where I practice. We have a lavish potluck lunch with group members dressed in holiday finery, and I invite a woman who has “graduated” to return and speak to the assembled about her reentry into the paid labor force.

Many colleagues frown upon these practices, for they clearly violate some of the basic rules of group therapy in that members are not supposed to have any contact outside of actual group sessions. But I have listened to my clients, and what I have heard them say over and over in various ways is that they long for community, connection, recognition, a sense of belonging, and an opportunity for establishing identity through belonging. I have chosen to help them through a means that some might say is substituting one false or pseudocommunity for another: group therapy for paid employment. But I think this misses the point.

We live in an era in which most people cannot even begin to conceptualize how they might get any of their emotional needs met outside of small family units or the paid labor force. Virtually none of the women in my group program would attend a women’s support group if it

were held outside a clinical psychologist's office or did not have the blessing of her primary care physician.

The betrayed women workers I have listened to for the past five years have tried to do what so many of us in this country seem to be attempting to achieve on a daily basis, that is, satisfy unmet emotional needs through our jobs. Perhaps these women tried a little too hard or had a surfeit of needs, too few internal resources to begin with, untempered naivete, or too great a belief in the American dream of success and salvation through work. But they are on a continuum with most of us who choose longer hours, take fewer vacations, and wake up and go to sleep at night thinking about our jobs. If under the rubric of "group therapy" these exiles from the labor force can learn that there are other ways of connecting with women who are not coworkers or supervisors, I believe I will have accomplished something. I will have helped them see that work is not "life" – surprisingly, an increasingly radical notion at the beginning of the 21st century.