

**INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY IN A CULTURE
OF COMPLAINT: DEROGATION, DEPRECATION,
AND THE APPROPRIATION OF
ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSFORMATION**

by

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Information Technology in a Culture of Complaint: Derogation, Deprecation, and the Appropriation of Organizational Transformation

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Abstract

Why do people complain about information technology? This chapter draws from an ethnographic study of an ongoing organizational transformation in a large, British retail bank to argue that complaint about IT does not always express a desire for change or a return to the status quo ante. Sometimes it performs these expressive functions, but complaint is best understood, to use Goffman's (1971: 63) terminology, as an *interaction ritual* that may also perform certain social functions. In this chapter, I distinguish between two rituals of complaint about IT in the Bank—*derogation* and *deprecation*—and describe the uses of each in the organization in bringing people together, building and repairing relationships, and strengthening bonds of community. In these guises, the situated rhetoric of complaint plays a role not only in the provocation of organizational transformation and its resistance, but also in the acceptance and appropriation of the transformed organization. Specifically, these rituals of complaint were available to people in the Bank to help them cope with the dislocation and changes implied by the centralization and partial automation of back office clerical work.

Introduction

Why do people complain about information technology? This may sound a pedestrian question, one whose answer could be expected to hold about as much interest as a scholarly treatment of why chickens cross the road. It seems obvious that people complain about a technology because they want it to be improved or removed. But the old joke about the jaywalking chicken may be instructive in shaking our certainty about this. The joke is funny (albeit only once) because the answer, “to get to the other side,” is self-evidently correct and yet unexpected. We don't expect it because we take it for granted: we skip past it in our search for explanations based upon deeper poultry urges. A first introduction to tautology for most children, the joke points to the fact that we cannot answer its question in a more satisfying way without more information about the chicken and his situation. Returning to my original question, the analogous answer is that people complain about a piece of information technology (IT) to voice dissatisfaction with it. This is by definition,¹ and, I claim, it is the only thing we can say in general. All more satisfying answers will be context specific.

This chapter draws from the specific context of an ethnographic study of an ongoing organizational transformation in a large, British retail bank to argue that complaint about IT does not always express a desire for change or a return to the status quo ante. Sometimes it performs these expressive functions, but complaint is best understood, to use Goffman's (1971: 63) terminology, as an *interaction ritual* that may also perform certain social functions. In this chapter, I distinguish between two rituals of complaint about IT in the Bank—*derogation* and *deprecation*—and describe the uses of each in the

organization. Briefly, derogation, “a lowering of honor or esteem”² of IT, serves as what Goffman (*ibid.*: 62–9) terms a *supportive ritual*: bringing people together, building relationships, and strengthening bonds of community. Deprecation of IT, “an expression of an earnest desire that something be averted or removed,” on the other hand, fulfills the standard expressive function of complaint, but it can also be—again with a nod to Goffman (*ibid.*: 108–18)—a *remedial ritual*: repairing relationships threatened by more personal complaints. In these guises, the situated rhetoric of complaint plays a role not only in the provocation of organizational transformation and its resistance, but also in the acceptance and appropriation of the transformed organization. Specifically, these rituals of complaint were available to people in the Bank to help them cope with the dislocation and changes implied by the centralization and partial automation of back office clerical work. This is so because of the particular stage set by the Bank’s culture and the details of this transformation it was undergoing. I describe these before returning to the discussion of derogation and deprecation.

Unpopular Culture

Let’s start modestly, though, with an example of a complaint about an organization’s technology that is not a call for redress or, indeed, action of any sort. Toward the end of my eight months of participant-observation with the bank that I shall refer to as the British Armstrong Bank (or BritArm),³ I first met Ben. Ben is a pseudonymous Senior Manager in BritArm’s London head office. As he led me into the stuffy conference room where we were to have our discussion, he walked over to open the window. It promptly

fell shut. He fiddled with the mechanism, but he could not get the window to stay open. “BritArm technology,” he said with a smile as he gave up and sat down. “Now, let me tell you a little bit about myself.”

He went on to give a résumé of his career with the Bank, but with his little derogation he had already told something about himself: not about his aggravation with the Bank’s technology, but of his affinity and agility with its culture. Small jokes at the expense of the Bank, and especially its IT, are common conversational ice-breakers in BritArm. BritArm employees complain about the Bank in the same way that the British public complains about the weather: incessantly and with good humor. And, as with gripes about the weather, these jibes at the Bank prompt quick agreement but do not by themselves signal antagonism. In the mouths of the culturally competent, they draw people together with their allusion to shared experience. They put people at ease with one another through the comforting routine of their recital. Ben’s quip about the Bank’s technology was no more a call for something to be done than his earlier greeting “How do you do?” was a request for a medical report.

Instead, it was an artifact of what I describe as BritArm’s “unpopular culture” (Weeks 1997). In BritArm self-deprecation is taken to extremes, even by British standards. Never once did I hear a positive word about the culture or the technology, and seldom did I hear anything positive about any other aspect of the organization. Complaints, on the other hand, were common. I was told repeatedly that the Bank is too bureaucratic, too rules-driven, not customer-focused enough, not entrepreneurial enough, too inflexible, too prone to navel-gazing, too centralized. And, it was added, too negative. Its technology, I was told, is outdated on installation, poorly maintained, plagued by delays

and a shortage of funds which are too often misspent. An often heard story about how the Bank came to have its much-derided branch banking computer system has it that the company that wrote the software marketed it to all of the major banks in Britain. All of the other banks had the sense to reject it, but not BritArm. People familiar with the project deny that account, claiming it to be a Bank myth. “Typical of people in the Bank to believe the worst,” one technology manager told me. Indeed. This is an organization where speaking notes were sent out to managers to help them explain to employees why the £1.5 billion operating profits posted that year by BritArm—an increase of roughly a third over the year before—was, in fact, bad news.⁴ And, what’s more, managers and clerks may come and go, assets may be acquired and disposed of, the organization periodically restructured, new systems introduced, jobs redefined, processes redesigned, but—the common wisdom holds—“the Bank hasn’t really changed in 300 years.”

The Bank is an example of a negative, but strong, culture that nobody admits to liking and everybody feels helpless to change. Complaints within the Bank about its IT must be understood in this context. And despite the almost exclusive attention paid in the literature to cultures that are, in the words of Whyte (1955: 299), “interesting and pleasant” for members, there is no reason to believe that BritArm is unique in the unpopularity of its culture.

It is important here to be clear about what is meant by “culture.”⁵ Hannerz (1992) offers a conceptual framework that is particularly apt when trying to understand BritArm and its culture of complaint. This is because Hannerz concerns himself with what he calls the “complex cultures” of, for example, contemporary Americans and Britons rather than the simpler cultures of the ethnographic-present Trobriand Islanders and

Nuer. To use the adjective “simple” is not to say that such cultures are easy to understand or lacking in richness and subtlety. But it is to say that whether or not Malinowski (1922) and Evans-Pritchard (1940) were wise to treat the cultures they studied as self-contained and homogeneous, ethnographers studying in the US and UK today would not be wise to do so. The classic “small-society” model—decreasingly applicable even to small societies in these days of global communication and commerce—of organizations is particularly inappropriate for the study of organizations whose members received their primary socialization⁶ in a large, porous, and variegated society (Baba 1989: 7). It is impossible to understand culture in BritArm UK without referring to the broader British culture in which the Bank is set and which, to some extent, it reflects.

Hannerz (1992: 7) conceives of culture as having three dimensions. The first dimension, labeled “ideas and modes of thought,” corresponds to the two levels of “espoused values” and “basic underlying assumptions” in Schein’s (1992: 17) model familiar to students of organizations. The second dimension, labeled “forms of externalization,” corresponds to the level of “artifacts” in Schein’s model. They are “the different ways in which meaning is made accessible to the senses, made public” (*ibid.*). Hannerz labels the third dimension “social distribution:”

the ways in which the collective cultural inventory of meanings and meaningful external forms—that is, [the first and second dimensions] together—is spread over a population and its social relationships (*ibid.*).

It is in the attention he pays to this third dimension, the social distribution of culture, that Hannerz differs from other anthropological and organizational theorists; it is primarily along this dimension that complex cultures differ from simple ones; and it is this

aspect of his framework that makes it appealing for the current study.

Rejecting the customary commitment in anthropology and elsewhere to “the idea of culture as something shared, in the sense of homogeneously distributed in society,” Hannerz finds it more useful to start from the premise that “culture is distributed, and includes understandings of distributions” (*ibid.*: 15).

The major implication of a distributive understanding of culture, of culture as an organization of diversity, is not just the somewhat nit-picking reminder that individuals are not all alike, but that people must deal with other people’s meanings; that is, there are meanings, and meaningful forms, on which other individuals, categories, or groups in one’s environment somehow have a prior claim, but to which one is somehow yet called to make a response (*ibid.*: 14).

In other words, people within a complex culture recognize that they have a perspective that is different to the perspectives of certain other people in the organization, they have some idea (correct or not) of these differences, and they try to take them into account in their contacts with others.

There are two other implications of this model of culture that are equally important for the present work. Both have to do with asymmetries. First, the culture being imperfectly shared means that there are differences among individuals in the gap between the entire cultural inventory and their personal share in it (*ibid.*: 32). Some individuals in the Bank have more cultural knowledge and agility than others. Second, some individuals have more influence over the culture than others. Borrowing the term from Mills (1963: 406), Hannerz (1992: 82) refers to these people collectively as the “cultural apparatus.” In organizations, the cultural apparatus includes leaders (Schein 1992: xv), “boot camp” trainers (Kunda 1992: 5–6), designers of organizational rites (Trice and

Beyer 1985: 371-2), and in general:

all those specializations within the division of labor which somehow aim at affecting minds, temporarily or in an enduring fashion; the people and institutions whose main purpose it is to meddle with our consciousness (Hannerz 1992: 83).

The influence of the cultural apparatus is potent but always imperfect. Its message is filtered and reinterpreted by its audience.

From the point of view of the population . . . , the cultural apparatus and its messages become a part of that situation which has to be defined and for which an adaptation (perhaps moral and intellectual as well as practical) has to be created (*ibid.*: 91-2).

To be concrete, the cultural meaning of a new information technology in the Bank is provided to users to some extent by the designers of the technology, but primarily by the executives who mandate its implementation. This meaning arrives with the technology into the branch or back office and, in a process well-described by authors such as Orlikowski (1992), colors but does not determine the reception, use, and eventual impact of the IT.

The Transformation

The setting of the current study is a BritArm back office processing center called a Securities Centre (ASC)⁷ which opened in July 1993, one year before I began my fieldwork there. ASC was created as a pilot test for the Bank's broader "Delivery Strategy" for moving back office work out of the branches and into centralized paper factories. The manufacturing analogy is explicit in the Bank (encoded even in new job titles such as

“Doer 1” and “Doer 2”); it is part of the provided meaning of the change. The idea, not unique to BritArm, is to centralize processing in order to generate sufficient economies of scale to make partial automation practical. In the case of ASC, this processing involves collecting and reviewing the paperwork necessary to perfect guarantees, mortgages, and mortgage debentures taken by the Bank to secure lending. A job formerly done by senior clerks under the supervision of the lending manager was now being done in ASC by junior clerks, and even temporary agency staff, assisted by a computer system called TecSec.

One of 16 such Centres across the Bank, ASC perfected the security for 248 branches. Its 124 employees handled approximately 1,100 new items of security each month and worked to complete approximately 8,000 leftover items of security that were partially completed by branches when the Centre opened and securities work was transferred to it. Besides the manager, there were three senior assistant managers and eight assistant managers, one leading each team of Doers 1 and 2. For part of my time studying ASC, I became a Doer 1. That is, I checked that charge forms and title documents were in order, that insurance and ground rent were paid up to date, that property valuations had been obtained, and so on. Doers 2 handled the exceptional (and exceptionally important) cases. In turn, the assistant managers laboriously checked every aspect of our work: perfection is the operative word when perfecting securities. In the unlikely event that the Bank had to rely on a piece of security in court, I was told repeatedly, every “i” must be dotted, every “t” crossed.

The original plan had been to make TecSec a true “expert system,” but that had been deemed by senior executives to be too expensive. The compromise, a heuristic system,

was essentially an on-line version of the progress sheets clerks formerly used to track their work. An internal report on ASC found fault with this approach:

The software requires more securities expertise to operate than was expected and its inflexibility frustrates knowledgeable users and makes it difficult for them to use their judgment to take shortcuts and expedite things.

Experienced Doers 2 learned that you sometimes had to “lie to the system”—when, for example, documents arrived from customers in an unexpected order—to force it to produce needed forms. Meanwhile, Assistant Managers learned they had to check 100% of the work done by their Doers 1 who often trusted the system more than their common sense.

By 1994, ASC was producing quality security—a Bank inspection found that “the standard of completion of security by the Securities Centre is particularly good”—but it was over budget by £425,000 per annum,⁸ and lending managers complained that security was taking too long to be completed and thus their ability to deliver customer service was being impaired. Lending managers said too that they preferred having securities done in their branch or Corporate Business Group where they could have control over the process and where they could be sure that their senior clerks would get some, but not too much, securities experience. This points to the fact that not only were new premises created, people moved—ASC’s staff were drawn from branches all over two regions of the Bank—and jobs redesigned as a result of the new structure and technology, but career paths were changed as well as the Bank looked to provide “horses for courses” as the commonly heard cliché has it. As explained to me, the idea was to find the paper pushers and create places like the Securities Centres to allow them to push

paper exclusively. Find the salesmen and put them in front of the customer. Find the leaders and groom them for top jobs. Recognize that most Bank hires are incapable of performing in multiple roles and subdivide the work accordingly.

“Pilot test,” though the Bank’s own terminology, is perhaps misleading here. There was no question of a reversal or dramatic revisal of the Delivery Strategy—indeed, it was being rolled out to other areas of the back office even as the Securities Centres were still cutting their teeth. What’s more, the creation of the Securities Centres and the introduction of TecSec themselves represented a sizable, if localized, transformation of the organization in their own right. A major effort, the change was coordinated by a team in the misleadingly named Network Strategy and Development (NS&D) department in Head Office. It produced a 400 page Implementation Handbook which was given to each Regional Operations Manager who would oversee a Securities Centre. The dispute over the value of this handbook falls along predictable lines. Compare the opinion of Doug Thomas, one of the NS&D managers responsible for the implementation design:

The trouble with Securities Centres is that people don’t follow the recipe. It is like baking a fruit cake—and you can take this metaphor as far as you like. You don’t want crap fruit, but you don’t need the best fruit either—that is like the staff. If the recipe says cook it for two hours at 100 degrees, that is what you should do. You can’t—like some regions wanted to—cook it for one hour at 200 degrees. The Centres that have done best are those that have followed the recipe closest. Of course you can’t follow it blindly, but you can follow it. The trouble was, I didn’t have any power to force them to follow it. Very frustrating.

with the equally strong view of a member of the management team at ASC:

Literally, the only parts of this Centre that are working well are those parts where we ignored the Implementation Handbook. It isn’t realistic, it assumes a best-case world, and we would have been better off starting from scratch on our own without it.

All things considered, the situation offered an ideal vantage point from which to observe the culture of complaint and its intersection with organizational transformation: there was certainly no shortage of subject matter.

Derogation

Returning to the episode with Ben and his window, we saw that it revealed both the depth and shallowness of the unpopular culture in BritArm. It runs deep enough to shape patterns even of casual greeting in the Bank and to lead to a BritArm reading of elements of British culture. And yet it can be superficial in that it does not always correspond to feelings of deep discontent or a desire for redress. To use Hannerz's terminology, the distinction within the form of complaint is between modes of thought antagonistic towards some aspect of the current situation and those acquiescent in the status quo. This is the difference between a complaint considered to be a deprecation and one considered to be a derogation. The question "considered so by whom?" is relevant since, as we shall see, there are interesting cases of disagreement on this point between speakers and various members of their audience. There is no unequivocal partition between the two categories—the distinction is in play in the Bank. Nevertheless, derogation and deprecation of IT are conceptually distinct and it is worth exploring the role each plays in the ongoing efforts of ASC managers, staff, and internal customers to cope with the transformation implied by the Bank's Delivery Strategy.

Ben's joke about BritArm technology was a derogation. This is because it was a complaint: it put the Bank down—but it didn't express a deprecation's "earnest desire"

for change. Instead it signaled a passive, resigned acceptance of the window's closing and the state of the Bank's technology as things that, for the time being, we were going to have to live with. It is in this sense that we can say Ben was expressing acquiescence in the status quo. This is not to say that he did not possess a desire that the Bank's IT and window fittings improve, merely that he did not express that desire here. His remark was not a solicitation of redress but a way to make me laugh, to put me at ease, and to warm up our conversation. It was a supportive ritual meant to strengthen (even if only slightly) our relationship by identifying himself as a culturally competent insider and by including me to some degree, granting me some rights as an insider.⁹

This might sound obvious, and it would almost certainly be obvious to BritArm employees for whom the use of derogatory remarks to produce these sorts of desirable social outcomes is well-established. It would be counter-intuitive to employees of Uedagin, the Japanese retail bank studied by Rohlen, where "love Uedagin" is considered the proper attitude toward the company.

Because it is their community and the source of a good life for them, and because it is made up of their fellow workers, people should naturally feel emotional attachment for the bank and express it through pride, dedication, and enthusiastic participation (Rohlen 1974: 50).

In such a context, derogation can be expected to lead to frowns, unease, and coolness. Brought up under a different realm of primary socialization, the British employees of BritArm are more comfortable than Rohlen's Japanese with self-mockery and rather less comfortable with displays of pride or enthusiastic participation.¹⁰ The secondary socialization they receive in BritArm reinforces, if it doesn't create, the idea that derogation can strengthen the bonds of community.

As one example of how this plays out in the Bank, consider the following example drawn from my fieldnotes.¹¹

After I had been sitting alongside Cutler, my Doer 2 mentor, for two weeks learning the intricacies of his role at the Securities Centre, he asked if I would like to be a “huge help” to him and his colleagues on Team 2. I was put on my guard by the sly grin on his face and the conspiratorial glances he shared with those sitting nearby. But I was enthusiastic about the prospect of ingratiating myself to a useful informant and of shifting my fieldwork to participant-observation. I readily agreed.

The task Cutler had in mind for me was the revaluation of a portfolio of shares lodged with the Bank by a customer to secure a line of credit. It wasn't urgent: the job had been left undone for over a month. But it was required by the Bank's internal auditors and Cutler didn't know when he would be able to find time to do it. The job was tedious. Cutler retrieved for me the customer's file which contained hundreds of share certificates from over 120 different companies.¹² Figuring out what was what was made difficult by companies that had merged, been acquired, gone bankrupt, or changed names over the years. It took me the rest of the day merely to produce a list of which current share prices I needed to obtain. Normally, when shares are taken by the Bank as security, they are held in a central department which takes care of revaluations. This customer was an exception for reasons no one at the Securities Centre knew.

I had to write the list out in longhand since the computers on our desks had no facility for doing word processing or spreadsheet work. There were two computers in the Centre, out of 80, with Microsoft Word and Excel on them, but I was advised that it was best just to do the job by hand. This was frustrating since the customer's file contained a computer printout of the previous valuation from two years ago. It would have saved time and effort had I been able to start with that and make additions and modifications to it. There was in any case, though, no soft copy of the previous valuation so I would have had to retype it all anyway even with a computer at my disposal.

Members of the team paid me a lot of attention while I worked away on this. Nick, the team leader, came by a number of times to see how I was getting on and to show his appreciation. After a couple of hours, Cutler apparently started to feel guilty about having given it to me to do. “You've gone awfully quiet over there,” he said. Our desks were head to head in a line with other desks in the open-plan office. “You know, you don't have to do it,” he added. “Just leave it, and I can finish it later.” I assured him that I didn't mind. “But it's very boring. You must be bored out of your mind over there.” Not wanting to complain, I said that I was all right with it, that it was good to have a little job to do. “Yeah, but it's pretty tedious, isn't it?” I demurred, but after several people stopped by over the course of the afternoon to sympathize and tell

me how boring was the work that I was doing, I confessed yes, it was fairly tedious. “Oh, I know,” I was told.

The floor under the desk I was sitting at had a slight tilt to it, not uncommon in old English buildings. It meant that my chair kept slowly sliding away from the desk and I had to keep scooting myself in all the time. It was uncomfortable and Cutler noticed me fiddling around with the chair adjustments to see if I could stop from rolling back. “Uncomfortable, isn’t it?” he said. I agreed, complaining my back was starting to hurt from all this scooting and sliding. He and Joan, the Doer 1 sitting next to him, laughed and said that they had each used to sit over on that side, but moved desks for precisely that reason. We complained convivially about the conditions under which we were forced to work, and I said I didn’t know how Tom—the man whose desk I was borrowing—put up with it. It transpired that Tom had previously been a coal miner so this deprivation was likely pretty mild by his standards.¹³

Encouraged by this friendly banter, I went on to make derogatory remarks about how ridiculous it was to do this by hand, about the state of the brush in my bottle of correcting fluid, and about the customer who, I hypothesized aloud, didn’t actually need the line of credit but just opened it so that we would be the custodian of his shares. Joan and Cutler seemed to find my exasperation hilarious and Joan told me, “Now you know what it is like to be a BritArm securities clerk.” This struck me. If she was right, then being a securities clerk at BritArm feels like basking in the warm glow of adversity with sympathizers all around. I felt more like a part of the team than I ever had before, and the event marked a turning point in my relationship with Team 2. They treated me with less suspicion and more inclusion afterwards. To have suffered enough to be able to complain about the Bank was to be part of the group and to have made these mild derogations was evidence of my bona fides as “all right.”

As I was being socialized to understand, derogation is an important element of the culture at BritArm. The ritual of making derogatory remarks about some aspect of the Bank—often its IT—and receiving in return empathy, and perhaps sympathy too, is a glue that strengthens the bonds between the individual and the group. The dull routine of the back office was punctuated with exclamations like “I hate this machine;” “How can we get any work done with phones always ringing?” and “The branches still aren’t filling in requisitions correctly.” If the complaint was valid (more on validity in a moment), the response would take the form of laughter, a comment along the lines of

“Oh, I know,” “Terrible, isn’t it,” or a rejoinder of another complaint. If not, sympathy would be withheld and the response would be a mocking “Awwww” and laughter, a comment like “Oh, come on,” or, worse, silence.

The phenomenon is not unique to back office departments. In the public space of the banking hall exclamations are kept to a minimum, but people whisper across desks and form into small huddles to exchange complaints and condolences (and myths, like the story of how the Bank came to have its current branch banking computer system). In the bank vault or file room, over beers in the pub at lunch, behind the closed door of a manager’s office, in the car on the way to see a customer, in conference rooms before meetings, in staff rooms while the kettle is boiling: all across the Bank, as regularly as peach, fish, and banana time in Roy’s (1960) Clicking Department, time out from work is taken up with this ritual exchange.

The ritual takes on a particular importance in a newly established office like ASC, however. Few of the managers or clerks had worked together, or even known one another, before the creation of the Centre. Now they were to work in teams as the pioneers of a new way of perfecting security. They are self-described (for the most part) as members of a particularly retiring and risk-averse segment of a generally retiring and risk-averse occupation (the more extroverted and aggressive bankers typically chose to remain in the branches where they would now be expected to actively sell the Bank’s products to customers). The comforting ritual of derogation provided a commonly available means of building rapport and work relationships, of coming together as a group, even of building an identity as members of the Securities Centre. Complaint can build identity in the Bank because, while *everyone* complains, not everyone complains

about the same things. Derogation's allusion to shared experience presumes a reference group. Ironically, then, the complaining *ad nauseam* about TecSec and its many imperfections, about the failure of the Bank to provide the promised facility for security requisitions to be electronically transmitted from the branches to the Securities Centres, or about the inability of the hardware to handle extra Doers in cases of cyclical peaks in security requisitions, may have helped to alleviate what could have been much more serious, organizational, impediments to the success of Delivery Strategy (such as dysfunctional teams, employee anxiety, staff turnover, perhaps even work-to-rule or other forms of passive resistance).

The ritual of derogation is structured by two notions: what counts as a valid complaint and what constitutes an appropriate response. Validity hinges on audience perceptions of the complainant and the opinion expressed in the complaint itself. As I have argued, derogations—as distinct from deprecations—are not solicitations of redress. One doesn't make fun of TecSec in the expectation that someone will hear and make things better. Indeed, the sense staff have of the isolation and remove of the IT department may help account for the popularity of the Bank's IT systems as targets of derogation.¹⁴ One derogates to get a laugh, some understanding, or sympathy. But to work in this way, the audience must agree with the opinion expressed by the complainant. Complaints about the weather don't work as conversation starters unless there is agreement that the weather is bad. Otherwise the complaint is unwarranted and thus invalid. Throughout Britain there is widespread agreement that the weather is bad and that nobody ever does anything about it; throughout BritArm there is widespread agreement that the case of IT is little different. Both are always, therefore, valid targets

of complaint. Further, though, the audience has to agree that the complainant deserves (though he or she expresses neither desire for nor expectation of) redress. My complaint about office ergonomics would not have worked to bolster my insider status had the others not agreed that my desk was uncomfortable and that, all else equal, I deserved to be more comfortable. If redress is seen to be undeserved, the complaint is a *whinge* and thus invalid.¹⁵

Evaluations of opinion and desert are contingent on the relationship between complainant and audience. The same joke about the Bank's technology that provokes feelings of *bonhomie* when voiced by an insider is an insult in other mouths, as I found to my discomfort on several occasions. With every new group in BritArm that I studied, I had to earn anew my derogation privileges. Derogation acts to reproduce and reinforce bonds between the individual and group, but it cannot produce them where they don't exist. An outsider cannot expect to make friends in the Bank by insulting BritArm. Nor does merely working for BritArm give one *carte-blanc* to be derogatory about the Bank.

It would be misleading to suggest there were rules as to when sympathy would be given rather than offense taken—there was much individual variation. Some people seemed to be so unpopular that they couldn't complain about the weather without being contradicted; others had the *savoir faire* of the court jester and could get away with almost any remark. There were two important overarching patterns, however. The first is that derogatory remarks were more likely to elicit positive responses when the target of the comment was an aspect equally close to or equally distant from the salient contexts of the complainant and audience. So, for example, the manager of the Securities

Centre and an IT manager could joke together over lunch about the ineptitude of the Head Office budgeting process, or the quirks of the demands sent down by Legal and Technical Services. But a derogatory remark about the absurdity of a recent consultant's review of TecSec commissioned by the Bank, which reported that "TecSec is perceived by its users to be a 'good', useful system," was not found so funny or endearing by the IT manager.

The second pattern is that derogatory remarks were more likely to elicit sympathy and understanding when the hierarchical distance between complainant and audience was low. Derogations among peers or between subordinate and superior were not problematic, but introduce two or more layers of the hierarchy between the complainant and the audience and misunderstanding was more likely. I was told by senior managers that it was inappropriate for them to share any negative feelings they may have about the Bank or its IT with junior managers or staff, and I seldom saw this norm violated—though often enough those negative feelings did travel down by cascade as senior managers would share derogations with direct reports who might share them with their direct reports and on.

Equally seldom was derogation by someone low in the hierarchy eliciting empathy or sympathy from someone higher up. The problem in this case is that signals break down and derogations are confused for deprecations. The desire for change that distinguishes a deprecation from a derogation is not always (or even often) explicitly stated. Sometimes it is only hinted at. So long as the audience knows that they cannot be expected to provide redress for the complaint, there is no confusion.¹⁶ But ambiguity can creep in if the complainant is uncertain whether his audience can offer redress or the au-

dience does not know if they can reasonably be expected to. Of course, this can happen even where this is no hierarchical distance between the complainant and audience. A team leader who complains in a managers' meeting about the computer illiteracy among Doers 1 will likely receive sympathy from his peers but maybe also advice on how to deal with the situation. At times, when people complained to me about the Bank, I was unsure whether they wanted my opinion, my sympathy, or thought perhaps that my computing background could prove of some use to them. This caused me considerable anxiety: to offer an opinion of advice when sympathy was requested was to risk insulting the person by implying that I thought I knew better than they did what to do; to offer sympathy when redress was requested was to risk frustrating the person by appearing to be unwilling to help. Perhaps feeling it always best to assume that anyone complaining up the hierarchy expected redress, and anyway restricted by their norm of stoicism from appearing sympathetic to less senior personnel expressing negative views about the Bank, managers treated virtually all of the few complaints directed to them from lower in the hierarchy as deprecations. It is to the ritual of deprecation that I next turn.

Deprecation

Unlike derogations, deprecations are complaints expressing an "earnest desire that something be averted or removed." Deprecations are antagonistic to the status quo; they are solicitations of redress. But clear, direct deprecation is relatively rare in Brit-Arm. This is because deprecation can provoke embarrassment. It can cause a loss of

face by pointing out inadequacy or by forcing a public statement of unwillingness or inability to provide redress. Aversion to embarrassment is a powerful force in the Bank, and it leads to distinct patterns of deprecation that this section will examine. It is worth pointing out first, however, that BritArm is once again reflecting broader British culture in its antipathy to embarrassment. The ready and delicate sense of what is fitting and proper in dealing with others so as to avoid giving offense or causing embarrassment is summarized in the word "tact."¹⁷ While it is by no means the case that every Brit possesses the gift of tact, it is undeniable that the British understand themselves to be a tactful people. Tactful, indeed, to a fault, as British humorists such as Douglas Adams are wont to note:

"Tell me the story," said Fenchurch firmly. "You arrived at the station."

"I was about twenty minutes early," Arthur said. "So I bought a newspaper, to do the crossword, and went to the buffet to get a cup of coffee. . . [and] some biscuits. . . Laden with all these new possessions, I go and sit at a table. . . So let me give you the layout. Me sitting at the table. On my left, the newspaper. On my right, the cup of coffee. In the middle of the table, the packet of biscuits."

"I see it perfectly."

"What you don't see," said Arthur, "because I haven't mentioned him yet, is the guy sitting at the table already. He is sitting there opposite me. . . Perfectly ordinary. Briefcase, business suit. He didn't look," said Arthur, "as if he was about to do anything weird."

"Ah. I know the type. What did he do?"

"He did this. He leaned across the table, picked up the packet of biscuits, tore it open, took one out, and. . ."

"What?"

"Ate it."

"*What?*"

"He ate it."

Fenchurch looked at him in astonishment. "What on earth did you do?"

"Well, in the circumstances I did what any red-blooded Englishman would do. I was compelled," said Arthur, "to ignore it."

"What? Why?"

"Well, it's not the sort of thing you're trained for, is it? I searched my soul, and discovered that there was nothing anywhere in my upbringing,

experience, or even primal instincts to tell me how to react to someone who has quite simply, calmly, sitting right there in front of me, stolen one of my biscuits.”

Fenchurch thought about it. “I must say I’m not sure what I would have done either” (Adams 1985: 547-9).

What is lacking is not so much training in how to respond, but training in how to respond given the tact that “any red-blooded Englishman” knows is required in the situation. Deprecation is harder in some situations than others, though, as comedian Victoria Wood jokes. She tells a story about taking British Rail and finding a couple having sex on a crowded commuter train to London. Nobody says a word, studiously ignoring the two until they finish and light up cigarettes. Then someone says, “Excuse me, this is a ‘No Smoking’ compartment” (Wood 1991).

It is interesting to note that Wood’s apocryphal commuter does not say “I would like you to put out those cigarettes.” By recounting the “No Smoking” status of the compartment rather than expressing a desire that the cigarettes be put out, the speaker has effectively depersonalized the complaint and is able to use British Rail rules as an intermediary to the deprecation. These two tactics of tactful deprecation, the use of depersonalization and intermediation, make the remark about smoking possible where a remark to the couple about sex would not be. Both of these tactics are common in the Bank, and IT is commonly a component of them.

This is in contrast to what Argyris (Argyris 1954: 74) found in his ethnography of an American bank. He did find a strong aversion to embarrassment among the employees of the bank, and he reports that:

Fifty-five per cent of the employees spontaneously list “tact and diplomacy” as the most often required ability in their formal work. The next most often

listed ability, “accuracy,” has two-thirds less votes (*ibid.*).

In that bank, though, this led not to tactful deprecation, but to an absence of deprecation. Noting that “interviews emphasize that many of the employees would much rather accept relatively unhappy circumstances than complain” (*ibid.*: 74), he quotes one “somewhat dissatisfied” employee as saying:

I’ll tell you what I think of it. It’s not always a pleasant thought to me. If you are an ass kisser, you will get along all right. I think if you speak the way you feel you will get nowhere, not here. The only thing that’s good you know, is to bow down, to knuckle down to the guys but that would be my feeling. I don’t think people think this is a friendly bank (*ibid.*).

The suggestion here is that the requirements of secondary socialization in this bank are working contrary to those of the employees’ primary socialization. It would be too strong to say that Argyris’ bank is “un-American,” but the need for ass-kissing and repression of complaint are not seen as characteristically American by employees of that bank as the use of tactful depersonalization and intermediation are seen as characteristically British by employees of BritArm.

In part, the use of intermediaries in deprecation is due to a bureaucratic protocol of complaint in the Bank where one is supposed to direct most complaints to one’s manager who starts it on its way up and down the hierarchy through the proper channels on its way to the appropriate party. A complaint about TecSec from a user may be heard and repeated by a half-dozen people, then, before it is heard by someone who can do more about it than pass it along. Even in cases where that protocol does not apply, or is being ignored, though, deprecations in the Bank are very often made through intermediaries to spare the complainant and recipient the embarrassment of having to face each other

and cope with the reactions provoked.

Fears of deprecation creating embarrassing scenes seem well-founded. Perhaps because of the rarity of direct deprecation, even mild rebukes can provoke passionate reactions.

One day while I was working as a Doer 1 under the watchful eye of Cutler, Joan, another Doer 1 on the team, took a call from a Corporate Account Executive (CAE) about a planning report on some land he was proposing the Bank take to secure a loan. The CAE told Joan that Cutler had promised last week that he would look into prices for the report and order it; now the manager is calling to check what progress has been made. None. Cutler says that he remembers talking to the guy, but he never promised to get a report and would never have said he would check around about prices. That is just not something he does: the price of reports is not something that the Centre worries about, he argues. Joan tells the CAE that nothing has been done yet, but that they will send for the planning report right away. She tells Cutler that he didn't sound happy as he hung up and she goes to fax the request off to a firm to do the report. Cutler is flushed and clearly upset. He repeats to Joan that he would never promise something like that, to check the prices. He tells me that complaints such as these are "really not on. We're all one company!"

A little while later, Nick, the team leader, comes over having just received a call of complaint from the CAE. Cutler says that he honestly doesn't remember what he said to the CAE but he doesn't think he promised to price and obtain the report. Nick tells him not to worry, that they are all under a lot of pressure and they have so many things going on at once that it is no wonder they might forget one or two things. He quickly adds that he's not saying Cutler did forget to send the report. Cutler explains to me that it seems he screwed up. He repeats that he can't recall exactly what happened. They just get too many calls. These people in the branches, he says, think that the Centre is here working only for them. But they have dozens of branches to serve.

Nick gets off the phone and asks to speak to Cutler. He says that he told the CAE essentially not to worry about the planning report because TecSec reports that it is a post-reliability formality. This means that it is Bank policy to release the loan funds to the customer before this formality is completed. The CAE, Nick says, gave him grief about this, saying that if that was true, it shouldn't be. After all, if we find out afterwards that there is a motorway about to be built through the land we would really be stuck. Cutler goes to the small bookcase of loose leaf binders called the Action Sheets and selects the appropriate volume. These are the Bank's standard operating procedures,

they are updated regularly via circular and each branch and office would have a set. It is not clear from the Action Sheets, though, whether checking the planning report is a pre- or post-reliability formality. Cutler goes back to the progress sheets they used before the process was semi-automated. To his relief, it confirms the post-reliability status of planning reports. TecSec is vindicated.

Cutler and Nick talk about it some more, though, and Nick says that the CAE has a point with his motorway example, and suggests that Cutler call the Legal, Technical, and Securities Department (LT&S) in London to clarify the issue and find out why this formality is post-reliability. Also, he suggests Cutler call the firm handling the report to see if it can be handled as a rush job. While on hold with LT&S, Cutler asks Ken, a Doer 2 on another team, what he thinks. Ken says that planning reports almost never turn up anything and they can take months to get. LT&S confirms this analysis and notes that if the manager is concerned, he has the discretion to hold the money back until the report is obtained. Cutler reports this to Nick to report back to the CAE, and goes back to work having spent over an hour on this issue.

There is no telling how this episode would have gone differently had the complaint been made directly to Cutler and not to Joan and then Nick. The interesting thing is that putting the two parties directly concerned on the phone together was never suggested. Furthermore, even without having to confront Cutler, the CAE still quickly seized the opportunity to switch the target of his deprecation from Cutler to the impersonal TecSec.

It is much less embarrassing to face someone as an intermediary to a deprecation than as its instigator. The least embarrassing depreciations of all are those that are not instigated by any person, those where everyone involved is merely an intermediary. This is the case when the deprecation is depersonalized. The deprecation's solicitation of redress is expressed as stemming not from any personal desire of the complainant, but from the impersonal requirements of Bank IT or policy. This is why, for example, performance problems involving even minor violations of policy are deprecated while often more serious problems that don't violate the letter of any rule are not directly

deprecated. Managers rely on the much derogated black and white bureaucratic inflexibility of the reams of policy Action Sheets—and now of the TecSec system—to ease the deprecation that is part of their job. Note that this is exactly the same finding made by Smith in her study of an American bank. There, middle managers protested the removal of bureaucratic standards for performance evaluation. They argued that being given more flexibility would make their jobs more difficult and trouble the relationships they had with their people (Smith 1990: 74).

IT serves as a convenient whipping boy in BritArm precisely because of its impersonality. For example:

Faced with rumored accusations of incompetence and pedantism by lending managers, the Securities Centre's team leaders started inviting the assistants of these managers for a half-day visit to the Centre and lunch. I knew several of those assistants, and unanimously they came away with a higher regard for the team leaders and Doers 2 they met, but no fewer complaints about the performance of the Centre. "They're good people and they're working hard," one said, "but the teams have too much to do, they are understaffed, and the technology falls down. Typical BritArm, really."

The shift of focus of complaints away from individuals is a dialectical move where the contradictory opinions of complainant and defendant are merged into the higher truth of TecSec being at fault. Relationships between ASC staff and their former colleagues in the branches, strained by process changes and performance problems, are rebuilt through shared deprecation of TecSec. This is the remedial ritual of deprecation. Rather than be separated by complaints and accusations, all parties come together in shared suffering of the Bank's inadequacies in the area of IT.

It would be an exaggeration to say that all deprecation of TecSec served this remedial function. Formal complaints about TecSec were submitted by staff to the Centre

manager who, if he felt them warranted, would pass the complaint to the IT department. During my eight months with BritArm, TecSec was updated to reflect a change in Bank policy regarding the necessity of getting all customers to sign a waiver form if they declined to seek independent legal advice before charging security to the Bank—one of the most egregious cases where Doers had to lie to the system to produce the necessary forms for the customer to sign—and a problem that made the system hang periodically was addressed as were several other issues. The TecSec User's Group, however, had a list of dozens of other changes deemed necessary by Centre managers and agreed to in principle by IT—some had been on the list as long as a year—but that had not yet been scheduled to be implemented. Deprecation of TecSec might some day lead to its improvement, then, but it led more immediately to the improvement of relations between ASC and its internal customers. The ritual is repeated in interactions between TecSec users and developers. Complaints about IT people who are “second-rate” and “have no clue about what we do here” morph, when those IT people are met, into complaints about the system of prioritizing IT projects: planned improvements to TecSec were prioritized below other IT work and had been downgraded twice to make room for other work.

There are limits to the ritual effectiveness of deprecation. A common complaint in the Bank—and one more common the higher you go in the hierarchy—is that there is too much complaining in the Bank and too much resistance to change. This is well known, and there is a stigma attached to the label of complainer or, worse, Luddite. A complainer is “not on board” and “not a team player;” a Luddite is “dead wood” and an “old dog” who can't be taught new tricks—attributes no (secretly) ambitious

organizational man or woman can afford to acquire.

“I speak my mind too much to get on in this Bank,” a manager with a reputation for blunt-speaking told me. “Actually, I never thought I’d get as far as I have. I won’t get further.”

Even when invited by a senior figure to complain, reservation is warranted. *Bankground*, BritArm’s main newsletter, features an interview in each issue with some member of the Bank’s staff. They routinely ask what is the greatest problem the interviewee perceives in the Bank, and they typically receive answers like the following:

If I had to point to any frustrations, I suppose I would say working for a very large organization sometimes brings constraints which are, perhaps, necessary (*Bankground*, April 1994: 5).

Derogation and deprecation are a regular part of the BritArm day, but knowing where to draw the line is important.¹⁸ Just as Kunda (1992: 107) describes a prescribed role distance in the strong culture of Tech—a token cynicism that was to be expressed as a sort of ritual exception that proves the official ideology to be the rule—so there is a prescribed role distance of earnest positivity and optimism that must be shown from time to time in the unpopular culture of BritArm. The review that found TecSec to be perceived by its users as “good” and “useful” came as no surprise to culturally aware staff in BritArm: that is just how they would have responded if asked by executives or their consultants.

Conclusion

It is well-documented that information technologies often allow uses beyond those intended by their designers. What I have tried to show in this chapter is that, in addition to adapting IT in unexpected ways, users can adapt *complaints* about IT in unexpected ways. In the mouths of the culturally competent, ritual complaints about IT in BritArm can be tactics of strengthening group bonds and repairing relationships strained by organizational transformation. Given the enormous amount of complaining going on, there is little of the direct deprecation in BritArm that would provoke change. But complaint about IT may nevertheless facilitate transformation, not by causing it, but by mitigating its side-effects. What's more, the constancy of complaint can lend a sense of permanence—recall the received wisdom that the Bank hasn't really changed in 300 years—to an organization facing increasing rapid and radical changes. In the unpopular culture, it seems that the more things change, the more unpopular they become.

To identify the function of a ritual is not to explain it, however. The Panglossian (Voltaire 1759: 4) formula—that all is for the best in this best of all possible worlds—is untenable. The culture of complaint has costs associated with it: namely a cynicism and negative attitude that have been identified by people at all levels of the Bank as being undesirable but that defy organizational efforts to change them. Multiple extensive and expensive culture change programs have failed to do more than enforce a limited lip service of positivity and optimism about the Bank's IT program. It is unclear, therefore, that the unpopular culture is optimally rational for BritArm or the result of strategic design. I described examples of Japanese and American banks where BritArm's unpopular

culture could find no foothold in legitimacy. BritArm is a product of the wider British culture in which it is set. More accurately, it a product of interpreted borrowings from that wider culture. The Bank is not so much British as it is *stereotypically* British in its self-deprecation¹⁹ and strictures of tact.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine the origins of the culture of complaint in BritArm. The purpose here is different and the point, perhaps, more general. When analyzing attitudes towards IT, we need to not only examine the *causes* of complaint (what is it about the system that makes people dissatisfied), but also the *consequences* of complaint (what social functions it might perform). The employees and managers of BritArm find themselves with plenty to complain about, in the conventional sense, regarding the Bank's IT. Indeed, the complaints I describe would not be legitimate if there was not consensus that BritArm's technology is as relatively unspectacular as Britain's weather. What I have argued, though, is that the ritual functions of complaint are institutionalized in the Bank in such a way that if current problems with the IT were solved, others would likely be found to complain about in their stead. To understand complaint as situated rhetoric, we must understand it as an interaction ritual. If we think ourselves too sophisticated to laugh at why the chicken crossed the road, the joke may be on us.

Notes

1 Specifically, it is by definition of *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1991: 383).

2 The definitions of "derogation" and "deprecation" come from *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1991: 526, 523).

3 By way of methodological note, over the course of 18 months, I spent 8 months full-time in

BritArm UK and 4 months full-time in the Bank's US subsidiary. In each case, the research was designed as a "T" where a long period of time was spent in a single part of the Bank followed by shorter periods of time in many other parts. In England—the focus of this paper—I spent three months in a back office processing center called the Securities Centre. Following my time there, I spent two weeks shadowing a chief manager (in charge of ten branches and of the lending to larger business customers), two weeks each in three branches of different sizes (large, medium, and small—each of which is said in the Bank to have a different feel to it), a week each in another Securities Centre and three other back office units, a week in another branch, and a week in a Regional Office. I also spent a scattered 5 days at the Bank's training college attending a course and a number of end-of-course dinners where I had the opportunity to meet managers and staff from all over the Bank. I spent three days with managers I met this way, then three weeks in various part of Head Office in London and, finally, a week-long visit after my time in the US bank to meet again with many of my informants.

In the UK in particular and to a lesser extent in the US, I attended many private dinner parties, pub lunches, one beer breakfast, and every Bank party I could get myself invited to. In the early stages of the fieldwork, I tried taking notes while in the Bank but found that, except in formal interview situations, this attracted too much attention and even suspicion. Outside of interviews, therefore, I kept a small notebook in my coat pocket and jotted down what reminders I could to be fleshed out that evening either on my laptop or into a Dictaphone on my commute home. In addition, as insecure fieldworkers are wont to do, I picked up all manner of paperwork. There wasn't a brochure or report too insignificant to escape my collection. I did, however, sign a confidentiality agreement with the Bank as a condition of my access and this restricted the documents I could take away. Despite this, I was able to amass a large filing cupboard of materials to accompany my roughly 1500 pages of notes.

4 The speaking notes acknowledged that pre-tax profits for the first six months of the year had risen to £767m, an 83% increase on the £419m figure the year before. Bad debt provisions had fallen by 47%, and the Bank was reporting a 14% increase in its dividend. They explained why, despite superficial appearances to the contrary, these results were troubling. The argument can be summarized as follows. The results announced were for BritArm Group as a whole, and not just BritArm UK Branch Banking (UKBB). Much of the increase in profits derived from the Group's international banking and investment banking businesses rather than branch banking. Within UKBB, the increase in profits was attributable to a decrease in bad debt provisions. Operating income actually declined slightly (£3.45bn versus £3.47bn the year before) and had been flat or falling for some time. Advances (lending) had fallen to £81.7bn from £85.7bn. The Bank's cost-income ratio were higher than that of competitors. Further belt-tightening was in order.

To say that the bad news interpretation of the interim results is a product of the unpopular culture is not to say that anything was fabricated: the Bank's official explanation was a legitimate, factual interpretation of an equivocal reality. The point is that, in other cultural contexts, and with other ends in mind, other interpretations of the results would also have been possible.

5 The well-known problem is that there is little agreement about what "culture" actually means. As Alvesson notes, as a term it is economical: "one word signifies a broad range of intangible societal and organizational phenomena" (Alvesson 1993: 3). With over 250 anthropological definitions of "culture" to choose from—Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) famously catalogue 164 of them; Keesing's (1974) review adds 86 to that list; and I discuss Hannerz's (1992) definition in this chapter—not to mention numerous sociological ones, management scholars have chosen to invent scores of their own. As Van Maanen (1984: 216) quips: "Those of us who are the culture vultures of organization studies are a fairly contentious lot and do not frequently adopt one another's definitions." This is only partly out of spiteful obstinacy. Van Maanen argues that:

The ends of fieldwork involve the catchall idea of culture; a concept as stimulating, productive, yet fuzzy to fieldworkers and their readers as the notion of life is for biologists and their readers (Van Maanen 1988: 3).

Concrete descriptions of particular cultures, then, are best served by vague definitions of culture in general. Ethnography, after all, is an inductive endeavor. Keeping culture imprecise in the abstract encourages each ethnographer to inductively arrive at a conception of culture appropriate for the context studied. Of course, with so many definitions available, the chances of inductively arriving at a

conception of culture already articulated by someone else are increasing.

6 I am referring to the distinction Berger and Luckmann (1967: 130) make between primary and secondary socialization. Primary socialization starts in childhood; it is the process through which an individual becomes a member of society. Secondary socialization is a subsequent process that inducts an already socialized individual into a new sector of society—like the Bank. In primary socialization, significant others, imposed on the individual, are in charge of his socialization. Their definitions of his situation are posited for him as objective reality. Secondary socialization is seldom as powerful except in cases where it is consistent with the already formed self and the already internalized world of primary socialization (*ibid.*: 131, 140).

7 I will use the acronym ASC to specify this particular Securities Centre without revealing its actual name.

8 Unfortunately, I was not able to ascertain the Centre's total budget figure to compare it with the overrun. Some indication of the magnitude of the overrun can be gleaned from the fact that the original business case for the Centre was based on estimated savings of £4.4m over ten years by perfecting security in a centralized unit instead of each branch doing it individually. The savings were expected mainly from being able to replace senior clerical staff with more junior staff because of TecSec. The cost overrun came primarily in the form of roughly 35 more employees working in the Centre than had been envisioned when the budget was drawn up.

9 In this sense, it is similar to the ritual of a host telling a guests to makes themselves at home. This is meant to convey certain rights to the guests, but is not meant literally (rummaging through drawers as if one were at home may be out of bounds, for example). Likewise, I was being granted the right to hear derogations normally not for public consumption, but it was not clear that it would have been acceptable for me to join in the good-natured fun at the Bank's expense. I have more to say about this later.

10 Interestingly, while clearly less comfortable with self-mockery than their British counterparts, the Japanese bankers described by Rohlen seem quite comfortable joining the Brits in mocking England. Rohlen (1974: 51) quotes a New Year's letter to employees in which the bank's president cautions, "Those who are misled by momentary prosperity into loosening the reins, are destined to become, as England has, a sorrowful spectacle of decline."

11 I will use the convention of setting long examples drawn from my fieldnotes off in the same indented, single-space format as block quotes. This is simply to make them easier to read and is not an indication of their being verbatim quotes from my notes or anywhere else.

12 In the Securities Centres, documents are not stored in file folders but rather in A4-sized envelopes slit open across the top. These are called "pods" and on the way to retrieve the files on this day I asked Cutler why they were called that. "I don't know," he told me. "Stupid, isn't it?" Derogation can be used not only as ice-breakers to get conversations started, but also as deflections to bring conversations—and inquiry—to an end.

13 Mild, too, compared to the conditions faced by English bank clerks in Victorian times who, as the social commentator Thackrah observed in 1831, "suffered from the confined atmosphere [of the counting house], a fixed position and often from long days. Their muscles are often distressed by the maintenance of one posture and they complain frequently of pains in the side of the chest. The digestive organs suffer most, a fact apparent even from the countenance and tongue. The circulation is imperfect; the head becomes affected and though urgent disease is not generally produced, yet a continuance of the employment in its fullest extent never fails to impair the constitution and render the individual sickly for life" (Anderson 1976: 17).

14 This is not to say, as we shall see later, that no complaints about TecSec were ever addressed by the IT department.

15 "Whinge" is a term used more in England than in America. A whinge is a whine—a peevish complaint.

16 More specifically, confusion is avoided so long as Hannerz's (1992: 68): "I know, I know that everybody else knows, and I know everybody else knows that everybody else knows" formula holds.

17 This definition of tact comes from *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1991: 2232).

18 For example, as part of one of the Bank's many culture change programs, psychometric test were performed to evaluate executives' enthusiasm for the Bank's vision. A league table of scores was

produced so that each executive could see where he stood, but—much to the disgust of the change agent—scores were never formerly used in promotion decisions. The message of the unacceptability of executive derogation or deprecation of the Vision was clear, however.

19 Given the definitions of “derogation” and “deprecation” that I use in this chapter, “self-deprecation” may be a confusing label. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1991: 523) notes it as an anomaly, explaining that, in the phrase “self-deprecation,” “deprecation” is taken to be synonymous with “depreciation”—“the action of speaking slightly of someone or something” (*ibid.*)—and thus similar to “derogation.”

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