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Work-Related Networks and Household Organization
Among Chicana Cannery Workers

by
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Working Paper Series No. 2

February 1984

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Introduction

Canneries in Northern California process fruit and vegetables during the summer months, and increasingly are becoming a declining industry. After World War II, the Santa Clara Valley's economy was dominated by agriculture and canning, and it was known as the "Valley of the Heart's Delight." Since then the electronics and related industries have expanded into the "Silicon Valley." In 1973, over 64 percent of the Valley's cannery labor force of 11,000 was Mexican American. Chicanas—or Mexican American women—alone make up about 36 percent of the cannery labor force. Increasingly canneries are relocating to the rural Central Valley, and the number of cannery jobs is diminishing. As a result, cannery workers are becoming

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on the whole a middle-aged labor force as only those with highest seniority are able to keep their jobs. In the last year alone over a thousand cannery workers lost their jobs in the Santa Clara Valley. Since I conducted my research in 1977-78, in many ways the situation of cannery workers I will describe today is one that is undergoing change (cf Zavella 1982).

The material I will refer to consists of interviews with fifteen Chicana cannery workers. The median age is 46 years and they worked an average of 16 years on a seasonal basis. Some informants started work at the age of 14 and worked over thirty years in canneries. In addition, most informants did not belong to any club or organization. Informants generally worked on the line in unskilled jobs such as sorters. From the interviews, one of the important patterns that became clear was women's involvement in work-related networks. I will address the following interrelated questions concerning the networks of Chicana cannery workers: How are work-related networks structured and why did they become important to Chicana cannery workers? And, how do the networks operate and what meaning do they have for informants? I will show how Chicanas' cannery work culture—of which work-related networks are an important manifestation—evolved. I view work culture in a manner similar to Benson (1978), which includes the autonomous values and practices of women workers which mediate the formal structure of the work place and provide meaning to the job.

The Structure of Work-Related Networks

Work-related networks are either social networks made up of friends exclusively, or include relatives as well as friends who work in canneries. For my informants, work friends were usually of the same ethnic background and roughly of the same age. Most of the network members were long-term seasonal cannery workers. The longevity at the job not only allowed the friendships to flourish, but provided expectations that they would endure. For the most part, these were stable friendships of middle-aged Chicanas. Networks also could be organized across gender lines. Women initiated

friendships with female coworkers, but once established, the networks included husbands in the course of certain activities.

The structure of work-related networks varied between two poles, and were of four types. On one end were friend dominant networks, which were composed entirely of friends from work. Regardless of whether they were recent immigrants from Mexico or third generation Chicanas, women who had no kin residing in the area developed work friendship networks apart from kin networks. The opposite extreme was kin dominant networks. These were composed almost entirely of cannery workers who were relatives. It was common for informants to originally seek cannery jobs accompanied by their female kin, particularly sisters, or to secure jobs with the help of relatives who were already employed in the cannery. Often married couples met one another for the first time at the cannery. It was also common for women's children to work at least one season at the cannery before moving on to better jobs. Women in these situations usually had work-related networks in which kin predominated, and networks included members of their own nuclear families.

The mere presence of kin residing in the area who were also cannery workers, however, did not mean that kin and friendship networks coincided. Some informants had numerous relatives working in canneries, and they developed extensive friendship networks that were integrated into kin networks. Other women developed friendship networks separately from kin networks that were largely made up of cannery workers. Informants who did not consider their cannery worker relatives as being part of their friendship networks usually had different political values, other interests and considered themselves to be outside of cannery workers' culture. Most informants had networks somewhere in the middle of the kin dominant and friend dominant types. Both their friends and kin were part of the work-related networks, but they differed in terms of whether the relatives and coworkers were largely separate or integrated.

While the networks varied in terms of the number of workers, the structure generally could be considered "close-knit." This was due in part to the fact that some of the informants' friends were also comrades with one another, that is they were ritual comothers who became fictive kin through Catholic baptismal rites. An informant chose a friend from work to sponsor her child at baptism with the hope of solidifying the friendship and honoring the woman and her spouse. In other cases the women became comrades when their children married. Thus work friendships networks also included fictive kin. After years of working together, friends or comrades knew one another fairly well, and a few women acted as core members of their work-related networks. The presence of fictive kin who were coworkers blurs the distinction between friendship and kin networks, but adds to their close-knit nature.

Why did informants develop close-knit networks? Work-related networks originated because of the general work context and particularly the nature of the work process of "women's" jobs.

Canning production is geared to a continuous conveyor belt that moves the raw produce through various stages as it is processed, canned and cooked and then cased and either stored or shipped to market. Production is highly mechanized except for sorting operations, which require the largest number of workers, and is where women are concentrated.

When women first obtain jobs in canneries they are not formally trained. They are immediately placed on the job and learn it from their coworkers or occasionally a supervisor. The work process is tedious and monotonous and women workers are immobilized. While the actual process of sorting is not difficult, the constant motion of so much produce moving on the belt, the humidity, the background din from the cannery machinery and cans crashing against one another on conveyors above their heads, and the nauseating smells from chemicals such as chlorine make the job both distasteful and demanding. Coworkers teach women to ignore these conditions,

adjust one's equilibrium to the movement, and concentrate on the quality of the produce. Supervisors—or floorladies—constantly pressure women to work faster and to be careful. Sorters have little room to control the pace or techniques of work.

Other jobs—such as check weigh—allow more flexibility. A check weigh grabs a handful of say spinach, places it in a can and weighs it for the proper amount. Women who are experienced learn to gauge the proper weigh with their hands, and by-pass the weighing operation. When they were paid by the piece rate, this was critical in enabling them to make more money. Since the piece rate is no longer used, skipping one task gives a woman a break from the fast pace. Many informants felt they could never have even survived on the job without the help of coworkers who taught them both the work process and the structure of authority. Women who had relatives working in the same plant had a ready-made training team who taught them how to be cannery workers. Other women initiated relationships with coworkers through their informal training process. Coworkers became what Benson (1978) calls a "sisterhood," and informal work group that socialized women into the work culture. Yet it is interesting to note that they were not self conscious groups. Most informants claimed with some disgust that "I trained myself," even though they had help, and many women did not see coworkers as constituting a group.

Work groups evolved into work-related networks because of two main structural features: the nature of work culture in canneries, and women's changing position in the life cycle.

Generally, canneries are not pleasant places to work. There is little job mobility and women have been largely confined to the lowest paying jobs. Occupational segregation of ethnic women allowed them to establish relationships with one another, yet they could not develop them at work. Breaks are only twelve minutes, and along with half hour lunches, they provide little time to socialize on the job. With work that has little intrinsic

value and short occasions to socialize with coworkers, one would expect that, as Blauner (1964) suggests, workers would organize themselves through their union or work organizations to make their jobs meaningful. It was very difficult to Chicano workers, however, to find meaningful participation in their union local.

Northern California cannery workers are affiliated with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters. Generally cannery workers are dissatisfied with the Teamsters union (cf Brown 1981), and my informants were no exception. Some of them had almost a decade of rank and file activism within the local and established alliances with other Teamster caucuses in Northern California. The dissatisfaction stemmed from what workers perceived as a general lack of representation and lack of union democracy. In addition, there was ethnic antagonism between the Italian American Teamster officials and Chicano caucus members, with much name calling and red-baiting. Chicano activists wanted the union contract translated into Spanish and for the local to hold bilingual meetings (among other things), but the union leadership refused. There was even a short-lived "Teamsters for (Cesar) Chavez" movement by Chicano cannery workers in the early seventies when the United Farm Workers and the Teamsters were having a jurisdictional battle in the fields. The Teamster union was not a source of organizational support for most Chicano cannery workers.

In sum, the general work context included oppressive working conditions and a disinterested or even antagonistic union. The reason why Chicana cannery workers focused their social activity around work-related networks, then, stem directly from the general work culture which was not conducive for the expression of meaningful relationships at work. Work-related networks enabled women to bear the difficult conditions of their jobs, and added the dimension of solidarity with other workers.

For the most part, work-related networks started out with social motivations. Members socialized with each other frequently during the off-

season, which ran roughly from October through May. The women alone visited each other's homes, telephoned each other several times during the week, went shopping or out to lunch, or went out for drinks. As couples, cannery workers got together occasionally for parties, barbecues, short week end trips, or even went on extended vacations together. My informants were often the organizers of large-scale activities which many cannery worker couples and their kin and friends attended.

Cannery work-related networks also operated in a manner similar to kin networks, and served as sources of exchange of members. While the actual exchange of goods and services was not very extensive, network members were good sources of information regarding problems that arose from their work situation. Women found babysitters through their networks, or learned how to qualify for unemployment benefits or to claim disability pay from co-workers.

Work friends were also sources of advice and emotional support. Women discussed work problems and personal problems, especially regarding their children. Marital problems were important topics, and work friends provided a crucial source of support in women's struggles with their husbands. The standards of housekeeping and how much labor their husbands should contribute was one important marital conflict. Another conflict was over whether the woman should go back to work each season nor not. About a third of my informants' husbands did not want them to work at all, and these women discussed this issue with their work friends. Informants frequently sought out a work friend when they just needed to talk. As one woman, who eventually divorced her husband, said: "I don't know how I would have survived without my friends."

The context of work had other consequences for how work-related networks operated. The lack of job mobility and unwillingness of the union to meet the special needs of the Chicano work force spurred some informants into labor organizing.

While only a handful of the informants were politically active, these women's friends and kin were often also involved in labor organizing. Generally the work-related networks became politicized after they were established as social networks. In the case of one woman, about six of her friends began to meet frequently and inevitably the conversation turned to the work situation. They began to devise ways to change the conditions of work. After the calloused rebuffs from male union officials, the women decided to organize women cannery workers themselves. They founded a caucus and then filed a complaint with the Fair Employment Practices Commission. They later became plaintiffs in a race and sex discrimination suit against California Processors, Inc., which they eventually won. In addition, they wrote articles for a cannery workers newspaper and one informant ran for president of the union local. Her friends served as campaign manager and volunteers in a bitter campaign that was narrowly lost. The friendship network evolved into a militant organization.

As they were politically active together, work friends became more important in personal ways. Many of the women activists had conflicts with their husbands over their political involvement. (Indeed, one informant claimed that reluctant husbands were the biggest obstacles to organizing women cannery workers.) The husbands either demanded that the women stop organizing, or restrict their activities to times that were convenient for their families. Many husbands complained that organizing took up too much time, and the women were neglecting their families. Partly because of their husbands' opposition, but of course due to other problems with the marriages, several of the activists eventually divorced their spouses. As a direct result of their political activism, these women were in a position to leave poor marriages. Work friendships served as a crucial means of support to those women who went through the painful process of seeking a divorce.

Other women intensified their relationships not only with network

members but with spouses through their political activism. As network members increasingly became involved in organizing, for example they twice ran a slate of largely Chicano workers for union office, the networks became both larger and more close-knit. Relations with network members took on a whole new meaning as social activities increasingly took on political goals. Coworkers or comrades were not only friends from work, but political allies who shared all the frustrations and camaraderie of labor organizing.

The Meaning of Work-Related Networks

Even if they were not politically involved, the meaning added by work-related relationships became in itself significant to my informants. Especially as they became middle-aged and their children either left home or no longer required so much attention, these informants had more time and a desire to socialize. The significance of work-related networks intensified as these women sought relief from the isolation or boredom of homemaking. The desire to interact with work-related friends became an important reason for informants to continue working, even if they were financially stable and no longer had to work. The women's increased social needs differed from their situation when they started working the their children were young.

The way that work-related networks are structured and how they operate is significant when one considers the general context of Chicana kin relations. Studies repeatedly show that more than Anglo or Black women, Chicanas tend to seek kin over friends as sources of emotional support and with whom to socialize, as well as to exchange goods and services (Keefe et.al. 1978; Wagner and Schaffer 1979; Gilbert 1978; Keefe 1979). Female kin are sought out by Chicanas particularly when as Keefe states "there is a special bond of affection and trust" (1978:59). Since some of my informants had numerous kin who were coworkers anyway, they extended their kin networks to include special friends form work. Especially if they were

comrades, the friendships were fictive kin, and they could feel free to develop confianza—that is, trust or familiarity—with work friends. Even informants whose networks only included friends often characterized the relationship in kinship terms: "She's been like a sister to me." Another woman said of her work-related network: "It's like a little happy family. You look forward to seeing one another." Clearly, friendship networks were serving needs that kin networks typically provide, and in many ways work-related networks became surrogate kin networks.

Conclusion

The significance of Chicanas' work-related networks is two-fold. On the one hand friendships initiated on the job functioned to "humanize" the work situation. Friendships added meaning to the work culture and allowed women to look past the negative aspects of the job as they enjoyed relations with coworkers outside of work. These women's criticisms of working conditions were blunted, for women saw work friendships in a way that brought the family to work and made the general situation seem better.

For those women who were actively trying to change working conditions, work-related networks not only brought meaning to the work place, but became a focal point of their private lives. In a sense, these women brought work home as work relationships infused their home and social activities, and at times their political involvement even took precedence over relations with their family.

Future research will clarify how networks function for ethnic women workers in other contexts of work and in other positions of the life cycle. It may well be that women's longevity at work, under conditions in which the work process is assembly line work, and work is performed with members of their own ethnic group are the conditions under which a strong women's work culture develops. Clearly in the case of my Chicana informants, work-related networks was one important way in which their family and work lives intersect.

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