



WORKPLACE CHANGE

The Interuniversity Project
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Institute of Behavioral Science,
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University of Puget Sound

WORKING PAPER

The Changing Workplace, Alcohol Problems and Well-Being: Findings From Our Research Program and Reflections on Their Meaning

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Background

In this paper, we describe what we consider to be the most important findings from our two major studies on the impact of job and workplace change on employee well-being, with a special focus on alcohol use and abuse, and what conclusions about the field and its future we draw from them. Before doing so, it is important that we first describe why we have asked certain questions in our research but not others.

We came to the workplace/alcohol field from the workplace side of the equation. That is to say, we began our collaborative efforts as workplace researchers rather than as alcohol researchers.¹ Though coming from different social science disciplines (political science and sociology), we were both attracted to the workplace as a setting where one might usefully examine some of the most important factors shaping the lives of individuals. We believed that the job and workplace contained sets of important explanatory variables for understanding a wide range of individual behavior and outlooks relevant to human well-being, including those connected to alcohol problems. This seemed to us self-evident, given that work takes up so much of the lives of individuals and because it is so centrally connected to issues of personal identity, use (or non-use) of human capacities, and life chances. The research we have conducted together over the course of more than a decade has confirmed our initial beliefs about the importance of jobs and workplaces for individual well-being, though we also discovered that the relationship between the workplace and alcohol behavior is at times exceedingly weak and at other times more complicated than we had first assumed.

Our research is undertaken from a structuralist perspective. By this we mean that the objective social and economic relationships in which people find themselves explains a very

great deal about their behavior, attitudes, and relative well-being. The structuralist research tradition has focused on the workplace as an important nexus between objective conditions and well-being outcomes, and has spawned a very large body of rich empirical research.² Recently, the Whitehall group has demonstrated, for example, that social structural factors in general and workplace-related factors in particular play a large role in determining peoples' mental and physical health (Marmot and Wilkinson 1999a).³

Like all structuralists, we make two fundamental assumptions. First, in work organizations, power differences between employees (whether hourly or salaried) and owners (represented by top managers in most large work organizations) explains a great deal about how and why specific decisions are made, what tactical and strategic policies are adopted, how work is organized, and how the rewards and burdens of production are distributed. And, because these are so important to individuals, we suggest that power relations in the workplace are relevant to issues of employee well-being.

Second, we assume that the job and workplace are profoundly affected by developments in the larger political economy outside of the work organization and the power relationships that exist in the larger society. Though most of our empirical research focuses on micro-level and individual-level processes, relations and institutions that operate within workplaces, most of the variables that are at the center of our research have been shaped by larger structural changes going on in the society, economy and polity. One cannot understand job and workplace processes and how they affect people, we suggest, without taking account of the globalization (Dicken 1998; Friedman 1999; Mittleman 2000), technological (Knoke 1996; Cappelli, Bassi et al. 1997) and managerial (Drucker 1993; Drucker 1995; Cappelli, Bassi et al. 1997) revolutions now underway in the United States and much of the remainder of the world, as well as the responses

to these changes by governments. Today, employees at all levels of work organizations in the United States, for example, are being affected by ,computerization of a broad range of planning, design, monitoring and production processes, out-sourcing and downsizing, the reduction of hierarchy in favor of teams, pay for performance schemes, diversification of the workforce (itself a product of both government immigration and affirmative action policies), and the relative decline in the power of organized labor in fashioning government economic, social and technology policies.

Conducting our research from within the structuralist tradition, we expected to find that most job and workplace changes would prove to be burdensome for employees and detrimental to their long-run well-being (Sheppard and Herrick 1972; Braverman 1974; Shaiken 1986), including harmful alcohol behavior. Our expectations followed from our assumptions about the differential power of employees and owners in the workplace and about the differential power of labor and capital in the fashioning of government policies. American business would respond to the new world of intensified market competition, we believed, by radically restructuring various aspects of their operations, including how and where planning, production and distribution takes place, relatively free from employee input and with profit goals in mind. Such a radical restructuring has been going on, with important effects already apparent. At the macro-level, there is a great deal of evidence that the old post-war, quasi-partnership of big labor, big government and big business has largely gone by the board, leaving organized labor weakened and management more willing to flex it's muscles in the pursuit of high rates of return and “shareholder value” (Gordon 1996; Useem 1996; Osterman 1999; Osterman 2000). Moreover, it appears that some of the basic foundations of the welfare state have been transformed (Noble 1997; Page and Simmons 2000), and that wealth and income have become decidedly more

unequal (Gottschalk 1997; Weinberg 1999). At the micro-level, a substantial number of employees have experienced downsizing, technological change and new ways of organizing work and have experienced these things more as subjects of these changes than as their authors (Cappelli, Bassi et al. 1997). There is also much talk about the death of the psychological contract that was said to exist between employee and employer in the post-war economy, and the disconnect between employee loyalty and good work and job security (Ciulla 2000). It would not be unreasonable in light of these factors to assume that job and workplace change, introduced by private firms in pursuit of their own ends, would prove to have negative effects on employees.

Structuralist-oriented alcohol researchers, whether from the “work stress” or “alienation” traditions,⁴ would expect that negative employee well-being outcomes would result from the radical job and workplace restructuring. For the former, the sheer scale of change, and the uncertainties about the future that are tied to it, increases the number and intensity of job stressors. For the latter, changes introduced by top management, without employee input and without employee interests in mind, are bound to be alienating in the sense that employees in restructured jobs and workplaces will still lack autonomy, a role in making fundamental decisions, and the full use of their human capacities. For both stress and alienation researchers, expectations are that the negative outcomes of restructuring are bound to “spill over” or “generalize” into non-work domains and affect the well-being of employees, including their physical and mental health, and their use of alcohol. In its condensed form, the argument takes the following form: because work is so important as a source of meaning, identity, dignity and morale, job insecurity and work arrangements that are either unduly stressful or alienating will leave their negative mark on the behavior and well-being of employees (Greenberg and

Grunberg 1995) (Kohn 1977; Karasek 1979; Jahoda 1982; Kohn and Schooler 1983; Karasek and Theorell 1990).

We believe that, in the end, “structuralists” must incorporate insights from both the “alienation” and “stress” traditions, as we have done, if we are to fully understand the workplace’s effects on human well-being. Though we reject the notion that all wage labor under capitalism is alienating, we recognize the especially important role of job autonomy, powerlessness/mastery and variable degrees of use of capacities in any overall conceptualization of the workplace-well-being relationship. To the same degree, now borrowing from the “stress” tradition, we recognize that not all work relationships cause stress and strain, nor that all workplace innovations introduced by privately owned firms are stressors. Thus, while intensified competition and new technologies may have aggravated inequality and job insecurity, there is also some evidence that the resulting work restructuring may be flattening organizational hierarchies, introducing team working, enriching the skill content of many jobs, and opening doors to previously excluded groups--such as women and minorities in traditionally male occupational roles and organizations (Appelbaum and Batt 1994; Osterman 1994). These changes obviously have the potential to increase the opportunity for employee participation and control at work, though it is an important task of research to sift through the rhetoric to the underlying reality.

Research Sites and Methods

The findings we report below are based on research conducted in two industrial settings on the West Coast. One setting is the wood products industry; the other, a large manufacturing company making high technology products. In our first collaborative project in the wood-

products industry, we focused primarily on the workplace from the structuralist-alienation point-of-view, examining the alcohol and well-being outcomes of inequalities in power and control. In the second project, we have been examining the impact on employees of a range of stressors created by firms as they pursue strategies involving down-sizing, re-engineering jobs and creating less hierarchical forms of work organization.⁵

The wood products industry is characterized by fairly small manufacturing plants (average size 100-200) using non-capital intensive and routine, mechanized methods. The workforce is comprised mostly of lower-skilled blue-collar workers, with very few professionals and managers. We selected this industry because its wide range of ownership and participatory environments—including producer cooperatives, employee stock ownership firms, private companies with strong unions and private companies with no unions—allowed us to examine the impact of worker control and participation on individual well-being, including assessment of alcohol use and abuse.

Our second research site is a very large division of one of the nation's leading manufacturers and exporters. The company produces high technology products and has long held a dominant position in the industry and in the global marketplace. The division employs some 100,000 workers who range across the entire occupational status hierarchy, and include managers, professionals, engineering and technical workers, and highly skilled and semi-skilled white and blue collar employees. We selected this division because it was undertaking most of the restructuring changes that are now occurring across the U.S. manufacturing sector in response to the appearance of global hyper-competition in its own industry. The division has undergone continuous restructuring in the nineties, experiencing two large-scale layoffs of 30,000-40,000 workers each time, substantial changes in production technology, and several

major changes in workplace organization. Lean production processes have been introduced systematically throughout the division, for example. Teams have been introduced in sections of the division, though most tend to be of the short-term variety. While the division has experienced repeated periods of layoffs and rehires in the past in response to cyclical fluctuations in demand, the latest and current round of layoffs is expected to be permanent, part of a longer term strategic policy. This division was, therefore, an ideal site to explore the alcohol and health effects of workplace restructuring, defined in terms of job redesign, workplace reorganization and downsizing.

We used a variety of data gathering strategies in our two major studies (one in wood products; one in the high technology manufacturing setting). First, we conducted in-depth interviews with company officials and employees in the relevant firms, as well as focus groups with employees, to help us understand the particular work and alcohol cultures of each of the firms, the nature of the production process and the social relations of the workplace, the range of stressors characteristic of each setting, and the kinds of coping styles used by employees. These interviews and focus groups helped us design the questionnaires we eventually used in the two studies which form the basis of the present paper.

The final survey instruments were comprised of scales and single item measures mostly drawn from the literature, with established and acceptable levels of reliability and validity. We also created a range of new scales based on interviews, focus groups and our reading of the literature on emergent issues in the restructuring workplace. These new scales included measures of the extent of and satisfaction with job reengineering, the degree and kind of contact with layoffs, and individuals experience with teams and participatory decision making. New scales were evaluated using exploratory factor analysis and convergent/divergent validation before

using them in any analyses. Measures to assess the levels of general work stress, satisfaction, autonomy, participation, work team experience, contact with layoffs, organizational commitment, job involvement, as well as measures to examine depression, mastery, alcohol consumption, alcohol problems, symptoms of poor health, and changes in certain health behaviors were included in the final versions of the questionnaires.⁶

In addition to these self-report data, the companies were able to provide us with a number of measures from their own records, including accident rates, overtime worked within a specified time period, and performance ratings. These data were matched to the self-report survey data using a confidential identification number.

Mail surveys were sent to the homes of respondents, using address lists provided by the companies. The cross-sectional survey in the wood products industry was conducted in the Fall of 1992. A longitudinal panel design was used for the study in the large manufacturing organization, with the first survey conducted in the Fall of 1996 (Wave 1) and the second survey in December, 1999/January 2000 (Wave 2). For both research sites, participants were randomly identified and sent an introductory letter, consent form and survey (N= 2150 for the wood products, N= 3700 in Wave 1 data collection for the manufacturing organization). Employees from all occupational groupings (manufacturing organization), mill types (wood products) and organizational levels were included in the data collections. Respondents were assured confidentiality and promised a \$15 (wood products) or \$20 (manufacturing both Waves 1 and 2) dollar payment if they participated. For Wave 2 participants in the manufacturing organization, only those who had completed surveys in Wave 1 and who were still employed at the company (N=1965) were mailed an initial letter and reminded of their prior participation. All other

procedures were identical. Response rates were 66.5% for the wood products workers, 62% for Wave 1 and 63% for Wave 2 manufacturing workers.

Research Findings and Implications

1. We have found that structural workplace factors are rarely associated with alcohol use and abuse indicators, and when they are, the relationships are not very strong.⁷

In order to test propositions on alcohol from the work alienation tradition, we designed our studies in the wood products industry around a range of firms, of roughly the same size, demographic characteristics and technical production processes, that varied from one another in the degree to which employees had the formal right to take part in decision making in important workplace and enterprise matters. At the most participatory end of the scale were producer cooperatives in which the worker owners as a group had the formal right to make all enterprise decisions. The next most participatory firms were Employee Stock Ownership companies, followed by companies with labor unions. Anchoring the non-participatory end of the scale were non-unionized companies. Mean participation rates in the four categories of firms were consistent with our assumptions; those firms that had formal structures for worker participation in decision making in enterprise matters (cooperatives and ESOPs) were most likely to have higher levels of participation in firm-level decision making.

The presence of alienating work is not solely indicated by the absence of employees from the firm's decision making process. We understand alienation more broadly, as "engagement in the production process in such a way that one is unable to work in an autonomous, conscious and, and creative fashion; that is, usable to work in such a way that control over one's own labour and the use of one's human capacities." (Greenberg and Grunberg 1995:84). In order to examine

these aspects of alienation, we added measures of job autonomy and use of capacities (i.e. skills, job complexity, etc). Our expectation, of course, was that work alienation would spill over into problematic alcohol use based on the notion that employees would seek to reduce work induced stress by “self-medicating” with alcohol (Martin, Blum et al. 1992).

Our expectations were not met. We discovered in the wood product study that the degree of individual participation in firm-level and job site decision making and the degree to which one used one’s capacities on the job were unrelated to either heavy drinking or negative consequences from drinking. Job autonomy, strangely enough, was positively and significantly related to both alcohol outcomes, exactly contrary to our expectations.⁸ These findings led us to agree with Seeman’s remark that “certain kinds of nonalienated work may have its own risks and frustrations” (Greenberg and Grunberg 1995: 75).

In our current study in the large restructuring manufacturing company, we have again failed to find much support for the propositions that alienating and stressful work predicts alcohol use or problems. We find, for example, that job reengineering changes that enhance skills in general and computer skills in particular, increase work loads, enhance job autonomy and encourage team decision making are unrelated to CAGE scores measuring drinking problems. Only workload increases from job reengineering innovations is related to self-reported increased rates of drinking in the past year, (not in itself a necessarily problematic outcome) while improvement in general skill levels is associated with decreased rates of drinking. No other downsizing, job reengineering or organizational changes are significantly related to changes in alcohol intake or rates of problem usage.

2. While structural workplace factors are not good overall predictors of alcohol use and problems among employees, there are particular groups of employees who seem to be especially “at risk” in the workplace.

Though structural workplace factors do not predict alcohol outcomes very well, certain groups of employees seem especially vulnerable to problematic alcohol use: those who endorse “escapist reasons” for drinking (e.g. beliefs that drinking can help one relax, deal with pressure, feel more in control of situations, feel more powerful, deal with pressure at work, and so on); and women managers. As to the first group, we have found that those scoring high on escapist reasons for drinking, in both studies, at three sampling time points, and in every occupational and demographic category, were more likely to drink heavily, suffer negative consequences from drinking and score high on the CAGE measure of problem drinking. As to the second group, we have found exceptionally high levels of heavy and problematic alcohol consumption among women managers in our ongoing panel study of the large, restructuring manufacturing division. For example at Time 1, over 23% and at Time 2 over 27% of women managers reported CAGE scores of 2 and higher (the cutoff used in the clinical literature to determine alcohol problems), compared to a range of 11-14% for managerial men and nonmanagerial men and women. Women managers at Time 2, moreover, reported a significantly higher number of days drinking to intoxication in the past 30 days as compared to all other groups: 2.29 days for women managers, versus 1.07 days for male non-managers, .99 days for male managers, and .41 days for women non-managers. These patterns are stable over time, with few changes noted between the two surveys. Additionally, although drinking alone and immediately after work are related to higher alcohol problems for all respondents, these drinking contexts were associated with significantly more problems for women managers. The findings do not seem to be a function of

an over-reporting bias among women managers; women managers and non-managers reported the same number of drinks to feel the effects of alcohol or to become intoxicated, and at levels significantly lower than those reported by male managers and non-managers, thereby confirming well-known gender differences. This finding held across two survey waves in the panel sample suggests that this finding is stable (Moore, Grunberg et al. 1999).

3. Though structural workplace factors (job autonomy, use of capacities, participation in decision making, and restructuring experiences) do not predict alcohol use and outcomes very well, if at all, they remain important variables for explaining a wide range of important non-alcohol, well-being outcomes.

Though structural workplace factors are not very useful for understanding problematic alcohol use, they are strongly associated with other well-being outcomes. We generate strong evidence that working in alienating and non-alienating ways matters a great deal for individual well being. In our wood products studies, for example, we found that use of capacities, job autonomy, and participation in decision making were positively and significantly related to job satisfaction and a sense of personal mastery (Greenberg and Grunberg 1995). Additionally, in our study of job reengineering in the large, restructuring manufacturing firm, we find that changes that enhance job autonomy, increase skill levels and encourage team decision making are associated with higher levels of personal mastery and job satisfaction, whereas changes that simply increase work loads are associated with lower levels of mastery and job satisfaction. We have also found several health effects related to the current restructuring in the large manufacturing firm. For example, controlling for time 1 levels of the dependent health measures, reengineering changes that resulted in increased skills had the effect of decreasing physical

symptoms of poor health. Similarly, increases in the use of computers lowered depression scores. Reengineering changes that resulted in much greater work loads, on the other hand, produced more symptoms of poor health and higher levels of depression.

However, and consistent with our structuralist perspective on the importance of outside economic pressures inside-the-firm relationships, we have found evidence that the potential positive effects on individual well-being derived from employee empowerment can sometimes be negated by strong economic and social forces impinging on firms from the outside. We found, for example, that mills in cooperative and employee-owned companies in the wood products industry – mills that we assumed on an a priori basis to be the “best” places to work, given their high levels of worker control – had the lowest rates of employee satisfaction, higher levels of job insecurity and powerlessness, significantly higher accident and injury rates and the greatest prevalence of heavy and problematic drinking (Greenberg & Grunberg, 1995; Grunberg, Moore, & Greenberg, 1996). We attributed these findings to the precarious market situations of the cooperative and worker owned firms competing against mills owned by large conglomerates that had more resources to purchase raw materials and new technologies for production and distribution. In this particular case, benefits associated with worker control were negated by the larger context of economic insecurity.

4. Structural workplace factors are best understood as complex sets of variables; neither alcohol use nor other well-being outcomes can be predicted very well from any single, independent workplace variable.

In our current project, our principal concern has been understanding how broad and continuous restructuring—in the form of redesigned jobs, downsizing, and altered authority

relationships in the workplace—affects the alcohol use and general well-being of employees across a wide range of job titles and organizational positions. We have assumed (and discovered to be true) in our research project that restructuring is multidimensional in character, with some innovations likely to have generally good effects on stress and well-being, while others are more likely to be negative in consequence (Parker and Brody 1982; Appelbaum and Batt 1994; Applebaum, Bailey et al. 2000), thus rendering uniform characterizations about the effects of workplace restructuring difficult (Hodson 1996; Smith 1996; Jackson and Mullarkey 2000). We have assumed (and have found to be true) that companies can and do introduce sets of innovations that have contradictory well-being outcomes for employees. For example, companies might introduce technologies that require increased use of skills while they are at the same time engaged in large-scale layoffs.⁹ We have also assumed (and have confirmed) that even a single innovation can have contradictory well-being outcomes for employees. Thus, the introduction of teamwork and flexible working arrangements can both add to employees' sense of autonomy and mastery but also intensify workloads and performance stress. We found that increased computer use from job reengineering, to take another example, is associated with decreased depression but increases in alcohol intake.

*5. Models linking structural workplace factors to individual well-being do not follow a simple, linear spillover pattern. Rather, the linkages between workplace restructuring and alcohol and well-being outcomes are heavily mediated and moderated, and sometimes even non-linear **or non-monotonic.***

Our findings consistently show that the “work drives him/her to drink” story is untenable. Rather, the greatest explanatory power is achieved by specifying the conditions under

which heavy or problematic drinking is observed. For example, in the wood products mills, we found that not participating in day-to-day decisions concerning working conditions was associated with heavy and problematic drinking. This relationship, however, was almost entirely mediated by job satisfaction and endorsement of escapist reasons for drinking. (Greenberg & Grunberg, 1995). By this we mean that while there were both direct and indirect effects for nonparticipation on drinking, the largest portion of the effect worked through job satisfaction and escapist reasons for drinking. We also found among workers in the wood products firms that heavy and problematic drinking was predicted by the interaction term of job dissatisfaction and endorsement of escapist reasons for drinking. Specifically, increasingly higher levels of alcohol consumption and problems were found only among those who had high levels of escapist drinking motives and who were also dissatisfied with their work (what we call an “escapist response” to work stress). Employees who were dissatisfied but who had low levels of endorsement of escape drinking reasons were found to have increasingly lower levels of alcohol consumption and problems (what we call a “non-escapist” response). (Grunberg, Moore & Greenberg, 1998).

This interaction effect was found a second time using data from our current study in the large, restructuring manufacturing organization. Controlling for other drinking motives (such as drinking for social or enjoyment reasons), and using job stress rather than job dissatisfaction as the work variable, we again found an “escapist” and a “non-escapist” response to work alienation and stress (Grunberg, Moore et al. 1999). We have concluded, therefore, that while there is spillover from work restructuring experiences to alcohol use and well-being, the relationship is not a simple “high stress leads to problem drinking” narrative but a more complex one. Indeed, we believe we have strong evidence for the existence of what we call a “non-escapist” response

to restructuring in which those experiencing high job stress but not endorsing the escapist drinking perspective (the vast majority of employees), report lower levels of drinking.

Our use of escapist reasons for drinking as both a mediator and a moderator variable in our research is reflective of on-going questions we have about how reasons for drinking are formed and sustained over time. Using it as a mediator implies that work can have some causal influence on the development of these beliefs about alcohol, while using it as a moderator suggests that work has no direct effect on these beliefs(i.e. they are probably formed outside the workplace) even though the two interact. (Farber and Khavan 1980; Cooper, Russell et al. 1988; Abbey, Smith et al. 1993; Smith, Abbey et al. 1993; Neff 1997). Recent data from our longitudinal panel study in the large, restructuring manufacturing company sheds some light on this question. We find, after controlling for Time 1 “escapist” beliefs, that work stress, work overload and work-family conflict are predictive of Time 2 levels of “escapist” beliefs. Though we suspect that beliefs about the utility of drinking as a coping mechanism are mainly formed outside the workplace, it does appear as if the workplace makes an additional contribution to the development and maintenance of such beliefs. However, exactly how and why workers increasingly come to see alcohol as a means of “self-medicating” to cope with work stressors is unclear at this point. It is possible that high levels of work stress and overload prompt workers to search for effective coping techniques, and, through trial and error or through involvement in drinking networks (Ames and James 1990), settle on alcohol as one of their preferred coping mechanisms. Whatever the reasons, greater attention to model elaboration linking work to alcohol use and problems can help us identify the several pathways that link the two domains.

In addition to complex models that incorporate mediator and moderator variables, we have also found several relationships that are not even monotonic. Though Cisin and Cahalan

long ago suggested that many work-alcohol linkages were unlikely to be linear or monotonic (Cisin and Cahalan 1968), assumptions of linearity and monotonicity have characterized much of the field (Seeman and Anderson 1983; Markowitz 1984; Mensch and Kandel 1988; Parker and Farmer 1990; Steffy and Laker 1991). We discovered, for example, some “threshold effects” where only the most problematic drinkers (defined as CAGE scores of 3 or 4, representing 2.6% of the sample) demonstrated significantly elevated levels of job dissatisfaction, intent to quit, job stress, and to a lesser extent, general depression. Abstainers, drinkers with no alcohol problems (CAGE = 0), and drinkers with some alcohol problems (CAGE = 1 or 2) did not differ from each other on these job attitudes. To take another example of non-monotonicity, the sense of job security demonstrated a rather clear curvilinear function, with abstainers and the most problematic drinkers reporting the lowest sense of job security (Moore, Grunberg, & Greenberg, in press).

We thus strongly agree with others in the field who note that simple “spillover” models are not convincing and that more complex moderated, mediated and non-linear models are required to understand the relationship between work and well-being, including the relationship between work and alcohol behavior (Harris and Fennell 1988; Shore 1992; Wilsnack and Wilsnack 1992; Frone, Russell et al. 1994; Ragland and Ames 1996; Blum and Roman 1997).

6. We have discovered important group differences among employees in the workplace restructuring/ well-being relationship.

In our current research, we have begun to examine particular groups of employees who might be more vulnerable to the effects of workplace restructuring, asking whether problematic drinking and other physical and mental health problems may be more likely to occur among

certain demographic and occupational groups or among those experiencing particularly stressful workplace experiences. Among our most interesting findings is that, in addition to their higher incidence of alcohol problems, women managers score badly on a number of well-being indicators. Thus, women managers report the highest scores on a number of negative health measures including a greater number of reported symptoms of poor health, sleeping problems, smoking more in the last year, and both increased and decreased eating. Though the differences are not statistically significant--this may be related to the small number ($N = 41$) of women managers at Time 2—the directionality of all variables is the same. At the present time, the reasons for the “at risk” status of women managers is as yet unexplained, and the literature, while it offers certain ideas about why women managers score more badly than other employees on alcohol and mental and physical health indicators (Schein 1975; Davidson and Cooper 1984; Richman and Rospenda 1992; Wilsnack and Wilsnack 1992; Kraft, Blum et al. 1993; Shore 1997; Shore 1997; Richman, Rospenda et al. 1999).¹⁰ This should be of particular concern to government, company and union decision makers as companies increasingly hire and/or promote previously excluded groups, such as ethnic minorities and women.

Certain subgroups among layoff survivors also show poor physical and mental health outcomes in the changing workplace environment. Survivors of downsizing have frequently been treated as a single group, often compared to those who have lost their jobs or to workers in similar organizations who are not going through cycles of layoffs. In our work, however, we have found important differences among layoff survivors who have had different layoff experiences within the company. For example, some have had direct contact with layoffs (defined as those who have either been laid off, then rehired by the company, or who have received an official warning notice that they might lose their jobs), while others have

experienced only indirect contact with layoffs (defined as those who have not experienced direct layoff contact but who have friends or coworkers laid off in their company). Still others have been “bumped” to another job or bumped others, while others have had no contact with layoffs or the bumping that is triggered by layoffs. We find that well-being outcomes differ across these experiences in a systematic fashion—those with the most direct contact with layoffs have the worst well-being outcomes, followed by those with indirect contact, those who have been bumped, and then those who have had no contact with layoffs at all. This systematic ranking holds for reported changes in eating and alcohol consumption, increases in the sense of job insecurity, depression, symptoms of poor health, alcohol problems, work injuries and illness, and days missed due to injuries and illness (Grunberg, Moore et al. 2001).¹¹

Future Research in the Field

Although the job and workplace are but one set of influences on alcohol use and on mental and physical health (along with the family, lifestyle, personality, and genetic predisposition), our research confirms the continuing salience of work on employee well-being. In particular, the workplace is an important vantage point for examining the impact of globalization and technological transformations. To be sure, globalization and technological changes are affecting nearly every aspect of the lives of Americans, ranging from education, to family relations and modes of entertainment, to mention just a few. It is in the workplace, however, where firms, facing intensified competition, whether from global or domestic competitors, introduce the most far-reaching changes over the shortest period of time. It is also in the workplace, especially in very large firms, where researchers have the opportunity to reach large populations, with diverse skills and occupations, educational backgrounds, ethnic and racial backgrounds, and income

levels, who are experiencing globalization and technological change processes directly. If these processes are as consequential as supposed, and if we want to examine how they affect the well-being of a broad range of individuals, the workplace would seem to be an ideal research setting.¹²

Having said that, we turn our attention to a broad set of observations, based on our own research experiences and findings, about the future of research in this field and what investigators might do to increase understanding of the impact of jobs and workplaces on well-being.

1. We suggest that it may be time for investigators to go beyond workplace/alcohol studies in favor of a broader conception of human well-being that includes alcohol use, to be sure, but also other mental and physical health outcomes.

We will not say much here on this point; most of this paper, has in fact, been leading in one way or another to this conclusion. But, put briefly, we believe that the linkages in the research literature between work and alcohol have been either non-existent, exceedingly weak where there has been a statistically significant association, or confined to particular subsets of the employed population (women managers; those who endorse “escapist” reasons for drinking). Furthermore, while many employees have observable negative reactions to alienation and to stressors generated by workplace restructuring, we suspect that the great majority of them do not turn to alcohol as a problem solver. Adverse effects may show up in a variety of other outcomes that are consequential for well-being, including changes in eating behavior, smoking, exercise, sleep patterns, or levels of depression.

2. It may be time for investigators to reintroduce disparities in power relations between labor and capital, both within workplaces and in the larger society, as key variables in workplace outcomes research.

This is a plea that we reintroduce some of the insights from the alienation tradition into the investigation of the effects of job and workplace change. In the current climate of horizontal management, work teams, quality circles and other innovations, we must reemphasize that the workplace is a setting where employees in the United States have the power of “exit” but not “voice.” We would point out that virtually all of the job and workplace reforms we have been examining in our recent study were designed and introduced by management and can be withdrawn by management at any time, even those that have apparently flattened the organization and decentralized decision-making. We are not suggesting that all such innovations have ill effects on employee well-being; it is to say that disparities in power are a key element of workplace relationships, and such disparities surely work themselves out in the ways that workplace restructuring is experienced by employees.

Furthermore, comparing workplaces that operate in different national institutional contexts where wide variations in the relative power of labor and capital exist, would help researchers better understand the generalizability of nationally-based findings, and provide some sense of the options governments, management and labor have as they navigate through the new political economy. To take one example from our recent work, we note that layoffs and the degree of individuals’ experience with layoffs, play an important role in employee well-being. Layoffs are largely a product of downsizing, the strategic shrinking of an organization’s workforce. Such strategic downsizing is particularly prevalent in the United States, a specific political economy wherein labor is relatively weak and business, with the support of

governments (federal and state), has a relatively free hand to use its strength to improve its competitiveness and profitability. Contrast this with the political economy of several European nations where labor remains relatively powerful and business is heavily constrained in its actions by government regulations and societal norms. We stress the need to focus on the larger political economy because it helps remind researchers like ourselves that the way workplaces are organized and what policies organizations follow are not immutable but are amenable to changes generated through employee pressure and public policies.

3. Investigators need to expand the number and kinds of workplaces they study.

The best place to examine the effects of job and workplace change on well-being is in real workplaces rather than in broad surveys of the general population. Because so few systematic studies in such settings exist, and because the few that do exist are in a narrow slice of the extant economy, research sites should be expanded to include a wider range of types of companies, economic sectors, and public agencies. It will be especially important to include companies in the most dynamic and fastest changing areas, namely, software, internet, telecommunications and wireless as well as in the low-end service sector (e.g., food, health care, security). It is also vitally important to ensure that data are collected from multiple constituencies in the organization, including employees across the entire spectrum of the hierarchy. Too often, researchers have collected data from only one constituency and this has led to an overly narrow and unbalanced picture of workplace change.¹³

4. Investigators might want to pay more attention to potentially “at risk” groups in the workplace/ well-being relationship.

We have shown that, while many of the relationships between work and well-being (and especially alcohol) variables are statistically non-significant or significant but weak across heterogeneous workplace samples, the relationships among certain identifiable subsets of employees and well-being outcomes are striking. We have shown this to be the case with layoff survivors who experienced layoffs most directly and with women managers. We suspect that there are other subsets of employees who are particularly at risk in rapidly changing workplaces and the recent use of signal detection analysis may offer a particularly promising new avenue for identifying such subgroups (Hagihara, Tarumi et al. 2000). We ought to pay attention, we suggest, not only because inclusion of such sub-sets of employees makes our explanations more convincing, but because it may offer fruitful avenues for interventions. For example, knowing that employees who receive warn notices are particularly vulnerable to poor well-being outcomes can provide the impetus for structural reforms or for targeted assistance programs. Similarly, knowing why women managers have more serious alcohol and health problems—whether it be from multiple roles stress or a hostile work environment or some other cause—might lead to changes in the workplace that make the managerial role more fulfilling and less stressful for women

5. Investigators would do well to abandon simple “spillover” models in favor of more complex, mediated and moderated models of the workplace/well-being relationship that pay attention to the wide range of individual responses to workplace variables, that include consideration of the interactions of multiple workplace innovations and practices, and that use families of workplace and outcome variables.

In our own research, we have moved from simple structural spillover accounts of the effects of job and workplace factors on employee well-being and alcohol behavior, to more complex, social-psychological accounts which blend structural factors and individual predispositions and reactions to structural change. These more complex accounts, while recognizing the importance of structural factors, also acknowledge that jobs and how people experience them are refracted through more proximate social and psychological processes. This means that multiple pathways lead from workplace influences to well-being outcomes, and that the very same workplace stressors may have negative outcomes for some employees but not others. This also means that outcomes may vary across individuals from the same alienating and stressful work situations, with some showing changes in alcohol use, others in mental health, still others in physical symptomology, and still others in some combination of all three.

It is also the case that job and workplace changes probably interact with one another in as yet unanticipated ways. Investigators need to pay more attention, then, to the interaction effects of current workplace transformations. As we have pointed out, much of the restructuring brought about by the information technology revolution is occurring in a context of strategic downsizing. In the large manufacturing site that we studied, the introduction of computers and skills training did not completely outweighed the powerful harmful effects of the cycles of layoffs which have resulted in significant declines in trust, satisfaction, commitment to the organization over time.

We also suggest that researchers should begin to think in terms of “clusters” or families of work-related stressors (independent variables) and well-being outcomes (dependent variables). For example, if we are interested in examining the effects of layoffs on health, we would do well to include variables on the layoff side that reflect the diversity of experiences

surviving employees have had with it, and include variables on the outcomes side that reflects the diversity of felt effects from layoffs. These would include alcohol variables, but also a range of physical and mental health variables. We should do this in recognition of the fact that alcohol is but one of several possible responses to workplace stressors, and that physical and mental health effects come in a wide range as well. Our point is that it is not reasonable to expect a single work characteristic (increased computer use, for example) to explain much variation in a given well-being measure (increased alcohol consumption, for example). Single independent variable to single dependent variable models do not explain much in the job and workplace change to well-being/alcohol relationship.

This suggests the need for interdisciplinary research teams that can combine expertise on different aspects of work and well-being outcomes. While there are examples of research programs (e.g., the Whitehall studies) that recognize the multifaceted nature of work change and well-being outcomes, most have been too narrowly focused at both the independent and dependent variable ends. Though interdisciplinary research teams are rife with potential problems, and are difficult to manage, it is the only way investigators can bring together the expertise that is needed in this field.

6. Research would be greatly enriched by an expansion in the use of longitudinal panel designs.

As nearly all researchers acknowledge, but often fail to accomplish for a variety of reasons, longitudinal panel designs are vitally important if we are to unravel the complex nature of the workplace/ well-being relationship. There are a number of reasons for recommending longitudinal studies. Obviously, questions concerning causality can only be addressed with this type of research design (Marmot & Wilkinson, 1999). In our own work for example, we have

been able to examine the effects of layoff contact on health, controlling for previous levels of reported health conditions. This technique allows us to eliminate the alternative hypothesis of self-selection that often plagues this type of research. Without this type of analysis, we would not be able to rule out that employees with preexisting poor health were the ones selected for potential layoffs (i.e., being warned of a potential layoff as required by law).

Longitudinal designs also allow us to treat work restructuring as a recurring series of events without relying exclusively on respondent recall. The very large manufacturing company we are currently studying has been restructuring continuously since our study began in 1996 and plans to continue to do so for several more years. The longitudinal panel design allows us to examine the impact of the timing, duration and frequency of restructuring experiences. Another benefit of such panel designs is that they allow us to examine well-being outcomes that may require a “gestation” period before they appear. For example serious alcohol problems may only slowly emerge as stressors increase in frequency or severity and as drinking behavior changes.

Some Concluding Thoughts

It is not often that we are given the opportunity to think about the progress of our scholarship over the course of many years and to draw conclusions from it for the larger community of scholars, investigators and practitioners. In the end, we can only guess at how relevant our own research experiences might be for others in the field and how helpful our suggestions might be. We only know that we are grateful for having been given the opportunity to do so.

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Notes

¹ Before our collaboration, each of us had already done extensive workplace research focusing on the effects of power and powerlessness on the job. Greenberg examined their effects on political citizenship and Grunberg on productivity and safety." (see Greenberg 1981; Greenberg 1986; Grunberg 1986).

² The literature is far too extensive to review here but one ought to pay particular attention to the contributions of (Kohn 1977; Kohn and Schooler 1983; Karasek and Theorell 1990).

³ Variations across societies in institutional structures and power relations result in quite striking differences in the health of populations and occupational groups. For example, societal inequality, which varies across societies, seems to be a risk factor for mortality and morbidity (Wilkinson 1996; Kwachi, Kennedy et al. 1999). Similarly, unequal status in organizational hierarchies also results in divergent health outcomes, as evidenced by the remarkable social gradient in mortality (and coronary heart disease or CHD) found among white-collar workers in the Whitehall studies (Marmot and Wilkinson 1999a). Moreover, the greater frequency of layoffs in some societies and the relative absence of social safety nets in them may contribute to societal differences in health outcomes among the unemployed (Barfley, Ferrie et al. 1999).

⁴ Structuralists working in the “alienation” tradition believe that alienation is inherent in the wage relationship, meaning that wage (and salary) earners in all capitalist societies lack job autonomy, are powerless (that is, while they have the power of “exit” in relationship to the job, they do not have the power of “voice.”), and have little opportunity to use their human capacities. Structuralists working in the “stress” tradition, while rejecting the idea that all jobs are inherently alienating in capitalism, nevertheless recognize that many aspects of the job and the workplace cause stress and strain, including but not confined to the lack of job autonomy, powerlessness, and low use of skills and capacities. The goal of the “stress” researcher is to uncover those aspects of work that cause undue stress and strain with an eye towards finding ways to reduce negative effects (alienation researchers, of course, believe that such negative effects are inescapably tied to the wage relationship). At base, stress researchers are more agnostic and take a more empirical approach to the effects of workplace change than alienation researchers. For the distinctions between the “alienation” and “stress” traditions (see Trice and Sonnenstul 1988; Martin 1990; Trice 1992). It is worth noting that Martin, Sonnenstul and Trice identify two additional work-alcohol traditions, namely “workplace culture” and “social control.” Researchers in each of these traditions have made important contributions in understanding the relationship between work and alcohol. (for exemplars see Trice and Roman 1978. ; Ames and James 1990; Ames and Redhun 1996)

⁵ We would point out that the introduction of workplace innovations that increase stress is itself based on the powerlessness, hence objective alienation, of employees. So far as we have been able to determine, downsizing, job redesign and workplace reorganization is undertaken by management without much, if any, input from labor. Though firms may occasionally consult

with unions and their employees, the initiative in these matters is clearly on the side of management.

⁶ A complete list of the scales used may be obtained from the first author.

⁷ We do not mean to imply that workplace alcohol effects are weak or non-existent in general. Indeed, results from the workplace culture and social control perspectives are quite impressive. Our claim is only relevant to the research we have conducted using the alienation/stress (structuralist) perspective.

⁸ This finding is entirely consistent with expectations from the social control tradition, however.

⁹ While introducing work innovations that potentially could enrich employees' jobs while carrying out massive layoffs is not an ideal situation, we have found evidence that such job enrichment can mitigate the damaging well-being effects of downsizing. (Also see Parker, Chmiel et al. 1997).

¹⁰ We hope to formulate and test an explanation in a proposed extension of the present study.

¹¹ Preliminary analyses of the longitudinal panel data show, however, that the degree of contact with layoffs is only significantly associated with depression and the tendency to eat more.

¹² This requires, of course, that researchers are able to secure access to large private firms.

¹³ To take one example, relying exclusively on managers for reports on the effectiveness of high performance work systems tends to produce exaggerated accounts of their success. (see Applebaum, Bailey et al. 2000).