

Neoliberalism at Work

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Abstract

Organizational decision-makers increasingly promote neoliberal work practices, which emphasize market processes and unrestricted deployment of organizational resources, as a means to optimize economic performance in an intensely competitive environment. A growing number of sociologists have raised questions about their tactics and pointed to negative consequences for employee well-being. We expand on this literature by using content-coded data on 217 work groups to investigate implications of neoliberalism at work for well-being of workers and firms. We especially emphasize on how neoliberal practices influence relationships and day-to-day behaviors that underwrite organizational functioning and success. Findings indicate negative ramifications, including increases in turnover and quitting, and reductions in informal peer training and effort as well as job quality. Importantly, these associations are net of any secular time trend. Qualitative materials capture how and why these relations exist and additional consequences with strong potential to undermine foundations for prosperity and future organizational success.

Keywords

organizations, occupations, and work, economic sociology, labor and labor movements, job insecurity, job quality, neoliberalism

Neoliberalism at Work

The development and application of neoliberal economic principles over the last few decades has widespread implications not just for the success of national economies but also for organizational functioning and the quality of work life. Neoliberal theology argues that unrestricted markets are the most efficient mechanism possible for allocating resources and optimizing outcomes for national economies, organizations, and individual workers (Fourcade and Healy 2007:286; A. L. Friedman 1977). At the national level, neoliberalism aims to limit regulation, remove constraints on the flow of goods and money, privatize state functions, and dismantle structures associated with collective bargaining (Cooper and Ellem 2008; McMichael 1996). Parallel ideologies have taken root within organizations as well. Ability to hire and

fire employees as needed and to reward workers on an individual rather than collective basis have come to be regarded as pivotal to maximizing profits, creativity, productivity, and growth (Cappelli 1999; Romer 1986).

The actual successes of neoliberal policies are widely debated and best described as “mixed.” While market-focused policies are often credited for economic expansion in Latin America, recent retreats from neoliberalism suggest the emergence of other options with potentially more favorable prospects for development

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(Walton 2004). Similarly, in Europe, neoliberal policies have received renewed competition from social democratic policies focusing on human capital development and/or sustaining demand (Huber and Solt 2004). In the United States, emphasis on privatization has been linked to downward occupational mobility (Wilson, Roscigno, and Huffman 2013), and a retreat from class compromise in favor of market-based approaches has been implicated in declining rates of profit (Vidal 2013).¹

Within organizations, market-based employment practices, including removal of low-achieving employees, have been credited with helping companies “make the leap” from “good to great,” and firings in particular are regarded by some organizational leaders as important avenues for securing employee effort (Collins 2001; Fraser 2001). Some critics, however, argue that this approach to production, including outsourcing and lean staffing practices, devolves to chronic states of disruption and precariousness without accompanying prosperity (Kalleberg 2009; Smith 2010). The argument here is that methods meant to improve the bottom line may undermine not only the work experience but also the organizational functioning and success.

Our study expands the understanding of how neoliberalist ideology guides market-based approaches to solving routine organizational problems, and analyzes the impacts of neoliberal work structures on organizational and worker well-being. Moving beyond theoretical propositions and presumed relationships between market principles, competition, and organizational effectiveness, we ask whether *economic organizations with neoliberal employment policies* (e.g., flexible employment structures, relating to workers as atomized individuals, use of economic incentives, etc.) are more or less effective in terms of fostering growth, productivity, stability, and job quality. Of particular interest to us are implications of neoliberalist practices for the informal relationships, norms and behavior that help constitute (or in some cases disrupt) efficiency and productivity. Analyses suggest that neoliberalist production methods erode job quality, organizational stability, and informal workplace relationships and behaviors conducive to organizational

functioning, without discernible benefits for organizational growth or productivity. Our qualitative data highlight mechanisms—ones that generate fear, uncertainty, and tenuous relationships, thereby discouraging proactive effort and mutual support. “Re-immersion” in the ethnographies (see Roscigno, Lopez, and Hodson 2009) also allows us explicate potential long-term impediments to organizational success, including loss of potential for human capital development, promotion of individualistic orientations that encourage workers to pass on rather than solve problems, and energy wasted in navigation of a complicated social landscape.

Our investigation “sociologizes” managerial discourse on implications of neoliberal organizational practices by denoting informal processes consequential for productivity and growth, but neglected by advocates of neoliberal reforms. An understanding of what changing economic organization means for informal work processes and organizations also contributes to a growing body of sociological research investigating what changing economic organization means for individuals and the economy as a whole (Avent-Holt 2012; Kalleberg 2013; Lin and Tomaskovic-Devey 2013; Vidal 2013). We conclude with a discussion of our findings in light of broader trends in inequality and a shifting balance of power among workers, owners, and managers in contemporary society.

Neoliberal Organizational Structures

Neoliberalist theory promotes removal of barriers to exchange and reliance on market mechanisms to root out maximally efficient and productive procedures and generate economic growth. Neoliberal policies thus aim to liberate markets from constraints deriving from patronage and collusion, replacing them with market mechanisms based on free enterprise, competition, and pricing rooted in the balance of supply and demand (Menzetti 2010). At the global level, this has meant removing barriers in the flow of money and goods. Nations scrambling to attract transnational corporations adopted policies geared toward eliminating market interference and

fast-tracking exports—contributing to the emergence of a “world factory” and a global labor market in which labor forces across the world compete with one another—often on the basis of cost (Canales 2003; Kalleberg 2009; McMichael 1996). For workers in more developed economies, incorporation of previously untapped labor pools into the global economy has eroded market protections previously secured via collective bargaining, placing downward pressure on job security, wages, and benefits (Bellamy Foster, McChesney, and Jonna 2011; Cappelli et al. 1997; Polanyi 1975).

Neoliberal ideologies have also guided expansion of the role of market forces *within* workplaces, thus transforming employment practices and work relationships (Kalleberg 2009). Neoliberal work organizations aim to replace political compromises between organizational stakeholders and job entitlements previously set through bargaining and seniority rights with market determination of wages and benefits (Kochan and Osterman 1994). As such, they represent a decisive break with the “Great Compromise” in labor relations of the mid-twentieth century, wherein labor peace and cooperation were secured through an acceptance of bargained rights for employees (Cappelli et al. 1997; Polanyi 1975).

In the current era of financialization and emphasis on shareholder profits, employers want to regulate production, eliminate waste, and use resources more effectively. Accordingly, they seek to revise production methods as they see fit, subjecting workers to frequent reorganization, strict task regimens, and electronic surveillance (Davis 2009). Most importantly, employers have sought flexibility in purchase and deployment of labor, with particular emphasis on hiring/firing at will and on using part-time and temporary employees. Neoliberal models of effective job structures, thus, have stressed the importance of eliminating job protections such as those based on seniority and heightening the ability of management to fire workers it deems less productive.

Of particular importance from the standpoint of the employees is the movement toward “boundary-less careers” in which workers are expected to develop ongoing skill sets that

allow them to move through a series of employment situations across their careers as economic opportunities change (Osterman et al. 2001; Roper, Ganesh, and Inkson 2010). Workers are encouraged to see themselves as entrepreneurs and to regard employment as a chance to develop skills enhancing their marketability and leverage in securing the *next* in a series of jobs not bound by organizational structure or hampered by firms’ commitments to underachieving employees (Cappelli 1999). Firms can further improve individuals’ work lives by removing unproductive workers, according to best-selling author and management guru Jim Collins (2001). Rather than invest time properly managing a “hiring mistake” and potentially driving away strong performers, he writes, managers should make a “people change” (Collins 2001:56). A Wells Fargo executive sums up this line of reasoning: “The only way to deliver to the people who are achieving is not to burden them with the people who are not achieving” (Collins 2001:53).

A Sociological View

Neoliberal work practices, especially a retreat from permanent and full-time employment, can enhance profits in the short term. What are their implications, however, for other measures of performance and for foundations for long-term success? The presumed benefits of neoliberal work practices for productivity are not well documented and may reflect an overly simplistic view of the factors involved. Some of the presumed impacts rest on a sociological image of workers as taking joy in work if given the opportunity to contribute. Again, in the words of Jim Collins, “great companies” (those with the most remarkable gains in share values over a 15-year period) rely on employees “who are *self*-motivated and *self*-disciplined, those who wake up every day, compulsively driven to do the best they can because it is simply part of their DNA” (Collins 2005:15).

Missing from this account are sociological insights pertaining to *variations* in worker contributions, particularly with regard to informal workplace relationships and behaviors needed to overcome routine challenges and maintain

functional organizational operation (Blau 1955; Juravich 1985; Scott 1994:87). A growing body of sociological research on management citizenship behavior has shown that workers' voluntary contributions vary with how work is organized and how workers are treated. In particular, managerial practices adhering to implied norms of mutual obligation (i.e., respect for workers' rights and maintenance of production viability) are foundations for vertical harmony and prosocial behaviors such as cooperation, work effort, and rule-following (Hodson 1999; Rubin and Brody 2011). Furthermore, management citizenship behaviors have been shown to improve a firm's bottom line through increases in productivity, profitability, and customer ratings and reductions in accidents, theft, absenteeism, turnover, and defects (Gallup Inc 2013).²

A neoliberal approach to work potentially undermines not only perceptions of respect but also morality, as organizational structures, including employee relations, are narrowly determined by their consequences for cash flow with the goal of maximizing profits and increasing shareholder value rather accommodating stakeholder bargaining (Bolton and Laaser 2013; M. Friedman 1970). This is accomplished in part by using part-time workers who can be called in or sent away as needed, reorganization and surveillance to maximize the amount of work done, and limiting employee rights and grievance procedures while providing incentives that reward individual employees (Kochan and Osterman 1994; Lambert 2008, 2012). Hourly workers have lost wages and seniority rights secured via collective bargaining, and salaried professionals increasingly experience job insecurity in the form of layoffs and increased temporary, contract-based employment (Barley and Kunda 2004; Fligstein and Shin 2004).

How do employees respond to these changes? While CEOs often believe that employees and organizations alike will thrive under new arrangements (Collins 2001; Kunda 1992; Fraser 2001), critics describe increased precarity of work and the erosion of benefits and wages as destructive to motivation and the quality of work life (Kalleberg 2009). Many

workers held at arm's length by their employers feel hurt and frustrated, and some protect themselves psychologically by withdrawing commitment from their employers (Cappelli 1999; Fraser 2001; Sennett 1998; Smith 2001). A brutal work pace and continuous assessment, especially in the context of insecurity, takes a toll not only on individual well-being but also on coworker relationships and support (Courpasson 2006; Crowley et al. 2010). Moreover, chaos borne of rapid change heightens conflict with management (Barley and Kunda 2004; Fraser 2001).

Declining rates of profit overall and failure of companies such as Circuit City—where employment practices once credited with generating impressive stock-market gains later received blame for the firm's break-down and liquidation—suggests the need to reevaluate this approach (see Collins 2001:41, Davis 2009; Eames 2009; Vidal 2013). Indeed, it reminds us that even proponents of a more competitive and market-driven employment model once described “visionary” companies “built to last” as guided by some core ideal beyond profit maximization (Collins and Porras 1994). Southwest Airlines, for example, attributes some of its success to the firm's commitment to the health and well-being of its employees. In 1979, the company's then CEO outlined a 10-point plan to survive increased competition in the wake of airline deregulation, including maintenance of the firm's “family and people feeling.” “We're proud of our employees,” he wrote (Collins and Hansen 2011:126). This approach continues to define Southwest Airlines, which describes a commitment to workers' health, security, growth and development as pivotal to its top rankings in customer satisfaction surveys and in *Fortune* magazine's list of the “World's Most Admired Companies” (Southwest Airlines 2010, 2012).

The Current Study

Given conflicting accounts and a pressing need for paths toward economic stability and prosperity, there is a need for systematic evaluation of how neoliberal work practices impact organizational outcomes and job quality, and a dire

need to understand potential implications for informal relationships and behaviors—the hidden-in-plain-sight foundations for organizational functioning and long-term success. A central challenge for studies of neoliberal policies in the workplace is to develop techniques to adequately measure the new workplace practices prescribed by neoliberalism while simultaneously having sufficient cases to constitute a control group against which to evaluate the effectiveness of these policies. Because neoliberalism has been a widespread movement in organizational relations occurring at a particular historic moment, this problem is compounded by the difficulty of establishing the appropriate counterfactual comparison—neoliberalism compared to what?

In the current study, we use content-coded data from in-depth organizational ethnographies collected across the latter half of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first century to investigate implications of neoliberal work organization for workers, firms, and informal relationships and behaviors conducive to functional production. In addition to capturing day-to-day features of work life through in-depth observation, this body of ethnographic work also offers the organizational variability that is necessary to ascertain patterns of relationships between organizational characteristics and organizational and employee outcomes—variability not typically available in single case study applications. Using these ethnographies as a data source, we are able to investigate how varied organizational practices impact workplaces and worker outcomes across more than a half century—and, importantly, to untangle the effects of other temporal changes in workplace relations from the particular impacts of neoliberal workplace policies.

From Narratives to Numbers

Ethnographies were selected for coding in a two-part procedure. First, the population of organizational ethnographies was identified via computer-assisted searches of archives, examination of the bibliographies of located ethnographies, and consultation with a team of

20 experts who reviewed our list and suggested new titles. Approximately 800 books published by scholars in a range of disciplines (e.g., sociology, anthropology, management) were secured, generally through the university library or interlibrary loan, and subject to detailed examination (a second phase of selection). Books selected for coding conformed to two criteria: (1) observational data collection extending over a period of at least six months in a single organizational setting and (2) a focus on at least one clearly identifiable occupational group. Books not conforming to these criteria were eliminated from the study, along with those that were too short or thematic to be coded. To date, 162 ethnographies have been coded, some of which had sufficient data to code multiple cases. For example, Rosabeth Moss Kanter's (1977) *Men and Women of the Corporation* provided sufficient information to code two cases, managers and clerical workers.

Books have been coded using an instrument designed for this purpose. In the initial stage of instrument design, a list of variables and preliminary response categories representing core concepts in the sociology of work literature were constructed. Each of the four team members involved in the project individually read and coded a common, selected ethnography and then met to discuss consistencies and inconsistencies in their respective codings, the retention or removal of items, and the refinement of variables, response categories, and coding protocols. This process of reading, coding, and refinement was repeated for eight representative ethnographies. The end was an instrument that trained coders could complete for each of the ethnographies with maximum reliability.

Once the coding instrument was finalized, the full set of ethnographies was read and coded by the same team of four researchers, participants in a yearlong graduate research practicum, and additional graduate research assistants supported through a National Science Foundation grant. Coders were trained to use a common protocol with explicit variable definitions and to rely on direct evidence presented in ethnographers' published findings (variables without sufficient data were recorded as "missing"). Coders worked

individually, documented their conclusions with page numbers, and then met to review each case in detail and to resolve questions. The result of the coding operation is 217 cases—each a single work group in a particular organization—with data on organizational characteristics, the labor process, workplace relationships, worker behaviors, and other aspects of employment structures and day-to-day activities of the work group. Industrial and service settings are well represented, including manual labor and service work, as well as a range of white-collar occupations including clerical, managerial, and professional employment.³

Measurement

We begin by identifying practices exemplifying a neoliberal approach to employment—ones reflecting neoliberal ideals of maneuverability, limiting claims employees can make to particular hours or treatment, and avenues for workers to pursue self-interested rather than collective goals. These include a pattern of firings, task reorganization, implementation of bonus pay schemes, an absence of independent grievance machinery such as that provided by unions, increased surveillance of workers, use of part-time or temporary labor in excess of 15 percent of the workforce, and an absence of collective representation in corporate decisions. A neoliberalism scale used in the current study is a simple count of the number of these policies present in any given organization and thus ranges from 0 (none) to 7 (all).

Coding of variables is based on the ethnographic accounts. A pattern of sustained firings as a corporate policy, for example, is evident in an ethnography of a bank using downsizing to offset a history of bad investment decisions by top management:

Managers were also to isolate and manage out their “nonperformers,” unproductive workers who allegedly drained corporate profitability. But the unproductive workers to be managed out were not simply uncooperative or negligent: in a new definition, the “poor performer” was one who fell at the bottom of a ranked curve (the

“Bell curve”) of employees in each unit . . . Managing up or out, using this scheme to penalize and push employees, would allegedly give managers the daily, micro-level tools to move American Security from a paternalistic growth-based system of personnel policies to one characterized by diminishing opportunities and promises. (Smith 1990:47)

An example of “task reorganization” is provided by an ethnography of a nursing in a large urban hospital:

In theory nurses’ aides carry out the “mundane” tasks involved in patient care, like emptying bedpans or changing sheets, and free up highly skilled RNs for the more “complicated” tasks requiring their expert knowledge and skills. In practice, however, nurses’ aides were assigned the time at the bedside that RNs, while performing so-called mundane tasks, used to gather important clues to the patient’s condition and response to treatment. The reduced number of RN’s, meanwhile, became responsible for the care of a larger number of patients, while also supervising the care activities of a growing number of nurses’ aides, who deliver care at the bedside but lack the skills or the knowledge necessary to recognize, correctly interpret, or communicate vital information about patients. Requiring this information to do their jobs of planning and evaluating care, RNs still needed time—a scarce commodity given RNs’ new workloads—with patients to gather this information. (Weinberg 2004:10)⁴

Measuring neoliberalism in terms of organizational practices rather than the timing of the study and/or corporate rhetoric allows us to assess the implications of an overall approach to employees consistent with ideals of neoliberalism without limiting us to settings that have articulated this perspective. Table 1 provides example cases of organizations high on the neoliberalism scale and organizations with low scores on this scale, which we refer to as “Great Compromise” organizations in recognition of their greater use of bargained solutions between organizational stakeholders. We base these classifications on practices rather than temporal context, and our analyses include a measure of timing of the case study to statistically control

Table 1. Example Ethnographies Representing Neoliberal and “Great Compromise” Workplaces.

“Great compromise” work practices

- Blau, Peter M. 1955. *The Dynamics of Bureaucracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (neoliberal score = 1)
- Orr, Julian, 1996. *Talking about Machines*. New York: Cornell University Press. (neoliberal score = 1)
- Gamst, Frederick C. 1980. *The Hoghead: An Industrial Ethnology of the Locomotive Engineer*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston. (neoliberal score = 2)
- Gyllenhammar, Pehr G. 1977. *People at Work*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley. (neoliberal score = 2)
- Ospina, Sonia. 1996. *Illusions of Opportunity*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. (neoliberal score = 2)

Neoliberal work practices

- Drori, Israel, 2000. *The Seam Line: Arab Workers and Jewish Managers in the Israeli Textile Industry*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. (neoliberal score = 5)
- Graham, Laurie. 1995. *On the Line at Subaru-Isuzu*. Ithaca, NY: Industrial and Labor Relations Press. (neoliberal score = 5)
- Williams, Bruce B. 1987. *Black Workers in an Industrial Suburb*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press. (neoliberal score = 5)
- Grenier, Guillermo J. 1988. *Inhuman Relations: Quality Circles and Anti-unionism in American Industry*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. (neoliberal score = 6)
- Tannock, Stuart, 2001, *Youth at Work: The Unionized Fast-food and Grocery Workplace*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. (neoliberal score = 6)

for change over time—something that could reflect secular shifts in workplace organization or in ethnographers’ theoretical foci.⁵

Neoliberal policies are seen by both proponents and critics as having far-reaching implications for workplaces and workers. Accordingly, the dependent variables for the analysis presented here reflect a diverse set of organizational and job quality characteristics. Organizational outcomes include variables for productivity and growth (not typically the focus of ethnographic case studies but generally reported in contextual information setting the stage for the study), and work group stability, including measures of seniority, turnover, and quitting. Informal relationships and behaviors include employee-management conflict, informal peer training, and withholding effort. We also investigate impacts on job quality, with measures for extrinsic and intrinsic rewards (pay and benefits, job security, meaningless work and abasement).⁶ Descriptive information on the coding, means, and standard deviations for these variables—along with measurement of neoliberal work organization and time—are presented in the Appendix. The meanings of

dependent variables and the basis for their coding in the ethnographic accounts are further illustrated in the Results section, where we report their associations with neoliberal organizational policies.

Modeling Strategy

We use a straightforward statistical strategy based on examining the correlations between the neoliberal organization scale and its potential consequences for the organization and workers. We present findings both with and without controls for timing of the case study, as well as correlations between timing of the study and our outcomes. Analyses controlling for time allow us to weigh the direction and significance of relationships net of secular trend in work organization and/or workplace relations reflecting technological, sectoral, or other changes occurring over time.

We also return to the original narrative accounts to examine mechanisms underlying the observed associations and potential elaborations on processes pertinent to long-term organizational prosperity. This re-immersion

in the case studies returns to the observational roots of the qualitative case studies and parallels the methodological strategies of qualitative researchers who seek out mechanisms and contradictions and pursue these to the point of theoretical saturation (Hammersley 1997; Lee 1999).

Limitations

Although cases included in this study reflect a wide range of industries and occupations, they are not a random sample of all work groups. To be sure, they are better suited to detecting linkages between phenomena and underlying processes than making generalizations about the prevalence of particular practices (Small 2009). The data include ample variation for detecting relationships among variables, and the array of industries and occupations represented lend confidence that the results will not be biased by the range of settings investigated. Nevertheless, significance tests designed to measure probability of error in a random sample can only be regarded as suggestive.

Inclusion of case studies conducted prior to widespread adoption of neoliberal policies increases variation in our sample and our ability to detect patterns but introduces potential for macroeconomic, technological, or other changes to generate spurious results. Our statistical controls for year(s) in which ethnographic studies were conducted helps minimize this possibility, but it is plausible that some other change correlated with adoption of neoliberal policies but not time influences our dependent variables. This trade-off is inherent in use of these data: the ability to detect patterns in variables not generally available for quantitative analysis comes with a loss of contextual meanings and influences—not only with respect to relationships observed but also in measurement of the variables themselves. Contextual influences are a significant focus in the re-immersion phase of our investigation, wherein we return to the ethnographies that underwrite our findings for illumination of processes less discernible from content-coded data. This phase of the study also helps to supplement our understanding of implications for

organizational well-being. This is particularly important considering limitations of our organizational growth and productivity indicators, which are crudely measured and may be subject to reciprocal or even reverse causation relative to our independent variables—a point to which we return in our conclusion.

Results

The correlations exploring secular time trends for the various organizational and workplace outcomes are presented in column 1 of Table 2. Examining first organizational outcomes, we see no evidence of correlation between time and productivity, growth and quitting, and only small marginal correlations to seniority and turnover. In contrast, correlations between neoliberalist employment practices and these same variables—presented in column 2 of Table 2—form a very clear and statistically significant pattern. First, there is no association between neoliberalist practices and our measures of productivity or growth, suggesting the need to consider implications of neoliberal policy that may impede these outcomes. Second, diminished seniority, heightened turnover and quitting are more common in the context of neoliberalist employment practices. A study of emergency medical technicians shows how these tendencies may in turn impede organizational efficiency and output:

There is little to keep the private attendant on the job once he becomes disenchanted with the work . . . During the first two years in the Metropolitan EMS system, two-thirds of Liberty's attendants stayed less than a year. Because of this turnover, the company must invest resources in finding and orienting new attendants. Quality control safeguards are weakened because the crew chiefs are distracted and allowances are made for the new workers. While the company pays lower salaries to the less experienced, it may earn less because of fouled up paperwork, wasted supplies, and lost time. (Metz 1981:107)

Turning to informal workplace relationships and behaviors, employee-management conflict was positively correlated with year of study, while informal peer training and withholding effort

Table 2. Correlations of Time and Neoliberal Work Organization with Workplace Outcomes (Organizational Ethnographies, $N = 217$).

Outcome variables	Correlation with year of study	Correlation with neoliberal work organization	Neoliberal work organization net of time
Organizational outcomes			
Productivity	.087	.065	-.038
Growth	-.115	.030	.073
Stability			
Seniority	-.145†	-.201**	-.164*
Turnover	.122†	.231***	.204**
Quitting	-.032	.376***	.411***
Informal relationships and behaviors			
Employee-management conflict	.172*	.157*	.107
Informal peer training	-.129†	-.176*	-.143†
Withholding effort	.024	.232***	.237***
Job quality			
Pay and benefits	-.104	-.290***	-.273***
Job security	-.122†	-.168*	-.136*
Meaningless work	.082	.150*	.131†
Abasement	.209*	.189*	.130

†significant at $\leq .10$ (2-tailed tests). *significant at $\leq .05$. **significant at $\leq .01$. ***significant at $\leq .001$.

were not correlated or only marginally so. In contrast, all three variables were correlated with neoliberal work organization, which increased conflict, reduced peer training, and increased employees' tendency to withhold effort.

Examining the correlations of neoliberalism net of time (column 3 of Table 2) allows us to evaluate the associations of neoliberal organizational policies and organizational outcomes net of other unmeasured changes occurring over time. The resulting partial correlations are highly similar to the zero-order correlations between neoliberalism and organizational outcomes presented in column 2, suggesting these negative associations operate above and beyond any underlying unmeasured secular change. In short, neoliberalism undercuts seniority and peer training while increasing turnover, quitting, and effort restriction. The case studies demonstrate how the use of temporary contract workers, for example, can create tensions and hinder facilitation between coworkers, as in the following example from an ethnography of computer workers in California's Silicon Valley:

I always notice a person's badge . . . If you see blue on the back or a blue slip or whatever it is they have, they're employees. If there's white down here, [points to his badge] they're employees. Any other color, all bets are off . . . If it's a contractor that I don't know or anybody with a different color than white or blue standing around—I just don't talk about it. (Barley and Kunda 2004: 184)

Proponents of neoliberal work practices describe employees as enjoying the capacity to prosper without the "burden" of nonperforming coworkers. Lacking a sociological perspective, however, they overlook how pervasive fear of being identified as a nonperformer impedes the performance of employees—something that quickly emerges as a theme among ethnographies coded as high on neoliberal work practices. The following passages from a case study of supervisors in an industrial plant illustrate:

One . . . foreman stated that he least liked the fact that "Superintendents are discontented with [the organization] because of insecurity. Most only whisper it. They don't want word to get around

for fear of losing their job. I think it is the key to the problem superintendents are having. If a person is not comfortable with what they are doing or feel his job is in jeopardy, they can't do a job 100 percent." (B. Williams 1987:141)

Mr. Stark stated that his first impression of the company was that "the place seems to be a little paranoid." . . . [After an incident during his first week of employment, he didn't] "feel that much involved with the damn place." He was disturbed that people who theoretically had decision-making powers were either afraid to make decisions or did not care. . . . (Williams 1987: 120)

Turning to job-quality outcomes, the most fundamental observation is that there is a consistent and pervasive deterioration in the quality of work life evidenced across both time and in close parallel with neoliberal policies. Lower pay and benefits, less job security, more meaningless work, and more abasement all follow in the wake of neoliberal work practices. With the exception of abasement, all remained significant after controlling for time. Although our findings did not detect a straightforward relationship between neoliberalism and abasement, given the pervasive association of neoliberalism with deteriorating job conditions, it may be that the secular trend toward both greater employee-management conflict and increased employee abasement reflect the accumulation over time of changes resulting from organizational policies increasingly dominated by neoliberal ideologies. In other words, 30 years of neoliberal orientations within organizational leadership may underwrite the observed secular trend toward both increased conflict and greater abasement over time.

Qualitative Re-immersion

The above findings cast doubt on the proposition that neoliberal work practices deliver rewards to employees and suggest they instead impinge on job quality, labor force stability, and informal relationships and behaviors conducive to organizational functioning without benefits for organizational growth and productivity. Our re-immersion in the qualitative data

further illuminate troublesome aspects of neoliberal work environments that may help to explain why neoliberal policies are not associated with increases in growth or productivity. We find three distinct processes beyond those assessed in our quantitative findings with strong potential to diminish prospects for long-term organizational success.

First, without the benefit of insider knowledge passed on between workers, organizations have difficulty prospering as employees must learn on their own what workers in more stable environments can gain from more senior employees. The result is the loss of potential for human capital development within the organization, with negative consequences for quality and growth. In a large urban hospital undergoing a merger and reorganization along neoliberal principles, for instance, senior nursing staff was cut dramatically and reallocated to administrative functions—undermining informal apprenticeship relations that were essential for skill development:

New staff did not have the benefit of mentoring and professional support. Dawson worried, "having all new staff, just like buzzing around without any good role models, is a disaster because there's no way too learn except by your mistakes or by your experience. . . . You'll never transcend to being great because you never saw greatness." (Weinberg 2004:73)

The contrast between chronic disruption in neoliberal organizations and more cooperative and collegial relations in organizations characterized by bargaining, seniority, and a more collectivist approach to production could not be starker across the ethnographies. A study of urban firefighters, for example, illustrates how stability and an organizational environment allowing for the emergence of solidarity and cooperation forms the basis for growth and deepening of human capital within the organization:

I learned a lot just by listening, you know to those old war stories. Because they would say that we had this or did that, and I'd say but how the hell did you get to the fire? And they'd say well we took this in and took the pipe and put it

in this way . . . One of the things that I learned was to search a room with a straight stream about three feet off the floor to look for a window; to bust the window first and then open the wide fog, because if you open that wide fog you're going to get your ass burnt right there at the door; no two ways about it. (McCarl 1985:141)

Second, neoliberal work policies that seek to reward high achievers and marginalize or eliminate “nonperformers” promote individualistic orientations that encourage workers to move problems around the organization rather than to solve them. The following passage taken from a case study of a British bank that adopted neoliberal practices illustrates how these policies not only deter peer training and assistance but also encourage workers to transfer problems to their coworkers in the interest of preserving the appearance of individual productivity.

Some issues on each queue are more convoluted than others. In view of this, the staff used various methods to “pass-on” the more labyrinthine issues because they can have a deleterious effect on their productivity figures. In effect they are side-stepping work, so that other members of staff will have to deal with the more entangled matters. This fiddle could, therefore, be regarded as a fiddle against one's work colleagues. (McCabe 2007:138)

Managers likewise sidestep problem-solving to avoid association with production problems—a direct result of their lack of job protections, according to a General Motors employee:

[A] foreman . . . can be replaced tomorrow, and he's got nobody to back him up. So everybody's a little bit afraid . . . So if you have a problem . . . your foreman . . . tries to take care of it without bringing it to his superintendent . . . So they all try to keep it down, low level and under the rug. “. . . just fix it and let it slide.” (Milkman 1997:175)

The same self-preservation impulse can put short-term profit at odds with long-term growth when members of an atomized workforce pursue the kinds of bonuses espoused by proponents of neoliberalism. Some of the core mechanisms through which a focus on short-term

profitability can become a strategy of long-term decline are detailed in an ethnography of a large multinational chemical company:

Managers who can successfully squeeze assets are first in line, for instance, for the handsome rewards allocated through bonus programs. One good way for business managers to increase their [numbers] is to reduce assets while maintaining sales . . . The most common way of doing this is by deferring capital expenditures, everything from maintenance to innovative investments, as long as possible . . . An upper-middle level manager [explains] . . . you can just keep patching things up, just putting absolutely no money at all into the business. Or you can just make an edict that will cut supplies by 25 percent . . . My favorite things are not to replace . . . inventory and that shows up as direct profit on your balance sheet . . . Essentially . . . shutting off . . . anything that is an expense. And you know what happens when you do that? The guy who comes into that mess is the one who gets blamed, not the guy who [did it]. (Jackall 1988:91–92)

A final concern emerging from our re-immersion in the qualitative data is the tremendous loss of energy associated with navigating a complex social terrain in which career success, and even retaining one's job, depends upon identification as a high achiever (Fraser 2001). This pressure is particularly intense in professional work organizations, where employees are continuously assessed and expectations for appropriate social behavior are considered part of the job (Courpasson 2006). Workers laboring under neoliberal policies expend a great deal of energy simply navigating this complex social terrain, as illustrated in a case study of automotive engineers:

“He's such a bully!” interjected Erberto. “When we don't have the right answers to technical questions, he just yells at us, saying we're stupid.”

“So why do you always laugh during meetings?” I asked. “It seems like your group is having such fun.”

Chen smiled, his pudgy face bulging at the sides. “It's because we're afraid,” he said. “When Oda tells a joke, we all feel we must laugh along with him.” (Mehri 2005:141)

Conclusion

Our investigation of ethnographic case studies indicates that, net of any secular temporal trend, neoliberal approaches to work organization are associated with sharp declines in job quality and negative organizational outcomes, including increases in turnover and quitting and reductions in the informal peer training and effort that tend to underwrite smooth organizational functioning.

Re-immersion also highlights potential impediments to organizational success in the long term. These include impeding development of human capital in the organization, promoting individualistic outlooks that incentivize sidestepping problems and even creating them, and consuming energy of workers who labor to avoid “land mines” in an increasingly complex and achievement-oriented social terrain.

This study brings a sociological outlook to managerial discourse by connecting neoliberal ideologies and changing work practices to informal processes that are consequential for productivity and growth but are largely ignored by advocates of neoliberal reforms. In particular, it highlights how a myopic focus on short-term profit leads organizations to squander their resources—the capacities and potential contributions of workers who create the value they sell for profit—undercutting the long-term investments and sustained effort needed to realize increases in productivity that will last. Central to these losses are instability and erosion of peer training and effort among workers paralleling the reduction in management commitment to the workforce and their well-being.

In shedding commitments to labor that previously helped to secure mutual prosperity, corporations have threatened their own viability, as measured by declining rates of profit in the post-labor-accord era (Vidal 2013). Our own findings suggest that, even at the level of the firm, productivity and growth do not increase with application of neoliberal policies. Given that these variables were measured concurrently with organizational practices, however, we cannot exclude the possibility that application of neoliberal principles were an organizational *response* to stagnant or declining

productivity and growth, or that earlier problems obscure gains in these regards. Somewhat more likely is the possibility that null findings reflect gains evident in indicators not included in our study (e.g., an intense work pace).

This possibility does not negate our suggestion that neoliberal practices erode foundations for organizational success but does indicate the need for more research linking organizational practices to organizational outcomes—including the informal relationships and behaviors we address here. Future studies in this vein would benefit from more precise data on organizational performance such as defects, theft and customer ratings (e.g., see Gallup Inc 2013), temporal constraints allowing for more precise causal interpretation, and explicit attention to the role that commitments made to employees (e.g., along the lines of those articulated by Southwest Airlines) play in shaping the same outcomes. In addition, modeling informal relationships and behaviors as mediators may help to reveal more about the processes involved.

None of this is to say that the null impact of neoliberal practices on organizational growth and productivity is necessarily an artifact of the data or result of its limitations. Indeed, this finding is consistent with a core criticism of neoliberal organizational policies—namely, that they have reduced wages for employees and increased the wealth of investors but not actually facilitated growth and expansion (Fourcade and Healy 2007). The implication of well-documented deterioration of working conditions in the neoliberal era is that exclusive attention to shareholder profitability not only leads to worsening job conditions but can even constitute a policy of industrial abandonment rather than guiding productive investment (Fligstein 2001; Fligstein and Shin 2004; Greenhouse 2008; McCann and Schwartz 2006; Osterman 1999; Sass 2000; van Riemsdijk 2010). Indeed, concerns about industrial abandonment, jobless growth, and the financialization of the economy have become part of the lexicon of the era of neoliberalism (Krippner 2005).

If neoliberal policies promote outcomes antithetical to organizational functioning and

growth and are so detrimental to job quality, why have they been so widely adopted and supported across a range of settings? In short, the reason seems to be that organizational outcomes are not being maximized; rather, shareholder value is being maximized, and these two strategies result in very different outcomes. A focus on shareholder value dovetails nicely with neoliberal organizational policies because it allows for short-term gains in profits while avoiding the hard and uncertain work of product development and improvement (Khurana 2010; Krippner 2005; Locke and Spender 2011; Nau 2011).

To comprehend the willingness of organizations to seemingly write off their own future, it is important to understand that economic organizations with neoliberal orientations do not maximize organizational utility as a whole—they maximize shareholder utility. And the shareholders have only the most fleeting attachment to the organization—an attachment that can easily and quickly be transferred to any other organization worldwide that promises quicker, even if fleeting and artificial, profits.

Understanding the prevalence of policies that may seem irrational from the standpoint of the organization requires theories that are capable of explaining how rationality operates within rather than beyond institutional frameworks (A. Scott 2008:435). What is rational for stakeholders may well be irrational for the organization, its employees, and even society.

Viewed in light of this perspective, our suggestion that neoliberalism is detrimental for workers and undermines foundations for organizational growth and productivity does not necessarily mean that it threatens organizational survival, which increasingly turns on

profits rather than productivity. Instead, our findings may simply indicate redistribution of power and resources within firms. Proponents' support of a "winner-take-all" mentality and reward structure in which skyrocketing salaries at the top are said to reflect merit and contribution, and lagging salaries elsewhere are argued to reflect the improved working of market forces (see Frank 1996), is certainly consistent with this view. This explanation also dovetails with recent investigations of financialization, which is argued to have decoupled the generation of surpluses from the act of production, thereby reducing negotiating leverage of labor and increasing bargaining power—and income shares—of owners and elite employees (Lin and Tomaskovic-Devey 2013; see also Thompson 2013).

Addressing these problems begins with greater recognition that neoliberalism is not equally beneficial to all members of an organization (or society) and that workers are losing ground. This understanding can promote a sense of urgency, but it remains to be seen how workers will confront the problems addressed here and elsewhere. Some observers have suggested that there can be no return to the standard employment relationship—a foundation of the capital-labor accord—and that progress might start with abandoning hope of returning to old ways of working and adopting creative, even utopian, visions of what work can be (Kalleberg 2013). In the meantime, individuals might begin to challenge neoliberal ideologies and policies, question the inequalities and "race to the bottom" they seem to promote, and attempt to slow their spread while coming to terms with the changes they have wrought, before the balance of power shifts further.

Appendix

Variables, Codings, Means, Standard Deviations and Scales (Organizational Ethnographies, N = 217).

Variables	Coding	Factor scores	M	SD
Time	Year field observations completed		1980	12.42
Neoliberal work organization	Count of seven neoliberal facets (firings, bonus pay, work reorganization, no or company-only grievance system, surveillance, temporary or part-time workers \geq 15%, and not corporatist)		3.21	1.48
Organizational Outcomes				
Productivity	1—declining, 2—stable, 3—increasing		2.47	0.66
Growth	1—declining, 2—stable, 3—growing		2.02	0.81
Stability				
Seniority	In of median years of seniority		6.72	6.21
Turnover	1—low, 2—medium, 3—high		2.07	0.87
Quitting	0—no, 1—yes		0.84	0.37
Informal Relationships and Behaviors				
Employee-management conflict	Standardized scale, 1st eigenvalue = 2.50; 2nd eigenvalue = .83; alpha = .803		0.00	1.00
Conflict with management	1—never to 5—constant	.761	2.94	1.06
Conflict with supervisor	1—never to 5—constant	.792	3.00	1.05
Poor leadership	1—exceptional leadership to 5—catastrophic	.836	3.08	1.00
Chaos	1—exceptional organization to 5—catastrophic	.767	2.90	1.03
Informal peer training	1—none to 5—extensive		3.25	1.21
Withholding effort	Standardized scale, 1st eigenvalue = 2.40; 2nd eigenvalue = 1.23; alpha = .724		0.00	1.00
Withholding enthusiasm	0—no, 1—yes	.803	0.68	0.47
Work avoidance	0—no, 1—yes	.688	0.66	0.47
Procedure sabotage	0—no, 1—yes	.396	.80	0.40
Pride in work (<i>r</i>)	1—rare, 2—average, 3—a great deal	.778	1.76	0.78
Job satisfaction (<i>r</i>)	1—very low to 5—very high	.721	3.05	1.06
Job Quality				
Pay and benefits	Average of standardized items for pay (1—very low to 5—very high) and benefits (1—none to 4—high)		0.00	1.00
Job security	1—none, 2—minimal, 3—average, 4—high		3.03	0.95
Meaningless work	1—fulfilling, 2—somewhat meaningful, 3—meaningless		1.97	0.78
Abasement	1—none, 2—some, 3—half, 4—most, 5—all		2.08	1.10

Note: (*r*) indicates variable reverse coded prior to scaling.

Authors' Note

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Notes

1. Other potential explanations for the mixed economic record of neoliberalism have focused on the variety of practices included under this umbrella and the need to parse these practices and, in terms of policy, to seek economic success by linking appropriate practices to appropriate institutional and cultural contexts. We agree that the time has also arrived for such a parsing and contextualizing of neoliberal national economic policies as well as neoliberal organizational policies (see Walton 2004).
2. Although Gallup's measures track closely with Hodson's (1999) MCB concept, Gallup describes them as measures of "employee engagement."
3. More information on this project, including cases, the code sheet, and coding protocol, is available at <http://intra.sociology.ohio-state.edu/people/rdh/Workplace-Ethnography-Project.html> (See also Hodson et al. 2011).
4. From the nurses' standpoint, this reorganization or tasks negatively impacted the quality of work life and for patient care but the essential point here is simply the prevalence of task reorganization as a corporate strategy in this setting, not its consequences.
5. Because the 1960s and 1970s workplace studies were more dominated by critical approaches, such as labor process theory, than is typical today suggesting that predispositions among the ethnographers should have worked against rather than in support our hypotheses.

We have also conducted validity tests evaluating the role of the ethnographers' theoretical orientations and found no patterns of bias. It is, of course, conceivable that an organization with limited growth and productivity could have adopted neoliberal work practices, with long-term impacts becoming apparent only after the ethnography was complete. We return to this topic in the conclusion.

6. Selection of variables reflects conceptual distinctions between neoliberal organizational policies and worker outcomes. Some neoliberal practices have clear implications of certain aspects of job quality; for example, firings and lack of grievance procedures have clear implications for job security. But while the former is clearly an organizational practice, the latter is a broader indicator of job quality—one not necessarily rooted in firings or neoliberal work practices.

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