SOC 205 Lecture 7: Poverty and health linkages-Work factors

Discussion Questions
• What are the three major work-related mechanisms that underlie the relationship between poverty, or low SES, and health?
• How do these mechanisms link poverty, or low SES, to health status?

Three major work-related mechanisms
• Physical characteristics of the job or employment setting
• Psychosocial characteristics of the job
• Unemployment

The linkage between low SES and health
• Numerous authors, including those assigned for the current lecture, argue that persons with low SES are:
  • More likely to take jobs that are characterized by factors that lead to ill health.
  • More vulnerable to those factors in that they lack the resources necessary to combat them.
  • Where have we seen this latter argument before?
    • Vulnerability explanation for poverty
    • Stress buffering hypothesis

Physical characteristics
• Chasin (in “Structural Violence for Workers and the Unemployed”) argued that:
  • The profit motive drives employers to create unhealthy working conditions for employees through denying improvements in the workplace that would guarantee the safety of workers.
  • She reports that the estimates of those who die from occupationally induced illnesses is probably about 58,500 per year.

Physical characteristics
• Chasin continued:
  • Of all the countries in the developed world, the U.S. holds the worst work safety record.
    • U.S. workers are 36x more likely to be killed on the job compared to Swedish workers
U.S. workers are 9x more likely to be killed on the job compared to British workers.

Structural violence?
- Chasin makes numerous references to the notion of structural violence. What does she mean by the term?
  - She defines violence as “acts, intentional or not, that result in physical harm to another person or persons.”
  - Structural (vs. interpersonal) forms of violence occur as a consequence “of the routine workings of a society, especially of its stratification system.”

Structural violence (continued)
- What is the major clue that structural violence exists?
  - If certain groups are suffering from conditions that could be corrected when other groups are not, structural violence exists.
- What are some examples of structural violence in the workplace?

What are the most dangerous workplaces?
- According to Chasin, the most dangerous workplaces are food processing plants.
- She notes the fire at the Imperial Food Products chicken processing plant. (?)
  - 25 workers were killed because exits were locked and workers could not escape.

A victory for workers?
- According to both Chasin and Smith (Black lung disease article), coal miners eventually won some health concessions through the Coal Mine Health and Safety Act.
- Shortly thereafter, congress passed the Occupational Safety and Health Act, which lead to the creation of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.
- Since the OSH Act, what are the trends in workplace safety?

What does Chasin argue is the major limitation of OSHA?
- The agency is both underfunded and understaffed.
  - It’s budget is about $300 million (compared to $1.1 billion for fish and wildlife, and $28 billion for the CIA).
  - In 1990, Chasin estimates that there was about 1 inspector for every 2,307 workplaces.
Discussion Question
• Healthy People 2000 has established numerous goals to promote the health and well-being of the U.S. population. One of the goals is to reduce workplace accidents and injuries. What would you propose to do to accomplish this?
  • The target areas for HP 2000 are reducing workplace homicides, deaths attributable to pneumoconiosis, and reducing smoking in the workplace.
  • HP 2000 notes that the two leading causes of death at the workplace are transportation accidents and homicide.

Psychosocial Job Characteristics
• The idea of the importance of job characteristics for health is not a new one. (?
• Marx referred to the concept of alienated labor in terms of discussing workers’ loss of control over their occupational lives. He argues:

  What constitutes alienation of labor? First, that the work is external to the worker, that it is not part of his nature; and that, consequently, he does not fulfill himself in his work but denies himself, has a feeling of misery rather than well-being, does not develop freely his mental and physical energies but is physically exhausted and mentally debased…His work is not voluntary but imposed, forced labor. It is not the satisfaction of a need, but only a means for satisfying other needs…Finally, the external character of work for the worker is shown by the fact that it is not his own work but work for someone else, that in work he does not belong to himself but to another person.

Melvin Kohn and job characteristics
• Drawing on Marx’s idea of alienation, Kohn devised several different measures of the concept:
  • Powerlessness: belief of individuals that their own behavior can control their outcomes.
  • Self-estrangement: a sense of being “detached from self, of being adrift-purposeless, bored with everything, merely responding to what life has to offer rather than setting one’s own course.

Kohn’s outcomes continued
• Normlessness: an expectation that socially unapproved behaviors are needed to achieve desired goals.
• Cultural estrangement: giving low value to goals that the society deems are important.
Kohn’s Insight

• Given the arguments of Marx regarding alienation of labor, Kohn argued that three
elements of the workplace should be important for determining levels of worker
alienation (as defined by the aforementioned measures):
  • Ownership and hierarchical position in the workplace
  • Degree of bureaucratization of the workplace
  • Occupational self-direction

Occupational Self-Direction

• Occupational self-direction is composed of three concepts:
  • Closeness of supervision: how much latitude a supervisor allows and how much
    supervision is exercised.
  • Routinization of work: repetitiveness of tasks
  • Substantive complexity of work: relationship of the worker with things, data or
    ideas, and people.

What did Kohn find?

• He found that jobs characterized by low levels of occupational self-direction scored
  higher in terms of all 4 measures of alienation.

Psychosocial Job Characteristics

in Marmot and Theorell

• Marmot and Theorell argue that certain psychosocial job characteristics are tied both
to low SES and to cardiovascular health.
• They review a number of studies that show relationships between stressful job
  situations, or jobs defined by certain psychosocial characteristics, and negative health
  outcomes.
• What are the three psychosocial aspects of jobs that they discuss?

Characteristic #1:
Skill discretion

• Jobs that are higher in skill discretion are those that:
  • provide opportunities for workers to learn new skills
  • allow workers to learn new ways to overcome problems in unpredictable situations

Characteristic #2:
Authority over decisions

• Jobs that are characterized by high levels of authority:
  • allow workers to make decisions on their own
  • negate much of the need for supervision, especially close supervision
Characteristic #3: Social Support

- It has been argued that social support is important for the maintenance of individual health and well-being. This is one of the most commonly found relationships in the study of social factors and health.

Low SES and job characteristics

- For all three psychosocial factors, persons who are lower in SES are more likely to have jobs that lack high levels of the positive resource. That is,
  - Low skill discretion
  - Low authority over decisions
  - Low social support

Job Strain

- Gordon O’Brien argues that certain jobs can lead to strain (or stress) which in turn lead to health problems.
- What are the types of characteristics that lead to strain?

The Job Strain-Resources Model

- O’Brien sees some utility in the model of job strain and resources proposed by Karasek.
- Essentially, jobs that are low in resources but are high in demands will be characterized by higher levels of strain. As such, they should produce worse health outcomes.
- Is there any evidence for this perspective?

The Consequences of Unemployment

- Richard Smith argues that unemployment leads to a number of adverse conditions:
  - suicide
  - risky health behaviors
  - mental health problems
  - physical health problems
  - premature death
- He presents a model that summarizes these processes.

Discussion Question

- Both Chasin and Jones argue, somewhat convincingly, that unemployment produces poor health outcomes. In this regard, Chasin argues that unemployment is a form of structural violence.
- Given her definition of structural violence, do you agree that unemployment is a form of structural violence? If so, how is it?