

## CHAPTER 13

# Work and Mental Health

MARK TAUSIG

Work<sup>1</sup> is a central activity and a principal source of identity for most adults. As such, the relationship between work and mental and emotional well-being is of substantial interest. The effects of work on well-being, however, cannot be effectively understood simply by examining individual experiences in particular work settings. Rather, work-related well-being is linked to macroeconomic and labor market structures that define opportunities for employment (and probabilities for unemployment), to characteristics of jobs, to workers' positions in other social stratification systems, and to the intersection of work roles and other major roles, especially marital and parental roles.

Four distinct research traditions address the ways in which work and psychological well-being are linked. First, labor market studies examine the effects of macroeconomic structures on mental health (Brenner, 1973; Catalano & Dooley, 1977). These studies generally assess the relationship between aggregate macroeconomic conditions, such as unemployment rates and aggregate rates of disorder, but occasionally link aggregate economic conditions to individual psychological outcomes (Dooley & Catalano, 1984b; Fenwick & Tausig, 1994). In addition, labor market-related studies also examine the psychological

<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, the notion of work is limited to "paid employment." Thus, housework and its relationship to mental health is not explored as a separate topic here. Such work is clearly of economic value and is related to broader economic, political, and social structures and processes but is beyond the scope of this chapter. Some research on the relationship between paid work, housework, and distress is discussed, however, in the section on work and family (see also Chapter 12).

impact of unemployment and reemployment (Kessler, Turner, & House, 1989; Turner, 1995). Recent discussions of the psychological effects of the restructuring of the employment relationship (i.e., plant closings, downsizing, contingent work, deskilling) fall into this tradition, although such studies use macroeconomic changes largely as background for individual-based outcome studies.

There is a second research tradition that examines the relationship between well-being and the characteristics of jobs (Karasek, 1979; Kohn & Schooler, 1982). These studies examine how features of jobs—such as the level of job demand, decision latitude, autonomy, substantive complexity and co-worker support—affect psychological orientations and mental health status. These studies generally do not link characteristics of jobs to larger economic and social conditions, but treat job characteristics as constants and technological “givens” of the production process. Much of this research has been limited to the male labor force.

A third literature is reflected in studies that attempt to explain the relationship between positions in social structure (particularly, gender) and well-being. Since Gove and Tudor’s (1973) early study of the importance of multiple roles for mental health, attempts to assess the mental health consequences of participation by women in the paid labor force have uncovered a variety of issues related to the consequences of social stratification. These include the occupational distribution of women, differences in the characteristics of “women’s” and “men’s” work, and gender-related differences in the relationship between aspects of job characteristics and psychological well-being. Similar research regarding the effects of social–structural positions described by socioeconomic status, social class, and race are also included here.

A fourth, and closely related area of research examines the intersection of paid work and other social roles, particularly family roles. This literature has developed in part because of increased female participation in the labor force and in part because of the more general recognition that the impact of roles and statuses cannot be properly understood without accounting for larger social contexts. This research has principally examined the experience of women who work but seldom deals with labor market factors that might affect the types of work available or their effect on mental health. Its focus is on the spillover or contamination of roles, principally between the family and work spheres.

In this review, I summarize what each of these four research areas tells us about the relationship between work and mental health. Each approach reflects subdisciplinary interests but collectively they present a broader sociological perspective. As a foundation for this approach, I briefly describe the contexts within which the individual experiences work and the ways in which these contexts are consequential to his or her mental health.

## THE SOCIAL–STRUCTURAL CONTEXT OF WORK

The emerging portrait of the relationship between work and mental health that comes from juxtaposing these four research areas fits well with the view of psychological distress as a fundamental product of social–structural arrangements (Link & Phelan, 1995). In this instance, macroeconomic structures and changes, social status positions, and role sets provide a context for understanding how the immediate work environment affects psychological well-being. Figure 13.1 provides a working conceptual model.

This model allows us to link the aggregate level research on macroeconomic structure with research on the relationship among job characteristics, stress, and distress. These two