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Paths of Reentry: Employment Experiences of Injured Workers

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Background *An injury at work can result in a change in jobs or employers, unemployment, or withdrawal from the labor force. Substantial life changes can occur, often mediated by the initial attempt to return to employment.*
Methods *This study uses ethnographic interviews of 204 workers injured in Florida.*
Results *The study describes three paths to reemployment taken by the injured workers. The "welcome back" path provides workers with a sense of being valued by their preinjury employers. This positive effect remains, even for those who are unable to continue working because of limitations imposed by their injuries. Other paths cause workers to feel undervalued, as discarded or damaged goods, and generate hostility and resentment. Females in all groups are less likely to be currently working. White males were more likely than other groups to be employed in skilled jobs and are also the most likely to return to light-duty jobs and to remain in their preinjury jobs over time.*
Conclusions *Half of the workers in this study experience employer indifference or hostility in response to their attempts to return to work after an occupational back injury. After injury, there are both commonalities and meaningful disparities in post-injury experiences of White, Black, and Hispanic male and female workers.* Am. J. Ind. Med. 38:373–384, 2000. *© 2000 Wiley-Liss, Inc.*

KEY WORDS: workplace injuries; injury experience; human costs; qualitative methods

INTRODUCTION

An injury at work can result in unanticipated work-related outcomes for the injured worker. Depending on the nature of workers' skills and limitations as well as on their employers' responses, the outcomes can include a change in jobs at the same place of employment, a change in employers, unemployment or even withdrawal from the labor force. Studies of employment rates after injury indicate that the future labor market experiences of injured workers are similar to those of displaced workers [Galizzi and Boden, 1996]. Labor market effects may persist even for those who fully recover from their injuries, with workers losing their preinjury jobs and their investments in skill and seniority at those jobs. The longer workers are off work, the more unlikely are both eventual return to work and continued employment [Galizzi and Boden, 1996]. Recent research has shown that employment rates and economic losses incurred by injured workers are substantial [Galizzi and Boden, 1996; Biddle, 1998; Boden and Galizzi, 1999; Reville, 1999]. Reduced productivity due to the severity of the injury can also cause lower employment rates after injury, but employer accommodation of injured workers can substantially improve workers' long-term employment prospects [Burkhauser et al., 1995; Daly and Bound, 1996].

These effects, however, are not experienced equally by workers from different racial and/or ethnic and gender

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categories. Studies of racial differences in the labor market suggest that non-Whites are more likely to be dislocated and to be unemployed for longer periods than Whites [Addison and Portugal, 1987; Podgursky and Swaim, 1987; Hamermesh, 1989]. Compared with Whites, non-Whites who change jobs because of layoffs fare worse relative to those who remain with the same employer [Ruhm, 1987]. Black workers have a worse job displacement experience than White workers, and much of the racial difference in displacement is related to the disparity in the proportion of Black and White workers engaging in blue collar employment [Fairlie and Kletzer, 1996]. Blacks and Hispanics suffer greater post-layoff earnings losses than non-Hispanic whites and these losses occur among both those who found other jobs within the same and different industries [Ong, 1991]. Moreover, among those out of the labor force, Blacks are more likely than Whites to report being disabled [Siegel, 1993; Bound et al., 1995]. Black workers are exposed to more hazards at work and have higher injury rates than White workers [Robinson, 1991] and these disparities remain after controlling for age and education [Robinson, 1987]. The health of Black middle-aged men is generally worse than that of White men [Gibson, 1994; Bound et al., 1995], and higher rates of disability among Blacks at both younger and older ages have been shown to account for almost all of the race difference in labor force participation rates [Hayward et al., 1996].

Studies of the impacts of displacement have found that displaced women lose a greater proportion of pre-injury earnings than do men [Podgursky and Swaim, 1987; Jacobson et al., 1993]. Despite women's much lower pre-displacement earnings, other studies find that displaced women's total losses are greater than those of men [Ruhm, 1987; Crossley et al., 1994].

Although these studies illustrate the economic impact of workplace injuries and job dislocation and of the disparities in impacts on workers from different racial and/or ethnic and gender categories, there remains a narrow understanding of workers' experiences of these events. To appreciate fully the social significance of these losses, we must not only identify patterns in post-injury experience, but also understand the meaning of these patterns to injured workers.

This paper reports on findings from a study that uses ethnographic interview methods to provide an understanding of the experiences of White, Black, and Hispanic injured workers in their post-injury attempts to return to gainful employment. In particular, we focus on how these workers experience their employers' attitudes and behaviors when they attempt to return to their pre-injury jobs. This critical period, when injured workers attempt to reestablish their careers and return to gainful employment, has an important impact on the pattern of work for the rest of their lives. Research has shown that efforts during recovery and the early phases of return to work by employers, insurers, and workers' compensation agencies can support successful outcomes. These efforts include modified work programs, reduced hours, vocational rehabilitation, medical case management, active monitoring of workers during recovery by case managers, and integrated proactive return to work programs [Hunt and Habeck, 1993; Krause et al., 1998; Krause et al., 2000]. This study provides us with injured workers' understandings of what actually happens when they are ready to go back to work.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Overview

The data are from a study focusing on the human costs of occupational injuries. The study investigates the perceptions of injured workers related to the impact of injury in six critical areas—their relationship to their pre-injury job and employer, their post-injury employment, their medical care, their self-perceptions, their family relationships, and their perceptions of fairness in the process. Interview data were obtained from April 1997 to January 1998. The study utilized ethnographic interviewing in order to provide information about injury-related norms, beliefs, context, and behavior of workers from different racial and/or ethnic backgrounds.

Ethnographic methods produce qualitative data that provide depth and detail through direct quotation and careful description of situations, events, people, and interactions. In collecting qualitative data, the researcher seeks a qualitative understanding of the social meanings and social relationships that comprise the study environment [Needleman and Needleman, 1996]. Qualitative research stresses the socially constructed nature of reality, and qualitative researchers seek to answer questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning [Denzin and Lincoln, 1994]. This allows for rethinking basic assumptions, reconceptualizing problems, and generating theoretical ideas [Needleman and Needleman, 1996]. Ethnographic interviewing permits the researcher to understand the world as seen by the respondent within the context of the respondent's everyday life. The term ''ethnographic interviewing'' is based on the anthropological method of describing the local point of view and social organization, the culture, of a people and results in studying systems of meaning and rules [Hahn, 1996].

Sample Selection and Procedure

Ethnographic open-ended interviews were conducted with 204 workers from Florida: 72 White workers, 72 Black workers (12 males, 12 females in each of the three age groupings); 60 Hispanic workers (12 males and 7 females

aged 20–29 years; 12 males and 12 females aged 30–49 years; 12 males and 5 females aged 50+ years). All the workers had back injuries in 1990 and were paid workers' compensation temporary disability benefits for at least 4 weeks or received permanent disability benefits (permanent impairment or wage-loss benefits) or compromise settlements. We chose to interview people with injuries to only one part of their body to reduce the inherent heterogeneity of the injuries studied, and we chose back injuries because they are almost 30% of all compensable injuries in Florida. We stratified our sample by gender, age, and racial and/or ethnic background (Black non-Hispanic, White non-Hispanic, and Hispanic, ages 20–29, 30–49 and 50+ years). The interviews were conducted approximately 6 years after the workplace injury. Workers were selected randomly within each stratum from a list of those eligible. The total sampling frame was 845 injured workers. The population of injured workers was very difficult to locate 6 years after their injuries, particularly younger and older Hispanic females. We located 299 individuals or 35% of the sampling frame and completed 204 interviews, or 68%. The response rate is therefore 204/845 or 24%.

We have information from workers' compensation records on personal and job characteristics of people we could not locate, those who refused, and those who were interviewed. This information suggests that people who refused to be interviewed were older, had longer service, and were better paid than respondents and those we did not locate (Table I). It is likely that longer service and better pay are consequences of the fact that people who refused tended to be older. We lack a direct measure of injury severity, but benefit payments suggest that respondents may have been more seriously injured than non-respondents. Medical benefits were higher for respondents than for the people who refused to be interviewed and those we did not locate. If we measure income benefits in terms of weeks of preinjury earnings, respondents were paid benefits equivalent to an average of 55 weeks of earnings, while the other two groups were paid an amount equal to 45 weeks of earnings. Income benefits were highest in the group that refused to be interviewed, but this reflects their higher earnings. Those who refused appeared to work somewhat more frequently in the agriculture, construction, or manufacturing sectors. Approximately one-third of the workers in each group were represented by attorneys, indicating similar levels of dispute in the three groups.

The relatively small numbers and low response rate mean that quantitative results may not be generalizable. However, this is not a significant issue for the qualitative focus of this study: how workers with significant back injuries describe the different paths of return to work and how these workers respond to their employers' post-injury behavior.

Interviews were audio-taped, but no full names were used on the tape. Only subject code numbers were used to identify respondents. To help maximize the response rate, we paid respondents $20.00 for the interview; notified them by mail prior to the interview; and used a forwarding address service for workers who may have moved since the injury. Before the interview, respondents were sent a letter describing the interview and informing them that an interviewer would be contacting them and that they would be sent $20.00 after they completed the interview. We included a self-addressed postcard to be returned if the telephone number had changed and/or there was a preferred time for the interview. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Boston University Medical Center.

Interview Guide Design

To help assure collection of comparable qualitative data, an interview guide listed specific questions and topics to be covered in a particular order in the interview. The guide was translated into Spanish and back-translated to check for accuracy. Questions were drawn from our previous survey studies [Galizzi et al., 1998], as well as from scripts shared with us by Reid et al. [1991]. Questions about perceptions of the behaviors of supervisors, employers, coworkers, worker's compensation, family members,

TABLE I. Florida Workers. Average Characteristics of Respondents, Those who Refused, and Those not Located

Characteristic	Respondents	Refusals	Not located
Age	45	53	43
Percent over 50 years old	41	68	36
Preinjury weekly wage	328	433	301
Percent with tenure $<$ 1 year	38	31	42
Medical benefits paid	$12,046	$9,121	$7,648
Income benefits paid	$18,404	$19,599	$13,395
Income benefits paid (as a multiple of preinjury wage)	56 $\times$	45 $\times$	45 $\times$
Percent represented by attorney	32	32	34

and friends were interspersed with questions about the workers' own behavior. Questions explored the workers' beliefs and attitudes about themselves as workers including their pre- and post-injury attachment to employment, their experience of work injury, encounters with the medical and legal system, and the effects of their injury on family relationships.

Analytic Procedures

After the tapes were transcribed, the interviewers checked their own tapes for accuracy. Codes were developed that represented a category or theme found in the data and put directly into the text by attaching to segments of text. Each worker interviewed was evaluated by the set of thematic codes developed. In order to explore linkages between/among particular categories, Ethnograph software, a text retrieval program geared toward in-depth exploration of data, was used.

RESULTS

The Return to Work

During recovery from a workplace injury, workers decide whether they want to return to work and, if so, whether they want to return to the workplace at which they were injured. When workers reenter the workforce after an injury, the path of reentry is partly self-controlled and partly employer-controlled. Initially, workers may decide whether they want to return to the preinjury job or decide not to return because of concern about being unable to perform the work or fear of reinjury, for family or educational reasons, because they want different employment, or because they move from the area. However, decisions that are entirely self-determined are the exception. Although over 90% of workers in our study chose to return to their pre-injury job or place of work (Table II), they encountered paths of reentry governed by decisions made by the employer.

Our respondents described three employer-controlled paths of reentry to the preinjury workplace, which we have called ''welcome back,'' ''business as usual,'' or ''you're out'' (Table III). In all paths of reentry the supervisor is typically ''the face'' of the employer.

Returning to the Pre-injury Workplace

In the most common path, ''welcome back,'' the employer wants the worker to return and provides a work environment that is flexible to the injured worker. In the ''business as usual'' path the employer acknowledges the worker's injury but neither assists nor impedes the transition back to work. Employers may say that they lack available jobs consistent with the worker's physical limitation or that they cannot provide a work environment that accommodates the injured worker. In the ''you're out'' path, the employer

TABLE II. Florida Workers' Post-injury Work History Total (N = 204)

	White		Black		Hispanic	
	Male N = 36	Female N = 36	Male N = 36	Female N = 36	Male N = 36	Female N = 24
Return to preinjury employer	n = 28	n = 32	n = 28	n = 28	n = 27	n = 20
Returned to preinjury job	23	23	16	18	20	14
Laid-off after return to preinjury job	5	5	8	5	1	6
Chose to leave after return to preinjury employer	5	13	5	11	6	4
No return to preinjury employer	n = 8	n = 4	n = 8	n = 8	n = 8	n = 4
Preinjury employer refused reemployment	4	2	6	6	4	2
Chose not to return to preinjury job	3	2	2	2	2	2
Retired because of injury	1	0	0	0	3	0
Current work status	n = 36	n = 36	n = 35	n = 35	n = 35	n = 23
Preinjury job and place of employment	9	5	5	1	4	3
Preinjury place of employment	4	0	4	2	3	3
Preinjury job, different employer	1	4	2	4	2	1
Different job, different employer	13	11	9	14	19	5
Not working	8	14	12	14	4	11
Retired	1	2	3	0	3	0

TABLE III. Florida Workers' Postinjury Return to Work Paths

	Number N = 185	Percent 100
"Welcome back"	92	50
"Business as usual"	48	26
"You're out"	45	24

either refuses to rehire the worker or the worker returns to the workplace but employment is terminated soon afterwards as the employer finds fault with the worker's performance or requires the worker to do work which he/she is unable to perform.

The three paths of reentry not only result in different work outcomes, but also impact workers' perceptions of their self-value. Self-value ranges from feeling valued in the ''welcome back'' path, being undervalued or having indeterminate value in the ''business as usual'' path, and lacking any value in the ''you're out'' path.

In the following analysis, we use the experiences of workers in the three employer-controlled paths of reentry to illustrate how workers experience the three paths and how they respond to their employers' treatment of them.

"Welcome Back"

In the ''welcome back'' path, the employer encourages the worker to return to the pre-injury job. The employer acknowledges the worker's injury-related limitations and provides accommodations to permit the worker to return. In this path of reentry, the employer's behavior indicates that the workers are valued as employees, and the workers know that the employer is gladly welcoming them back to work and wants them to stay.

The following examples illustrate this path, with the employer making accommodations (although not necessarily resulting in continued employment). Tony (White, 30–49 years old) a foreman's assistant in a construction company, was injured when his foot became entangled in steel wiring on a construction site. He required surgery for his injury and after approximately 8 weeks he returned to his pre-injury employer and job. He explained how he was treated by his supervisor when he returned to work:

> If I wanted to try to come in and work he said 'sure.' He even made it to where I didn't have to do nothing but answer the phone. And he was constantly, you know, 'are you all right? If you need to go home, go home, don't worry about it' . . . They wanted me to come back to work- . . . they just treated me great . . . from the owner of the company down, they all, I mean I was treated great.

When injured, Tony had worked for his employer for 2 years. Although he wanted to remain in the job, he eventually chose to leave because of pain from his injury. ''I tried to work afterwards for six, eight months, I kept going back but I just couldn't handle it.'' When explaining about leaving the job he said about his employers, ''They tried everything they could . . . to let me stay on the job.'' Tony is not currently working.

Raymond (White male, 50+ years old) was injured lifting chlorine containers at his job as a swimming pool technician. He had worked for his employer for 6 months when he was injured. Raymond returned to the job after 2 weeks and when he returned he was given a helper, ''but I haven't recovered to the point that I can lift.'' He currently works for the same employer but does not do the same kind of work, ''I just do different work, where there's no heavy lifting.''

Martin (Black male, 50+ years old), a pool maintenance worker, was injured when a pump fell on his back. He had worked for his employer for a year and returned to the same job after 2 weeks. He was told by his doctor to return to light duty, ''and I went back to light duty about a week.'' He explained that his employer shared his concern for his condition but, despite the concern, Martin could not perform even the light duty work he was assigned. ''I couldn't do [the work] so from then on I was out.'' He is not currently working.

Statements from Tony, Raymond and Martin reflected other workers in the ''welcome back'' path, many of whom had to leave the job. Martin said that his employer was fair to him, despite the fact that he could not retain his job,

> You know, they was really concerned about me, because I mean, they know that I was hurt, and I was a dependable employee, you know . . . but I wasn't performing, you know, what I was hired to do.

"Business as Usual"

The ''business as usual'' path is characterized by a sense of employer benign neglect. The injured worker returns to the pre-injury job, but the employer makes no adjustments and expects the worker to do the job as if nothing had happened. Eventually the worker either sticks with the pre-injury job, is fired, or leaves. Workers in this path may translate the benign neglect as a message that they are undervalued. They regard the employer as indifferent to them; as not caring whether they stay or leave.

The following examples depict this path. Carol (White female, 20–29 years old), a pastry chef in a restaurant, was

injured unloading crates. She explained that when she returned to work, ''he [the manager] couldn't care less. All he wanted was his work done. He wanted his meals out on their tables.'' When Carol returned to work her back was sore, but when she sat down, ''the manager would come back and tell me to get my butt up . . . .'' Carol left the restaurant job and is not currently working.

Lucille (Black female, 50+ years old) worked as a clothing labeler in a uniform laundry for over 20 years, ''and over the years, this is what the doctor told me, [my back] was just deteriorating from all that standing on concrete and then one day . . . I just felt something kinda snapped.'' When she returned to work her supervisor said, ''I could do it, or . . . I was takin' up space and somebody else could do the job.'' Lucille left the job and is not working.

Jose (Hispanic male, 30–49 years old), a tractor maintenance cleaner, was injured when he slipped while washing a tractor in his job as tractor cleaner. When he returned to work, ''[the doctor] told me to do soft work and the supervisor put me to do normal work . . . the same as before . . . . The same tractor that I used before is the same one that they gave me again.'' Jose remained in the job.

Another aspect of the ''business as usual'' path occurs when employers claim that they cannot provide positions that the injured worker can perform within the limitations imposed by the injuries. The worker initially returns to the pre-injury place of employment but cannot perform the pre-injury or assigned job and the employer offers no other position. Although the worker is given a chance to be reemployed, the path transmits the message that the worker is no longer a desirable employee. Workers view themselves as damaged goods and of having inconclusive or indeterminate value.

The following two situations reveal this aspect. Hector (Hispanic male, 50+ years old) had worked for 33 years as a biscuit salesman when, ''my back went out on me from all the years of bending and picking up boxes.'' He tried to return to work but, ''I couldn't do the physical work and they couldn't find anything else for me to do.'' Hector is not currently working.

Rosa (Hispanic female, 30–49 years old), an orange picker, was injured when her ladder tipped over. She had been working for 4 months at the time of the injury. Two weeks after the injury, she was told by her employer and the employer's physician to return to picking oranges, despite her statement that she could hardly move or turn. She went back to her job, but after working for 3 hours was unable to continue because of pain from the injury. Rosa left the job and is not currently employed.

A common theme for workers in the ''business as usual'' path was that the worker's welfare was irrelevant to the employer. Lucille expressed this belief saying, ''That's all they wanted, was the work to get out.'' Similarly Carol remarked about her supervisor, ''All he wanted was his work done.''

"You're Out"

In the ''you're out'' path, most workers return to the preinjury workplace, either to the pre-injury job or another position. The workers cannot do the work, or the employer finds fault with the work being performed, and the employer chooses not to offer another position, even though one may be available. Workers in this situation generally express the belief that the employer no longer valued them and was looking to terminate them. Workers experiencing this path view themselves not only as damaged goods but also as being discarded and of having no value whatsoever, irrespective of how many years they may have been employed. In this path the employer may also decide to terminate the injured worker before the worker has tried to return. Many workers interpret this behavior as actively hostile and dismissive. They believe they were terminated just because they had suffered an injury and would be a liability to the employer, and that the employer was looking for an excuse to fire them.

The following examples explain the feelings of rejection and employer hostility. Donna (Black female, 20–29 years old) was a home health care worker who was injured when a patient fell on her. She explained about her supervisors, ''Well, their reaction was, 'well we're sorry that it happened,' and then they really turned cold and nasty against me. And then they started to find things to get rid of me.'' When she returned to work, ''they told me I couldn't come back on light duty. I had to come back regular staff or not at all.'' Donna paid for secretarial classes and eventually obtained a unit secretarial job, a lower paying position with another employer.

Raoul (Hispanic male, 20–29 years old) was injured unloading dishes in his job as a restaurant dishwasher. He had been working for 4 months when the injury occurred and returned to work after 1 month. When he returned he was terminated from the job and was told by his supervisor, ''Well since you got hurt on the job we're gonna have to let you go and hire somebody else to take your position because we don't think you're 100 percent able to do the job.'' In Raoul's words, ''They wanted to fire me 'cause I hurt myself on the job.'' Raoul is currently self-employed.

Dan (Black male, 20–29 years old) was a city garbage collector who was injured when he fell from the back of the garbage truck. He had been working for 2 years and returned to work 1 month after the injury. He was fired from his job and currently works delivering goods for a retail store.

> Once I got back on the job, their main intent was to terminate me. They put me in positions where they knew it would cause stress and strain on my back.

> And the statements I got from them were 'if you can't do the job find another one.' That's straight out of my superintendent's mouth . . . . they had me bending over painting lines for the parking spaces. Anything that involved a lot of bending . . . I ended up being fired or terminated . . . . they was in too much of a hurry to get me back to work so they could terminate me. Those were his exact words, 'terminate me.'

Dan believed that his supervisors intended to terminate him as soon as he returned to work. He philosophized about his experience,

> You should give that man the benefit of the doubt and try to prove his injury wrong before writing him off as him lying . . . 'Cause it's not fair to the employee, especially if . . . if you got an employee that's put a lot of time in on the job, has been faithful to the employer, and kept up his end of the agreement between the two of them as far as productivity and then they just, because of an unfortunate accident or incident, he gets hurt and needs them to support without as much productivity as before when he was healthy, they shouldn't try to write him off or get rid of him.

Charles (Black male, 30–49 years old) was a service worker for city public works who operated heavy equipment and was injured lifting manhole covers. After 2 months he was ready to return to work but said that,

> after [management] knew I was hurt, they made sure that I didn't come back on the job . . . They fired me I think about five months after the injury . . . Once I had got injured they didn't want me back . . . . I had been there 10 years. I had a lot at stake. I didn't want to lose 10 years of service but they didn't even give me a chance . . . not even to answer the telephone.

Charles is working in a different job for a different employer.

Elizabeth (Black female, 30–49 years old) was a tractor driver injured when a bale of hay fell on her back. She had worked for the same company for 7 years at the time of the injury. She did not return to work after the injury because, ''they didn't want me back. [They] just say if you can't do the job they hired you for then they don't want nothing to do with you.'' Elizabeth is not currently working.

Carlos (Hispanic male, 30–49 years old) a heavy-duty equipment technician was injured when he was lifted by a crane. He had worked for his employer for $9\frac{1}{2}$ years at the time of the injury and returned to the same employer and job initially, but was ''forced to quit'' because he could no longer perform the same job. When he returned to work he found that, ''The first order was, 'because you don't feel well you have to work only a certain amount and we can't pay to you the same salary' . . . He forced me to quit and I didn't want to quit the company.'' Carlos works part-time ordering parts as a depot worker.

The sense of betrayal heard from workers in this path was expressed by Carlos who said, ''I was disappointed after I was so honest to the company after so many years I working almost 80 hour a week, after I handle the company like I'm the right hand for the supervisor, the right hand.''

The Myth of "Light Duty" and "Special Accommodations"

Workers, even those encountering a ''welcome back'' atmosphere, often feel poorly served by the accommodations made at the workplace when they return to work. Although half of all workers who returned to the pre-injury employer reported that they returned to light duty work, some reported that they lost their light duty jobs before they were ready to take on heavier work or that the ''light duty'' positions were no lighter than their preinjury job or other jobs in the workplace (Table IV).

> It was light duty for a few weeks, for a two-week period, and then we were back to a regular routine again. (White male 30–49 years old)

> Well they put me on ''light duty'' but there's no such thing as light duty. (Black male 30–49 years old)

> It was supposedly light duty. (Black female 30–49 years old)

> Well, I did what they considered light duty at that time which was still lifting. (Black female 50+ years old)

> Well dispatching is supposed to be light duty but it wasn't anything light about it. (Black female 50+ years old)

> Well, they called it light duty. (Black female, 50+ years old)

> Well they put light duty on it but then nobody took care of that so I had to do my own job. (Hispanic male 50+ years old)

Although workers were told by their doctors to return to light duty work, many mentioned that the employers made

TABLE IV. Florida Workers' Postinjury Needs and Capacities Total

	Number	Percent
Return to Work[a]	N = 159	
Light duty work when returned	79	50
Light duty for 1–2 weeks	7	4
"Light duty" when returned	15	9
Worked fewer hours when returned	47	30
Required special equipment to return to work	60	38
Employer provided equipment	29	48
Medical provider provided equipment	5	10
Worker provided equipment	6	8
Current work	n = 129	
Has limits on work capabilities	74	58
Requires special accommodations	32	25
Current job flexible to needs	87	68
Has not told about injury	13	10

[a] The return to work group refers to people who initially went back to work for the preinjury employer and responded to questions about light duty.

no attempt to accommodate their needs. Carlos was told by his doctor to return to a light duty job ''but he [supervisor] say he no have it.'' Another Hispanic male (30–49 years old) was told by his doctor not to return to his job as a tractor driver but the supervisor reacted differently, ''He told me no matter what, get on the tractor and work slow, but work.'' A White male (50+ years old) recounted that his doctor had recommended he sit more often, ''but they didn't go along with that, they didn't even take that into consideration.'' Two Black males (50+ years old) explained that they did not return to light duty work because, ''there's no light duty job,'' as did a White female (50+ years old) who said, ''there's no light duty in cafeteria work,'' and an Hispanic female (50+ years old) reiterated this saying, ''they send you for light duty but there is no light duty whatsoever. I told the doctor 'of what light duty are you talking about, there is no light duty standing on a production line eight hours.'''

For many workers the return to the workplace included a prescription from a medical provider to use special equipment, but most frequently the employer did not provide the recommended equipment. Although a chiropractor told Rosa she needed a neck brace, she was not provided with one. Because she could not afford to purchase one, she used a rolled towel around her neck. When moving to new places of employment, some workers are reluctant to tell their new employers about their problems (Table IV). However, this precludes the employer's providing accommodations or special equipment. Charles said he requires special equipment but has not asked for any because, ''I don't want them to know I have a problem with my back.''

White males are more likely than other males or females to return to an employment situation that enables them to continue working by providing light-duty work (Table V). Three-quarters of the White males we interviewed report a period of light duty, a greater proportion than any other group. Female workers are least likely to report returning to light duty jobs and most likely to make sarcastic remarks that any ''light duty'' assigned was not really light duty. White males are the most likely, and Hispanic males and females the least likely, to report that their current jobs are not flexible to the limitations imposed by back problems. Both White and Hispanic males who changed employers report that they have not told anyone at their current job about their back problems. They fear losing their jobs if their current employer knows they have a back injury.

Perceptions of Racial and/or Ethnic Discrimination

Workers also talked about their perceptions about how fairly they were treated and commented about experiencing discrimination. When asked about their treatment at work and the treatment of workers who had been injured on the job, Black and Hispanic workers frequently responded that they believed they were treated differently because of their

TABLE V. Florida Workers' Postinjury Needs and Capacities Total (N = 204)

	White		Black		Hispanic	
	Male	**Female**	**Male**	**Female**	**Male**	**Female**
Return to work[a]	n = 28	n = 32	n = 28	n = 26	n = 26	n = 19
Light duty work when returned	21	15	12	11	9	11
Light duty for 1–2 weeks	2	0	0	0	4	1
"Light duty" when returned	2	4	2	4	2	1
Worked fewer hours when returned	10	18	6	3	4	6
Required special equipment to return to work	11	9	8	8	11	13
Employer provided equipment	8	2	5	6	6	2
Worker provided equipment	0	4	0	0	0	1
Medical provider provided equipment	1	0	0	1	1	3
Currently working	n = 27	n = 20	n = 20	n = 21	n = 28	n = 12
Has limits on work capabilities	13	16	9	13	13	10
Requires special accommodations	4	7	4	9	5	3
Current job flexible to needs	21	16	15	15	13	7
Has not told about injury	4	0	1	3	4	1

[a] The return to work group refers to people who initially went back to work for the preinjury employer and responded to questions about light duty.

race or ethnic background. Dan explained about his treatment,

> they kept sendin' me to doctors that would spend less than five minutes with me and tell me that I was okay. I actually went to one that said, 'a big Black man like yourself, if you can't do the job find another one.'

Charles believed that he was laid off because of being Black saying, "I know that's an easy thing for somebody to say but in my case I think it's true." Charles gave examples of other people who had back injuries and who had returned to light duty jobs and although he said that another Black coworker had been given a light duty job after a back injury, he elaborated that, "we only had a certain number on the job so you had to have somebody in a position where they could say that they were being fair with the, you know, the positioning of the crew leaders or whatever." Another Black male (30–49 years old) said about one of his supervisors, "he wasn't nice, prejudiced, and at times he gave me a hard time." After returning to work he was laid off. "They told me they had nothing for me to do. So then, that's when I know it was more than what they told me. They had a job on the board but they didn't want me to have it." A Black male (50+ years old) who was a city maintenance worker said about his job, "Well I really feel I'm entitled to more money what they could have given me . . . I had a hard time to get it and I really believe I'm not the only one ever had it like that. There's a lot of discrimination in the world today." Two Black females (20–29 years old) talked about discriminatory practices including one who said of a White female worker who had been injured, "they did a lot more for her than they did for me."

Similar comments were heard from Hispanic workers. Raoul remarked about the management that, "they was mean. I understood. I thought they was racist. They try to make me buy a back brace instead of giving me one. They gave this white guy one but they didn't give me none." Carlos explained that when he returned to work, "I feel discrimination . . . I was disappointed after I was so honest to the company after so many years." Another Hispanic male (50+ years old) remarked that at his job, "there were all types of people and nationalities and everyone got along well. Some supervisors they went beyond and abused their position, see, even though that never happened with me." One Hispanic male said that he worried about applying to workers' compensation because it would affect his job, "because I don't know, because I didn't understand English well, much less to read it or anything like that . . . I think later on it would affect me." Language issues were also of concern to Rosa who explained that, "I feel that I'm one of those people that they love to humiliate, because I'm a Mexican or because I don't speak English. Because other people they do help . . . and with me they did what they wanted." Another Hispanic female explained about her workplace that, "the atmosphere that one worked in was not good because there is a lot of discrimination."

Interestingly, a few Hispanic workers referred to their non-Hispanic supervisors as helping them because they were Hispanic. One male (50+ years old) said about his former supervisor, ''when he find out I was looking for a job he called me right away. Because he like Latin people that work.''

Perceptions of Gender Discrimination

Although not directly asked about gender issues and experiences at work before or after the injury, a number of females believed that they were treated differently because of their gender. Three White females (20–29 years old) said they had been required to do heavy jobs that men were not asked to do such as, ''I was working in a seafood department and I was actually asked to do something that a woman never should have been asked to do . . . taking out probably about a sixty to seventy pound block of ice. And there was men . . . wouldn't do it.'' A White female (20–29 years old) reported that, ''I was treated very unfairly compared to what the other people had been treated . . . the assistant manager believed that women shouldn't be in the sporting department,'' and, similarly another White female (30–49 years old) said that because she was a woman she was not treated in the same way as other people injured on the job. ''Well one, because I'm a woman, that had a lot to do with it . . . other than cashiers there weren't any women workers. I was treated rather shabby.'' Elizabeth thought that her gender was the reason she was laid off, ''You know, sometimes they just hire ladies just 'cause they have to. But they don't want you back once you get hurt.'' Two Hispanic females (30–49 years old) commented that they were expected to do work that was inappropriate for women. One who worked in the rug department of a department store remarked, ''It was heavy . . . most of the ladies, they get problems and I mean they should have given us some kind of belt or something . . . while we were working.'' The second worked in the bakery of a supermarket said although her doctor told her to return to light duty work she was put to work in a strenuous job, ''that was what the men did there.''

DISCUSSION

Implication of Overall Findings

Some people choose to leave the preinjury employer because of concern about being unable to work or about reinjury. For others, the injury and its consequences cause them to reevaluate their lives, leading them to decide to return to school, to stay at home to care for family members, to move, or to stop working. However, the great majority want to return to the pre-injury employer.

This study describes a variety of paths to reemployment available to workers attempting to return to the workplace after an injury. Those who want to return to the pre-injury employer face an array of employer responses ranging from ''welcome back'' to ''you're out.'' When an employer welcomes the injured worker back, that worker maintains continuity of employment and builds on an investment in employer-specific skills and seniority. Returning to the pre-injury employer reduces the length of time off work and the resulting costs of work absences after injury because finding a new employer or new occupation increases time off work and causes a loss of investment and seniority in the preinjury job [Galizzi and Boden, 1996]. In addition to reducing time lost from work, the ''welcome back'' path provides workers with a sense of being valued by their employers. This positive effect remains, even for those who are unable to continue working because of their limitations. Other employer responses cause workers to feel undervalued, as discarded or damaged goods, and this generates hostility and resentment. These latter paths, experienced by half our respondents, also makes it more difficult for workers to reenter the labor market and may well affect long-term employment. All the workers we interviewed had back injuries that left them with long periods of subsequent disability. Many were unable to return to their previous jobs for months, and some were never able to return. Most would have benefited from employer support of their return to work and a significant amount of assistance in resuming productive employment.

Approximately one-third of injured or disabled workers in other studies have reported that their employers provided workplace accommodations [Burkhauser et al., 1995; Daly and Bound, 1995; Galizzi et al., 1998]. In a study of construction workers, employers provided accommodations for only 11 of 45 workers who had symptoms lasting longer than 2 months [Welch et al., 1999]. In our study, half of those who initially returned to work reported that their employers offered light-duty work. However, a substantial number also told us that the work was light duty in name only or that it was offered for too short a period. Even when a physician recommended special equipment to aid the worker's return to employment, frequently neither the employer nor workers' compensation insurance provided or paid for this equipment.

Employer programs providing accommodations for injured and disabled workers have been shown to reduce time off work and increase the likelihood of post-injury employment [Krause et al., 1998]. However, the experiences of respondents in this study suggest that many workers do not receive accomodations, and if they do receive them, the accomodations are limited. This raises important questions about the adequacy of employer assistance for disabled workers.

Although these findings suggest the potential value of programs that encourage employers to offer accommodations to workers who need them, there are few examples.

Exceptions are the Employer-at-Injury Program (EAIP) which subsidizes employers who offer modified or light-duty jobs to get workers back to work before they have fully recovered [Oregon Department of Consumer and Business Services, 1998a]. A second program, the Preferred Worker Program (PWP) provides incentives to hire workers who have received permanent disability benefits and cannot return to regular employment including up to $25,000 for tools, equipment, and redesign of the worksite to allow preferred workers to become employed [Oregon Department of Consumer and Business Services, 1998b].

The Experience of Discrimination

While injured workers have much in common, the findings of this study suggest that there are racial and/or ethnic and gender differences in the return to work experience of injured workers. Statements made by workers about their post-injury return to work reveal that a substantial number of minority and female workers believe that they suffer discrimination after they are injured. White males are the most likely to be offered light-duty work and to remain in their pre-injury jobs over time. Black and Hispanic workers are more likely than White workers to be employed in occupations in which they were unable to either return to their original job or to other employment. This finding is consistent with the finding that Blacks and Hispanics suffer greater post-layoff earnings losses than non-Hispanic Whites [Ong, 1991]. Until now, no research had studied racial differences in workers' losses from injuries.

On the dimension of gender, female workers are more likely than male workers to remain unemployed 5 years after the injury. This is consistent with recent research showing that women injured at work suffer proportionately greater economic losses than do men [Boden and Galizzi, 1999]. Other studies have found that women are less likely to acquire new skills after displacement [Jacobson et al., 1993] and displaced women are unemployed for longer periods than men [Jones and Kuhn, 1993].

These findings suggest that injured racial and/or ethnic minorities and women may experience a double dose of discrimination: first in the employment process and then after they become injured. The second dose of discrimination might occur if workplace injuries are considered by employers as signals about the overall desirability of the injured worker. Where employers' prior beliefs about productivity, commitment to the labor force, and motivation of particular groups are positive, the signal sent by a workplace injury may not have a strong impact on employers' behavior. However, when employers' prior beliefs are prejudicial about a particular group (Blacks, Hispanics, women, and so on), the injury may reinforce existing prejudices and lead to poorer treatment toward members of that group.

As noted earlier, the nature of the study does not allow generalizing outside our sample, and we cannot say whether racial/ethnic and gender disparities are related to differences in types of jobs held by different groups or whether they reflect inherently different treatment of injured workers by race and/or ethnicity or gender. Our findings indicate that workers' perceptions may reflect real but unacknowledged differences in the ways that White, Black, and Hispanic male and female workers are treated on the job. This suggests a need for further investigation to clarify the nature and extent of post-injury discriminatory behavior and steps that might be taken to minimize such behavior.

CONCLUSION

To understand fully the impacts of workplace injuries, it is necessary to broaden analyses beyond economic analysis to include the experiences of injured workers. This study suggests that there are meaningful common themes, but also disparities, in post-injury employment experiences of White, Black, and Hispanic male and female workers. Understanding the experience of job reentry from the perspective of the injured workers themselves may help in designing policies that better accomplish the social goal of minimizing the substantial economic and noneconomic costs of workplace injuries.

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