

**Working Paper**

**Restructuring Time  
Implications of Work-Hours Reductions for the Working Class**

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# **Restructuring Time**

## **Implications of Work-Hours Reductions for the Working Class**

**Keywords** work/family, class, time, hours, resistance, change

### **Abstract**

This paper examines the implications of work hours reductions, specifically through curtailing overtime, for hourly, working class employees. Much of the literature on work/life integration recommends a reduction in hours by salaried employees and the restructuring of work to support working shorter but smarter hours. We find that long hours are essential for many working class employees for whom overtime hours have become the solution to a host of work/family problems, ranging from the basic need to “make ends meet” to the more hidden strains of caring for extended families and dealing with divorce, illness, and addiction. Efforts to reduce hours will be met with resistance not relief. Our depiction of working class concerns addresses the need for the work/family literature to move beyond a focus on professionals and to tackle tough tradeoffs regarding livelihood and quality of life.

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## **Restructuring Time**

### **Implications of Work-Hours Reductions for the Working Class**

Work/family research has identified both synergies and trade-offs between the realms of home and work (e.g., Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000). The synergies involve flexibility and adaptations that enrich both realms (e.g., Crosby, 1991). The trade-offs generally focus on the scarcity of time, the cure for which is flexible or reduced hours. Reduced hours have been shown to appeal to the salaried professional employees who have been the focus of most work/family research (e.g., Bond, Galinsky & Swanberg, 1998; Moen, 2003). Work/family scholars have not yet examined fully whether the implications of reduced work hours and the potential trade-offs to be overcome are similar for the working class, despite a commitment to diversity and to uncovering varied workers' perspectives.

This paper presents a qualitative analysis of a reduction in overtime hours for working class employees, occasioned by work "restructuring" (e.g., Osterman, 2000). Detailed qualitative portraits of employees' dilemmas have played an important role in advancing the work/life literature. When employees feel they must hide their home life and any challenges in balancing it, the very nature of the issues – and the avoidable negative effects on work outcomes – become invisible and thinly understood. In response, both early and ongoing research on work/life integration has focused on uncovering the nuances of workers' hidden work/life concerns and adaptations through in-depth qualitative exploration (e.g., Hochschild, 1991, 1997; Jackson, 2002; Nippert-Eng, 1996; Perlow, 1997; Rapoport & Rapoport, 1965; Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher & Pruitt, 2001). This work was oriented not only toward helping workers survive and advance but toward finding changes in work practices that benefited the entire enterprise. In the spirit of this tradition, we add missing portraits to the collage by considering the nature of working class concerns about hours reductions. We consider how the desire for reduced hours might be made complex by financial and other constraints.

We open by examining three main threads in the work/family literature: employees' desires to reduce hours, the barriers to their doing so, and some enablers of their doing so. Our method section considers the special challenges of gaining access to contested terrain – where matters of income, personal finance, private worry, and resistance to change are difficult to broach. We close by considering the special barriers to reduced hours for the working class and the implications for different enablers of balance.

## WORK TIME, WORK/LIFE BALANCE AND CLASS

### The Appeal of Reduced Work Hours

Work/family research on the effect of long work hours and on the desirability of hours reductions often rests upon the “scarcity hypothesis” (e.g., Baruch, Beiner & Barnett, 1987; Bielby, 1988; Hyde, DeLamater & Hewitt, 1998; Barnett & Gareis, 2000), which makes the straightforward assertion that human energy is limited. The more one works, the less time and energy one has available to devote to family, personal, or civic engagements. Long work hours, then, are likely to generate conflict for workers, and reductions in work-time appear desirable.

Reinforcing this view of work time are several trends in work and in family structures. Professionals are working longer and longer hours, while more families are juggling careers for both spouses (Jacobs & Gerson, 1998). Such workers, when surveyed, often do report a desire to work less and to have more time for themselves (Bond, Galinsky & Swanberg, 1998; Moen, 2003). Accordingly, work/family scholars have examined the effects of long work hours and have studied the emergence of various types of reduced-load work arrangements, generally with the assumption that these reductions would benefit workers.

However, as Barnett and Gareis note, existing research on the effects of long hours is mixed: “short hours are not necessarily or universally associated with better outcomes, neither are long hours necessarily or universally associated with negative ones” (2000:358). Research is now

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shifting to investigate the causes underlying these divergent results, with particular attention to variance in the features of work arrangements with shorter or more flexible hours and to the voluntariness of the arrangement (e.g., Fuchs & Jacobsen, 1991; Barnett & Gareis, 2000; Kossek, Lautsch & Eaton, 2005). While these factors may be important, another influence we believe may be critical is the class status of the workforce involved.

Because it was partly triggered by increased work hours of professional workers, the existing work/family research has focused heavily on the implications of reduced hours work for professionals. It recommends reduced hours as a good strategy for work/life integration and retention of talent (Barnett & Hall, 2001). The desire for hours reduction may be different, however, for lower-skill working class people than it is for professional workers. Nippert-Eng

(1996:163), for example, considers status differences in the capacity to balance work and life, noting that the greater temporal and spatial accountability of lower level workers makes it more difficult for them to attend to home needs seamlessly during the work day. However, Jacobs and Gerson (1998) note that long work weeks are more common for professionals, managers, and technical workers than they are for workers with lower-skill level in other occupations, and Reynolds (2003) has shown that professionals do express more interest in hours reduction than do other workers. Factors that impede and facilitate hours reductions also may differ across the two work groups.

## **Hour Reductions: Barriers and Enablers for Professionals and the Working Class**

Professional workers' desires for hours reductions have been shown to be impeded by their concerns about career impacts. For example, product development engineers who work long hours in order to meet expectations for "face time" in the office end up creating inefficiencies in the work process (Rapoport, Bailyn, Kolb & Fletcher, 1998). "Rat race" dynamics arise in these competitive professional careers where face time is the tie-breaker when other aspects of merit cannot easily be measured (Landers, Rebitzer & Taylor, 1996). Workers suffer quietly in a system where they prefer fewer hours but nonetheless work longer hours just to stay in the game. Hochschild (1997) describes a slightly different scenario in which home circumstances provide the barrier to hours reductions. Workers keep doing long hours to avoid even more difficult tasks in their chaotic and crunched home life.

The primary recommendation from scholars is to restructure work to enhance efficiency and flexibility so workers can work less and still achieve in both work and home realms. Individual efforts alone cannot overcome conformity pressures and norms (Landers, Rebitzer & Taylor, 1996), and so broader work redesign and culture change is recommended to enable more professionals to take advantage of hours reductions. Rayman (2001:178), for example, documents an experiment at a bank to restructure work so that employees can work smarter not longer, a collective effort that took the pressure off individuals to resist long hours. This approach builds upon the arguments in the work/life "dual-agenda" literature (e.g., Bailyn & Fletcher, 1997) that maintains that the most effective approach for organizations wishing to deal with work/family problems is to focus on broad changes to the work process and norms that will

respond to personal concerns as well as benefit the organization's performance (e.g., Friedman, Christensen & DeGroot, 1998; Lee, MacDermid & Buck, 2000).

Little comparable research has assessed barriers to hours reduction for the working class. Schor's influential research that documented increased work hours and barriers to reducing them for Americans (Schor, 1991; Leete & Schor, 1994) is an exception. Schor argues that Americans, from professionals to those working for minimum wage, are working longer and longer hours in large part because of cycle of consumerism – social pressures pushing people to keep purchasing what they see others have (Schor 1991; 1994). While Schor (1991) recognizes that some of the lowest paid workers could not afford to give up any work, and while she argues the minimum wage should be increased in response, for the vast majority of workers she recommends that the consumption spiral be pre-empted through a cultural shift. Workers – working-class, middle-class or professional – should try changing their expectations and lifestyles so they can live on less, or “downshifting” (Schor 1991;1998).

We examine these three themes, of working for career advancement, working to avoid family and personal time, and working to consume more luxury items, as well as exploring whether other work/life dilemmas exist for blue-collar workers.

## **RESEARCH METHOD AND RESEARCH SITE**

### **Accessing Contested Terrain**

Our starting point for this study was the opportunistic discovery that overtime hours reduction was a very hotly contested issue at a plant where each author was studying other issues that are impacted by worker responses to overtime hours reduction. Organizational behavior has favored studies of those outcomes that are most accessible, measurable, and trouble free, thereby missing more nuanced or contested areas (Staw, 1984). The study of conflict, tension, and dissent requires a different kind of access into an organization (Webb & Palmer, 1998). We learned about the overtime issue as a supplement to two ongoing research projects in the same company, undertaken separately by this paper's two authors: one on trust and the transition to teamwork during work restructuring and one on contingent work and its effects on both temporary and permanent employees. Coming directly at this problem would have been difficult, but getting a tangent to it, as ethnographers often do, allowed us to make some fortuitous discoveries.

The study of the transition to teamwork and the challenge of building trust pointed to areas of worker resistance where workers felt at risk that cross-training, job rotation, and other practices would allow managers to reduce the size of the workforce. Managers expressed surprise that workers were not eager to seize the opportunity for work enrichment entailed in work restructuring, and began to express concern that potential loss of hours created resistance. The study of contingent work revealed a wish among temporary workers for more stable hours, and with that a more stable income stream. In contrast to the view that shorter or supposedly more flexible hours are preferred, workers experienced these as uncertain and anxiety-producing hours.

Based on the observations from these studies, we realized we had found an interesting and overlapping area to pursue in more depth. Moreover, we had established access and relationships in this plant so that we could pursue this quite sensitive topic.

## **The Setting**

We use an in-depth case study to explore these issues for the working class, a method necessary because of the exploratory nature of our study and consistent with prior work/life research. We studied teams of assembly workers and their team coordinators and managers who worked in one plant at QualCo, our pseudonym for this Fortune 500 company long known for its “family” atmosphere and concern for workers. We conducted an in-depth case study of this site. Work in this location occurred around the clock across five shifts. Overtime occurred on Saturdays and Sundays, or in the form of “earlies” (e.g., coming in at 3am before a 7am-3pm shift or at 11am before a 3pm-11pm shift) or “overs” (e.g., staying from 3pm-7pm after a 7am-3pm shift).



**Table 1: Shifts, Staffing, and Demographics at One Plant of QualCo**

	Hours	Staffing Level (# people)					
		Black Male	White Male	Black Female	White Female	Other Female	Total
A Shift	Monday to Friday 7 a.m. – 3 p.m.	3	6	7	3		19
B Shift	Monday to Friday 3 p.m. – 11 p.m.	3	3	4	1	1	12
C Shift	Monday to Friday 11 p.m. – 7 a.m.		9	7			16
E Shift	Saturday and Sunday 7 a.m. – 7 p.m. Monday and Tuesday 3 p.m. – 11 p.m.		3	2	1		6
F Shift	Saturday and Sunday 7 a.m. – 7 p.m. Thursday and Friday 3 p.m. – 11 p.m.		2		1		3
Total staffing		6	23	20	6	1	56

**Data Collection**

*Group meetings.* We convened group meetings specifically to discuss the topic of overtime and the proposed reductions and to introduce our study as an opportunity to voice their ideas. In the course of our other studies, we had also sat in on regular team meetings. We held meetings at the time of shift change (to allow more workers to attend). We covered all five groups in three visits: E and A shifts at 3:00pm, the cusp of B shift and F shift at 3:00pm, and the C Shift at 6:00 am. In these large group settings, we were surprised by the intensity of feelings about this hot potato topic and gained much substantive data from these preliminary discussions.

*Interviews.* We interviewed workers who volunteered to participate in interviews across each of the five shifts. Interviews lasted for approximately one hour and provided background

on individuals' experiences as well as their perceptions of their team-members' work patterns. We also conducted interviews with virtually all of the team coordinators, with upper management and the plant manager in the site.

All interviewees were volunteers. That they were given time to participate during the workday may have been an appealing break. We met with all interviewees in a separate, closed space. Their names were not given to managers so that confidentiality could be protected.

Although our interview sample was composed of volunteers rather than randomly chosen, we believe this was appropriate for our study. Volunteers may be those who have strong feelings about something – either positive or negative – and therefore motivated to participate in a study. Because we are investigating some of the causes of concern and resistance, capturing these voices is a benefit rather than a problem for the purposes of this paper. Even a handful of disappointed workers, stressed about how to adjust their home life to a new work circumstance, could have an important effect on a team in the restructured team production process. Alternatively, the opposite potential bias with a volunteer sample is that we would tap only those who tout the “management line.” Indeed, in our setting, this issue would have been greater had workers been required (by management) to speak with us, as is the case in many studies. In the end, our actual data show neither bias and include a range of respondents, including those who currently work no overtime, those who work many hours but who could give it up easily, and those who would face significant difficulties and anger in losing overtime. In total, we met with all 56 members of the staff of this site in large or smaller group settings, and conducted in-depth interviews with sixteen workers and managers.

This level of voluntary participation in the study was particularly difficult to attain because of conflict and strong emotional reactions surrounding the issues of teamwork and overtime in the site. We entered the site in a time when management said there was a “storm of distrust” swirling around these issues. One of our early shift-change meetings with groups of workers was characterized by intense conflict between workers and management. Our notes from this early meeting show workers saying that it was, “us versus them.” The fact that some workers declined to talk to us is yet another piece of data that overtime hours are emotionally charged for workers (Sutton, 1989, 1997).

*Archival information.* We also collected documentation from management regarding the restructuring at QualCo, the strategy for changes in the plant and how these had been communicated to workers.

## RESULTS

This section opens by summarizing some of the patterns of engagement with overtime hours that we heard from workers. Next, we summarize some of the themes that are common in the work and time literature that echo in our data. Then, we introduce three new themes that emerged in our data. Each reveals normally hidden aspects of workers' lives that are not considered in discussions of work and life balance but that deeply inform their approach to overtime. We use pseudonyms in the examples and quotations.

### Patterns of Overtime Work

At QualCo there are a very few workers who regularly refuse overtime, several who always accept it, and a majority who usually accept it and keep their name on the list to be asked regularly. Several people observed that most people doing overtime work about 46-54 hours per week, but that a few do 60-70 hours per week and routinely do six or seven days each week.

Workers have different patterns that balance their lives. For example, Brian likes to stick with an 8-hour day each weekday and get home at a "reasonable hour, so I can still have a life" and do all overtime on weekends, particularly because, "Sunday is double time, the money day. I wouldn't pass up a Sunday unless for a wedding." Angie observed, "I wouldn't say no to a Sunday even for a wedding or christening."

Many workers have settled into their patterns for a long time. Overtime is not about coping with crunch times at the plant, but a steady way of life: "It's been pretty much this way for years." Workers were aware of the differences in livelihood created by their own overtime work and that of others. One noted that a typical person in the plant might have "a base salary of \$30,000, but with overtime, it's up to \$50-60,000." For this region of the country, that difference crosses the line from below to above the median income and from eligibility for federal assistance (e.g., for housing or fuel) to ineligibility for a family of four. That is, this difference in salary is not another \$20-30,000 of luxury goods but a difference that moves a family from marginally poor to just about comfortable.

Even workers who valued their overtime still spoke of the difficulties it posed in their lives. Damon said, "I hope my kids go to college and get good jobs, so they don't have to do what I do, work six to seven days a week." The overriding preference, of course, would be for a 40 hour week that paid a livable wage.

## Themes in Common with the Literature

As we noted above, the discussion of working time in previous studies focuses on two main themes for salaried workers: professionals and engineers are prevented from acting on their desires to work reduced hours through inefficient work practices, organizational policies, and institutionalized status contests (Landers, Rebitzer & Taylor, 1996; Perlow, 1997; Perlow, 1999); and long work hours may also serve as an “escape” from unpleasant tasks at home (Hochschild, 1997). Our data contain variants of these accounts: some salaried managers work long hours to enhance their perceived chances for promotion, while other (typically male) managers and workers connect their long hours to a need to bury themselves in work after the end of a relationship or, in one case, to avoid confronting tensions around a homosexual identity. When working long hours for these reasons, managers and workers perceived overtime to be more under their control. Often these managers and workers in our sample had already voluntarily reduced their overtime hours, or viewed their current excessive work hours as temporary and a choice or coping mechanism.

Another theme, of spiraling consumption being a barrier to hours reduction, was developed in the literature with respect to both professionals and the working class. When we probed this idea in our interviews, we found that it was not always easy to distinguish workers “needs” and “wants” or to identify easy choices that workers and their families could make to reduce their consumption. We also noted interesting differences in perspective across managers and workers on this issue. Managers often viewed workers’ consumption patterns as excessive and urged them to cut back and adjust to shorter hours, to downshift as the literature recommends. Their examples included some derogations of stereotypical working class consumptions patterns, such as criticizing workers’ purchases of gold chains or lawn ornaments, not surprising amidst the contest over “taste” that separates the classes (Bourdieu & Nice, 1987). Perhaps these references also made it easier to dismiss and feel less guilty about employees’ financial hardship in the face of overtime reductions. In contrast, the workers themselves distinguished more carefully between overtime money needed to “make ends meet” and money allocated to “little luxuries”.

Graciella, for example, gave a clear list of the kinds of things that she could afford with overtime that she would not afford on her base salary. She said, “Without overtime, I couldn’t do the things I wanted.” When asked what those things were, she had a ready list:

Take a vacation each year;

Buy three sets of books, I just got them, and want to study them [she was still learning English as a second language];  
Fix my house – do some remodeling;  
Change the oil in my car when I'm supposed to;  
I have a large family – there are lots of weddings, christenings, and funerals too – it costs \$5-7 to have 3 masses prayed, \$35 for a bouquet;  
I have lots of nieces and nephews [no children of her own], and as the oldest sister, I want to help send them to college.

Whether such items were viewed as necessities, or as luxuries, varied across our sample. Graciella felt that these things were not extravagances but things that gave her a quality of life that she had sought when she immigrated to the United States. She was happy to be able to work extra hard to have them. Others might argue that taking a vacation each year or buying books for education and self-improvement might not be essential to life. At the same time, these are also not what most middle- or upper-class workers or managers would consider “extras” in their own lives and not what the “downshifting” movement proposes eliminating. Overall, while workers at QualCo generally emphasized overtime mainly as a means of acquiring necessities, it is also permitted at least a modest amount leftover for occasional luxuries. As Lisa said, “you do have to treat yourself once in awhile too, ...like to a pair of earrings; everybody knows that.”

Although many workers used overtime pay entirely for necessities, or for a combination of necessities and little luxuries, managers tended to focus on (and to judge) workers' acquisition of extravagances in their descriptions of overtime motivations. For example, the attributions made about one worker, Ella, and her own reasons for working overtime, exemplify this contrast in perceptions. Ella reports that she works overtime to:

...try to make ends meet. OT is a big issue. If I don't work more than 40 hours, I have to get a part time job. If I didn't need it, I wouldn't work. ... Maybe if the economy wasn't so hard, maybe I wouldn't have to work OT. I try to survive. ... It is not easy to work 12 hours. It is a long day. I psych myself out to get through it. I try not to think about the time passing. If I think about it and get discouraged or want to go home, I remind myself that I need this. I better do it. I think about the bills coming in. I'd get a second job if the OT was cut. I had done that in the past. I don't want to work more. I can't hold up anymore. It is hard to last 12 hours. I get tired.

Her manager Ray, while recognizing that Ella had faced some costly problems, mainly viewed Ella as creating her own financial problems.

People don't have reserves today for a rainy day. They spend all they've got plus the plastic. ...I give them financial advice. Don't blow all you make. It's nuts. Don't buy the boat to sit in the drive[way] 'til you have to give it up cause OT is over. Ella is a very hard worker. She has no savings and always has a reason to have nothing but lint in her pocket. She got robbed a couple times, and had to move. She gives money to the family. We don't teach the value of money.

It is perhaps natural for managers to focus on workers' purchases of jewelry or a television one size bigger than would have been purchased without overtime; these purchases may simply be more visible and more discussed in the workplace than is overtime used for paying utility bills and other necessities. However, the differences between managers' and workers' perspectives on this issue point to the danger for scholars in relying on aggregate data and in recommending that workers simply downshift and cut back. The literature on work hours trends and the consumption spiral has generally been advanced by economists drawing on historical analysis and aggregate economic data on average worker behavior. If it is difficult for managers, who see their workers at least five days per week, to fully understand workers' financial difficulties, these everyday challenges are even less likely to be apparent in statistical snapshots, and recommendations to expect and make do with less will not help those workers who devote overtime pay to necessities.

## **New Themes in our Data**

We turn now to three themes that emerged in our data and that speak to how people need and cope with overtime and the barriers to working class hours reduction: (1) supporting the extended family, (2) dealing with divorce, and (3) refueling the body. Supporting the extended family was a theme that echoed particularly in the accounts of women of color. Dealing with divorce echoed particularly in the accounts of white men.

(1) Supporting the extended family. As real family incomes decline, more and more households are expanding to take in older children moving home, and elderly relatives who can no longer afford to live alone. The meaning of "family" is also shifting as families try to cope with the impacts of a variety of social ills, ranging from illiteracy to drug abuse and poverty.

One striking example we observed was a "granny track" at QualCo. A notable portion of the workforce at this plant (8 of the 27 women in the plant) was composed of grandmothers working to support their grandchildren, nieces, and any other children in the family whose

parents were unable to support them. Recent Census data has documented the growing prevalence of grandparents raising children and the press has reported on new public policies to support housing and childcare for “grandfamilies” (Zuckoff, 2001). Through the lens of Gerry, a manager:

There are lots of grandmothers, 45-55 year old black females, from the deep south, {with} daughters in the middle twenties who drop lots of kids off with mom. Grammy works 16 to 24 hours of overtime per week to support them. She can't go to welfare to get money because she makes too much. I know of eight women here in this situation. It's not just their daughters. There are also sisters of people here. They put the kid where there is the most money....These people are like squirrels running on a treadmill...They came up here in the late 60s and early 1970s to work to support their families. Now they have kids in trouble with drugs and so on... They are parents again at the age of 55.

And Richard, a co-worker, observed:

There are some who work the C shift from 11 to 7 a.m., and watch grandkids all day, and do overtime on weekends. Don't know how they do it.

One of the grandmothers, Gladys, told us her hopes of taking courses offered at QualCo as part of restructuring and job redesign, but the challenges of doing so given her responsibilities at home:

I want to take the algebra class so I can help my grandkids with homework. But I'd have to be on A shift. But I like the C shift, working til 7 (am) and get home just in time to get them to school and be there when they get home, so they don't get in trouble. It's easier to get someone to stay with them over night. Day is harder.... I do overtime on the weekends, but sometimes I come in ahead of shift around 9 [pm].

Overtime also became a solution for families with financial burdens of caring for family members who are older, ill, or have special needs – problems widely seen as generating a “legitimate” financial need for the extra money overtime provides. Bob, a manager, said:

There are a few cases where there is real financial need...One person has a handicapped child and they need a special van and this creates a big financial burden.

And Gerry, a manager, described:

One story, the kid passed school but was illiterate. She works overtime to [pay to] tutor him, because he graduated and can't get a job.

Tom described a co-worker:

One has an Alzheimer parent, and 2 boys, and she does a fair amount of overtime and is lucky it's available. She also does cleaning at 2 a.m.

He went on to say that his mother had Alzheimer's and that he and his brother were paying for her care. He resented that the overtime hours cut into the time he had to visit with her, but also saw them as necessary for providing for her. He and his brother negotiated about who visited when, paid how much, brought food on which days, etc. At one point he cut back his overtime, which he said was possible because his wife had a full-time job now that their children were grown.

Much of the literature on work and family has assumed a normative, nuclear, heterosexual two-income family (for example, titles like "She Works, He Works" (Barnett & Rivers, 1996) shine the spotlight on this type of family situation). However, we encountered many other types of family structures that create different needs for workers to take off-shift work and to supplement it with overtime at odd hours or on weekends. The focus on gender as the main social identity variable in thinking about work / family in the literature has obscured patterns that look different when considering the intersection of gender with race and class (Holvino, 2001). The balancing acts of older, African American working class women raising children from their extended families casts a whole new light on why workers need overtime, very different from the debate between managers and workers about who really has a legitimate financial need for overtime. The literature on strategies for dealing with long hours at work is silent on the concerns of this group of workers.



(2) Dealing with divorce. The focus on work / family as a woman's career concern has also obscured some of the specific issues that are salient to men, especially working class men, such as the issues for divorced men supporting two households. The realities of divorce and new step families are widely documented. The frequency and negative implications of divorce may be greater for low income workers. Shift workers like those in our study at QualCo have a 25% higher divorce rate than other workers (Overman, 1993). Working class wages barely support the maintenance of a family, and those whose lives involve alimony payments turn to overtime to make ends meet. This aspect of work and family balance is rarely, if ever, discussed.

Jack, a supervisor who has cut his overtime from 120 to 52 hours per month, explains the links between his long work hours and getting divorced in the first place. He elaborates how the cycle continues, because divorce requires more overtime to make alimony payments, which are calculated on the assumption of his having overtime as part of his income.

The hours I worked were one of the larger pieces of the pie in my divorce – not the only reason, but a major one. I was married 11 years and ...One day I came home and she said, 'You're a nice guy, I just don't love you anymore.' I was never there. Three or four weekends a month I worked. Absence doesn't make the heart grow fonder. I was making more than \$125,000 per year {on a base pay of less than 48,000} and I bought and built 2 houses, so we were doing well financially. We were just never physically together.

...Now I 'have to work' because I'm a divorced male. Courts say that you must support your kids to the manner they are accustomed....Child support payments are based on your base pay, shift premium and overtime. I pay all child support, medical, dental, clothing, and 50% schooling. I'd have to get the {child support} decree changed ...It would be a 'swan dive into bankruptcy court' if overtime goes away. Everything in the child support assessment is based on what the male is making as a wage. I'm even stuck on the B shift because the shift premium is included in the assessment. Modifying court documents to try to change it is costly because of legal fees.... The courts don't want to hear my problems. They aren't interested in my wanting more leisure time or changing the assessment so I can get out of overtime.

The construction of masculinity, particularly in working class jobs, requires that men be breadwinners (Collinson & Hearn, 1996). It is a point of pride with some of the men in this plant that they work grueling hours. Bill recounted how, in order to afford a gym membership so he could work out, he also did cleaning at his gym in the early mornings, affording him barely four hours of sleep.

(3) Refueling the body. Overtime work is physically grueling for the working class in a way that is different from the eyestrain and repetitive stress of professional employees. It is dangerous as well, as tired workers can lose fingers, limbs, and lives as they tend complex machinery. An extensive literature documents exhaustion and accidents in off-shift and overtime work (e.g., Nag & Patel, 1998; Sabourin, 1997). Exhaustion has effects both at home and at work. At home, as Stephen observed, “It’s tough to deal with kids when you’re tired from physical and boring work.” At work, there are effects both on product quality and on team relationships, as three QualCo workers observed:

When you’re tired, you’re not sensitive to the machine, there are product defects, yield to run times suffer.

People fall asleep on the machines. You can tell who. They come in at 3am for pre-shift.... Sometimes you have to carry the ones who came in early and are tired. Every group has 1-2 that have to be carried. We know. It has to be kept in the group.

We cover each other. The supervisor doesn’t want to hear about it.

Overtime puts strains on team relationships, which in turn affects prospects for the success of work restructuring which depends on teamwork. At the same time, the stress of losing overtime and the competition for overtime when it becomes more scarce can create even greater stresses on team relationships. Workers had evolved a social contract about covering each other through overtime work that was demanding but necessary, but they do not have a social contract for competing with each other for limited overtime.

We also heard a theme that is never surfaced in the literature on coping with long hours. To cope and push the body, we heard tales of workers who used cocaine. They entered a vicious cycle: They used more cocaine to stay alert during their second shift, an expensive habit that required working more overtime, which in turn required more drugs. This dynamic was revealed in interviews with only a few employees and managers and is difficult to verify, precisely because it is part of the subterranean culture of the work world that is rarely glimpsed. It is, however, consistent with Gill and Michaels’ (1992) finding that drug users receive higher wages than non-users. They argue that illegal drug use occurs in response to emotional and other strains, and has the effect of raising productivity and wages, at least in the short run.

Janine, who used to work 60 hours per week, told us that she is a recovering addict and that she worked to sustain her habit. She was “running off cocaine... [it] gave energy” and was a vicious cycle. She estimated that 20 to 25 percent of the workforce in the plant are in the same situation – current or recovering addicts. “People don't talk about it though. It is very sensitive, but the people all in recovery talk about it. There is usually a lot of shame with addiction.”

Another worker agreed:

You see more {drug} abuse when people are working a lot of overtime....You call the supervisor if you suspect that someone is intoxicated.

Management was aware of these trends. One manager said:

People will confide in me. There are cocaine addicts. There is one person who spent \$3,500 per week on her habit. Her boyfriend forced her into prostitution. She got treatment, and she is fine today. She was threatened [by management] that she had to get treatment or she would be gone [fired].

The costs of having to work overtime are high, but eliminating overtime swiftly to cut costs would be like going cold turkey, both figuratively and literally, for many workers who depend on overtime.

## **DISCUSSION**

We add to the qualitative descriptions that have generated an understanding of work – life integration. Because the “ideal worker” was assumed to be committed to work and unperturbed by family interruptions (Fletcher, 2001), work–family conflicts and solutions were kept hidden. It was traditionally regarded as “unprofessional” to bring home issues to work. One project of the work/family literature has been to make the invisible visible, and in doing so, to show how work–family conflicts compromise workplace productivity. Once understood, work–family dilemmas can be addressed in ways mutually beneficial to employees and employers, so the dominant line of reasoning and empirical work has gone. Following this tradition, we add the missing portraits of how the working class handles work–life integration to the collage. These portraits are interesting not only as ends in themselves that advance

understanding, but also because they may point toward distinctive solutions informed by working class experiences.

These case study data have uncovered three rarely considered themes regarding work hours reductions: caring for the extended family, dealing with divorce, and refueling the body. Together, they make clear the intensity of resistance to overtime reductions occasioned by work restructuring. In-depth qualitative data such as these point to places where the literature may continue to look for patterns. The stories we found reveal the paths by which workers can become entrenched in a particular pattern of working hours and unable to shift to a more leisured and balanced lifestyle except at great cost to themselves and their families.

The barriers to reducing work hours that workers in this company experience vary in important ways from themes raised in prior research. First, instead of working mainly to

participate in a cycle of consumerism (Schor, 1991), to avoid unpleasant or chaotic home tasks (Hochschild, 1997), or to compete for ever-higher posts on the corporate ladder (Landers, Rebitzer &

***... workers at QualCo work overtime to support themselves and their extended families, to deal with the financial strains of divorce, and because of addiction born partly of the punishing physical demands of long hours of blue-collar work.***

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Taylor, 1996), workers at QualCo work overtime to support themselves and their extended families, to deal with the financial strains of divorce, and because of addiction born partly of the punishing physical demands of long hours of blue-collar work.

Second, one of these themes – supporting the extended family – was particularly common among African-American women. Clearly, a key to understanding work hours reductions more fully is to consider the simultaneity of race, gender, and class social identities for workers and their implications taken together (Holvino, 2001). For example, the very notion of “family,” at the heart of work/family research, needs to be reconsidered and broadened: as Collins (1990:47) argued in *Black Feminist Thought*, the family life of poor people challenges assumptions because, in order to survive, “the family network must share the costs of providing for children,” as we saw at QualCo. The household is indeed the right unit for thinking about work/family, and the literature has been moving away from examining individual workers’ patterns of hours to considering the household (Jacobs & Gerson, 1998). However, this treatment of household generally considers couples or joint careers. But only about 40 percent of households look that way (Friedman & Greenhaus, 2000). In the many households not composed of dual earners, there are special challenges for single parents, divorced parents, and

grandparents who are parenting small children. For example, recent U.S. census data – and a number of popular press articles about it (e.g., Zuckoff, 2001) – have documented an increase in children being raised in the households of their grandparents (about six percent of all children) and echoes our finding that working grandmothers are an important group to study to understand work/life balance fully.

Third, the toll that physical labor takes on the body is not to be under-estimated, even as the focus of much research shifts toward knowledge work. Moreover, the knowledge, tacit and otherwise, required for manufacturing work in new high-involvement team-based

***... the toll that physical labor takes on the body is not to be under-estimated, even as the focus of much research shifts toward knowledge work.***

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workplaces is increasing, making the distinction between knowledge work and manual work less clear and possibly an outdate prejudice. Just as with professional jobs, there are diminishing returns to hours on the job. The costs of long hours in terms of high stress, reduced creativity, and narrowed problem-solving have been of interest for professional jobs and form part of the basis for arguing for hours reductions as good for both employees and employers (e.g., Kellogg, 2002). Working class jobs are sometimes held in contrast as being so routinized that an additional hour of work is just more of the same. However, the costs of high stress, reduced creativity, and narrowed problem-solving are just as important, especially for the restructured workplace, and additional costs of accidents, fatigue, and addiction accrue as well.

## CONCLUSIONS

Solutions to work hours dilemmas for the working class may have to be both narrower and broader than those for professionals. Our closing section extends some implications from our study. Clearly simple hours reduction or downshifting do not work for our sample population. Other solutions, like incorporating flex-time policies and enhancing work efficiency (by, for example, reducing unnecessary meetings) so that salaried workers can work less, presumably for equivalent pay and status, are not feasible for team-based assembly workers either. We review three other solutions that have been proposed for professionals and show how working class experiences both show the limitations of these proposals and also offer possibilities for deeper learning about these solutions.

First, professionals are frequently exhorted to be less individualistic in making adaptations (e.g., Perlow, 1997) and in hiding their true preferences for shorter hours (e.g., Lander, Rebitzer & Taylor, 1996). But collective responses to work/family dilemmas remain interesting exceptions, such as, for example, women's caucuses at work that have a social movement sensibility (Scully & Segal, 2002). However, the working class has a long tradition of voicing its concerns collectively, which we witnessed in our group meetings on this topic and which captured managerial attention to the overtime issue. Managers in our study were just beginning to realize the problem was systemic and not a matter of a few problematic individuals. Working class members have long banded together to cover for each other, in both covert and overt ways (e.g., Roy, 1952). In coping with the loss of hours, or the greater extreme of loss of jobs, working class members make systemic attributions and support one another, while professionals might blame themselves and suffer alone (Newman, 1988). Prospects for collective responses to distributive issues such as overtime pay may be better understood and addressed by adding the working class to the work/life opus.

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***Future research should be cautious in dismissing corporate programs as a narrow solution and consider how their design and utilization can be handled well.***

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Second, the accepted wisdom about corporate programs, where professionals are regarded, is that programmatic solutions, like on-site child care and parental leaves, are underutilized, are not the source of change, and can even distract from the real source of the problem. Looking at deep cultural change in work practices is argued to be more promising (Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher & Pruitt, 2001). While such an approach surely has merit, the value of programs for the working class should not be underestimated; they are often under-served in terms of available programs. For example, for addiction problems, an employee assistance program (EAP) may be the best option. A parental leave program that is extended to give grandparents time off for a newly arrived grandchild might be beneficial, just as the extension of parental leaves to fathers and to adoptive parents was valuable. In implementing such individually-tailored responses to work/life dilemmas, managers should of course be informed by research that has shown their flaws – particularly that workers will not use them if they believe they could be penalized, formally or informally, by supervisors or nonusers (Eaton, 2003). Future research should be

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***Clearly simple hours reduction or downshifting do not work for our sample population.***

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cautious in dismissing corporate programs as a narrow solution and consider how their design and utilization can be handled well.

Third, the deep cultural changes advocated to relieve work/life burdens for professionals are broached at the organizational, or maybe occupational, level. Such solutions may need to be broader for the working class, going beyond just the organization to involve the community or to develop policy solutions. Employees working overtime for reasons such as providing a van for a handicapped child should be getting public assistance or health insurance to cover these costs and not squandering time that could be spent with that child on overtime. Similarly, grandparents working overtime to support their grandchildren might instead be given subsidies similar to what foster parents receive, because they are giving desirable family-based care for children who would otherwise go into the foster system (this solution has been broached in policy and press discussions). And class-based concerns could be better taken into account in assessing alimony payments for workers at different income levels and in a way that does not lock in the requirement to keep overtime levels up. When it comes to deep cultural change, the locus may not be changes in any one workplace but rather changes in societal assumptions about class, effort, merit, and income. These assumptions shape hours, wages, and policies – and shape the work/family dilemmas of the working class. At the least there is a transitional dilemma that should be addressed at a broad level – a question of how workers could be eased to new patterns of work and who would bear the shifting costs. There are tough trade-offs regarding livelihood and quality of life that warrant discussion at the societal level.

In closing, our research contributes by inserting previously unheard voices into the discussion of time and work/family integration. We have documented the negative effect of hours reductions for many working class employees, particularly where work restructuring leads to lost overtime hours and strains on family finances. This result stands in contrast to the dominant view in the work/family literature, which generally views a reduction in work hours as easing work/family tensions. Clearly, it is critical to consider the varied experiences of workers at different status and income levels, and also workers of varied background and family circumstances, to fully assess practices like work hours reductions and their impacts and future prospects.

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