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Workers at Risk

The presence of hazardous chemicals in the workplace is having profound human costs in terms of anxiety as well as illness. Workers' concerns are likely to affect collective bargaining, compensation claims, and the morale of the work force. Yet risk analyses seldom address the perspectives of those exposed to hazards. The following observations are based on interviews with workers in various occupations who are routinely exposed to hazardous chemicals in their jobs.*

The diversity in perceptions was striking. Some workers saw risks as dangers, others as part of the job; some were resigned to hazardous conditions, others sought change. Their social relationships, attitudes about work, choices, and, above all, the extent of their control over working conditions shaped perceptions and guided responses to risk.

Many workers conveyed a sense of isolation, fostered by persistent anxiety, reluctance to talk about health, and fear that complaining could jeopardize their jobs. The use of protective equipment compounded the feeling of isolation; respirators insulated people from communication as well as hazards. Safety policies that required rotation of workers in hazardous jobs broke up work groups, inhibiting discussion of common problems. Those who had little interaction with co-workers believed their problems were unique. Embarrassment about problems such as sterility, cancer, and nervous disorders made workers reluctant to talk. Those who felt isolated dismissed problems as personal, denying the possibility of risk.

Perceptions of risk also reflected attitudes about work. Those who enjoyed their work and valued its results tended to minimize the significance of risks. The contrast between professional and production workers was sharp. Workers talked about risks in the context of job alternatives. Those with family obligations were unwilling to speak out about conditions in the workplace. Afraid that they would be labeled troublemakers, they lapsed into an attitude of resigned compliance. However, they felt they were forced to choose their job over their health. Workers who actively tried to change working conditions were those with fewer economic constraints, greater opportunities, or a union that provided protection.

The workers we interviewed were preoccupied with questions of control. They expressed a sense of powerlessness in the face of uncertainties about exposure and long-term effects on health. Contributing to their sense of impotence was the technical complexity of information about risk and their inability to use what information they received. Concern about control also reflected their lack of confidence in management efforts to minimize hazards. Many factory workers believed that production and profits were given priority over protection of health; many laboratory technicians felt that research was given priority over people. Workers complained that managers poorly understood the realities on the shop floor, yet discounted the validity of direct experience. Those in a position to exercise judgment about their working conditions worried less about risk.

What does this imply for recent policy proposals? Supplementary wages have been proposed for those who must take risks. Some workers we interviewed were willing to accept hazard pay, but suggested that this would only add to the burden of choosing between work and health. Science panels have been proposed to evaluate risk. While scientific assessment could enhance regulatory decisions, our interviews suggested that workers are not likely to accept risks solely on the basis of expert risk-benefit calculations. They believe that risks cannot be objectively measured and balanced, that personal dangers must be avoided at any cost. They want a greater voice in decisions that may affect their health. Like others concerned about the impact of technology, they seek to participate in the politics of technical decisions.—DOROTHY NELKIN, *Professor, Cornell University, and Visiting Scholar, Russell Sage Foundation, 112 East 64 Street, New York 10021*

*D. Nelkin and M. Brown, *Workers at Risk* (Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago, in press).