Normalized Intensity: The New Labour Process of Middle Management

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ABSTRACT   Based on qualitative interviews (n = 64) within five UK organizations that have embarked on large-scale restructuring (including delayering, downsizing, culture change, role redesign, lean production) we argue that middle managers are currently experiencing significant and progressive work and personal pressures. Performance is monitored more closely, hours and intensity of work are increasing, roles and tasks are changing frequently, and prospects for promotion are downscaled within flattened hierarchies. Whereas middle managers report increased levels of autonomy and skill, are often well remunerated, and frequently appear motivated (at least in the private sector), we suggest their burgeoning grievances over working hours, role pressures and promotion prospects have worrying implications for the future performance of UK industry. We argue further that the motivation for corporations to embark on such large-scale restructuring is best understood with reference to the incessant demands of international capitalism. We conclude that such restructuring, and the personal managerial experiences that result from it, is in keeping with many, but crucially not all, of the trends predicted by Bravermanian labour process theory.

INTRODUCTION

Middle managers in large organizations have repeatedly been castigated as being surplus to requirements due to technological changes and the new necessities of flexibility, shareholder value, responsiveness and lean-thinking (Gratton, 2004; Kanter, 1989; Peters, 1992). Following widespread organizational reforms throughout the 1990s (Cascio, 1993, 2002; Littler et al., 2003), the pressures on middle managers are widely understood to have grown, involving the threat of redundancy, increasing hours of work, growing areas of responsibility and intensified competition for promotion. Some of the literature is more positive about middle managers' prospects and worth. Writing on the USA, Cascio (1993, 2002) argues that downsizing and redundancies can have devastating effects on the morale of survivors and should only be pursued as a last resort and with great caution. Dutton and Ashford (1993) and Dutton et al. (1997) similarly claim that

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middle managers are important, often unsung, staff who have usually been in post longer than top executives and are highly effective when it comes to mobilizing resources and 'selling' issues to top management. Hence it is claimed that top management can gain advantages from involving middle managers more closely in strategy development (see also Floyd and Wooldridge, 1997; Huy, 2001). In general, however, the literature is gloomy. Usually analysts either criticize middle managers as outdated and obstructive, or sympathize with them as exploited and threatened employees.

The middle management literature has tended to be based on either large-scale trend surveys (Benbow, 1996; Littler and Innes, 2004; Littler et al., 2003; Lockwood et al., 1992; Poole et al., 2003; Wheatley, 1992; Worrall and Cooper, 2001; Worrall et al., 2004) or small-scale qualitative case studies (Bunting, 2004; Burchill et al., 1999; Cascio, 2002; Dutton et al., 1997; Ezzamel et al., 1996; Heckscher, 1995; Martin and Wajcman, 2004; McCann et al., 2004; Newell and Dopson, 1996; Rubery et al., 2002; Sims, 2003; Thomas and Dunkerley, 1999). So far, however, only limited progress has been made towards linking the structural changes associated with changing economic climate and organizational design with the personal impacts of these changes on individual middle managers. Our paper therefore has two research aims. The first is to develop a macro-level view to explain how increased competitive pressures have stimulated organizational change, resulting in substantially increased demands on middle managers. This analysis is informed by the traditions of labour process theory (Ackroyd and Thompson, 2005; Braverman, 1974; Littler, 1982; Thompson and Warhurst, 1998). Our second aim is to go deeper into our case studies to provide rich qualitative description of middle managers' experiences of their working lives, and the personal effects of large-scale workplace restructuring. This enquiry is influenced by the approach of ethnographic workplace studies such as Barley and Kunda (2003) and Kunda (1992), and the methodologies outlined by Eisenhardt (1989), Patton and Appelbaum (2003) and Yin (1994). Insights into the nature of the labour process are gained through considering the linkages between macro level structural change and the personal experiences and subjective interpretations of human actors. While qualitative interviews are, of course, useful for supplying insights into subjectivity and actors' interpretations (Silverman, 2000), they can also shed light on the ways in which personal experiences are to a large extent shaped by broader structural changes that are beyond the scope of individual agency.

The paper therefore analyses the changing managerial labour process at both structural and personal levels. In so doing, we acknowledge the traditional weaknesses of labour process theory; notably its inability to address issues of individual autonomy, resistance and meaning (O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001), its unhelpful insistence on class analysis (Littler and Salaman, 1982), and its overly pessimistic and deterministic conclusions as regards deskilling (Littler and Innes, 2003, p. 93). We are keen therefore to emphasize the importance of the subjective interpretations of employees as they come to terms with the impact of organizational change, rather than subsuming all of these viewpoints into a unified, class-based analysis of labour versus management (see Ezzy, 1997; Knights and McCabe, 2003; Knights and Willmott, 2000; McCabe, 2004). Nevertheless, our view is that structural-level economic transformations have direct and serious implications for mid-level managers and that it can be misleading and dangerous

to take a theoretical position that overplays agency, identity construction, and discourse at the expense of structure (Reed, 2005; Thompson, 1993; Thompson and Ackroyd, 1995).

The rationale for this realist viewpoint stems from our methodology. We have basically adopted an inductive, grounded approach to studying organizations. During our company visits the philosophy was to learn from the senior HR staff and the middle managers, as they explained the social structures and economic forces that influence their behaviour. We were frequently struck by the similarity of our informants' viewpoints about these structures and forces. A number of important issues were regularly alluded to (by senior HR managers and middle managers alike), such as shareholder value, the Anglo-American system, intensified competition, and the need for increased capacity utilization. Taken together, they reveal an acute shared awareness among white-collar staff of intense global pressures and the unpleasant, but seemingly unavoidable, reform measures designed to meet them.

The paper is divided into five further sections. The next section provides an overview of the literature on structural transformation and how this relates to the stimulation of organizational change and the associated impact on middle managers. The subsequent section outlines the study's methodology based on qualitative research. A short section then follows which introduces the main structural reforms experienced in the case studies, before the main, substantive section reports on the personal impacts of such large-scale organizational change. Conclusions are then drawn in which we account for the key economic drivers of these changes, the impact of these changes on the labour process of UK middle managers, and the possible longer-term implications for middle managers' working lives.

THE CHANGING STRUCTURE OF LARGE BRITISH ORGANIZATIONS

Mainstream human resource management, organization studies, and sociology of work literatures suggest that workplaces in the public and private sectors of all advanced economies have changed significantly since the mid 1980s. The 1990s in particular are regarded as a time of intense change in which employment in large organizations was subjected to a bewildering series of transformations, particularly those associated with the intensified pressures of international competition, the implementation of new advanced technologies, and the interconnections of the knowledge-intensive 'new economy' (Castells, 2000, pp. 77–162).

Authors describing such substantial workplace changes include Adamson et al. (1998), Beynon et al. (2002), Brown and Lauder (2001), Cascio (1993, 2002), Eastman (1998), Fraser (2001), Gallie et al. (2001), Green (2001), Harrison (1994), Heckscher (1995), McGovern et al. (1998), Ogbonna and Wilkinson (2003), Rubery et al. (2002), Sahdev (2004), Scase and Goffee (1989), Sennett (1998), Webb (2004), White et al. (2004), and Worrall et al. (2000). These studies reveal, to a greater or lesser extent: increased pressures on managerial staff; larger workloads; increased insecurity and surveillance; replacement of permanent by temporary contracts; and a decline in 'life-time' employment. In addition, the introduction of 'new managerialism' in public sector restructuring

has resulted in similar outcomes, as described by Beynon et al. (2002), Carter and Fairbrother (1995), Kirkpatrick et al. (2005), Pollitt (1993), and Thomas and Davies (2005).

There is, however, a significant body of literature making countervailing arguments. This includes the work of Gordon (1996), who questions the extent of change, claiming that many large publicly-listed US corporations remain 'bloated'. Baumol et al. (2003, pp. 92–130) similarly claim that large US firms (with the exception of those in the manufacturing sector) have actually *grown* in size, despite the ubiquitous discussions of downsizing. Ackroyd and Thompson (2005), Alvesson and Thompson (2004), and Hales (1999, 2005) argue that significant changes have taken place, but that private firms and large public sector organizations remain bureaucratic and hierarchical (see also McNulty and Ferlie, 2004).

Elsewhere more positive appraisals of the situation can be found in Albert and Bradley (1997), Balogun (2003), Gratton (2004), and Newell and Dopson (1996), who claim that shifts away from traditional managerial employment systems such as internal labour markets and seniority payment systems can liberate professional and managerial employees, allowing access to more flexible 'boundaryless' careers, more interesting work tasks, and increased pay. White et al.'s survey (2004, pp. 60–1) suggests that the period of delayering in large firms is now over, and that prospects for career progression have actually improved in recent years, although longer work hours and greater work intensity were indeed regarded as major problems for almost all employees (2004, p. 102).

It is important to bear in mind, however, the complex and often apparently contradictory nature of data on restructuring in large firms. The survey data of Littler et al. (2003) and Littler and Innes (2004) demonstrate that broad employment trends can be hard to discern. Even when managers have experienced delayering and downsizing, the overall numbers of people described as 'managers' in many large PLCs has grown, due, for example, to mergers, acquisitions and pay-scale regrading (see also Webb, 2004). The stated policy at group level (as shown in company documents and as described by senior managers at corporate headquarters) does not always directly reflect the local workplace experience within the firm. Managers at the local work level are drawn from all over the company, filtering in and out of the broader group management layers and grades. For this reason, it is essential to complement large-scale surveys with small-scale, qualitative studies within local workplaces. When doing so, however, it is equally essential to make connections between the 'macro-level' changes to political economy and organizational design and the 'micro-level' experience of the middle management labour process.

This connection is important because senior managers of large organizations are under pressure to exact greater demands from workforces whilst simultaneously cutting costs (Littler, 2005). Such changes have led to a steady increase in workplace pressures on staff, but these changes do not amount to a radical break with the past (Morris et al., 2005, 2006; Thompson, 2003). Furthermore, while many large firms are shrinking, often shedding hundreds of middle managers, others are growing in size and increasing their numbers of middle level employees (Baumol et al., 2003; Littler and Innes, 2004; White et al., 2004). Echoing Ackroyd (2002), Alvesson and Thompson (2004), Ackroyd and Thompson (2005), Hales (1999, 2005), and Littler and Innes (2004), we will argue that whilst major workplace change has undoubtedly taken place, claims of the 'death of

middle management', the 'end of bureaucracy', or of the coming of a 'new economy' (comprised of 'virtual' organizations and based on the networks and flows of electronic information) are exaggerated.

Instead, we will explain the intensification of middle management work with reference to the restructuring of contemporary capitalism. Recent literature on the labour process of large firms (Ackroyd and Thompson, 2005; Thompson, 2003) suggests that restructuring does not entail a paradigm shift towards 'post-bureaucracy' but is instead part of the long-term rationalization pressures associated with capitalism. On the one hand, the middle management story is therefore in keeping with the trends described earlier by, for example, Braverman (1974), Burawoy (1979), and Littler (1982), in that managerial labour is vulnerable to the rationalization and intensification brought on by restructuring. On the other hand, Braverman's deskilling arguments are contradicted by the evidence of increasing middle management responsibilities (see also Grimshaw et al., 2002).

Furthermore, there is a danger in over-generalizing from case-study evidence on the 'fate of middle management', particularly if arguments about the nature of capitalist restructuring are pushed too far in a unilinear direction. As we shall see below, the structural-level data on the five case studies were quite different in many important ways, and it would be wrong to assert universally that all large firms are cutting staff and delayering middle management because of the logic of shareholder value, as suggested, for example, by Ackroyd and Thompson (2005) and Lazonick and O'Sullivan (2000). Although there is, of course, strong evidence to suggest that extensive flattening and shrinking took place during the period 1997–2000, we shall argue that the experience of our large organizations was that delayering was completed during these years, and that once a firm had moved to 3 or 4 layers it could not really become any flatter. Furthermore, Froud et al.'s (2000, 2005) analysis of company financial data shows that many firms exhibit poor return on capital employed both before and after restructuring. Shareholder value is an important, but not the sole, indicator of firm performance. Organizational success and the choice of which units to restructure depends crucially on the competitiveness of products and services as well as more mundane issues such as the location of physical resources. PLCs share a long-term tendency to indulge in 'false signalling' (Littler, 2005) – issuing public statements about the intention to engage in radical restructurings and job cuts without actually carrying them out (see also Bowman and Singh, 1993, p. 6).

Organizational change is a highly complex situation embedded in wider issues of political economy, exchange rates, market confidence, firm strategy and geographical position. It is difficult to predict future structural changes in firms, because these are contingent on the whims of product and financial markets, the availability of investment capital and the relative technological capacity of regional business units. However, given the differences in economic conditions, we shall see that the pressures on managers reported in our case studies are remarkably similar. This perhaps indicates that the *ideology* of implementing delayering, culture change and group work to induce higher middle management performance is a popular one amongst senior management in large organizations across a range of sectors and countries (Hassard et al., 2007; McCann et al., 2004). This is particularly true if we consider public sector restructuring, which is far less directly related to international competitive pressures (Morris, 2005).

In sum, much literature suggests that the pressures on large UK organizations are increasingly severe, as they must provide good value to shareholders (or taxpayers) by reducing the cost base while developing highly competitive products/services for ever-more demanding customers (Littler, 2005). Within this scenario of simultaneous demands to increase performance and cut costs, many organizations have, as a result, placed increasing pressure on employees' time as they attempt to meet them. However, despite such significant changes, an element of caution must be added. Organizations' histories are rich and complex, and transforming long-established structures and processes is far from easy. Some organizations have indeed displayed a facility for resisting the 'inevitability' of radical changes brought about by the growth of international competition. As we shall see, individual managers also vary in their responses to such changes, resisting and adapting to the numerous pressures and transformations they multifariously face.

RESEARCH METHODS

A multiple case study methodology was utilized by the researchers. Although the case study methodology has weaknesses, notably a lack of generalizability (Patton and Appelbaum, 2003; Yin, 1994), it offers useful insights that cannot be achieved with other approaches. In particular it provides high levels of detail, and allows for multiple data collection methods (see also Eisenhardt, 1989; Gomm et al., 2000). We chose to study very large (over 10,000 employees) organizations because they possess significant numbers of middle managers and are likely to have faced substantial pressures to restructure. In so doing, we selected four private sectors (automotive, brewing/distilling, metals, and utilities) and one public sector (local government), for these typically have histories of bureaucratic, hierarchical management systems and structures. We chose to omit high-technology firms because we were particularly interested in assessing the extent of change to more traditional bureaucratic forms. We felt that although some of the literature on high-tech firms paints a picture of dramatic, but not necessarily negative, change for employees (such as Barley and Kunda, 2003), the focus on eye-catching, 'leading edge' firms might not be representative of what was being experienced in more traditional sectors. Initially a list of 40 potential PLCs (ten for each sector) was compiled. Contact details of the firms' Directors of Human Resources were drawn from the FAME database,[1] and letters requesting meetings and explaining the research aims were sent. Access to these firms, however, was not always easy – 23 letters received no response at all, and ten firms wrote back to decline involvement. Of the seven firms that agreed to participate, one was discounted because it replicated an industry we already had agreed access to (utilities), and another (in brewing/distilling) was unwilling to arrange meetings with middle managers. Securing access to the public sector case study was rather easier – a former employee of the council acted as an intermediary in setting up a meeting with his former head of department, who then agreed to a meeting following a telephone conversation explaining our project aims.

During 2003–04 each case study organization (which we have given the pseudonyms AutoCo, BrewCo, SteelCo, UtilitiesCo and LocalGov) was visited twice. Firstly a group interview was held between the three researchers and each organization's Director of HR.[2] Occasionally, the senior HR representative was accompanied by another member

of the HR staff (such as at SteelCo), while at one of our case companies (BrewCo) we were granted access to the entire Senior Management Team on the site, including the heads of HR and Finance. Over typically the course of 60–90 minutes, these managers provided overviews of the organizational changes that have taken place since 1997. In particular, our managers provided details on organizational structures before and after restructuring, and on middle managers' work tasks, pay, conditions, and future prospects. The managers were all provided with a project overview and a semi-structured interview schedule in advance of the meetings. Extensive company documentation was also gathered.

Secondly, the case organizations were each revisited several weeks later in order to conduct hour-long, one-to-one interviews with ten middle managers, using a second semi-structured interview schedule. We wished to interview middle managers themselves in order to understand the views of those directly affected by change. We did not wish to rely solely on senior managers' accounts, as we felt that their views may be overly optimistic about the effects of change, given their distanced position from middle managers' work tasks and experiences. Our middle managers were drawn from a variety of functions of the business and volunteered to take part having previously been contacted by their organizations' HR department. There were however some differences across the case organizations in terms of how access to middle managers was granted. At BrewCo, the head of HR organized the interviews for us and simply instructed the volunteer middle managers to attend meetings at certain places and times. Elsewhere (such as at LocalGov and UtilitiesCo), there was less direct senior management involvement. Here we were simply given lists of contact details of middle managers and it was left to us to ask for and arrange interviews. Although all interviews were conducted on company time and on company premises, the content remained confidential.

Whilst we were unable to make exact demands on the case study organizations as to whom we wished to interview, the senior HR representatives were familiar with our topics of interest and, having been provided with our research project outline, easily grasped our intentions. We are confident therefore that the slight differences in the process of gaining access did not compromise the quality of the data. Most of the middle managers who were made available to us had considerable levels of experience (some as long as 20 years' service). As longer-term stakeholders in the organizations they were able to provide in-depth accounts of both the personal impacts of restructuring and the motivations for top management's pursuit of change over the years. We made it clear that all interviews would be private and confidential and our managers appeared extremely candid and forthcoming, with few signs of the respondents providing watered-down accounts for fear of subsequent consumption by senior management. Table I provides a list of our interviewees. All of the interviews (totalling almost 70 hours) were tape-recorded and fully transcribed (comprising over 840 pages of A4 or approximately 386,000 words).

Our middle managers were asked to provide their own explanations of the motivations for, and impacts of, the restructuring measures. After the tape recordings of the meetings were fully transcribed, the authors pursued the 'within case method' outlined by Eisenhardt (1989, pp. 539–40), creating detailed write-ups for each site. (Edited versions of these write-ups form the basis of the fifth section of this paper.) Repeat readings of the interview transcripts enabled us to highlight middle managers' main issues of concern. Relevant sections of the middle manager interviews were grouped under the following

Table I. List of interview respondents

Case study	Senior HR respondents (group interviews)	Middle manager respondents (one-to-one interviews)
AutoCo	1 male, 1 female	9 male, 1 female
BrewCo	5 male, 1 female	10 male
SteelCo	2 male	9 male, 1 female
UtilitiesCo	1 female	7 male, 3 female
LocalGov	1 male, 1 female	9 male, 1 female

Note: N = 14 senior HR managers, 50 middle managers.

themes: work–life balance, changes to job roles, career expectations, job security and job satisfaction. With the aid of these thematic groups, it was possible to compare the general experiences of middle managers across cases, and, as we demonstrate below, the high levels of similarity were striking.

The main research questions addressed in the interviews were as follows: To what extent have large organizations in the UK followed strategies of downsizing and delayering? For what reasons have they pursued these strategies? To what extent have the working tasks, rewards, and promotion prospects of middle managers been reorganized? Finally, what impacts have large-scale restructuring had on the more internal, personal aspects of middle managers' lives, such as working hours, loyalty, and morale?

In relating our research method to sociological and organizational theory, we have applied labour process analysis to the ideographic study of middle management in an attempt to address the traditional problem of the denial of agency and subjectivity in Braverman-inspired work. *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (Braverman, 1974) contains scant coverage of mid-level managers (Teulings, 1986, p. 143), and more recent labour process literature has also tended to focus on shop-floor or supervisory employees, as have the counter-arguments to this body of knowledge (such as Knights and Willmott, 1989; O'Doherty and Willmott, 2001). In order to tap middle managers' subjective interpretations, our interviews were semi-structured and exploratory in nature. In this way, the socio-economic structures alluded to in the interviews (such as increased international competition), were not derived from the authors' *a priori* assumptions and tested on unthinking research subjects, but were instead built from the informants' own interpretations of events. When conducting our semi-structured interviews, we were learning from those actively involved in the ongoing restructuring of firms – we were concerned with *their* categorizations and explanations. Obviously, conversing with a wide range of people involves gathering a large number of subjective and possibly conflicting opinions. However, on interviewing 64 managers across five cases we experienced a 'saturation point' (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 545) whereby familiar themes regularly emerged, enabling us draw a number of similar experiences across workplaces.

Finally, our attempts to connect managers' subjective interpretations with broader issues of organizational structure and economic change through in-depth qualitative inquiry were buttressed by supporting documentation on company performance, organizational structure, and employment, and by publicly-available UK survey

research (such as Benbow, 1996; Lockwood et al., 1992; Poole et al., 2003; Wheatley, 1992; White et al., 2004; Worrall and Cooper, 2001).

CASE ORGANIZATIONS: EMPLOYMENT, TURNOVER AND RESTRUCTURING

As noted, the five case organizations were given the pseudonyms AutoCo, BrewCo, LocalGov, SteelCo, UtilitiesCo and LocalGov. While LocalGov is a public sector local authority, the other four are major publicly-listed corporations (AutoCo is US-owned). Basic employment and turnover details are detailed in Table II.

All five organizations have experienced one or more major changes to their management structures since 1997 (see Table III). Two had reduced management layers during this time, while two others had delayered previously (in 1993 and 1996 respectively). Three substantially reduced overall employment numbers, of which two radically reduced management numbers. All had made significant alterations to middle managers' work tasks and have pursued organizational culture change programmes (see Table IV). Although this paper cannot make any wider claims as to the generalizability of these

Table II. Turnover and employee size of the five case study UK organizations

Company name	2003 UK turnover (approx UK £)	2003 total UK core employees (approx)
AutoCo	7.4 billion	17,000
DrinksPLC	9.4 billion	38,955
of which BrewCo	756 million	310
SteelCo	7.2 billion	25,000
UtilitiesCo	2.0 billion	15,674
LocalGov	403 million*	16,500

Note: * Net annual budget, combined of Council Tax and other revenues (approximately 25%) and central government allocation (approximately 75%). *Source:* UK Audit Commission. www.audit-commission.gov.hk/
Source: Interviews, company documentation, FAME database.

Table III. Changes to group-level consolidated employment figures for the four PLC case studies, 1997–2003

Firm	Employment 1997		Employment 2003	
	Managers	Total employees	Managers	Total employees
AutoCo	1,370	29,000	1,751	17,000
DrinksPLC	N/A	72,479	N/A	38,955
SteelCo	8,150	36,100	5,650	25,000
UtilitiesCo	894	12,242	1,384	15,674

Source: Interviews, company documentation, FAME database.

Table IV. Restructuring methods of the five case studies

Case study	Middle management employment changes	Delayering (year)*	Summary of impacts on middle managers
AutoCo	Early retirements, redundancies and recruitment freezes. Managed Score Cards for managers. Compression of 13 pay scales into 5 broad bands.	8 → 5 layers (1996)	Somewhat increased stress, hugely increased hours and workload responsibilities. Fewer promotions.
DrinksPLC	Early retirements and recruitment freezes. Extensive use of contract labour on site.	8 → 3 layers (2000)	Substantial increases in stress, hours and workload, reduced promotion opportunities.
SteelCo	Early retirements, redundancies and recruitment freezes. Increased use of performance-related bonuses, and compression of 10 pay scales into 4 broad bands.	5 → 3 layers (1999)	Somewhat increased stress, significantly increased hours and workload, fewer promotions, greater amounts of cross-functional teamwork and devolved authority.
UtilitiesCo	Early retirements extensively used, but the number of employees (including middle managers) has grown through acquisitions. 'No redundancy' policy established.	Management layers remained unchanged at 6 layers	Somewhat increased stress, significantly increased hours and workload, role insecurity, fewer promotions, increased autonomy for some, increased 'cross-silo' group work.
LocalGov	Widespread use of early retirements and outsourcing. No redundancy policy established. The merging of departments has meant a severe reduction of managerial posts.	7/8 → 4 layers (1993)	Somewhat increased stress, significantly increased hours and workload, role insecurity, fewer promotions, increased group work.

Note: * 'Layers of management' includes senior managers but does not include boards of directors or front-line supervisors.
Source: Case study interviews conducted in 2003–04.

experiences, the substantial degree of restructuring that has taken place at these five organizations is consistent with broader data on the UK (Benbow, 1996; Lockwood et al., 1992; Poole et al., 2003; Wheatley, 1992; Worrall and Cooper, 2001), and indeed other OECD countries (Cascio, 1993; 2002, pp. 41–2; Littler and Innes, 2004; Littler et al., 2003).

Initially senior HR managers were asked to describe their organizations' motivations for pursuing change. Overwhelmingly they cited imperatives to reduce costs and raise performance. Intensifying international competition and, in the case of LocalGov, government public service reform policies, have made efficiency a central concern of senior management. Radical overhauls of production technology, workflow systems, and information and communication infrastructures have enabled organizations to cut staff (including managers), making large cost and time savings while increasing the workload and responsibilities of survivors. Even where the consolidated numbers of middle managers had grown (UtilitiesCo and AutoCo), hierarchies were flattened (usually in the mid 1990s) and middle managers described growing work pressures and declining promotion prospects. Surviving middle managers worked on a wider variety of tasks and required a much broader understanding of the business environment of their firms. This finding casts doubt on the 'deskilling' arguments of Braverman as applied to managers. On the other hand, a labour process interpretation of middle management work is highly consistent with the evidence of the intensification of work and the disposability of middle managers. The hardening or toughening of white-collar working life is clearly demonstrated in our data (see below) and much of the existing literature on middle management (Littler et al., 2003; Thomas and Dunkerley, 1999; Worrall and Cooper, 2001), and indeed in the literature on other types of employees (Beynon et al., 2002; Burchill et al., 1999; Heery and Salmon, 2000; White et al., 2004).

For our middle managers themselves, amidst much confusion, criticism and cynicism, they generally claimed that they were valued members of their organizations and enjoyed their work. The long hours that they put in, despite an absence of direct supervision, and the willingness to cooperate with senior management's frequent reorganization strategies, suggest that they possess substantial degrees of agency. It was not simply a case of a pliant middle management being bullied into submission from above. Rather, as we shall see, the urgent pressure to reorganize and to change was felt strongly across all management strata, even if many were unhappy with the prospect of further change.

We now turn our attention to the case study details themselves, which serve to illustrate both the structural transformations to the workplaces and middle managers' own subjective interpretations of what such change has meant for their working lives.

CASE ANALYSIS: STRUCTURAL TRANSFORMATION AND SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE

BrewCo – A Traditional Workplace Under Severe Competitive Pressures

The brewery in question is a famous historical site in a city centre, which still produces a world-famous brand of beer. Although much of the site has been closed, and some if it transformed into museums, merchandising outlets and visitor centres, it retains several

production facilities, and a major distribution depot. In Victorian times the site was much larger, including a windmill, storage sites and even its own railway system. Generations of men had worked at the brewery and historically staff have enjoyed good pay and pension rights. Middle managers and HR staff alike speak proudly and nostalgically about past times, when BrewCo staff were looked upon as privileged to work for such a respected employer.

Today, BrewCo is but one production site of many owned by a giant UK beverage corporation, DrinksPLC. The corporation owns several world-renowned drinks brands whose organizational imagery is carefully retained, nurtured and managed (even if as independent brewing and distilling companies they have long ceased to exist). BrewCo is perhaps caught in the middle of what could be seen as an economic and historical vortex. Its very location and physical structure reflects BrewCo's historical evolution and corporate transformation. One hundred and fifty year old warehouses stand empty, many plastered with danger signs, with only one or two office spaces in use. Elsewhere are much newer facilities housing elaborate systems boards which monitor all production from raw material to distribution. These buildings rub shoulders with BrewCo's profitable visitor centre, restaurant and museum.

This tension between tradition and change was strongly felt by both the senior management team and middle managers at BrewCo. Radical delayering took place in 2000, when the traditional hierarchy was reduced from eight levels to just three. In concert, the brewery reduced its headcount from over 4,000 in 1995 to just 310 by 2003. The senior management team suggested it was trying to reduce the headcount further, from 310 down to around 170 'core' employees on the site, while continuing with the extensive use of agency staff (almost 1,000).

While the senior management team was keen to emphasize the need for radical change, some middle managers appeared demoralized and distanced from this process. Indeed BrewCo middle managers expressed a great deal of pessimism, with many suggesting that all drinks production may actually leave the site in the not too distant future. Whereas pay and conditions remained good, the future was perceived as uncertain:

> Do I feel loyal to BrewCo? No I don't. BrewCo no longer exists. I am a manager for DrinksPLC, and that is really all that matters to them in the centre. We could be closed down at any moment. We have to cooperate with the change regimes or we are out of a job even quicker. Really this place is not profitable and I am sure it will eventually be gone and they'll be no more brewing here at what used to be BrewCo. (Packing Shift Manager, Male, BrewCo)

According to some middle managers however there had been some 'signs of improvement' in the recent behaviour of senior management. There had been harsh cuts previously, but the management style of the current senior management team was perceived as an improvement on the 'aggression' and 'ruthlessness' of the previous 'regime':

> Certainly I've acknowledged that in my time here, in 2003 now, that is the change for the better. . . . You can actually sit down and talk to a director who'll tell you 'you're

not doing very well' and will try to help you, not cut you down. . . . I didn't enjoy it about a year, year and a half ago when we were going through horrendous change, we didn't get a lot of support, and that was why. We tripped and fell a few times and there was a lot of, if you like, in a Western a lot of Indians up on the hill waiting to pounce. I think we've got over that now. I'm looking at a lot of younger people, . . . and looking at the way this change has been attempted to be managed, that's been really refreshing. A few examples of building changes, getting the employees involved in work streams, which actually develop training programmes – that's unheard of in this company. (Brewing Shift Manager, Male, BrewCo)

These views were in contrast however to others of a more trenchant nature offered by this manager in connection with a previous 'period of difficulty' (transformation linked to ownership change) at BrewCo, during which middle management worked extremely long hours in order to 'recover the situation'. Although his wife had given birth only days before, this manager still felt the need to come in and offer his expertise at this difficult time for the company. He now felt however that 'times had changed' and if something like that happened again he suggested would not give up his time, given his general level of disenchantment with the management style at the time of this major structural change.

Another manager was very clear on how the 'global' goals of the head office (namely 'increasing shareholder value') translated into local workplace intensification with very serious results for employee welfare:

At the end of the day, in the Anglo-American model, companies are built around maximizing shareholder value. . . . If you read documentation around balance between home life and working life . . . , it's all about driving shareholder value, maximizing that and nothing else. Now that doesn't necessarily mean that your career is one of servitude, I mean you can be part of an organization that's driven by the need to maximize shareholder value and still have a good career and a rewarding one. But I think organizations' appetite is insatiable, I think an organization will take and take and take, if you give it ten hours a day it will take it and ask no questions, if you give fourteen hours a day it will take it and ask no questions. And it will take and take and take, if your health suffers it will take it and have no questions, and if you have a nervous breakdown it will marginalize you and say you're, you know it won't formally do that, it will put a warm arm round your shoulders and say you're a valuable member of the team and you know we really, 'take your time and get well and come back to us'. But the subtext in the organization would be if you can't cut it you will be marginalized. . . . But I have definitely seen people going out for prolonged periods, I mean I was off for a long period . . . but I guess a significant number of people are cracking under the pressure and are just taking time out and going sick, whatever. (Transition Manager, Male, BrewCo)

The competitive pressures on BrewCo were perhaps the most intense of all the organizations in this study, and concerns about the site's future were actively discussed by mid-level managers. Keeping production on this site appeared difficult on cost and

efficiency grounds. The impacts of restructuring were acutely felt at BrewCo, and the labour process of the surviving middle managers was highly intensified. Middle managers explained how international markets had not been kind on BrewCo's main brand of beer (sales had been steadily falling for some time), which meant BrewCo faced tougher restructuring pressures from head office than other DrinksPLC production units. The nature of technological change in the brewing industry was also particularly important in this case, as employees were especially vulnerable to efficiency drives and job reductions. The unions retained a strong presence here, however, and negotiations were ongoing to protect employment. The new approach to managing change sounded promising, but whether the new, young senior management team will be able to keep production on the site remains to be seen.

UtilitiesCo – An Expanding Firm With Expanding Pressures

The director of HR and ten middle managers were interviewed at the head office of UtilitiesCo. This is a large organization of over 15,000 staff based in the north of England. Originally a state-owned company known as 'ElecAuthority', it was privatized in 1990, and became 'ElecCo'. This was subsequently purchased by 'WaterCo' in 1996, forming the merged company, UtilitiesCo. The company now operates in the heavily regulated sectors of domestic utilities (water and electricity), in unregulated business-to-business provision (including consultancy, IT, and outsourcing services) and customer services (telecoms). Although there had been no delayering, and employee numbers have been steadily growing, the director of HR expressed concern about the overloading of middle managers:

> I mean they've been pretty decimated I would say. . . . A lot of our middle managers are quite under siege. . . . I feel like they've got a bit of a pincer movement because there's these people at the senior levels of the organization who say, you know, 'we've got to do all these things' and it is like raining down on people. If you think about the different initiatives, the culture change, the need to perform, and . . . we've got very demanding targets on the regulated business for investment and capital improvement projects. I would shudder to think how some managers come into work some days and think, 'well how do I prioritize all of this?' (Director of HR, Female, UtilitiesCo)

One middle manager we interviewed had been at the former ElecAuthority/ElecCo since leaving school in 1965. He had also been sponsored by the company through his degree with a student apprentice scholarship. However, since the takeover and formation of the new company he had to reapply for a position 'every year or two':

> Since 1991 I have had nine different roles often involving work at different locations. . . . In the Electricity business of UtilitiesCo there has been restructuring on a near annual basis with staff leaving the business.

Do you ever feel that your job is at risk?

> Yes. Although there has never been a compulsory redundancy policy, pressure is brought on staff by not awarding them a satisfactory position and consequently many have chosen to accept a severance package, one year's salary, typically. (Middle Manager, Male, UtilitiesCo)

Another mid-level manager had a very high level of responsibility from 1998 to 2001, with about 120 staff reporting to him, who responded to electricity supply interruptions in a large urban region. He worked to a budget of £15 million. From 2001 to 2002 he performed a similar task in the water business. He said the company was under pressure to protect its reputation for continual delivery of power and water. Since 2002, however, he had been preparing the electricity revenue price review submission to OFGEM for 2005–10. These different tasks had meant varying types of work:

> In my roles from 1998 to 2001 I had a large degree of autonomy and implemented many innovations. However in my current role it has been structured in a very mechanistic manner. . . . I enjoyed my role in 1998 the most, as I was very busy, had the opportunity to work with and develop a team and implement many innovations. This was very rewarding. I do not receive any satisfaction from my current role or find much enthusiasm from others working on other aspects of this project. (Middle Manager, Male, UtilitiesCo)

The multiple reorganizations had been accompanied by a major culture change programme. Upwards of 8,000 staff had gone through the training sessions. 'We look to have leaders rather than managers and to change our whole behaviour', said one middle manager. According to her, however, the organization remained 'macho', 'racist', and 'very bureaucratic', with ethnic minorities and women very under-represented at management levels. Alongside senior managers applying pressures for change on middle managers, some ambitious middle managers had actively bought into the change agenda and wanted to find more humane ways to administer it:

> I actually believe the critical key is that if you create dissatisfaction with people with what they do currently, then they are in a better position to look at the next opportunity as an actual improvement. I know it's how you manage that transition and a lot in it is about the people management and being sensitive to those, and telling people enough information so they feel there's like, whilst they'll not be in control of their destiny at least they are knowledgeable about what's going on and have the right information. If they don't believe they're being told the right things or they feel that things are not transparent or things are underhanded and happening away behind closed doors then I think we've undermined the whole process. (Commercial Manager, Female, UtilitiesCo)

Although the performance pressures were considerable at UtilitiesCo, managers had job security (although little role security) and, in contrast to BrewCo, were not expecting significant job cuts. Many of UtilitiesCo's products were in heavy demand, and the company enjoyed a monopoly position in several markets. The company was growing in

size, had not delayered, and was moving into new, unregulated markets. Morale was therefore far higher than in BrewCo. Having said that, the demands on middle management staff were still very heavy, suggesting that the increasingly tough nature of middle management working life is a feature across a range of sectors (Littler et al., 2003; Morris et al., 2005, 2006).

AutoCo – Managers on Overdrive

AutoCo is a US-owned global corporation. For our research, we visited the UK head office and a major engine plant employing approximately 1,450 staff. The automotive industry is perhaps *the* sectoral exemplar of the 'radical' global transformations view of political economy. The complexity and range of the inputs, throughputs and outputs of the industry have all increased dramatically over the last 10–15 years. The automotive industry, is, of course, renowned for one of the highest levels of inter-company ownership, cross-border production, and joint ventures. It also features immense global competition and over-capacity, with the producers of many brands facing sales difficulties. Not unlike BrewCo, historic car companies become simply brand names or badges under a much larger ownership umbrella. AutoCo's US parent corporation owns eight badges, and the engine plant we visited produces engines for several of them. Although large investment from head office into new technologies had safeguarded the plant's mid-term future, and group-level managerial employment numbers had grown, the plant HR manager was fairly critical of how organizational reforms had impacted at the local level. Reform included delayering from eight to five layers in 1996. In his experience new technologies have facilitated work intensification and job cuts:

> Today it is all about capacity utilization. In 1980 we produced 2,000 engines per day of one type with 2,000 people. Now, 1,450 [people] produce 3,000 of four engines. . . . My big worry is the new folk coming in. . . . The burnout rate is going to be high. (HR Middle Manager, Male, AutoCo Engine Plant)

The Production Team (middle) Managers were under a heavy monitoring regime. According to the same HR manager:

> There is a system of scorecards. The plant manager has one and it cascades down. So each Production Team Manager [PTM] has his or her own scorecard. Those are people with engineering and manufacturing expertise. On an hourly basis PTMs have the stress of being person plus or minus. PTM is the first line of management, they have enormous stress. It doesn't matter much to me, I'm an old fart, an old AutoCo hand, I know my way around and I'll be gone in a year or so. But I feel sorry for them. (HR Middle Manager, Male, AutoCo Engine Plant)

Promotion prospects for such managers were not good, and they would have to accept substantial sideways moves as 'progression', instead of the more traditional stepwise ascent of an internal hierarchy:

Not all PTMs can get promoted in this lean structure, that's the crux of it, you've got there very quickly. (HR Middle Manager, Male, AutoCo Engine Plant)

The Engineering (middle) Managers spoke of similar pressures. Following considerable changes since the early 1990s, the workplace has become more competitive in terms of promotion, more demanding in terms of hours and quality, but also more professional and less authoritarian in terms of managerial style:

I think there's too much pressure from high above to say 'no more additional people' . . . it has knock-on effects where we're asking people to cover bigger areas and different roles. But certain roles, I think, are managed better in our organizations than what they have been . . . from a competency level, we're trying to move the needle throughout the AutoCo organization with supervisory staff. And that, I think, more so now that's being done with coaching, you know, I think the style of management needs to change . . . there's an old style of management which I've been brought up in and it's just shout, bawl, 'get on with it!' type of thing. Obviously that has an impact on the individual you're dealing with. So whereas in the past . . . my experience has shown that we probably didn't really focus in on the impact with people because of some of the environments and the jobs – that supervising was always seen as the hard person or even the hard man. Now we are seeing more and more women in the organization which is good, so I think our role as managers need to change but then we need to be given the coaching and the guidance and the training and also the mindset to say 'well, hold on, the role is slightly changing' . . . we have less and less people, less layers. The work content's growing in the sense that the expectation from the organization is growing. (Motor Components Area Manager, Male, AutoCo)

A second manager had 14 years' experience as a training manager at several AutoCo sites across the UK and Europe. He had previously worked (for 12 years) as an engineer at an independent UK car firm acquired by AutoCo, originally joining them as a student apprentice. This middle manager spoke of severe workplace pressures in the transition to a managerial role, with in recent years the expectations on management knowledge and competence having risen steadily:

When you're a new manager you end up, you're living here in the plant, not going home much and making sure that it's in good shape and all the other managers are doing what they said they would do and likewise all the foremen and all the engineers and everybody else, you know. So there was a tremendous learning curve which I found very stressful at the beginning but actually got to deal with it towards the end . . . I guess my working day is typically seven in the morning till six in the evening, and when you have, you know, periods like with the audit that would be all weekend as well . . . I think management jobs have changed significantly because there's a much greater expectation to know a broad knowledge base of how the company works. Before, years back, there were traditional chimneys, I think, where you actually were expert in your chimney. And now it's you have to be that but you also have to be able to understand the business in its totality. (Training Manager, Male, AutoCo)

This engine plant was likely to remain open for the foreseeable future, meaning relative job security. On the other hand it was subjected to the same efficiency rationalizations elsewhere in the AutoCo group, involving widening responsibilities. Middle managers interviewed at AutoCo frequently alluded to the ideology of increased performance that impacted on their working lives. They described a managerial labour process that had become extremely intense, largely because of substantially increased performance demands as competitive pressures in the industry mounted. No company or manager could afford to be complacent. Managers require wider experience and greater levels of ability, and have to be prepared to improve constantly their knowledge and skills in order to meet targets, make bonuses and avoid poor appraisals.

Our investigations at AutoCo confirmed the somewhat pessimistic picture of 'pincered' middle management – under substantial pressures from senior levels and from below (Thomas and Dunkerley, 1999; Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 2003; Worrall et al., 2000). They must appear to be flexible team leaders but must also extract ever more effort, quality and performance from the production staff in their teams. It was hardly surprising that the managers at AutoCo described high levels of stress and very long working hours. But at the same time they appeared highly motivated, well-paid and important employees, a world away from the stereotypical image of non value-adding bureaucrats (see also Balogun, 2003, Dutton et al., 1997; Huy, 2001; Reilly et al., 1993).

SteelCo – Reforging Workplace Practices

SteelCo is a major international steel producer. We visited one of its four main UK-based integrated production facilities. In keeping with so many other heavy manufacturing sectors, SteelCo faces extremely severe competitive pressures, not least from China and certain eastern European countries. Major reforms have been carried out in terms of the company's employment structure and the work tasks of middle managers. Job cuts over the years had been heavy across the group, but the plant we visited was reasonably protected from job losses in the most recent rounds of redundancies, due to its technological capacity for producing high-grade products and its proximity to deep-water ports. However, as the HR manager of one of its steelworks explained, delayering policies had significantly affected its middle management:

> In 1997 we had this multi-layered pay structure which itself creates a barrier to flexibility and performance improvement. Because everyone's looking upwards to 'Whose gonna make decisions? When am I gonna become an MM2 as opposed to an MM1? My career progression takes me through.' So clearly everyone is focused on clear progression through grade progression. In 1997 we launched what we termed the Management Project. And the Management Project was a total and comprehensive review of terms and conditions of employment for managers. . . . That was focused on reducing the number of grades we had in the organization, and introduced a concept of broad banding. Whereas perhaps we had a band of about 15 hundred pounds difference between the bottom of the grade to the top of the grade we moved to about 6 or 7 thousand pounds. And effectively we reduced the management in middle management grades from 10 categories to effectively . . . 3 categories. So we

removed away from this [10 levels] to a category C business senior management population and category D and E for the rest of the management population, based on a broad banding principle. Based on performance, based on contribution, you move though these broad bands as a result of their own contribution to a personal rating of performance. (HR Director, Male, SteelCo)

Although this senior manager spoke positively about the changes, the introduction of teamworking, the removal of layers and the stripping away of the traditional job titles had exposed SteelCo's middle managers to significant work intensification. There was extremely tough competition for upwards mobility at SteelCo. A mid-level manager in HR described how white-collar staff had to learn to deal with the prospect of sideways movement, just as we had observed at AutoCo:

We're just in the middle of our management development review process and that is a key feeling that's come out of every single one. But because of the change in the grading structure that we implemented in 1999, because of flatter organizational structures people are wanting to move from one grade to the next grade to the next grade. And that is just not possible because you know the jump that is required from E grade, [which is] like lower middle manager, to a D grade, which is senior middle manager, to C grade, which is senior manager is significant. And graduates are coming in expecting to be promoted to D and C bands within five years and it doesn't happen. . . . And it's very hard for people to see the move from one E grade job to another E grade job as being progression, you know they see it as well it's a sideways step. . . . And you know before because of the hierarchy of grades that we had you could make those sideways steps and yes you would get a moving grade but it was like *that* small. [Makes finger gesture of small size] But it didn't matter that it was that small, it was a moving grade and you could go home and say 'I've been promoted' you know . . . and it's becoming a greater challenge for us, and you look at the graduate retention figures for example and you ask 'well, why have people left?' And it is something to do with kind of stability, security, company image particularly over the last two or three, four or five years because of what we've been through. (Middle Manager, Human Resources, Female, SteelCo)

This question, of how mid-level management's aspirations can be managed in a flatter structure, was described as perhaps the most salient among the issues facing the HR community in all the companies visited. On a more positive note, middle managers who had survived restructuring did claim to enjoy their work, stating it was more interesting and demanding. As a result, they appeared to be highly motivated although, as this manager went on to explain, this high motivation comes not just from the increased financial and intrinsic rewards of the job but also from the direct impact of broader economic pressures:

The roles are actually becoming broader now and have more responsibility. I certainly think that. Whereas I would guess in the past it was quite you know kind of 'your role was your role', I think certainly over recent years we're expecting a lot more and a

greater variety within job roles and people to accept that that's normal. . . . I can't remember the last time somebody said 'well, that's not in my job description', whereas, you know, that's what used to happen. I think that's just a change in everybody recognizing you've got to move on to be ahead of the game. And given the other changes that we've gone through as a business and a company that people need to be able to do that otherwise we will never survive, you know? (Middle Manager, Human Resources, Female, SteelCo)

Despite the growing interest level of the work tasks, the overall picture from our three manufacturing case studies was perhaps one of pessimism. Although two of the sites (AutoCo and SteelCo) appeared unlikely to shed further significant numbers of staff, middle managers have endured a great deal of change, involving substantial increases in responsibility and a major intensification of the labour process. The demands of the job appeared to be continually on the rise. Despite working within a quite different type of environment, middle managers in our public sector case study organization had experienced surprisingly similar changes.

LocalGov – Emulating the Toughest Elements of the Private Sector?

At LocalGov we interviewed two senior HR managers and ten middle managers in a major department of a large city council. The council had gone through several recent reforms, some of which were government policy-driven, others cost-driven. A fundamental process of merging and breaking down traditional functional boundaries had taken place. The Council had progressively reduced its 23 separate departments, initially by a major transformation to nine, then to eight, and finally to five. Policy-driven reforms in 1993 had included changes to the occupational rankings, amounting to the reduction of managerial layers from seven to four. The former Civil Service titles had been removed, and LocalGov managers were renamed First Tier (Director of Department), Second Tier (Head of Service, of which there are eight), Third Tier (Area Office Managers, or managers of other functional teams such as performance improvement, or IT development), and Fourth Tier (front-line team leaders). Two of our ten middle manager respondents were fourth tier 'acting up' to third.

At its peak, the council's headcount was 17,000 employees, of which 7,000 were schoolteachers. In addition, the (formerly titled) Housing and Environmental Services departments outsourced around 700 staff to private contractors – in refuse, street cleaning, building cleaning, engineering and vehicle maintenance – as part of the Compulsory Competitive Tendering scheme. The HR managers explained how the previously separate Housing and Environmental Services departments had recently been merged to create the Department of Neighbourhood and Housing, comprising around 2,300 staff. The new Department was responsible for the delivery of housing services to the city, including rent collection, public housing maintenance, road maintenance, and environmental health. In addition, there were several Area Offices around the council's geographical area which were run by third tier managers.

Third tier managers had experienced considerable job enlargement. According to one former area officer (now manager of a 'cross-cutting team', Service Improvement):

That's how the strategic stuff is done, the chief officers are increasingly only operating at a strategic level, pushing down and down the operational stuff. (Third Tier Manager of Service Improvement Team, Male, LocalGov)

Working hours had certainly increased:

When I took on the Best Value review my hours went up massively there which is probably being an hour and a half every day more again, but then I was taking work home which I've never done before, four hours a week at home probably. And I never got out of that because the Best Value review was only just about to finish when I changed over jobs to come here. And coming here last March and working very long hours was a standard 8 hour day, up to 10–11 hours here, and then its not been as much work at home, there's been a bit of that. My missus has actually started to keep a record on that. . . . If I could have been out the door at five fifteen on the dot I wouldn't have too many worries about doing that. So yeah I've always felt a bit of a fool that I'm doing these hours, but its part of my character. There are things I like to get right. I like to lead by example. And the cost of this is my family. (Third Tier Manager of Service Improvement Team, Male, LocalGov)

Despite such commitment, promotions in CouncilCo were very hard to come by. With only seven second tier positions available, many middle managers had given up trying to climb higher. Although job security existed in the council (there was a no redundancy policy and all managers were on open-ended contracts), expectancy of changes of role departments was widespread:

Well, I wouldn't say job security is there because . . . they could make up their minds if they didn't like you to sort of roll you to another department which can have a crushing effect on people's morale. Some people don't recover from that. So anybody can be dealt with by reorganization particularly by senior management such as myself. Like they did with the second tier, you know. 'Third tier? Let's reorganize it so there's two less and we could get the other two to do something else.' There's nothing you can do about it. They'll find you a job on the fourth tier level, pay protected for two years, but you know, you can either look for another job, or get on with it, in which case you would get so depressed, you'd go sick, resign or whatever else. . . . I never feel secure. (Third Tier Manager, Male, LocalGov)

Another third-tier manager with an HR role in the same department expressed similar misgivings. Although there was evidence of her job becoming more varied (but also more intensive), organizational restructuring had meant that her role was thrown into confusion:

Do you see yourself as quite a valued member of the organization?

I do. It's difficult, it's quite difficult to answer, in one respect, because there's a lot of change going on. As usual! I consider myself a valued member of Neighbourhood and

Housing Services' management structure. . . . Some of the HR managers will work very much on casework; disciplines, grievances, complaints, those sorts of things, and spending an awful lot of their time on that. I actually spend very little of my time on that. I spend much more time with the heads of service, the management of change, the objectives for the department, and part of that is down to . . . a relatively new Chief Officer, who has come in and, sort of, made his plan known, and we've got a very clear plan that we're now trying to achieve. An awful lot of my work is project work, working with the second tier, working with [Chief Officer] about that bigger strategic direction. I think the reason why I say it's quite difficult is that they're coming to the end of a Best Value review . . . which is . . . cross-cutting, right across the organization on HR. And that will mean that I won't be part of this department any more. All the HR is being recentralized. And therefore what my role will be is unclear. And how much I'll be able to get involved in the, sort of, strategic direction of a department is very questionable at the moment. (Third Tier HR Manager, Female, LocalGov)

The expansion of responsibilities was a major feature or her recent career experience. When asked whether she had a large amount of cross-departmental responsibilities she answered:

Yeah, very much so. Yeah, I mean, if you look at our Equality of Action plan for example, it goes to loads and loads and loads of pages, I can't remember how many, but my name appears against probably a quarter of the department's objectives. Which is quite a scary prospect. It's not necessarily doing them all, but I'm the lead officer or I'm the person that's supposed to get all the other managers doing things. But that can be a bit concerning, yeah, but I've got a lot of projects, management change projects, so lots of things that span out over either a big part of the department, or the whole department. (Third Tier HR Manager, Female, LocalGov)

LocalGov managers shared views similar to those of our large private sector firms regarding the need for change. As with AutoCo, SteelCo and UtilitiesCo, managerial job cuts were not expected, but uncertainty over roles, major intensification of work, and increases in complexity were of real concern. It was suggested that low morale was even more of a problem, for we were reminded that public sector managers' pay and bonuses were in general considerably lower than those in the private sector (see below).

In short, LocalGov had been subjected to significant change but with a tiny fraction of the resources available to large PLCs. While some middle managers welcomed the change of emphasis away from a traditional, bureaucratic public sector approach (towards working across the structure in project teams), few expected to be promoted rapidly in this leaner structure where working hours were now long and prospects for elevation increasingly remote.

CONCLUSIONS

We conclude by briefly summarizing the results of our study and then drawing out some implications for theory and practice. While we cannot make broad generaliza-

tions about the fate of middle managers in the UK based on five cases, we aim to show how our cases might contribute to the development of a 'new' labour process analysis of managerial work. There is a clear division in our findings in that they appear both to support and contradict traditional elements of labour process theory. On the one hand, we found much support for traditional labour process expectations in terms of increased working pressures and reduced job security. On the other hand, and in contrast to the Bravermanian concept of the progressive and unilinear 'degradation of work', our managers reported widespread upskilling and experiences of increased responsibility and autonomy. Many also suggested that salaries and bonuses had been improved after structural transformation. Our findings therefore point to the substantially transformed nature of the managerial labour process – this includes more interesting and rewarding work, accompanied by higher potential rewards, but alongside ratcheted pressures and expectations that demand greater personal sacrifices and imply serious penalties for poor performance (or refusal to make such sacrifices).

The impetus for organizations to develop into such heavily demanding workplaces appears clear. Senior HR managers repeatedly described the necessity of cost cutting, exertion of greater effort, and the need for higher levels of expertise in order to match the competition. This imperative was well understood and readily recounted by senior and middle management alike, as they linked their personal pressures into a much broader narrative of organizational performance and economic necessity. Our analysis therefore suggests that a fruitful avenue for further labour process-inspired research might lie in similar examinations of the connections between changing macro-economic climates and the realities of working life as these pressures filter down through the organization.

Our four large firms and our local authority went through similar restructuring exercises, driven by top management's desire to lower costs and increase efficiency. Although large-scale corporate restructuring has been endemic for many years (Bowman and Singh, 1993) the competitive pressures enacted on firms show no signs of abating. In our case corporations, however, downsizing appears to have has slowed (except in BrewCo) and delayering, whilst practiced robustly in previous years, appears to have come to a halt. This implies that the forms of radical change to corporate structures that featured so heavily in earlier literature may now not be so commonplace. This does not mean that the pressure on staff has eased, however. The upshot of these changes has been the normalization and institutionalization of the intensified middle management labour process. This new environment was described to us as simply 'the way things are'. In the words of a middle manager at SteelCo: 'Everybody's working hours are creeping up. That's life'. In return for greater financial rewards (at least in the private sector), middle managers were resigned to increased surveillance, greater work intensification, higher levels of responsibility, reduced security, and fewer opportunities for promotion. Some private sector middle managers earned as much as £70,000 per annum, with the possibility of a further £30,000 in performance-related annual bonus. LocalGov third tier managers, on the other hand, earned around £35,000 per annum with no bonus entitlement. The newly intensified nature of working life for public sector middle managers may be, therefore, particularly distressing as they have undergone similar levels of

work intensification to the private sector but without requisite increases in financial reward.

As noted, our findings support some aspects of Bravermanian analysis but conflict with others. The macro-level narrative of top management efficiency demands and the associated disposability of middle managers is very much in keeping with the picture usually painted by mainstream labour process analysis. However the concept of universal deskilling is not supported by our evidence. Middle managers in our organizations were under constant pressure to upgrade their skills in an environment where their responsibilities and spans of control had widened considerably. The unilinear labour process view of middle managers being subjected to deskilling and work degradation, could be rooted in the context in which Braverman was writing. In the early 1970s large monopolistic firms were continuing to grow in terms of headcount (Braverman, 1974, pp. 260, 264). However, following the significant contraction of employee numbers in many large organizations since the 1980s, middle managers have frequently upgraded their skills and widened their responsibilities as workloads have expanded to compensate for headcount reduction. Moreover, the steady increase in performance pressures and expectations also tends to drive the upskilling of middle management work. Even where employee numbers have grown (UtilitiesCo), and where the organization is not reliant on share capital or involved in international competition (LocalGov), efficiency drives were at the forefront of managerial strategy, forcing middle managers to upgrade their capabilities.

The evidence from our cases supports wider empirical studies which demonstrate that delayering contributes significantly to both work intensification and a slowdown of upward mobility for middle managers. This is in keeping with the pessimistic picture of middle management careers painted by, for example, Heckscher (1995), Scase and Goffee (1989), and Worrall and Cooper (2001), and opposes the findings of career renewal presented in White et al. (2004). This is a major concern, particularly as survey data of large firms indicates that delayering has been widespread across OECD countries (Littler et al., 2003). While there was some evidence of middle management's potential being 'harnessed' (Balogun, 2003) and the organizations had tried to restructure 'responsibly' (Cascio, 2002), such attempts at ameliorating the harshest effects of the new organizational demands did not provide solace for overworked managers juggling with uncertainty and transformation. Despite the personal pressures, however, many of these managers appear to remain focused, committed, and enthusiastic. This was probably due to the relatively higher wages and bonuses on offer (at least in large PLCs), the challenging and varied nature of the work, and because managers who were unwilling or unable to put in the enormous amounts of time and effort necessary to survive in these workplaces had either chosen to leave or been forced out. Our case studies suggest that the labour process of middle managers is characterized by work intensification and insecurity, but also substantially increased responsibilities, skill levels and pay. However, the close linkage between the growing cost-cutting demands of international capitalism and the intensification of working life – a cornerstone of labour process analysis – is strongly supported by our study. We suggest that a closer examination of the subjective interpretations of middle managers can actually shed light on the connections between macroeconomic structure, workplace transformations, and everyday life, and this might be a fruitful avenue for further labour process inquiry.

We have suggested that the intensification of the middle management labour process is derived from the increasingly harsh terms of engagement of international competition (see Thompson, 2003). With some notable exceptions (Delmestri and Walgenbach, 2005; Hales, 1999; Littler et al., 2003; McCann et al., 2004; Morris et al., 2005), there is perhaps still insufficient international evidence of this relationship in the academic literature. It is unclear, for example, whether middle management working life is subject to the same kinds of pressures under less liberal and less financialized economic systems, such as Japan or Germany. Also more research is required on the gendered aspects of the middle management labour process, particularly as work–life imbalance appears increasingly acute. This is noted even by enthusiasts for radical restructuring, such as Kanter (1989, pp. 291–4).

Finally, the uncompromising environment in which corporations operate, and the resultant transformation it brings to organizational structures and managerial work practices, appears to have made the labour process of surviving UK middle managers more demanding, more pressured, more stressful, but also (for some) more financially rewarding and varied. Whereas many UK middle managers appear able to adapt and survive in these harsh and intensive conditions, it must be remembered that many others have failed to thrive. One of the more disquieting aspect of large-scale corporate change in Britain is that, despite the tremendous hardship that restructuring brings, financial results have been modest, while pay for top management (possibly the only clear winners to emerge from major corporate change) has skyrocketed (Froud et al., 2000, 2005). The question of how to improve working conditions for middle managers in the next decade is therefore an important one if large corporations wish to preserve the goodwill of their highly-skilled middle management employees.

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NOTES

[1] FAME ('Financial Analysis Made Easy') is a major database of 3.4 million companies registered in the UK and Ireland. http://www.bvdep.com/en/FAME.html
[2] At LocalGov, we interviewed the Head of the Department of Neighbourhood and Housing, and he was accompanied by the most senior HR manager in that Department. We did not have access to the Council's central HR at this case study, as our access to the organization was mediated through a former employee of this department.

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