



Research paper

Alcohol drinking behaviors and alcohol management policies under outsourcing work conditions: A qualitative study of construction workers in Taiwan



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 June 2015

Received in revised form 11 August 2015

Accepted 13 August 2015

Keywords:

Alcohol
Outsourcing
Policy
Workplace

ABSTRACT

Background: Workplace alcohol policies are crucial for workers' health and safety. The practice of outsourcing is gaining popularity around the world and was found to be associated with poorer health in the working population. This study aimed to examine how outsourcing complicates the implementation of workplace alcohol policies and affects workers' drinking behaviors.

Methods: In-depth interviews were conducted with 16 outsource workers, 3 subcontractors and 3 worksite supervisors. Information regarding workers' drinking behaviors, their knowledge, and attitudes toward workplace alcohol policy were analyzed using a qualitative thematic analysis.

Results: Factors associated with poor workplace alcohol management included smaller size and private ownership of outsourcers, subcontractors' own drinking behavior and positive attitude to alcohol, and precarious employment conditions of outsourcing workers. The multilateral relationship between outsourcers, subcontractors, and workers complicated and impaired the implementation of workplace alcohol policies.

Conclusion: The implementation of workplace alcohol management policies was hampered in outsourcing work conditions due to poor coordination of supervisors in the subcontract chain. The enforcement of alcohol policies in the workplace should be strengthened by consolidating management responsibilities of outsourcers and subcontractors.

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Introduction

Workplace alcohol use is known to cause problems, including chronic illnesses, sick leave, absenteeism, reduced performance, labor conflicts, work accidents, and damages to equipment, products, as well as company reputations (EuroFound, 2012). Heavy drinking was estimated to affect 6 to 8% full-time working adults in North America and 9% of male workers in Taiwan (Cheng, Cheng, Huang, & Chen, 2012; Marchand, 2008). However, alcohol problems distribute unevenly in different working populations by occupation, employment condition, and work condition. For example, a national survey in Taiwan revealed that among

employees, workers with alcohol dependence were more likely to be male, manual workers, and on jobs with piece-rated or time-based pay systems (Cheng et al., 2012). Despite that the practice of outsourcing has gained growing popularity in recent 20 years (Gochfeld & Mohr, 2007; Mayhew & Quinlan, 1999), the impact of outsourcing to workplace alcohol management and drinking behaviors has been rarely studied.

Outsourcing refers to the practice of an organization contracting out parts of production or service tasks to another organization or individual, usually through competitive tendering. Accumulating studies indicated that outsourcing increased the risk of poor self-reported health, sickness absence, and work-related injuries (Azari-rad and Thompson-Dawaon, 2003; Min et al., 2013; Nenonen, 2011; Quinlan & Bohle, 2008). The link between outsourcing and poor occupational safety and health (OSH) outcomes operate through multiple pathways, including economic pressures, poor coordination of OSH management, and regulatory failure (Quinlan & Bohle, 2008). Studies have shown that OSH

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services for outsourcing workers, including alcohol policies, were usually more limited than those who were directly hired, due to multilayered contract chain, which tended to dilute employers' responsibility in carrying out preventative measures (Gyi, Haslam, & Gibb, 1998; Quinlan & Bohle, 2008; Salazar, Takaro, Gochfeld, & Barnhart, 2003). Nevertheless, studies of how the characteristics of outsourcers and subcontractors as well as the multilateral employment relations influence workplace alcohol management and workers' drinking behaviors remained scarce.

The purpose of this study was to examine how these contextual factors may influence the implementation of alcohol management policies in outsourcing work conditions. Three major actors in the practice of outsourcing were identified, namely outsourcers (public or private, including prime contractors), subcontractors, and outsourced workers (Gyi et al., 1998). We targeted construction workers in this study because outsourcing is known to be popular in construction industry and alcohol drinking has been a major OSH concern among construction workers (Cheng et al., 2012; Gochfeld & Mohr, 2007). Specific research objectives of this study were to examine drinking behaviors in construction workers who were employed under outsourcing conditions, and to explore how outsourcers, subcontractors, and workers make sense of workplace drinking and alcohol policies in relation to their working conditions and multilateral relationships.

Methods

Participants

Eligible participants were workers aged 18 years or older, had worked in construction sector with outsourcing conditions for at least 1 year, and had either drunk at work or had seen others drinking alcohol in the workplace. Study subjects were recruited by snowball sampling, which started with researchers' personal social networks, but in the later stage through purposive sampling in order to maximize information variation (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Subcontractors and construction site supervisors were also invited for interviews. This study was approved by the IRB of the National Taiwan University.

A total of 22 male interviewees participated in this study of which 10 interviews were conducted in four construction sites and the other 11 interviews took place either in public place or the interviewee's residence. Among the 16 outsource workers, 2 were painters, 2 were odd-job workers, 4 were formwork workers, 3 were fire protection technicians, 4 were welders, and 1 was ironworker (Supplement 1). All of the interviewed workers had worked in many worksites, including construction sites of building projects, manufacturing factories, electricity plants and railway, or road construction projects.

The work tenures of the three worksite supervisors ranged from 7 to 23 years; one of them had been a plasterer before undertaking the supervisor position (case no. 3). Types of work tasks that the three subcontractors undertook were plumbing/electricity, carpentry, and welding work. These three subcontractors worked with their employees and were at the lowest tier of the subcontract chain, i.e., they did not further subcontract work to others. Many of the interviewees had switched among multiple work roles of worksite supervisors, subcontractors, and outsourcing employees.

Procedure

This study adopted a social constructionism approach (Burr, 2003) and semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face to explore the following topics by the first author: drinking behaviors and drinking norm in the workplace, existence of workplace alcohol policy and knowledge, and attitude toward

workplace alcohol management. Examples are: "when and where do you drink alcohol while working? Who paid for alcohol?" "Whom do you drink with in the workplace?" "Were there any alcohol management measures taken in the workplace and who implemented them?" Interviews took place during the period between September 2013 and June 2014. Lengths of interviews ranged from 32 to 76 min, with an average of 48 min. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Two complementary strategies, namely "consensus" view across interviewees and "variability" perspective across responses, were used to identify features (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Features of multilateral relationship in outsourcing and contextual factors related with workplace drinking were sorted and coded. Themes were then identified, reviewed, and refined from these features (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results

Drinking Behaviors in Construction Worksites

All interviewees except one odd-job worker knew that alcohol was prohibited in construction worksites. However, workplace drinking was very common in their experiences. Interviewees agreed that the most commonly consumed alcoholic beverages in construction worksites were alcoholic energy drink (AED) (with 10% alcohol) and beer, which were often drunk during rest time but also during work. Drinking amount ranged from one can of beer to several bottles of AED (600 ml per bottle) per day.

We identified two primary themes in the interviews about workplace drinking. Drinking at work was made sense of as 'incentive to work' and "workplace socializing". These two meanings of workplace drinking are grounded in participants' low-wage working conditions, and tensions in outsourcing management chain relationships. The characteristics of outsourcers, subcontractors, and employment conditions featured the theme of "incentive to work," and the multilateral relationship between actors in outsourcing conditions featured the theme of "workplace socializing." Together, they effectively undermine workplace no-alcohol policies and compromise the safety of outsourcing workers and are described in detail below.

Factors Influencing the Implementation of Alcohol Management Policies

We found that the implementation of company-level alcohol policies were influenced by characteristics of outsourcers, characteristics of subcontractors, and workers'; meaning making of workplace drinking as an incentive to work. This meaning was grounded in the employment conditions of outsourced workers and produces tensions in management chain relationships.

First, in terms of characteristics of outsourcers, it appeared that alcohol policies were more comprehensive and better implemented in public or large-scale projects. Reasons for better alcohol management in larger projects included the following: outsourcers usually employed full-time safety inspectors, government inspectors visited these worksites more often, and large construction companies (prime contractors) valued their reputations highly, therefore, invested resources in preventing workplace drinking. Requirement set by government was another reason that prime contractors, especially those tendering for public projects, adopted stricter alcohol control policies because their occupational safety records would be routinely reviewed. One interviewee explained:

"Drinking is prohibited in technological plants. Reputations of large enterprises would be damaged if occupational injuries happened inside their properties. The enterprises have numerous affiliated

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