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A Call to Action: Psychological Harm in Slaughterhouse Workers

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BY MICHAEL LEBWOHL

“Down in the blood pit they say that the smell of blood makes you aggressive. And it does. You get an attitude that if that hog kicks at me, I’m going to get even. You’re already going to kill the hog, but that’s not enough. It has to suffer. When you get a live one you think Oh good



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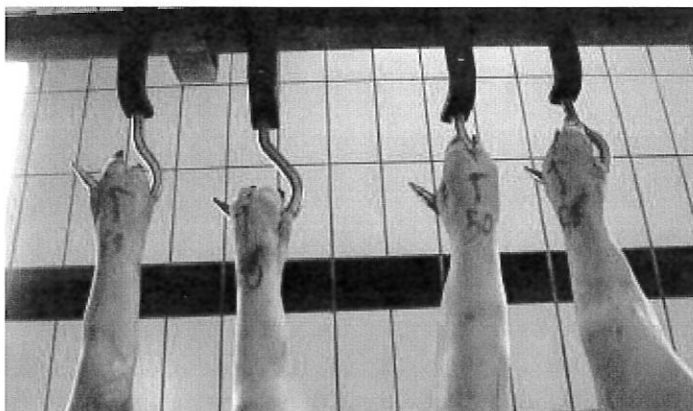
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These words do not come from the mouth of someone that society would classify as mentally well. However, they are words that sadly represent a class of workers present in civilized countries across the world: slaughterhouse workers. In America alone, over seventy thousand individuals work on slaughter lines² and face the daily burden of killing several hundred animals every hour.³ These workers perform a job that, by its very nature, puts them at risk of psychological disorder and pathological sadism.

This risk emerges from a combination of many factors of slaughterhouse work, one of which is the stressful environment that slaughtering creates. A large portion of this stress comes from the exceptionally high rates of injury among the workers. Slaughter facilities boast nonfatal injury rates of up to twenty out of every hundred workers, a proportion that is steadily decreasing but still makes meatpacking far and away the most dangerous profession in the United States.³ This monstrous rate mainly comes from everyday workplace hazards that are especially present in slaughterhouses, such as repetitive motions and heavy lifting. Yet, a significant portion comes from other, unpredictable dangers that serve as a more severe sources of everyday stress. Employees' interactions with live, frightened, and dangerous animals that must be contained and controlled means that every minute of work is another minute of profound danger.

The workers who are most acutely in danger are those that belong to a group called "stickers," or workers who slit the throats of animals so they bleed out. Theoretically, all non-poultry livestock must be stunned before being bled out, generally with a contained bolt-gun or "knocker," or by a large electrical shock. In many operations, however, this is rarely achieved. Foremen often tinker with the settings on knockers and electric shock guns in order to protect the quality of the meat and set line speeds to be excessively fast, leading to conscious, active animals often flying down the line towards stickers. The stickers then face the danger of being struck by the large, terrified animals. Making this more perilous, and thus more stressful, is the fact that the stickers hold sharp knives for the purpose of sticking the animals. These knives, when combined with the kicking animals, put stickers at risk of injuries ranging from the cosmetic to the gruesomely fatal.^{1,4}



However, the dangers of slaughterhouse work are not unparalleled. Many industrial jobs come with hazards that contribute to worker stress.

However, slaughterhouse work is unique among major industries due to its innate violence. Though

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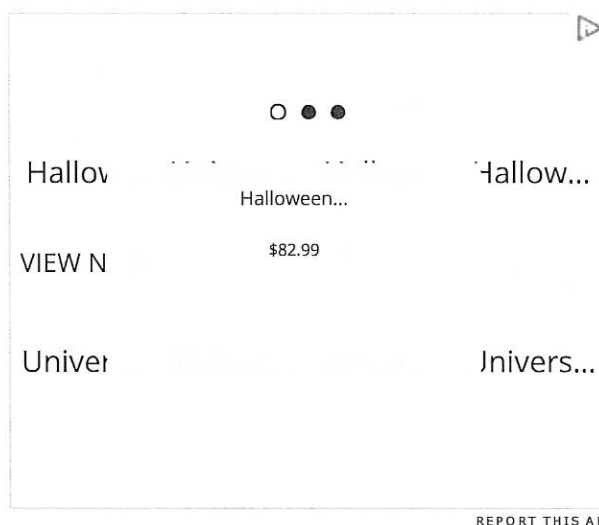
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Pigs hanging from the ceiling in a typical American slaughterhouse. Source: Seniju

violence affects slaughterhouse workers' mental health and behavior, one of the most prominent studies

investigated the impact of having a slaughterhouse in a community on crime rates within that community, using this as a metric for psychological health. The study used the FBI's Uniform Crime Report data in combination with the US Census to look at how crime rates changed as new industries came to town. They took data for over five hundred counties between the years 1994 and 2002, and then compared slaughterhouses' effect on crime to that of other industries. Though the industries they used for comparison were nearly identical in other predictors of changes in crime (namely worker demographics, potential to create social disorganization, and effect on unemployment in the surrounding areas), slaughterhouses outstripped all others in the effect they had on crime. They led not only to a larger increase in overall crime, but, disturbingly, disproportionate increases in violent crime and sexual crime.⁵



The authors of the crime study theorized that the reason for this increase was “spillover” in the psyches of the slaughterhouse workers, an explanation that is backed up by sociological theory and anecdotal evidence.⁶ This is seen in one worker’s testimony about how working a long shift slaughtering livestock affected how he viewed and treated his coworkers:

“I’ve had ideas of hanging my foreman upside down on the line and sticking him. I remember going into the office and telling the personnel man I have no problem pulling the trigger on a person—if you get in my face I’ll blow you away.”¹

Social theorists would consider this behavior to be a “progression” from animal abuse to human violence.⁶ However, this progression is distinct from the typical progression

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aggression, a relatively easy first step before moving to human targets. In slaughterhouses, the predisposition to abuse is not necessarily preexisting, but killing animals may serve a similar purpose in those without a predisposition as it does in those with one by acting as a first step that desensitizes workers to further violence aimed at humans.

Psychologically speaking, this desensitization may also be explained through the mechanism of “doubling,” in which individuals are compelled to create dual selves, one good, one bad.⁸ This coping mechanism is often necessary to deal with morally dubious employment. Doubling has most notably been studied in the case of Nazi doctors, a situation which may be comparable to the institutionalized and necessarily un-empathetic killing of animals in slaughterhouses.⁸ Creating and sustaining oneself with “good” moral character and having another self that can mechanically end lives for hours each day not only serves as another source of psychological stress for workers, but exposes workers to the risk that their pathologically un-empathetic work selves will slip into their community lives. This is another explanation for the “spillover” that affects slaughterhouse workers’ minds and communities.

A combination of these mental acrobatics and stressors contributes to psychological disorder, and specifically may create a type of post-traumatic stress disorder called perpetration-induced traumatic stress (PITS).⁸ Unlike many forms of traumatic stress disorders in which sufferers have been victims in a traumatic situation, sufferers of PITS are the “causal participant” in a traumatic situation.⁹ In other words, they are the direct reason for another being’s trauma. Living with the knowledge of their actions causes symptoms similar to those of individuals who are



A worker in a slaughterhouse, preparing meat to be sent off for further processing and consumption. Source: Southern Foodways Alliance

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populations, primarily Nazis and executioners.⁸ Without resorting to formal study, however, it is still possible to see that the symptoms (and causes) of PITS fit neatly with slaughterhouse workers' testimonies about their experiences:

"And then it gets to a point where you're at a daydream stage. Where you can think about everything else and still do your job. You become emotionally dead."¹

So a lot of guys at Morrell [a major slaughterhouse] just drink and drug their problems away. Some of them end up abusing their spouses because they can't get rid of the feelings. They leave work with this attitude and they go down to the bar to forget."¹

These stories echo those of combat veterans and survivors of disasters who suffer from stress disorders. The need to dissociate from reality to continue with their work leads individuals down a path that some may term "pathological".

Currently, slaughterhouse work is still a necessary evil in American society, and precisely because of this, it deserves more academic attention than it has received. Significant theoretical and anecdotal evidence underlies the idea that slaughterhouse work is mentally harmful. Yet, without hard, empirical, quantitative evidence to support that assertion, little can be done to ameliorate the situation. Studies that result in policy improvements to protect these workers are especially necessary considering that slaughterhouse workers generally come from demographics that lack the agency to stand up for their own rights, or to remove themselves from such profoundly damaging work conditions.³ Continued failure to acknowledge and address this issue is an inexcusable danger to workers' personal health and the health of their communities.

Michael Lebwohl is a junior in Pierson College majoring in Chemistry. He can be contacted at michael.lebwohl@yale.edu.

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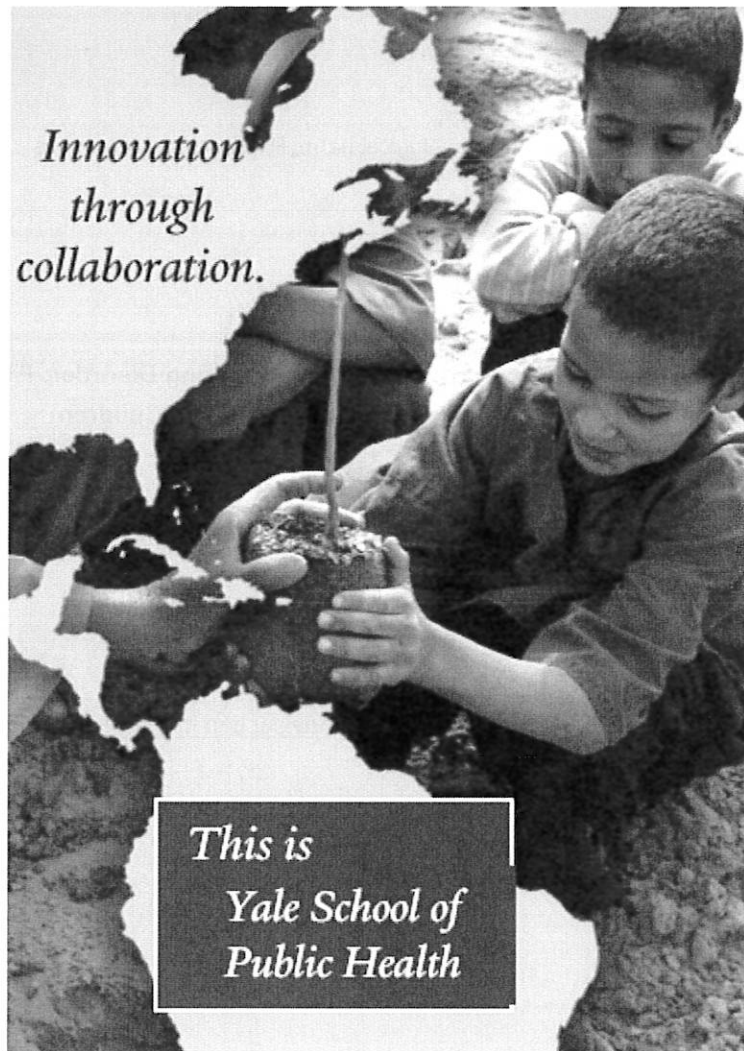
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