

RESEARCH NOTE

EILAT SYNDROME: DEVIANT BEHAVIOR AMONG TEMPORARY HOTEL WORKERS

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Based on primary and secondary data, it is argued that the unique characteristics of Eilat as a remote resort town situated on the historical and cultural margins of Israeli society combine to produce a liminal image that attracts hotel employees prone to substance abuse during what they view as a temporary sojourn in the city. In addition, this liminal image presumably shapes the perception of these temporary employees regarding their sojourn in the town on a transitional job during the period of time between their national/military service and civilian life. This article delineates the sociocultural, organizational, and legal conditions leading to the occurrence of this behavioral syndrome.

Key words: Temporary employees; Eliat, Israel; Liminal image; Behavioral syndrome

Introduction

The use of drugs in Western society has been examined in various contexts such as deviant behavior, addictions, treatment, prevention, and the setting of a national policy. Some substances that have been used by the nonproductive members of society are now being increasingly used by people who are employed. In 1991, a committee was appointed to investigate substance abuse at the workplace in the US (Normand, Lempert, & O'Brien, 1994). Following the completion of the committee's report, several researchers have investigated the relationship between work and

substance abuse (Harris, & Heft, 1992; Institute of Alcohol Studies [IAS], 2011; Mangione et al., 1995; Wadsworth, Moss, Simpson, & Smith, 2006; Wiesner, Windle & Freeman, 2005). This growing body of literature on drug use and the workplace consists of epidemiological surveys, studies examining the effect of psychoactive substances on performance at work, and studies that address practical and ethical issues related to the screening of employees and candidates. Interestingly, one of the conclusions arising from reading this eclectic body of literature is that the use of drugs is unrelated to the nature of work, and that it is rather related to the employee's personality. It can be claimed,

however, that it would be irresponsible to arrive at the conclusion that there is no correlation whatsoever between the work environment and substance abuse. In an attempt to broaden this narrow perspective on substance use and work in this respect, this article will attempt to illustrate the way that the sociospatial isolation of Eilat and its unique characteristics as a remote resort town, can demonstrate and clarify the high rate of substance use among the hospitality workers in this town.

Following this line of research, a survey conducted in Eilat ($n = 458$)—a remote and isolated resort town at the southernmost tip of Israel—reveals an extensive use of cigarettes, alcohol, and other illicit drugs among workers in the hospitality industry, which is a major employer in the town (Belhassen & Shani, 2012). The goal of the survey whose results would inspire the arguments included in this article was to examine the relationship between the habits of substance use by hospitality workers in Eilat, on the one hand, and the socio-demographic characteristics, job characteristics, and job attitudes, on the other, in terms of work alienation and job satisfaction scales (see also Belhassen & Shani, 2013). In brief, it was found that hospitality workers use substances at a rate that is much higher than the average within the general population (Bamberger, Biron, & Neuman, 2004), and higher than in any other job within the Israeli economy (Israel Anti Drug Authority [IADA], 2009). An overwhelming majority of the respondents (80%) indicated that they had used alcohol in the 30 days prior to the survey, while approximately half of the respondents reported that they had at least one instance of binge drinking (i.e., five drinks on a single occasion) during the same period. With regard to illicit drugs, approximately 20% of the respondents reported the use of illegal drugs during the previous month. Finally, 51.5% reported cigarette smoking on a daily basis, and heavy use of tobacco (i.e., more than 10 cigarettes a day) was reported by 30.7% of the respondents.

Fifteen semistructured interviews and field note observations collected by a trained informant, who was employed at one of the hotels, shed light on a work culture that promotes the social and physical availability of substances. The interviewees indicated that going out to dance clubs and drinking in bars were their main leisure activities. All of the

interviewees engaged in such activities at least once and occasionally three to four times a week. Some workers reported that the use of cannabis was particularly popular as a way to pass time at home during nighttime, as a complementary activity to spectator sports, video games, and meeting with friends. Some also stated that they or other workers used cannabis at the hotels; the latter practices were in hiding but apparently not too cautiously. According to the interviewees, cannabis smoking during work hours was rare and usually took place “at the dark corners of the hotel” as one interviewee put it. Others reported that cannabis was used by workers when they were left alone for a prolonged period of time, such as employees conducting night audits and security workers on night shifts. Two interviewees reported a case where workers were dismissed after being caught smoking cannabis during work hours.

The Conditions That Nurture Eilat's Liminal Work Environment

Tourism-related syndromes are usually associated with the behavioral reactions of tourists while visiting places that hold some significant meaning. The most well known are the Jerusalem Syndrome, in which tourists or pilgrims experience religious delusions during their visits to the city (Kalian, Catinari, Heresco-Levi, & Witztum, 2008; Witztum & Kalian, 1999), and the Paris Syndrome, observed mainly among Japanese tourists who are deeply disappointed by the City of Light (Katada, 1998). In contradistinction to these two syndromes, which are related to the reaction of tourists, the Eilat Syndrome is principally a behavioral phenomenon affecting temporary workers in the tourism industry whereby they make a widespread use of substances during their brief employment as hotel workers in a remote resort town. This article will describe the cultural, organizational, and legal conditions under which this phenomenon occurs in Eilat. Under certain conditions, Eilat Syndrome could possibly develop in other resort towns as well. In what follows, this article attempts to delineate the three categories of conditions that arguably modulate the habits of substance use, and arguably other deviant behaviors, by hospitality workers during their sojourn in the city.

The Sociocultural Aspect

In his analysis of the process that led to the emergence of Eilat's image as being liminal, Azaryahu (2005) noted that "being situated at the southernmost tip of Israel, the location of Eilat at the geographical margin of Israel created an image of an extraordinary place and sustained its prominent image within a popular imagination" (p. 117). During its early years, Eilat served as a penal town for criminals, who were obligated to move to Eilat as part of their verdict (Markus, 1958). During the 1960s and 1970s, Eilat was famous for the "beatniks" who lived on its beaches seeking to escape the urban life.

The prevalence of substance use is readily explained in light of the thesis based on availability. In the study of substance use, theories based on availability suggest that the social and/or physical availability of alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs increases the rates of usage (e.g., Ames & Grube, 1999). Social availability refers to the normative support of substance use in social environments surrounding the users. Indeed, in the case of Eilat's specific prominent features—the city's geographic isolation from the rest of the country as well as its character as a liminal hub in Israeli society in which deviant behavior is tolerated (Azaryahu, 2005)—arguably foster the social availability of substances among the residents of Eilat.

The above-mentioned interviews reveal an inter-hotel culture in which substance use and abuse have become acceptable and/or are tolerated due to the unique characteristics of the city's hospitality manpower. In this context, the interviewees spoke about clubbing and bar attendance as one of the few leisure activities available to them, especially for workers residing at one of the three hotel employee dormitories in the city. The vast majority of the residents of these building complexes (where some of the data was collected) are young single workers who come to Eilat to complete their 6-month job in order to qualify for the financial grant to which they are entitled following the completion of their military/national service. These workers view their stay in the city as a brief interlude following their military service and preceding their "real life back in Israel," as one interviewee put it. Such a perception of their Eilat stay fosters an attitude

where it is permissible to go out, drink occasionally, and experiment with other drugs. This attitude is reinforced by their age and point in their lives—in most cases, they are young adults with no children—and in turn, it influences the general ambience in the city, especially among the hospitality workers.

The Organizational Aspect

The idea that the hospitality industry can be regarded as a liminal workplace fostering abnormal behavior is not new. This liminality and the associated deviant behavior may be traced to two features of the industry. First, due to the low level of skills required, hospitality workers are relegated to a weak labor market position, and they therefore command a limited bargaining power. Second, the unique work environment of hotels fosters and perpetuates acts of moral and criminal deviance, such as substance abuse, inappropriate sexual behavior, and even criminal offenses such as petty theft (Miller, 1978; Shamir, 1981; Wood, 1992). This article seeks to broaden this thesis by showing how external forces contribute to the liminality of this remote, isolated resort town.

Despite the alienating job characteristics of some of the occupations at typical hotels, hospitality workers are among the lowest wage earners within the Israeli economy. Traditionally, data issued by the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics consistently reveal that they are at the bottom of the salary scale. The turnover within the hospitality industry in Eilat is quite high. In fact, the vast majority of Israeli employees do not remain in their jobs for more than 2 years. Yet managers agree that workers are crucial to the industry, since they hold the key to the overall quality of service that constitutes the core of the experience sold to the customers. In addition to manifesting a service orientation and the ability to be attentive and empathetic to clients' complaints, employees working directly with clients are also required to express a high level of identification with the organization. This identification is manifested not only in the uniform that many of them are expected to wear during work hours, but also in the professional language and behavioral codes that they are required to adopt. Thus, it can be stated that the hospitality industry requires a high level of

commitment on the part of its hotel employees, including physical and emotional labor, to ensure good interaction with the clients (for a review on the subject of emotional labor and the falsification of emotions in the tourism industry, see Van Dijk & Kirk, 2008).

The availability of alcohol in hotels is both physical and social. Physically, all of the hotels in the city sell alcohol, and some house the most prestigious bars. Drinking at bars is one of the few activities that the city offers tourists. Hotel workers are exposed to the nightlife even more than the typical local residents. The results of a comprehensive survey conducted in the US showed that young employees (aged 18–25) earning low wages, as well as low-paid workers in the food industry (either preparation or serving) or in service industries, are most likely to use psychoactive substances (Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2009). Curson and Young (1998) found that hospitality workers had high rates of alcohol use. Pizam (2010) argues that it is well known among researchers that many hotel workers experience problems associated with alcohol abuse. In fact, most of the interviewees admitted to coming to work with hangovers, especially on weekends. All these findings suggest that the hospitality industry tends to foster an organizational climate that tolerates the use of alcohol.

The Legal Aspect

In 1988, the Israeli parliament passed an amendment to the “Grant to discharged soldiers performing vital work,” a subsection of the National Insurance Law originally enacted in 1982. The rationale behind this law was to encourage discharged soldiers to work in fields identified as pivotal for the national economy and requiring low-level skills (industrial plants and workshops, construction sites, agricultural crop growing sites, packing houses, caring for disabled people). The 1988 amendment added hotels and gas stations to the list of preferred workplaces. The people eligible for the full grant (~\$2,400 as of January 2011) are discharged soldiers (and women following the completion of their national service instead) who had worked for 6 months in a preferred job as stipulated by the law. Eligible persons who work for a

shorter period of time may be entitled to partial payment under certain conditions. When the amendment was passed, young adults began to flow to Eilat in large numbers. The town admittedly offers them the opportunity to experience their first job as employed citizens after completing their military service, which usually starts immediately after high school, at the age of 18. However, it would be reasonable to assume that the remoteness of Eilat’s location, coupled with its image as a resort town where the sun never stops shining as well as its reputation as a liminal hub in Israeli society, are the magnets that attract so many young adults to the city. Arguably, the 1988 Discharged Soldiers Law determines the temporal parameters of the stint in Eilat and accentuates the liminality of this time away from home—during this period of time when each young person can explore his/her freedom in relative independence (for many workers this will be their first experience as civilians away from their parents’ homes).

Conclusions

Drawing on the case of Eilat’s hospitality industry, this article contributes to the growing literature on drug usage in the workplace by suggesting that the working environment may influence the drinking and drug use habits of employees. It illustrates that the sociospatial marginality of Eilat is an important element in being attractive to temporary employees who come to work, explore, and live in the remote resort town. The conditions that arguably cultivate the deviant behaviors described above provide an insight into a social problem that can be examined in other resort locations with similar sociospatial features. In this respect, this article shifts the focus from the workers’ personality and disposition—an approach that governs the literature on drug use within the workplace—into a supplementary approach, which takes into account the influence of the broader working conditions as well that might trigger deviant behaviors.

Further research will admittedly be needed to provide managers and policy makers with the tools required to reduce the negative impact of substance use on the workers’ performance. Nevertheless, based on the data gathered so far, it is already possible to make certain recommendations. One

recommendation is to seek to broaden the spectrum of leisure activities available to hospitality workers in isolated locations; another recommendation might be to increase access to the activities available to the permanent residents of Eilat. In addition, the cessation of smoking and responsible drinking programs may be offered to workers wishing to minimize their current consumption habits. Arguably, the workplace is an appropriate setting within which to promote such programs, since hotel workers usually spend many hours at work. Finally, the importance of a work climate that would nurture employees' welfare has been pointed out in the service industry literature (Schneider & Bowen, 1993). Working under the influence might disturb the interaction with customers in case of front-of-the-house employees, or increase the chances for accidents for back-of-the-house employees. It is therefore recommended to explicitly ask workers to avoid alcohol and other drugs usage during work hours.

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