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The meaning of work: Lessons from sociology, psychology, and political theory

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Abstract

Economics views work as merely providing purchasing power. Many economists agree that there is a great deal more to work, but they nonetheless feel comfortable with this narrow description, believing that important aspects of work that they have left out of consideration have no impact on the validity of their analytical conclusions and policy propositions. This paper argues that if economics is to shed light on urgent socio-economic issues and suggest appropriate remedies, labor economics must be expanded to encompass work as a creative endeavor—an escape from social isolation—and to acknowledge the analytical implications of the workplace as a social microcosm, which is, inter alia, governed by power relationships. This paper presents lessons from an investigation of the meaning of work in a number of cognate disciplines and outlines their implication for labor economics and for policy seeking to advance the cause of social justice. © 2000 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Economics stands alone in describing the positive aspect of paid work simply as the opportunity to make money. Economics is also unique in emphasizing just one negative, the loss of leisure. In contrast, psychology (both individual and social) and sociology emphasize

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the centrality of work, *per se*, to individual well-being. These academic disciplines do not play down the critical role played by purchasing power as a need essential to well-being, but they emphasize the critical role played by the nonpecuniary aspects of the work experience. These include not only the features of the job itself, but also the general character of the physical and human environment at the workplace. The pecuniary and the nonpecuniary aspects are fundamentally seen as two vital determinants of well-being that cannot simply be treated as substitutes for each other.

Although many economists would agree that there is a great deal more to work, they nonetheless feel comfortable with this narrow description, believing that important aspects of work that they have left out of consideration have no impact on the validity of their analytical conclusions and policy propositions. The standard abstraction, however, is problematic as far as social policy design is concerned because what is abstracted from the analysis remains central to the work experience and to the impact of this experience on individual well-being. Furthermore, this paper argues that the abstraction of nonpecuniary rewards, and all potential losses other than forgone leisure, does not simply affect the precision of the analysis, it also introduces systematic biases. The identified root cause of socio-economic malaise, and the proposed remedies, are unduly inclined towards a specific subset of possible causes and specific remedies to elicit “right” individual and systemic conduct. The conceptual landscape opened up by academic discourses outside economics presents us with a much richer perspective on the place of work in the life of individuals in advanced, modern industrial societies and a more complex description of the workplace. If we accept the insights of the intellectual discourses in these disciplines, we will in all likelihood conclude that the economic description of workers’ and management’s conduct at the workplace is seriously flawed and biased towards the search of pecuniary rewards. We will also be compelled to reconsider the economic welfare and social justice implications of the current institutional structure under which paid work is organized.

The social psychology literature provides ample information about theoretical formulation of the meaning of work from a psychological perspective.¹ It emphasizes purely psychological needs for work and the psychological deprivation that occurs when these needs are not adequately met. These psychological needs, this literature emphasizes, are embedded in our social, ethical, and cultural structures. In the case of the vast majority of people in advanced industrial societies, these psychological needs can be met only through paid work. This is so because many of the psychological needs that earlier societies met through social structures, such as religious rituals, the expanded family, and the village community, have now been taken over by the institution of paid work.

Emphasizing the psychological significance of paid work, this literature does not deny the direct psychological impact of financial stress. However, it takes pains to emphasize that well-designed paid work fulfils a number of functions that are vital to individual well-being, over and above, and independent of, providing access to things that money can buy.

As we might expect, the sociological literature shares some of its intellectual terrain with social psychology in its emphasis on the centrality of paid work to one’s sense of social identity and individual self-worth. This literature stresses that claims on the design of job tasks, the human environment of the workplace, and the choices individual people make

cannot be analyzed in an atomistic context where individual tastes and constraints on action are independent of the social structure.

The psychology and the sociology literatures have clear implications for the manner in which (using the economic parlance) one should describe the arguments of workers' objective functions and the preference ordering they represent. They also have implications for the analytical specification of workers' opportunity sets. The sociological literature has similar implications for the description of the employer's side of the picture.

When we explore literature generated by political scientists, the description of both "objective functions" and the opportunity sets of workers and managers gain additional dimensions. Specifically, political theory emphasizes that the design of jobs, the choices workers are presented with, and the interactions between management and workers cannot be described in terms of atomistic conduct. Neither does this literature see the social determination described by sociologists as adequate. Rather, they argue that the structure of interpersonal relationships and the processes that select the ultimate outcomes are significantly driven by the quest for power, *per se*. The workplace, they argue, is governed by a system that functions like a polity. The actions of management, therefore, cannot be seen as motivated by the sole goal of profit maximization, and the workers are not simply trading off leisure for commodities. In summary, the quest for power and the dynamics of political conduct, political scientists argue, have a significant role in shaping the ultimate outcome for both sides of the workplace divide.

Social psychology, sociology, and political theory do not exhaust the intellectual well from which we can draw. The philosophical discourse on rights and justice, the historical perspective offered by labor history, and the burgeoning feminist literature that cuts across disciplinary boundaries also offer invaluable insight into the rights and wrongs of the work experience.

In summary, this paper argues that the intellectual perspectives on work and the work experience put forward by cognate disciplines suggest that the abstraction of nonpecuniary rewards and all potential losses other than forgone leisure does not simply affect the precision of the analysis, it also introduces systematic biases into the economic diagnosis of root causes of socio-economic malaise and the remedies it places on the agenda of social policy.

Section 2 summarizes the psychological and the sociological perspectives on the significance of paid work. Section 3 presents some insights from political science and feminist scholarship. Section 4 outlines implications for economic modeling of workers' objectives and for welfare economics. Section 5 concludes.

2. The social and psychological significance of paid work

The psychology literature on the significance of paid work has largely been driven by an attempt to understand the plight of unemployed workers during the '30s and again during the last two decades. It was the recognition that the psychological impact of job loss could only in part be explained by psychological consequences of financial stress that gave the research its direction and scope. Analytical attention turned not only to loss of a sense of self-worth,

but also to the positive psychological needs that are satisfied by the activities and social interaction available in gainful employment. This research agenda gradually widened to encompass the profile of jobs and the workplace environment, focusing on the manner in which these factors can enhance or detract from the psychological well-being of individuals and their psychological capacity to cope with labor market upheavals.

Jahoda (1982) offered a conceptual framework whose starting point was her observation that, in modern, advanced industrial societies, paid work must be understood not merely as a vital economic organ, but also as a central social institution. This institution now serves important psychological functions that in preindustrial societies were provided outside the domain of paid work. For the vast majority of people, the workplace is now the sole institution capable of satisfying these psychological needs, needs it should be emphasized, that are deemed essential to individual well-being.² Jahoda (1982) identifies two major function of paid employment: “manifest” and “latent” (p. 59). The manifest function is assigned to the financial rewards of paid work; the significance of this function is reflected in the impact of financial deprivation on the psychological well-being of the family and many other aspects of the individual’s daily life. The latent function is associated with paid work as an institution. Here, as summarized by Feather (1989), the focus is on the time structure that work provides (albeit via imposition); the extension of social activities into areas that are less emotionally charged than family life; the sense of participation in a collective purpose and effort; the assignment of status and identity by virtue of employment, *per se*; and finally, the contribution to psychological well-being by virtue of being a required, regular activity. Jahoda (1982) then links the loss of these categories of experience to impaired psychological well-being.

As academic dialogue would have it, the emphasis on environmental factors in the work of Jahoda (1979, 1982), Jahoda and Lazerfeld (1971) and other writers has triggered a switch of attention to personal agency and its capacity to cushion the impact of job loss (Fryer 1986; Fryer et al. 1986, 1984).³ What has ensued has parallels in the discourses of other social sciences—nurture or nature, systemic factors or personal failures, and so forth. In accordance with their private, personal philosophy, some scholars will lean towards nature as the dominant explanans, other towards nurture.⁴ Rigorous science, however, must find a way to probe the interaction between these two facets of human existence in modern societies; it is futile to shelter under one of these two notional umbrellas, even when one is inclined to believe that at a given junction of time and place the main driving force is one rather than the other. There are encouraging signs that an increasing number of scholars share the belief that the conceptual framework underpinning their analysis should try to encompass both facets. This is not an easy task, however, so progress is inevitably slow.

Personality traits can be seen as immutable, capable neither of being enhanced nor undermined by the work experience. Alternatively, personality traits can be seen as entities that interact with job content and the overall workplace environment and, in the process, are either enhanced or undermined, depending on the circumstances and nature of the work.

A number of writers have lent their support to the second proposition. For example, Bakke (1933) linked the capacity to withstand the psychological rigors of job loss with the degree of control entrusted to the worker in their (now defunct) job. Little or no control, he observed, was associated with a sense of having little control if any on their own destiny. Interestingly,

O'Brien (1986) cites Bakke's (1933) observation to suggest that the psychological phenomena attributed by Jahoda (1982) to job loss, per se, may instead reflect job content with unfavorable effects on individual psychology, shaping dispositions in a manner that takes its toll on the worker. The underlying proposition must be that unemployment takes its toll primarily on those unfortunate enough to hold jobs that undermine their capacity to cope with hard times. I am inclined to accept the proposition that there are indeed good and bad jobs as far as the impact on personality traits is concerned, but this does not ipso facto exclude the possibility that job loss, per se, creates the psychological deprivation outlined by Jahoda (1982).⁵ In terms of the terminology employed by O'Brien (1986), and other psychologists, good jobs rely on, and therefore foster, an internal locus of control. Psychologically bad jobs rely on external loci of control, undermining rather than nurturing them. An expanded notion of welfare economics, informed by this research agenda and acknowledging the reform agenda for welfare economics, may well need to include some basic principles of job design and overall workplace environment as salient elements of its analytical framework. This issue is further discussed in section 4.

Warr (1987) attempted to describe the principal features of a good job. He defined a set of features that are in principle applicable to a wide range of jobs and occupations, with the absence of these features (or wrong doses of them) defining bad jobs. He expressed concern about the widespread practice of positing linear relationships between dependent and independent variables. To amplify his message, he named the model after a group of vitamins, only some of which are known to be linearly related to good health; the remainder are beneficial only in limited dosages, with larger doses being detrimental to good health. Specifically, his "vitamin model" proposed that 1) opportunity for control, 2) opportunity for skill use, 3) externally generated goals, 4) variety, 5) environmental clarity (presence of transparency and productive feedback), and 6) opportunity for interpersonal contact all positively contribute to individual well-being, but only if present within bounds. These are likened to vitamins A and D, in that too much or too little of any of the above six brings about undesirable levels of psychological stress. He identified only three major job traits as linearly related to individual happiness: 1) valued social position, 2) money, and 3) physical security; these were likened to vitamins C and E.⁶

In addition, commenting on the dichotomy between situation-centered and person-centered theories (see note 4), and recognizing that both sets of theories contain *enabling accounts*, Warr (1987) described his own model as belonging to the class of *situation enabling models*.

Feather (1989) surveyed a range of general psychological models, which he suggested could be used productively to analyze the psychological functions of paid work and the consequences of job loss. A number of these were focused on the concept of self and the manner in which this concept relates to prevailing social values.⁷ Rosenberg (1979, 1981) presented a comprehensive argument that supports the proposition that the psychological concept of self is significantly shaped by social interaction;⁸ more recently, Bandura (1986) expresses the need for a social cognitive frame of analysis.⁹ Kelvin and Jarrett (1985) offered a concrete example, observing that the concepts of self held by unemployed persons are often crucially affected by the manner in which society perceives the unemployed as a group. Consequently, they argue, the psychological impact of unemployment will, inter alia, vary

according to whether or not social stigma is attached to the unemployed. The role of perceived social support has also been noted (Silver & Wartman, 1980).

Undoubtedly, there are people who can ride the wave, cope well with a stressful work environment, and come triumphantly out of job loss experiences. On the other hand, there are many individuals who, through no fault of their own, get badly hurt. Clearly both robust personalities and more fragile personalities exist, but this does not preclude the proposition that environmental factors can undermine the psychological well-being of individuals. We could describe this proposition analytically as a leftward shift in the probability-density-function of individual psychological well-being in response to environmental deterioration. The psychological heterogeneity remains, but the mean declines.

Furthermore, something much more subtle is also likely to occur. Labor market upheavals generate different feedback mechanisms for the robust and less robust individuals. The more robust are likely to receive positive feedback that supports their positive disposition because the process through which people are drawn out of the pool of unemployed places those with a positive outlook on life at the head of the job queue. This is mirrored in the experience of the less robust, who are betrayed by their countenances and tend to be placed much lower down the job queue. The resultant negative feedback works to further undermine their concept of self. Thus the impact of labor market deterioration on psychological traits may not only affect the mean of the distribution, but also stretch the distribution as a whole, generating polarization that amplifies the initial heterogeneity.

What might we mean by the notion of “concept of self”? Do people who have strong allegiance to their own well-developed sense of moral values experience erosion of a positive concept of self? Does evidence of a significant dissonance between one’s own value system and those values deemed essential for job retention and getting a new job undermine one’s concept of self? Or is it just a matter of self-confidence in one’s ability to project an attractive personality? Does the prism through which external events are interpreted affect one’s concept of self? Here, it is worth noting that the psychological literature has addressed some of these issues. For instance, discussing self-discrepancy theory, Higgins (1987) focused on the potential for a discrepancy between many views of one’s self: the actual self and one’s self-image; the actual self and a significant other’s image of one’s self; the ideally desired self and one’s own self; the ideally desired self and the significant other’s image of one’s self; the morally “ought” and own self, and, finally, the morally “ought” self and the significant other’s image of one’s self. Each of these discrepancies can be a source of serious psychological stress. If and when the role of social interaction is seen as pertinent, the notions of “ideal,” “morally ought” and “significant other” are likely to include influences outside one’s own early childhood and adolescent home environment. Even the discrepancy between the actual self and own self-image can be widened by an “own image” that is significantly colored by a biased perception on the part of peers, work colleagues, and supervisors. Finally, attribution theory proposes that the manner in which meaning is attributed to events by individuals may be affected by and affect one’s concept of efficacy (Bandura, 1986).¹⁰

The literature gives the impression of a significant measure of cross fertilization between psychology and sociology, particularly where psychologists have accepted environmental factors and social interaction as partaking in the shaping of concepts of self and overall psychological well-being.

Sociology challenges our concept of atomistic conduct and our reluctance to probe the processes that govern preference ordering of individuals. Its emphasis is on the centrality of social interaction, and this seems to be particularly prominent in the post-Parsonian sociological literature. This literature suggests that choices made and actions taken by individuals are crucially affected by the cultural context, set of social controls (such as norms and sanctions), social networks and class, ethnicity and gender affiliations (see Markus, 1987; Smelser and Swedberg, 1994). This literature also emphasizes a basic human need for individual authenticity, embedded in both a fundamental notion of human dignity and the need for individual fulfillment (Markus, 1987). These observations have obvious implications for the potential impact of the job content and the work environment on psychological well-being discussed above. If job content and human relations in the work environment are in dissonance with social norms, and if workers are very restricted in their ability to act as authentic individuals in Markus' (1987) sense, then psychological stress is predicted by the (psychological) self-discrepancy theory.

Finally, sociologists have also been prominent in feminist scholarship, a contribution addressed in Section 4, as will sociological contributions that are located in the interface between sociology and political science.

3. The workplace as a social arena

As described above, the psychology literature emphasizes the importance of a range of attributes of jobs and workplace environments to individual mental and emotional well-being. For instance, in a comprehensive book-length project, Warr (1987) presents his "vitamin model." This emphasizes attributes such as the opportunity for exercising control and using skills, the need for transparency and productive feedback, and opportunity for interpersonal contact. Warr (1987) emphasizes the importance of setting these attributes at the right level and, presumably, the right quality. Although the psychology literature dwells on the features of the ideal work experience, political science, management theory, sociology, feminist scholarship, and the literature on the concept of power discuss a range of factors that determine job content and human relationships in the workplace. This literature proposes that matters such as the extent of control and the opportunity for use of skills allowed by a given job are driven by factors other than the goal of enhancing the psychological well-being of employees, *per se*. Enhancement of the employees' psychological well-being enters the picture only incidentally, when attention to these needs is believed to have a significant influence on the capacity of the enterprise to realize its own goals.¹¹

The literature on management theory reveals a spectrum of views about the strategies best suited to foster a high productivity, nonconflictual work environment. Indeed, writers are divided on the question of whether conflict can be eliminated entirely. The management literature, however, does exhibit a core feature: its focus is on maximizing the enterprise's long-term capacity to generate profits. Workers' psychological well-being appears only as a constraint on the maximization of the enterprise's objective function; it is not an element of the enterprise's objective itself. Consequently, the extent to which strategic advice given by management theorists recommends attention to specific psychological needs of workers

tends to vary only with differences of opinion on the manner in which human nature can constrain the capacity of the enterprise to achieve its business goals. Those who share Elton Mayo's (1949) belief that it is in the interest of the enterprise to enlist the co-operation of workers, and that this entails flatter organizations, also tend to recommend that jobs should allow workers to have substantial control over their jobs. In circles where the shadow of Frederick Taylor (1964) still looms large, more emphasis is placed on hierarchical management structures, minimization of the dependence of jobs on particular skills, and a reluctance to allow workers to participate in management.¹²

Critics have rejected the premise of both schools of thought, that conflict at the workplace is simply a manifestation of inept management and that it can, therefore, be eliminated once good management is put in place. The specific reasons for suggesting that some level of conflict is endemic to the employment relation vary significantly, depending on the intellectual perspective from which writers approach the issue.

Among management theorists, Chris Argyris' (1964) view is that conflict is normal and had caused managers to establish controls in the first place. Schelling (1980), from the perspective of game theory, warns us that distributive aims, per se, can reduce the chances of reaching a co-operative Pareto-dominating solution. Furthermore, if we depart from the Nash equilibrium premise that gains are evenly split, we may conclude that a long-term strategy that in the fullness of time promises to deliver high mutual gains may, nevertheless, be set aside in favor of a short-term, zero-sum game outcome. This would be the case, for example, when one side, rightly or wrongly, believes that their chance of getting the lion's share from redistribution of the pie is particularly high. They may then be attracted by this prospect of immediate, high profit, bypassing the prospect for larger mutual gains offered by a co-operative strategy that requires long-term commitment from both sides.

As Rothschild (1971) observed more than two decades ago, the mainstream of economics eschews the question of power.¹³ Political scientists and the economists' school of political economy emphasize not only a conflict of economic interests at the pecuniary level, but also more fundamental, structural political and social reasons that place workers and their employers in a conflictual relationship. They reject the premise on which both economic science and management theorists build their description of the enterprise's objective, rejecting long-term profit as the sole determinant in the choice of technology and design of jobs and as the sole rationale for an hierarchical chain of command (Caporaso and Levine, 1992; Waring, 1991). Rather, they argue, the quest for power, per se, plays a significant role in shaping the production and human relations systems in the workplace. Waring (1991) also argued that labor relations cannot possibly be understood unless the workplace is conceptualized as a polity.

The issue of power and the quest for power, per se, is complex. Even writers who recognize that a quest for power does exist on a scale that merits comprehensive study do not readily accept the notion of a quest for power, per se. Rather, these writers tend to see the quest for power as a derivative phenomenon, with power being sought only as a means to achieve other goals. These writers often cite the desire for wealth and the social status that it confers as the primary goals. Power, in other words, is seen here within a standard framework of *instrumental rationality*. Wrong (1979), for instance, argued that only psy-

chopaths seek power, per se, for their own individual use and only leaders of nondemocratic, social movements seek power, per se, as a collective goal (Wrong, 1979, p. 231).¹⁴

If we restrict our theory of human conduct to atomistic conduct of solipsistic individuals who choose to (and can) be guided solely by instrumental rationality, then we would be unable to predict a quest for power, per se. Yet, there is an extensive body of literature that persuasively argues that the concept of instrumental rationality (e.g., Hargreaves Heap, 1989), and the very denial of the role of passions in guiding human conduct (e.g., Hirschman, 1977; Rothschild, 1993; Sen, 1977, 1987) is very narrow as either a descriptive account of actual conduct or as a normative guide to individual fulfillment. Wrong's (1979, p. 231) vision that confines the quest for power, per se, to a few psychopaths and a handful of political dictatorships is, therefore, hard to embrace. Institutions are full of individuals who are too jealous of their power to allow their subordinates to co-operate with members of other institutions, or even other segments of the same institution, even when co-operation has obvious advantages over a more insular *modus operandi*. People who exert power on others are often entirely unaware of the spell they cast on their subordinates, even when this undermines their workers' productive capacity. These are neither psychopaths nor gloating dictators. Instrumental rationality does not acknowledge the unconscious, the failure to note, or the possibility of cultural preconceptions that render certain phenomena invisible.

The possibility of wielding power (over people) without necessarily being aware of it was addressed by Caporaso and Levine (1992). Addressing the distinction between interests and wants, they suggest that wants are interests that are "clearly in the purview of choosing agents (that is when they consciously pursue their interests) . . . When they are *not consciously aware* [emphasis added] of the importance of various outcomes, but where those outcomes can be demonstrated to affect the welfare of persons, we speak of interests" (p. 163).¹⁵ Citing Galbraith (1983), Caporaso and Levine (1992) show a similar emphasis on the proposition that the wielding of power need not be the result of a conscious decision. Furthermore, agreeing with Galbraith (1983), they also suggest that power may have significant presence even when those on the receiving end are unaware of the fact that power is being exerted over them:

[Conditioned] power . . . is subjective; neither those exercising it nor those subject to it need always be aware that it was being exerted. The acceptance of authority, the submission to the will of others, becomes the higher preference of those submitting. This preference can be deliberately cultivated—by persuasion or education. This is explicit conditioning. Or it can be dictated by culture itself; the submission is considered to be normal, proper, or traditionally correct. This is implicit conditioning. (Galbraith 1983, p. 24; cited in Caporaso and Levine, 1992, p. 173).

This clearly points to an exercise of power that cannot be explained in terms of instrumental rationality. This, in turn, suggests that job contents, the production process, and the hierarchical structures found in the workplace cannot be fully explained by the profit goal or even by a search for "mutual gains".¹⁶ Social customs and norms of behavior can explain the exercise of power, even in the absence of a conscious attempt by those who exercise it. The well-being of subordinates at the workplace would certainly be affected when they are aware of the power that superiors have over them; it is even possible that their well-being is affected when they are not consciously aware of it.

Lukes (1974; cited in Caporaso and Levine, 1992) points to systemic factors that could explain what Galbraith (1983) describes as implicit conditioning. He argues that

[The] bias of the system is not sustained simply by a series of individually chosen acts, but also, most importantly, by socially structured and culturally patterned behavior of groups, and practices of institutions which may indeed be manifested by individual inaction. (Lukes, 1974, p. 21–22, 23; cited in Caporaso and Levine, 1992, p. 173)¹⁷

In summary, this literature suggests that some people have power over others, that they seek power both as a means to an end and as an end in itself, and that they can exercise this power either consciously or unconsciously. A natural question follows: what are the factors that endow some people with power and what are the factors that place other people on the receiving end?

These issues have been the focus of a large body of literature ranging from Marxist scholarship through political science to the more recent developments in feminist scholarship. This diverse body of literature points to a range of factors that assign privilege to select groups of individuals—power is possessed by virtue of affiliation with a privileged group. Whereas the Marxist literature emphasizes class, other discourses have drawn attention to the categories of race, ethnicity, sex, and gender. The emphasis on class tends to focus on power exercised vertically down the managerial hierarchy at the workplace. The feminist and ethnographic scholarships, in contrast, draw attention to power currents running not only vertically but also horizontally, setting apart individuals working alongside each other in objectively identical productive capacities according on gender and ethnicity.

Yet, another category of people can be described as comprising a socially privileged group. These are people with temperament and personal ethics such that in a given socio-economic structure they naturally wield power. This is reflected in a common workplace scenario where less assertive individuals find themselves dominated by the more powerful. Here power is exerted not only across the gender and ethnic divides, but also within each of these groups.

Whereas many of the rights of privileged groups have been defended historically as essential to social order or economic prosperity, critics argue that they breach fundamental democratic tenets. Keat (1982), drawing on Marx, argued that there exists a fundamental dissonance (“lack of unity”) between the concept of rights that governs political citizenship and that governing “civil society,” with this latter term referring to the system of market exchange and economic relationships. This dissonance, he argued, is a reflection of the privileging impact of property rights, not a reflection of the needs of the good society. Feminist writers and political philosophers, such as Dahl (1997), in contrast, have questioned the very idea that political citizenship fully grants democratic rights.

Feminist writers argue that men are assigned a privileged social position because the social values and ideal archetypes that govern the public sphere (including market exchange) are modeled after men (e.g., England, 1993; Farber and Nelson 1993; Folbre 1992). Consequently, female attributes that are valuable to the public sphere are undervalued. England (1993, p. 39) cites a body of feminist literature that sees sexism reflected “in failing to see how much traditionally female activities or dispositions contribute to the economy, society or polity.” She added that “Feminists who emphasise this sort of sexism see the

remedy to include changing values that deprecate traditionally female activities. . . . ” Another way of putting this is that ideal social archetypes dominate the prism through which individual merit is perceived, creating a systematic bias in favor of men, while tending to render valuable attributes of women invisible. This occurs, so the argument goes, because the identifying characteristics of capacity to contribute in the public sphere are closely associated with the attributes that in our culture defines manliness. The proposition that attributes that are valued in the public sphere are patterned on the notion of manliness extends to race, class, and even farther afield. This is so because it says that members of any nonsocially dominant group face the possibility of having attributes that are undervalued in the public sphere simply because they are “different.” For instance, implicit in the concept of gender as distinct from sex is the proposition that there are men whose temperament and personal ethics limit the extent to which they are willing to conform to the “ideal” properties (e.g., competitiveness) commonly associated with manliness.

Dahl (1997) argued that the concept of democracy has not been upheld as a categorical right. Democratic principles, he argues, demand that “no one subject to the rules of the demos should be excluded”. Citizenship, however, “is not a *categorical right*, . . . but rather *contingent* on capabilities” (p. 118). This emphasis on capabilities ipso facto excludes members of the community from full participation in the polity. The issue of “exclusion” thus recurs in the analyses that center on class, gender, ethnicity, as well as citizenship. Similarly, addressing the issue of the requisites for genuine citizenship, Pixley (1993) extends the possibility of exclusion from genuine democratic participation by undermining access to paid work. Paid work and citizenship, she cogently argues, are inexorably linked with each other.¹⁸

In summary, the thrust of the literature surveyed in this section is that the design of job content and the structure of human relationships governing social interaction in the workplace are governed by specific business goals and a culture that allows management to exercise power over others without necessarily being aware of it. These goals, this literature clearly suggests, do not necessarily satisfy the psychological needs of workers. The literature also cogently argues that the specific set of social values that guide management strategies tends to favor select social groups, while rendering the merits of other groups of individuals invisible. This, I propose, has implications for both economic science’s notion of optimal allocation of social resources and for modern society’s image of itself as a community that adheres to fundamental democratic tenets and secures a reasonable degree of social justice.

It can also be argued that this literature lends support to the proposition that a number of analytical models that are frequently employed in the analysis of specific labor market issues contain significant *misspecification errors*. A consequence of the omission of significant aspects of paid work abstracted is the introduction not merely of white noise, but of a systematic bias into analyses that seek to explain behavior or to recommend policy.

4. The economy as a social domain

Our society has entrusted the bulk of our human resources in the hands of those who legally own workplaces. The design of jobs, physical environment, and the core structure of

human relations at the workplace are largely the domain of managers guided by their own cultural outlook, operating as the agents of the shareholders. True, in most advanced industrial societies the owners of workplaces are required to abide by certain socially prescribed principles that set certain obligatory minimum standards, and to this extent workers are recognized as *stakeholders* in the workplace. However, the requirements address only a few of the variables that influence workers' welfare, and hence, represent only minimal recognition of workers as stakeholders with legitimate claims on the design of jobs and the workplace environment. This, in turn, suggests that there are strong grounds to believe that our deployment of our human resources in the workplace falls short of a social optimum. The supporting argument is threefold:

First, if we accept that the mental and emotional well-being of workers is a substantial element of society's social welfare, then social welfare is suboptimal because this aspect of it is systematically undervalued in the design of work and the workplace. Second, although shareholders' (or business) goals are recognized as legitimate goals of the business enterprise as a whole, the quest for power, per se, and the significant role played by social and cultural preconception must operate as natural brakes on the capacity of the enterprise to realize its own long-term profits. Third, the thrust of the disciplinary discourse surveyed in earlier sections of this paper is that the allocation of resources may well violate certain fundamental social concerns.¹⁹ In terms of the economic vernacular, this requires expansion of our notion of "social-welfare" function to include society's concerns about social justice, basic democratic tenets, and economic preconditions for genuine citizenship. This conclusion follows from the very notion of "efficiency" because efficiency, strictly speaking, means meeting an objective, whatever it may be, at the lowest possible resource cost. Once we expand the concept of resources to include workers' physical and psychological well-being, expand the notion of social objective to include maximization not just of the value of purchased goods and services, but also the quality of social interaction, social justice, and compliance with democratic tenets, we come up with a very different efficient allocation of resources.

Economics, however, does not readily accommodate the proposition that the market and the manner in which we assign property rights at the workplace places too little weight on the worker's mental and emotional well-being. Adam Smith envisaged a market mechanism that secured higher wages for those engaged in less pleasant, less safe, and more transient jobs. The Chicago school expanded this vision by adding the proposition that an unfettered market mechanism brings about earnings equality.²⁰ It is possible that a large majority of economists reject these visions as a utopia that is beyond the reach of the invisible hand. However, academic discourses in cognate disciplines go beyond questioning the properties of market dynamics to deeper questions of individual and social objectives.²¹

Social psychology, sociology, and political science challenge our description of workers' objective ("utility") functions. They distinguish between the consciously sought aims, actual personal needs (whether recognized or not) and the unconscious. In contrast, the concept of instrumental rationality that informs economic modeling denies the role of the subconscious and treats unrecognized needs as an empty set.

Perhaps even more critical for the economic description of worker behavior is the fact that the literature of cognate disciplines also challenges our assumptions about subjective interest in substitution and the scope for trade-off in general. Economists assume that all positive

work aspects are substitutable for each other. We posit that, for a sufficiently high level of monetary rewards, workers will willingly forfeit an unlimited volume of valuable, nonpecuniary aspects of the work experience and that such a trade-off leaves them better off at the end of the day. To many social psychologists, sociologists, and political scientists this would come across as a very sour joke.

In fact, even more is at stake. Our formal models also posit “additive separability,” either in variables or in their logarithms. This, in turn, assumes that individual components of the work experience can be studied and evaluated independently of each other without ever needing to glimpse the nature of the work experience in its entirety. Such assumptions, as we know only too well, are driven by mathematical tractability and not by a painstaking study of actual behavior. More fundamentally, our models are primarily a description of the conditions that must hold as a matter of logical necessity (for “existence,” “uniqueness,” and “stability” of equilibrium points). As such, they represent legitimate and indeed highly valuable intellectual contributions. The trouble begins only when they are being used as descriptive statement about real people in a real-world context.

I am not proposing that we economists should join the physicists’ in their search for the holy grail of the *grand unifying theory*. Rather, the proposition is that because we do not, and in all likelihood cannot, have such a theory, we should seek out observations made by others’ disciplinary discourses, employing them in an attempt to identify biases in our own analysis of particular issues.²² Economic science can make a significant intellectual contribution to the moral standards of our society by choosing to identify the systemic currents that govern the allocation of resources, starting with human resources in our socio-economy.

Let me illustrate what I mean by inherent analytical biases. The thrust of the observations made by social psychologists and other observers of the labor market (e.g., Barbash, 1983) is that economics overly emphasizes pecuniary rewards, while underestimating the significance of nonpecuniary aspects of work. These analyses also suggest that exclusive adherence to models that assume self-centered agents and atomistic conduct greatly limits our analytical capacity to predict or explain behavior.²³ Consider the manner in which the concept of “moral hazard” and the “principal-agent” model have been applied in the field of labor economics. The worker, being seen as the agent of the employer (the principal), inflicts on the employer the risk of bearing moral hazard losses. The standard analytical solution is to recommend a payment device that contains “coinsurance.” If, however, we accept the noneconomist perspective on work (as a source of essential good and not simply as forgone leisure), and the nonsolipsistic description of individuals, we reach a different analytical conclusion. We conclude that the employment relationship itself already contains a built-in coinsurance element that readily guards the employer as the principal.²⁴

Consider yet another issue. Why should we, as a rule, see workers as the agents and employers as the principals? Could there be an argument for describing employers as agents and workers as the principals? I think, yes. In complete analogy to employers entrusting the operation of their equipment and managerial functions to the hands of the workers, the workers entrust their body, soul, and the management of their productive skills in the hands of their employer. If the design of jobs makes little use of their productive skills, and provides little scope for expansion of these skills, then the value of their “human capital” will be progressively diminished. Poor work conditions and a repressive human relations struc-

ture take their toll on workers' physical and psychological health. This reversal of the principal-agent relationship has obvious analytical implications. In a similar vein, Rothschild (1990) shows that applied risk bearing theory ignores the risk that workers face as the owners of human capital, while paying a great deal of analytical attention to the risk borne by the owners of nonhuman capital assets.²⁵

5. Conclusion

Economics has only a limited ability to address issues of social justice.²⁶ This applies both to the formulation of policy recommendations and, more fundamentally, to understanding the root causes of socio-economic malaise.

Economists do have an important contribution to make to this debate, of course, because the economic dimension is central to many of these issues. However, we tend to get out of our depth when we try to use our particular tools to address personal, social, and organizational aspects of complex issues such as work. What we must do is to draw together the insights from economics, sociology, psychology, and political philosophy to synthesize a broader analysis of work, one that reveals its multifaceted nature and shows that its contribution to well-being goes far beyond acting as a means to transform leisure into commodities.

In this paper, I have argued that the economic view of work is extremely narrow and that this restricts our ability to understand specific workplace issues. It also has implications for the quest for efficient allocation of resources in the workplace and the larger labor market.

As economists, we analyze the efficient allocation of resources to achieve the maximum level of social welfare. However, we normally define social welfare purely in terms of goods and services available for consumption. We view people as consumers, but fail to recognize that as people we depend on work to satisfy social and psychological needs, and these cannot simply be traded off against income and consumption. Addressing these needs, as the social psychology literature shows, contributes substantially to our individual welfare. They must, therefore, be recognized in our definition of aggregate welfare and in our prescription for what constitutes efficient allocation of resources in the workplace and the labor market.

Using the notion of moral hazard and the principal-agent model as examples, this paper has shown that our analytical conclusions may change significantly when we modify our customary description of the workers' objective function to include aspects emphasized in the psychology literature.

When we add insights from political science, sociology, and feminist and ethnographic scholarship, we discover that factors that govern the dynamics of social interaction in the workplace also play a significant role in determining individual well-being. For instance, this paper has illustrated how the political science discourse on the question of power challenges our exclusive reliance on instrumental rationality, with its denial of the unconscious and the possibility that exercise of power is habitual for some individuals.

The literature of these disciplines also suggests that the position of privileged social groups and the recognition of shareholders as the prime stakeholders of business enterprises

leads to a design of work and the workplace environment that systematically undervalues the well-being of workers (and other nonprivileged social groups).

Finally, this paper has argued that, given the centrality of work in individual and overall social well-being, the economic notion of a social welfare function must be further expanded when we examine the efficiency properties of workplaces and the national labor market. Political scientists emphasize the crucial role of access to meaningful paid work as a prerequisite for genuine citizenship. They also emphasize the demands that basic democratic tenets place on organizations such as workplaces.

If we see ourselves as a truly democratic society that seeks to secure a reasonable level of social justice, then, this paper has argued, this has direct implications for our notion of a social welfare objective and significant consequences for which allocation of resources can be described as truly efficient.

Let me conclude this paper by repeating a statement from Section 4. I am not proposing that we economists should join the physicists' in their search for the holy grail of the *grand unifying theory*. Rather, the proposition is that because we do not, and in all likelihood cannot, have such a theory, we should seek out observations made by other disciplinary discourses, employing them in an attempt to identify biases in our own analysis of particular issues. Economic science can make a significant intellectual contribution to the moral standards of our society by choosing to identify the systemic currents that govern the allocation of resources, starting with human resources in our socio-economy.

Notes

1. An excellent survey of this literature is provided by Norman Feather in his 1989 seminal book, *The Psychological Impact of Unemployment*. Section 2 of this paper draws heavily on this book.
2. Feather (1989, p. 33) draws attention to Jahoda's (1982) observation that "the psychological needs met by employment are probably deeper and more enduring than the institutional arrangements to which they have become accustomed as satisfying them" (61). A slightly different emphasis on the significance of work, as far as individual well-being is concerned, is provided by Maslow's (1954) model of self-actualization.
3. Jahoda's approach, critics have argued, is functionalist and, therefore, leaves no room for personal agency. Yet, it is important to note that she does acknowledge differences between individual and group responses to given circumstances. It should also be noted that her critics have acknowledged her intellectual contribution to the analysis of the psychological functions of paid work.
4. Warr (1987) agrees with an earlier observation (Gergen, 1982) that the psychology literature evinces two bodies of theories: situation-centered and person-centered.
5. Incidentally, Jahoda (1982) does explicitly state that there are both good and bad jobs as far as human psychological needs are concerned.
6. Feather (1989) discerns a measure of affinity between Warr's (1987) model and Jahoda's (1982) distinction between the manifest and latent functions of paid work.

7. Feather (1989) informed us that these theories have a long history, with enhanced interest being shown since the 1970s. He also cites Rosenberg (1981) who discerned two theories of self-concept: in one, the self is relatively stable (immutable), regardless of environmental factors; in the second, social interaction usually partakes in shaping the self-concept.
8. Rosenberg's (1979, 1981) analysis draws explicitly on sociological theory.
9. Feather (1989), citing Cooley (1902), drew our attention to an observation made long ago to the effect that "we see ourselves through the eyes of others." Although this cannot be literally true, as we do have a measure of personal agency, it does have a significant element of truth.
10. See Bandura (1986) for his discussion of self-efficacy theory.
11. Failure to perceive the importance of the psychological needs of workers can readily occur when cultural preconceptions point to different root causes for low productivity. Similarly, proposed remedies may fail to consider expanding the scope of control that individuals are given in their jobs.
12. But as Waring (1991) persuasively argues, both schools of thought aim at one and the same thing, to eliminate industrial conflict and maximize the level of output extracted from the workforce.
13. Except, needless to say, for the phenomenon of "market power."
14. Even Caporaso and Levine (1992), who discuss the notion of power at length and in the specific context of the work place, at times seem to be grappling with a desire to anchor the notion of power with Bertrand Russell's definition of power. Wrong (1979), in contrast, started from this premise and stayed within it quite comfortably.
15. Similarly, Purdy (1988) discusses three dimensions of power at the workplace. Employing the same dichotomy to argue that under the third dimension, in contrast to his first two, "B simply does not entertain the possibility that A's differential advantage could be challenged: indeed, may not even recognize that A enjoys an advantage" (p. 27).
16. For a definition of mutual gain see Kochan and Osterman (1994).
17. In contrast, Wrong (1979) drew a line between what Galbraith (1983) defined as explicit and implicit, stating that

When social controls have been internalized, the concept of power as a social relations is clearly inapplicable, [but note that he also continues to say that] but to assume that most conformity to norms is a result of internalization is to adopt what I call an oversocialised conception of man. (p. 3)

18. This proposition is advanced by Pixley (1993) when arguing against proposals to introduce negative income tax as a palliative for unemployment. Such fiscal measures, she explains, will undermine the scope for genuine citizenship.
19. Note that the first two propositions are underpinned by the standard concept of efficient allocation of resources (except that we emphasize nonpecuniary aspects of workers' welfare), although the third does not.
20. Recall that human capital theory proposes that that the present value of earnings from labor, after subtracting the present value of out of 1) pocket outlays on education and

- training and 2) the earnings forgone while studying and training, are equal across the workforce.
21. For another rejection of the standard notion of work in economic science see Lane (1991), Part V.
 22. This is very eloquently stated in Harding (1995).
 23. For instance, Rabin (1998) drew on psychology literature to challenge our customary description of individual preferences, arguing specifically against the cavalier assumption of self-centricity.
 24. Moral hazard theory, and an exceedingly narrow concept of the significance of work for individuals, also underpins the Shapiro and Stiglitz (1984) “shirking model,” which dominates our macro textbooks (see Housego, 1998) despite the criticism it has attracted in many circles, for example Solow (1990) and Ulman (1990).
 25. Note that Arrow (1970), argues that firms have extensive opportunities for diversifying their financial assets, and therefore he does not believe that compensation for risk bearing can be seen as a significant component of profits. Workers, in contrast, have much more limited opportunities for asset diversification
 26. I provide a more extensive discussion of this proposition in Gill (1996a, 1996b). Etzioni (1988) provides a compelling discussion of the analytical consequences of the neoclassical preoccupation with individuals devoid of any moral dimension.

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