CONCEPTUALIZING WORK AND WORKER WELL-BEING

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Abstract

The importance of worker well-being is widely-embraced. But there are numerous perspectives on what worker well-being actually is, how to measure it, whether it needs improving, and, if needed, how to improve it. This paper identifies ten distinct conceptualizations of work and outlines their importance for how we think about worker well-being. This provides a unique conceptual framework for a deeper understanding of approaches to worker well-being. This framework also illustrates how particular views of worker well-being reveal implicit assumptions about work, and provides a foundation for a broad approach to worker well-being that reflects the wide breadth of work’s importance for the human experience.
There is longstanding concern with the well-being of workers. Early observational analyses by Friedrich Engels (1845) and Henry Mayhew (1861), novels by Charles Dickens and Émile Zola, the photography of Lewis Hines (Sampsell-Willmann 2009), and diverse secular and religious reform movements focused attention on poverty wages and dangerous working conditions as industrialization became widespread in Britain, the United States, and elsewhere. The academic field of industrial relations was born in the early 20th century out of a deep unease with imbalances in the employment relationship that led to exploitative wages and working hours, arbitrary supervisory methods, and frequent industrial accidents (Kaufman 2004). Concerns with worker well-being similarly underlie the early theorizing of Karl Marx (1844), Georg Simmel (1907), and others regarding the alienation of workers from their work, Max Weber’s (1922) work on the repressive nature of bureaucracies, and Henri de Man’s (1927) search for factors that enabled or prevented workers from fulfilling a variety of human needs such as activity, creation, and self-worth.

Today, many scholars, policymakers, advocates, and business leaders continue to embrace the importance of worker well-being (Guest 2008). Modern exposés continue to qualitatively illustrate the low pay, long working hours, and dangerous working conditions endured by some workers (e.g., Ehrenreich 2001; Harney 2008) while statistical portraits quantitatively analyze job quality (Green 2006) and wage trends (Mishel, Bernstein, and Shierholz 2009). The International Labour Organization (1999) champions “Decent Work” while labor organizations and myriad community organizations push for improved wages and working conditions. Related theorizing in industrial relations highlights the need for balanced employment relationships that provide equity and voice to workers (Budd 2004). Scholarship in business ethics identifies standards for meaningful work (Bowie 1999), as does scholarship rooted in psychology and organizational behavior (Ulrich and Ulrich 2010). Other important
research examines job satisfaction (Green 2006), mental health (Warr 1987), and job insecurity (Heery and Salmon 2000).

These and other perspectives on worker well-being, however, frequently differ in how to define worker well-being, how to measure it, whether it needs improving, and, if needed, how to improve it. For some, worker well-being is a subjective construct based on workers’ attitudinal evaluations of their work; for others, worker well-being is an objective construct evaluated against specific criteria. In either approach, varied aspects of well-being might be the focal point of a specific analysis, such as physical health, psychological health, job characteristics, employee voice, pay and benefits, or economic insecurity. Some authors take a broader approach (e.g., Green 2006), but much of the work related to worker well-being is narrowly focused.

Against this backdrop, this paper uses an original framework of ten conceptualizations of work to provides a unique conceptual framework for a deeper understanding of approaches to worker well-being. This framework also illustrates how particular views of worker well-being reveal implicit assumptions about work, and provides a foundation for a broad approach to worker well-being that reflects the wide breadth of work’s importance for the human experience.

DEFINING AND CONCEPTUALIZING WORK

Though not frequently recognized, any examination of worker well-being is ultimately rooted in how one defines and conceptualizes work. Particular conceptualizations of work not only focus attention on certain aspects of work and away from other dimensions, but also define who is and is not a worker. For example, using the term “employee well-being” instead of “worker well-being” implicitly equates work to paid employment and thus limits the analysis of worker well-being to paid employees. This would then exclude the well-being of other types of workers such as independent contractors, the self-employed,
volunteers, or care-givers, and might also exclude temporary workers, day laborers and other workers who do not fit within accepted norms of stable paid employment worthy of social approval.

To avoid marginalizing various forms of work it is important to define more work broadly than employment. Specifically, work is defined here as purposeful human activity involving physical or mental exertion that is not undertaken solely for pleasure and that has economic or symbolic value. This broad definition separates work from leisure (“not undertaken solely for pleasure”), but also allows work to be pleasurable and recognizes that there can be a fuzzy boundaries between work and leisure. This definition also encompasses more than paid employment by also including activities that generate economic value even if they are unpaid, such as caring for others, volunteering, self-employment, and subsistence farming, and the definition also recognizes that work can achieve non-economic ends such as identity creation.

The purpose of this broad definition of work is to encompass diverse conceptualizations of work that provide a robust foundation for conceptualizing worker well-being, not to precisely delimit what is and is not considered work (Glucksmann 1995). Using this broad definition of work, ten conceptualizations of work can be identified through a broad integration and synthesis of the work on work as a key concept across the humanities and the social and behavioral sciences: work as a curse, freedom, a commodity, occupational citizenship disutility, personal fulfillment, a social relation, caring for others, identity, and service (see Table 1). The remainder of this section sketches these ten conceptualizations. Due to space constraints, these portrayals are necessarily stylized, but there is a rich body of scholarship and theorizing that lies behind each conceptualization (Budd 2011).
A Curse

For thousands of years, work has been seen as painful toil necessary for survival that conflicts with life’s more virtuous or pleasurable pursuits. When it is assumed that God or nature require all or some to engage in arduous or dirty work, then work is conceptualized as a curse. Seeing hard work as a god-given curse has deep roots in Western thought. The Judeo-Christian tradition and Greco-Roman mythology share a common story in which humans originally did not have to work (at least not very hard), but a displeased god (for example, the Judeo-Christian God punishing Adam for his disobedience in the Garden of Eden, or Zeus punishing humankind because Prometheus stole fire for it) punishes humans with toil. Hard work is thereby seen as a necessary part of the human experience.

Elite segments of societies also tend to see the lower classes as occupying their natural place in the social and occupational hierarchy. Perhaps most famously, Aristotle reasoned that nature creates humans of varying intellectual abilities, and the intellectually inferior are naturally suited to be slaves. Fast forward 2,300 years to Herrnstein and Murray’s (1994) claims in *The Bell Curve* that contemporary America is stratified by genetically-determined intellectual ability, and we see the persistent belief in a natural ordering of work. The marginalization in contemporary Western societies of some occupations as “women’s work” or fit only for minorities or immigrants can similarly reflect a belief in a natural social hierarchy. In this way, less desirable forms of work are conceptualized as a curse of the lowly classes.

Freedom

For much of human history, work was typically seen as forced by God, nature, custom, law, or physical violence. The centrality of the individual and freedom in modern Western thought, however, provides the basis for conceptualizing work as a source of freedom in several ways. One strain of this thinking is freedom from nature. This line of
thought emphasizes the creative nature of work that is done independently of the daily necessities of nature. In this way, a worker is a creator—someone who “rebels against nature’s dictates” (Mokyr 1990: viii) and is able “to impose culture” on the natural world (Wallman 1979: 1). Ideally, creative work allows us “to be ourselves, set our own schedules, do challenging work and live in communities that reflect our values and priorities” (Florida 2002: 10).

Other ways of thinking about work as freedom pertain to individual liberty from the coercion of other people. John Locke famously argued in the 17th century that labor is the foundation for political freedom because it establishes ownership of private property. In other words, by being able to control the fruits of your own labor, work can be a classical source of liberty not from nature, but from other humans and human institutions. This theorizing on the roots of political freedom also has important implications for economic liberalism (Macpherson 1962). When work is conceptualized as one’s own property, workers become free to sell their labor for pay if they so choose. Moreover, when one's work is yours and yours alone, there are no social obligations or limitations on how much you can accumulate through your work. Wage work and unchecked capitalist accumulation are therefore given moral approval, and the foundation is laid for seeing work as an economic commodity to be bought and sold in free markets. Such perspectives are reinforced by the legal systems of capitalist economies in which work is seen as an activity undertaken by individuals who are free to pursue occupations of their choosing and to quit at will. From this standpoint, employment is a contractual relation between legal equals, albeit with continuing tensions between the unrestricted freedom derived from legal principles of free contracting and the lingering influence of status-based standards (Deakin and Wilkinson 2005).
A Commodity

The emergence of Western liberalism created a new conceptualization of work: “what could be more natural in a social universe composed of separate and autonomous individuals whose chief occupation was trading commodities back and forth than that some individuals should sell the property in their labor to other individuals, to whom thereafter it would belong?” (Steinfeld 1991: 92). In this way, work comes to be seen as a commodity in which an individual’s capacity to work—what Marx called “labor power”—is viewed as an abstract quantity that can be bought and sold. Diverse forms of concrete labor are all reduced to sources of economic value that can be made equivalent by exchanging them at an appropriate set of relative prices. Work is thought of as a generic input into a production function, and employers and workers buy and sell generic units of this commodity called work or labor (or labor power in Marxist terminology).

Mainstream (neoclassical) economic thought embraces the commodity conceptualization of work. Employers are assumed to maximize their profits by utilizing the optimum amounts of labor, capital, and other inputs to produce goods and services for sale. Work and workers are thus treated like any other factor of production. On the supply side, work is something that individuals choose to sell in varying quantities in order to earn income and maximize their individual or household utility. Employers and employees are therefore both modeled as treating hours of labor as one of a number of quantities to factor into the relevant optimization problem; marginal analysis determines the optimum amount of labor to buy or sell in the labor market no different from other commodities. Moreover, by seeing work as a commodity, its allocation is seen as governed by the impersonal “laws” of supply and demand. The intersection of labor supply and labor demand determines the terms and conditions of employment, and work is analyzed like all other economic commodities—“the
theory of the determination of wages in a free market is simply a special case of the general theory of value” (Hicks 1963: 1).

**Occupational Citizenship**

Work can also be conceptualized not as an activity undertaken by autonomous individuals, but by citizens who are part of human communities. To see workers as citizens is to decommodify them to give them a status as more than just factors of production or individuals seeking personal fulfillment or identities (Standing 2009). Specifically, citizens should be seen as having inherent equal worth and are thus entitled to certain rights and standards of dignity and self-determination irrespective of what the market provides. Work then is conceptualized as occupational citizenship when we think of what it means for workers to be citizens of a human community.

Industrial relations scholarship frequently argues that citizen-workers are entitled to minimum working and living conditions that are determined by standards of human dignity, not supply and demand, and to meaningful forms of self-determination in the workplace that go beyond the freedom to quit (Budd 2004). Closely-related approaches include conceptualizations of workers’ rights as human rights, the International Labour Organization’s campaign for decent work, and various theological and ethical approaches that emphasize that work should respect standards of human dignity.

**Disutility**

In mainstream economic theorizing, individuals are modeled as rational agents seeking to maximize a utility function that is increasing in the consumption of goods, services, and leisure. Work is a central element an individual’s maximization problem because work yields goods and services directly through self-production or indirectly through earned income. However, the physical and mental activity of working is seen as reducing one’s utility. This perspective on work has two roots: seeing it as a painful or stressful
activity, or as something that is less pleasurable than leisure such that work involves the opportunity cost of reduced time for pleasurable leisure (Spencer 2009). In either case, work is conceptualized as disutility—a lousy activity tolerated only to obtain goods, services, and leisure that provide pleasure. This conceptualization further perpetuates the negative views of work that originally arose by seeing work as a curse.

When imperfect information makes employment contracts incomplete, economists frequently assume that employers face a principal-agent problem—how to get the agent (in this case, a worker) to act in the interests the principal (in this case, the owners of the organization). This is because work is being conceptualized as disutility so that workers are assumed to want to exert minimal levels of effort (“shirking”). By assuming that monitoring is typically difficult or imperfect, theorizing in personnel and organizational economics thereby focuses on solving these principal-agent problems by using optimal monetary incentives to combat disutility by making additional worker effort utility-enhancing (Lazear 1995).

**Personal Fulfillment**

A focus on the positive and negative physical and especially psychological outcomes that are inherent in work creates a conceptualization of work as personal fulfillment. In this way of thinking, work is cognitively and emotionally directed by the brain. Mental states such as attitudes, moods, and emotions can affect individuals’ work behaviors; the nature of one’s work—such as the job tasks, rewards, relations with co-workers, and supervision—can affect one’s mental states. As such, work is viewed as an activity that arouses cognitive and affective functioning. Ideally, work should be a source of personal fulfillment and psychological well-being that satisfies needs for achievement, mastery, self-esteem, and self-worth (Turner, Barling, and Zacharatos 2002). But work with mindless repetition, abusive co-
workers or bosses, excessive physical or mental demands, or other factors that comprise lousy work can have negative psychological consequences.

The centrality of cognitive and affective mental processes for conceptualizing work is emphasized most strongly by scholars in industrial-organizational psychology, organizational behavior, and human resource management. Some key foundational research topics that result from conceptualizing work in this way are individual psychological differences such as cognitive ability or personality, job satisfaction, organizational justice, and intrinsic work motivation. Human resource management scholarship builds on the conceptualization of work as personal fulfillment by assuming that to be effective, human resource management practices must satisfy workers’ psychological needs by managing their cognitive and affective functioning. This is typically seen as a win-win situation by embracing a unitarist vision of the employment relationship—psychological needs can be fulfilled through fair treatment, intrinsic rewards, and placement into appropriate jobs, employees will reciprocate by being hard-working and loyal, and high levels of organizational performance, including profitability and shareholder returns, will result.

A Social Relation

The extrinsic rewards of work emphasized in mainstream economics or the intrinsic rewards emphasized in psychology underappreciate the extent to which work is embedded in complex social phenomena such that individuals seek approval, status, sociability, and power. The social context also provides constraints, such as social norms that define the boundaries of acceptable behaviors or work roles, or power relations that define access to resources. To see work as consisting of human interactions that are experienced in and shaped by social networks, social norms and institutions, and socially-constructed power relations is to conceptualize work as social relation. Three major approaches to thinking about work occurring within a rich social context are instructive.
First, the social dynamics of interpersonal work interactions are highlighted by theories of social exchange and social networks (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005; Portes 1998). Work is thus seen as a social exchange consisting of open-ended, ongoing relationships occurring within networks of social ties based on trust and reciprocity that have imperfectly-specified obligations and a multiplicity of objectives. A second approach to conceptualizing work as a social relation focuses on the importance of social norms for how work is experienced and structured. These norms can stem from direct, interpersonal contact—such as norms in work groups to limit output or work effort—while other norms are organizational in nature, and still other work norms are societal-levels constructions.

A third social relations approach emphasized socially-constructed hierarchies and power relations. For example, Marxist-inspired theorizing on work embraces a social relations conceptualization of work by seeing capital-labor or employer-employee power dynamics as socially-constructed. Work, then, is viewed as contested terrain in which employers and employees are continuously seek control and make accommodations. This dialectic of control and accommodation can occur through formal policies, rules, and other structural features of the employment relationship (Thompson and Newsome 2004) as well as through organizational culture and other discursive elements (Knights and Willmott 1989).

Another approach that emphasizes socially-constructed hierarchies consists of feminist theories of patriarchy and gender (Gottfried 2006).

Caring For Others

The traditional conceptualizations of work in the social and behavioral sciences and the accompanying research that primarily focuses on paid employment to the exclusion of unpaid household work and other caring activities that do not produce economic commodities are criticized by feminist scholarship for ignoring gender issues (Gottfried 2006). Feminist thought rejects the resulting devaluing of “woman’s work” and asserts that it should be seen
as real work. Specifically, it is work as caring for others—the physical, cognitive, and emotional effort required to attend to and maintain others.

While caring for others is not limited to unpaid household work and is not the exclusive domain of women, it powerfully affects the gendered work experiences of women. Housewives are frequently seen as unproductive, working women are often saddled with a majority of the burdens of household work, and women in the workplace face gendered expectations about appropriate occupations and work behaviors that are frequently rooted in idealized visions of caring, domesticity, and femininity. In feminist theorizing, this gendered nature of work is the result of socially-constructed norms and power dynamics, not maternal instincts or other biological features (Jackson 1998). Also, beliefs about the gendered body in the workplace and the care-giving responsibilities of women lead to employment-related discrimination as men and women are segregated into different occupations, given different roles and levels of responsibility, expected to sell or tolerate differing levels of sexuality, and paid differently for comparable work.

Identity

To help understand who they are, individuals create identities that enhance their understanding of where they fit into the broader world. Given that work is a significant part of many people’s lives, work can be conceptualized as identity—that is, as a source of understanding and meaning (Leidner 2006). Work can be a source of meaning on several levels. The personal identity dimension consists of stable attributes and traits that an individual sees as making him or herself unique, including descriptors related to one’s work. The social identity approach highlights identity construction via categorizing oneself into various groups, such as one’s occupation and employer. The interactionist approach focuses on the role of social interactions in creating individual identities. From this perspective, the
social roles attached to occupations and careers are a major source of one’s self-presentation and identity. Identity related to class and class consciousness are also rooted in work.

At a more fundamental level, work can be viewed as a central element of creating a species identity for humans. The importance of work for humanness was most famously advanced by Marx’s (1844: 76-77) argument that “In creating an objective world by his practical activity, in working-up inorganic nature, man proves himself a conscious species being, i.e., as a being that treats the species as its own essential being.” It is from this belief that self-directed work is the essential quality of being human that Marx further argued that the commodification of work causes alienation—the loss of humanness experienced when workers are forced to sell an inherent part of themselves. In the 1981 papal encyclical 

*Laborem Exercens* (“On Human Work”), Pope John Paul II articulated the importance of work in terms strikingly similar to those presented by Marx:

> Work is one of the characteristics that distinguish man from the rest of creatures, whose activity for sustaining their lives cannot be called work. Only man is capable of work, and only man works, at the same time by work occupying his existence on earth. Thus work bears a particular mark of man and of humanity, the mark of a person operating within a community of persons. And this mark decides its interior characteristics; in a sense it constitutes its very nature (preface, emphasis omitted).

**Service**

Contemporary Western conceptualizations of work are typically individual-centric—work serves an individual’s and his or her immediate family’s needs for income, psychological fulfillment, social recognition, and identity as well accomplishing the family’s caring needs. But work can also serve God, humanity, or one’s country, community, or family in ways that go beyond serving the needs of an individual and his or her immediate family. In this way, work can be thought of as service.

Since the early years of the Christian church, work has been seen as a way to serve God’s kingdom by preventing idleness (leading to sin), providing for one’s family, and
generating surpluses for charitable giving. Later, Martin Luther and John Calvin further enhanced the status of daily work by believing that everyone’s (non-sinful) occupation represents something that God summons us to do by providing special gifts or talents—that is, a calling: “something that fits how we were made, so that doing it will enable us to glorify God, serve others, and be most richly ourselves” (Placher 2005: 3). Furthermore, today’s Christian theology of work is frequently complemented by a conceptualization of work as an act of co-creation with God, as captured here by Pope John Paul II in *Laborem Exercens*:

> Awareness that man’s work is a participation in God’s activity ought to permeate…even the most ordinary everyday activities. For, while providing the substance of life for themselves and their families, men and women are performing their activities in a way which appropriately benefits society. They can justly consider that by their labor they are unfolding the Creator’s work, consulting the advantages of their brothers and sisters, and contributing by their personal industry to the realization in history of the divine plan (§25).

Whether for religious or secular reasons, a popular way of serving a community is through volunteering. Even though volunteering is typically unpaid or minimally paid, it should be seen as work because it involves effort, produces value, and is structured by the same factors that shape paid work such as labor market opportunities, individual motivation, social norms, and gender. (Taylor 2005). There are diverse reasons why individuals pursue or are encouraged to pursue volunteer work, civic service, and community-building. Helping others who are impoverished frequently stems from humanitarian concerns motivated by religious and/or ethical principles. In a very different vein, the classical republicanism school of thought in political philosophy emphasizes civic virtue in order to hold a community or a nation together. Serving others is also advocated as a way of repaying one’s debt to society while military service is frequently seen as patriotic service for one’s country.

Confucianism provides another foundation for seeing work as service. Specifically, the centrality of the family in Confucian thought means that work in East Asia is frequently seen as serving the multi-generational family and the common good, not the individual. As
the East Asian countries have industrialized, Confucian values have also carried over into the employment relationship for wage and salary workers. The Japanese ideal of lifetime employment in which employees are recruited for and expected to stay at the company for their working life can be seen as a reflection of Confucian importance of familial reciprocity and loyalty, even if this ideal is a reality for only a minority of the workforce. In other words, working for the family becomes working for the corporate family.

**CONCEPTUALIZING WORKER WELL-BEING**

Each of the conceptualizations of work has important implications for how we think about worker well-being—what it is, whether or not it is important for society, how to measure it, and how it is determined (see Table 1). For starters, if work is simply a curse, then we should accept rather than question our fate of painful toil, and it is not worth thinking about worker well-being very much. Work is expected to be lousy, so there is little reason to consider measuring worker well-being. Moreover, to see work as a curse is to see the nature of work as beyond our control, so there is no basis for trying to improve it. Worker well-being, in other words, is pre-ordained by nature or God.

Conceptualizing work as freedom, in contrast, provides very different perspectives on worker well-being. First, when work is seen a source of freedom from nature’s constraints, then worker well-being should include a creative dimension. Specifically, the ability to create as part of one’s work will increase well-being, and the lack of such opportunities reduces it. Second, when work is viewed as a source of political and economic freedom, worker well-being should include a dimension of independence. From this perspective, worker well-being should not be evaluated highly if workers are excessively dependent on their employers and therefore afraid to engage in political or other activities. Free speech protections for workers, in contrast, would be seen as enhancing worker well-being.
When work is conceptualized as a commodity, economic markets are seen as the primary driver of employment conditions. As a result, this conceptualization highlights the role of market forces in determining worker well-being. Mainstream economic theory further shows that work is compensated by an amount equal to its economic value when labor markets are perfectly competitive, and supporters of the neoliberal market ideology therefore see market-determined outcomes as fair. From this perspective, worker well-being is mostly equated to the ability of workers to freely quit their jobs and seek whatever employment opportunities they desire. With these conditions in place, employment conditions are seen as fair and as reflecting free consent. This perspective, then, does not encourage serious examinations of worker well-being; rather, workers are assumed to find their situations acceptable because they would otherwise seek better situations. The commodity conceptualization of work also privileges paid employment, so unpaid work and other forms of non-commoditized work are devalued, if not ignored.

The occupational citizenship conceptualization of work provides an important foil for the perspectives on worker well-being that are derived from the commodity conceptualization. Specifically, this perspective emphasizes citizenship rights that include minimum labor standards consistent with safe and dignified living and working conditions, and that also include employee voice and self-determination as entitlements of autonomous human beings. In this way, worker well-being is seen as an objective standard that should consider these rights. Workers with low wages, dangerous working conditions, and a lack of opportunities for voice are seen as having low levels of well-being, irrespective of their subjective evaluations of their job satisfaction. Moreover, this perspective rejects the ability of markets to provide these standards and instead supports employment regulation and other institutions such as labor union representation to improve worker well-being.
In modern social sciences scholarship, by retaining the assumption that work is expected to be lousy, the conceptualization of work as a curse has evolved into work as disutility. When work is seen as disutility, well-being is derived from consumption and leisure, not work itself. So worker well-being rests on the extent to which work supports consumption and leisure, primarily through income. Moreover, mainstream economic theorizing assumes that workers can rationally determine their optimal amount of hours to work and effort to exert. In this way, workers are seen as achieving their highest levels of well-being possible given whatever constraints they face. Worker well-being is therefore not a rich construct when work is conceptualized as disutility, and considerations of how to improve worker well-being generally point toward increasing workers’ choice sets, especially by recommending additional human capital accumulation. But even this is with an eye toward increasing income rather than improving the nature of one’s work per se because when work is conceptualized as disutility (or a curse), there is nothing special about work beyond providing the income necessary to survive and enjoy life.

In sharp contrast, if work is seen as a source of personal fulfillment, then worker well-being is an important construct. Specifically, worker well-being depends on the extent to which work provides physical and psychological rewards. Much of the literature focuses on psychological rewards, and in this way, worker well-being is seen as a subjective self-appraisal of one’s job satisfaction, happiness, self-esteem, and other attitudes. The nature of one’s work, co-workers and bosses as well as individual psychological dispositions are seen as the major determinants of worker well-being. Because conceptualizing work as personal fulfillment frequently goes hand-in-hand with a unitarist perspective on the employment relationship, enlightened managers are seen as the preferred mechanism for designing employment practices that promote job satisfaction and personal fulfillment because satisfaction and commitment are assumed to be beneficial for individual and organizational
performance. The conceptualization of work as identity takes the personal fulfillment approach one step further by revealing the deep importance of work for self-understanding. From this perspective, then, worker well-being is a function of the extent to which work contributes toward a positive self-identity.

Conceptualizing work as caring for others also has important yet unique implications for worker well-being. This perspective broadens the scope of worker well-being to also include the extent to which work provides opportunities for caring for others, either directly through the work itself, or indirectly by reducing conflicts that prevent workers from fulfilling their caring responsibilities. Seeing work as caring also implies that non-commoditized forms of work should not be overlooked when conceptualizing and analyzing worker well-being. A true picture of the state of a country’s workers should include not only the well-being of paid employees in stable jobs, but also workers frequently considered “marginal”, whether paid or unpaid. Finally, feminist perspectives on work reject deep-seated dualities such as production/reproduction, work/family, and labor/leisure (Glucksmann 1995). From this perspective, worker well-being should take a holistic approach that recognizes the interconnected nature of a society’s full breadth of work activities and does not divorce worker well-being from other aspects of well-being.

Just as seeing work as caring for others broadens the scope of worker well-being, so, too, does seeing work as service. Specifically, the conceptualization of work as service implies that worker well-being is derived from the extent to which work provides opportunities for serving others, either directly through the work itself, or indirectly by reducing conflicts that prevent workers engaging in service activities outside of work. This can be measured both subjectively—e.g., through self-appraisals of the extent to which workers believe they are serving others—and objectively—e.g., by analyzing the extent to which policies that promote service activities are present.
Lastly, conceptualizing work as a social relation highlights the human interaction elements of work. This way of theorizing work therefore reinforces the perspectives on worker well-being emanating from many of the previous conceptualizations that emphasize the deeply human aspects of work, such as creativity, fulfillment, identity, and caring for others, and (at least for some schools of thought within the social relations approach) the objective standards derived from the occupational citizenship conceptualization. The theoretical perspective of work as a social relation further emphasizes that work and its related institutions are human creations rather than immutable facts of life or a natural state of affairs. This provides legitimacy to the question of worker well-being and to considerations for how to structure work and work-related institutions so as to promote the achievement of high levels of worker well-being. Some theorizing within the social relations approach further emphasizes the importance of the power structures that are created through social institutions. Consequently, this conceptualization sees worker well-being as explicitly determined by the relative power of the parties to the employment relationship, and further highlights the need to change power dynamics if improvements in worker well-being are to be achieved.

**CONCLUSION**

Many scholars, business leaders, policymakers, and advocates claim that worker well-being is important. But there are numerous perspectives on what worker well-being actually is, how to measure it, whether it needs improving, and, if needed, how to improve it. A deeper understanding of these perspectives can be obtained by using explicit conceptualizations of work to uncover the importance of how we think about work for how we think about worker well-being. The divergent implications of these conceptualizations for worker well-being highlight the importance of this unique framework.

Unfortunately, the specific perspectives on worker well-being embraced by different groups of academics, policymakers, advocates, and others are typically (implicitly) rooted in
one or two (unstated) conceptualizations of work. Debates over which perspective on worker well-being is “best” or “correct” are therefore ultimately debates over which conceptualizations of work are “best” or “correct.” But unlike Frederick Winslow Taylor who believed that there is one best way to accomplish work, I assert that work is too complex to be reduced to narrow conceptualizations. Work is not disutility or personal fulfillment, work is disutility and personal fulfillment. Work is not organizational citizenship or identity, it is occupational citizenship and identity. So rather than trying to identify the “best” perspective on worker well-being by debating which conceptualization of work is best, research and policy should be guided a recognition that the complexity of work means that worker well-being needs to be seen as equally complex. To this end, the conceptualizations of work presented in this paper and the corresponding perspectives on worker well-being provide a foundation for a comprehensive approach to worker well-being that embraces a complementary rather than exclusionary approach to perspectives on work and worker well-being. Note further that this means that worker well-being is both a subjective and an objective construct.

Moreover, not only can thinking more explicitly about work promote a deeper understanding of and broader approach to worker well-being, but thinking about approaches to worker well-being can also help reveal what a society values. When individuals emphasize the mobility aspects of worker well-being to the exclusion of other aspects, they are implicitly conceptualizing work as a commodity and dismissing other conceptualizations of work. If pay and compensation are the focal points of worker well-being, this implies that unpaid work is not valued. A focus on equal employment opportunity without regard for job quality implies that work is seen as a source of income, but not intrinsic rewards or self-identity.
Putting all of this together, a greater appreciation of the two-way connections between work and worker well-being is not only useful for developing a deeper understanding of both work and worker well-being, but also for developing sufficiently broad approaches to worker well-being that adequately reflect not only the sheer diversity of the roles of work in our lives, but also the tremendous importance of work for individuals and the communities in which they live.
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<td>A Curse</td>
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<tr>
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<td>An abstract quantity of productive effort that has tradable economic value.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Occupational</td>
<td>An activity pursued by human members of a community entitled to certain rights.</td>
<td>Importance of objective minimum standards and rights, including employee voice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizenship</td>
<td></td>
<td>Well-being is derived from consumption and leisure, not work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disutility</td>
<td>A lousy activity tolerated to obtain goods and services that provide pleasure.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Physical and psychological functioning that (ideally) satisfies individual needs.</td>
<td>Importance of subjective measures of satisfaction, happiness, and self-esteem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fulfillment</td>
<td></td>
<td>Well-being does not simply emerge, it is created by norms, institutions, and power structures.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Social Relation</td>
<td>Human interaction embedded in social norms, institutions, and power structures.</td>
<td>Work should provide opportunities for serving others and not interfere with serving others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring For Others</td>
<td>The physical, cognitive, and emotional effort required to attend to and maintain others.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>A method for understanding who you are and where you stand in the social structure.</td>
<td>Importance of positive self-identity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>The devotion of effort to others, such as God, household, community, or country.</td>
<td>Work should provide opportunities for serving others and not interfere with serving others.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>