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“Patching” My Life **Sociological Lessons for a Joyful Work**

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Abstract: Various literature in the sociology of work, and my own past work experience, are consulted to develop a general philosophy of my work utopia. There are so many different types of work in this world. Some people may define work by their job or their career, most people only consider work to be paid work where they receive a wage for their labor, the time that they spend and the tasks they accomplish within their job. Some people love their work; they find joy in going to their job everyday. I want to do something I enjoy, something that even if I hate my boss I'll still keep working because I love my job. I want to help people. I am studying alcohol and substance abuse in school right now. I plan to get my masters in counseling so that I can help people who can't help themselves. I love working with people. Almost all of my jobs that have involved dealing with people have been my favorites. I like being a part of someone's life, and by being a counselor I will be able to do this. In a way I want to be like the character Patch in the film *Patch Adams*, he wanted to help people with their problems, give them the hope that someone is there to listen to them. And so do I.

There are so many different types of **work** in this world. Some people may define work by their job or their career, most people only consider work to be paid work where they receive a wage for their labor, the time that they spend and the tasks they accomplish within their job. Some people love their work; they find joy in going to their job everyday. For others, however, they consider their work simply a job.

There is no denying that there are many different kinds of work that people do every day. In their *Fast Forward*, the authors Torry Dickinson and Robert Schaeffer state “when most people think of work, they imagine men with paid jobs. But this is

the narrowest possible conception of work. What is left out of this picture is the fact that different kinds of people work, not just men, and they do different kinds of work. Actually, women do most of the world's work, and it is unpaid” (Dickinson & Schaeffer, 23).

Work can be done outside or inside the house throughout the daily **tasks** that members of a household complete. These tasks are vital to the household; if they were not done then their household may not run smoothly. This work is known as **subsistence work**. It is a type of work that is necessary to allow the household to survive. Work is divided up by society as a whole.

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Each person does some sort of work to help society produce. About this **division of labor** Harry Braverman writes, “each individual of the human species cannot alone produce in accordance with the standards unknown to any animal, but the species as a whole finds it possible to do this, in part through the social division of labor” (Braverman, 72).

There are even every day activities that we do that might not be realized are actually work. A mother soothing her child when he or she is crying is actually work; it is **emotional work**. Every person in this world does some type of work at one point in their lives, and they say that once a person starts working, they never stop.

More and more Americans are working harder and harder to survive. They are working longer hours to try and keep their jobs. In her article “The (Even More) Overworked American” Juliet Schor finds data proving that “the average American worker added an additional 199 hours to his or her annual schedule—or nearly five additional weeks of work per year (assuming a forty hour week)” (Schor, 7). People are spending less time with their families and more time at their jobs. They are losing out on leisure time and relaxation. Harry Braverman defines the work cycle very well. He says “the transformation of working humanity into a labor force as a factor of production and instrument of capital, is an incessant and unending process” (Braverman, 139). Some people feel like they are on a track, where they just keep on going and keep on working until one day they can reach retirement. They hope that at retirement they’ll eventually be able to slow down.

Growing up I lived with my mother and sister although the composition of our household was constantly changing. When I was seven years old my parents separated and we moved in with my elderly grandmother. Living in this house there was a sense of **patchworking**, everyone contrib-

uted to the household in some way. Nazli Kibria refers to the term patchworking in her article, “Household Structure and Family Ideologies: The Case of Vietnamese Refugees.” She says that “patchworking [is]... the bringing together and sharing of diverse resources” (Kibria, 60). My mother was the only person who worked outside of the home. She brought in the main source of income with her paycheck from her job. Her role was definitely that of the **breadwinner**. My sister and I helped around the house by doing chores like laundry, washing dishes, light cooking, ironing, cleaning, and grocery shopping. In “Children’s Share in Household Tasks,” authors Frances K. Goldscheider and Linda J. Waite report that “children who live in a mother-only family play a key role in the household economy: they share more overall and they share in every single task” (Goldscheider & Waite, 814). My sister and I lived in a single parent home and we did do more tasks and chores than some other children may have done. We also helped through **care work** by taking care of my elderly grandmother.

While living with my grandmother we received benefits from the state. My grandmother, because she was elderly, received social security. Because my mother was a **single-headed household** we also received welfare from the state. All these benefits being used together within the household along with the wages from outside labor, and the unpaid work going on inside of the household, made us a **collectivist family**. We all combined our wages and helped out around the house so that everyone within the family could reap the benefits.

As a student studying I do **unpaid work** all the time. Most people may not consider school a place of work, but students are actually doing unpaid labor. Harry Braverman, in his *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, states that “to seize upon the materials of nature ready made is not work, work is an activity that alters these materi-

als from their natural state to improve their usefulness" (Braverman, 45). In addition I am working for my degree, a degree which will eventually help bring in some sort of income into my household. In school I study to get a degree so that I can get a good job that I like, a job that can realize my work utopia. I hope to work as a counselor that works with alcohol and substance abuse patients which is a type of care work that involves emotional labor. This type of work is often **gender divided**. Women are often thought of as counselors because the work entails care, and deals with emotions.

When I was younger my mother would work Saturdays at her job for **overtime**. She would work her normal five days a week and then work a sixth day for extra pay. At this time my mother was a travel agent. My sister and I would go to work with her. We accompanied her mostly because there was no one else to watch over us, but also because we "worked" there as well. One year the brochure magazine for the company had a misprint. My sister and I worked on an **assembly line**, where I would open the brochure to the page, pass it to her and she would place a sticker over the incorrect information; we would then move on to the next brochure. We didn't get paid much, but it was nice to have a little money and not be bored throughout the day.

When I was about thirteen I worked for my aunt at her job for about two or three weeks. My aunt works in a life insurance agency. She started there when she was twenty years old and has been working there for almost forty three years. Today not many people stay at their job for life; however, in the past it was pretty common for workers to stay in one workplace for long periods of time, or even for their entire career life. Henry Ford helped to allow workers a job for life. In his "Evolution of the New Industrial Technology," Stephen Meyer III writes about how Ford was able to keep employees for life. Ford was able to provide benefits for his employees and

guarantee them a job for life. I, however, did not last in my work as long as my aunt did at MassMutual. I was merely a **contingent worker**. I was there to do a job and once that job was finished I was done at MassMutual. I photocopied all of the agents files for the new general agent. It was great because at the time I was about thirteen or fourteen, just going into high school and enjoyed the extra spending money. I felt a little **alienated** doing the job though. I was in the photocopier room all day long by myself and didn't really get to talk to other employees; I was just left with a machine all day.

My next job was working at a concert center. The work was almost like **piece work**, where workers are paid by each product they create. The case at the concert center was a little different, though; I got paid by how many concerts I worked at. I worked as an usher, which held some **status** and **power**. I could try and get my friends into better seats than they had paid for. I really disliked this job, however. No one wanted to listen to a sixteen year old girl tell them they couldn't sit where they wanted to sit. The patrons were often drunk and did not listen to what I had to say. My last concert that I worked for was a Dido concert. Dido didn't show up for the show; the patrons arrived at 7:30 p.m. to watch her perform; and no one told them until 10:30 that she wasn't going to be making an appearance. People were extremely angry and of course took it out on us as workers. I was so fed up that I took off my uniform and just started walking to the main entrance. I never went back.

Work is a place that someone should feel comfortable in. It is a place where you should be judged on your job performance and your character. No one should have to worry about their race, age, or gender while working. They should also not have to feel like their race, age, or gender will prevent them from getting a job. **Discrimination** and **inequality** are supposed to be

two subjects that should no longer be associated with the world of work. Unfortunately that is not the case. Discrimination and inequality still exist in our working culture. Although many people may believe that they no longer exist, they do. What has changed concerning discrimination and inequality is the way employers act. Even though there are many laws that try and prevent discrimination and inequality, employers are still able to discriminate if they so wish. Employers and companies are able to hide their attitudes towards a certain race, age, or gender in many new ways so that they do not get caught in the act (Herring).

I have worked a few different jobs over the years. I never really felt at the time that I was discriminated against, but I did feel people took advantage of me, whether it was because of my age or gender.

I worked in a summer camp for three years every summer. I worked three days a week from 8 to 4 and on one day a week I had my late day, where I would stay until 5. I was hired by the city, so the actual camp didn't pay; Mayor Menino's city program The Red Shirts did. The pay for the time and type of work was actually pretty good. We were paid a little more than minimum wage and were able to go to a beach or lake everyday and work on our tans. I was paid \$326 every other week, which now doesn't seem like much, but at fourteen, fifteen, and sixteen, with no bills it seemed like more than enough. I know that in many countries adults wouldn't even get paid this much. Glenn Firebaugh in his article, "The New Geography of Global Income Inequality," says that there has been a huge growth in the world's average income, but that the growth has "disproportionately benefited different regions of the world, with richer regions generally benefiting much more than poorer regions" (Firebaugh, 172). Maybe due to this unequal distribution of wealth I was able to get paid a higher wage than most youth my age.

Each morning there were certain things that had to be done. We had to pack the children's lunches, snacks, juices, and milks; we had to pack sports equipment for the day, arts and crafts equipment; we had to fill two five gallon jugs of water and pack them; and we had to pack or refill the first aid kit, and then watch the children in gym until the bus arrived. Once the bus did arrive we had to pack all the supplies, food, and equipment into the back of the bus and the camp's van. Here's where the problem was.

I always arrived early to camp. Out of all the tasks that had to be done in the morning each worker was supposed to do only one or two of them. I always ended up doing more. Every day I would pack the milk and juices first and then maybe the lunches and snacks. After that I should have been more than done; however, that was not the case. My other red shirt co-workers ended up arriving late or would go straight into the gym so I would have to do all the work. I also was told "oh you're the only one who can get all the milks to fit in perfectly." It was not fair that we were all getting paid the same and I had to do more work than the others. Then when it came time to pack up the bus I would end up carrying mostly everything into the bus. I was mad that I had to do so much work and that no one was helping me.

In her article, "*Lives on the Line*," author Ruth Buchanan discusses the difference between **talent** and **skill**. She writes that the work that requires the development and use of interpersonal skills are often understood as personal development rather than actual job skills (Buchanan, 369). Buchanan continues on to say that "work typically performed by men is identified as requiring certain kinds of skills, what women do is more often described as the utilization of their so-called natural talents" (Buchanan, 369). Perhaps that was the case at the Little House Summer Camp. Perhaps this ability to load the milks in "perfectly" was con-

nected with the fact that I was a female, and it was just one of my "natural" talents.

When we arrived at whatever beach or lake we were going to for the day it was time to unpack the bus and van. Again I was left to do most of the work. Not only did I have to do most of the work, but the bags were heavy. We had just between fifty and seventy five campers in the camp each week. Fifty to seventy five lunches are very heavy to carry. Being a girl who was just at five feet tall at the time, the bag definitely outweighed me. There was no way I could carry it by myself. The red shirt boys would walk right past me and not offer to help. I was very angry, but because I was new, I was young, I was a girl, and I was one of the only white employees there, I said nothing. I was also from another neighborhood than most of the workers there. Most of my coworkers had grown up together and knew each other their whole lives. The older counselors who were more superior to us as red shirts were not going to yell at their friends for not helping me.

In their article, "Gender Inequality at Work," David A. Cotter, Joan M. Hermsen, and Reeve Vanneman discuss how some females are more likely to be discriminated at work than males. They say that females make less money than males, and are hired less than males. At the camp we were all paid the same, which I'm sure was due to the fact that we were being paid by the city. However there were more males working than there were females. There were about three female red shirt workers, while there were about six male red shirt workers. That shows that males were hired twice as many as the females were. I don't believe that this job was a sex typed occupation (a job that is commonly preformed by one gender or the other); instead, I feel that there were simply more males that were friends with other previous years' staff and had heard about the job through **social networking**.

One day I overheard some of the older counselors talking, saying that the boy red

shirts were the best workers. I was so mad; just because they were the same color, same gender, from the same neighborhood, and they were friends, did not mean that they were better workers than I. In *Race and the Invisible Hand*, Deidre Royster writes about blue-collar African-American men not being able to utilize their personal contacts to further themselves in a career. The author says that blacks do not rely on their personal contacts to ignite their careers. However, at my job that was not the case; all of my co workers knew one another. They had either gone to the camp as children, had a family member working there, or went to the community center growing up. When it came time to get summer jobs they relied on their contacts to help them get the jobs they needed. I still knew I wasn't going to say anything though; after all there were more of them than there were of me. Then I heard one of the older, Spanish, male counselors saying, "are you kidding me? Michelle's the best worker here. She's here before everyone else. She does all the work. She carries everything everyday and she doesn't complain about it." Little did he know that I was complaining about it, not to my co workers but to my friends and family. Still, nothing changed. People still acted the same towards me and my coworkers still acted the same.

In their article "Stories Employers Tell," Philip Moss and Chris Tilly write about how employers say that certain races may be better workers than others. In one case a white employer said that black workers might work a little harder and are more willing to stay a little longer, but that whites were more friendly and more dependent, more educated, but maybe not the best workers. Based on my experience at the camp, I would have to disagree with this Atlanta fast food restaurant owner. Your race doesn't necessarily determine that you are going to work a certain way. If that was the case my black coworkers would have been doing most of the work.

However in my situation that was not the case. I was doing most of the work. I believe that you have to base your opinions on a person by person situation, not on color, because being a certain race doesn't mean you'll work in a certain way. I believe that my supervisors may have believed that because I was quiet and a quick worker it was easier to ask me to just do the tasks that needed to be done rather than asking the males to do it—because they knew it would be a struggle to get them to actually do what they wanted.

One day we pulled up to a lake parking lot. I got out of the bus and walked to the back door to open it and start unloading. One of the older, white, male counselors was standing near by. Technically it was not the older counselor's responsibility to help us carry the stuff down to the lake; we were supposed to do it. As I lifted out one of the five gallon jugs of water he came over and said "Put that down." I did what he said, then he handed me a bag of balls. He said "Here take these down to the lake, and don't come back up for anything else." I looked at him like what's going on? I did what he said but I kind of hung back a little to see what was going to happen. The person that was calling out to them was John. John grew up in the neighborhood; he had also been working at the camp since he was old enough, and before he was old enough to work there he went to the camp as a child. He was also well over six feet, close to six five. This was someone that these boys had known and respected for quite some time and he definitely held authority over them with not only his position at the camp, but also his size.

Before I walked down the hill I heard him call a few of the boys over to him. He told them that I and the other two girls I worked with weren't going to be carrying any of the heavy stuff anymore, that they were going to take the lunch bags everyday and the jugs with the five gallons of water. None of the boys told him no. They didn't

say much and I could sense that they were not pleased with what he was saying, but what could they do. They certainly were not going to say no to John. He outranked them within their jobs, but was also older and bigger than him. I'm sure they were afraid about what would happen if they didn't do as he said.

After that day not much changed. John was the leader of the oldest group in camp and so he took his groups to places most days that were different than where we went to. I think the boys thought if John wasn't around they didn't have to listen to what he told them; when he was in the camp, though, I never carried the lunch bag or the jugs of water. I still had to do most of the work in the morning; that didn't change.

Although not much changed I was glad that John had stood up for me because due to my position within the camp I wouldn't have defended my self. I still carried the lunch bag every once in a while but one of the other girls and I would take it together and we would take our time bringing it down to the beach or lake, in hopes that when we got back to the bus most of the stuff would have already been brought down. So maybe I carried that bag a few more times than I should have, but at least I saw that someone else recognized the work that I was doing and someone else saw that it wasn't fair that I was doing most of the work with little to no help from my coworkers.

This may not be the most extreme case of inequality, it may not even be inequality in some people's eyes, and I realize that most people are affected a lot more than I was through discrimination. At the time, however, it seemed like I was being singled out and that no one was on my side except for the one time John stepped in. I feel like that is what it feels like to be a part of an unequal job. When you feel you can't rely on someone else to help you or confide in, that is what I imagine to be a part of an unequal

job.

Since I was seventeen I have worked in a local convenience store. The store sells coffee, tea, pastries, donuts, muffins, and groceries, but caters to the Irish community in the area. I recently quit my job, and it was the first job I had actually ever quit. The concert hall was used on a per show basis and I had just never signed up for any more shows. At the store I was a hard worker. At one time I worked five mornings a week at five a.m. I was a store clerk. My job basically included ringing up customers' purchases. Because I worked there for almost four years I really got to know the customers, as most of the workers do. I knew about their lives; what they did for a living; if they were married, or had a boyfriend or girlfriend; and if they had children and so forth. Most importantly I knew their coffee order; I knew how they preferred their tea or coffee, what they liked to eat in the morning, and how many packets of ketchup or napkins they liked with their breakfast.

When I first started working mornings I was amazed at the other girls' knowledge of all these different orders; but after a while I began to describe people by what kind of muffin they got, what time of the morning they came in, or what type of cigarettes they smoked. People like that in the morning, they enjoy the fact that they don't have to speak, that someone is there to make their lives a little easier, and get them exactly what they want without a word.

I loved most of the customers there. In fact I became friends with many of them. I knew about most of their lives' stories just from their coming in and some of them even got to know mine. Some people even gave us Christmas presents to show us how much they appreciated us. The problem was my boss. I know that this is a common occurrence for so many workers in society. So many people have issues with their bosses. They may enjoy the work, but simply can not work for the boss. When you

can't get along with your boss or you know that he or she do not respect you, that makes it extremely difficult to do your job. Even if it is one that you love, you hate going to your work place and eventually resent the things you once loved.

My boss did not appreciate his workers. If he needed something we were just supposed to give up our own time out of our lives for him with no questions asked. This would be fine if there were any thanks involved after the favor was done, but with him there were no thanks. It was also hard to deal with because I was getting paid minimum wage. I never received a pay raise in the almost four years I was there, except for when the state increased the minimum wage and my boss was forced by law to pay us more.

In his article entitled "On the Digital Assembly Line," Simon Head looks at various call centers through out the U.S. He listens to the complaints of the workers there. Head finds that the workers really disliked the set up of the call center. The arrangement of the desks and floor plans made it such that their supervisors could watch the employees while they were working. Just like in *Nickel & Dimed*, Barbara Ehrenreich discusses how so many workers felt like they were being watched by their employers. When Barbara went out into the low wage workforce she was surprised to see that so many employees were treated very badly; she was especially surprised that she would have to be drug-tested. Returning to Heads study, the workers were also set up with computers that monitored the amount of calls being taken in. If a worker was not getting enough calls in then the supervisor could do a number of things to the employees. Some employees were given special classes to try and be able to meet the target times, while others were immediately dismissed. This shows to me that favoritism was going on.

I definitely saw this within the store. My boss Gerard let some employees get

away with anything while he reprimanded, and even worse, fired some for those exact things that others got away with. One employee in a Teletech establishment did not comply with the company's footwear policy. One day she wore one sandal with a sock and one shoe to work, because she suffered from a swollen toe. Managers made her take off her sandal and sock to prove that the toe was black and blue (Head, 128).

We also had a similar policy where we were not able to wear sandals. Many people, however, disregarded this policy and wore sandals anyway. Most people got away with it. Gerard didn't say anything to them (including his daughter); others however weren't as lucky. One employee, Emily, wore flip flop sandals to work one day. Gerard had a problem with Emily for quite some time previous to this day. Emily had sold cigarettes to a minor without knowing and caused Gerard to be fined, and also received a punishment of not being able to sell cigarettes for a few days. Gerard happened to notice that Emily was wearing sandals that day. He made her sign a piece of paper that stated that if any thing had happened to her because she was wearing flip flops, that she could not sue him. No one else had ever had to sign this piece of paper when wearing sandals, but because Gerard disliked Emily he made her sign the paper.

Returning to the Head's study, another incident occurred at a call center in Arizona. A pregnant woman was criticized by her supervisors because she got sick in the bathroom. Her employers told her that she should throw up in the trash basket beside her desk. While we were working, we did not receive breaks, even though that is against the law. Gerard told us that if anyone had a complaint with that then he would have to have us start reporting our tips. We had tip cups on the counter; we hardly made enough for tips to be reported. Although some days you might make good tips, there were other days were you might

only get five dollars. If I worked a long day time shift like 9 to 4, I would most likely eat something at lunch time. I usually went across the street to a deli and picked up a sandwich. Gerard would get mad that not only were we eating on the job, but also that we weren't eating food from the restaurant he owned right next door. He would stare at you and watch you eat and make you feel very uncomfortable, so much so that you wouldn't even want to eat anymore. Or, he would purposely bump into you while eating. Better yet, he would actually put his face right next to your food, ask you what it was, where you got it, and how much it was. Then he would inform you that he makes the same thing, for a lot cheaper.

Today I currently work at that same life insurance that I did contingent work, when I was thirteen years old. I am a part time worker there and also a part time worker at a credit union.

In the past few years, in the industrial capitalist nations, the field of work has been referred to as "**Post-Fordism**." The Post-Fordist ideology is discussed in "The Transformation of Work Revisited" written by Steven P. Vallas and John P. Beck. This term refers to "large scale shifts [which] have occurred in product markets and process technologies. Large corporations are letting go their more traditional dependence on fundamental bureaucracy and routinized tasks, and instead are using a new group of work arrangements. These arrangements are often referred to as flexible specialization, the post-hierarchical workplace, and the learning organization" (Vallas and Beck, 136-137). Basically employers are trying to use more technology instead of humans to do the work to produce their product, and when they need an actual human to do the work they hire part-time, seasonal, or temporary workers.

One of my jobs is working in a life insurance agency. The agency consists of two general agents; they are more or less the

biggest bosses, although there are higher ups in the home office. These two men have contracts with agents who go out and sell life insurance. The agents have no set work hours or days but must produce a certain amount each year in order to remain a full time agent. In order to get the applications of those applying for life insurance (the people that the agent went out and found), the general agents hire staff to get the applications in and maintain a smoothly run office. I am a staff member; but in reality I don't do much. I answer phones, photocopy, file away completed applications, and help out where needed. My fellow staff workers, though, have a lot of work to do.

The two women I work with input the applications into the system. I would say that their work is **skilled mental work**. They do not use their body to produce something, instead they use their mind. They know the computer system and know which questions must be answered. They know how the system works and they know how to "fix" the system. They know that there are certain answers to life application questions that will most likely guarantee a "no" answer; they also know that there are some questions that must be answered, therefore if they are not answered then they return the application until the questions are answered. The agents, I believe, are more **practical skill** workers. They use their clients' body language in order to determine whether or not they believe they will purchase life insurance. They also debate and list the reasons as to why a person should buy insurance; therefore they are relying heavily on their body.

I believe that this work is telling of the Post Fordism era. The two general agents have no problem firing those agents who do not make their contract. They are also constantly looking for ways to have computers do the work for humans, like using programs like QuickBook or Microsoft Excel within the accounting department. Most importantly they try to get work that

should be done by more than one out of one worker.

All these jobs are just for the present time. They are jobs that I am doing to support myself through school, and give me a little spending money. However, my work utopia is to help people. I don't want a job, I want a **career**. I want to be able to move up within a company and do something that I love which what I believe is the difference between a job and a career. I want to do something I enjoy, something that even if I hate my boss I'll still keep working because I love my job. I want to help people. I am studying alcohol and substance abuse in school right now. I plan to get my masters in counseling so that I can help people who can't help themselves. I love working with people. Almost all of my jobs that have involved dealing with people have been my favorites. I like being a part of someone's life, and by being a counselor I will be able to do this. In a way I want to be like the character Patch in the film *Patch Adams*; he wanted to help people with their problems, give them the hope that someone is there to listen to them. And so do I.

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