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From Construction to Social Work: Finding Value in Helping Others

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Abstract: I ultimately ended up leaving the carpenter's union to go back to school. However I shifted my goals away from business and construction management to focus on the field of sociology. By getting a degree in sociology I can come closer to realizing my **work utopia**, what I imagine to be the perfect balance of work and quality of life. In the future I see myself involved in some type of social work. I realize that social work does not pay as much as construction management, contracting, or other fields of work; however it appeals to me in the fact that I can help others. While I do want to earn enough money to live comfortably and buy some of the better material things, I am more concerned with having time with family and working with people. In the documentary film, *Running Out of Time*, the terms "simple living" and "downshifting" really stood out to me. I can picture myself giving up the opportunity to make more money in exchange for a better quality of life. This speaks to some of Juliet Schor's points in her article "The (Even More) Overworked American." Schor writes of trends in working hours and suggests using **labor saving technologies**. These technological advances include "the Internet, computers, wireless, bio-informatics and science" and were designed to "yield stupendous productivity gains that delivered us from excessive labor" (Schor, 9). She suggests that Americans use the time saved from technological advances to pursue hobbies and participate more in family activities. Perhaps we would be better off if we could learn to live on a lower income in exchange for more free time.

Capitalism is the driving force of the U.S. economy. **Capitalism** is the economic system which focuses on the production for profit based on the sale of goods and services within the market. To produce more is to profit more. This drives us to work more. We are taught that the more we work and the harder we work, the better off we will be. Because I have grown up in a capitalist society, I have ignored the many different types of work that exist. Growing up I only knew work to be a "job" with set hours which was done in return for a "paycheck." I never knew that some of the

things I did everyday (for no money) were actually considered to be "work."

While I am currently unemployed, I do a lot of work on a day-to-day basis which helps me know that I am a contributor to society. UMass Boston student Caitlin Farren writes, "upon studying the sociology of work, our definition of work expands to include countless aspects of our lives including, but not limited to, our survival, the reproduction of ourselves, and the functioning of society as a whole" (Farren, 22). This statement relates directly to C. Wright Mills' idea of the **sociological**

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imagination, using which “the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period...he can know his own chances in life only by becoming aware of those of all individuals in his circumstances” (Mills, 349). To better understand my own personal situation, I must look at my own work history and my living situations. Throughout my life, my work history and my living situations have changed repeatedly. These changes have impacted me in various ways.

The most important part of my survival is not my family, but rather my household. A **household** is a unit of people that pools together their finances, labor, benefits, and links to social networks. These resources include both paid and unpaid work, the ability to bring in assistance from the government, and links to varying community networks (Kibria, 56). A household differs from a family in the fact that blood ties are not a requirement. One does not have to be a relative to contribute to the unit. Membership is based on the contribution. Individuals combine resources and assets for the betterment of the entire group. As Nazli Kibria points out in her article, “Household Structure and Family Ideologies: The Case of Vietnamese Refugees,” when discussing households it is important to include the potential impact of the structured environment on the household. The **structural environment** is composed of three parts; the labor market, the state (government policies and services), and community (Kibria, 58). My current household is comprised of my mother, a wage earning teacher, myself, a full time student, and my brother and my grandmother. We work together to survive by combining our resources. My mother brings in money, buys the food, and pays the bills. Her job not only brings a steady income, but also health benefits. I contribute by doing a wide range of work around the house. When I was of a younger age, I

contributed by making the household eligible for government assistance in the form of food stamps and child support.

The structural environment has shaped my household a great deal. My brother and I were raised in a single income household. Our father was not present, making our mother the only source of income. This impacted the resources and opportunities that would be available to us. The job market in Boston during the late 1980s and early 1990s did not provide many opportunities for single women with young children. While we were younger my mother brought in wages as a waitress. Having a low income, single parent household made us available for government programs and food stamps. My brother and I were also eligible for free lunch at school.

When I was older my mother was able to finish school and become a teacher. This allowed her to bring in a higher income, making us no longer eligible for certain government assistance. However, we were now able to receive benefits through my mother’s job. The current day labor market in Boston consists mainly of construction, finance, healthcare and education. Just as in most states around the country, growing unemployment rates have had negative impacts on Massachusetts, leaving more families in need of state or government assistance programs. More and more jobs are requiring higher education for prospective employees, which is one of the reasons I am currently working towards a degree.

In *Fast Forward*, authors Dickinson and Schaefer explain that, “throughout much of the world, people in households work hard to meet basic subsistence needs” (Dickinson, 24). My household is an example of the importance of people working hard to help each other get by. In order to go back to school full time and graduate I needed to quit my job as a carpenter’s apprentice. For me to do this and still be able to survive, I had to move back home to my mother’s house. Being a student and not having a full

time job gives me a somewhat flexible schedule. I have no money to offer to help with mortgage payments and utility bills. However, I am able to be around to help out by doing subsist work while other members of my family are at their jobs. This **subsist work** includes all of the work that household members do to help each other get by and survive. However, I am still able to subsist, or work together with my mother to make sure that all her needs around the house are fulfilled. I receive no money for it but I do have the time to fill in and take care of whatever needs to be done in the home, whether its vacuuming, washing dishes, doing laundry, caring for the pets, taking out trash, preparing some meals, cleaning the bathroom, as well as several other tasks. This subsist work allows my mother to focus more on her work outside of the home while it also gives me a sense of value within the household and makes me feel like a contributor. As part of my subsist work I help my mother take care of our home. I wash the dishes, take out trash, make small repairs, vacuum, and many other tasks that need to get done.

I am also able to do tasks for others, such as my brother and my grandmother. My brother pays me cash to clean up his apartment and his car. On one of my days off from school I go to his apartment, vacuum the floors, wash any dishes in the sink, clean his bathroom, empty the trash bins, and do all of his laundry. He also allows me to use his car to get to and from school. I receive cash from my grandmother in exchange for yard work and any other job she needs done. This includes giving rides to the grocery store, doctors' appointments, and radiation treatments, as she is not able to do this on her own.

The subsist work that I do within my household can also be linked to what Nazli Kibria calls "patchworking." In "Household Structure and Family Ideologies: The Case of Vietnamese Refugees" Kibria uses the term "**patchworking**" to describe how

the Vietnamese Americans worked together to make life better for the household as a whole. Each member is able to offer assistance in any number of ways. Being different in terms of gender and age is seen as positive in patch working as this maximizes the household's available resources. Because my grandmother is in her eighties, she is able to bring in benefits from government programs such as SSI and Medicaid. As I mentioned earlier, I was a young child in a single parent home. That made our household eligible for food stamps and other government assistance programs.

When I was younger I did not understand that my weekly list of chores could be considered work. In the article "Children's Share in Household Tasks," Goldscheider and Waite state, "most parents respond that performing household work builds character and develops a sense of responsibility," when asked why they should expect children to be involved in the household work (Goldscheider, 810). Growing up I was taught that doing household chores was just something that I needed to do. According to the Goldscheider and Waite, **chores** include, "learning to cook, do laundry, and clean up one's room" (Goldscheider, 810). Growing up my list of chores also included feeding and cleaning up after the pets, mopping the kitchen floor, and dusting furniture as well as several other tasks. My mother let me know that doing chores as a child would make it easier for me to accept a heavier workload as an adult.

My mother not only raised my brother and I, but also helped to raise my three cousins (two girls and one boy). At the beginning of the week my mother would try to evenly split up the chores between the five of us. We all took a turn rotating who would be doing certain tasks. We were never taught that one job was meant for a male or another for a female, as there was no **gender division of labor**. Sex did not determine how the assignment of chores

was distributed. In our household there was a simple **age division of labor**. However, we were not broken up into age groups with age specific tasks; once you were old enough to do a certain job, you did it. When I was ten years old and was tall enough to reach the sink, I started to take on washing the dishes. The same went for my female cousins and my brother.

A point from “Children’s Share in Household Tasks” that really stands out to me is the statement, “boys in mother-only families—both teenagers and young adults—take *much* more responsibility for housework than do sons in otherwise comparable families headed by two parents” (Goldscheider, 815). This became clear to me when I moved away from home and into a house with four of my friends (all from two-parent homes). Through conversations about our upbringings I found out that I had done a great deal more housework than any of my roommates. Further, I was told that some of the things I did, such as laundry and cooking, were women’s work. I am now proud of the fact that my mother did not use a gender based division of labor.

In “Feeding Lesbian Families,” Christopher Carrington describes **feeding work** as “a number of distinct processes including planning, preparation, and management of meals” (Carrington, 260). This work was mostly done by my mother for the better part of my childhood. Taking part in the household work when I was old enough definitely did build my character as well as a sense of responsibility. When I was about twelve years old my mother started to ask me to plan what I wanted to eat during the week. This made me think about the different aspects of making an entire meal and planning meals for others. It made me more aware of what it takes to run a home and what it means to work together to get something done.

While most of paid work is done in the formal economy, some also do work in the

informal economy. There are people who, for instance, make money by dealing poker and black jack in some underground gambling clubs around Boston and surrounding towns. They get paid “under the table” for their services as a dealer. This type of work allows them to make arrangements with people as to how they will be paid. Their work as a poker dealer is not regulated by the government in any way and therefore falls into the **informal economy**, which means that they do not report it to the government or the IRS and do not pay any taxes on it. They seem to prefer this type of work because right now they cannot afford to lose some of their earnings to state or federal taxes. It’s just money in their pocket that they can do with what they please.

While these people do have some control over how they get paid for their poker dealing services, this is not an example of enterprising work. Dickinson and Schaefer point out that **enterprising work** refers to “the work people organize for themselves in the underwater, submerged, informal...enterprising economy” (Dickinson, 26). While these folks are able to make money on their own by dealing poker and black jack, they ultimately do not own the clubs or poker rooms. They are still working for somebody else. However, there are those who enterprisingly open their own “poker rooms.”

Dickinson and Schaefer define **wage work** as “work for others to obtain wages and salaries that “jobs” in the “labor force” provide” (Dickinson, 27). Throughout my life I have worked many jobs. The first wage work I ever did was when I was fifteen years old. I worked at a lemonade stand at a tourist site near the U.S.S. Constitution. Since then I have been a line cook at a small restaurant, a sales associate at a Staples, a janitor, an overnight clerk at a CVS, and a carpenter’s apprentice. I also did a year as a member of AmeriCorps, where part of my job was setting up and

running an after school program to promote healthier living for overweight elementary school children. All of these jobs have brought me many different experiences, and have impacted my life in varying ways.

When I was about twenty years old I started college. In order to move out of my mother's house I had to get a job that would allow me to earn enough money to pay rent and bills, while also leaving me time to attend classes and study. I chose a position as an overnight clerk at a CVS in Quincy. The normal shift was from 10 at night until 7 in the morning. I would then go home, shower, and go to school for a full day of classes. Being a full-time worker and a full-time student at the same time caused me to become overworked. **Overwork** refers to people working "more than is healthy" (Golden, 30). I was working so much that it was affecting the quality of my life. I wasn't getting enough sleep which caused me to get sick more often. Also, I had little or no time for leisure activities with my other college roommates, which was one of the main reasons I moved out of my mother's house.

While working at CVS I had to deal with being alienated from my own feelings. In order to keep my job I had to let the company tell me how to feel and act while working, often ignoring my own natural feelings. When dealing with customers I was required to always have a smile on my face and to treat every customer with respect at all times, even when I was tired or bored or when customers were being rude to me. This control over my feelings and human emotions somewhat stripped me of my humanity and my soul. By sticking to company policies, I accepted the fact that I had to manipulate customers into giving desired responses. This speaks to what Arlie Russell Hochschild wrote about in "The Managed Heart" when she referred to **emotional labor**, or the selling of one's emotional labor for a wage. As part of

emotional labor we are to "induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (Hochschild, 72).

Hochschild's example focuses on a flight attendant. The job of the flight attendant is to make the customer feel comfortable and safe during the flight. Using emotional labor, the flight attendant may present herself as being happy, even when she is not, so as to gain the desired response from the customer. She may also have to control her feelings to change the way she interacts with the passengers, making sure that passengers will be satisfied with their experience so that they will fly with a particular airline company again. Hochschild's example relates to my own experience while working at CVS. I had to put a smile on my face and act as if I was in a great mood and truly got joy from helping the customers. I had to actively try to keep myself calm while customers were being rude to me or while they were asking stupid questions. Hochschild also notes that such use of emotional labor "is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value" (Hochschild, 71). Whether or not the flight attendant is happy, or if I was truly happy while working at CVS, is of no consequence. The flight attendant and I must act a certain way to yield a specific response because that's our job. We accept that there is deception (to ourselves and to the customers) in our behavior and execute the job because that is part of the job. Work not only alienates us from our emotions, but also from the physical labor itself. In *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, Harry Braverman discusses how corporations and businesses put great effort into adjusting "the worker to the work in its capitalist form" (Braverman, 139). This means that the company attempts to change the person (worker) into a piece of machinery, a cog in the big machine which is business.

While working as a carpenter's appren-

tice, I was usually unhappy with the work I was doing. However, I was able to continually talk myself into sticking with the job because I did like some of the benefits I received from such work. Though the work was unskilled and tedious, I was paid well. On top of the good pay, I received very good health benefits and excellent overtime pay thanks to my membership in the Carpenters' Union. This demonstrates the importance of Fordism on my work experience. **Fordism** focuses on the shift to the eight-hour work day and wage increases that would allow workers to live above poverty line. In *The Sociology of Work Structures and Inequality*, the authors state, "the underlying premise underlying Fordism was that unskilled workers should be paid enough to buy the products of their labor" (Vallas, 91).

While working as a carpenter's apprentice for about two years starting at age twenty-one, I was treated as a piece of machinery. The work was hard and often felt like I was part of an assembly line. I witnessed the impact of **Taylorism**, which Stephen Meyer III describes as, "characterized by true standardization and interchangeability of parts, work rationalization, and line production methods" (Meyer, 32). Taylorism reorganized work by eliminating "wasteful moments and motions in the performance of work" (Meyer, 33). While I was a carpenter's apprentice I had to spend time at carpentry school to learn the different areas of construction. While there I could see the effects of the advances in scientific management. I was taught specific ways to do certain tasks, rather than being allowed to use my own methods. For example, the instructors at the school taught us that there was a specific way to hold and swing a hammer. Holding the hammer at the very bottom of the handle and swinging all the way through the nail was the right way to do it. It allowed for fewer strokes of the hammer to get nails into place. While this

may have ultimately been designed to save time, I wasn't always as comfortable as I would have been if I were to do a job my in my own way, holding the hammer higher and taking a few more strokes. I would spend day after day doing the same task over and over again, making the work very undesirable.

Taylorism also represents the shift from a dependence on skilled, specialized labor to a dependence on unskilled labor. The type of tasks assigned to me, such as cutting and fitting strips of rubber to outline office cubicles, left no room for me to be creative. Braverman points out, "in human work...the directing mechanism is the power of conceptual thought" (Braverman, 47). There was no real human skill or style, or conceptual thought (of my own) to the work I was doing, which left me feeling completely alienated from the work.

Braverman states that in **human work**, "the directing mechanism is the power of conceptual thought, originating in an altogether central nervous system" (Braverman, 17). When we move away from human work and more towards the machine-like work commonly found in our capitalist society, we are stripping workers of their creativity. When I could not be creative in my work as a carpenter's apprentice, I had absolutely no connection to the work I was doing. I would simply show up to work at seven in the morning, get my instructions for the day, put my headphones in and toil away without putting any real thought into what I was doing. Karl Marx argues, "this realization of labour appears as a loss of reality for the worker, objectification as a loss of the object of slavery to it, and appropriation as alienation, as externalization" (Marx, 45). This **alienation** refers to the separation of the worker from his or her work. In the capitalist mode of production, the worker does not control the product that he makes and is stripped of the creative process which is what distinguishes human labor, an activity

that separates humans from animals and machines. **Capitalist mode of production** habituates the worker by making the worker need the job. This is made possible because of “powerful economic forces, major corporate employment and bargaining policies, and the inner workings and evolution of... capitalism” (Braverman, 151). Braverman uses the example of the Ford motor companies. When the Ford workers became dissatisfied with the wage and working conditions, they began to revolt. To counter this revolt and readjust the workers, Ford increased the daily wage which made workers “anxious to keep their jobs” (Braverman, 150). The increase in pay had to be just enough to allow the working class to come close to keeping up with the cost of living, but low enough to make it necessary for him to keep that particular undesirable job.

Along with the feelings of alienation towards the work, I realized that I could work as hard or as efficiently as I possible could, but my profits would not increase. The end result of my labor was benefiting the company and not myself, which took me further away from having a connection to the work.

When I realized that the work I was doing brought me no stimulation and made me feel like a machine, I also realized that my labor was just a commodity for the contracting companies to buy and sell on the market. A **commodity** is an object which acts as the foundation of the wealth in capitalism. I agreed to sell my labor in exchange for a paycheck. The work I did turned a profit for the contractor who was giving me a paycheck. This made me an object, not a human being. Because my living situation (the fact that I was born into a working class family) is such that I must sell my labor, I realized that in order for me to get out of such cruder forms of the capitalist mode of production I would have to quit my job and further my education.

Before I quit I came up with the idea

that I would go back to school to get a degree in business or construction management. I planned to work my way up to the point where I could own my own construction company. Owning the means of production for my work would allow me to call the shots. I could decide when and where I was going to work and whom I was going to hire.

I ultimately ended up leaving the carpenter’s union to go back to school. However I shifted my goals away from business and construction management to focus on the field of sociology. By getting a degree in sociology I can come closer to realizing my **work utopia**, what I imagine to be the perfect balance of work and quality of life. In the future I see myself involved in some type of social work. I realize that social work does not pay as much as construction management, contracting, or other fields of work; however it appeals to me in the fact that I can help others. While I do want to earn enough money to live comfortably and buy some of the better material things, I am more concerned with having time with family and working with people. In the documentary film, *Running Out of Time*, the terms “simple living” and “downshifting” really stood out to me. I can picture myself giving up the opportunity to make more money in exchange for a better quality of life. This speaks to some of Juliet Schor’s points in her article “The (Even More) Overworked American.” Schor writes of trends in working hours and suggests using **labor saving technologies**. These technological advances include “the Internet, computers, wireless, bio-informatics and science” and were designed to “yield stupendous productivity gains that delivered us from excessive labor” (Schor, 9). She suggests that Americans use the time saved from technological advances to pursue hobbies and participate more in family activities. Perhaps we would be better off if we could learn to live on a lower income in exchange for more free time.

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