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## A Lifetime of Labor: A Sociological Imagination of Work as Life

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## *A Lifetime of Labor*

### **A Sociological Imagination of Work as Life**

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**Abstract:** This is a critical reflection on the sociology of work in a sociological imagination framework, involving an effort to critically analyze my work experience in light of various sociological perspectives, concepts, and literature. Each day, nearly every person on this planet works. This may be hard to believe when thinking in terms of the basic, more stereotypical idea of work: getting woken up early in the morning by an alarm clock and rushing off to a paid job. However, work is actually a very complex system which everybody takes part in. If we, as members of a capitalist culture, begin to see life every day as a group of tasks—some we enjoy and maybe some not so much—we may begin to value each person in society equally for the work they do and become more “human” in the process. The idea of blurring the lines between paid and unpaid work in a positive way and valuing each of them is something that might slow the progressive dehumanization of our capitalist culture. Over the years, we have become programmed as a society to only value money, and in turn, to value the idea of hard work and constant work as the norm. This idea has caused irreparable damage which has shown itself in increased divorce rates, less empathy and sympathy for our common person, high rates of crime including murder and the senseless war we are currently involved in. If we as a society and as humans could begin to value care work and see the significance of unpaid work in general, maybe we could begin to correct many of the mistakes we have made.

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Each day, nearly every person on this planet works. This may be hard to believe when thinking in terms of the basic, more stereotypical idea of work: getting woken up early in the morning by an alarm clock and rushing off to a paid job. However, work is actually a very complex system which everybody takes part in. If we, as members of a capitalist culture, begin to see life every day as a group of tasks—some we enjoy and maybe some not so much—we may begin to value each person in society equally for the work they do and become

more “human” in the process.

**Work** can be broken down into two different categories: **paid** and **unpaid**. Each of these has subcategories. Unpaid work is work that everyone does daily, but tends to be undervalued in our society. We all live in **households**, or “the organizational units for working people the world over” (p. 28), according to Dickinson and Schaeffer as stated in their book *Fast Forward* (2001). A household can be comprised of any number of people and can span the globe. Households are basically groups of people

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who pool their various resources together in order to survive.

In our households, we do **subsistence work**, a form of unpaid work. Household members work together to do laundry, cook, clean, and possibly attend school. My current household is comprised of me, my boyfriend, my sister, her boyfriend and one other roommate. We each take turns cleaning the common areas of the house and my boyfriend and I take turns doing other chores, like laundry and cooking, depending on whether he is working late or I have to spend time doing homework. I would say that up to five hours of my time is devoted to subsistence work daily.

Another time of unpaid work is **share work**, where according to Dickinson and Schaeffer, “people share, swap and barter with relatives, friends and neighbors” (p. 24). Because this work is usually done outside of the household, it can be called **intra-household share work**. For example, in exchange for visiting and providing emotional support a few times a month to my parents, both of whom are ill, my sister and I are provided with dinner. In this way, we are swapping with each other things that we need. My parents receive love, attention and companionship and my sister and I receive a free meal, which is beneficial to the both of us since neither of us earns much at our paying jobs.

On the other hand, there is also **paid work**, which is what people commonly think of when “work” is mentioned. One type of paid work is **enterprising**, where people “rent rooms, repair houses, make and recycle goods and sell goods and services from their home...” (Dickinson and Schaeffer, p. 24). To make extra money, my sister creates and sells artwork through a community gallery near our home. She earns about \$150 extra a month on average and does not report this income on her taxes. She feels the need to earn extra money this way because the money she earns at her paid job, when doing **wage**

**work**, does not pay enough for her to have a decent quality of life.

Wage work is the stereotypical, more valued kind of work because it is the more standardized, regulated or **formal economy** type where people earn a set wage for selling their **labor power**, according to Braverman in his book *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974). This form of work is a newer form which has evolved in human societies over the course of hundreds of years. Our capitalist society is completely dependent on this set up for its survival.

Braverman states that work is an activity that alters nature to change its form to make it more suitable for our needs. We differ from other animals in that our work, human work, is not instinctive. We have the ability to imagine how something should be and then we can physically go through the motions to bring this idea into existence. As Braverman states, humans have turned work into a “purposive action” (p. 49). If this is the case, why has it become important to turn the majority of working people into mindless machines, like worker bees buzzing in the hive?

It seems that those in power are more interested in maintaining working class conditions in such a state that they would increase their own profits. Our world of work is divided up by institutions such as race, gender, and social status. This is called **the social division of labor**. Once industrialization began, people realized that if a job is divided into many parts, with each person specializing in each step, production increases and more money can be made. This idea of chopping up a job into many parts that a number of people can work on is called **detail division of labor**, according to Braverman. This system totally destroys the skills of many workers to benefit the corporation. It completely polarizes society so that the majority of people are performing menial, repetitive tasks for the “greater good” of humanity. Meanwhile, the people who come up with the ideas earn large sal-

aries along with the ability to sit back and relax, while the people doing the more physical work earn sometimes pennies an hour. Braverman calls this the **capitalist division of labor**. This system takes advantage of many people on a global level.

Some of the people taken advantage of by our capitalist economy are the working poor, people of color and immigrants who are expected to work long hours doing grueling jobs while earning sometimes less than minimum wage. At the very least, the amount earned is usually never equal to the cost of living. In "Household Structure and Family Ideologies: The Case of Vietnamese Refugees" (1998), Kibria discusses the difficulty of entering this world of paid work for Vietnamese immigrants in Philadelphia in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The jobs that were most easily accessible to these immigrants were, "low level, service sector positions, such as waitressing and cleaning, which tended to be poorly paid, part time, unstable and devoid of benefits and opportunities for advancement (p. 58). Another example of the exploitation that happens in our society is described in the book *Fast Food Nation* (2006) by Eric Schlosser. In this book, Schlosser gives many examples of workers being mistreated at meat processing plants in America where the **conditions of work** tend to be horrible. Because the workers are expected to work at such a fast pace while not being provided adequate training or safety equipment, some are injured while using machines and knives to cut the meat and some are injured from inhaling toxic products used to clean the plants. Most of the people interviewed by Schlosser for his book were Mexican immigrants, but other people are also taken advantage of in similar ways.

One group of people who are rarely thought of during the discussion of work are the people with disabilities. Recently, I shifted positions within the non-profit agency I work for and have gotten to see first hand how people with mental retarda-

tion and other disabilities are completely taken advantage of. Currently, I work as a job coach in a vocational training program. It would seem from the title that it would be my job to teach skills to people with disabilities and provide them the support they need to hold a job. In actuality, I am nothing more than one of the dreaded supervisors, similar to the ones I loathed in the Charlie Chaplin movie, *Modern Times*.

There are different sections in the factory building set up to allow workers to do different kinds of tasks. Some of the jobs the lower skilled workers have are building boxes, stuffing envelopes and sorting nuts and bolts. Some of these jobs are provided by the agency I work for in order to keep people busy. On average, a worker will earn one penny per piece that they complete. This is often referred to as **piecework**. Some of the higher skilled workers package nails. This job is broken up exactly as how work was broken up in *Modern Times* and is similarly done in real life factories complete with conveyer belt. It is a good example of **Taylorism** in that the entire workshop is set up for mass production and in the way that incentives are built into the job. The disabled people I work with know that the faster they work and the fewer breaks they take means they will earn more money for that pay period. I have just begun working in this department and I already feel completely **alienated** from the job; I feel I have no control over the work going on around me and I cannot relate to the process as a whole. I am sure the people I work with feel this way as well.

Besides alienation, another problem caused by the Taylorist model is the anger and hostility that I have observed among the workers. In the nail room, the entire flow of work is dependent upon every worker in the room. If one person is working too slowly or takes breaks too frequently, everyone else suffers. Workers get angry at one another, and there is bickering and constant arguments that need to be at-

tended to by the supervisors. It really is not a nice environment to work in. The entire time I am there, I want to interact more with the people around me and I often-times talk and joke with the disabled people I am supposed to be “bossing.” Some of my colleagues do not seem to appreciate this very much and seem much more concerned with producing more and more goods. My **role** as a supervisor, or what is expected of me, is to simply make sure that the workers stay focused on their work and to keep tabs on the people I am responsible for.

Another way these disabled workers are exploited directly relates to Schlosser’s book, *Fast Food Nation*. Before the nail room, I worked in the vinyl room where approximately 25 disabled people manufacture different kinds of medical bags commonly used in hospitals, such as feeding bags and colostomy bags. These workers are constantly exposed to sheets of vinyl being heat sealed and to a chemical called methyl ethyl ketone, both of which are known to be toxic to the human body. On top of this, no chemical masks are provided for the workers, even the supervisors. While talking with a supervisor who had worked in the vinyl room for twenty consecutive years, I learned that up until recently, ventilating fans were only allowed to be turned on for one hour a day, a half hour in the morning and a half hour in the afternoon. Fans were set up and connected to a timer. Only after months of protests by the staff did the company allow for the fans to be kept on all day. The supervisor I spoke to, who happens to be a Chinese immigrant, said to me that she would not be surprised if she was diagnosed with lung cancer in a few years but since she does not possess many **hard skills**, she felt that she had no option but to stay with the agency.

In the article “The Evolution of the New Industrial Technology” (2006) Meyer argues that Ford’s ideal worker would be “...the mindless automaton who applied

himself constantly and consistently with little thought” (p. 39). Since people who are mentally retarded do not fully understand their situation—the health risks they encounter, the low wages or poor working conditions, they seem to be the ideal Taylorist or Fordist worker. Ironically, worker’s rights posters are placed in every workshop but only a handful of workers have the ability to read them. This population is definitely being exploited under the guise of job training by a non profit agency.

I can relate to resorting to a low wage job, although I am not an immigrant or disabled person forced to do physical labor. Because I do not yet have a college degree, I am seen as unskilled by potential employers. The job I had up until recently, which required much **emotional labor**—or labor that turns emotions into a commodity, according to Hochschild in the article “The Managed Heart” (2006)—among a variety of other skills, only paid \$12.38 an hour. At this job, which was in a day habilitation center, my title was “Community Training Specialist,” or CTS. This title was a way for the agency I worked for to try and make me feel that my job was important. Really, I was a glorified direct care worker. It was my duty to teach life skills to developmentally delayed adults. Hidden in the description of my job were additional tasks to teach communication skills, sign language, run an art therapy group, work as a lunch monitor, plan out curriculum, do paperwork and generally be a parent, friend, psychologist and behaviorist for the thirteen people whose well being I was personally responsible for. I had to do all of this every day with a smile on my face, hiding all of the emotions I may have been feeling that day.

Some mornings I might have woken up with a headache, or maybe I did not get enough sleep. Maybe I had an argument with my boyfriend or just did not feel like going to work that day. For whatever reason, sometimes I am in a bad mood because

I am a human being, but it was my job to sell my emotional labor for a wage. It was my job to be friendly, caring and responsible at all times. By training people to force warmth, happiness and spontaneity, we are training people to be able to turn their emotions on and off. This is something that affects the world on a macro level as well. As a society, we are less apt to sympathize with people. If we do, we turn around and complain about the person we were just sympathizing with. We have become angry as a society and the emotional labor brought about by capitalism plays a part in this.

While I complain about the inequality that is a direct result of the capitalist idea of work, I also directly benefit from it. Living in the United States, low paying job or not, I am a child of privilege. After the Industrial Revolution in America, roughly from 1860-1900, we quickly out-earned our Western European counterparts. This **global inequality** is still a trend today. As Glenn Firebaugh states in his article "The New Geography of Global Income Inequality" (2006), "...the growth has disproportionately benefited different regions of the world, with richer regions generally benefiting more than poorer regions" (172). Firebaugh goes on to present data using **nations as a unit of analysis** which show the dramatic difference between the United States and other countries around the world. In the U.S., Income per Capita grew by about \$16,000 from 1820 to 1990. In contrast, income in Africa (all countries combined) only rose by \$4,500 approximately (according to data from Angus Maddison). So just by living in this country at this particular time, I am earning more than most people around the world, even though I still lack a college degree. If viewed from this global angle alone, I am definitely a privileged person.

Another way that I benefit from this system of inequality is my ethnicity. According to Deirdre Royster in her article "Race and the Invisible Hand" (2006),

"While blacks did experience significant educational and occupational gains during the 1970's, their upward trajectory appears to have tapered off in the 1980s and 1990s" (285). Royster goes on to say that white men always have the upper hand because of certain community contacts they might have. Usually, blacks are lacking these contacts. What is completely unfair is that, even though the men she mentions in her article went to the same school and had the same teachers, these teachers, who seemed to have been all white, only acted as job connectors and contacts for the white students. The black students searching for employment were left to fend for themselves while white students like me could take advantage of **white privilege**.

Again, although I can recognize the unfairness of this situation, I still did use this white privilege and system of contacts to find work at the agency I am still employed by. Four years ago, my father was doing construction work in front of the building I work in now. He became friendly with some of the staff who would come outside for smoke breaks and while talking to them, found that the company was hiring. When my father came home to tell me about the opportunity, I was instructed to write on the top of my application that I was directly referred by one of the workers my dad met earlier. I got the job and, although I do feel that I am completely qualified for the position, had I not had contacts I never would have even known the company was hiring. I have a strong system of contacts and in this way, I am directly benefiting from inequality in this country.

Much of the oppression and inequality felt in the workplace comes directly from bosses and managers. I can completely relate to this. According to Philip Moss and Chris Tilly in their article, "Stories Employers Tell" (2006), a manager's perception of different workers, especially based on their race, has a huge influence on how they rate the skill level of the worker, and, it seems,



how they treat their workers. Moss and Tilly go on to say, "To what extent are assessments of various racial or ethnic groups as 'more focused,' 'friendlier,' 'faster,' or 'not as dependable' shaped by stereotypes?" (235). My previous boss had strong opinions regarding me and my coworkers which seemed to be based on **racial stereotypes**, ageism and sexism and he was not afraid to express them. He is a very hostile person and most of the staff is afraid of him. His overt prejudice, sexism and general harassment would probably make anybody uncomfortable, to say the least.

Last summer, MassHealth was coming in to do an audit of our day program. Because my boss had not been keeping up with the requirements we were supposed to meet, our company was in deep trouble. One of the case managers, who were responsible for doing much of the paperwork and documentation for the program, had left months before and a replacement had not been found. As an act of desperation, my boss decided to put three direct care staff in charge of doing the mountains of paperwork that would need to be done in order for us to have a chance of passing the audit. He elected his three "best" staff, as he said. The staff he elected included me and two other coworkers. One is white and the other is Filipino. Over the course of that summer, my boss was uncharacteristically nice to the three of us, speaking to us like human beings, asking for our opinions and even throwing us a breakfast which the other staff were invited to. All of this attention, especially the breakfast, made me incredibly uncomfortable because I knew my boss was not being genuine and because it was causing the other staff to feel even more undervalued than before. It was obvious to me that we were considered the "best" staff because of our race and age. I knew this because of the way I had seen him treat my other coworkers on a day to day basis.

During meetings, my old boss, who is a

middle aged black man originally from Trinidad, deliberately berated and humiliated staff whose first language is not English. One of my coworkers, a young man originally from Kenya, got the brunt of this abuse. My boss would ask a confusing, wordy question and they ask my coworker to rephrase the question to make sure he understood it and then he would have to answer it. My boss would smirk at my coworker and the rest of us would stare down at the table. My coworker always mumbled and averted his eyes, and his hands usually began to shake. Since I still work in the same building and am close with many of the people I used to work with, I know this boss still treats other people in a minority position horribly. He once made the program RN cry. She is a 70 year old woman who has worked for the agency for fifteen years. As she cried he clicked his teeth and said, "You've been around for such a long time. I thought you were tougher than that." Because I am white, young and have decent writing skills I am perceived to be smart and my boss left me alone, until some of my coworkers and I started to file complaints about him with upper management.

When my boss realized that I was actually the first person to go up and complain about his behavior and encouraged my coworkers to do so, he began actively ignoring me and bullying me at work. One day fairly recently, he shouted at me in front of my group of clients and I began crying. After four years of dealing with abuse from my boss, I decided to do something about it. My response was to go upstairs to the vice president of the company while still crying to thoroughly express the way this man constantly made me feel. I was sent home for the rest of the week with pay by the vice president and my boss was disciplined. I wrote a formal complaint letter about him and requested to be transferred to a different department within the agency, but a few days later I gave my notice to the agency. Also, after I gave my no-

tice, the case manager from my old department was inspired to give her notice as well. Her reason for leaving was my old boss as well. Hopefully our acts of resistance will force the company to finally take some action against this abusive man who seemed to deliberately mistreat workers who are already underpaid and undervalued.

According to Braverman in his book *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, some of the outcomes or symptoms of this way of breaking up paid work and treating the workers poorly are "...dissatisfaction as expressed in high turnover rates, absenteeism, resistance to the prescribed work pace, indifference, neglect and overt hostility towards management" (p. 141). This angry mindset of the paid worker, which seems to be a common one, not only affects the worker and his life within the corporation, he or she also takes home those feelings of anger, hostility, alienation or indifference and they, in turn, affect the worker's household and the quality of unpaid work done by these workers in the home. In this way, the lines of paid and unpaid work definitely do cross.

Another outcome of this evolution of paid work is the complete devaluation of unpaid work. People rarely see the complex list of chores they do daily at home as being work. Nor do they see **care work** for elderly or sick relatives or visiting friends to maintain relationships as actual work. In actuality, everything we do on a day to day basis is work, not just the part we get paid for. We do find joy in work as a way of life, just as many animals do; we just have forgotten to consider all of the kinds of work that are done. The devaluation of most work is what separates humans, especially those who live in a capitalist society, from animals. According to England and Folbre in their article "Capitalism and the Erosion of Care" (2006), "care that goes unrewarded is likely to diminish over time" (p. 497). This directly relates to women feeling that

"just being a mother" is not enough. Nowadays it is common for women to do a full load of unpaid work at home while simultaneously holding down a full time paid job. What often ends up happening is women are forced to choose between one or the other and since we no longer seem to value unpaid work as a society, paid work wins out. In turn, we end up paying other people to do our care work for us.

In my work utopia, one of the main things I want is a combination of and equal value for paid and unpaid work I will be doing. Because child care workers earn just above minimum wage while agencies collect huge fees from parents, I know that it is hard to find highly skilled workers to take care of children. Also, I do not share the typical view of child rearing that most people in Western society have. To me, this form of unpaid work is absolutely on the same level as any paying job I could ever have. Because our capitalist society only values flexible workers, it is hard for women of childbearing age to find work. Most employers are reluctant to hire younger women or mothers because of the common opinion that mothers are not committed to their jobs. On the other hand, if a woman does decide to have a baby and leave work, the family is faced with financial hardship because of the need for a **dual earner** household, or a household in which both parents work. The problem is that women are simultaneously in their prime years to have children and start a career. I know I will be faced with this dilemma in a few years, but I plan on finding a company who will allow me to bring my baby to work with me.

According to Carla Moquin from the Parenting in the Workplace Institute, babies in the workplace tend to be very content and cry less than other babies. When the mother responds quickly to the baby, the crying rate is drastically lowered. Babies up to eight months of age sleep for most of the day and the frequent social interaction and



stimulation keeps them very happy and entertained. Since I want to be a counselor for teen mothers and teach parenting skills in general, this combination of paid and unpaid jobs would work out beautifully. This idea of a combination of paid and unpaid work was seen in the movie *Patch Adams*, in which a medical student provided care work to sickly people, essentially for free. While the real life Patch Adams went on to run his own hospital which receives grants, the people who work at his hospital earn an average of \$2,000 to \$3,000 a year, but are provided room and board at the hospital. This was a perfect example of my idea of a work utopia.

Another part of my work utopia that ties in with valuing unpaid work is the issue of time. In her article "The (Even More) Overworked American" (2003), Juliet Schor gives data on the annual number of hours Americans spend working. She states, "What the data show is that from 1973 to 2000, the average American worker added an additional 1999 hours to his or her annual schedule—or nearly five additional weeks or work per year" (p. 7). This data supports Schor's argument that, contrary to popular belief, leisure time in America is decreasing. According to Schor, married dual earner couples now only have an average of twelve minutes per day to sit down and talk to each other. No wonder the divorce rate in the United States is at an all time high! People are actually being alienated from their unpaid work. It is now a status symbol in this country to pay others to cook our meals, care for our children, mow our lawns and clean our houses because we are all simply too busy earning money to do these things ourselves.

It is also a status symbol to force this constantly busy way of life on our children. In the article "Overscheduled Kids, Underconnected Families," Doherty and Carlson argue that enrolling kids in too many extracurricular activities, such as sports, drama, dance and acting classes, combined with

the chronic overwork of the parents, is tearing families apart. The **standard of living** may be increasing, because of the amount of things we all have and the number of things our children participate in, but the **quality of life** is actually rapidly declining. In my work utopia, I would work a 30 hour work week; six hours per day five days per week, or if it could be done, in four days per week. This is not an insane, out of reach idea. Most workers in Europe follow this schedule now, in addition to having four to six weeks of paid vacation each year. As Schor states in "The (Even More) Overworked American" (2003), "From today's vantage point, a time-surplus society may seem utopian, almost unnatural. But that's only because we've been going at 24/7 for too many years and have lost sight of other possibilities" (p.11). It does seem "utopian," but it is completely possible and I plan on living my life according to this standard as I progress with my career.

The idea of blurring the lines between paid and unpaid work in a positive way and valuing each of them is something that might slow the progressive dehumanization of our capitalist culture. Over the years, we have become programmed as a society to only value money, and in turn, to value the idea of hard work and constant work as the norm. This idea has caused irreparable damage which has shown itself in increased divorce rates, less empathy and sympathy for our common person, high rates of crime including murder and the senseless war we are currently involved in. If we as a society and as humans could begin to value care work and see the significance of unpaid work in general, maybe we could begin to correct many of the mistakes we have made.

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