

Is this work? Revisiting the definition of work in the 21st century

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the study was to specify the perceived outdated nature and lack of definitional clarity associated with the concept of work and further to outline that the nature of work has dramatically changed in the 21st century, while definitions of work referenced in research remain those that were dominant in the previous century. Lastly, the study aimed to propose an updated conceptualisation and definition of work to aid future research.

Design/methodology/approach – A scoping literature review was adopted as the methodology guiding the study. A scoping review is particularly suited to identifying the conceptual boundaries on a given multi-disciplinary topic and is used to map the key concepts underpinning a research area as well as to clarify working definitions.

Findings – Nine main themes underpinning the concept of work were extracted from the extant literature. These were assimilated with contemporary literature across multiple disciplines. Contexts of work as they relate to dimensions of work and workspace are developed and visualised. A proposed contemporary definition of work is presented.

Research limitations/implications – The aim of the study was to address the problem with current and future research continuing to refer to traditional conceptualisations of work, while the nature of work has dramatically changed. The findings are preliminary and intended to stimulate further discourse towards a greater consensus of a definition. The implications of proposing an updated definition of work is that it is intended to better inform future research reflective of its multi-disciplinary and significantly changed nature.

Practical implications – The implications to practice are the main impetus of this study. The authors found that research associated with work was being confounded by traditional and outdated interpretations, excluding alternative forms of work or not recognising its multi-dimensionality. It is proposed by the paper that an updated conceptualisation of the nature of work in this era, as it is reflected across disciplines and practice, would positively contribute to the understanding, management and conceptualisation of work in practice.

Originality/value – A systematic literature review across disciplines of the definition of work will reveal the outdated nature and disparate interpretation of the concept of work. An inclusive, multi-disciplinary and contemporary definition of work has not been suggested. This scoping review was conducted to address this problem and gap in the literature. Further, this paper presents a multi-dimensional and spatial conceptualisation of work that is proposed to better inform future research and practice associated with work.

Keywords Work, Definition of work, Meaning of work, Workplace, Employment

Paper type Conceptual paper



1. Work in the 21st century

The United Nation's Declaration of Human Rights states in Article 23: "Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work, and to protection against unemployment . . . the right to equal pay for equal work". With that goal not achieved a half century later, the International Labour Organization articulated the Decent Work Agenda as an added dimension of human rights. Still grappling with how to achieve full and productive employment and decent work, the United Nations incorporated the Decent Work Agenda in their 17 Sustainable Development Goals, to promote "sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all". Progress towards securing these rights and goals which acclaim work as a self-evident good is undermined by a paradox: We are still left wondering, What is work?

Traditional perspectives of work define it in narrow terms, including work as functional and transactional framed in terms of a predetermined workplace (e.g. [Colbert et al., 2016](#); [Lester and Costley, 2010](#)), remuneration (e.g. [Guthrie, 2008](#); [Kustini and Purwanto, 2020](#)) and/or employment (e.g. [Pettinger, 2019](#); [Taylor, 2004](#)). Indeed, these traditional perspectives of work have been dominant within research discourse on the topic throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

However, literature emerging in the early part of the 21st century points towards a need to revisit what work means to individuals and humanity more broadly. This is especially relevant within the context of rapid technological and social change in this era of the so-called Fourth Industrial Revolution ([Hirschi, 2018](#); [Schwab, 2016](#)). More recently, the dramatic changes in the nature of work have become more stark. The COVID pandemic not only forced a significant shift towards remote work enabled by technology, while emptying city office blocks, but also forced many production workers to remain at home, closing down whole industries and resulting in increased economic hardship for those unable to go to work. Similarly, while we have anticipated the automation of work in terms of artificial intelligence, its rapid adoption have given rise to a dramatic increase in the discourse as to what constitutes work and what forms of human work will become redundant.

More than a decade ago for example, [Dejours \(2007, p. 72\)](#) maintained "there is no such thing as purely mechanical work" and [Deranty \(2009, p. 70\)](#) argued that "the definition of work remains a serious theoretical problem". [Veltman \(2016\)](#) concurs and observes that "yet the topic of work has received only minor attention in leading theories of justice and human flourishing". The purpose of the present research is to examine the dimensions which define the nature of work at the individual unit level and consider what a suitable definition of work might be for the 21st century. Following on from the recommendation by [Cho \(2020, np\)](#) that future research should consider micro and macro boundaries in "advancing our knowledge on the boundaries in work and careers", we revisit the micro boundaries of the notion of work.

2. Conventional conceptualisations

Earlier industrial era literature about work was primarily concerned with human productivity in exchange for remuneration and the conditions under which such transactional exchanges took place. This focus reflected and was largely shaped by liberal economic theory as articulated by [Smith \(1937\)](#) and theories of labour, such as those of Marx ([Sayers, 2005](#)). The work of [Fayol \(1916\)](#) and [Taylor \(1947\)](#) further served to stimulate research in terms of the management of labour and the outputs of work as part of an increasingly dominant economic rationale associated with productivity and the performance of work, particularly in relation to the organisation of work.

Conceptualisations of work have changed over time and reflect transitions from agrarian to industrial and post-industrial production systems ([Savickas and Baker, 2005](#)).

Accordingly, “the meaning of work literature is the product of a long tradition of rich inquiry spanning many disciplines” (Rosso *et al.*, 2010), such as applied psychology (vocational psychology, organisational and industrial psychology), sociology and economics. However, “the field of industrial sociology (work and occupations) . . . has moved it even farther away from the study of work to a concern with individuals conceived as economic beings” (Simpson, 1986, p. 578). Furthermore, “conceptual confusion” has resulted in what Deranty (2009, p. 70) described as “operating on an ultra-thin definition of work . . . [that] claim[s] for sole authority in the other social sciences”. Conceptual confusion and concomitantly thin or disparate operational definitions of work hamper research and should be countered with conceptual clarity (Bringmann *et al.*, 2022).

Work is commonly defined in terms of outputs of production or as associated with notions of employment and capital, most notably the problematic term “human capital” (Tan, 2014). However, highly cited work by Casey (1995) suggests that based on this, “the industrial legacy of the centrality of production and work in social and self-formation hovers precipitously with the post-industrial condition in which work is declining in social primacy”. This continues to hold true (Casey, 2013). It appears that the precipitous balance between research being guided by such industrial era “thin definitions” associated with economic perspectives fail to capture the context of significant societal changes, due to dramatic shifts in technology, knowledge systems, human mobility and production systems. Furthermore, traditionally dominant definitions of work no longer capture its full meaning and, therefore, the multi-disciplinary field of work studies requires a comprehensive analysis of work’s theoretical foundations from a people-centred and current pragmatic perspective (Provis, 2009; Rosso *et al.*, 2010).

More recently the literature has broadened to include the psychology of working (Blustein, 2006, 2013; Duffy *et al.*, 2016). Yet despite what seem to be advances in the research on work, the notion of work largely remains within the paradigm of employment and economic theory. Rarely has the literature acknowledged, as an example, unpaid or unrecognised forms of work, such as voluntary service (Taylor, 2004), entrepreneurial activities, subsistence activities, modern slavery (Craig, 2017) or the care work done by women without compensation (Richardson, 2012; Richardson and Schaeffer, 2013) or those in forced marriages (Fellows and Chong, 2020). It is the work of women which seems invisible to the dominant paradigm and discourse of economics (Shah, 2006).

Dik and Duffy (2009, pp. 428–429) reintroduced discussion surrounding the notion of work within human function, describing work as the “role in human function”. They present five *a priori* assumptions to support this argument.

- (1) Humans are “capable of genuine intentionality, forethought, self-regulation, and self-reflectiveness”;
- (2) “Humans are meaning-making organisms who consciously and subconsciously construct both global and particular meanings for life experience”;
- (3) “Individuals enact a constellation of life roles that interact in varied and complex ways . . . [and] work to occupy one of these life roles and define working broadly to include any activity or effort, paid or unpaid, that is directed toward accomplishing or producing something that fills a societal or organizational need”;
- (4) “Humans, by necessity, live in societies bound by common needs and mutual service and that work role activities therefore have direct or indirect social implications that vary in magnitude”; and
- (5) “Obstacles to meaningfulness and purpose at work are present on multiple levels (e.g. individual, organisational, societal) but also that these obstacles are amenable to change”.

However, the failure to recognise work as an innate human function and one which is not always defined in terms of remuneration, employment or place has depersonalised human work activity. In turn, this has allowed conditions of exploitation and economic rationalism to remain unchecked for many decades (Dejours, 2002; Deranty, 2009; Mauss, 1979). The concept of the division of labour conforms to a “logic that is strictly functional and instrumental” (Deranty, 2009, p. 74) within an economic rationalism that does not fully take into account the personal and social fluidity of work. Even when addressed outside its economic paradigm, a primary focus of the psychology of work has traditionally aimed at the clinical, pathogenic nature and impact of experiences of work, particularly those usually associated with employment (Deranty, 2009). In an attempt to resolve this problem within psychology, Blustein (2011) promoted the relational theory of working as a way in which the meaning of work can be better understood.

An examination of the chronological development of the notion of work forms a foundation for what is proposed as moving towards a more holistic definition of this important human function. We seek to progress the recognition of work as a broader concept and start by building on the foundational definitions promoted by the sociology and psychology of work.

3. Decent work?

Work has evolved alongside changing societal trends driven most recently by the industrialisation of society (Laurance, 2019). In the mid-1960s, work was increasingly promoted as a virtue for the development of an individual’s career (Quey, 1968) and became regarded as a vehicle for the development and expression of an individual’s self-concept (Super, 1957). However, the definition of work at this time continued to be the theme of linking the individual to a form of economic benefit and incompatible with, or at least indifferent to, individual and political freedom (Deranty, 2009). As Quey (1968, p. 223) stated at that time, “work is purposeful mental and physical human activity which deliberately points beyond the present by creating economic products or values to be consumed in the future”. The understanding of the work environment within which this economic exchange was to occur was predominantly restricted to a place, with set times and well-defined procedures and outcomes.

Yet Quey (1968) also opposed the potential depersonalisation of the human being within the context of work and as such shifted the economic benefit perspective from the system (i.e. the macro-environment) to the individual (i.e. the micro-environment) as a beneficiary. The general work–remuneration relationship however continued to be a key component of the argument for work, but this shift started a recognition of broader meaning that is ascribed to work. Thus, Quey (1968, p. 225) concluded, “In order to preserve its own health, society periodically may need to revalidate its overarching values and purposes including the meaning and role of work in society”. This paper furthers that dialogue about the role of work but has as its key premise, work as a fundamentally innate human concept influenced, but not defined, by an economic rationale of remuneration and place of production.

In this Fourth Industrial Revolution (Schwab, 2016), the world of work is fast moving from an information age to a conceptual age where the processing and conceptualisation of new knowledge and ideas typifies much work (European Foundation of Management Development, 2012). As such, the conceptual age has been significantly influenced by traditional liberalism and the notion of freedom of the individual. Driven primarily through technological progress, increasing access to information, social networks and media and communications, emphasis on individual freedom has become more widespread and acceptable. Enabled by dynamic technological platforms, global and cultural communications have exponentially increased creating “a new wave of networked social

movements [positive and negative], which have been mobilized in the urban space and in the institutional space [introducing new] movements and actors of social change” (Castells, 2012, pp. 19–20). These shifts have altered the nexus between individuals and work in an unprecedented way.

The impact of a largely networked global society (Castells, 2010) has added to what we refer to as the “liberalisation of work”, making certain previously defining dimensions redundant. In short, we put forward the “liberalisation of work” to mean that individuals are increasingly being liberated from the confines of traditional notions of work in favour of shifting the emphasis towards finding meaning in and/or an awareness of their relationship with work. The liberalisation of work seeks to acknowledge all forms of work as an inclusive concept whose purpose is to accommodate the multitudes of positive or negative outcomes resulting from work and the changes currently transforming the “social structure of society” (Castells, 2012).

Evidence in the last 15 years suggests there is increased uncertainty among those who work in the traditional workplace as to the existential nature of work in their lives, which in turn has eroded the individual’s confidence in the idea of having a predictable long-term career or secure employment (Blustein, 2006; Blustein *et al.*, 2013; Savickas *et al.*, 2009). It is increasingly evident that an individual’s purpose and work meaningfulness can no longer be generally attributed to a stable career or place of work (Paulik *et al.*, 2014; Pratt and Ashforth, 2003; Steger *et al.*, 2009; Steger *et al.*, 2012). Consequently, traditional and persistent paradigms which describe work are questionable and a broad, multi-disciplinary revisiting of the concept is required.

4. Towards conceptual clarity and thick definitions of work

Definitions of work have been referred to by Deranty (2009) as thin and thick. “Thin” definitions of work have been typified by narrowly categorised descriptions that are strictly functional and instrumental and usually occur within a particular economic worldview. Clot (2004, p. 98) subsequently termed this narrow focus of work as “directed activity”, suggesting the organisation of human effort towards productivity aims. However, Wisner (1995) had earlier made the critical observation that the modelling of work activities under these definitions rarely accounts for real-world experiences, overlooking working conditions and the consequence to lived experiences of the worker.

In contrast, “thick” definitions account for the richer subjective meanings ascribed to work, including personal interpretation and investment in work activities. The relationship of thin and thick descriptions of work provided by Deranty has been provided in Table 1.

To resolve the suggested dichotomy between thin and thick definitional approaches to the construct of work, as well as considering that not all work is defined by institutional productivity parameters, remuneration, employment and workplace, it is necessary to conduct a review of the theoretical perspectives of work.

Thin definition	Thick definition
Foundation established on neoliberal economic theory Money is key to personal motivation Given the opportunity, humans would opt out of working	Subjective investment in work (self-motivation) Mobilisation of individual capabilities Personal interpretation of work and adaptation to the context of work
Transactional interactions associated with work	Sociality and sociability (relational) interactions of work

Source(s): Adapted from Deranty (2009)

Table 1.
Thin or thick
definitions to explain
the world of work

This paper therefore systematically explores the literature and seeks to propose a tentative revised definition of work for the 21st century in order to promote a common understanding of the universal nature of work. A more human-centric and pragmatic perspective is arguably needed to accommodate rapidly changing notions of work, where it takes place, what it is exchanged for and how it is recognised in the different lines of scholarly enquiry. As Provis (2009, p. 124) suggests, “The point here is not that we need to get rid of the idea of work or define it precisely for everyday purposes, but that we need to do so for purposes of theory and policy development”. As such the paper therefore aims to review the literature and work towards a more contemporary conceptual definition of work.

5. Method

A scoping literature review is a relatively newer form of mapping the literature on a given multi-disciplinary topic (Arksey and O'Malley, 2005; Cacchione, 2016; Peters *et al.*, 2015). Scoping studies, as defined by Arksey and O'Malley (2005, p. 21), “aim to map rapidly the key concepts underpinning a research area” and can “be used to map the key concepts underpinning a research area as well as to clarify working definitions, and/or the conceptual boundaries of a topic” (Peters *et al.*, 2015, p. 141). Munn *et al.* (2018) agree that scoping reviews are appropriate to clarify key concepts or definitions in the literature. A key premise of the study is that current definitions of work are inadequate in capturing the contemporary nature of work. As such, the paper's intent is to collate a multi-disciplinary perspective of work including its conceptual boundaries. To this end, a scoping review was deemed an appropriate initial research method.

Tricco *et al.* (2016) further indicate that scoping reviews are helpful in exploring evidence to inform future research. The purpose of this paper aligns with the motivation to conduct a preliminary study that (1) recognises the conceptual limitations of current definitions of work, (2) identifies underlying dimensions and parameters of what may constitute a contemporary, multi-disciplinary definition and (3) stimulates future discourse and research in order to contribute to theory.

In contrast to a systematic literature review, where the investigation is structured and defined by narrow parameters to exhaustively answer a clearly defined question, a scoping review can utilise a flexible approach to search for descriptive meaning surrounding a topic of interest setting a foundation for further research (Peters *et al.*, 2015). Similarly, while an integrative review seeks to provide a comprehensive and holistic understanding of a particular topic in order to generate new theory (Torraco, 2005), a scoping review is a preliminary assessment of the nature of the phenomenon and may inform a more exhaustive review (Grant and Booth, 2009). As the intent of this paper is to stimulate further discourse and future research, a scoping review was deemed an appropriate approach.

In this instance, the six-step methodology defined by Arksey and O'Malley (2005) was used to guide the literature search process. Step 6, Consultation, is noted by Arksey and O'Malley to be an additional step that seeks to inform stakeholders and validate the findings. This paper serves to fulfil Step 6. The steps followed include

- (1) Identifying the research question;
- (2) Identifying the relevant studies and study selection (i.e. inclusion criteria);
- (3) Study selection;
- (4) Charting the data;
- (5) Collating, summarizing and reporting the results;

Step 1: Identifying the research question

The key premise of this paper is that work is an “area in philosophy where progress has stalled” (Deranty, 2009, p. 70), yet its nature is irrevocably changing. Further, those previously dominant definitions of work do not adequately capture its current nature. In order to address this apparent stagnation despite very clear indications to those certain paradigms continue to frame academic discourse, the primary purpose of this scoping literature review was to identify and examine current definitions or pseudo-definitions of work within a multi-disciplinary context. This was deemed necessary as definitions typically inform the theories of disciplines and the operationalisation of concepts which, in the case of “work”, have arguably led to the fragmented nature of current research.

The question that the scoping review seeks to address is *What are the definitions of “work” in peer reviewed literature and do they capture the broad and rapidly changing nature of work in the 21st century?*

Step 2: Identifying the relevant studies and study selection (i.e. inclusion criteria)

Decisions have to be made at the outset about the coverage of the scoping review (Peters *et al.*, 2020). These are determined based on the purpose of the review and within the constraints of resources and time. The search strategy for this paper adopted Peters *et al.*'s (2020) three-stage process: (1) initial search of multiple databases to determine the extent of use of the term “work”; (2) an analysis of the key words “definition of work” and “work is defined as” as contained in retrieved papers and (3) search of the reference list of retrieved papers to identify additional sources.

As this study is concerned with definitions of work as presented and cited in academic literature, only peer-reviewed published academic articles related directly to the definition or description of work were considered. Grey literature was not included as the study sought to identify definitions as peer reviewed and cited in mainstream disciplines.

The point of departure for the review was that if the notion of work is universal in nature, its definition should be clear, be current and not be constrained by disciplinary boundaries. As such, search results across all disciplines were considered.

Step 3: Study selection

Due to the preliminary nature of a scoping review, two main databases were selected for the review search. A number of databases were considered including Google Scholar, Primo.exlibris, Scopus and Web of Science. It was deemed that due to the preliminary nature of the study, Google Scholar and Primo.exlibris would provide sufficient coverage and avoid duplication of the results.

A Google Scholar search yielded approximately 19,300 results that referred to meanings attributed to “work”. These mostly included articles associated with “the meaning of work”, “organising work”, “psychology of work”, “employment and work”, “work productivity”, “socialisation of work” and “workplace”, and search for academic publications between 2010 and 2020 yielded 9,920 results reflecting these different fields. These results confirmed the vast breadth and application of the notion of work, yet few moved beyond being descriptive and actually defined “work”.

A second search using Primo.exlibris group for the term “definition of work” yielded 157 results. These papers were cross-checked with the results from the Google Scholar search. After applying a test that the paper must contain the phrases “work is defined as” or “the definition of work is”, 22 papers and two UN Charters were left to review.

Step 4: Charting the data

Step 4 identifies and presents the definitions and main themes that have emerged from the selected literature. A thematic analysis of retrieved sources was conducted that sought to

identify the main themes that were associated with “work”. These definitions and themes have been tabulated and presented in [Table 2](#).

Step 5: Collating, summarizing and reporting the results

Based on the key literature identified in step 4, the data were collated and presented for analysis.

6. Summary and analysis of results

From this preliminary scan of the literature as presented in [Table 2](#), there are indications that work has predominantly been defined in terms of its being associated with the workplace, remuneration and employment. In contrast, some mention has been made of the need to adopt a more holistic view ([Veltman, 2015](#)), understand work as a mental and physical human activity common to all humans ([Quey, 1968](#)), identify work as fundamentally inherent to all people’s lives ([Harpaz and Fu, 2002](#)), be inclusive of all workers within a broader experiential and psychological context ([Duffy et al., 2016](#)), see work as relational made up of social interactions ([Blustein et al., 2019](#)) and see work as critical in the development of all individuals ([Blustein et al., 2019](#); [Duckenfield and Stirner, 1992](#); [Issa, 2014](#); [Duckenfield and Stirner, 1992](#); [Issa, 2014](#); [Duffy et al., 2016](#); [Mikkonen et al., 2017](#); [Blustein et al., 2019](#)).

It appears that there is growing recognition that work is a complex relational dynamic rather than a purely transactional exchange ([Richardson, 1993](#); [Casey, 1995](#); [Provis, 2009](#); [Blustein, 2013](#); [Veltman, 2016](#); [Blustein et al., 2019](#)). Not all work is remunerated ([Duffy et al., 2016](#)).

Three papers discuss the nature of the definitions of work. As noted earlier, [Deranty \(2009\)](#) points to the conceptual confusion associated with “work” and that its philosophical development has stalled. He suggests that “today the area [of work] suffers from added conceptual confusion since economic theory, operating with an ultra-thin definition of work, has come to occupy a position of quasi-hegemony in policy debates and is pressing its claim for sole authority in the other social sciences” ([Deranty, 2009](#), p. 70). [Dejours’](#) perspective was that work can be constitutive and normative and rejects the notion that work is only functional and instrumental ([2002, 2007](#)). The observation justifies the criticism that not all work is transactional and related to economic precepts but rather that its description should be broader and normative so as to capture the full human experience of work.

[Blustein](#) recognises the social aspects of work especially in its being relational in nature ([2011, 2013](#)). The “real world” of work impacts people’s lives, and he asserts that the sociology of work cannot be ignored. The dynamic human interchanges and interactions (both positive and negative) that occur during work processes help to define the nature of work.

The main themes associated with work that were identified include the following.

6.1 Work as employment

[Veltman \(2016\)](#) points out that work can be autonomous or lack autonomy such as that conducted by the stay-at-home parent, family carers, slaves, volunteers or the subsistence farmer, amongst others. Work that lacks autonomy largely falls outside the parameters of employment. One is compelled to agree that despite not being employed and largely unpaid, such work influences agency, identity and self-worth but is not easily definable ([Geens and Vandenbroeck, 2014](#); [Pfau-Effinger et al., 2009](#)). Albeit that most work is in the form of employment, definitions of work that make employment defining conditions to qualify as work are flawed. It is necessary to frame future discourse in a way that is able to accommodate unpaid work and work outside of employment.

Table 2.
Sources with
definitions of work and
main themes

Author and date	Innate function	Ubiquitous	Meaningfulness	Well-being	A calling	Workplace	Employment/job	Remuneration	Career/profession	Relational	Service
United Nations (1948)			X								
Quey (1968)						X	X	X			
Simpson (1986)					X	X	X	X			
Duckenfield and Stürner (1992)					X	X	X				
Richardson (1993)		X		X	X	X				X	
Casey (1995)					X	X				X	
Gini (2001)			X			X			X		
Harpaz and Fu (2002)		X				X					
Dejour (2002/2007)	X		X			X					
Deranty (2009)		X									
Provis (2009)		X				X				X	
Blustein (2011)	X		X		X	X			X		
Blustein (2013)	X				X	X				X	
Issa (2014)											X
Veltman (2016)	X										X
Duffy <i>et al.</i> (2016)			X			X					
Mikkonen <i>et al.</i> (2017)				X						X	
Blustein <i>et al.</i> (2019)		X		X					X		
Cho (2020)	4	7	5	4	2	10	15	4	3	5	2

Source(s): Authors' own work

6.2 *Work and the workplace*

It is increasingly apparent, especially as illustrated by the COVID-19 pandemic, that the notion of workplace is fluid (Issa, 2014, Veltman, 2016) and probably better described in terms of a “space within which work takes place”. A spatial model for work, as Harrison and Dourish (1996) argued, includes features of relational orientation, proximity, partitioning and presence relative to the real world. The creation and existence of new spaces where “work” is carried out encompass new behavioural and collaborative interactions that have become exponentially more prevalent. Workplaces, as locales of organised work, are still predominant but are no longer an apt or defining feature of work. Instead, it is suggested that space for working is three dimensional, with multiple determinants and possibilities of how that space is organised into a *locale* including the digital environment that locates human action and behaviours (Harrison and Dourish, 1996, p. 69). Dourish (2006, p. 300) further concludes that “digital technologies have colonized other locations and other aspects of life” including that of work.

6.3 *Work as ubiquitous*

Quey (1968, p. 223) defined work as “purposeful mental and physical human activity which deliberately points beyond the present”. Richardson broadened the definition of work as “embedded in family and personal lives, as well as in paid employment” (1993 p. 431). All people work as noted by Veltman (2016).

6.4 *Work as relational*

Blustein (2011, 2013) and Blustein *et al.* (2019) have appropriately concentrated on exploring aspects of the psychology of work to strengthen and theorise the importance of human relationship as experienced in the context of work. They suggests that “work-based decisions, transitions, and experiences are not simply the expression of individual agency, but are rooted in interactions with a broad array of external influences . . . new theoretical positions are needed for the 21st century that encompass an expanded vision of working along with an integrative understanding of the complex, reciprocal relationships between work and other life domains” (Blustein, 2013, pp. 1–2). Blustein therefore agrees that due to the dramatic global societal changes of this century, a new, holistic theoretical position is needed to accurately describe work.

6.5 *Work and meaningfulness*

There has been a considerable shift towards work being described on a continuum of meaningfulness from working (Blustein *et al.*, 2019; Blustein, 2011; Provis, 2009; Harpaz and Fu, 2002). This is linked to the idea of gaining meaningfulness from work as a product of “decent work” (Blustein *et al.*, 2019). Further, that work is a “pivotal and fundamental component of people’s life . . . work and working are of profound importance to them” (Hapaz and Fu, 2002, p. 639).

Work is also one of the most significant contributing factors to one’s inner life and development . . . Work is the means by which we form our character and complete ourselves as persons . . . Work is the yardstick by which we measure ourselves against others. It is the means by which we establish our rank, role, and function within a community. Work not only conditions our lives; it is the necessary condition for life (Gini, 2001, pp. 2–3).

There is general agreement in the papers sourced that work needs to offer meaning. That said, not all work may be very meaningful and certain forms of work may confound the idea that work has any formative value.

6.6 *Work and career*

In the early 1900s, the term “career” aligned with the choice and development of a vocation and a career path often determined by an organisation. However, there has been a significant shift over the last few decades in that individuals are now mostly responsible for the development of their own career or, more recently, different careers (European Foundation of Management Development, 2012). The variability of careers and transferability of skills have made career changes more common and less definable as categories work. Instead, it has been recognised since the later stages of the 20th century that “developmental considerations need to be shifted from a focus on career to a more central focus on the individual” (Richardson, 1993, p. 431).

Blustein similarly differentiated working from the notion of a career. He notes (2011, p. 3) that the “conceptual view of working is not meant to replace the notion of career; rather, working is viewed as set of activities that, under optimal circumstances, may yield greater volition levels in educational and work-based options”. These activities may culminate in a particular career, but the work itself is not defined by it.

6.7 *Work and well-being*

Sigmund Freud believed that work was an essential and a fundamentally human characteristic, describing it as a “pillar of a healthy life”. Duffy and Dik (2013), in defining work as a “calling”, propose a linkage between work-related and general well-being outcomes. They indicate that connecting one’s work with a tangible, pro-socially oriented purpose rather than a career is more relevant in modern times. Simpson (1986, p. 563) warns that “the field of industrial sociology (work and occupations) has shifted from work and workers to economic concerns, and has transformed our conception of the worker from a social actor to a passive object acted on by macro level forces”. Indeed, Cho (2020) suggests that work should instead be determined in terms of role boundaries that impact health outcomes rather than economic considerations only. He points out the negative health outcomes that result from work that falls outside of role boundaries as perceived by the individual. Duffy and Dik (2013, p. 140) conclude that conceptions of work should be “inclusive of all workers, capturing the primarily contextual and secondarily psychological variables that impact the ability to secure decent work, satisfy needs, and experience work fulfilment and well-being”.

6.8 *Work and remuneration*

Traditionally, remuneration refers to the way in which employees are rewarded in exchange for their efforts (Kessler, 2000). Bloom and Milkovich (1992, p. 22) defined remuneration as a “bundle of returns offered in exchange for a cluster of employee contributions”. The transactional nature of remuneration has thus traditionally framed work as a product of one’s effort in exchange for financial rewards. This perspective of work is overwhelmingly still referred to as defining work (and is able to accommodate the nuances and shifts described above). However, it has also been observed that a view fixated on the transactional nature of work threatens the inherent meaning, social and individual value of work by becoming commoditised and packaged to reflect financial value (Cho, 2020). As such, remuneration is mostly seen as the organisation of a payroll system in relation to a performance assessment system of work outcomes (Sardjana *et al.*, 2019) rather than work relative to human capability, expression of professional identity or agency and self-realisation. This standard view has also driven much of the research on work especially as it relates to enhancing productivity, processes and costs/benefits (See, e.g. Martono *et al.*, 2018).

Despite sufficient evidence and recognition in the literature that (1) work may take place in the absence of remuneration (Veltman, 2016), (2) work is a service to society and a community (Issa, 2014) and (3) work is relational and an expression of self-determination including the “full spectrum of work that people do to survive” (Blustein, 2011, p. 3), a consensual and holistic definition of work that includes these perspectives remains elusive.

6.9 Work as innate function

Harpaz and Fu (2002, p. 569) note that “work constitutes a pivotal and fundamental component of people’s lives”. Blustein’s (2011, p. 3) examination of the definition of work includes additional concepts such as “working is a central aspect of life, providing a source of structure, a means of survival, connection to others and optimally a means of self-determination”.

In summary, work is not constrained by employment, place, remuneration or career even though it is often linked to these notions. The next section discusses emergent perspectives about work in the scholarly literature.

7. Discussion

Monumental changes have taken place in the way work and workers are conceived throughout the period of industrial modernisation. The literature reflects these shifts from early 19th century works to more recent studies. A thematic analysis of located literature identified using a scoping review methodology is presented above. The analysis identified themes associated with work conceived in studies in terms of employment, the workplace, being ubiquitous, being relational, being meaningful, career, well-being, remuneration and as an innate human function. Despite the array of themes, they have not been assimilated into a cohesive concept that balances the internal (individual, human centric and experiential) perspectives of work with the external (contextual and economic) conceptions of work.

Commentators are increasingly acknowledging that the values and attributes of dignity, equality and mutual respect are important conditions for decent work. This has allowed more recent extensions of studies of “work” to include individual interests in the development of knowledge and capabilities (European Foundation of Management Development, 2012; Gherardi, 2009; Smith, 2001); human-centric resource management (Dal Poz *et al.*, 2009); work as an expression of human foresight, intentionality and self-reflectiveness (Dik and Duffy, 2009); qualities of leadership in the workplace (Gill, 2002; Kumar, 2015); emotions and organisational behaviour (Benozzo and Colley, 2012) and workplace reflection (Nilsen *et al.*, 2012), amongst others.

Despite the emergence of these perspectives in more recent studies, the traditional understanding of work defined in terms of employment and economic rationalism continue to guide dominant discourses despite no longer being universally applicable (Veltman, 2016). However, the literature does agree across disciplines that work is largely relational in nature (Blustein *et al.*, 2019) and is a social construct that differs according to context and culture (Cruss and Cruss, 2016).

Dik and Duffy (2009) argue there is congruence between work and the subjective perceptions of life satisfaction and vocational identity/conditions. These are not solely aspirational but functional, thus representing a spectrum of internal individual experiences and external functional conditions and metrics with which it can be perceived. The point being made is that humans’ perception of work and their response to it is experiential and relative to their environment but functions within a rational and instrumental context. Blustein *et al.* (2019, p. 5) expand on this by suggesting that the Psychology of Working Framework focuses on the “role of social connections throughout many aspects of contemporary working . . . the relational theory present(s) a set of propositions about the interpersonal and social contexts of working, encompassing relationships throughout the life span”. This reinforces the idea of an internal and external dichotomy framing how work can be conceived.

Employment was often historically associated with achieving one’s career, worth or identity through work and employment (Gini, 2001; Tausig, 2013). However, as Pouyaud (2016, p. 12) states, “Work [employment] has become increasingly precarious and

constraining. This change does not only concern the poorest countries, where work may not even allow survival, but also rich ones, where work has become a form of alienation, even if it provides sufficient income". There is growing awareness that work is increasingly able to alienate individuals from society especially when the work is ad hoc and conducted in virtual spaces. Despite this awareness, the conceptualisation of work in the literature is not yet broad enough to inform these new lines of enquiry.

Arguably, the world of work serves to broaden the individual's experience and its influence on self-esteem, self-worth and the individual's physical and psychological well-being (Burke, 2012; Kuhnert and Palmer, 1991). Meaningful work is closely associated with worker well-being (Steger *et al.*, 2012) and increasingly extends beyond the traditional parameters of workplace. Well-being can be associated with positive relationships; personal growth; purpose in life; environmental mastery; self-acceptance; and autonomy (Wright and Huang, 2012) or by its components such as psychological well-being (e.g. happiness), physical well-being (e.g. health) and social well-being (e.g. friendships and human interaction) (Grant *et al.*, 2007). The interpretation of well-being, happiness and life satisfaction are terms increasingly associated with meaningful work (Steger *et al.*, 2009) and require further investigation across different physical, social and political structures and economic systems (Selezneva, 2011). Broadening the conceptualisation of work therefore is necessary to be more representative of the lived experience of work while being more inclusive of different forms of work that fall outside of employment.

Work experiences are based on the interaction between the person and his or her environment. Experiences are influenced by the confluence of an individual's desires, needs, purpose and capacities and the individual's environment, i.e. the world, both physically and increasingly digital. Provis (2009) notes that in the past, the notion of work was primarily given meaning within the context of an institution and/or workplace. This arguably is embedded in the idea that one's place of work and institution shapes the identity of individuals. Based on these interactions with their environment, individuals learn to improvise, revise and create new ways of deriving meaning from their experiences (Fouad and Bynner, 2008). All forms of work result in individual experiences, both positive and negative. These experiences inform the way individuals behave, both consciously and subconsciously. Associated with learned behaviours influenced by work experiences, Smith (2017) notes that workers are, in essence, learners and that they learn through the activities that make up work.

Fouad and Bynner (2008, p. 241) conclude that "work has a central place in adult life and in shaping individuals' identities." Identity is defined as self-categorisation in the formation of one's identity, in which categorisation depends upon a named and classified world which includes terms learned within a culture (Brenner and DeLamater, 2016; Stets and Burke, 2000). Cultures that shape personal identity include workplaces and institutional cultures (Angouri, 2018) which have symbols used to designate positions in social structures and are described as roles (Stets and Burke, 2000). Gini (2001, pp. 2–3) agrees and states that "work is the yardstick by which we measure ourselves against others. It is the means by which we establish our rank, role, and function within a community." This dynamic and effect of work on identity is not well captured within the context of work framed by employment, productivity and remuneration. Certainly with the significant shift towards remote and digitally enabled work, the associated effect on self-identity is of interest.

With the dynamic changes in work described earlier and its more subjective interpretation as suggested in emerging literature, it can be proposed that the cultural symbols that dominated identity formation in the past will have shifted and have become confounded. As an example, the physical determinations of workplaces, such as the executive corner office or one's position in a production line, are no longer as deterministic of identity as before. Similarly, increasingly different forms of work experienced by individuals in the 21st century

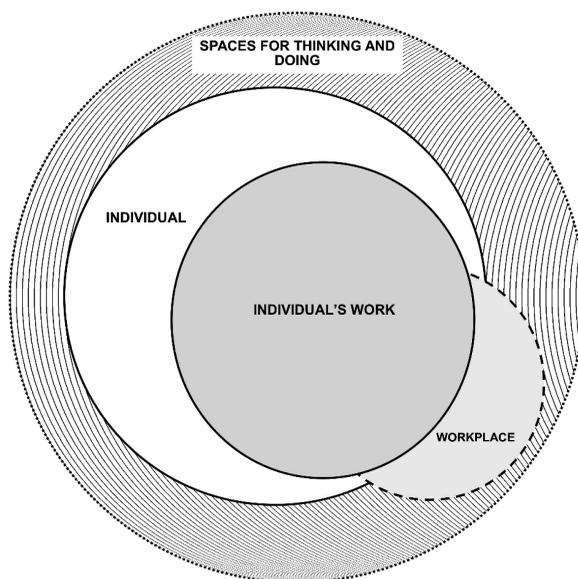
suggest that new cultural “symbols” will inform identity formation. A broader frame of reference beyond workplaces and institutions is needed to sufficiently capture this shift.

Blustein (2013, p. 2) alludes to these new places of work but still largely confines his definitions to workplaces as “the space shared by working and relationships is considerable, with each domain of life affecting the other, often in profound ways”. It is suggested that nature of these new “workspaces” have created new forms of relational interactions and identity formation. Figure 1 tentatively illustrates the notion of the world of work occurring within a space for thinking and doing beyond the confines of a workplace. The degree to which an individual’s work takes place within a workplace is variable and may differ in proportion, but such places are often shared with others and as such lie partly or completely outside the individual’s realm of thinking and doing.

Lefebvre (1996) outlines three dimensions of learning spaces: (1) the perceived space, (2) conceived space and (3) the lived space. Extending Lefebvre’s argument more broadly, the same dimensions can be applied to where work takes place. The academic discourse still largely associates work with a geographical location and the physical environment as conceived by the parameters of employment but fails to capture the broader notion of spaces where work takes place as described by Lefebvre (1996) and Dourish (2006). Work in the home, in the park, on the golf course, in the shower or in a coffee shop can be represented as a “perceived” and “lived” workspaces and thereby prompts reconfiguring how work is associated with workplaces.

8. A tentative new definition of work

Blustein (2013, p. 4) suggests that “this shifting context will require different conceptual and practice tools . . . that are designed for a radically different work context that has framed most 20th century career development theories”. This paper presents the results of a scoping review aimed at providing a preliminary clarification of the dimensions and parameters of what may constitute a contemporary, multi-disciplinary definition of work.



Source(s): Authors’ own work

Figure 1.
The interface of individual and work occurring within a workplace and more generally within a space for thinking and doing

In response to the scoping review question, *Do current definitions of work capture the broad and rapidly changing nature of work in the 21st century?*, the results of this review suggest that there have been calls for a more contemporary approach to studies of work reflecting the significant shifts that have been taken/are taking place. The literature notes that there are numerous instances of work that are not captured by mainstream definitions of work. From the preliminary review, the paper suggests that the dominant themes of employment, remuneration, workplace and career, among others, are “external” contexts of work and that these interact with the “internal” dimensions of work.

Figure 2 illustrates the interaction between the contexts and dimensions of work as identified from the literature and gives rise to a tentative taxonomy of five dimensions of work:

- (1) *Work is innate.* Work is an innate human function (Dejours, 2002; Dik and Duffy, 2009) which inherently informs the individual’s life purpose and role (Ward and King, 2017);
- (2) *Work affects well-being.* Work influences well-being (Dejours, 2002; Deranty, 2009; Duffy and Dik, 2013; Duffy et al., 2017);
- (3) *Work is relational.* Work is relational (Blustein, 2011, 2013; Richardson, 1993) and is manifest through various socialisation processes (Dejours, 2002; Deranty, 2009; Veltman, 2015);
- (4) *Work is identity.* Work is driven by personal and societal codes of ethos and praxis (Fergusson et al., 2019), which in turn is manifest through one’s expression of professional or vocational identity (Savickas et al., 2009; Ward and King, 2017) and/or social service (Issa, 2014) and
- (5) *Work is learning.* Workers are learners, and they learn through the activities that make up work (Smith, 2017). Learning through work is a product of the subjective experience of the worker (Dewey, 1938) as they derive meaning (Fouad and Bynner, 2008) from the interactions within the contexts of work (Rodgers, 2003).

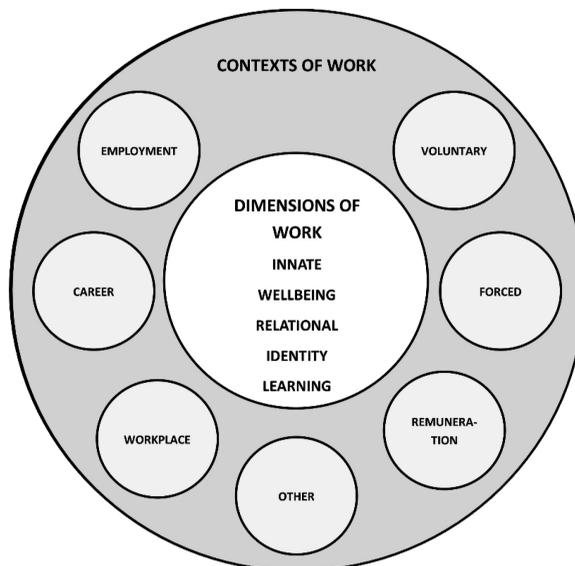


Figure 2. Illustration of the interaction between “contexts of work” and “dimensions of work”

Source(s): Authors’ own work

Building on the analysis and argument extracted from the aforementioned literature, it is proposed that the definitional perspective suggested by this paper contributes to (1) justifying a delineation of the definition and study of work in order to address redundant assumptions associated with dominant paradigms in a vastly changed approach to and modality of work and (2) developing a more inclusive approach that is a more accurate description of work. To this end, a summary is proposed that may inform a new definition of work: *Work is an innate human function which inherently informs the individual's life purpose and role; work is relational and is manifest through various socialisation processes comprising interactions with the contexts of work, deriving meaning from conscious thought and activity and/or efforts, and is driven by personal and societal codes of ethos and praxis which in turn is manifest in the expression of one's work and social service, while influencing one's well-being.*

8.1 Conclusion

The dramatic changes to the nature, context and manifestations of work evident in this century show no signs of being linear or reducing in the rate of change. Rather, exponential and material changes in the way humans work are anticipated and require proactive research and design for future application. Failing this, emerging threats to the autonomy of individuals and humanity are possible.

We have argued that work can no longer be primarily defined in terms of place, employment, productivity or remuneration. Our scoping review of the literature establishes that previously dominant conceptualisations and lines of enquiry of work do not adequately capture the contemporary nature of work, its diversity of the forms it takes, and may be redundant in certain contexts. Instead, this review identified emerging dimensions of work, such as the innate nature of work, work and well-being, work as identity and learning as common underlying dimensions of work that interact with contexts of work.

Guided by the notion of thin and thick definitions of work, the paper provides insights into the convergent and divergent perspectives associated with how work is described in the extant literature. The literature suggests there needs to be better consensus on the definition of work and its meaning as these have far-reaching implications for future research and society more generally.

This study thus proposes that understanding work at the individual unit of analysis in terms of the dimensions of work and contexts of work is more meaningful than current, bounded disciplinary paradigms. This paper seeks to stimulate discourse and lead to more meaningful, future research, particularly across the areas of sociology, psychology, education, health and economics. The implications of the paper do not necessarily exclude helpful perspectives associated with the rational economics of work. Rather, it seeks to encapsulate a holistic perspective that may better understand and organise work in the future.

It is proposed that future research critically considers the summary definition proposed by the paper. The dimensions identified should also be tested in order to develop greater consensus on a contemporary definition. Further, it is suggested that new lines of enquiry emerge that include comprehensive reviews, qualitative and quantitative studies that seek to confirm, develop and elaborate on the taxonomy of work and its underlying dimensions suggested by the paper. It is noted that the paper is a preliminary investigation of the literature aimed to inform future research by proposing a taxonomy of work and tentative definition.

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