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THEORIZING WORK:  
THE IMPORTANCE OF CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF WORK  
FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

John W. Budd

Center for Human Resources and Labor Studies  
University of Minnesota  
3-300 Carlson School of Management  
321 19th Avenue South  
Minneapolis, MN 55455-0438 USA  
*jbudd@umn.edu*  
(612) 624-0357  
fax: (612) 624-8360

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Abstract

This paper uses the disciplinary theorizing on work found in the social and behavioral sciences to construct seven distinct conceptualizations of work. Each conceptualization represents an important way of thinking about work within one or more academic disciplines, and each forms a foundation for a certain paradigmatic approach to analyzing and designing work, work-related institutions and practices, and related issues. These ideas about work do not simply describe alternative perspectives; rather, they actively structure our understandings of and our experiences with work by providing frames of references, norms, values, and attitudes toward work that actors translate into specific practices.

Frames of reference have long been important for shaping the employment relations perspectives of scholars, policymakers, advocates, and others (Fox 1966, 1974; Ackers and Wilkinson 2005). These frames of reference reflect assumptions and values regarding the objectives and operation of the employment relationship (Befort and Budd 2009; Budd and Bhave 2008, 2010). Frequently missing, however, is the recognition that how we conceptualize work is also very important for shaping research and practice in employment relations. As noted by Hyman (2004: 269),

The early writers in our field—the Webbs in Britain, Commons in the United States—indeed regarded an understanding of work itself as a necessary foundation for the study of rule making through labor legislation and collective bargaining. But too often, the attempt to establish industrial relations as a respectable, self-contained academic discipline involved a one-sided exploration of the “web of rules,” their construction, and their application without systematic attention to the work that was being regulated.

In this way, Marx’s famous observation that the nature of work is inappropriately locked away in the “hidden abode of production” remains largely accurate today.

This paper uses the disciplinary theorizing on work found in the social and behavioral sciences to construct seven distinct conceptualizations of work. Each conceptualization represents an important way of thinking about work within one or more academic disciplines, and each forms a foundation for a certain paradigmatic approach to analyzing and designing work, work-related institutions and practices, and related issues. These conceptualizations do not simply describe alternative perspectives on work; rather, they actively structure our understandings of and our experiences with work by providing frames of references, norms, values, and attitudes toward work that actors translate into specific practices. Researchers study particular aspects of work, workers expect certain things out of their work, business leaders implement particular employment practices, labor leaders advocate for desired contractual

provisions, policy-makers enact employment regulations of a certain kind, judges interpret employment and labor laws in particular ways, and social approval and economic resources accrue to some individuals but not others all because of how people think about work. In this way, fundamental conceptualizations of work are powerful *ideas* about work that have real consequences.

### **CONCEPTUALIZING WORK**

Work can be a challenge to define. It is defined here as purposeful human activity involving physical or mental exertion that is not undertaken solely for pleasure and that has economic value. The first part of this definition (“purposeful human activity”) distinguishes work from the broader realm of all human effort. The second part (“not undertaken solely for pleasure”) separates work from leisure, while allowing for work to be pleasurable and thereby recognizing that there can sometimes be a nebulous boundary between work and leisure. The final part (“that has economic value”) allows work to be more encompassing than paid employment by also including unpaid caring for others, self-employment, subsistence farming, casual work in the informal sector, and other activities outside the standard Western boundaries of paid jobs and career aspirations. The purpose of this broad definition of work is to encompass the diverse conceptualizations of work found across the social and behavioral sciences, not to precisely delimit what is and is not considered work (Glucksmann 1995).

From this broad definition of work, I identify seven conceptualizations of work that are particularly relevant for considering the importance of these conceptualizations for research and practice in employment relations: work as a commodity, occupational citizenship, disutility, personal fulfillment, a social relation, caring for others, and identity. These conceptualizations are summarized in Table 1 and presented in the remainder of this section. Due to space

constraints, these portrayals are necessarily stylized, but there is a rich body of scholarship that lies behind each conceptualization (see Budd 2011). Other conceptualizations are also possible—such as seeing work as a source of freedom or a method for serving God (Budd 2011)—but are beyond the scope of this paper.

### **A Commodity**

Work is conceptualized as a commodity when an individual's capacity to work—what Marx called “labor power”—is viewed as an abstract quantity that can be bought and sold (Biernacki 1995). When work is commodified (conceptually), diverse forms of concrete labor are all reduced to sources of economic value that can be made equivalent by exchanging them at an appropriate set of relative prices. Work is simply a generic input into a production function, and employers and workers buy and sell generic units of this commodity called work or labor (or “labor power” in Marxist terminology). For those who think of work as a commodity, its allocation is seen as governed by the impersonal “laws” of supply and demand. The intersection of supply and demand determines the going wage rate (and other terms and conditions of employment), and work is analyzed like all other economic quantities—“the theory of the determination of wages in a free market is simply a special case of the general theory of value” (Hicks 1963: 1).

### **Occupational Citizenship**

Employment relations scholars have long rejected the wisdom of treating labor like any other commodity because when work is seen purely as a commodity, it is analyzed as an economic quantity independent of non-economic concerns and ignores issues of human agency and dignity. Employment relations scholarship instead sees work as occupational citizenship—an activity undertaken by citizens with inherent equal worth who are entitled to certain rights and

standards of dignity and self-determination irrespective of what the market provides (Crouch 1998). The term occupational citizenship updates Marshall's (1950) "industrial citizenship." But the core idea that citizenship rights for workers are needed to prevent the complete commodification of work can be traced back at least to the early 20th century efforts of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, John R. Commons, and others to construct an institutionalist approach to economic analysis that emphasized the human qualities of labor and rejected the idea that labor is simply a commodity both analytically and normatively (Kaufman 2004, 2005). Normatively, this approach is also very closely related to conceptualizations of workers' rights as human rights (Gross 2010) and to the International Labour Organization's campaign for decent work.

Institutionalist labor economists, employment relations scholars, and others who implicitly adhere to this theorization of work reject the neoclassical economics assumption that labor markets are perfectly competitive. As a result, the employment relationship is a bargained exchange between employers and employees such that employment outcomes depend on the elements of the environment that determine each party's bargaining power (Budd, Gomez, and Meltz 2004). Job ladders and other elements of the internal labor market result from a mixture of pressures, such as economic efficiency, relative bargaining power, and customs (Doeringer and Piore 1971). Decent working and living conditions depend on employees having adequate bargaining power or the protections of mandated labor standards (Budd 2004). Labor unions and governmental regulations are therefore particularly important institutions in this perspective. That (non-Marxist) employment relations scholars see the employment relationship as analogous to a pluralist political society in which multiple parties (e.g., employers and employees) have legitimate but sometimes conflicting interests reinforces the analytical emphasis on and normative preference for decision-making and dispute resolution processes that respect a

diversity of rights and interests, and thereby balances the interests of employers and employees in the pursuit of occupational citizenship (Budd 2004; Clegg 1975).

### **Disutility**

In mainstream economic thought, rational individuals are assumed to maximize a utility function that is increasing in the consumption of goods, services, and leisure. Work is an essential part of each individual's maximization problem because work provides goods and services, either directly through self-production or indirectly through earned income. But the activity of working is generally seen as *reducing* utility. This view of work comes from seeing it as a painful or stressful activity, or by assuming that leisure is more pleasurable such that work involves the opportunity cost of reduced time for pleasurable leisure (Spencer 2009). In either case, work is conceptualized as disutility—a lousy activity tolerated only to obtain goods, services, and leisure that provide pleasure.

### **Personal Fulfillment**

Conceptualizing work as personal fulfillment focuses on the positive and negative physical and especially psychological outcomes that are inherent in work. From this perspective, work is directed by the brain, both cognitively and emotionally. Mental states such as attitudes, moods, and emotions can affect individuals' work behaviors; the nature of one's work—such as the job tasks, rewards, relations with co-workers, and supervision—can affect one's mental states. As a result, work is conceptualized as an activity that arouses cognitive and affective functioning. Ideally, work is a source of personal fulfillment and psychological well-being because it can satisfy human needs for achievement, mastery, self-esteem, and self-worth (Turner, Barling, and Zacharatos 2002). But lousy work—work with mindless repetition, abusive

co-workers or bosses, excessive physical or mental demands, or other factors—can have negative psychological consequences.

### **A Social Relation**

The material gains of work emphasized in mainstream economics or the intrinsic rewards emphasized in industrial-organizational psychology fail to recognize that work is embedded in complex social phenomena in which individuals seek approval, status, sociability, and power. The social context also provides constraints, whether in the form of social norms that define the boundaries of acceptable behaviors or work roles, or in the form of power relations that define access to resources. To conceptualize work as social relation is therefore to see work as consisting of human interactions that are experienced in and shaped by social networks, social norms and institutions, and socially-constructed power relations. There are a variety of approaches to conceptualizing work that emphasize the social context, and three major approaches are instructive.

First, theories of social exchange and social networks focus on the social dynamics of interpersonal work interactions (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005; Portes 1998). In this way, work is seen as a social exchange—an open-ended, ongoing relationship based on trust and reciprocity that has imperfectly-specified obligations and a multiplicity of objectives—that occurs within a network of social ties. Second, work can be conceptualized as a social relation by recognizing the importance of social norms for how work is experienced and structured. Some of these norms might stem from direct, interpersonal contact—such as norms in work groups to limit output or work effort. Other norms might operate at an organizational level in the form of organizational culture, and still other work norms are societal-levels constructions.

Third, a social relations approach to conceptualizing work can be rooted in a focus on socially-constructed hierarchies and power relations. Marxist-inspired theorizing on work, for example, reflects a social relations conceptualization of work because capital-labor or employer-employee power dynamics are socially-constructed. Work, then, is seen as contested terrain in which employers and employees are frequently seeking control and making accommodations. This dialectic of control and accommodation can occur through the structural features of the employment relations such as formal policies, rules, and routines (Thompson and Newsome 2004) as well as through discursive elements such as organizational culture (Knights and Willmott 1989). Feminist theories of patriarchy and gender represent another approach that emphasizes socially-constructed hierarchies (Gottfried 2006).

### **Caring For Others**

Feminist scholarship criticizes the traditional conceptualizations of work in the social and behavioral sciences for devaluing women by ignoring gender issues (Gottfried 2006). Research in neoclassical economics, mainstream employment relations, and Marxist sociology, for example, primarily focus on paid employment to the exclusion unpaid household work and other caring activities that do not produce economic commodities. Feminist thought rejects the resulting devaluing of “woman’s work” and emphasizes that it is indeed work. Specifically, it is work as caring for others—the physical, cognitive, and emotional effort required to attend to and maintain others (Baines, Evans, and Neysmith 1998).

Caring for others is not limited to unpaid household work and it need not be the exclusive domain of women, but it powerfully affects the gendered work experiences of women (Graham 1983). Housewives are frequently seen as unproductive (Folbre 1991), working women frequently must work a “second shift” or a “double day” taking care of domestic responsibilities



after a day of paid employment (Hochschild 1989), and in the workplace women confront gendered expectations about appropriate occupations and work behaviors that are frequently rooted in idealized visions of caring, domesticity, and femininity (Gottfried 2006). In feminist theorizing, this gendered nature of work is ascribed to socially-constructed norms and power dynamics, not some mythical maternal instinct or other biological features (Jackson 1998). Moreover, beliefs about the gendered body in the workplace and the care-giving responsibilities of women lead to employment-related discrimination as men and women are treated differently—they are segregated into different occupations, given different roles and levels of responsibility, expected to sell or tolerate differing levels of sexuality, and paid differently for comparable work.

## **Identity**

Individuals create identities to help understand who they are by increasing their understanding of where they fit into the broader world. Since work is such a major part of many people's lives, work can be conceptualized as identity—that is, as a source of understanding and meaning (Leidner 2006). This can occur on several levels. The personal identity dimension focuses on stable and consistent attributes and traits that an individual sees as making him or herself unique (Turner and Onorato 1999). This can contain biographical information, including descriptors related to one's work. The social identity approach focuses on how individuals further construct their identities by categorizing themselves into various groups (Hogg 2006). This might include one's occupation, employer, and other work-related group constructs. The interactionist approach suggests that individuals create identities through social interactions with others (McCall and Simmons 1966). From this perspective, the social roles attached to occupations and careers are a major source of our self-presentation and identity during our adult

years (Hughes 1971). Work can also be seen as the source of class identity and class consciousness.

At a deeper level, work can be seen as a fundamental aspect of creating a human identity not as individuals or classes, but as a species. The centrality of work for humanness was most famously advanced by Marx's (1844: 76-77) argument that "In creating an objective world by his practical activity, in working-up inorganic nature, man proves himself a conscious species being, i.e., as a being that treats the species as its own essential being." It is from this belief that self-directed work is the essential quality of being human that Marx further argued that the commodification of work causes alienation—the loss of humanness experienced when workers are forced to sell an inherent part of themselves. Catholic social thought presents the importance of work to humans in terms strikingly similar to those presented by Marx. In the 1981 papal encyclical *Laborem Exercens* ("On Human Work"), Pope John Paul II wrote:

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

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH**

Mainstream (neoclassical) economic thought embraces the commodity conceptualization of work. Employers are assumed to maximize their profits by utilizing the optimum amounts of labor, capital, and other inputs to produce goods and services for sale. Work and workers are thus treated like any other factor of production. On the supply side, work is something that individuals choose to sell in varying quantities in order to earn income and maximize their individual or household utility. In economic research, therefore, employers and employees are

both modeled as treating hours of labor as one of a number of quantities to factor into the relevant optimization problem; marginal analysis determines the optimum amount of labor to buy or sell in the labor market no different from other commodities (Blundell and MaCurdy 1999; Hamermesh 1993).

By rejecting the idea that work is simply a commodity governed by competitive labor markets, employment relations research largely focuses on the diverse range of institutions that govern work, from workgroup-level employee participation schemes to industrywide collective bargaining and trans-European consultation mechanisms, from local-level labor regulations to national-level corporatist regimes and international labor standards. However, much of the employment relations scholarship does not ask what work is, and instead models the employment relationship as a bargaining problem between workers and employers with varying power, rights, and interests. This perspective reinforces the attention devoted to the institutions that govern the employment relationship. In this way, the ideas that employment relations scholars have, or do not have, about work focus their research in specific directions.

When work is conceptualized as disutility, then workers are expected to shirk. From this perspective, it is common to model the employer as facing a principal-agent problem—how to get the agent (in this case, a worker) to act in the interests the principal (in this case, the owners of the organization). By assuming that monitoring is typically difficult or imperfect, theorizing in personnel and organizational economics focuses on solving these principal-agent problems by using optimal monetary incentives that make additional worker effort utility-enhancing (Lazear 1995). Economists who study work within organizations, therefore, focus on the performance effects of various incentives mechanisms, such as pay-for-performance compensation plans or

tournament-type promotion systems. This research emphasis is directly tied to the ideas these researchers hold about work.

The idea that work can provide personal fulfillment is emphasized most strongly by scholars in industrial-organizational psychology, organizational behavior, and human resource management. Workers' cognitive and affective mental processes are therefore at the center of research conducted by these scholars. Some key foundational research topics that result from conceptualizing work in this way are individual psychological differences such as cognitive ability or personality (Ones et al. 2007); job satisfaction (Judge et al. 2001); organizational justice (Folger and Cropanzano 1998); and intrinsic work motivation (Donovan 2001). This research generates important contrasts with research rooted in seeing work as disutility. For example, the latter emphasizes the importance of financial incentives to motivate performance, but psychologically-based research (including some by behavioral economists) suggests that extrinsic rewards can crowd out intrinsic motivators and therefore warns against an over-reliance on extrinsic rewards (Deci, Koestner, and Ryan 1999; Fehr and Falk 2002).

Other schools of thought within employment relations and in related disciplines like sociology conceptualize work as a social relation. This perspective focuses attention on socially-constructed power relations and norms when analyzing the tensions between and determinants of conflict and consent. The research questions analyzed by scholars who conceptualize work as a social relation are therefore quite different from those analyzed by scholars who conceptualize work as disutility or personal fulfillment. Labor process theory, for example, focuses on how labor power is transformed into productive work effort in this context of socially-constructed power structures (Thompson and Smith 2010). Feminist scholarship focuses on the gender aspects of these norms and power structures, such as how men and women are treated differently

by being segregated into different occupations, given different roles and levels of responsibility, expected to sell or tolerate heightened levels of sexuality, and paid differently for comparable work (Acker 1990).

Conceptualizing work as caring for others further directs research toward issues of work and the human body because caring work frequently involves bodily interaction (Wolkowitz 2006). And thinking about work as identity prompts research on conflicts between work roles and the authentic self (e.g., Erickson and Ritter 2001) and on how discursive practices shape workers' subjective perceptions of their identities (Alvesson and Wilmott 2002). Ideas about work therefore have important implications for the nature of research on work pursued by different groups of scholars—the questions addressed, the issues dismissed as unimportant, and the overall methodological approach.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

By providing the intellectual foundation for designing particular employment practices, ideas about work also shape how individuals experience work in practice. These can be seen by considering how alternative conceptualizations of work yield contrasting views about conflict and consent in the employment relationship (see Table 2). In other words, consider two key questions: 1) why do employees not deterministically fully convert their potential work effort (“labor power”) into actual effort (“labor”), and 2) how can employers obtain higher levels of actual effort?

Conceptualizing work as disutility highlights the aspects of work that are burdensome such that employer-employee conflict in the employment relationship stems from an employee's preference for leisure. When work is disutility then, employees will consent to high effort levels because of the need or preference for money. Managers who think of work in this way therefore

emphasize the use of human resources policies that provide strong financial incentives, such as pay-for-performance plans, and employees in such organizations will experience work in ways in which monetary rewards are paramount. When work is conceptualized as personal fulfillment, in contrast, conflict is seen as resulting from unsatisfactory and unfulfilling working conditions. Human resources professionals who embrace this conceptualization therefore seek to increase employee performance by implementing practices that satisfy workers' psychological needs through fair treatment, a variety of intrinsic rewards, and placement into appropriate jobs. Workers in such organizations will experience work differently than those in extrinsically-focused organizations because of different underlying ideas about work.

If work is seen as a social relation characterized by antagonistic employee-employer interests, then conflict in the employment relationship stems from conflicts of interests and power imbalances. Moreover, when work is a social relation, then norms are powerful determinants of behavior. As such, employees can be guided and consent achieved through a combination of normative and structural control devices. Jobs can be deskilled to shift the balance of power in the workplace from skilled workers to managers (Braverman 1974), assembly lines and employee scripts can constrain employees to behave in specific ways (Leidner 1993), mentoring programs can be used to shape and discipline the attitudes of junior employees (Covaleski et al. 1998), and self-managed work teams can be used to create performance norms based on peer pressure (Barker 1993).

When work is conceptualized as caring for others, conflict and poor employee performance result from work being structured in ways that devalue caring for others and that serve the interests of men. Managers who embrace this perspective emphasize the construction of anti-discrimination policies and family-friendly policies. For those who conceptualize work as

identity, employment relationship conflict is seen as resulting from threats to self-identity, and consequently employee consent can be crafted through work that promotes positive self-identity. So various approaches to managing employees and the accompanying human resources practices are rooted in alternative ideas about work.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR EMPLOYMENT REGULATION**

Each of the conceptualizations of work also has important implications for how we think about employment regulation (see Table 3). When work is thought of as a commodity, then the efficient allocation labor is the key objective. Mainstream economic theory further shows that work is compensated by an amount equal to its economic value when labor markets are perfectly competitive. It is therefore common for supporters of the neoliberal market ideology to champion competitive markets as the best protection a worker has against exploitation. Competitive markets, not employment regulation regimes, are therefore favored. Individuals who embrace this perspective consequently focus on the labor mobility effects of employment regulation. Policies that improve mobility (e.g., the free movement of workers within the European Union, or benefits portability in the United States) are supported, and policies that restrict mobility (e.g., restrictions on employee dismissals) are criticized. Also, the commodity conceptualization of work focuses on paid employment, so unpaid work and other forms of non-commoditized work are ignored, and not deemed relevant to debates over employment regulation.

In sharp contrast, the occupational citizenship conceptualization emphasizes citizenship rights that should be provided through employment regulation and other institutions rather than relying on the market to provide them. This includes minimum labor standards consistent with safe and dignified living and working conditions. This also includes employee voice and self-determination as entitlements of autonomous human beings (Budd 2004). Employee voice can

take various forms, but only collective voice through labor unions, and perhaps works councils, is seen as providing true industrial democracy in which unilateral, unchecked managerial authority is replaced by orderly rules, participatory rule-making, checks and balances, and due process in dispute resolution. In this conceptualization, then, collective approaches to employment regulation come to the fore.

When work is conceptualized as disutility, there is nothing special about work beyond providing the income necessary to survive and enjoy life. Consequently, pay and income are the focus of employment regulation, and income support programs can achieve the same goals. When there is a focus on job creation, it excludes concerns with the quality of those jobs. Moreover, that work is seen as painful toil leads to the belief that individuals will only work hard when they are provided with financial incentives. In this way, conceptualizing work as disutility leads to a particular concern with the disincentive effects of employment regulation or of income support programs. In the first half of the 18th century, the utility of poverty doctrine asserted that poverty was useful because the lower classes would only work hard if they were poor. More recently, the contemporary drive to make work a requirement for receiving income support or welfare payments reflects, at least partly, an assumption that people need to be pushed to work (Lødemal and Trickey 2001). The idea of work as disutility, then, provides only weak support for employment regulation, and focuses attention on work requirements or unintended disincentives to work in debates over employment regulation.

If work is seen as a source of personal fulfillment, then work should ideally be structured to provide intrinsic rewards. This would seemingly provide an important basis for supporting employment regulation that promotes high employment standards pertaining to employee autonomy and voice, dignified supervision, privacy, control over working hours, and the like. In



practice, however, three related views can undermine the support for this type of employment regulation. First, personal fulfillment is frequently seen as a subjective concept. This approach and the corresponding lack of attention on objective standards for fulfilling work do not direct attention toward employment regulation. Rather, research focuses on how individuals experience work and their resulting levels of job satisfaction. Second, conceptualizing work as personal fulfillment frequently goes hand-in-hand with a unitarist perspective on the employment relationship. In this way, human resource management, not shared or regulated models of employee governance are favored. In other words, enlightened managers are seen as the preferred mechanism for designing employment practices that promote job satisfaction and personal fulfillment. Third, the intrinsic rewards of work are generally seen as individual rather than collective, thereby further undermining the perceived need for collective approaches to employee governance and for employment regulation that supports collective forms of employee voice.

The theoretical perspective of work as a social relation highlights that work and its related institutions are human creations rather than immutable facts of life or a natural state of affairs. This opens up the intellectual space for considering the goals of work and for designing employment regulation regimes that support these goals. Furthermore, this social relations conceptualization emphasizes the importance of the power structures that are created through institutions. Consequently, this conceptualization sees employment regulation as both a product of, and a method for shaping, the relative power of the parties to the employment relationship. As one example, government-funded job training programs that emphasize positive attitudes such as a strong work ethic and submission to authority can be seen as reinforcing employer power by teaching workers to accept lousy working conditions and to not question the authority

of employers (Lafer 2002). In China, the government denies residency permits for rural laborers while also providing them with temporary dormitory accommodations adjacent to urban factories. This directly affects the power dynamics in the employment relationship by ensuring a supply of fresh labor reserves of young workers who work long hours and who are replaced before they can demand higher wages or develop solidarity with their co-workers (Pun and Smith 2007).

Seeing work as caring reminds us not to overlook non-commoditized forms of work when analyzing and designing employment regulation (Standing 2009). To date, this has not happened in practice in many countries. For example, the U.S. legal system “conceptualizes housework as solely an expression of affection, the currency of familial emotions”—there are no benefits such as workers’ compensation, no direct entitlements to social security (only as a spouse), and only a limited recognition of economic value in divorce proceedings (Silbaugh 1996: 4). The conceptualization of work as caring also forces us to ask difficult questions regarding the desirability of using employment regulation to commoditize care work (e.g., the marketization of elder care) (Armstrong and Armstrong 2005). More broadly speaking, feminist perspectives on work reject deep-seated dualities such as production/reproduction, work/family, and labor/leisure (Glucksmann 1995). From this perspective, the processes, actors and governance of employment regulation need to take a holistic approach that recognizes the interconnected nature of a society’s full breadth of work activities.

The conceptualization of work as identity reveals the deep importance of work for self-understanding, and consequently provides a basis for questioning whether employment regulation does enough to promote positive self-identity. The deeper belief in the importance of work for humanness, in turn, provides the foundation for the world’s major religions and secular

human rights advocates to call for decent working conditions and labor standards (Peccoud 2004). From this perspective, work is not something to be taken lightly or for granted. Rather, its deep importance for the quality of individual lives and the societies in which we live must be considered and actively promoted by the processes, actors and governance of employment regulation. In these ways, ideas about work powerfully shape how individuals approach employment regulation, and therefore how work is experienced.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, ideas are important in employment relations in many ways, although frequently not recognized explicitly. This paper highlights one of these ways—specifically, the importance of conceptualizations of work for shaping research and policy agendas, and therefore for influencing not only how we understand work, but also how we experience it. However, the role of these ideas is frequently limiting. Researchers focus on questions rooted in one or two ways of thinking about work, and practitioners design employment practices based on a focused conceptualization of work, especially work as disutility or personal fulfillment. The breadth of conceptualizations of work developed in this paper, in contrast, reveals the complexity of work. Research and practice would benefit from recognizing this complexity by incorporating of a broader range of ideas about work into their frames of reference and therefore into their resulting actions.

For example, many questions in employment relations are ultimately rooted in workers' interests—when will workers form trade unions, do social partnerships effectively represent workers' interests, what types of public policies are needed to support workers and their families, is technological change good for workers, to name just a few. A deep understanding of workers' interests requires recognizing multiple conceptualizations of work—if work is a lousy activity

endured to earn income, then workers' interests are defined by extrinsic rewards, if work is a source of personal fulfillment, then workers' interests are defined by intrinsic rewards, or if work is a social relation then workers' interests are structured by social relationships. Theories of the employment relationship that involve workers' interests, or worker perceptions of justice, therefore, should be built on a foundation that includes diverse ideas about work. Kelly (1998), for example, creates a richer basis for understanding collective employee action by combining theoretical aspects that implicitly stem from seeing work as disutility, identity, and a social relation compared to other approaches that implicitly use a narrower conceptualization of work.

That workers experience work in diverse ways further underscores the need for a broad approach to understanding work that breaks from the limitations of thinking about work in a monolithic fashion. In assessing the quality of jobs, for example, a focus on rising skill levels and earnings might lead us to conclude that job quality is on the rise, but a richer approach that also includes work intensification and control reveals a more nuanced understanding in which job quality is changing in complex ways (Green 2006). As a second example, by overlooking conceptualizations of work beyond that of work as a commodity, the extent to which employment is being transformed from a stable, long-term career-oriented relationship to a short-term, market-driven exchange is frequently overstated. By explicitly conceptualizing work in richer terms, McGovern et al. (2007) provide a more nuanced understanding of changes in the employment relationship that is consistent with the observed persistence of formal human resources practices. Thirdly, a true understanding of gender will not result from adding "women's issues" to the list of employment relations concerns without allowing work to have a gendered component (Wajcman 2000). This requires broadening our ideas about work.

Lastly, the conceptualizations of work developed here reinforce the deep importance of work for the human experience. Embracing the idea that work has fundamental importance will help remind us that employment relations is ultimately about people, not institutions (Hyman 1975), and can provide a renewed basis for a the ethical commitment of traditional employment relations scholarship. As Ackers (2002: 15) has argued, “nothing is more central to the reconstitution of community and civil society than rethinking work, which consumes so much of our daylight hours, confers income and status, and shapes life-changes in so many ways.” Ideas in employment relations are indeed powerful.

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Table 1  
Conceptualizing Work

Work as...	Definition	Exemplars
A Commodity	An abstract quantity of productive effort that has tradable economic value.	Production functions and labor demand theory. Competitive wage theory.
Occupational Citizenship	An activity pursued by human members of a community entitled to certain rights.	Institutionalist theories. Industrial democracy.
Disutility	A lousy activity tolerated to obtain goods and services that provide pleasure.	Principal-agent models and shirking.
Personal Fulfillment	Physical and psychological functioning that (ideally) satisfies individual needs.	Job satisfaction. Organizational justice. Intrinsic work motivators.
A Social Relation	Human interaction embedded in social norms, institutions, and power structures.	Social exchange theory. Marx's social relations of production. Labor process theory.
Caring For Others	The physical, cognitive, and emotional effort required to attend to and maintain others.	Feminist theories of patriarchy. Gendered work norms and sex discrimination.
Identity	A method for understanding who you are and where you stand in the social structure.	Social identity and interactionist theories. Emotional labor. Identity workers.

Table 2  
 The Importance of Conceptualizations of Work for  
 Understanding Conflict and Achieving Consent in the Employment Relationship

Work as...	Source of Conflict	Method for Obtaining Consent
Disutility	Work is painful; leisure is preferable	Provide source of income and financial incentives
Personal Fulfillment	Work is stressful and unfulfilling	Structure work to be intrinsically rewarding
A Social Relation	Work is structured to serve the interests of the powerful	Structure work to force compliance; create norms that disguise inequalities and that obligate effort
Caring For Others	Work is structured in ways that devalue caring for others and that serve the interests of men	Structure work to reduce discrimination and conflicts with other spheres of human life
Identity	Work creates a negative or contradictory sense of self	Structure work to create a desirable sense of self

Table 3  
The Importance of Conceptualizations of Work for Employment Regulation

Work as...	Implications for Employment Regulation
A Commodity	Efficient allocation of labor is foremost concern. Policies that promote labor mobility are key. Ignores unpaid and other forms of non-commoditized work.
Occupational Citizenship	Employment regulation can be a key method for supporting the achievement of citizenship rights, including minimum labor standards, safety standards, and protections for collective employee voice.
Disutility	Work is expected to be lousy so minimal need for regulation. Work is only important for producing income so this is the focus of regulatory concern, but need to guard against creating disincentives to work.
Personal Fulfillment	Work should be psychologically rewarding, but subjective, unitarist, and collective assumptions favor managerialism over shared governance and collective regulation.
A Social Relation	Socially-created institutions and power structures are recognized as important elements of work, so employment regulation should address (and also reflect) these issues of institutions and power.
Caring For Others	Recognizes non-commoditized forms of caring for others as work, and draws attention to the need to include these forms of work in conversations about employment regulation.
Identity	Sees the deep importance of work for individuals, and thereby provides a basis for substantive employment regulation.