CRAFTING A MULTIDISCIPLINARY THEORY OF WORK FOR INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

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Abstract

Industrial relations scholarship focuses on the employment relationship and related practices and institutions. Frequently overlooked is the more fundamental question, what is work. Drawing on research from across the social and behavioral sciences, this paper develops a multidisciplinary theory of work for industrial relations. This multidisciplinary approach is essential for avoiding monolithic conceptions of work that prevent a full understanding of the employment relationship and that limit the connections between industrial relations and other disciplines.

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Karl Marx (1867: 195) famously challenged the classical economists’ reduction of the employment relationship to an exchange of commodities in the labor market because this relegated the actual nature of work to a “hidden abode of production” and prevented an accurate understanding of the employment relationship. Industrial relations has successfully taken up part of this challenge—the rejection of labor as a commodity has long been a hallmark of industrial relations theorizing and advocacy, and industrial relations scholarship emphasizes the importance of micro and macro-level institutions, not just labor markets, for understanding the employment relationship. But work itself continues to be largely overlooked. As noted by Richard 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.

Given the importance of work not only for individual workers, but also for shaping the formal and informal institutions surrounding the employment relationship, Hyman goes on to criticize this lack of attention to work by asserting that “we cannot understand industrial relations unless we understand production”—that is, the nature of work.

Within industrial relations, scholarship on worker well-being (Godard 2004; Guest 2008) and on labor process theory (Martínez Lucio 2010; Thompson and Newsome 2004) pay the closest attention to the actual nature of work. But the former is more concerned with measuring the impact of various work arrangements than with theorizing work and the employment relationship. The latter draws important theoretical connections between work and the employment relationship, but emphasizes particular theoretical approaches to work, and industrial relations scholars in the pluralist camp have not paid a lot of attention to this critically-oriented line of scholarship.
In the pluralist camp, labor is simply rejected as a commodity (Kaufman 2004, 2005). I will argue below that this amounts to theorizing work as occupational citizenship. But like the conceptualization of work as a commodity, work as occupational citizenship is an abstract conceptualization in that it does not depend on the specific character of actual work. Consequently, industrial relations scholarship has focused more on the institutions that govern work than on the nature of work itself. Industrial relations may have entered the hidden abode of production, but it has not yet fully discovered the theories of work that provide a foundation for a deep understanding of the employment relationship.

Industrial relations can and should do better. Other disciplines in the social and behavioral sciences have identified various theories of work that are more concrete in nature than the abstract conceptualization of work as occupational citizenship—that is, they depend more on the actual nature of work. This theorizing should be explicitly integrated into industrial relations scholarship to foster a richer understanding of work and the employment relationship. For example, many questions in industrial 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. We need to understand alternative conceptualizations of work in order to better understand workers’ interests—if work is a lousy activity endured to earn income (as in mainstream economic theorizing), then workers’ interests are defined by extrinsic rewards, if work is a source of personal fulfillment (as in psychological theorizing), then workers’ interests are defined by intrinsic rewards, or if work is a social relation (as in sociological theorizing) 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 a multidisciplinary theory of 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 makes a multidisciplinary approach to theorizing work particularly important. Theorizing work as a monolithic entity will produce incomplete (at best) or misleading understandings of the employment relationship. 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. The development of an explicit approach to theorizing work from multiple perspectives can lay the foundation for more scholarship like these two examples.

Opening up the theorization of work to allow for diverse ways in which work is experienced also provides the needed basis for understanding gender in industrial relations. A true understanding of gender will not result from adding “women’s issues” to the list of industrial relations concerns without allowing work itself to have a gendered component (Wajcman 2000). A monolithic approach to work also fosters an exogenous view that work must necessarily be a certain way (e.g., painful) and obscures more penetrating analyses that see work as endogenously determined by social institutions (Spencer 2009). A richer
approach to theorizing work therefore opens up space for questioning the determinants of the nature of the employment relationship, and for considering various alternatives.

A multidisciplinary approach to theorizing work is particularly important for the field of industrial relations. Hyman’s contributions to industrial relations, for example, suggests several important objectives for the theoretical approaches used in industrial relations. Theory should help us understand the subject matter of industrial relations—work, the employment relationship, work-related behaviors and institutions, and the like—in ways that “provide accurate maps of diversity” (Hyman 2008: 279), connect with theorizing on broader social phenomena (Hyman 2004), and remind us that industrial relations is ultimately about people, not institutions (Hyman 1975). A multidisciplinary theory of work in industrial relations that moves beyond the abstract conceptualization of work as occupational citizenship can serve all of these goals.

**Work in the Abstract: From Commodity to Occupational Citizenship**

Work is defined in this paper 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).
Work as a Commodity

Work is theorized as a commodity when an individual’s capacity to work—that is, their physical and mental capabilities, or what Marx called “labor power”—is seen as an abstract quantity that can be bought and sold (Biernacki 1995). In this way, diverse forms of concrete labor are all envisioned as sources of economic value that can be made equivalent by exchanging them via an appropriate set of relative prices. Work is nothing more than 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 from a Marxist perspective). Individual identities are lost because it does not matter who is actually doing the work; working conditions are irrelevant because all forms of work simply produce something.

Mainstream (neoclassical) economic thought embraces the commodity conceptualization of work by treating it like any other factor of production on the demand side. 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 (Hamermesh 1993). Specifically, a profit-maximizing employer will hire labor up to the point at which the marginal cost of hiring an additional unit of labor equals the value of labor’s marginal productivity. On the supply side, mainstream economic theorizing treats work as something that individuals choose to sell in varying quantities in order to earn income and maximize their individual or household utility (Blundell and MaCurdy 1999). Employers and employees are therefore 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.

When work is 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 “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). 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. Conceptually, however,
work is commodified whenever it is seen as an abstract quantity with a tradable exchange
value, regardless of whether the labor market is perfectly competitive.

Work as a Occupational Citizenship

Industrial 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. In other words, industrial relations scholarship 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).1

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1 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, industrial 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) industrial 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).

In other words, industrial relations scholarship has largely focused 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. Underlying this scholarship is a rejection of work as a commodity in favor of an occupational citizenship conceptualization that emphasizes human agency and dignity in imperfect labor markets independent of the specific nature of work. Most industrial relations scholarship does not ask what work is, but instead models the employment relationship as a
bargaining problem between workers and employers with varying power, rights, and interests. In this way, industrial relations replaces one abstract conceptualization of work with another.

**Other Critiques of the Commodification of Work**

An occupational citizenship conceptualization of work rejects the work as a commodity conceptualization for its lack of attention to human agency and dignity. But there are other critiques. Marx, for example, criticized capitalism’s commodification of work in two ways. First, by believing that self-directed work is the essential quality of being human, Marx (1844) saw the commodification of work as causing alienation—the loss of humanness experienced when workers are forced to sell an inherent part of themselves. Second, Marx (1867) argued that a “fetishism of commodities” that focuses our attention on exchange values hides the underlying social relationships. This is particularly problematic for work because abstract, commodified work appears to have some objective value and employment appears to be the impersonal exchange of one commodity (labor power) for another (money). This commodified view covers up the underlying social phenomena that structure work—interpersonal relationships, social norms, and, of particular concern for Marx, unequal property rights and ownership structures. Feminist scholarship also criticizes the commodity conceptualization of work for privileging paid employment over unpaid reproductive work. As the latter is typically seen as the responsibility of women, the commodification of work devalues women’s work, and, in fact, suggests that it is not even work because it is not commodified (Folbre 1991). Addressing these critiques requires a more fundamental inquiry into the concrete nature of work through a multidisciplinary theory of work.

**The Elements of a Multidisciplinary Theory of Work**

In addition to theorizing work as a commodity and as occupational citizenship, five theories of work are particularly relevant for improving industrial relations scholarship
through a richer theoretical treatment of the nature of work: work as 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 a range of applications and debates are noted so as to suggest the richness and applicability of each theoretical perspective. Others conceptualizations are also possible—such as seeing work as a source of freedom, a method for serving God, or as slavery—but are beyond the scope of this paper.

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. In other words, work is theorized as disutility—a lousy activity tolerated only to obtain goods, services, and leisure that provide pleasure.

Economists assume that work reduces utility in two ways (Spencer 2009). First, work is seen as strenuous. W. Stanley Jevons (1871: 164), one of the first neoclassical economists, helped enshrine this negative view of work by defining it as “any painful exertion of body or mind undergone with the view to future good.” Second, work is assumed to conflict with leisure because there are only a fixed number of hours in a day. By assuming that leisure is pleasurable and provides utility, work becomes disutility. From this second perspective, the disutility of work is not a pain cost, but an opportunity cost (Spencer 2009). While the theory of work as disutility can be criticized for its narrowness (see the following subsections), note that it is a theory rooted in the actual nature of work.
Modeling work as disutility is of great relevance to industrial relations research on organizational policies to motivate and reward workers. When imperfect information makes employment contracts incomplete, economic models of workers in organizations fall back on seeing work as disutility and assume that “the worker likes income but hates work” or “dislikes effort” (Lazear 1995: 14; Garibaldi 2006: 84). It is then straightforward to show that if the employer pays a fixed wage, employees will shirk by exerting the least amount of effort that keeps themselves from being fired. Shirking can be seen as effort avoidance if work is painful, or as a form of on-the-job leisure if leisure is assumed to be preferable over work (Spencer 2009). In either case, the employer faces 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 (Garibaldi 2006; Lazear 1995).

**Personal Fulfillment**

When appropriately-structured, work can be beneficial for an individual’s physical and psychological health, and when work is physically or psychologically stressful, it can harm individual well-being. Conceptualizing work as personal fulfillment focuses on these positive and negative physical and psychological outcomes. Excepting a concern with workplace safety, the emphasis in this conceptualization among social and behavioral scientists is generally on the psychological aspects of work. From this perspective, all work, including manual labor, is directed by the brain, both cognitively and emotionally. Mental

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2 The neoclassical economics model of labor supply (e.g., Blundell and MaCurdy 1999), however, is not very helpful for theorizing work because workers do not care about the quality of work, just the rate of pay and the labor-leisure trade-off. In fact, in this approach, labor supply is not really a decision about working, it is a decision about choosing between consumption and leisure (Spencer 2009).
states such as attitudes, moods, and emotions can affect individuals’ work behaviors; the concrete 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 theorized 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 (Maslow 1943; 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.

The centrality of cognitive and affective mental processes for theorizing work is emphasized most strongly by scholars in industrial-organizational psychology, organizational behavior, and human resource management. 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; Schmidt and Hunter 1998); 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). As a second example, when work is seen as a source of fulfillment, employee monitoring is seen as a positive development tool that can provide feedback to employees and remove barriers to intrinsic rewards, but when work is modeled as disutility, monitoring is seen instead as a threat mechanism to identify and punish those who shirk.
Human resource management scholarship builds on the conceptualization of work as personal fulfillment by assuming that to be effective, human resource management practices must satisfy workers’ psychological needs by managing their cognitive and affective functioning. This is typically seen as a win-win situation by embracing a unitarist vision of the employment relationship. Psychological needs can be fulfilled through fair treatment, intrinsic rewards, and placement into appropriate jobs, employees will reciprocate by being hard-working and loyal, and high levels of organizational performance, including profitability and shareholder returns, will result. In this way, human resource management seeks to recognize the human factor in work in order to improve individual and organizational performance (Kaufman 2008). There are important, provocative critiques of human resource management and organizational behavior that challenge the prescriptive, unitarist declarations of human resource management scholars and practitioners (e.g., Bolton and Houlihan 2007; Thompson and McHugh 2002). These critiques implicitly challenge the individualistic conceptualization of work as personal fulfillment absent concerns with social relations and citizenship rights.

A Social Relation

Work can also be conceptualized as a social relation in which the social context of work is emphasized. From this perspective, work is embedded in complex social phenomena in which individuals seek approval, status, sociability, and power (Granoveter 1985). Work is thus seen as a way of achieving more than the material gains emphasized in mainstream economics or the intrinsic rewards emphasized in industrial-organizational psychology. 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. This incorporation of the social structure into theorizing on work “shifts attention away from seeing the world as composed of egalitarian, voluntarily chosen,
two-person ties and concentrates instead on seeing it as composed of asymmetric ties bound up in hierarchical structures” (Wellman 1983: 157). To conceptualize work as social relation is therefore to see it 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 theorizing work that emphasize the social context, but three major approaches are instructive.

First, theories of social exchange and social networks focus on the social dynamics of interpersonal work interactions. A social exchange is defined as an open-ended, ongoing relationship based on trust and reciprocity that has imperfectly-specified obligations and a multiplicity of objectives—not only money, but perhaps status, respect, and other socioemotional items (Blau 1964; Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005). When work is a social exchange, employees expect to be rewarded or taken care of in the long run, but they are less concerned with how their daily effort ties explicitly to specific rewards. Employees are also predicted to develop emotional attachments to their organization and feel proud to work for that organization. The perceived mutual obligations between employee and employer are also theorized to form a psychological contract (Cullinane and Dundon 2006). Social exchange theory can also explain why employees engage in organizational citizenship behaviors (Wayne, Shore, and Liden 1997). In a related vein, seeing work as a set of interpersonal interactions also means that how an individual experiences work can depend on the characteristics of their social network, or what is frequently called social capital (Portes 1998).

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. In Japan and Korea, workers toil for long hours, and even risk death from overwork—*karoshi* in Japan or *gwarosa* in Korea—because it is socially unacceptable to leave work before one’s boss. In industrialized countries, the concept of a career embodies social norms that grant social approval to continuous, upwardly-mobile paid employment, and devalue workers in low-paid, contingent jobs and women engaged in unpaid reproductive work. In this way, “careers are more than shorthand encapsulations of personal biographies; they are located within—and serve to sustain—a social structure that defines a repertoire of expected behaviors and relationships” (Moen 2005: 190).

Third, a social relations approach to theorizing work can emphasize socially-constructed hierarchies and power relations. Three major examples are Marxist-inspired analyses of the capitalist employment relationship and class (Hyman 2006), feminist theories of patriarchy and gender (Gottfried 2006; Walby 1990), and theories of racial discrimination (Delgado and Stefancic 2001). Marxist-inspired theorizing has a rich history in industrial relations (e.g., Edwards 1986; Hyman 1975; Kelly 1998; Thompson 1989). This reflects a social relations conceptualization of work because capital-labor or employer-employee power dynamics are socially-constructed. As noted by Marx (1867: 188), “nature does not produce on the one side owners of money and commodities, and on the other men possessing nothing but their own labor power.” Rather, capitalism defines the “rights and power over resources” in a particular way and “these rights and powers are attributes of social relations” because they control not how people relate to things, but to each other (Wright 2005: 10). It is through socially-embedded relationships, particularly the dynamics between those who own the means of production and those who do not, that class in a Marxist framework has meaning (Hyman 2006).
When employer and employee interests are assumed to sharply clash in a conceptualization of work as a social relation, the employment relationship is seen as a dynamic space of control and accommodation (Edwards 1986; Thompson and Newsome 2004). If one emphasizes social norms, then control and accommodation occur through the re-shaping of workplace norms (Hodson 2001), organizational culture (Grugulis, Dundon, and Wilkinson 2000), and a variety of other discursive practices (Knights and Willmott 1989). Psychological contracts between employers and employees can also be seen through this lens and interpreted as normative control mechanisms that might appear to make a hierarchical employment relationship seem balanced and thereby provide legitimacy for employee subservience (Cullinane and Dundon 2006).

If one instead emphasizes socially-constructed power structures, then control and accommodation occur through formal policies, rules, and routines. Labor process theory, in particular, focuses on how labor power is transformed into productive work effort in this context of socially-constructed power structures (Martínez Lucio 2010; Thompson 1989; Thompson and Newsome 2004). Taylorism, for example, is seen as an intentional managerial strategy to design work in such a way as to enhance managerial control over workers (Braverman 1974). Service workers can also be controlled through scripts that must be followed when interacting with customers (Leidner 1993). Worker non-compliance or misbehavior can take many forms, including absenteeism, soldiering, misuse of company resources, or forming labor unions, depending on whether employers and employees are struggling over the appropriation of time, work, product, or identity (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999).

**Caring For Others**

Feminist scholarship criticizes the traditional conceptualizations of work in the social and behavioral sciences for being blind to gender issues and for devaluing women.
Neoclassical economics and Marxist sociology, for example, embrace sharply divergent theories of work, but generally focus on paid employment to the exclusion of unpaid household work and other caring activities that do not produce economic commodities. Mainstream industrial relations scholarship is similarly dominated by analyses of workers in traditional, paid jobs. Feminist thought rejects the resulting devaluing of “woman’s work” and emphasizes that it is indeed work (Oakley 1974). 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—as demonstrated by paid jobs in the health care and educational sectors—and except for childbirth, it need not be the exclusive domain of women—as indicated by male nurses and stay-at-home dads—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. The causal explanations for women’s subordinate roles, however, are heavily-debated and include radical feminist theories of patriarchy, Marxist feminist theories of capitalist patriarchy, dual systems theory that combines these two, and post-structural feminist theories that emphasize discursive practices (Jackson 1998).

Conceptualizing work as caring for others brings the human body to the fore because caring work frequently involves bodily interaction (Wolkowitz 2006). These interactions are
highly gendered because they are constructed around assumptions of women as maternal, subordinate, emotional, and sexually passive rather than predatory (Twigg 2000). More generally, recognition of the gendered body at work provides an important avenue for deconstructing traditional portrayals of gender-neutral organizations in which “jobs and hierarchies are abstract categories that have no occupants, no human bodies, no gender,” and “the abstract, bodiless worker, who occupies the abstract, gender-neutral job has no sexuality, no emotions, and does not procreate” (Acker 1990: 149, 151). Specifically, feminist scholars argue that the personal traits believed to be necessary for corporate success are generally seen as masculine (Kanter 1977), good jobs are designed for the ideal employee who works full-time without care-giving interruptions—that is, for male breadwinners (Acker 1990; Williams 2000), the feminization of jobs is pursued within a gendered discourse in which men and women are seen as particularly well-suited to certain types of work (Caraway 2007), and physical appearance is important for success in some service occupations (Gimlin 2007; Wolkowitz 2006). Beliefs about the gendered body in the workplace and the care-giving responsibilities of women therefore 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 heightened levels of sexuality, and paid differently for comparable work (Anker 1998).

Feminist perspectives on work also provide an avenue to a more integrated approach to work. Deeply-ingrained dualities such as production/reproduction, work/family, labor/leisure are roundly rejected in favor of approaches that recognize the interconnected nature of a society’s full breadth of work activities (Glucksmann 1995). Industrial relations needs a deep recognition of the gendered nature of work and a rejection of these dualities, rather than a trite adding of “women’s issues” to the list of industrial relations research and policy topics (Wajcman 2000).
Identity

Individuals create identities to help understand who they are by increasing their understanding of where they fit into the broader world (Owens 2003). Since work is such a major part of many people’s lives, work can be theorized as identity—that is, as a source of understanding and meaning. This can occur on various 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; Stryker 1968). 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).

An important application of conceptualizing work as identity is emotional labor—the effort involved in managing one’s emotions and producing “a publicly observable facial and bodily display,” especially in interactive service work (Hochschild 1983: 7). This projected work identity can conflict with one’s true sense of who they are and produce an inauthenticity reminiscent of Marx’s alienation (Hochschild 1983). Empirical research reveals that emotional labor is indeed related to feelings of inauthenticity (Erickson and Ritter 2001), but under the right circumstances emotional labor can also be rewarding and enhance one’s authentic self (Godwyn 2006). The ideas that work-imposed identities can conflict with self-perceptions of authentic selves has been extended to a number of areas. Organizational change or the re-structuring of jobs can engender resistance because they undermine work-related identities that workers have established for themselves through self-categorization and
social interaction (Jenkins and Delbridge 2007). Leidner (1993) shows how service workers lose a sense of personal identity when they are forced to present themselves in certain ways, such as wearing ugly uniforms or following corporate scripts in interacting with customers. In some Indian call centers, customer service agents that handle calls from the United States are required to suppress their national identity and present themselves as American (Poster 2007).

Postmodern thought provides another important application of work as identity. From this perspective, one’s identity is a fluid and fragile understanding based on discursive practices (du Gay 1996). To see work as postmodern identity is therefore to see individuals as employees embedded in organizations full of discourse—meetings, social gatherings, motivational posters, training sessions, and the like—that constantly (re)shape their understandings of themselves. As such, the individual becomes “an identity worker” who continually incorporates “new managerial discourses into narratives of self-identity” (Alvesson and Wilmott 2002: 622). When the employment relationship is characterized by antagonistic employee-employer interests, managerial discourse to shape workers’ identities is furthermore seen as a form of normative control—an exercise of organizational power to obtain and control worker effort through internalizing the norms and values of the organization (Alvesson and Wilmott 2002; du Gay 1996; Knights and Willmott 1989).

 Putting the Elements Together

The elements of a multidisciplinary theory of work presented here draw upon the range of models of work used across the social and behavioral sciences that are of greatest relevance to industrial relations. With a sharp academic division of labor, the conceptualizations are typically used individually or in small subsets—such as commodity and disutility by economists, a social relation and sometimes identity by sociologists, a social relation, identity, and caring for others by feminist scholars, or personal fulfillment by
psychologists and human resource management scholars. Consequently, the various
disciplinary literatures tend to universalize work—for example, from an economics
perspective, work is always painful; from a psychological perspective, workers always desire
intrinsic rewards. In this way, it would be easy to think that we should be searching for the
best conceptualization—is work disutility or personal fulfillment, is it a commodity or a
social relation, is it a commodity or occupational citizenship? But in constructing a
multidisciplinary theory of work for industrial relations, it is not a question of which
conceptualization is correct, but of what can we learn about work from incorporating all of
them. In other words, work is too complex to be reduced to a single universal
conceptualization. Rather, we should think about how to integrate the theoretical elements of
work identified by the social and behavioral sciences.

Inspired by Hyman’s (2001) insightful “geometry of trade unionism” in which
European trade unions are seen as a mixture of market-oriented, class-oriented, and civil
society-oriented goals and ideologies, the theoretical elements of work can be seen as coming
together in a “geometry of work” of individual, market, and society (see Figure 1). In the
context of Figure 1, an orientation means a certain perspective on the goals of work, the
source of power or constraints, and the locus of activity or decision-making. The individual
orientation consists of the personal (and household) rewards for working, individual decision-
making over work behaviors, and, in some cases, the household as the site of work. The
market orientation includes an emphasis on employers and labor markets to allocate work and
determine the terms and conditions of employment, the importance of work for serving
employers’ goals and economic prosperity, and formal organizations as the site of work. The

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3 One example of an exception to this narrow approach is Green’s (2008) model of employee
discretion that combines a theory of disutility that emphasizes the costs of increased
discretion with a theory of personal fulfillment that highlights the benefits.
society orientation reflects the importance of social norms and other social institutions, socially-constructed power relations, and societal goals.

These three orientations provide common anchors for the elements of a multidisciplinary theory of work. Work as a commodity is primarily a market-oriented conceptualization of work, with some tension with the individual dimension (e.g., attracting individuals to the market) and the society dimension (e.g., society setting the rules of exchange). Disutility and personal fulfillment focus on individual extrinsic and intrinsic goals, but with some tension with the market orientation as the nature of the rewards are determined by markets and employers. Work as a social relation reflects a society orientation (the importance of social influences), but with tension with the other orientations as social norms are constantly renegotiated by individuals, employers, and markets. Conceptualizing work as caring reflects a tension between gendered social institutions and the role of women in the household and the market. Theories of work as identity span the individual (the subject of identity), employer (which seeks to shape employee identities), and society (where identities are validated), though each of them might pull in separate directions. Occupational citizenship embodies a tension between a society orientation (non-market institutions to achieve societal goals of citizenship rights) and the market orientation (as markets and employers wish to govern work based on efficiency, not citizenship).

Furthermore, the tensions between the various conceptualizations can be understood as reflecting the differing individual/market/society orientations of each conceptualization. Seeing work as simply a commodity is criticized for its exclusive emphasis on the market and the exchange value of work. Theories that emphasize disutility or fulfillment are critiqued for their lack of a social context. Feminist scholarship on work as caring for others seeks to break the sharp compartmentalization of market, household, and society in scholarship and public discourse on work. Occupational citizenship is criticized for interfering with the market. A
triangular framework of individual, market, and society orientations can thus help industrial relations scholars build a multidisciplinary theory of work by revealing the tensions and complementarities among the elemental theories of work, and thereby facilitating their integration.

**Putting a Multidisciplinary Theory of Work to Work**

The complexity of work means that an accurate understanding of work requires a multidisciplinary approach. The multidisciplinary traditions of industrial relations make it the natural place for this important initiative to occur. The distinctiveness of such an approach is also important for industrial relations because it can help delineate industrial relations from the traditional social and behavioral sciences disciplines where work is theorized in a narrow, monolithic fashion. Industrial relations frequently imports theoretical perspectives from other disciplines, but the way they are enriched can be unique to industrial relations. A multidisciplinary approach to work in which universal, monolithic approaches are replaced by a contingent, complementary, multifaceted approach can thus help industrial relations preserve its unique standing as a distinct academic field.

But a multidisciplinary theory of work is not just useful for developing a deeper understanding of work, it can also provide an important foundation for understanding the core industrial relations topics, namely the employment relationship and its institutions. For example, rather than seeing the employment relationship as characterized by either employer-employee conflict (and hence, a singular emphasis on employer control and employee resistance) or employee consent (and hence a singular emphasis on employee accommodation and cooperation), the richest models of the employment relationship allow for both conflict and consent (e.g., Edwards 1986). Labor process theory is grounded in the social relation aspect of work and thus emphasizes socially-constructed power relations and norms in analyzing the tensions between and determinants of conflict and consent. To drastically
oversimplify for purposes of illustration, employment relationship conflict is theorized to result from the structure of the capitalist employment relationship in which the employers’ accumulation of surplus comes at the expense of workers; consent can be theorized to come from social and organizational norms supporting acceptance of the capitalist employment relationship, employer authority, and the like. So the employment relationship is seen as characterized by a dialectic of control and accommodation as employers and employees continually renegotiate the terms of the labor process by seeking advantages while also comprising so that the relationship does not break down completely (Edwards 1986; Thompson and Newsome 2004).

The multidisciplinary theory of work developed here can further add to our understanding of the employment relationship by broadening the theorizing on the sources and nature of conflict and consent in the employment relationship (see Table 2). In other words, a multifaceted theory of work provides broader insights to 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? The dimension of 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. The dimension of personal fulfillment hypothesizes a different source of indeterminant effort—unsatisfactory and unfulfilling working conditions—and thereby highlights an alternative method for creating employee consent—designing jobs such that they provide intrinsic rewards. Adding an element of work as caring for others to the theory of work adds another potential source of employment relationship conflict—a gendered structuring of work that privileges men’s work, discriminates against women and “women’s work,” and devalues caring for others. Lastly,
incorporating the dimension of identity into a robust theory of work yields the hypothesis that employment relationship conflict can stem from threats to self-identity, and consequently that employee consent can be crafted through work that promotes positive self-identity.

Note carefully that entries in Table 2 are intended to be read as complements, not substitutes. Table 2 is not meant to suggest that conflict stems from work being painful and less desirable than leisure, or that employment relationship conflicts arises when work in not fulfilling. This is exactly the monolithic approach found within various disciplines. Rather, the industrial relations approach to theorizing work should start with structural conflicts of interest, and then add the additional insights that come from seeing some forms of work as painful, other forms of work as personally fulfilling, and the like. In this way, opening up the hidden abode of production via a multidisciplinary theory of work can reveal a richer understanding of the employment relationship than is possible with a monolithic or uni-dimensional theory of work.

This type of theoretical approach to work can also increase our understanding of work-related institutions. For example, consider employment regulation (see Table 3). If work is modeled as a commodity, then the efficient allocation labor is a key economic objective and employment regulation should focus on policies that improve labor mobility. Through a lens of occupational citizenship, in contrast, there is a significantly broader scope for employment regulation to promote the citizenship rights of workers, such a decent living standards, safe working conditions, and opportunities for exercising workplace voice. Through a theoretical lens of work as disutility, income, not job quality or voice, is the key regulatory goal. In contrast, if work is seen as a source of personal fulfillment, then ensuring the quality of work is a key regulatory objective.

The theoretical perspective of work as a social relation highlights the importance of the power structures that are created through institutions; consequently, power is central to
the understanding of the determinants and effects of employment regulation that this perspective contributes. Seeing work as caring reminds us not to overlook non-commoditized forms of work when analyzing employment regulation, and also to ask difficult questions regarding the desirability of using employment regulation to commoditize caring work (e.g., the marketization of elder care). And theories of work as identity reveal the deep importance of work for self-understanding, and consequently provide a basis for questioning whether employment regulation does enough to promote positive self-identity. Putting all of these perspectives together will yield a deeper understanding of employment regulation, and provide a superior basis for designing regulation, than if work is universalized in a monolithic fashion.

Conclusion

Ackers and Wilkerson (2008) recently asked what industrial relations can add to 21st century social science scholarship, and thereby survive and move forward as an academic field. To their provocative list of answers, this paper adds another—industrial relations can uniquely contribute a multidisciplinary theory of work. While other disciplines focus on specific conceptualizations of work, the multidisciplinary traditions of industrial relations make it well-positioned to draw from and integrate the conceptualizations of work presented here.

This type of approach to theorizing work has multiple benefits. Drawing on key theories in economics, psychology, sociology, political science, and other disciplines would provide another avenue for deepening the intellectual ties between industrial relations and these disciplines. At the same time, embracing the breadth of these theories of work as legitimate elements of industrial relations scholarship can also contribute to the academic field of industrial relations by enhancing our comprehension of the paradigms that make up the field in an inclusive rather than exclusive fashion. If these conceptualizations are seen as
the ways of theorizing work in industrial relations, then pluralist, unitarist, neo-Marxist, feminist, postmodern, liberal market, and other perspectives would all be included in the field.

An increased focus on work—to complement, not substitute for, industrial relations scholarship on the employment relationship and its institutions (Budd and Bhave 2010)—would also help to draw our attention to the importance of individual actors, gender issues, and social institutions, not just formal institutions and organizations, in industrial relations. This would serve both the longstanding normative and analytical faces of industrial relations. Firstly, a richer approach to theorizing work will help remind us that industrial relations is ultimately about people, not institutions (Hyman 1975) and can provide a renewed basis for a the ethical commitment of traditional industrial 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.” And secondly, a multidisciplinary theory of work that moves beyond seeing work monolithically as a commodity or occupational citizenship, and instead seriously confronts the diversity of ways in which workers experience work will create new understandings of the employment relationship and its institutions. As various examples cited in this paper illustrate, some industrial relations scholarship certainly tries to understand work in rich ways. It is hoped that the framework developed in this paper will expand this scholarship. For, to paraphrase Richard Hyman, we cannot understand industrial relations unless we understand work.

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References


Compass 1 (September): 353–70.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work as…</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Exemplars</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Abstract Work</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Commodity</td>
<td>An abstract quantity of productive effort that has tradable economic value.</td>
<td>Production functions and labor demand theory. Competitive wage theory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizenship</td>
<td>An activity pursued by human members of a community entitled to certain rights.</td>
<td>Institutionalist theories. Industrial democracy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Concrete Work</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disutility</td>
<td>A lousy activity tolerated to obtain goods and services that provide pleasure.</td>
<td>Principal-agent models and shirking.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Fulfillment</td>
<td>Physical and psychological functioning that (ideally) satisfies individual needs.</td>
<td>Job satisfaction. Organizational justice. Intrinsic work motivators.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A Social Relation</strong></td>
<td>Human interaction embedded in social norms, institutions, and power structures.</td>
<td>Social exchange theory. Marx’s social relations of production. Labor process theory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring For Others</td>
<td>The physical, cognitive, and emotional effort required to attend to and maintain others.</td>
<td>Feminist theories of patriarchy. Gendered work norms and sex discrimination.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2
Using a Multidisciplinary Theory of Work to Understand Conflict and Consent in the Employment Relationship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work as…</th>
<th>Source of Conflict</th>
<th>Method for Obtaining Consent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disutility</td>
<td>Work is painful; leisure is preferable</td>
<td>Provide source of income and financial incentives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Fulfillment</td>
<td>Work is stressful and unfulfilling</td>
<td>Structure work to be intrinsically rewarding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Social Relation</td>
<td>Work is structured to serve the interests of the powerful</td>
<td>Social norms that disguise inequalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring For Others</td>
<td>Work is structured in ways that devalue caring for others and that serve the interests of men</td>
<td>Structure work to reduce discrimination and conflicts with other spheres of human life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Work creates a negative or contradictory sense of self</td>
<td>Structure work to create a desirable sense of self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work as…</td>
<td>Implications for Employment Regulation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A Commodity</strong></td>
<td>Efficient allocation of labor is foremost concern. Policies that affect labor mobility are key. Ignores unpaid and other forms of non-commoditized work.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Occupational Citizenship</strong></td>
<td>Employment regulation can be a key method for supporting the achievement of citizenship rights so need a broad approach to regulation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disutility</strong></td>
<td>Work is expected to be lousy so minimal perceived need for regulation. Income, not jobs, is important so income support policies are adequate substitutes for employment regulation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Fulfillment</strong></td>
<td>Work should be psychologically rewarding to individuals, so employment regulation should promote individual job quality.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A Social Relation</strong></td>
<td>Institutions and power are recognized as important elements of work, so there is scope for employment regulation to address these issues of institutions and power.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Caring For Others</strong></td>
<td>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.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Identity</strong></td>
<td>Sees the deep importance of work for individuals, and thereby provides a basis for substantive employment regulation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1: The Geometry of Work