

JOBS AND WELL-BEING: REOPENING THE DEBATE



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PART II.

ARE JOBS ESSENTIAL FOR WELL-BEING?

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I.

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

This is Part 2 of an investigation on the relationship between employment and well-being, focusing on the way that knowledge and claims in this area feed into social policy.

The subtitle of the investigation refers to “reopening” the debate on jobs and well-being. We intend this as a reproach to those who have suggested the matter is settled. With the backing of academics and professional healthcare bodies, the Department for Work and Pensions has claimed that there is a firm consensus on the idea that employment is essential for health and well-being, and that joblessness is inherently bad for people. Reopening the debate means asking whether the reality is so simple.

The investigation is divided into three parts. In Part 1, we drew attention to the most influential claims about the relation between jobs and health, showing how these have been used to justify a job-focused policy agenda, centred on the promotion and prescription of employment. This agenda includes features that are often discussed - such as welfare cuts and job-focused conditionality - as well as political developments that are less talked about, such as the coercion of disabled people off benefits and the drive to establish employment as a ‘health outcome’ in healthcare settings.

In Part 2 we turn to the evidence, questioning whether this job-focused policy agenda is truly supported by research on the relation between jobs and health. Against the simplicity of the idea that jobs are essential to well-being, we shed light on studies which show that the relationship between work and health is variable, sensitive to context, and ultimately ambiguous. In the broadest terms, research suggests that having a job is not always good for people, and that the quality of life without work depends on the circumstances.

In Part 3, we reflect on the implications of knowledge about jobs and well-being for social policy, suggesting that there is no justification for the UK's job-focused agenda that is rooted in convincing conclusions on the determinants of well-being. In response, we imagine the broad principles of a less job-focused set of policies. Our suggestions uphold the importance of a right to supported inclusion in employment for those who want it, but also put more focus on the quality of work available, and the possibility of reconstructing unemployment. This opens up the possibility for policies to focus on supporting people's agency, dignity and security when not working.

We also conclude Part 3 with several more philosophical considerations, suggesting that reopening the debate on jobs and health may require a more skeptical attitude in general, regarding the power of public health expertise to 'tell us what to do' politically. This is because we think the future of work and welfare ought to be a question for citizens. It is a question that involves asking what justice means, whose interests may be served by the idea that 'working is good for you', and what kind of society citizens would choose to live in, if they had a genuine choice. The value-laden nature of the debate means the future of work and welfare cannot be left to health experts alone.

We hope this investigation will be useful to health practitioners, policymakers and campaigners who have questioned the unqualified claim that 'jobs are good for you'. We also hope to persuade more people that the claimed consensus on this matter is not all it seems.

David Frayne and Max Maher

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II.

THE DRIVE FOR SIMPLICITY

The drive for simplicity

In the 2016 Improving Lives green paper, the relation between jobs and health is represented by the following diagram:



This diagram broadly reflects the cited findings from the 2006 Waddell and Burton review, which concluded that ‘there is a strong evidence base showing that work is generally good for physical and mental health and well-being’.¹ Such claims suggest that the relationship between jobs and health is not only strong and generalisable, but also in some way natural and unalterable.

We can think of this in terms of a drive for simplicity - the seeking of a straightforward, empirically verified answer to the question of work’s personal significance. In the sections below, however, our method is to show how this drive conflicts with a body of research that adds important context and ambiguity to the picture. Researchers have explored the complicating role played by a range of factors, including the quality of the jobs on offer, as well as the factors that shape each person’s experience of unemployment, such as personal history, the design of the welfare system, and the extent to which unemployment is viewed as a social stigma. Viewed as a whole, this research suggests that the relationship between work and well-being cannot be reduced to the question of whether or not a person has a job, troubling the idea that promoting and prescribing work represents the most rational direction for policymakers.

¹ Waddell, G. and Burton, K. (2006) *Is Work Good for Your Health and Well-being*. London: The Stationary Office. Available at: <https://cardinal-management.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Burton-Waddell-is-work-good-for-you.pdf>

III.

UNEMPLOYMENT AS A LACK OF EMPLOYMENT: THE JOB-DEPRIVATION APPROACH

Unemployment as a lack of employment: the job-deprivation approach

Over the past century, researchers have offered a variety of frameworks for understanding how people experience jobs and unemployment. The understanding woven throughout the UK work and health agenda most closely resembles the job-deprivation approach. In this approach, unemployment is seen as a state of deprivation from the 'normal' psychological nourishment received by workers.²

The influence of this approach has been credited to a formative study by Marie Jahoda and colleagues in the 1930s.³ Using a wide variety of methods, this study produced a detailed psychological portrait of the Austrian town of Marienthal, where the sudden closure of a textile factory led to unemployment among 77% of the community's families. Analysing the suffering they witnessed, the researchers concluded that employment represents a crucial source of psychological nourishment, connecting individuals with five core functions.⁴

These are:

- A time structure
- Regularly shared experiences and contacts with people outside the family
- Links to larger goals and purposes

² For an account of this approach and its influence on unemployment studies see: Cole, M. (2007) 'Re-thinking unemployment: A challenge to the legacy of Jahoda et al', *Sociology*, vol.41(6), pp.1133-1149

³ Jahoda, M., Lazarsfeld, P. F. and Ziesel, H. (1972) *Marienthal: The Sociography of an Unemployed Community*. London: Tavistock (originally published in 1933)

⁴ The functions identified by Jahoda and colleagues are (intentionally or otherwise) echoed in the views of Public Health England, who identified four functions: 'income', 'social interaction', 'a core role', and 'identity and purpose'. See Public Health England (2019) 'Health matters: Health and Work'. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-matters-health-and-work/health-matters-health-and-work>

- A sense of personal status and identity
- Regular activity

According to this model, the loss of employment results in a loss of access to these key goods of work, and it is this loss that explains the decline in health and well-being among unemployed people. Paid work is thus treated as something akin to a fundamental human need, leading to the assumption that all work is beneficial, psychologically speaking. Jahoda writes that 'employment is psychologically supportive even when conditions are bad'.⁵

5 Jahoda M. (1981) 'Work, employment and unemployment: values, theories, and approaches in social research', *American Psychologist*, vol. 36, pp. 184-191. This approach indeed played a significant role in shaping the legacy of unemployment research to come, with many researchers reproducing in their analyses the idea of unemployment as a state of deprivation from one or more of the core needs identified in Jahoda's research. As Cole argues, "the result was that the miserable, broken figures of the Marienthal study were moved closer to constituting the central and exclusive truth of the whole existence of the unemployed". Cole, M. (2007) 'Re-thinking unemployment: A challenge to the legacy of Jahoda et al', *Sociology*, vol.41(6), pp.1133-1149

IV.

THE ROLE OF JOB QUALITY

The role of job quality

A significant weakness of the job-deprivation approach is that it sidelines the importance of job quality. This is a weakness it shares with key documents surrounding the UK work and health agenda, which have focused on the role of employment status (whether or not a person has a job) but commented minimally on the significance of job quality.⁶ References to the need for work to be 'good' in order to benefit health are an empty gesture without any proper attempt to understand what a good quality job entails, and the power dynamics that determine whether such jobs are actually available.

Work can drain and damage people or represent a source of fulfilment, and this is reflected in a range of empirical studies on the significance of job quality. One meta-analysis of the available research found 'robust consistent evidence... that the psychosocial work environment is important for mental health'.⁷ The box below spotlights a number of studies demonstrating that job quality can have a more significant impact on health than whether or not a person is employed.

6 Waddell and Burton's government review, for example, acknowledges that the physical and psychosocial aspects of work can be a hazard to health, but opt out of exploring this avenue due to their assessment that there is 'insufficient evidence'. Waddell, G. and Burton, K. (2006) *Is Work Good for Your Health and Well-being*. London: The Stationary Office. Available at: <https://cardinal-management.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Burton-Waddell-is-work-good-for-you.pdf>

7 Stansfeld, S. and Candy, B. (2006) 'Psychosocial work environment and mental health: A meta-analytic review', *Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment and Health*. vol. 32(6), pp. 443-462. 'Job strain' is defined according to Karasek's 'job-strain model'. A job is 'high strain' if it has high psychological demands and the employee's latitude to make decisions on the job is low.

Job quality matters: insights from quantitative research

Graetz (1993)⁸ analysed data from a longitudinal health questionnaire, submitted to 16-25 year-olds in Australia. Exploring health changes over time and mapping these on to labour market transitions and assessments of job satisfaction, the research suggested that 'the highest levels of health risk are found amongst dissatisfied workers'. Graetz concludes that what happens in the workplace has more impact on health than employment status, advising that more attention be given to 'identifying the conditions and circumstances that make satisfying employment'.

Wanberg (1995)⁹ analysed data from a longitudinal questionnaire conducted over a nine month period, tracking unemployed people who either remained unemployed or moved into employment. The study found that individuals moving from unemployment into a dissatisfying job reported no improvement in their mental health.

Broom et al. (2006)¹⁰ analysed data from a survey of middle-aged Australians, exploring a range of health measures as well as employment status and the presence or absence of 'psychosocial stressors', such as job insecurity, low control at work, or the belief that finding another job would be difficult. The study found that 'poor quality jobs which combine several psychosocial stressors could be as bad for health as being unemployed'.

8 Graetz, B. (1993) 'Health consequences of employment and unemployment: longitudinal evidence for young men and women', *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 36, 6, pp. 715-724

9 Wanberg, C. R. (1995) 'A longitudinal study of the effects of unemployment and quality of reemployment', *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, vol. 46, pp. 40-54

10 Broom, D. H., D'Souza, R. M., Strazdins, L., Butterworth, P., Parslow, R., & Rodgers, B. (2006) 'The lesser evil: Bad jobs or unemployment? A survey of mid-aged Australians', *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 63(3), pp. 575-586.

Butterworth et al. (2011)¹¹ analysed data from seven waves of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics Australia survey, cross-referencing measures of mental health with employment status and 'psychosocial job quality' (a measure of job quality combining adverse job conditions such as high job demands, low job control, job insecurity and the perception of unfair pay). The study found that 'moving from unemployment to a job with poor psychosocial quality was associated with a significant decline in mental health relative to remaining unemployed'.

Chandola and Zhang (2017)¹² investigated the health effects of job transition, comparing the health of formerly unemployed adults who remained unemployed with those who moved into jobs ranked as poor quality (according to variables like pay, security, work autonomy, job satisfaction and job-related anxiety). Measuring a set of biological indicators linked to stress, the study concluded that there is little evidence to suggest that re-employment in poor quality jobs is better for health (and some evidence to suggest that it is worse for health) than remaining unemployed.

With the significance of job quality in mind, some researchers have departed from the job-deprivation approach. Peter Warr, for example, drew on medical terminology to outline a vitamin model of work and health.¹³ Warr outlines nine environmental features or 'vitamins' which are deemed significant for mental health, including the opportunity for control, the opportunity to use skills, externally generated goals, a sense of variety, environmental clarity, access to money, physical security, the opportunity for interpersonal contact, and the experience of having a valued social position. What matters is not whether or not a person has a job, but whether they have access to these key 'vitamins'.

11 Butterworth, P., Leach, L.S., Strazdins, L., Olesen, S. C., Rodgers, B., Broom, D. H. (2011) 'The psychosocial quality of work determines whether employment has benefits for mental health: Results from a longitudinal national household panel survey', *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, vol. 68 (11)

12 Chandola, T. and Zhang, N. (2017) 'Re-employment, Job Quality, Health and Allostatic Load Biomarkers: Prospective Evidence from the UK Household Longitudinal Study', *International Journal of Epidemiology*, vol. 1(1), pp. 47-57

13 Warr, P. (1987) *Work, Unemployment and Mental Health*. Oxford: Clarendon Press

This access could be gained through paid work, or by another means. The vitamin model has greater explanatory power than the deprivation model for making sense of the quantitative studies outlined in the box above, which strongly suggest that moving from unemployment into a job does not always benefit well-being.

Such observations have prompted researchers to investigate what makes a good job. The International Labour Organisation's national assessments of 'decent work', for example, combine nearly a dozen components (each with their own subset of indicators) including employment opportunities; the adequacy of earnings; working hours; whether jobs accommodate family life; job stability and security; fair treatment at work; safety of the work environment; quality of social security (such as pensions and healthcare provision) and opportunities for dialogue and worker organising.¹⁴ There is no consensus among researchers on what precisely constitutes job quality,¹⁵ but we suggest it revolves around roughly five areas:

- **The substance of work** (does the work confer a sense of meaning and allow for the exercise and development of skill?)
- **The level of compensation** (does the work pay well in relative and absolute terms, and does it confer a sense of status?)
- **The extent of control over work** (does the worker have autonomy over what is produced and how, and to what extent are workers subject to surveillance and coercion?)

¹⁴ Osterman, P. (2013) 'Introduction to the special issue on job quality: What does it mean and how might we think about it?', *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, vol. 66(4), pp. 739-752. For the ILO's breakdown of 'decent work' indicators, see: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---integration/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_115402.pdf

¹⁵ For an overview of measures on job quality, see: Kalleberg, A. (2016) 'Good Jobs, Bad Jobs' in S. Edgell, H. Gottfried and E. Granter. (eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of the Sociology of Work and Employment*, London: SAGE; Bustillo, R.M., Fernandez-Macias, E., Esteve, F., Anton, J.I. (2011) 'E pluribus unum? A critical survey of job quality indicators', *Socio-Economic Review*, vol. 9(3): pp. 447-475

- **Working hours and work intensity** (does the job have reasonable hours, does it accommodate other life priorities, and is the pace of work reasonable?)
- **Employment terms and conditions** (does the job offer security and opportunities for advancement?)

The impact of job quality on health may also depend partly on individual perceptions of what is 'good', and the extent to which the job meets individual wants and needs. These perceptions may be shaped by factors like employment history and what workers perceive to be realistic expectations of work, in the overall environment of opportunities.¹⁶

In reality, we also know that job quality has declined along certain key measures. In the three years prior to 2016/17 the number of people living in poverty in working families rose by over one million, and it was found that five in every six people in low-paid work fail to escape low pay over 10 years.¹⁷ In 2017, over 1 million people in the UK worked on a zero-hours contract, with many more in low-paid forms of self-employment,¹⁸ and one measure of job quality (combining working hours, pay level, and whether people have their desired type of contract) found that 31% of female and 35% of male workers in the UK were in poor quality jobs.¹⁹

16 See Lene, A. (2019) 'Job Satisfaction and Bad Jobs: Why are cleaners so happy at work?', *Work, Employment and Society*, vol. 33(3)

17 Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2018) 'Budget 2018: Tackling the rise of in-work poverty'. Available at: https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/budget-2018-tackling-rising-tide-work-poverty?gclid=Cj0KCQjwo-aCBhC-ARIsAAkNQisdqtss-dztOWDMzQEg3LTU_O-Fk-unzEpXdQgpwX5kBOVF_WRvly3waAmpJEALw_wcB

18 ONS (2016) 'Trends in Self-Employment in the UK: 2001 to 2015.' London: ONS; ONS (2017) *People in Employment on a Zero-Hours Contract*. London: ONS

19 ONS (2018) 'Job quality indicators in the UK: Hours, pay and contracts 2018'. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/jobqualityindicatorsin-theukhourspayandcontracts/2018>

If the lack of elaboration around what constitutes 'good work' is a significant shortcoming among advocates of the UK work and health agenda, so too is the scant consideration given to **the power dynamics that shape job quality**. A complex range of economic, political and cultural factors cause industries to shrink and grow, influence how employers design the production process, and impact the latitude of workers to organise to improve working conditions.²⁰ A full exploration of these forces is beyond our scope here, but we should note the tendency for capitalism's competitive pressures and profit incentives to lead employers to take the 'low road'.

A classic study by Harry Braverman in the 1970s explored the industrial technique of profit maximisation through 'scientific management': taking the skill and autonomy out of work by using standardised processes, detailed divisions of labour and employee surveillance.²¹ Recent qualitative studies and workers' testimonies describe the continuation of these techniques in major areas of contemporary work such as distribution warehouses, call centres and fast-food kitchens, where it is now common knowledge that efficiency is being prioritised at the expense of employee well-being and safety.²² These accounts show how labour technologies have diminished the experience of work at the same time as companies have prospered. Labour academics also point to a marked 'polarisation' of work in some countries - a situation in which good jobs have got better, and bad jobs worse, due to a variety of factors including the removal of worker protections and the ability to automate aspects of certain middle-level occupations.²³

20 For an overview of debates on what shapes job quality, see: Kalleberg, A. (2016) 'Good Jobs, Bad Jobs' in S. Edgell, H. Gottfried and E. Granter. (eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of the Sociology of Work and Employment*, London: SAGE

21 Braverman, H. (1974) *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. London: Monthly Review Press

22 See, for example, the participant observation studies: Guendelsberger, E. (2019) *On the Clock: What low-wage work did to me and how it drives America insane*, London: Little, Brown and Company; Woodcock, J. (2017) *Working the Phones: Control and Resistance in Call Centres*. London: Pluto

23 For an overview of what shapes job polarisation, see: Kalleberg, A. (2016) 'Good Jobs, Bad Jobs' in S. Edgell, H. Gottfried and E. Granter. (eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of the Sociology of Work and Employment*, London: SAGE

Authoritative claims about the health benefits of work are problematic if not accompanied by a sincere engagement with the question of what good work involves, as well as the nature of the power dynamics and interests that shape the quality of the work available. Without this engagement, we are left with the false implication that all work is beneficial for well-being.

V.

WORK AMBIVALENCE

Work ambivalence

Research on the health impacts of unemployment spans decades and the results are unequivocal: unemployment is linked to significant declines in both physical and mental health,²⁴ and these declines are also known to have a ‘scarring’ effect on people, compromising well-being in the long-term.²⁵ We suggested above that key documents and claims surrounding the UK work and health agenda resemble the ‘job-deprivation approach’ to unemployment, interpreting this suffering in terms of deprivation from the ‘normal’ psychological nourishment provided by a job. A further problem with this perspective is that it ignores evidence of more ambivalent feelings about employment among citizens.

Several studies have used a ‘Day Reconstruction Method’ (DRM), inviting respondents to create a log of their time-use over the course of a typical day, before later reflecting on the emotions experienced whilst engaged in each of the day’s activities. Research using the DRM suggests that the overall positive association between employment and well-being does not necessarily translate into a positive moment-to-moment experience of working.

In one DRM study with 909 women, Kahneman et al. found that working was the highest scoring activity in the study’s ‘negative affect’ category,²⁶ with a similar study finding that ‘working belongs to the least satisfying times of the day’.²⁷ Building on these DRM studies, more recent research has captured the well-being data of participants in real-time over an extended period, using a smartphone app.

24 Paul, K. and Moser, K. (2009) ‘Unemployment Impairs Mental Health: Meta-analyses’, *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, vol. 74(1), pp. 264-282

25 Clark, A., Geogellis, Y. and Sanfey, P. (2001) ‘Scarring: The Psychological Impact of Past Unemployment’, *Economica*, vol. 68(270), pp. 221-241

26 The moment to moment satisfaction of work was also related to where the work was done (in the workplace or at home) and with whom (colleagues or the boss). Kahneman, D., Krueger, A.B., Schkade, D.A., Schwarz, N. and Stone, A.A. (2004). ‘A survey method for characterizing daily life experience: the day reconstruction method’, *Science*, vol. 306(5702), pp. 1776-80

27 Knabe, A., Rätzl, S., Schöb, R. and Weimann, J. (2010) ‘Dissatisfied with Life but Having a Good Day: Time-Use and Well-Being of the Unemployed’, *The Economic Journal*, vol. 120(547): pp. 867-889

Findings show that engaging in work was one of the least pleasurable activities for respondents, second only to being 'sick in bed'.²⁸ A further study extrapolated from Kahneman's DRM data to construct a hypothetical 'perfect day' - one whose activities and their duration have been optimised for well-being. The study concluded that, based on the data, the 'perfect day' would dedicate a mere 36 minutes to working in a job, compared with the 106 minutes spent on 'intimate relations' (the favourite activity) and the 82 minutes spent socialising (the second most favoured).²⁹

Interview research has also shone a light on citizens who have deliberately chosen to spend less time at work.³⁰ Although they do not allow us to quantify the scale of these attitudes, such studies do reveal some of the common reasons why people reduce their commitment to employment. This includes the desire to get away from excessive workloads and tedious work, the belief that other life priorities have been neglected, the desire to develop skills and interests outside employment, or the broader sense that work compromises individual autonomy. These studies show that the decision to reduce working hours is also commonly prompted by shock events such as the death of a relation, which sensitise people to the value of time.

28 Bryson, A. and MacKerron, G. (2017) 'Are You Happy While You Work?', *The Economic Journal* vol. 127(599): pp. 106-125. The moment to moment experience of work was also mediated by whether respondents were working at home or at the workplace, and whose company they were in. The study suggests people are happier when with their peers, but would still rather be alone than with the boss.

29 Kroll, C., Pokutta, S. (2013) 'Just a Perfect Day? Developing a Happiness Optimised Day Schedule', *Journal of Economic Psychology*. vol. 34, pp. 210-217. The 'optimal day' is based on 16 waking hours and also takes into account the tendency for certain pleasures to yield less satisfaction when they are done more often (or their 'declining marginal utility').

30 For example: Balderson, U., Burchell, B. and Kamerade, D. (2020) 'An exploration of the multiple motivations for spending less time at work', *Time and Society*, vol. 30(1), pp. 55-77; Frayne, D. (2015) *The Refusal of Work*. London: Zed

The above research acts as a useful reminder of the diversity of preferences and attitudes to employment among citizens. It also demonstrates the difficulty researchers face in disentangling the factors that contribute to the decrease in well-being associated with unemployment. Since this does not appear to correspond with a preference for work over other activities, the relationship between jobs and health is more complex than the job-deprivation approach suggests: people may generally suffer in unemployment, but this does not necessarily correspond to a straightforward preference for the activities involved in employment.

In fact, an ongoing study at Cambridge University suggests that the personal benefits associated with having a job can be gained with a minimal investment of time in working. Known as the 'Employment Dosage' project, one component of the study used the UK Household Longitudinal Study to analyse how changes in working hours are linked to changes in well-being.³¹ The study found little variation between those employed with the fewest hours per week (between 1 and 8) and those with the highest (between 44 and 48). The findings of the study are concurrent with the general observation that people in employment experience a greater sense of well-being than unemployed people, but with one crucial addendum: it suggests the well-being benefits of working can be accessed with as little as one day of work per week.

31 Kamerade, D., Wang, S., Burchell, B., Balderson U.S., Coutts, A. (2019) 'A shorter working week for everyone: How much paid work is needed for mental health and well-being?', *Social Science and Medicine*, vol.241

VI.

**THE QUALITY
OF
UNEMPLOYMENT**

The quality of unemployment

The job-deprivation approach to understanding unemployment has been further challenged by a set of approaches which pay greater attention to the individual, showing how personal histories, social situation, values and perceptions can shape the extent to which unemployment is a positive or negative experience.³² These approaches help move our understanding beyond generalities about the personal significance of work.

One step in this direction is the agency model of unemployment proposed by David Fryer and colleagues, which suggests that the negative personal impact of unemployment is not caused by the loss of work per se, but by the potential loss of agency, or the ability to control one's life.³³ Crucially, Fryer's model highlights the possibility for individuals to take a 'proactive' approach to unemployment and enjoy a sense of agency.³⁴ The 'proactive unemployed' perceive the possibility of meaningful activity outside employment and spend their time engaging in self-defined productive and social activities. Drawing on interview research with unemployed people, Fryer suggests that the proactive unemployed are less likely to experience unemployment as psychologically detrimental.

32 See Edgell, V. and Beck, V. (2020) 'A Capability Approach to Understanding the Scarring Effects of Unemployment and Job Insecurity: Developing the Research Agenda', *Work, Employment and Society*, vol. 34(5), pp. 937-948

33 Fryer, D. (1986) 'Employment deprivation and personal agency during unemployment: A critical discussion of Jahoda's explanation of the psychological effects of unemployment', *Social Behaviour*, vol.1(1), pp.3-23

34 Fryer D. and Payne R (1986) 'Being Unemployed: A Review of the Literature on the Psychological Experience of Unemployment' in C. Cooper and I. Robertson (eds.) *International Review of Industrial and Organization Psychology*. New York: Wiley

Douglas Ezzy builds further on this idea in his interpretation of **unemployment as a 'status passage'**.³⁵ This approach suggests that unemployment is not a universal condition, but involves individuals moving from one social identity to another. The impact of this movement is different for different people, and the extent to which it is experienced as personally damaging will depend on the person's goals, the extent to which they identified with work, and whether or not unemployment brings with it a new positive role, which can substitute for working.

Both agency and status passage models raise the broader question: **what conditions make a less harmful experience of unemployment possible?** Empirical research does not offer a complete picture, but elements of personal biography, economic situation and the values that people attach to working have all been considered.

A study by Michelle Silver, for example, drew on in-depth interviews with well over a hundred retired people, asking them about their daily experiences and life histories.³⁶ Silver concluded that whether people develop a satisfying life without a job depends on a wide range of factors, from subjective ones like the expectations of retirement and what work means to people, to more objective ones, such as economic resources and the presence of supportive relationships. Although the study focuses overwhelmingly on discontentment in retirement, it concludes that 'this is not a sentiment that can be generalised', suggesting that whether a life without a job is rewarding or painful is ultimately 'shaped by social institutions and exchanges'.

35 Ezzy, D. (1993) 'Unemployment and Mental Health: A Critical Review', *Social Science and Medicine*. vol. 37(1), pp. 41-52

36 Silver, M. (2018) *Retirement and its Discontents*. New York: Columbia University Press

A qualitative study by Fryer and McKenna suggests that the level of anxiety about the future can have a key role to play. The researchers compared the experiences of redundant and furloughed men, finding that while the redundant men reported a dragging experience of time, several of the furloughed men developed satisfying new routines and enjoyed their time off work.³⁷ This would suggest that factors such as the particular nature of joblessness and level of anxiety about the future can have significant impact on the quality of unemployment (although the research also found marked variances in experiences within the two groups).

Surveying empirical studies of unemployment, O'Brien concluded that the scope for proactive unemployment is significantly affected by previous working experiences.³⁸ People whose primary experience of work has involved low autonomy and a narrowing of skills may find it harder to initiate self-defined activities during unemployment. This supports an observation from the philosopher, Andrea Veltman, whose own evidence review concludes that the cumulative effect of executing other people's decisions throughout working life is a deterioration of the capacity and inclination for autonomy in general.³⁹ Lippke adds speculatively that poor quality jobs can also make individuals feel less worthy of autonomy.⁴⁰ Work that entails a lack of decision making, scripted attitudes, routine operations, and high levels of surveillance and discipline 'send the message' to workers that they are incompetent. This could further inhibit the scope for a more rewarding or active experience of unemployment. Comparably, Silver's study of retired people suggested that 'greedy' professions like teaching or medicine, which leave people with little space to develop outside interests, are likely to heighten the difficulties people experience living without a job.⁴¹

37 Fryer, D. and McKenna, S. (1987) 'The Laying Off of Hands: Unemployment and the Experience of Time' in S. Fineman (ed.) *Unemployment: Personal and Social Consequences*. London: Tavistock

38 O'Brien G. (1985) 'Distortion in unemployment research: The early studies of Bakke and their implications for current research on employment and unemployment', *Human Relations*, vol. 38, pp. 877-89

39 This idea is fully explored in Veltman, A. (2016) *Meaningful Work*. New York: Oxford University Press (Chapter 2)

40 Lippke, R. L. (1989) 'Work, Privacy and Autonomy', *Public Affairs Quarterly*, vol. 3(2)

41 Silver, M. (2018) *Retirement and its Discontents*. New York: Columbia

The factors that shape the quality of unemployment are manifold and difficult to capture in full, but the value of focusing on the quality of unemployment is that it moves us beyond the idea that it is a uniform or predictable experience - that "worklessness = poor health". The research in this area forces us to question whether suffering during unemployment is natural and inevitable. Those studies focusing on the role played by job history are particularly interesting because rather than viewing employment as a source of psychological salvation, they hint at the role poor-quality work can play in making unemployment a struggle in the first place.

In the next two sections, we zoom in to look in more detail at two further factors shaping the quality of unemployment: the role of the work ethic, and the role of the welfare system.

VII.

THE ROLE OF WORK ETHIC

The role of the work ethic

One of the broader societal factors that may impact self-worth and the scope for agency among unemployed people are the cultural values that shape the meaning of joblessness. This is corroborated by a group of studies finding that the experience of unemployment is significantly shaped by the 'level of exposure' to the work ethic: the powerful ideal that citizens achieve status, contribute to society, and live a morally good life by participating in employment. The work ethic designates employment and economic contributions as the most worthy activities, and does not tend to register the social or inherent value of the kinds of activity a person might do outside work, such as caring for family and friends, voluntary work, playing, and other forms of unpaid cultural and political activity.⁴² The studies in the box below suggest that the well-being of unemployed people declines in situations where the work ethic has a stronger influence.

⁴² For histories of the work ethic see: Beder, S. (2000) *Selling the Work Ethic*. London: Zed; Weeks, K. (2011) *The Problem With Work*. London: Duke University Press (Chapter 1)

How does the work ethic shape the experience of unemployment? Insights from quantitative research

Studies suggest that the well-being of unemployed people is linked to the influence of the work ethic - something that varies nationally, across gender, and across various stages of the life course.

Eichorn (2013)⁴³ explored how experiences of unemployment vary according to national norms, using data from the World Values Survey. The study analysed the relationship between subjective measures of life satisfaction among unemployed people and a measure of national 'work emphasis'. Findings suggested that "in societies where the emphasis on the role of work is greater, personal unemployment depresses life-satisfaction more extensively". Eichorn explains this in terms of the feeling of deviating from something that the wider national culture considers desirable.

Strandh et al. (2013)⁴⁴ analysed longitudinal data to look at differences in mental health among unemployed people in two countries, Ireland and Sweden. The research found that unemployment was a more detrimental experience for Swedish women, as compared to Irish women. The researchers' explanation is that the personal identity of Irish women is less strongly tied to the norm of employment than women in Sweden, where labour market participation among women is higher and has been actively promoted.

Hetschko et al. (2014)⁴⁵ conducted an analysis of German panel data, finding that unemployed people experience a substantial increase in life satisfaction upon retirement, even when controlling for other changes in circumstances, such as income. The researchers interpret this as a result of an escape from the shame associated with the expectation to work. Retired people experienced improvements in well-being by leaving behind the negative identity of 'being unemployed'.

43 Eichorn, J. (2013) 'Unemployment Needs Context: How Societal Differences between Countries Moderate the Loss in Life-Satisfaction for the Unemployed', *Journal of Happiness Studies*, vol. 14, pp.1657-1680

44 Strandh, M. Hammerstrom, A., Nilsson, K., Nordenmark, M. Russel, H. (2013) "Unemployment, gender and mental health: the role of the gender regime", *Sociology of Health and Illness*, vol.35(5), pp. 649-665

45 Hetschko, C., Knabe, A., Schob, R. (2013) 'Changing Identity: Retiring From Unemployment', *The Economic Journal*, vol.124(575), pp. 149-166

Longhi et al. (2017)⁴⁶ analysed the impact of job loss on men and women using the UK Household Longitudinal Survey. They found that on average (after controlling for income loss), women's life satisfaction is affected less by unemployment compared to men, although this average gap also conceals internal differences. For example, women who believed that men and women should share the responsibility for both paid and unpaid work suffered more from job loss than those who felt happy with the male breadwinner model. The study concludes that values have a significant role to play in shaping the adversity of job loss, and that these values can be shaped according to gender.

Sage (2018)⁴⁷ analysed data from the European Values Survey, cross referencing a measure of life satisfaction with measures to approximate respondents' work ethic, including how respondents felt about work's overall importance, whether it should come first in life, and whether the idea of receiving benefits is humiliating. The research found that unemployed people with a stronger work ethic have significantly lower levels of life satisfaction than those whose work ethic is weaker. It advises that 'a powerful way of confronting the negative health and social effects of unemployment is to challenge the power of the work ethic'.

The findings of quantitative studies on unemployment and the work ethic complement qualitative studies that have provided more detailed insights into the feelings of shame or deviance often experienced by unemployed people, who believe they are failing to embody the standards set by the work ethic. One study, for example, has shed light on the embarrassment that some unemployed people experience when confronted by the question 'what do you do?',⁴⁸ whereas another explores the troubled accounts of unemployed white-collar men in the US, as they struggle with a sense of failure to meet the ideal of the 'self-made man'.⁴⁹

46 What works for Well-being? (2017) 'Gender and Unemployment - Analysis of Understanding Society: the UK Household Longitudinal Survey'. Available at: https://whatworkswellbeing.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Gender-and-unemployment-report_0157592800.pdf

47 Sage, D. (2018) 'Unemployment, wellbeing and the power of the work ethic: Implications for social policy, *Critical Social Policy*, vol. 39 (20), pp.205-228

48 Frayne, D. (2015) *The Refusal of Work*. London: Zed (Chapter 7)

49 Sharone, O. (2013) *Flawed System, Flawed Self: Job Searching and*

A further study analysed media reports and testimony surrounding suicides among benefit claimants, concluding that the 'internalisation of a market logic' is a significant factor.⁵⁰ Those who commit suicide have been led to feel worthless by a value system that frames productivity as the marker of a good citizen, and welfare claimants as a social burden.

Unemployment Experiences. Chicago: Chicago University Press

50 Mills, C. (2017) "'Dead People Don't Claim": A psychopolitical autopsy of UK austerity suicides', *Critical Social Policy*, vol.38(2), pp.1-21

VIII.

THE ROLE OF THE WELFARE SYSTEM

The role of the welfare system

The focus on unemployment as an inherent threat to health and well-being draws attention away from the health impacts of the welfare system, which itself plays a significant role in mediating experiences of joblessness. Most studies of welfare systems have been concerned with the impact of policy design on the rate of re-employment, but some have turned their attention to the impact on well-being.

The significant impact of the welfare system on the experience of unemployment should not be surprising. The welfare system can control how much income individuals receive during unemployment, with studies showing that the loss of income accounts for a significant proportion of the negative effect of unemployment on well-being.⁵¹ The health impact of the welfare system goes deeper than income, however, and is linked to the personal consequences of benefit conditionality and welfare bureaucracy.

The Welfare Conditionality Project, a five-year UK study, combined interviews with key stakeholders, front-line welfare providers, and unemployed people.⁵² It concluded that making behavioural requirements a condition of benefits had not only been ineffective at moving people into secure employment, but is also linked with other negative outcomes such as increased poverty and worsening health and impairments. The sanctioning regime, in particular, was linked with experiences of depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts.

51 Creed, P.A. and Macintyre, S.R. (2001) 'The relative effects of deprivation of the latent and manifest benefits of employment on the well-being of unemployed people', *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, vol. 6(4), pp.324-331; Paul, K. I. and Batinic, B. (2010) 'The need for work: Jahoda's latent functions of employment in a representative sample of the German population', *Journal of Organisational Behaviour*, vol. 31(1), pp. 45-64; Weich, S. and Lewis, G. (1998) 'Poverty, unemployment, and common mental disorders: population based cohort study', *British Medical Journal*, vol. 317(7151), pp. 115-119

52 Welfare Conditionality Project (2018) 'Final findings report'. Available at: http://www.welfareconditionality.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/40475_WelfareConditionality_Report_complete-v3.pdf

One recent study, based on in-depth interviews with 10 front-line welfare service providers, suggested that UK welfare reforms have encouraged forms of institutionalised violence within the benefits system.⁵³ The analysis suggested that the managerial pressure to focus on 'off-benefit flows', unofficial sanctioning targets, the shift away from face-to-face dealing with claimants, and a backdrop of benefit stigma is encouraging staff in the benefits system to override a sense of moral conscience and make decisions that harm claimants.

Experiences among disabled people have been especially disquieting. Disability and mental health campaign groups have raised deep concerns about the 'mad-making' impacts of welfare reform.⁵⁴ Factors such as increased conditionality and the known injustices of the Work Capability Assessment have put disabled people through extended periods of extreme stress and anxiety. One study from Liverpool University analysed the impact of reassessment for Incapacity Benefits between 2010 and 2013, finding that local areas in England which saw a greater number of people being reassessed saw a corresponding increase in suicides, self-reported mental health problems and prescriptions of antidepressants.⁵⁵ This supports evidence provided by GPs, who have reported increased workloads as a result of the financial hardships caused to patients by welfare reform,⁵⁶ as well as anecdotal evidence linking benefit cuts with increases in antidepressant, drug and alcohol use.⁵⁷

53 Redman, J. and Fletcher, D.R. (2021) 'Violent bureaucracy: A critical analysis of the British public employment service', *Critical Social Policy*, doi: 10.1177/02610183211001766

54 We direct readers' attention to the significant campaign work from groups such as Disabled People Against Cuts, Recovery in the Bin, and the Mental Health Resistance Network. These groups have conducted independent research on the harms of welfare reforms, provided a support network for people grappling with the system, and engaged in significant forms of direct protest in connection with the UK work and health agenda.

55 Barr, B., Taylor-Robinson, D., Stuckler, D., Loopstra, R., Reeves, A., Whitehead, M. (2016) 'First, do no harm: Are disability assessments associated with adverse trends in mental health? A longitudinal ecological study', *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, vol. 70, pp. 339-345

56 BMJ (2014) 'GP's workload climbs as government austerity agenda bites'. Available at: https://www.bmj.com/content/349/bmj.g4300?ikey=e288693f000053d52beb8128b35f546ca28b297c&keytype2=tf_ipsecsha

57 GPs at the Deep End (2012) 'GP experience of the impact of austerity on patients and general practices in very deprived areas'. Available at: http://www.employabilityinscotland.com/media/130417/gp_experience_of_the_impact_of_austerity_on_patients_and_general_practices_in_very_deprived_

Taking a closer look at the accounts of disabled benefit claimants, Ellen Clifford suggests that the distress caused by welfare reform is linked to more than the financial hardship of being denied a benefit claim; it is also linked to the assessment process itself, which is often described as a threat to dignity, couched in a context of 'disbelief' surrounding people's impairments.⁵⁸ Research also shows that the fear of being viewed as 'fit for work' and losing benefit entitlements discourages disabled people from undertaking non-work activities that might bring health and social benefits. One 2018 survey found over half of its disabled respondents saying they would be more active if they were less afraid of losing their benefit entitlements.⁵⁹

Comparative research on the European scale is also revealing. Analysing data from four waves of the European Values Survey, one study explored the relationship between the generosity of national welfare systems and the life satisfaction of unemployed people.⁶⁰ The study concluded that the loss in life satisfaction generally associated with unemployment is considerably less severe for people in countries with more generous welfare systems: 'restrictive benefit systems with short benefit durations and low benefit levels increase the psychosocial burden of unemployment and are thus connected to a far larger drop in life satisfaction'. The most obvious reason is that larger benefit payments provide unemployed people with the financial resources needed to purchase goods. But another significant reason is that less conditional welfare systems are also less stigmatising, reducing the burden on unemployed people to prove that they deserve support.

[areas.pdf](#)

58 Clifford, E. (2020) *The War on Disabled People: Capitalism, Welfare and the Making of a Human Catastrophe*. London: Zed (Chapter 6)

59 Johnson, E. (2018) 'The Activity Trap: Disabled people's fear of being active', The Activity Alliance. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339696753_The_Activity_Trap_Disabled_people's_fear_of_being_active

60 Wulfgramm (2014) 'Life satisfaction effects of unemployment in Europe: The moderating influence of labour market policy', *Journal of European Social Policy*, vol. 24(3), pp.258-272. 'Generosity' in this case relates to the size of benefit payments, as well as the extent to which these may be accessed as an unconditional right.

The significance of the welfare system in mediating the health impact of unemployment is also made clear by the World Health Organisation's 2020 report on health inequities across Europe. The study used a 'decomposition' method, allowing researchers to separate the socio-economic contributors to health inequities across Europe and rank their relative significance.⁶¹ Strikingly, the research found that 'Income Security and Social Protection' is the largest contributor to inequities in self-reported health (with the highest significance rating of 35%). This is compared to 'Employment and Working Conditions', which was the least significant contributor (with the smallest significance rating of 7%). The evidence in this area points firmly toward a need for more robust social protections rather than work prescription.

61 World Health Organisation (2019) 'Healthy, prosperous lives for all: The European health equity status report', Available at: <https://www.euro.who.int/en/publications/abstracts/health-equity-status-report-2019>. The study assessed the relative importance of five factors in shaping health inequities across 36 European countries. The factors are Health Services, Income Security and Social Protection, Living Conditions, Social and Human Capital, and Employment and Working Conditions. 'Income Security and Social Protection' is defined as 'being able to afford to pay for the goods and services considered essential to living a dignified, decent and independent life (such as fuel, food and housing)'. 'Employment and Working Conditions' refers to whether or not a person is employed and the quality of the work.

IX.

SUMMARY

Summary of Part 2

Are jobs essentially good for health?

Taken together, the above studies and approaches move us beyond the idea of an essential link between employment and health. Key studies have drawn attention to the myriad factors that intervene in how employment and unemployment impact a person's sense of well-being, from the various dimensions of job quality, to individual preferences, and the way in which the scope for agency when not working is improved or constrained by factors including personal biography, welfare policy and the presence of the work ethic.

In contrast to the 'drive for simplicity', which we argued underlies prominent claims about the necessity of jobs for well-being, research shows that the relationship between work and health is variable, sensitive to context, and ultimately ambiguous. Our review of the field leads us to the following conclusions:

- **Whether work is supportive of health and well-being depends on its quality along a range of measures.** These measures include contractual conditions (such as job security, pay and hours) and factors relating to the substance of work (such as whether it is experienced as meaningful, allows skill development and permits autonomy).
- **Whether joblessness harms people depends on the factors that shape the experience of not working.** Elements of personal biography, economic situation, the design of the welfare system, and the values attributed to working are among the relevant variables explored by researchers.

These observations lead us to a final conclusion:

- **Citizens' well-being would be best served by combined efforts to improve job quality and the quality of life outside of work, not the single-minded prescription of work that characterises the UK work and health agenda.**

We elaborate this final point in Part 3 of this report, where we conclude with some principles for a less job-focused policy agenda, as well as offering some more general critical reflections on the role played by health evidence in the policymaking process.



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