

Psychology and the International Labor Organization:

The Role of Psychology in the Decent Work Agenda

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The initial development of both the International Labor Organisation (ILO) and the psychological study of working can be traced to a period nearly a century ago when the labor market was in the throes of major changes. Now that many regions of the world are once again facing dramatic and far-reaching transformations in the world of work, we believe that it is important to connect the ILO and the psychological study of work and careers to maximize efforts to enhance the quality, availability, and security of work for all citizens across the globe. In this brief paper, we discuss some of the ways that psychology can inform the ILO mission.

SECTION 1: PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF WORK AND CAREER

Over a century ago, psychologists moved from the laboratory and consulting office to the world of work and careers. Two specific specialties have emerged that focus intensively on the nature of work in the lives of individuals and organizations.

- One perspective, now known as vocational psychology, has concentrated on the experiences of individuals as they plan for and adjust to the challenges of developing a stable and meaningful work life. Vocational psychology has informed the training and knowledge base of career counselors, school counselors, and psychologists who are interested in helping people navigate the many transitions of contemporary life. Increasingly, vocational psychologists are examining the role of human rights, and social identities (rooted in race, social class, ability, sexual orientation, migration, region, and their intersections) in relation to individuals' access and adjustment to work. Vocational psychologists are also exploring how individuals are influenced by conditions within the workplace and emerging from the social and economic network of resources and barriers that support or inhibit access to decent work. This increased focus on the context, broadly conceived, clearly links vocational psychology to the ILO agenda and to related initiatives that have been advanced in the UN Sustainable Development Goals.
- Another perspective, known as work psychology or Industrial-Organizational (I-O) Psychology, has focused on understanding how organizations and employers can use psychology to enhance the quality of their workforces, leadership, personnel selection, training, and related challenges within the workplace. I-O psychology has provided the knowledge base to enrich the work of organizational psychologists, human resource professionals, and others who are focused on developing a vibrant, productive, and effective work environment. Other psychologists from such fields as social, counseling, clinical, and health psychology also have focused on occupational health issues, mental health problems at the workplace, and other issues that are reflected in the Decent Work Agenda that the ILO has advanced.

When considered collectively, the various psychological examinations of work have identified a number of compelling research findings and initiatives that are relevant to the ILO's mission. In the brief review that follows, we summarize some of the major findings that psychologists have contributed to promoting the health and well-being of individuals, organizations, and communities.

- Having access to decent work (using the Decent Work Agenda as a guide) has been associated with individual and family well-being, and thriving communities. In short, people do better in

life when they are working. A stable and secure job provides people with the capacity to survive financially, connect meaningfully to others, and to determine the course of their futures. Moreover, access to stable and dignified work provides people with a powerful means of cohering their own identities, which we explore in fuller depth later in this paper.

- The flip side of the connection between work and well-being is reflected in a very rich literature on unemployment and mental health. Losing a job and/or not being able to obtain access to the labor market is causally linked to the development of mental health problems and increases in family violence. A summary of research findings on unemployment and mental health reveals that the best way to resolve the psychological problems that occur when someone is out of work is to have them obtain a new job that is decent, dignified, and stable.
- The growing prevalence of precarious work is clearly associated with mental health and physical health problems, as described by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and considerable research in psychology. Precarious work is characterized by a lack of explicit or implicit long-term trajectory, inadequate benefits, and deficient opportunities for skill development that might lead to sustainable and meaningful work. Precarious work is often manifested in underemployment, short-term and part-time contracts, or work in the informal economy.
- While work within the traditional labor market has become more precarious, the informal economy is becoming increasingly important for many people, especially those living in the Global South and other less industrialized regions of the world. In some regions of the world, the informal economy can represent up to 80% of the jobs and may be considered as a positive and productive option for meaningful work within some communities. Psychologists have been examining the impact of cultural beliefs, the level of support within one's relational networks, and other structural factors in shaping the nature of work in the informal economy.
- Psychologists have also been exploring the aversive impact of child labor, which remains a major obstacle in achieving the Decent Work Agenda and in promoting decent lives globally.
- Another relevant line of research is on the relationship between caregiving work and market place work. Psychological scholarship is contributing to the understanding of how gendered roles continue to result in unfair work burdens for women, who are often subordinated to caregiving work while also being compelled to work in the marketplace.
- Under certain conditions, work provides considerable opportunities for satisfaction and meaning. Extensive research has demonstrated that decent work is associated with greater resilience in other domains of life and with an enhanced level of health and well-being.

In short, a psychological perspective allows for a better understanding of the relationship between the socio-economic context, diverse work and life conditions, and the overall level of health and well-being of individuals and the stability of communities.

New Developments in the Psychological Study of Work

During the past few decades, the psychological study of work has identified the intersection of social identities within various aspects of the career development process. The impact of racism,

sexism, and classism, along with other forms of marginalization and oppression has been identified as a critical barrier for people seeking stable and decent work. Psychologists have been able to identify how discrimination, harassment, stigma, and micro-aggressions impact on people's capacity to develop and sustain work lives of meaning and purpose.

Similarly, gender continues to play a major role in people's experiences at work, as reflected in many of the ILO's reports. Across the world, major disparities exist with respect to the access that girls have to basic education, training, and post-secondary education. Within psychology, we have been able to identify how gender role socialization impacts the ways in which people consider their options in the workplace. For example, girls and boys are able to identify career options that are "appropriate" for their gender by the time they are in pre-school. The gender-role socialization process affects not just the external attributes of the workforce (such as gender pay gaps, differential representation of men and women in occupational sectors, and distribution of household labor), but also impacts powerfully on individuals' internal aspirations, beliefs, and identities about work.

Other marginalized social identities, such as non-dominant sexual orientations, ability/disability status, and religion all intersect with each other and with other aspects of our identities to influence both individuals' beliefs about themselves and the existence of external barriers in the labor market. Psychologists have been able to identify how oppression and marginalization affect people's identities and their access to opportunities. Building on these movements that are identifying the resources and barriers that frame the career development process, psychologists have now developed new initiatives to promote their growing focus on human rights and justice in the workplace. One of the most notable exemplars of this new focus is in the UNESCO Chair of Lifelong Guidance and Counselling, which has explicitly connected vocational psychology to many of the tenets of the ILO and UN, including the Decent Work Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals. Other initiatives that are exploring the shared space between social justice agendas, public policy, and the psychological study of working have been developed in various parts of the globe, with promising new ideas and programs emerging from these collaborations.

Within the world of theory and research, two new developments, one coming from vocational psychology and the other from I-O psychology, are reshaping discourses in psychology about working. Within vocational psychology, the psychology of working movement has created an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the nature of work by articulating the impact of social and economic factors in the development of both internal and external resources that promote well-being and work fulfillment. In a similar vein, the humanitarian work psychology movement has sought to apply principles and research from I-O psychology to developing nations and impoverished communities with the intention of enhancing opportunities for decent work. Both of these new perspectives share many of the same values and mission as the ILO; for example, the concept of decent work, which is central in both the psychology of working perspective and humanitarian work psychology, provides an explicit connection among these two fields and the ILO.

SECTION 2: IDENTITY AND WORK

The analysis of the influences of the experience of work on how people define themselves is an exemplar of how the psychological study of working can enrich our understanding of the impact of work in people's lives. Working is actually considered not only a productive activity but also as a psychological, symbolic, relational, and social space. At the workplace, for example, people potentially and ideally have the possibility to express themselves and their personality, to learn and grow, to identify and interact with others within a social group, and to find meaning and purpose in their lives. A psychological approach to the act of working as a psychosocial phenomenon is then pertinent to understanding what links people to work beyond the prescribed tasks they are paid for. Identity and identity development are therefore considered as a core psychosocial dimension affected by the experience of working.

Identity Tensions

Identity consists of the answer people give to the question "Who Are You?" In this question, the "You" reflects both an individual and a group identity resulting from the combination and articulation of personal and social facets. *Personal identity* is the definition that a person gives of himself or herself throughout different, sometimes disparate life experiences and roles; this might lead to the feeling that one is the same person at home (e.g. as a husband or wife, as a parent), at work (e.g. as a colleague or as a professional), as well as in leisure activities (as a friend or as a hobbyist). The question of identity also implies the dimension of time and the search for continuity between the past, present experiences, and self-projections in the future. Personal identity processes underlie a double tension: the challenges of balancing *sameness* and *difference* throughout life experiences and *continuity* and *change* over time.

Social identity refers to how people define themselves in relation to the social groups to which they belong, as well as to those they do not belong. Life experiences are never isolated from the social sphere and every role a person is engaged in involves being part of something bigger than the individual. For example, the transition to parenthood not only consists of preparing to take care of a child and changing the concrete organization of one's life, but also in integrating a new social role and being socially represented as parent or caregiver. Social identity processes entail, then, another tension that people must cope with, namely between the feeling of *belonging* to a social group that is more or less socially and personally valued and the search for *uniqueness*. For example, a soccer goalkeeper might both feel a sense of belonging to a team—and of being more or less proud to belong to it—and struggle to be defined as a goalkeeper with unique characteristics.

Because people always occupy parallel roles, the general identity of an individual, also known as self-concept, is the result of the combination and articulation of the *multiple identities* constructed in each of these roles. The global definition I have of myself results from my multiple roles as a family member, as a leisure person, as a partner, as a worker, and as a friend. These multiple identities are systemically embedded and the general self-concept depends on the relative importance people attach to each social role they are engaged in. For example, a student having academic difficulties might preserve a

strong general identity thanks to popularity among friends and skills at sport, if sports and social relationships are more central in life than academic achievement.

Identities are not only multiple but also constantly *in construction*. People are in a constant process of rethinking and redefining their identities by considering and conciliating their environment, who they want to be, and their understanding of who they are. Identities evolve according to people's development and life course, as well as in relation to their life experiences and social interactions. Currently, this continuous identity development is crucial because social structures (e.g. family, work, and leisure) are changing faster than ever and are a less stable external point of reference for identifications and identity construction. For example, family structures are taking multiple new forms, and family roles are less predictable and stable, pushing people to constantly adjust their definitions of their own roles within the family. The increase in social mobility also forces people to frequently reinvent themselves in relation to others, in effect redefining themselves each time they integrate a new life context or culture (e.g., building new relationships). Given the multidimensional and evolving nature of identity processes, people also must cope with an *integration-fragmentation* challenge, which is another form of identity tension. This dimension of the identity process involves having an integrative posture on one pole when people are able to harmonize their different social roles; the other pole is characterized by fragmentation, which occurs when people split their social roles in an effort to protect their general self-concept from identity threats coming from a given life sphere.

Identity and Work

Like other postmodern social structures, post-industrial labor markets are characterized by frequent and rapid change, increasingly complex transitions, and unpredictability. As a result, the work sphere is less capable of offering people stable external and stable points of reference for the construction of their identities. For example, a decreasing number of workers can identify as being part of an organization, knowing that they probably will want or have to change employers or being unsure that the current organization will even exist in the long term. Because people have to cope with diverse sources of identity tensions throughout multiple, and often fragmented, marginalizing experiences on the labor market, identity work—that is people's efforts to (re)form, maintain, or repair their identities—is currently intensive and psychologically demanding. As such, we understand and analyze identities at work focusing on the notion of *subjective career*, which reflects how people define themselves at work and as workers according to their perceptions of continuity through or despite constant change.

Despite the rapid evolution of the structural configuration of the labor market due to globalization, work is considered in many cultural contexts (although not all) as one of the most *central life spheres* for identity construction. Work is seen, among other functions, as allowing and promoting social recognition and social mobility. When a person is not engaged in remunerative work, she or he generally tries to find a defensible explanation or justification of the reasons why he or she does not work (such as "I am in a transition phase" or "I'm running a business" for people working in the informal economy). Naturally, considerable variability exists in the extent to which cultures value remunerative work, with some cultural contexts providing people with diverse alternatives for meaningful and rich lives outside of the

market place, such as caregiving work, volunteer experiences, and other community-based activities. What happens at work strongly influences people's lives outside of work, and vice-versa. Accordingly, one's identity at work is recognized to have important impacts on one's general self-concept. Moreover, the growing appreciation of the myriad ways in which people find meaning in their lives (which may or may not occur through remunerative work) is creating a multi-faceted understanding of the importance of work in the development of identity.

Given the focus of this paper on the ILO's Decent Work Agenda, we return to the concept of identity at work by exploring the question "Who Are You... and Who Are You Not... at Work?" which generally covers two dimensions: work identity and occupational identity. *Work identity* concerns the statutory aspect of work, regardless of what you do, in your job. It is constructed in contrast to people who do not work, such as students or unemployed people, and depends on how individuals identify with, value, or attach meaning to their role as a worker. *Occupational identity* concerns the vocational aspect of work and consists of the answer to the question "Who Are You... and Who Are You Not... as a professional," that is, as a worker in a specific occupation. People define themselves at work according to the characteristics and social representation of the trade or the job they do, and to what this job evokes for them (e.g., in terms of prestige or gender stereotypes). Their occupational role identification might then be more or less strong and assumed. For example, people who do jobs that are socially or morally less valued (low skilled jobs in some contexts or working in the informal sector in other contexts) often have to develop arguments—for themselves and society—to preserve a positive identity at work.

Identity Threats in the Work Sphere

Considering identity at work as the combination of *work* and *occupational* identities stresses that identity at work depends both on the opportunity to work—which contrasts workers vs. unemployed people—and on the quality of the work experience—which contrasts decent vs. indecent working contexts. Decent and sustainable work provides clear answers to the "Who Are You at Work?" question, for both work identity and occupational identity. Moreover, decent, purposeful, and meaningful work contributes to positive identity development. For example, being proud and happy to practice a given profession will contribute to people's hope for the future that will, in turn, have an impact on their well-being. On the other hand, however, identity construction at work is threatened for two groups of people: unemployed people or those engaged in chronically precarious work and workers doing "indecent" work.

The first identity threat concerns people living in marginalized contexts, that is *people permanently or recurrently excluded from the work sphere*, particularly when exclusion is not a choice and is unpredictable. Their answer to the "Who Are You at Work?" question is, "Nobody," which indicates that their work identity cannot be constructed because the work sphere is "empty." Their identity construction within their work role is impossible or, at best, unsteady. Unemployed people or those engaged in chronically precarious work do not have access to the status of "worker," which may be stigmatizing. Additionally, given the centrality of the work sphere for individuals' construction of their general identities across many regions of the globe, the lack of a work identity tends to spread to other life spheres—family, social relationships—which threatens their general self-concepts. For example,

psychologists have demonstrated that long-term unemployed people have a higher risk of developing chronic illness, addictions, mental health problems, and experiencing social isolation.

Having a job or an occupation is a necessary condition for developing a positive identity at work, but it is not sufficient. The second identity threat concerns *people who work without access to decent work*. Although they might be able to construct a work identity (i.e., they identify themselves as workers and endorse the worker status and role), their occupational identity might be affected. Workers doing “indecent” work answer the “Who Are You at Work?” question with “Someone I do not value” or basically “I do not know.” This scenario is less documented in research and deserves more attention, particularly in socioeconomic contexts that tend to marginalize substantial communities of adults who are seeking work. Identity at work depends on the personal and social meaning and purpose people attach to work and, consequently, on the degree of meaningfulness of the job they are currently engaged in. “Indecent” work is often associated with a negative meaning because it does not provide the psychological purpose workers expect from it in that it does not fulfill values and functions people ideally attach to work. When work is not decent, the resulting experience threatens the identity dimensions of continuity and belonging; in this context, people often struggle with constructing future plans on the basis of their current and past experiences and often feel disconnected from others and the broader social fabric. Like unemployment, it might also have negative impacts on identity building processes in other life spheres and on general self-concept, which leads to fragmentation of a person’s life spheres.

To recap, professional difficulties, unemployment, poverty, and precarious work have an impact on people’s identity construction at work and on their general self-concept. In turn, these conditions have an impact on their mental health. They also affect their ability to position themselves in the labor market in order to get decent jobs and, thus, to have access to decent lives. This negative spiral keeps people in chronic situations in which the levels of distress are also chronic. This may be especially the case in emerging countries where contextual resources are scarce. If jobs and decent jobs are not accessible to people, identity at work might be replaced by an identity associated with some non-market-place activities. And even when people can access work, the quality of it might not be decent and working may not fulfill the psychosocial needs people expect from it. The question that we can raise here is: what is the cost of these changes in the work force on the welfare of people and communities? Ensuring survival, of course, is central in our lives, but the loss of meaning, purpose, and identity can have devastating impacts around the globe (e.g., the rates of depressions or family violence are empirically linked with this problem). Psychology can help to answer these questions and perhaps develop optimal solutions as work becomes more precarious, especially for those without 21st century skills. In this context, and given the central role of work in the formation of personal and social identities, we claim that decent work should be considered as a core human right.

Identity as a Resource

An analysis of the relationship between identity and work is central not only to identifying the threats of unemployment and “indecent” work and to prevent or limit these risk situations; it also leads to the understanding of positive career paths that can generate interventions aimed at fostering

successful professional trajectories. When working has positive meaning, workers are able to link the work sphere with their general self-definition. The congruence between professional activities (what people do at work), the values associated with these activities (what they consider useful and important to do at work), and identity (the definition of self at work) can promote and sustain work engagement and work satisfaction, which, in turn, fosters productivity and health at work and elsewhere. Moreover, when professional activities are in line with individuals' expectations (in terms of content or benefits), these activities contribute positively to individual identity. This identity gives meaning to one's work, which promotes not only work engagement and health at work, but also overall well-being. This causal sequence is, however, moderated by contextual and systemic factors, such as the ebb and flow of the labor market, the welfare system, political decisions, and different degrees of marginalization according to people's ascribed social identities (e.g., gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.).

When people accumulate several jobs or have occupational paths with a succession of disparate jobs, finding meaning and subjective coherence in these different work experiences is crucial, yet very challenging. In this case, work identity functions as a meta-cognitive skill that helps to organize these different experiences in a coherent and meaningful overall structured representation. This representation fosters meaning both for realities occurring in different social spaces and at different times by structuring events coherently as they occur in different contexts (at work, in family, etc.) and at different moments in one's life. This socially defined self-representation also includes expectations concerning the interactions between people and their social, cultural, and economic environment. The prospective component of this self-representation demonstrates that it may contribute to helping people guide themselves in their interactions with their environment and may help them to cope with constraints. This identity may help people to activate and allocate their resources or to seek support in order to achieve their goals. Taking into account people's identities provides a better understanding of the link between access to and the sustainability of decent work, which largely depends on both external working conditions and internal well-being, which is characterized by subjectivity.

The idea that identity can function as a meta-cognitive competency and contribute to the organization of people's self-representations implies that identity also contributes to self-directedness. In this context, identity helps people to manage their professional paths and life courses and contribute to their overall well-being. Helping people to develop their meta-cognitive competencies and helping them to develop and structure their work and overall identities will contribute to helping them to self-direct their life course and improve their ability to have access to decent jobs and work, if the context offers such conditions. For this reason, action at the individual level, taking into account psychological aspects, must be complemented by action on the social, economic and political levels.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Vocational and I-O psychology have been concerned for many years with challenges that are also central in the Decent Work Agenda. If precarious work is known for being associated with mental and physical health problems, it has also been demonstrated that access to decent work promotes overall well-being at work and in other life domains as well. Vocational and I-O psychology can contribute to describing the relationship between the socio-economic context, work and life conditions, and well-

being at a social and individual level. Promoting access to decent and sustainable work implies also promoting social justice and fighting against social inequalities. However, decent work should not only be described in terms of objective work conditions, but also in relation to subjective career perceptions. Indeed, access to a decent work is also a form of social recognition that sustains people's positive identity development. This development in turn contributes to people's ability to cope with new life contexts or cultures.

This report reflects input from its three authors as well as a number of colleagues from varied regions of the world, who have helped to ensure that our contribution is as meaningful as possible across diverse nations and regions. We believe that the time is urgent for more intentional and systematic collaboration among labor economists, policy analysts, government officials, and psychologists interested in work and careers, so that we can ensure that the full range of experiences of people and communities are considered carefully as our world adjusts to a rapidly shifting work climate.

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