

## Good work, poor work? We need to go far beyond capitalism to answer this question

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Although framed under the title “*Work: what is it good for?...*” Mumby's (2019) article is ultimately providing an answer to a different question, mainly how particular macro-level factors at the political, economic and societal level affect the way people relate to work, and

how the role and experience of work has changed historically. Within the field of industrial-organizational (IO) psychology, we have a long tradition of examining how employees experience work through the study of work design, which pertains to the content and organization of one's work tasks, activities, relationships and responsibilities (Parker, 2014). As researchers who have, in recent years, sought to redirect attention to the relatively untapped question about the contextual influences on work design, albeit from a distinct theoretical perspective, we welcome Mumby's analysis. At the same time, we argue that Mumby provides a partial analysis of the influences that shape work, and we disagree with his apparent conclusion that, given current socio-political trends, work is irreparably damaged. We assert that the influence of socio-political systems on work is not deterministic because first, socio-political factors interact with other multi-level factors, and second, because decisions at various intermediary levels influence how macro-level effects trickle down to shape individual work experiences.

The overview of our research journey in this area provides a more nuanced, and ultimately more optimistic perspective. We build on an earlier analysis by Holman, Clegg, and Waterson's (2002) which identified three main paradigmatic perspectives on work design (i.e. functionalism, interpretivism and critical theory) and concluded that despite their fundamental differences, these perspectives all seek to answer some fundamental questions around 'How do jobs get to be the way they are?'; 'What are the roles, motives, and values of the various actors in these processes, and how do they exert power?'; and 'What are the impacts of new technologies and new working practices on work design?'. We use these questions to organize our commentary.

### **How do jobs get to be the way they are? Going beyond socio-political influences.**

Adopting a critical theorist perspective, Mumby (2019) identified the socio-political ideological forces of capitalism and how they affect work. However, the essay considers this

factor in isolation and focuses its analysis on only one type of influence, that is, a deterministic and top down process. We acknowledge that IO psychology has been similarly narrow in its approach to work design, which by and large adopts a functionalist paradigm grounded in human relations theory (Holman et al., 2002). In the case of IO psychology, research has predominantly focused on the outcomes of work design, with considerably less attention directed towards understanding its antecedents.

These distinct, but narrow, perspectives on work design have led scholars to call for broader and integrative analyses of the forces that shape work design (Clegg & Spencer, 2007; Parker, 2014). In an effort to address this need, we recently drew together the disparate literature that spans diverse theoretical perspectives to propose an integrative framework about ‘where work designs come from’. The framework summarizes the various ways in which higher-level external forces shape work design both directly and indirectly, including their interactions with lower-level forces such as managerial decision making and employee job crafting (Parker, Van den Broeck, & Holman, 2017). Similar to Mumby (2019), our framework acknowledges the role of the macro-level context and especially the characteristics that stem from capitalist regimes grounded in neo-liberalism, including market liberalization, globalization, and international supply chains. However, one of our key conclusions is that the effects of these macro level characteristics are not predetermined, and they can be mitigated by decisions and processes at other levels, ultimately leading to different experiences of work. In international supply chains, for example, dominant organizations may coerce suppliers to minimize costs, which typically leads to poor quality work designs. Yet, dominant organizations can equally select suppliers who provide high quality work to their employees when customers raise their ethical standards (Holman, Lamare, Grimshaw, Holdsworth, & Marchington, 2012), leading to better job design.

Further, although national-level influences are discussed by Mumby (2019) when highlighting the role of the democratic state and its (lost) abilities to protect against the worst excesses of capitalism, our review highlights a more complex picture. To start with, research actually indicates that, unsurprisingly, healthier economies foster better work designs, most probably because they are able to maintain reduced levels of unemployment and increased gross domestic product (GDP). These are thought to create conditions that stimulate organizations to invest in positive work practices (Parker, Van den Broeck, et al., 2017). Further, national-level institutional factors also shape the way in which macro-level influences translate into organizational practices, such as when strong trade unions or active national employment policies lead to high quality work in coordinated capitalist countries (Holman, 2013). Also, national regulations around work practices can generate differences in the quality or experience of work even within the same occupation, such as in the case of registered midwives, who in the US have their activities restricted to planned home births only, while in Canada they can also practice in hospitals or birth centers (Vedam, Stoll, Schummers, Rogers, & Paine, 2014).

Even within nations, there can be large variations in the quality of work as a result of organizational choices. Decisions made at organizational levels to invest in permanent workers may, for example, enable the development of a highly skilled work force, which in turn allows for the emergence of more complex jobs with more autonomy (Kompier, Fekke Ybema, Janssen, & Taris, 2009).

In sum, the macro and socio-political level highlighted by Mumby's (2019) focus on capitalism is just one aspect of the context that shapes work design, but its ramifications are not as straightforward if we consider all the associated forces that operate at different levels. The influence of this macro level factor can be shaped by decision making processes, both of people in position of formal authority as well as employees themselves. We expand on this point in more detail next.

**What are the roles, motives, and values of the actors in these processes, and how do they exert power? A more nuanced look at how ‘managerial logic’ operates**

Mumby (2019) seems to imply that “managers” are universally and intentionally focused on controlling employees. The idea that all managers make conscious and deliberate efforts to exploit employees is, however, in our view too simplistic.

First, stemming mainly from labor process theory, Mumby (2019) argues that managers not only adopt Taylorism as a direct way to deskill and control workers, but also design jobs in line with human relations theory. However, this latter approach is seen as no more than an attempt to indirectly control employees. In other words, there is no meaningful difference between Tayloristic and enriched job designs (i.e. jobs in which employees have autonomy to make decisions about their work, varied tasks and an opportunity to use and develop their skills). Research, however, documents systematic differences between these two approaches in terms of how employees experience work and how they feel, think, develop and perform as a result of these experiences. As summarized by Parker, Morgeson, and Johns (2017), considerable evidence supports the benefits of enriched work, ranging from well-being (e.g., job satisfaction, engagement) to psychological growth such as self-efficacy, meaning, to even improved physical outcomes (e.g., reduced musculoskeletal injuries, cardiovascular disease). Evidence shows that employees themselves also proactively craft their jobs to become more enriched, suggesting they indeed favor such types of jobs (Rudolph, Katz, Lavigne, & Zacher, 2017). This evidence does not necessarily contradict the idea that practices such as job enrichment can serve as ‘indirect’ control mechanisms, but the resulting improvements in job quality equally serve the interests of employees by facilitating meaningful work that supports worker growth and health.

A second challenge to the idea of ‘managerial control’ is that the design of Tayloristic jobs might not necessarily be an organized effort of one party to exert control over another.

Campion and Stevens (1991) developed a simulation that asked participants - a sample of undergraduate and MBA students - to allocate tasks to four different jobs. Using this simulation, these researchers showed that 'naïve' job designers showed a natural tendency to design simplified, low control jobs. While this resonates with the idea that the Tayloristic mentality is pervasive, it also suggests that it is not a uniquely managerial behavior.

We took these ideas further in our own work. After replicating the effects found by Campion and Stevens (1991), we expanded the samples to look at managers, as well as other human service professionals who are likely to be involved in decisions that shape the work of other people (Parker, Andrei, & Van den Broeck, 2019). The "natural tendency" to design simplified work was also evident in these expanded samples. Even human service professionals were not immune to it, despite their social science education and purported understanding of human motivation. This suggests that the "managerial logic" of control does not manifest only at managerial levels; it occurs amongst many of the people who participate in work design.

Third, our research challenges the idea that managers universally and deliberately apply "managerial logic". We modelled possible drivers and mechanisms in order to better understand how such a logic perpetuates, specifically, who is more or less likely to design enriched work. Our findings suggest that one propagation mechanism is not entirely premeditated: a consistent driver of work design behavior was the work design of the person making the decision. Specifically, when participants themselves had higher job autonomy, they also made decisions that led to more enriched jobs for others. These findings hint toward the possibility of virtuous or vicious spirals, in which good work design leads to good work design, while bad work design helps propagate bad work. We assume that these influences operate rather implicitly – that is, people's own work experiences serve as implicit learning for what work should look like, and this knowledge is applied rather automatically when people are in positions to make decisions that have implications for the work of others. In line with this

assumption, explicit knowledge did not mediate the relationship between the participant's own work design and work design behaviors. We likewise found that professionals with expertise in the topic of work design (i.e., IO professionals) were more likely to design enriched jobs, with our research suggesting that this was not due to their superior work design knowledge, but rather the opportunity for work experience and field practice that enables the acquisition of implicit knowledge about good work design. Our work thus suggests that at least some of the mechanisms at play in propagating poor work designs are implicit in nature.

Our extended research has identified further drivers of work design behavior. In the above study, we also showed that individuals with particular life values (high openness and low conservation values) are more likely to design enriched work. Likewise, in some of our ongoing projects we find that a power priming automatically leads to participants creating worse jobs for others as it prompts them to more readily adopt the perspective of the organization not of the individual employee (McIlroy, 2016). Similarly, a degree of psychological distance between the local work designer and the job incumbent automatically triggers less enriched work design for the latter (Hodge, Andrei, & Klonek, 2019). Our qualitative work suggests that managers design jobs differently when they want to be in control versus when they see themselves in the service of their employees, although several boundary conditions influence managers' desire and capability to foster high quality work, ranging from their own work design (e.g. role overload) to organizational factors such as the organization's size, culture and financial situation (Van den Broeck, Andrei, & Parker, 2019).

Taken together, our and others' research suggests that there are reasons "beyond capitalism" that explain why job designers and others sometimes create deskilled work for employees. Thus, while we concur with the idea that Tayloristic work has become a "taken for granted" way of organizing work, research provides insights into why this has happened, some

of the mechanisms through which this phenomenon propagates further, and potentially some ways in which we can intervene to change things.

### **What are the impacts of new technologies and new working practices on work design? A more optimistic view on future work**

Although Mumby's analysis is predominantly oriented at making sense of the past, he portrays a rather pessimistic view of future work. We certainly concur that capitalism and neoliberalism can create forces towards work intensification and exploitation. But these are not the only influences that will shape future work. At the global level, for example, we face a shift in economic power, ecological changes of global warming, and a shortage of natural resources. At the societal level, the aging population and new migration patterns as a result of climate change are demographic shifts that change the consumers, the available work force, and how work might need to be executed. At the organization level, organizations need to be able to adapt quickly to dynamic market conditions, such as in the case of companies that used to provide products (e.g., cars) increasingly now having to provide services (e.g., rides offered by Uber). Technologically, the revolution of Industry 4.0 with artificial intelligence, robotization and the internet of things have profound implications for what tasks humans carry out, and the way these tasks are organized (Liao, Deschamps, Loures, & Ramos, 2017). Even at the individual level, with new generations entering the workforce with vastly different technological upbringing (and possibly different values), we can expect to see changes in the sort of work that people might accept or seek to craft.

All of these changes have the potential to shape what work is, and its quality. But the jury is still out on whether these changes will make work better or worse. Some see these disruptions of the world of work as inevitable causes of unemployment and deterioration of the quality of the remaining jobs (Frey & Osborne, 2017). Much in line with Mumby (2019), these commentators highlight the increase of micromanagement, pervasive surveillance, and the



unequal distribution of information and decisional power as reaffirmation of the neo-Taylorisation of work. For others, socio-political, organizational and technological changes will displace some jobs, but these will be replaced by jobs that are higher in cognitive complexity, allowing for a net increase in safe, rewarding and collaborative jobs (e.g., Cirillo & Molero Zayas, 2019).

Our view, shared with others, is that neither the optimistic nor the pessimistic view should be assumed. Rather, as Pfeiffer (2017, p.23) observed, “tomorrow’s reality emerges from the outcome of today’s decisions”. Thus, we need to take active steps to make work better. Mumby (2019) suggests that macro-level political and economic forces determine work design, with others (e.g., managers, engineers, HR-professionals and even employees themselves) being rather powerless stakeholders. In contrast, we highlight that work design is the result of many agents’ choices, giving rise to multiple levers for achieving better work now and in the future, such as specific national policies and institutions, new organizational structures, education of managers and other local designers, and empowering employees themselves. For example, the UK’s EPSRC’s principles for robotics, and Europe’s General Data Protection Act, are high level policies that affect work quality. At the same time, and at the other end of the spectrum, in our work we have introduced programs to teach managers more about work design (see, for example, [smartworkdesign.com.au](http://smartworkdesign.com.au)). In other words, “multiple choices, or work organization solutions” (Parker, Van Den Broeck, et al., 2017, p. 268) are possible and indeed needed, and multiple actors need to take the lead in starting to shape good work today.

To do so, however, discipline and paradigm borders need to be crossed to provide a complex account of the ways in which work is shaped by larger forces, as well as to actually change work. To this end, we concur with Parker and Grote (in press), who advocated that IO psychologists need to work collaboratively with other disciplines (e.g., human factors, sociology, information systems, labor economics, and strategy) to not only influence work

design when new technology is implemented, but to actively influence the actual design of that technology in the first place (e.g., the design of algorithmic management systems). Parker and Grote (in press) have called for broader changes in the field of IO psychology to support a more proactive, intervention-oriented and inter-disciplinary approach to research and practice, such as increasing incentives for these different types of research, including design as a topic in the education of IO psychologists, and supporting engagement in policy-oriented advocacy. So - whilst we argue it is important to go beyond the deterministic view presented by Mumby (2019) – we also accept that, if we are to proactively improve work more so than hitherto, the field of IO psychology needs some reorientation.

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