Contested Ideas About Work: The Crowding Out of the Occupational Citizenship Conceptualization of Work

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Introduction

• Claim: Citizenship at work is hard to achieve because other ways of thinking about work dominate public discourse

• Conceptualizations (mental models) of work actively structure our understandings of and our experiences with work by providing frames of references, norms, values, and attitudes toward work that actors translate into specific practices

Conceptualizations of work

Research questions
- HR practices
- Public policies
- Judicial interpretations
- Social approval
- Economic resources
Introduction

• Because conceptualizations of work have real consequences...
  • ...the public discursive space in which work is defined is contested terrain
• To better understand issues of citizenship at work, it is important to explicitly consider the diverse ways in which work can be conceptualized
  • I’ll use a broad framework of 10 conceptualizations of work
  • So a citizenship conceptualization is just one of many, and it’s been crowded out by alternative views
The Many Faces of Work
Conceptualizing Work

- Using the disciplinary theorizing on work found in the humanities and social and behavioral sciences...

- Work as
  1. a Curse
  2. Freedom
  3. a Commodity
  4. Occupational Citizenship
  5. Disutility
  6. Personal Fulfillment
  7. a Social Relation
  8. Caring for Others
  9. Identity
  10. Service
Conceptualizing Work

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- Work as 1. a Curse
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  4. **Occupational Citizenship**
  5. Disutility
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Work as Occupational Citizenship

- What is work? an activity pursued by human members of a community entitled to certain rights and standards
  - Labor is not a commodity or a productive resource
    - Rather, workers are human beings who are members of communities and societies (“citizens”)
  - As citizens, workers are entitled to
    - Decent working and living conditions (equity) that are determined by standards of human dignity, not supply and demand
    - Meaningful forms of self-determination in the workplace that go beyond the freedom to quit (voice)
The ideal WWI soldier, and compliant, de-humanized employee...but not citizen

Work as Occupational Citizenship

- This is the familiar territory of industrial relations tracing back to the Webbs, Commons, and others
  - Labor is more than a commodity so workers’ rights are human rights
  - Existence of conflicts of interests and bargaining power imbalances in imperfect labor markets
  - Importance of employee voice & industrial democracy
- Try to balance rights/power via institutional intervention
  - Importance of labor unions and government regulation of the employment relationship
- Draws upon recent writings on occupational (formerly, industrial) citizenship by Fudge, Standing, Mundlak
But there are other important ways of thinking about work:

1. a Curse
2. Freedom
3. a Commodity
4. Occupational Citizenship
5. Disutility
6. Personal Fulfillment
7. a Social Relation
8. Caring for Others
9. Identity
10. Service

Some have the potential to support citizenship at work.

But the arguably dominant ones are hostile or indifferent towards it.

The stakes matter.
Work in the Neoliberal Market Discursive Space

Work as a commodity
nothing more than a generic input into a production function, and employers and workers buy and sell generic units of this commodity called work (or labor power); best governed by the market

Work as disutility
a lousy activity tolerated only to earn income to buy goods, services, and leisure that provide pleasure

Work as freedom
basis of the independence needed for being a contributing member of society, but heavy on self-reliance and freedom to quit

Work as a curse
an unquestioned burden necessary for human survival or maintenance of the social order
Work in the Unitarist Managerialist Discursive Space

**Work as personal fulfillment**
physical and (especially) psychological functioning that (ideally) satisfies individual needs

**Work as identity**
something that helps make you sense of who you are and where you fit

**Work as freedom**
the ability to create, innovate, and make things

**Work as a (micro) social relation**
a social exchange experienced through social networks

But heavily oriented toward individual psychological rewards and organizational benefits
Work in Potentially-Supportive Discursive Spaces

**Work as caring**
the physical, cognitive, and emotional effort required to attend to and maintain others

**Work as identity**
something that helps make you sense of who you are and where you fit

**Work as freedom**
the ability to be autonomous human beings and citizens

**Work as service**
the devotion of effort to others, such as God, household, community, or country

**Work as a (macro) social relation**
a social exchange constrained by social norms, and governed by societally-defined rights to resources
Conclusion

• How we think about work matters
  • Conceptualizations of work shape research, practice, policy agendas, social norms, access to resources
• Ability to promote and achieve strong ideals of citizenship at work requires supportive beliefs about the meaning and roles of work
  • Work = an activity pursued by human members of a community with inherent equal worth who are entitled to certain rights and standards of dignity and self-determination
• But the public discursive space in which work is defined is contested terrain (academic divisions, too)
Conclusion

• Occupational citizenship under siege
  • Neoliberal market and unitarist HRM discourses are hostile or indifferent to citizenship at work
  • And these have crowded out conceptualizations of work that are supportive of citizenship at work
• Promoting citizenship at work requires thinking fundamentally about what work is
  • And making the case for the deep importance of work not only for workers, but for families, communities, and societies in complex ways
• This is as much a contest of ideas as it is of practices and institutions
Further Reading

John W. Budd,
*The Thought of Work*
## Conceptualizing Work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Curse</td>
<td>An unquestioned burden necessary for human survival or maintenance of the social order.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>A way to achieve independence from nature or other humans, and to express human creativity.</td>
</tr>
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<td>A Commodity</td>
<td>An abstract quantity of productive effort that has tradable economic value.</td>
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<td>A Social Relation</td>
<td>Human interaction embedded in social norms, institutions, and power structures.</td>
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