

# BRINGING JOBS BACK IN: TOWARDS A NEW MULTI-LEVEL APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF WORK AND ORGANIZATIONS

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## ABSTRACT

In this essay, we call for renewed attention to the structure and structuring of work within and between organizations. We argue that a multi-level approach, with jobs as a core analytic construct, is a way to draw connections among economic sociology, organizational sociology, the sociology of work and occupations, labor studies and stratification and address the important problems of both increasing inequality and declining economic productivity.

**I**

more efficacious work systems at the organization level. It will reveal how new organizational forms and new labor market institutions interact to shape the opportunity structure and influence who gets ahead. It will shed new light on the determinants of work inequities related to social, legal, and economic structures and provide pathways to a better future.

In this essay we propose that *jobs* are a powerful analytic category through which we can develop a new body of knowledge about individuals, organizations, occupations and work. Jobs are a useful tool for a multi-level theorist in that they can be meaningfully nested within and between organizations, they may or may not be situated in an externally recognized occupational group, and they are vessels that host incumbents, but are malleable such that they can be molded and reshaped. All of these attributes allow ó essentially require ó analysts examining jobs to consider both the broader context and the worker who inhabits the role. As such, bringing jobs into the study of work and organizations will focus attention on both the micro- and macrostructures that simultaneously create a lived experience of work, a set of boundaries around roles and organizations, and economic outcomes for people, organizations, industries and economies.

We draw our inspiration (and our title) from two seminal papers: James Baron and William Dkgnd{øu" 3; :2" ctvkeng" kp" vjg" *American Sociological Review*." õDtkpikpi" vjg" hkt ou" dcem" kp<"" Stratification, segmentation and the qtìcpk|cvkqp" qh" yqtmö" cpf" Uvgphen Barley and Gideon Kundaøø 2001 article in *Organization Science*."õBringing work back ipö These articles ó and the bodies of work that both precede and follow them ó represent a dialogue about the structure of work and its consequences. They bring together macro- and micro- sociological perspectives and represent the best of quantitative and qualitative traditions. They are deeply grounded in the observed reality of work and organizations and pose important questions about the nature of the society that emerges as a consequence of how work is structured within and between organizations.

Work consumes disproportionate hours of our time and disproportionate attention of managers, organizational designers, policy makers and regulators. We know from extensive empirical

that the service providers are independent contractors ó entrepreneurs who are building their own businesses ó not employees and that they are simply providing a matching service. Indeed, the business models of gig economy firms require that they be free from the expensive obligations of complying with wage and hour laws, ensuring safety standards, and providing benefits to workers. But current legal frameworks in the United State are based on an understanding that independent contractors have autonomy over how they perform their work and the prices that they set ó neither is strictly true for most gig economy workers (see Harris and Krueger, 2015 for a thoughtful discussion of these issues). Whether workers in the gig economy are employees or independent contractors is hotly contested and reveals why understanding the structure of work

and predictable wage growth. But below the surface industrial engineers, managers, and human resource professionals discovered that people were not as easy to engineer for efficiency as machines. Workers resisted and organizational psychologists were brought in to design jobs in ways that workers would be both motivated and productive. The culmination of these efforts is the Job Characteristics Model (1980) Job Characteristics Model, which became the dominant model of work design and a canon of both organizational behavior and human resource management.

Oldham and Hackman (2010), in a retrospective on their job characteristics theory, state:

Back when we were doing our own research on job design, organizational work generally was organized as a linked set of specific jobs, each set up to be performed by individuals who worked mostly independently of one another in bounded, stand-alone organizations. Those jobs were carefully analyzed and defined, both to establish pay rates and to remove any ambiguity about what jobholders were supposed to do. For information about virtually any job from abalone diver to zipper trimmer or scholars, as well as job seekers and human resource professionals, could turn to the comprehensive Dictionary of Occupational Titles (Miller, Treiman, Cain, and Roos, 1980). One could learn all manner of things about specific jobs from the Dictionary or what qualifications are required, how risky they are, and even some of their motivational properties. (p.465).

Even today, management and organizational behavior textbooks portray an uncomplicated image of how work is structured: Organizations have priorities and objectives. Organizational leaders define jobs and allocate tasks to achieve known priorities and objectives. Managers ensure that workers are hired into jobs and complete the requisite tasks. In this light, differences across organizations are attributed to differences in priorities and objectives.

But throughout this historical period, analysts have noted important variation within and between jobs and occupations and within and between organizations. Walter (1991), describing factories in Philadelphia between 1870-1960 asserts:

Proponents of scientific management techniques rarely succeeded in setting their innovations in place. Resistance from foremen who were threatened by these new consultants, more notable resistance from workers, and the administrative nightmare involved in cataloguing tasks and establishing rates or particularly in firms whose product lines were always changing, as was the norm in Philadelphia or doomed most Tayloristic experiments from the start.

He goes on to critique occupational classifications more broadly:

The real problem with relying on occupational listings, however, is that work is invariably treated in these analyses as an activity rather than as an experience. The source dictates the approach: tasks, product rendered, skill levels, and sectors of the economy provide the terms to define jobs or a person is a ditch digger, a candlestick maker, white-collar employee, or transport

worker and it is assumed that the nature and quality of the experience is thus known. Avoiding the titles and understanding the substance of jobs on a daily basis may produce more valuable ways of describing employment, as rewarding, steady, responsible, protected or for example, or lonely, hazardous, irregular, monotonous, exploitative (this way of classifying occupations is deliberately fashioned on the primary and secondary labor market distinctions drawn by labor market segmentation (1991: 44-45))

points to one of the persistent tensions in the study of work. What perspective matters most that of the organization, or that of the worker? Is the point of studying the structure of work to develop a normative theory for managers and organizational designers, or is it to document the lived experience of workers?

### *Five Lenses*

In reviewing the literature relevant to understanding the structure of work, five prevailing lenses become apparent: task, organization, system politics, institutional, and individual preferences. The lenses are born of different disciplinary traditions and obviously have different emphases, yet all purport to uncover important truths about the structure of work. We briefly review each before comparing and contrasting them.

The first lens, the task lens, focuses on the nature of work and the characteristics of tasks. This early structural/functionalist writings on bureaucracy. The core notion is that work is defined by the tasks that are required. Tasks can be bundled in ways that are more or less broad, but there are a clear set of things that must be accomplished.

The second lens, the organizational lens, highlights the role of the organization typically a professionally managed bureaucratic organization in structuring work. This is not surprising given that large organizations were, for much of the recent era when theories of work structure were being developed, the arena in which jobs and tasks are undertaken and enacted. As such employing organizations have shaped and constrained what is and is not possible in structuring jobs and work. Most of our theoretical models assume that the structuring of work is the structuring of organizations and the structuring of organizations is the structuring of work. Organizations should, therefore, be central to understanding the structure of work and vice versa. Contemporary human resource management takes this perspective for granted and takes responsibility for job analysis, job descriptions, recruiting and staffing, and performance appraisal. function as being in support of organizational priorities.

The third lens, the system politics lens, has roots in Marxism and class conflict and is deeply embedded in the field of industrial relations. Through this lens, scholars and analysts see conflicting interests across groups. Sociologists who study the structure of work attend to demographic groups. For example, Strang and Baron (1990) document the proliferation of job titles an indicator of how work is structured -- as being driven by privilege: demographic

characteristics, professional power. They document ascriptive segregation by race and gender and social closure by powerful entities such as unions and the professions. This lens reveals ways that the structure of work is neither determined by the demands of the task nor the priorities of the organization, but instead through complex negotiations among competing groups.

The fourth lens draws from institutional analysis, and focuses on how broader societal pressures, including regulative, normative and cognitive (Scott, 2014), influence processes of work structuration (Lounsbury & Kaghan, 2001). For instance, Edelman (1992) showed how staffing variation in Equal Employment Opportunity/Affirmative Action offices (EEO/AA) was shaped by differences in normative pressures experienced; she showed that government agencies, which experienced the greatest degree of normative pressure, created EEO/AA offices with a mean of 7.1 full-time salaried employees, whereas colleges and business organizations, which experienced less normative pressure, staffed offices with an average of two or fewer full-time salaried employees. Lounsbury (2001) similarly showed how recycling activism led to the creation of fully staffed, substantive recycling programs, whereas most recycling programs are more symbolic add-ons to conventional trash operations. Indeed, the institutional approach has much to contribute in the development of a broader research agenda on the evolutionary dynamics of organizations and occupations (e.g., Baron & Bielby, 1980; Miner, 1990, 1991; Haveman and Cohen, 1994), as well as the creation and dynamics of new organizations and their entrepreneurs (e.g., Baron, Hannan & Burton, 1999; Burton & Beckman, 2007; Burton, Sørensen, & Beckman, 2002; Ferguson, Cohen, Burton & Beckman, Forthcoming).

The final lens, the individual preference lens, is of late the most fashionable in organizational psychology. It is epitomized in Grant and Parker (2009) job design as well as Wrznievski and Dutton (2001) notion. The essence of the idea is that individuals have needs and preferences and should either seek or create jobs that cater

the level of the worker, the organization, and the broader field (Cohen, 2013; Miner, 1990). It is also surprising in light of myriad calls from across the organization theory and organizational behavior communities to develop multi-level theories (e.g. Klein and Kozlowski, 2000). Not only is work central to organizational structures, it is central to opportunity and institutional structures. Even today we have a surprisingly limited understanding of how employees and organizational leaders work out these and other shifts in different ways across different organizations in different industries, and fields. This is a reflection of a more general gap in knowledge at the interface of work and organizations.

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As the world of work has become more complex and distributed, existing theoretical tools and empirical evidence are not adequate to explain how and why organizations structure jobs and work in particular ways. Recent scholars point to sweeping changes such as globalization, financialization, and advanced technology as the drivers of such sweeping changes such as the hkuuwtkpi "Y gkn"4236+"cpf"öPkmghkecvkqpö"Fccku"4238+"qh"y qtm, as well as the emergence of the öikiö"geqqo { "Dctng { " "Mwpcf."4226+. We agree, but also seek to better understand the on-the-ground mechanisms. Which kinds of jobs and tasks are vulnerable to change? How and when are new kinds of jobs formalized? Why do we see variation across seemingly similar firms in the way that they organize work? How does the broader institutional and cultural context, including laws, labor markets, and associations, interact to dampen or accelerate change? Answering these questions will require insights from all four lenses in combination. It will take a multi-level theory and an interdisciplinary conversation.

### **NEED FOR MULTI-LEVEL THEORY**

The study of the structure and structuring of work is ripe for multi-level theory. All of the requisite theoretical foundations are in place and there is a strong base of empirical work. To borrow the words of Kaghan and Lounsbury (2011:78), a multilevel approach asks scholars to ögo rktkecn {"g o dtceg" c" o gvjqfqngikecn" i tqwrku o "vjcv"tkejn {"cpf"eq o rngzn {"g o dgfu"qdugtxgf" behavior in broader micro- and macrostructures, and to give these wider processes theoretical rtkoce {"kp"gzrnckpkpi"rtqeguugu"qh"kpvgtguvö

This call is ever more urgent as the nature of work is, once again, changing. Sweeping forces such as technology and globalization are fundamentally altering the nature of work and imposing profound and pronounced changes on the structure of work within organizations. As Oldham and Hackman (2010) suggest:

It is true that many specific, well-defined jobs continue to exist in contemporary organizations. But we presently are in the midst of what we



believe are fundamental changes in the relationships among people, the work they do, and the organizations for which they do it. Now individuals may telecommute rather than come to the office or plant every morning. They may be responsible for balancing among several different activities and responsibilities, none of which is defined as their main job. They may work in temporary teams whose membership shifts as work requirements change. They may be independent contractors, managing simultaneously temporary or semi-permanent relationships with multiple enterprises. They may serve on a project team whose other members come from different organizations ó suppliers, clients or organizational partners. They may be required to market their services within their own organizations, with no single boss, no home organizational unit, and no assurance of long-term employment (p. 466).

This description vividly captures the interrelationships among these lenses. It portrays individual choice and agency, organizational and task constraints, and the broader social context and conflict in which these opportunities are embedded. But more importantly, it highlights the importance of jobs as an analytic construct and the need to understand how jobs, as bundles of tasks, are embedded within and across organizations, social

A core contribution of this volume is that many of the papers explore these intersections with jobs: how jobs are shaped by and shape organizations, occupations, and institutions. While we have developed rich traditions of researching individuals, organizational, occupational, legal, and

In her paper "Idiosyncratic jobs, organizational transformation and career mobility," Miner also questions the dominant conceptualizations of jobs. Miner does this by reviewing the body of work on idiosyncratic jobs and/or capabilities. The existence of such jobs draws into question the basic assumptions of the more mainstream job design research, in particular that the bundle of duties within a given job precedes the job incumbent or what she labels the vacancy assumption. In her review, she shows that these jobs have effects that sometimes positive that extend far beyond those for individual incumbents. Idiosyncratic jobs can lead to lasting change in organizational structures, learning, and altered mobility opportunities and career pathways within and across organizations. She proposes integrating research on idiosyncratic jobs with research on individual jobs -- job crafting, idiosyncratic deals, and negotiated joining and ecologies of jobs.

heteronomy, and this creates new problems and tensions for the jobs and work of HR staff. This paper highlights the utility of situating ethnographic understandings of work amidst broader institutional processes involving professional projects and other field-level dynamics.

The third set of papers examines constraints on the work done in organizations and the constraints coming from that work: what shapes work and what does work shape? In *Work at Work: Organizational Forms and the Division of Labor in U.S. Wineries*,<sup>6</sup> Haveman, Swaminathan and Johnson look at how organizational identity, linked to the social codes of categories, shapes the structure of work in organizations. In the context of wineries, they show the number of distinct jobs and functional areas delineated by job titles, as well as job

impacts the career prospects





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