Working to Thrive, Not Just Survive
My Work History in a Sociological Imagination

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Abstract: This paper explores how all forms of work influence different aspects of life. Social class, gender, familial and societal expectations all have great impact when it comes to the work that people do. Work is not solely defined as the way individuals create an income; instead, the term work can encompass many aspects of life. The point of this essay is to determine how the different forms of work that I have been exposed to throughout my life have impacted my own expectations and goals as I have matured. When work is seen in broader terms, it can become something to be truly passionate about—something that you love to do.

In life there are few unavoidable truths. One truth that is accepted worldwide is that people must work to survive. What varies with the idea of work is how it is defined.

In my view, **work** is defined as tasks that are completed whether for a monetary value or not so that an individual survives in their society. The concept of work, in American culture, is something that can all at once be valued, despised, or envied. Work is valued because it is seen as necessary in society as a way to remain organized, and to provide for yourself or your family. For the past thirty years this nation's **cost of living has** been increasing while income has been falling. It takes more money each year to be able to afford necessities such as food and shelter, so it is important to bring in an income. In many ways work can be despised as well, because working is time being taken away from leisure or family time, and many individuals often feel stressed with the pressures of various work they do. Paid work is also something to be envied by many individuals. To be unemployed can add tremendous amounts of stress to an individual's life, as one may not be able to sufficiently provide for one's family or oneself. **Joblessness** or lack of regular employment in the labor force not only provides obvious financial strain on a person, but there are many psychological stressors as well. The **effects of joblessness** can lead someone to not being able to provide a living for themselves, and not having consistent, dependable income can often lead people to feel inadequate in their abilities and depressed with their current predicament. Such feelings of hopelessness often lead people to leave the job search altogether, for fear that they will never be able to successfully gain employment (Wilson).

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Any type of work is important. Working allows people to feel productive, and if they are doing something they love, then that work can push them to strive to be better in life. While there will always be positive aspects as well as drawbacks, work is something that all humanity shares, and without it, the world most certainly would not function.

Work has always been a major part of my life, both directly and indirectly. My family has always worked very hard to acquire what we have. My parents have always had a **patchworking** approach, or the sharing of diverse resources (Kibria, 60), to running our household. They both pitch in with various tasks, both paid and unpaid work, in order to run our home. While my parents always had strong work ethics, I cannot remember a time when paying all the bills was not a major stressor. The pressure to pay the bills is a concern shared by many families across America, and yet I never went without any necessities like clothing, food or shelter. When I was very young my father was the **breadwinner**, or main supporter of our family (Brandt, 14), while my mother stayed home to raise my sister and me. This was by no means easy on our family financially, but my mother wanted time to spend with her children for a few years before we were old enough to enter preschool.

While it is often the wish of many families to have a parent stay home when children are just born or very young, such a decision can often cause major stress for the household financially. This dilemma was ever so present in my family when I was a child as well. I have often asked my mother if she enjoyed being home with my sister and me when we were toddlers or if she wished she had maintained a career and put us in daycare sooner than she had. Her answer was always the same. She loved having the time with her children, but living on such a tight budget, and on only one income, was stressful. This dilemma, having the desire to raise your children but struggling with the loss of income, is described in Ann Crittenden's article "The Mommy Tax." **The mommy tax** refers to how women are at a disadvantage income-wise when it comes to having children. Women lose the possibility for potential income when having children for many reasons including unpaid maternity leave and the fact that woman only make about eighty cents to every dollar a man makes (Crittienden 71). Both of my parents were raised in large immediate families, and my mother has always noted the desires she had in the past, when my sister and I were young, to expand our family even further. There is no doubt that because of the financial responsibilities that come with raising a child, along with the added pressures of the mommy tax, my parents decided not to have any more children.

My father has worked constantly throughout his life, and when he had a family to support, that work ethic only intensified. Like so many other men and women in America just trying to make a living and provide for their families, he would work multiple jobs at one time, having a full-time job as an electrician as well as multiple side jobs to complete prior to heading off to his aforementioned career in order to make extra money. By the end of each day my father was extremely fatigued and **overworked**, with little time to spend with the family he was trying so desperately to provide for. Working excessive hours at multiple jobs proved to be more costly to my father's well-being than he had ever envisioned. By cutting down on the side-work he did, it provided my family, and my father in particular, with a viable solution when my mother decided to reenter the paid workforce after my sister and I were able to attend school during the day. I am extremely thankful that both my parents were raised with a strong work ethic and that they were not afraid to put effort into the tasks they were presented with. As I look back on my

upbringing I am beginning to see just how much of an influence my parents and their respective work ethics and experiences have had on my own. I had previously thought I had hardly any work experience, but now I see how I could not be any more wrong. Every individual starts working in a variety of ways from a very young age, and every type of work contributes to society, no matter what status that work is given in society.

According to Dickinson and Schaeffer there are different categories in which work is defined. **Subsist work** consists of household duties that are done by individuals, usually women, such as child care, laundry, or cooking to name a few (23). This form of work is often overlooked, and not given the proper respect as being actual work because it holds no monetary value, but without the presence of subsist work many households would crumble. Women have generally held a lower status in societies around the world in comparison to men, and since many of the household tasks are left in the care of women, they are seen as being less important. The idea that subsist work is somehow less important than wage work (Dickinson and Schaeffer 23), or most forms of paid work, is absurd. I have most definitely partaken in my fair share of subsist work as the oldest daughter in my home.

A **gender and age division of (household) labor** (Goldscheider and Waite) most definitely exists in my household. Due to the fact that my mother had two daughters, there was no fair comparison when it came to determining how gendered different tasks were between siblings, but that does not mean that the tasks expected of my sister and I were not gendered overall. The tasks that my sister and I were expected to help out with were gendered in their nature because they revolved work done within the home. The home is traditionally seen as a woman's domain, the place where women "rule the roost."

Age played a major part in how tasks were divided up in my home as well. Since I am the oldest, I have been expected to carry the weight of household duties while my mother is at work. My sister may help out with dusting and vacuuming after school, but the bulk of housework was my responsibility. It has been my responsibility for many years to care for my younger sister, or clean the house after school before my parents got home from work. I am expected to do the dishes every night as well as make sure that the floors are washed and the laundry is done and put away before my mother gets home from work, and because I am the eldest, the fact that these tasks are in my control does not get questioned. "Teenage girls…contribute especially large amounts toward doing dishes and cleaning the house, and to share substantially in cooking and laundry" (Goldscheider and Waite, 255). This passage taken from "Children's Share in Household Tasks" really encapsulates my teenage years and the responsibilities expected of me. With the exception of preparing many meals, something I am still trying to perfect, the tasks described were all work that was given to me.

While it has been said that household duties traditionally reserved for women do not receive enough respect, can you imagine a world where everyday household chores were ignored? What would happen if the laundry was never done, the dishes never put away, no meals were made, and children were left to fend for themselves with no supervision? That is a scary world that I would rather not be a part of. A place of filth and chaos is not a world that anyone dreams of living in, and yet the very tasks that are considered second-class are the ones that keep society organized and running smoothly.

While subsist work is very valuable to our society, the main point of focus when discussing work is most definitely that of **paid work,** especially **wage work**. Over the

past few decades wages and state benefits have decreased, while costs for necessities like housing, education, and healthcare have all continually risen, making wage work that much more necessary (Dickinson & Schaeffer). The importance of paid work cannot be underestimated, as we all need money to survive. The feelings of accomplishment that go along with having a paying job were instilled in me at an early age. I remember at the age of six running a lemonade stand with my sister from the park across the street from our house. We charged twenty-five cents for a small cup, and fifty-cents for a large cup of lemonade, and stayed at our post, which consisted of a large cooler and Dixie cups for the lemonade, for about three hours before we got too hot and wanted to go home. Our mother sat with us on the bench the entire time, helping pour the lemonade or give the correct change. We probably made about ten to twenty dollars for the time we were out there and of course we had to split the profits evenly, which really put into perspective just how much time it would take to earn more the next time. Nonetheless, that lemonade stand was the beginning of my entrepreneurial experience, and earning five to ten dollars at the age of six felt like winning the lottery! Living in a society where **capitalist production**, or being able to produce the most goods in the shortest amount of time for the most profit (Braverman, 1974), reigns supreme, I had to learn quickly that in order to succeed and afford the different possessions I wanted, I would have to work hard for them.

Growing up I was always told that if I wanted to be successful and make any money I had to pay attention in school and work very hard. I was one of the millions of children who are taught to believe the **achievement ideology**. The term achievement ideology discussed by J. MacLeod instills the idea "Behave yourself, work hard, earn good grades, get a good job, and make a lot of money" (405). This ideology is promising in its roots. We all know that acting unruly or lazy, with no goals or aspirations are no way to live life; you are just letting the time you have on this earth slip through your fingers. The only setback with the achievement ideology is that it acts as if every individual is equal in terms of opportunities and privileges.

Being white and middle-class, I am much better off than other individuals. I am not faced with the racism that is still prevalent in our society. While many people may place the blame for poor test grades or high drop out rates in certain areas on **cultural deprivation**—that is, some deficiency with an individual's culture or family that causes them to lag behind their peers in terms of success (MacLeod, 406)—I refuse to believe this myth. I grew up in Charlestown, Massachusetts, a small town in the center of Boston that is divided by class, as if there is an invisible line where affluence and middle class individuals cohabitate and then there is an entirely different portion where individuals who do not make that much money or have the same cultural background as I reside. My family is not affluent by any means, but my parents were able to send us to parochial schools for a college preparatory education, where school supplies were abundant, the risk of violence was slim, and teachers were invested in our futures. At the public high school in my area students face metal detectors every morning, there have been numerous shootings and stabbings, and school supplies are always insufficient. How can people really be afforded the same opportunities when they are not afforded the same tools to reach success? It is also a sad reality that racism remains a prevalent barrier in success for many individuals even during this day and age. Whether it is inadvertent or blatant, both schools and places of employment fall victim to this inequality and injustice.

The public school in my area that was mentioned above consists of over ninety

percent minorities. African Americans, Latinos, and Asian-Americans are all students there, and while there is a small population of white students, they are hardly a vast number. The reasons behind such a disproportionate number of white students attending the public school in town were that most of them are middle class and can afford to send their children to private schools, and they want their children to receive the best possible educations with the least amount of violence. Sadly, the idea of **equality of income versus equality of opportunity** (Bowles, 235) is not available to all residents in Charlestown, and many minority students suffer the consequences. Equality of income refers to an idealist idea that "everyone receives the same income," while the idea of equality of opportunity refers to the notion that "everyone has the same chance to reach the top" (235).

Unfortunately in today's capitalist society, where competition and income play a major role in success, those equalities for all remain vacant. Due to their disproportionately middle or upper class status it is correct to conclude that white families are more able to financially facilitate sending their children to better schools than racial minorities. When children are able to receive more advanced educations and perform higher on exams that can grant them entry into the best colleges and positions in high-paying careers, it is hard to see how they would not be successful. If more minorities were given the same chances, there is no doubt that they would perform on equal levels of excellence, but unfortunately for many minority families, stereotypes about them can often hold them back in both school and careers. As a government agency official in Detroit Michigan states regarding the differences between black and white workers:

I think it's those that come from lower-income levels [who] have lower expectations of themselves and do not necessarily do as well as those who have lived a middle class or better life…So with Detroit being primarily black and low-income level in general, then it could appear to be black and white. (Moss and Tilly, 245)

When you are raised at a higher income-level, and given the best of everything money can offer, it is only reasonable that you would have a higher chance at success.

By no means was I born with a silver spoon in my mouth, but I have been given opportunities. I have also learned that if I ever wanted something, I had to work hard to earn it. While I have been in school I have had a variety of small part-time jobs that have taught me many lessons about how to be a capable worker in today's capitalist society. I babysat for a few neighborhood families from middle school through the end of my high school career, and those jobs certainly were a part of the **social divisions of labor** (Dickinson and Schaeffer, 31). Women are seen as nurturers in society, and it was almost expected in my upbringing that I would volunteer to care for neighborhood children while their parents had a night out. Babysitting was thought of by many members of my family as an easy way for me to make some spending money, while learning how to care for children, seen as a very valuable (and almost innate) skill for women. "The social meanings and values assigned to work—which are often associated with gender, class, ethnicity, and age—are the product of social and historical developments going back a long way" (Dickinson and Schaeffer, 31).

While I thoroughly enjoyed caring for children, it most definitely was not "easy"; and yet, caring for multiple toddlers at once gave me some lifelong skills. By working in the **"sex-typed,"** or gender segregated, occupation of child care—which is defined as an occupation "in which more than 70 per-

cent of the workers are of one sex" (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman, 191)—I was learning future skills I would need when I parent my own children. Patience and discipline are virtues that many employers search for when thinking about hiring a new employee. By gaining experience in childcare from a young age, I developed those skills quite quickly in order to make sure that the children were not running around wild and chaotic. While childcare is often seen as second-class work due to who usually is doing the work (women), and also its low monetary value, those jobs prepared me for many stressful situations in life. That is not to mention that raising children (as anyone from baby-sitters to nannies, to parents) is one of the world's most important jobs due to the fact that you are in charge of caring for another human life.

Despite the high amount of emotional labor required in the customer service fields I worked in, there were also drawbacks such as low wages being paired with highly adaptable technological skills. At the reception office there were three computer programs that were used to take, enter, and charge customers for reservations, and we were also expected to make daily excel spreadsheets of profits brought in. The clerical work and emotional labor involved at the job was substantial, and yet we were only making minimum wage. "Although firms and employees clearly are aware of a range of skills required for the delivery of high-quality customer service, the work continues to be referred to and understood by all as low-skilled labor" (Buchanan, 369). Dealing with the public and their complaints on a daily basis along with providing efficient customer service and clerical work deserves more credibility. Every one of the receptionists in the office had her own way of handling **everyday stresses** and used **survival strategies** to do so (370). Even though I probably should not admit this, my personal way of dealing with stressors such as irate or unreasonable

customers was to place the speaker on mute, so they could not hear me but I could hear them. That way it was allowing the person to vent openly, but not necessary for me to be chiming in, because most of the time angry customers just went off on tyrants before they calmed down and acted somewhat reasonable. During my time working in the reception office I found that even though receptionist or clerical work is under-valued, the lessons learned in patience and interpersonal skill are often valuable tools as stepping stones in more reputable careers such as marketing. When working at any paid job there are often various social expectations that go along with the various designated requirements of the job itself. I know personally that while working in the service sector as both a receptionist at a cruise company and as a greeter at a cell phone store there were various behavioral expectations. As both a receptionist and a greeter I was told to greet the customer in a polite, friendly manner that invited them to continue to use and recommend the company. While on the phone we were to always use common courtesies such as "good afternoon" or "please and thank you" when asking or answering questions. It was also understood that we were to do anything possible to accommodate the customers' wishes, or inform them of any specials we may have been having in case they wanted to pass on the information. As a greeter we were to dress in a professional manner, with neat blouses and dress pants and shoes—but no sneakers or jeans. There was also the requirement of a welcoming smile and good manners, along with the ability to articulate clearly so that the customer knew we were familiar with all policies and were willing to help them with any issues they may have had. These expectations are referred to as **emotional labor**, which "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (Hochs-

child, 72). Despite how I was truly feeling on any particular day, or how the customer was treating me, I had to remain cheerful and polite. Working with the public can cause you to perform a lot of emotional labor, but if you wish to succeed you must be able to adapt and follow the expected social "feeling" rules. Those "feeling rules" have applied to every generation of workers, whether they are participants in the dominant service sector of the present day, or were workers in the manufacturing sector of generations past; behaving in the ways deemed appropriate to any job is an important part of finding success in the workplace.

While working as both a receptionist and greeter, I was also exposed to and victim of different forms of sexual harassment. While it is unfortunate, **sexual harassment**, or continued occurrences of unwanted sexual behavior or sexual advances (Dellinger and Williams, 218), happens so frequently to most women that it is not paid the proper attention. While working as a receptionist, various male employees would make sexually-explicit jokes around or at the expense of fellow female employees. They usually meant them in a jovial manner, meaning no harm, but the professionalism of the office environment was most definitely discredited by their crude senses of humor. When it came to the jokes, most of the receptionists, including myself, chose to ignore them and let them roll off our backs. It was a different situation entirely though, when there were explicit examples of objectification and harassment. At a few different times while working at the front desk in the office, a few of the receptionists, myself included, were answering some of the male employees' questions and they would be blatantly staring at our chests instead of our eyes. To reach the point where you have to openly scold fellow coworkers with phrases like "my eyes are up here" is a point where you can no longer just ignore the inappropriate behavior. Due to the fact

that the company was a small business as well as family owned and operated, there were many incidents that were overlooked by management. With no real policies regarding sexual harassment laid out, the behavior of some employees was dealt with in a far different manner than if it had been a major corporation with such policies firmly stated and not tolerated. In order to stop the incidence of sexual harassment, it can no longer be quietly tolerated or ignored, such as what happened in my prior employment. Nobody has the right to speak or act inappropriately as in a way to make fellow employees feel uncomfortable and objectified.

I am currently employed as an assistant in a local tourism company's revenue room. In the office my duties consist of making and counting the different banks that are used on various daily excursions, keeping all the clerical duties such as faxes, spreadsheets, or company accounts up to date, and making sure that all revenue entering and exiting the office is accounted for. The job includes a tremendous amount of trust on the part of my employer since we are in charge of maintaining all company funds. There is also another aspect to the job that may be determined to be an incident of deskilling of a worker. In the office, the entire way the money is counted and sorted is computerized. This is often extremely helpful as I am able to just place a large amount of dollars or cents into a sorter and counting machine, and everything is automatically computed and ready to be put away. Of course, computerized equipment often has glitches or problems, and the idealist outcome of the money being counted perfectly does not always occur. There have been many occasions when both the bill and coin machines have malfunctioned or jammed, and have had to be fixed, leaving the money to be counted manually. I have no problem with counting money; it is not as if I am unable to add or subtract denominations in my head. It is

just that the entire process of fixing the machines while manually counting thousands of dollars can be extremely time consuming and frustrating.

Growing up during the technological age so many people including myself have come to rely on machines to aid or completely do our work for us, and that work becomes twice as much if the technology that is supposed to help is constantly breaking down. There are many days when I hear people complaining that their computers or cell phones are broken and phrases like "I do not know how I am going to survive until the end of the day" often come out of their mouths. What so many people forget is that just a few decades ago such technology did not even exist, and people survived just fine! Technology has come to play such a large part in the current work I do, that when it is not available it is almost like the crutch you were leaning on had been pulled out from under you. "As information technology restructures the work situation, it abstracts thought from action" (Zuboff, 125). This statement parallels my current job, along with so many other people's jobs across the country. Individuals have come to rely on technology to such a large degree, that when it is not available to us we are lost, as if we have no idea how to carry on in the workplace or household without it.

Following social rules is extremely important, but adapting to the expectations of any workplace is just as, if not more so, vital. In today's economy many people are struggling to find work, and for those that are lucky enough to have jobs, if they do not adapt to their workplace's and employers' expectations they can quickly find themselves out of luck. Due to the changing world of work, where incomes continue to fall while prices continue to rise (Dickinson & Schaeffer, 38), many people are starting to increase their search for paid work and opportunities at smaller *enterprising* work (Dickinson & Schaeffer, 23)— where they

are able to go into business for themselves—and are less interested in the consumerism-based ideals of our capitalist society. The **immiseration of workers**, or falling incomes and resources (Dickinson & Schaeffer, 42), have led many people to be more money conscious and thrifty in a society that thrives on mass production. With the economy facing a downturn, the availability of full-time work with benefits is becoming harder to find. As a soon-to-be college graduate the uncertainty of the job market is extremely unsettling. Everywhere I look there is a new media report of rising unemployment and job loss, and after spending several years in school hoping to better my future and increase the likelihood of my success, stories that only talk about the doom of the current job market do nothing to boost my confidence.

With so many new college graduates heading out into the current workforce, competing against much more experienced workers who are having just as much trouble finding work as us, the likelihood of getting a well paying job quickly is slim. The massive number of graduates heading into the workforce, as herds of cattle would head into grazing pastures, reminds me of Marx's idea of alienation. Alienation is a state of being and feeling separated from the labor process, the means of labor, the product of labor, and from other laborers and oneself as human beings. Alienation accompanies the process of capitalist exploitation during the labor process, when "the more the worker produces the less he has to consume, the more value he creates, the more valueless he becomes" (Marx, 46). Overproduction, whether it involves products or people, is a major drawback when it comes to the value an item brings to the table. The rarity of any object increases its value simply because it is not readily available to all. When the reverse happens, and items are overproduced, their appeal is lost.

If you think of "the worker" in terms of

the college institution, you are able to see college as the machine that children are geared toward from young ages in order to accomplish academic and financial success (remember the achievement ideology). Many students are spending the majority of their free time studying for exams or preparing their papers and presentations to the best of their ability, in the hopes that their efforts will allow them to stand ahead of the crowd. Each student holds the optimistic hope that he or she will be the shining star every company is begging for.

While in college many students alienate themselves from social or romantic opportunities so that they will have more energy to focus on graduating and obtaining a career that will put them in the elite classes of current capitalist society. Unfortunately, in the current economy graduates are so overproduced while jobs are so scarce, that college degrees are in many cases devalued—which is called "education inflation" (Cote & Allahar)—as they once were for the work that is currently available. The days when young people went right out of high-school into factories where they worked at **assembly lines** (Braverman, 146-147), and had specific tasks to get acquainted with and perfect in order to excel at their workplace—and with wages that, while not high were sustainable in comparison to today—are long gone. Now many students are entering the workplace with the same competitive skills, and there are not enough jobs to accept every applicant.

I do not want to come off as being pessimistic, because I am hopeful about the future and the many work experiences I have yet to undertake. I am uncertain about my own future in the world of work, but I know that I want to be helping people, and enjoying the work that I do. I do not want to be a worker like the one Charlie Chaplin portrays in the film *Modern Times*, where I become so numb with my work that there are no new challenges or joys to be found

from it. In the film Chaplin plays a character who becomes so engrained in the routines of his daily work, that even during breaks or at the end of the day the robotic movements that he uses to fix machines in the factory where he works continue to persist. Chaplin's character expresses many of Marx's views regarding alienated labor. "The more the worker externalizes himself in his work, the more powerful becomes the alien, objective world that he creates opposite himself, the poorer he becomes in his inner life and the less he can call his own" (Marx, 46). The work the Chaplin character was involved with became his sole focus, so much so that he lost sight of what else life had to offer.

I would much rather follow in the footsteps of Robin Williams' character Patch in the movie *Patch Adams.* In the film, Patch was able to overcome several obstacles like disapproving teachers, unfair medical laws, and a less than stellar mental health history to fulfill his dream of becoming a doctor, opening his own hospital, and truly being able to connect with patients. Unlike Chaplin's character in *Modern Times*, who became a slave to the labor he was producing, Patch Adams was able to fulfill his own career aspirations in an imaginative way that not only benefited his own well-being, but also that of his patients. To be able to connect to other people on such an emotional level and help them with the various problems they are experiencing would be a true honor. The guidance of my parents has already shown me that if you are willing to work hard, you will reap the rewards. I have already been granted so many opportunities that are not as readily available to others, and to waste them by not taking full advantage of the skills I have learned at home, in school and in the workplace would be truly a shame. I don't want to just *survive* in society based on the work that I choose to do, I want to *thrive*—physically, emotionally, and spiritually—and I know that with persistent effort and patience I will.

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