



“Summary of article by Robert E. Lane: Learning at Work: Beyond Human Capital” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 4: The Changing Nature of Work. Island Press: Washington DC, 1998. pp. 361-364

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[The] understandings of the greater part of men are necessarily formed by their ordinary employments.¹

It is not sufficiently considered how little there is in most men's ordinary life to give any largeness either to their conceptions or to their sentiments.²

The germs of the education of the future are to be found in the factory system. This will be an education which, in the case of every child over a certain age, will combine productive labor with instruction and physical culture, not only as a means of increasing social production, but as the only way of producing fully developed human beings.³

The business by which a person earns his livelihood fills his thoughts during by far the greatest part of those hours in which his mind is at its best: during them his character is being formed by the ways in which he uses his faculties at work.⁴

The point of view put forth by the four outstanding classical economists just quoted is no longer in fashion among their heirs, where work is most often viewed as a sacrifice, or disutility, that is undertaken only for wages and consumption gains. Nor is this view fully reflected by the "humanist" critics of modern economic theory, who see the potential for work to provide an enjoyable exercise of skill, knowledge and effort, but doubt that modern economies can provide such opportunity.

This paper employs a definition of work that disengages it from pain or disutility: "Work is the effort or activity an individual performs for the purpose of providing goods or services of value to others *or the self* and it is also considered to be work by the individual so involved." [238] To show the important role still played by work in most individuals' development, this paper draws on five studies by psychologists who have examined the actual effects of work on workers.

LEARNING AT WORK: EFFECTS ON COGNITION AND PERSONALITY

Paul Breer and Edwin Locke find that work experiences have a clear and immediate impact on basic personal values, such as individualistic versus social orientations. An extensive longitudinal study by Melvin Kohn and Carmi Schooler reinforces this conclusion, showing that, for example, "An occupation that requires self-direction does not merely recruit intellectually more flexible workers, it develops those cognitive powers of the workers as well." [242] Above

all, they emphasize that jobs with *substantive complexity* (usually highly placed, responsible, demanding but rewarding jobs) not only attract workers with matching qualities of intellectual alertness and flexibility, self-esteem and self-directedness; they also foster these qualities. By contrast, jobs lacking substantive complexity lead to feelings of alienation.

A similarly constructed study by Jeylan Mortimer and Jon Lorence delves further into the way that early values -- specifically those focusing on (1) income-maximizing, (2) people-orientation, or (3) intellectual challenge and autonomy -- tend to be reinforced, and also subtly altered, by jobs that (in two-thirds of the cases reviewed) are selected by the worker to match their early proclivities. They find that jobs with high incomes tend to decrease an individual's concern for others, while autonomous, challenging jobs seem to increase the worker's people-orientation. (No change in value-orientation was found in the people-centered individuals who took corresponding jobs.)

In developing countries, according to Alex Inkles and David Smith, factory work is the major contributor to the process and direction of change towards modernization -- more so than either the traditional culture or formal education. For example, length of tenure in a factory job is positively correlated with the modern belief in personal efficacy (as opposed to traditional fatalism).

In contrast to what might have been thought to have been a comparable experience by British workers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the cost in anxiety and well-being was not high among the modernizing workers; there were, for example, no differences between the modernizing group and the traditional village group in the telltale psychosomatic symptoms indicating psychic disturbances. [245]

Finally, psychologists George and Caroline Valliant note that "The willingness and capacity to work in childhood is the most important forerunner -- more important than native intelligence, social class, or family situation -- of mental health." [247] This observation may be gaining increased salience, as youth employment continues to decline in industrialized countries.⁵

THE PROCESS OF LEARNING

A central lesson from these studies is that what is learned during the work experience is very likely to be generalized to all of life. "For example, as in the Kohn and Schooler studies when a worker learns cognitive complexity, a sense of personal control, and self-esteem on the job, these do not evaporate when the worker leaves the job." [248-9] The Valliants pointed out, similarly, that "[p]eople who learned qualities of commitment and preservation at work embodied their qualities in their marital life." [249] And Inkles and Smith found that modern attitudes, such as tolerance for diversity, were also carried home from the factory.

Another lesson is that the most effective learning comes through observation of and interaction with others -- more so than learning by precept, or by the purely individualistic work-experiences that are sometimes assumed in descriptions of human capital development. Additionally it is interesting to note that pay or other work rewards have a high informational content (e.g.,

regarding the attainment of standards and goals, how one appears in others' eyes) which may be more important, at least above the subsistence level, than their material values.

ALIENATED WORK

In contrast to the positive effects of work cited so far is the concept of alienation. This has been blamed for static productivity as well as for a variety of reductions of well-being, including intergroup antagonisms, a sense of helplessness in political and social affairs, and a loss of a sense of harmony with nature.

What features of work are most likely to be alienating? Most often cited is lack of participation in the decisions that affect the worker. Additionally, alienation seems to represent a relative absence of the working conditions that were described earlier as contributing to general human development. For example, *self-directed work*, which is substantively complex, loosely supervised and non-routine, promotes attitudes of tolerance, respect and trust; while routine, unchallenging, low-status, heavily supervised work will not play such a developmental role, and is likely to reduce self-esteem and create a sense of alienation.

Even here, however, we need to see work in comparison to the rest of the individual's life. A job that to some appears un-stimulating, to others might be far better than staying home. While humanists claim that much of modern worklife is meaningless, work-deprivation (as in unemployment) may promote a far worse sense of meaninglessness. An unsentimental view of village life in the Third World contrasts the factory experience as relatively independent and autonomous. Similarly, "a study of women in repetitive, low complexity, clerical jobs in Chicago found that the social relations at work, not only among themselves but also in 'managing' their managers, were sufficiently engaging to make up for the lack of complexity in the tasks assigned to them." [256]

CONCLUSION

For many people the worst that can be said about work is not that they have to do it, but that it fails to provide the full benefits of fulfilling experience. Work has the potential to develop cognitive complexity, moral responsibility, self-esteem, and a sense of personal competence; self-directed work can move people to find intellectually challenging uses of their leisure time and to participate in a liberal democracy. This is the standard against which we should judge the success of a society in its provision of work; for a large proportion of the labor force this standard is still out of reach.

Notes

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1. Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (New York: Random House, 1937), 734-5; cited by the author on p. 253.
 2. John Stuart Mill, "Representative Government," in *Utilitarianism, Liberty, and Representative Government* (London: Dent, 1910), 216
 3. Alfred Marshall, *Principles of Economics*, 8th edition (London: Macmillan, 1938), 1-2; cited by the author on p. 248.
 4. *Ibid*

5. The five studies referred to are: Paul E. Breer and Edwin A. Locke, *Task Experience as a Source of Attitudes* (Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press, 1965); Melvin L. Kohn and Carmi Schooler, *Work and PERSONALITY: An Inquiry into the Impact of Social Stratification* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1983); Jeylan T. Mortimer and Jon Lorence, "Work Experience and Occupational value Socialization: A Longitudinal Study," *American Journal of Sociology* 84(1979): 361-85; Alex Inkeles and David H. Smith, *Becoming Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974); and George E. Vaillant and Caroline O. Vaillant, "Natural History of Male Psychological Health: Work as a Predictor of Positive Mental Health," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 138(1981): 433-40.