



“Summary of article by Robert Wuthnow: Shifting Perspectives: The Decoupling of Work and Money” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 4: The Changing Nature of Work. Island Press: Washington DC 1998 pp 379-381

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## **“Summary of article by Robert Wuthnow: Shifting Perspectives: The Decoupling of Work and Money”**

By the beginning of the twentieth century mainstream social scientists had shifted from a paradigm that placed economic behavior in the context of broader values to one that viewed work and money in isolation. As new immigrants poured into the United States, the American Dream became framed in terms of work and money. Today, when individuals are asked why they work, the overwhelming answer is "to make money." It seems to follow that "economic decisions compose a self-contained system, operating in terms of reward-and-benefit calculations, while moral commitments and values constitute a separate realm." "Money is in this view regarded as a universal exchange medium that translates labor into a commodity capable of being expended on any valued pursuit. We need to rethink the relationship between work and money, therefore, if we are to make a valid place for moral discourse to be considered." [87]

### **WORKING FOR MONEY**

Several surveys have tested the adequacy of the assumption that people work solely to make money. This assumption would be supported by findings that people rank monetary awards high among job values, that people would not work if they were not paid, that people would work more if they were compensated more, that career changes occur because of opportunities for more money, and that job satisfaction is closely associated with pay. On each count, however, the surveys suggest otherwise.

For example, in a study on American values in the 1980s, ninety-one percent of those surveyed argued that it is better to work at a job with lower pay than a higher paying job with low job satisfaction. In another analysis of 2,778 employees leaving the federal government, only ten percent responded that a desire to earn more money was their reason for resigning. More significant were issues of job satisfaction, stress, and conflicts with personal interests and lifestyles. Lastly, in a study where people were asked if they would not work if they had all the money they needed, seventy-eight percent reported that they would continue to work.

Surveys such as these may suffer from intrinsic biases; for example, it could be that people are more comfortable *talking* about job satisfaction and working hard than they are about *talking* about wanting a lot of money. People may in fact work because they want lots of money. Even if this is true, there is something in our culture that makes it hard for individuals to capture all of their values of work in solely monetary terms.

## **THE POST-SCARCITY THESIS**

Some observers of the work force suggest that a decoupling of work and money occurs when societies reach a certain level of affluence. In much of the developed world individuals achieve a standard of living that could, in theory, greatly reduce the monetary concerns of the average wage earner. When such a standard of living is reached, the values associated with work are said to shift toward emotional and intellectual gratification. Some evidence supports this thesis. A survey conducted in Japan asked "since I have achieved some material wealth, I would like to improve the spiritual aspects of my life." [91] Fifty percent of those surveyed agreed, while only thirty-four percent said they wanted to continue to improve their material standard of living. At the same time, studies conducted in Canada, the United States, and France document a series of conflicting trends. The importance of money may wax and wane over short periods of time, but it remains a subject of high concern for most people at all levels of income.

## **WORKING TO GIVE A LEGITIMATE ACCOUNT**

"How people understand their work, their money, and the relation between the two is a complex cultural matter. Instead of arguing simply that people work to make money, we need to pay closer attention to these cultural matters." [92] This paper proposes that a primary function of work is that it gives people a way to give a legitimate account of themselves. Accounts are a key element of the process by which we ascribe meaning to our behavior and express ourselves in public. They "connect the particular act under question to values and ways of talking about values that are acceptable in a given social context." [93] The main consequence of emphasizing legitimate accounts is that human action must then be understood in terms of the social and cultural context within which it occurs, rather than being seen only as a function of the exchange of goods, services, and other resources. While money is not absent from these accounts, they go well beyond an understanding of the individual as an isolated decision-maker who rationally calculates, for economic reasons alone, what work to do and how much to do.

In this context, work is a human enterprise, not simply as a function of "economic man." [93] If people do not work simply to earn incomes, but to provide themselves and each other with a legitimate accounts, then work and money cannot be considered part of a utilitarian discourse in the manner portrayed by economists. A theory of legitimate account suggests that people will consider the value of their work and self in relation to a wider set of cultural values, personal obligations, and perceptions of who they are. Not only do they seek meaning in the accounts they construct around their work; work can be an important element in people's efforts, more broadly, to give meaningful accounts of themselves.

Emphasizing the framework of accounts is distinct from emphasizing the subjective meaning that people give to their working lives. Subjective meanings that people attach to their work can largely be hidden from view, and may even be unknown to the individual. An account, by definition, occurs in public. In most cases people will give an account that is close or identical to their own feelings and beliefs. They can then honor their own accounts sufficiently to stay committed to a particular activity, to regard that activity as being meaningful, and to feel good about themselves when engaged in that activity.

## **PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER**

Drawing from original research on the changing meanings of white-collar work (drawn from a later chapter in the book), it can be seen that

[o]n the whole, the accounts people give of their work reveal that it is, in most cases, meaningful to them. The reason they feel committed to their work and expend so much energy on it is that they feel right about it, and it in turn makes them feel right about themselves. Everybody has moments of doubt when they wonder if they are pursuing the right career, and they know their current job is by no means perfect. Being able to tell stories to themselves and to their acquaintance, however, sustains them from day to day. We fail to understand the significance of these accounts if we assume, as much of the published literature does, that people somehow start out their adult lives with a certain set of values, search the labor markets until they find some line of work consistent with these values, and then live happily ever after.[133]