

Editorial: 'Good' Jobs and 'Bad' Jobs: Contemplating Job Quality in Different Contexts

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As stated in our previous editorial (Beauregard et al, 2018) we aim to capitalise on the interdisciplinary expertise of our team and draw attention of the WES readership to some of the thematic issues through our short editorials. In our first editorial we debated the issues of gender at work. This thematic issue is comprised of a variety of fascinating articles that are concerned with issues around good and bad jobs, job quality and dirty work, hence this editorial aims to offer some contextual background to the topic and tease out the main themes and contributions that the articles in the issue make to the current scholarship.

The issue of job quality has always been one of the main concerns for sociologists of work. The reasons for this are multiple: bad jobs come at a cost for both individuals and societies as they can 'can undermine health and well-being, generate in-work poverty and exacerbate child poverty, create and perpetuate gender inequalities in the labour market and beyond and constrain job and social mobility' (Carre et al, 2012: 1). As the last decade has been marked by economic downturn, austerity policies (Paraschi and Georgopoulos, 2018), and the growth of precarious work (Standing, 2011) and the 'gig economy' (Kallberg and Dunn, 2016; Wood et al, 2019), the focus on good or 'decent' jobs appears an even more pertinent endeavour. In fact, this is also recognised through policy: 'the quest for decent work for all men and women, for productive, high-quality employment and for inclusive labour markets is encompassed' in the International Labour Organisation's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (ILO, 2018). European Commission and World Bank Group have also issued a joint statement about the 'Futures of Work' suggesting that they would be working towards achieving this Sustainable Development Goals through collaborating on three focus areas: boosting skills, enhancing the systems of social protection of work and working to create more and better jobs (European Commission, 2019).

What constitutes 'good' or 'decent' jobs is debated both amongst both policy-maker and academics. Findlay et al (2013: 441) have argued that job quality is a multidimensional phenomenon and that 'multiple factors and forces operating at multiple levels influence job quality'. The latter, predictably, makes it more difficult to agree on how to measure and assess job quality: ILO for instance has eleven indicators of what makes work 'decent' including 'employment opportunities, adequate earnings, decent hours, stability and security of work, arrangements to combine work and family life, fair treatment in employment, a safe working environment, social protections, social dialogue and workplace relations, and characteristics of the economic and social context of work (Kallerberg, 2016: 112; see also Osterman and Shulman, 2011), but there are a variety of other 'decent work' indexes each measuring a differing number of variables (see European Parliament 2009).

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Assessments of what constitutes a 'good' job also vary from discipline to discipline (see Findlay et al, 2013). Generally, sociologists tend to view the quality of work as a complex issue and move away from a relatively simplistic view of good jobs as being well-paid and bad jobs being low-paid, a classification sometimes used by economists (see e.g. Acemglu, 2001), and away from a more individualistic view in psychology that whether a job is good or bad depends on individual perceptions or feelings of satisfaction (e.g. see Clarke, 2015). The emphasis in sociology has been on non-economic aspects of work including well-being, autonomy and control, opportunities for advancement and so on (Kalleberg, 2016; Butler and Hammer, 2019). For instance, Osterman (2013) highlights that the key factors explored in the studies on job quality tend to be the diversity in the substance of work (including skill levels, autonomy, and intensity or stress), compensation (including attention to wage inequality), the ability and extent of control over one's work and the extent of surveillance, stress and intensification of work, and employment terms and conditions, particularly involuntary nonstandard aspects. As debates around job quality continue, the papers in this thematic issue will illustrate this complexity and differences in understanding what makes good or bad jobs.

Good jobs going bad

Apart from the measurement and definitions, the issues that are of great interest to sociologists are about the processes of access to good jobs which as studies show are mediated by both class, race and gender (see e.g. Stier and Yanish, 2014; Warren and Lyolette, 2018) and the conditions under which and processes of how some jobs become better or worse. An interesting discussion in the field is about how jobs that used to be relatively good become bad, with studies contemplating a variety of factors, conditions and processes that lead to such deterioration (see e.g. Burns et al, 2016; Rothstein, 2016, Paraschi and Georgoloulos, 2018; Benton et al 2018). The studies highlight a range of factors that impact on this, including economic, social, political and industry-specific issues. Three articles in this thematic issue explore this topic of job deterioration but contribute to this discussion in an interesting way. Instead of looking at jobs or sectors that are notoriously bad or 'dirty' they look at how traditionally good jobs become bad. For example, public sector jobs (Stacey-Holdebran), journalism (Rosenkranz), or professional work of navigation officers and engineers (Sampson)

Stacy-Hildebrandt and colleagues, 'bad' jobs are juxtaposed against the narrative of the 'good work' framework. The co-existence of temporary work alongside permanent work in the Canadian public sector creates, as elsewhere, a two-tiered workforce and on the three defining characteristics of good jobs being used – job security, in-work benefits and income trajectories – temporary workers fare consistently worse than their permanent co-worker peers.

Rozenkranz identifies the process of social reproduction involved in freelance journalism in the US; that the process of speculation to create news, not only transfers risk from publisher to journalist, but reconstructs the nature of journalism as an occupation in the process.

Sampson navigation officers and engineers

Improving the quality of jobs

On the other hand, studies have also explored how bad jobs become better. As Simms (2017) argue, while there are sectors that are notorious for having 'bad' jobs and poor working conditions,

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however, it is important not to see job quality as a static state, and instead explore how this may be changed. One crucial factor, for instance that is considered in a range of studies is the importance of collective action and actors in determining and improving job quality. The crucial role of unions, for instance, is clear as evidence shows collective pressure and engagement may help improve job quality in sectors like where traditionally bad jobs dominate (Simms, 2017; Leschke et al, 2012; Grimshaw et al, 2018). Yet, when considering such facts, we have to remember that there are, inevitably, contextual differences between societies depending on different employment frameworks, the functioning of macro-institutions, economic regimes and so on (Kalleberg, 2016; Holman, 2013; Wood et al, 2019). Several articles in this thematic issue that speak to the topic of job quality improvement are also interesting in that they illustrate a variety of social contexts – including UK, Denmark and Philippines, showing how these different context impact on the processes and experiences of jobs.

Arnholtz et al -

Galam's study of Filipino 'utility men' working to gain a labour market foothold as seafarers, while the mechanism of gaining labour market access via the employment agency merely entrenches subservience, those who self-identify as 'utility men' have, at least some sense of agency about their position.

Pendeli and colleagues' article, the under-reported phenomena of prison work in the UK, which is identified as being legally and economically 'invisible' work, fails to motivate, engage or upskill and therefore fails to meet the 'rehabilitation' claims made to legitimise such practices.

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Can 'dirty jobs' be good jobs?

The final theme, which is closely related to the discussion of good and bad jobs and job quality is work in so-called 'dirty jobs'. The processes of doing dirty work and interrogations of the quality of jobs in 'dirty' industries have been debated a lot, including in WES (Hughes et al. 2017;). By 'dirty work' scholars typically mean jobs that are marked by stigma or some sort of taint, although the latter may vary and involve not just physical, but also moral or social (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999). Recently, there have also been discussions of emotional taint (McMurray and Ward, 2014), which refers to the process of emotional negotiations, for instance, of a positive self-concept or norms, or negotiating difficult emotional encounters that are involved in doing 'dirty jobs. Interestingly, while there are a variety of issues with 'dirty' work, recent debates have indicated that these jobs do not necessarily result in workers having negative identities or perceptions of themselves or their work and its meaning, as workers tend to employ a range of strategies of negotiating different taint of their occupations (Clarke, 2015; Ashforth et al, 2007; Stacey, 2006; Simpson et al, 2014). Morgan et al (2013) also show that when it comes to jobs it is both intrinsic and extrinsic satisfaction is important to workers and shape their perception of work in challenging industries. However, in their recent paper Hughes et al (2017) suggest that the success of these strategies that enhance self-esteem depend very much on the material aspects and conditions of the job. The two articles in this thematic issue add significantly to debating this issue through exploring the possibility of satisfaction in dirty work occupations overall (Walsh et al.) and the exploration of happiness in what is seen as a traditionally 'dirty' occupation of cleaning (Lene in this volume).

Deery et al.

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Lene ...

In addition to these two articles, this thematic issue also features two fascinating On the Frontline papers, which offer details examples of front-line workers' accounts in 'dirty' industries.

Jordan et al explore the process of 'dealing with the Dead' based on the first-hand account of the independent funeral director, adding to the development and illustration of the ways in which funeral directors negotiate 'emotional' taint. This account presents a vivid and fascinating example of the 'behind the scenes' experiences of managing and coping with death work. The article shows the process of managing moral taint that comes from combining the care of working with bereaved families while making money on doing so, which is negotiated through offering emotional comfort to the bereaved families. On the one hand, experience of working in this job and dealing with heightened emotions of grief and loss, show that attempting emotional neutrality may hide the paid of work as well as 'hide' the dirty nature of the occupation. But the account also illustrates the importance of material conditions in exacerbating the difficulty of this emotional work, for instance long hours, stress and job pressures.

Simpson and Smith's account of experiencing sex work is equally fascinating, and draws on a first-person narrative of a student sex worker echoing themes raised earlier on the conditions of dirty work, particularly the impact of the neoliberal climate and the 'gig economy' dominance has on the process of precarisation and insecure (but competitive) nature of being self-employed. Yet, the accountant also reveals complexities of experiencing and perceiving dirty work, suggesting that 'excitement of working in the sex industry is often derived from the nature of the job itself as well as the thought of engaging in a forbidden occupation and/or as an act of rebellion' (p. 4). The account also shows the 'sticky' nature of some 'dirty' jobs like sex work, demonstrating that it may be difficult to leave the job both in practical terms (for instance due to the difficulty of findings a decent well-paid job in contemporary economy) but also in emotional terms (for instance due to the need to continuously maintain secret about the 'past' and dealing with the fear of being 'found out').

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Both accounts add to and illustrate the discussions around the complexity of working experiences in so-called 'dirty' occupations, suggesting that dirty jobs may not necessarily be 'bad' even though day-to-day experiences of working in them may be very challenging.

In addition, the issue features two reviews of books that explore bad jobs and bad working conditions. One review is of Thomas's (2017) book which is concerned with the exploration of Sierra Leonean migrants workers at US military basis. The review highlights... The other review is of Ho's (2017) book on Occupational Health issues in China.

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Future research directions

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As previously stated, the improvement of job quality and creating good and better jobs is clearly on the governments' agenda. Yet, this does not mean that it is something that is guaranteed to happen. The papers in this thematic issue demonstrate that each of the themes and issues related to bad and dirty jobs is complex and require close and nuanced examination. As Kalleberg (2016) suggests challenges for researchers remain in thinking through how to conceptualise job quality and its characteristics and how to measure these. Research also needs to continue to explore why jobs vary in quality but also what conditions facilitate and add to the deterioration of it. As papers in this thematic issue show, none of these questions are straight forward and all require further examination. The trends in job quality also clear vary in different cultural contexts, therefore more cross-country comparisons may shed light on the issue of trends. Moreover, as with any other research there is a clear gap in exploring these issues in the countries of the Global South, as most studies, with few exceptions, remain focused on the European and North American context. In relation to dirty work, continuing to unpack the dynamics and complexity of negotiating work in these occupations remain an interesting issue, and perhaps, more attention could be paid to analysing the management of taint in jobs that are less physically 'dirty', but in occupations that are characterised by moral or emotional taint.

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