

Integrating Sociological and Psychological Perspectives in Studying Job Quality

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Introduction

Debates about the meaning of job quality have shifted in recent years as interest in job quality has grown. Once, job quality was a relatively simple term that referred to job characteristics which contributed to variations in intrinsic satisfaction (eg, Hackman and Oldham, 1980). Current conceptualisations are more expansive, acknowledging the importance of the proximate physical and organisational context in which tasks are undertaken and rewarded (Findlay et al, 2013) and sectoral and community characteristics too (see Pocock and Charlesworth, Chapter 6 in this book). Consequently, accounting for differences in job quality requires analysis of ‘multiple factors and forces operating at multiple levels’ (Findlay et al, 2013: 448).

These complexities raise questions about how studies of job quality have been and should be conducted. In the past the social sciences, particularly sociology, produced some of the key studies on job quality – these were studies that became classics in understanding work and employment more broadly (eg, Baldamus, 1961). Over recent decades the study of work and employment has transferred to business schools in Australia, as it has in the United Kingdom (Warhurst, 2010). Consequently, what was ‘industrial sociology’, now referred to as ‘the sociology of work and employment’, has withered in sociology departments in Australia and is rarely taught (see van Krienken et al, 2010; 2014). Furthermore, within business schools, the sociology of work has become subsumed by human resource management and industrial relations, both of which pay insufficient attention to job quality. Nonetheless, some aspects of job quality such as wages, working conditions and benefits, and health and safety have been frequently analysed as part

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These issues raise important questions for developing a job quality research program in Australia. One argument might be to forego innovation and undertake research that relies on the most promising contemporary theory and methods. This research strategy is likely to yield findings that can be readily compared with those of other countries and from which policy-makers can learn to develop interventions that result in better jobs for Australians. For several reasons, a more innovative approach might be preferable. First, because available job quality theory has shortcomings, future researchers would be remiss to repeat these deficiencies. Second, the argument that labour market institutions influence job quality is well-known to Australian industrial relations experts. However, little is known about employers' and workers' response to institutional and economic pressures to create and change jobs of varying quality. In other words, deeper examination is needed of job quality-related processes and the way workers and their unions or professional associations become engaged in shaping their destinies at work, including the outcomes of these endeavours. Third, Australia is heading towards an economic crossroads where sustainable growth based on mineral asset extraction in a climate-sensitive world is becoming increasingly problematic. Australia needs more innovation and that means more jobs that stimulate creativity and individual development while retaining a broader perspective as implied by the adage 'work to live rather than live to work'!

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JOB QUALITY IN AUSTRALIA

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INTEGRATING SOCIOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

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