



## *Sociological Reflections on My Work Experience*

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**Abstract:** Work is a very complex concept. I always considered a paid job to be work, but in reality work can be a variety of activities. I have had a few paying jobs in my two decade lifetime but I never thought I did so much of what Braverman defines as work. Helping out around the house is just as much considered work as the job that my father does. The housework that gets done by my family members, the babysitting of little cousins, the process of helping neighbors, and the nurturing of children are all classified as work. Thinking about all the different jobs that I have had and different types of work that I have participated in, I have had time to reflect on what my work utopia would be. When I think of my work utopia, I think about waking up each morning and being happy going to work. I do not envision myself working in an office building crunching numbers. I want to work with children in some way. I desire to graduate from college in the next two years and work toward getting a job that helps children. In my perfect world I would be a guidance counselor and then coach a high school sport. I love children and love the idea of making the lives of other people better. I am a very social person and enjoy a good conversation so I feel like this would be a perfect fit for me.

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Work is a very complex concept. I always just considered a paid job to be work, but in reality work can be a variety of activities. In his book *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974) Harry Braverman defines **work** as an activity with a goal that has an outcome or product. Work transforms nature by altering materials of nature that better support certain needs. I have had a few paying jobs in my two decade lifetime but I never thought I did so much of what Braverman defines as work. Helping out around the house is just as much considered work as the job that my father does. The housework that gets done by my family members, the babysitting of little cousins, the process of helping neighbors, and the nurturing of children are all classi-

fied as work.

Since the day I was born I was surrounded by this idea of work. I was born in 1987 during a period that is known as the postmodern era, a time of a new economy often referred to as **Post-Fordism**. Post-Fordism started around the early 1970s and is still considered to be contemporary. Post-Fordism is characterized by the rise of the service sector and the decline of industry, manufacturing, non-unionization, and low wages. More importantly, there has been a steady advancement in computer technologies. Finally, there is an emphasis on flexibility, i.e., the idea that a company should be flexible in the production of products and also in hours for the workers.

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The idea of mass production was the key component of the era before Post-Fordism which is known as **Fordism**. In his article titled "The Evolution of the New Industrial Technology," Stephen Meyer III describes Fordism as an economic philosophy. From this philosophy widespread prosperity and high profits can be achieved by high wages, thus allowing the workers to purchase products like the ones they produce (73). During the time when Fordism was prevalent, it was all about market demand. And once a company found out what and how much were needed then the company could increase or decrease the price accordingly. Fordism was known to be associated with the modern era and occurred during the 1920s up until the early 1970s. There was an emphasis on interchangeable parts and an assembly line. There was also a division of labor and standardized parts. A lot has changed over the past eighty years or so, but one thing that has not is the work. There is always plenty of work out there that needs to be done.

There are five people in my family. Although a **household** can be a family, the concept is not just limited to a family. A household can also consist of roommates, unmarried partners, or just friends who live together. In their book titled *Fast Forward* Dickinson and Schaeffer state that people in a household "join together different workers and separate kinds of work." Dickinson and Schaeffer go on to write that "the household is the organizational unit for working people the world over" (23). The people in a household, however, may work together to do many tasks and jobs necessary to survive. Most of the work that is done in the household goes unnoticed and is usually always unpaid. These unpaid jobs are very important, so work by members of a household is not limited to just **wage work**.

Wage work is work that a person does to receive some type of payment for. Payment can be made in, most commonly, a paycheck and can sometimes be accompanied by perks (Dickinson and Schaeffer 26). When I worked at a golf course as a caddy, one perk

that I received was having the luxury of playing the course every Monday afternoon. The course both paid you and guaranteed that you would be able to play the course at least one time a week.

It is very rare that a household survives on strictly wage work. In my family my father works and my mother stays at home and does what Dickinson and Schaeffer define as **unpaid work**. Dickinson and Schaeffer say that "women do most of the world's work, and much of it is unpaid" (25). My mother is definitely responsible for the unpaid work in my family. She is a stay at home mother who does the cooking and cleaning. She runs the errands and takes care of the children. Although she is not rewarded with a paycheck every other week like my father is, the work she does is vital and necessary for the survival of the household. Without her the household would not succeed because it is a lot of work to care for the children and make sure that they are accommodated for.

As my brother, sister and I grew up we started helping out with the work around the house. This is what Dickinson and Schaeffer call **subsistence work**. They state that "to subsist as workers, people work together" (29). The act of working together on tasks and getting them completed is known as subsistence work. Around the house nearly all the chores and household tasks can fit into the subsistence work category. For example helping out with cooking dinner, setting the table, doing the laundry, taking out the garbage, caring for a younger sister, and even babysitting are all what Dickinson and Schaeffer consider subsistence work. The idea of people working together to complete a task is usually unpaid. Just like the unpaid work done by my mother and the wage work done by my father, subsistence work, in which nearly all the members of a household participate, is vital to the success and well being of a household.

My beliefs about work are closely connected with the reality of what happens in my family today. On such issues as whether

I would want my wife to work or be a stay at home mother, I would choose for her to stay at home and take care of the children and the work around the house. The idea of a **dual wage earner household** is not one that interests me. A dual wage earner household is one in which two people, usually adults, work. They both are engaged in wage work and bring home some type of paycheck to better support their household. I do not want to have to pay for my child to go to daycare and not be with one of his or her parents during the day. I believe that my views on this particular subject are due to the **ideologies** that have shaped my parents' and my views.

In her article titled "Household Structure and Family Ideologies; The Case of Vietnamese Refugee" Nazli Kabri writes about the role of ideologies. She states, "These family beliefs or ideologies define norms and expectations about household activities and relations that affect the household economy" (60). Because my household has always had my mother at home to watch after the kids and do the unpaid work around the house I hold the same beliefs about what is right. I also believe that a child's most important job is to do well in school. While they are in school they should concentrate on their studies and should not be worrying about having an important job and making money. I have this in my belief system because it is an ideology that is held by my mother and father, one that they have passed on to my siblings and me while we were growing up.

I think it is common that in a household there are certain children that do more work than other family members. I do believe that all family members, in some way or another, do a handful of different kinds of work. In my household, I have noticed that my brother and I do much more work than my younger sister. This may be because of her age or her gender but it is definitely true. My brother and I are always helping out around the house, doing yard work, doing laundry, and just giving an extra hand wherever it seems necessary.

In their article titled "Children's Share in

Household Tasks" Frances Goldscheider and Linda Waite write about a household that is non-egalitarian. A **non-egalitarian household** is one in which family members are treated differently when it comes to specific types of work around the house. For example, my father would never expect my sister to help mow the lawn or help clean out the garage. I feel the explanation is because of her gender. She is a girl so it is more common for her to be doing work with my mother and not the outdoor work like my brother, father, and me. Furthermore, my mother would never expect nor want my brother, father, or myself cooking dinner or doing anything in the kitchen. Also, I feel there is more expected out of my older brother than what is expected out of me, and also my parents expect more help from me than they do of my younger sister. All of these ideas feed into Goldscheider and Waite's idea of a non-egalitarian household (813).

Some families depend a lot if not totally on the children to provide for the family. They do everything because the parents are not able. This was highlighted in the movie *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* when the main character Gilbert, played by Johnny Depp, and his two younger sisters have to take care of his obese mother and autistic younger brother. It is a lot of work to be the head of a household and these three kids do a good job at it. At times they struggle with it and want to have more of a social life, but they know that their household will not survive without their help. There are many families in today's world that are dependent on their children to help provide for their household. It is almost unheard of for a household that does not need the support and help from the children to be successful.

Although my work experience has not been that extensive, there is plenty to write and talk about. I have done a variety of work, including wage work, subsistence work, and unpaid work, all of which is considered human work. **Human work** is not instinctual, but rather, it is thoughtful (Braverman, 1974). A person who is doing human work is

imagining what he or she wants to do and then does it. Human work has a purpose and meaning in a person's life. It is conceptual, creative, and conscious. Just the other day I was outside doing some yard work and noticed my old neighbor mowing her lawn. She is old and was struggling to complete the task. So I consciously thought about what the right thing to do was and decided that I would walk over and help her out. This is both an example of subsistence work and human work.

I started working when I was around the age of thirteen or so, delivering papers to some houses around my street. It taught me about responsibility and meeting deadlines and overall was a good working experience. As I grew a few years older I started getting bored of working as a paper delivery boy so I decided to seek a job that was compatible with my interests. Of course I decided to be a golf caddy at a local private golf course. The money was decent but also if I caddied I was allowed to play golf there on Monday afternoon. There was no definite wage that I would be given every time I caddied, but rather it would be up to the person I caddied for. In his article titled "The Capitalist Firm in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" Walter Powell discusses the type of work that caddying would fall into. He defines it as **craft-based work**. Powell says in this article "Sociologists have long studied 'craft-based work' in which workers labored on short-term projects and were paid for specific performances (88)." I would caddy for a different member of the country club nearly every time I showed up at the golf course. After the round I was given a certain wage based upon how I did. The golfer decided whether or not the caddy did a good job and this would later be revealed to the caddy based on how much money he was given at the end of the round.

It was a common occurrence that even if you did caddy as well as you could, your tip was still dependent on how well the golfer played that day. So if the golfer played really poorly but you still gave him the appropriate clubs, told him the correct yardages, and

took out and put back in the flag there was still a good chance that you would not be paid the appropriate wage because of his performance. Even though I would do my job as well as I possibly could, I would not be rewarded for it. There was a sense of **alienation in the labor process**, as Karl Marx would call it. In his writing of "Alienated Labour" Marx talked a lot about the labor process and how people would contribute to the product, in this case on the assembly lines, and then not see the final product (46). This is similar to my experiences as a caddy. I would be alienated from the group of players and only be asked to give him a club or take out the flagstick. There was this sense that I was contributing to the good of the golfer and to improving his playing ability, but at the same time I could only express my individuality through the shots that he made. In both cases, assembly lines and caddying, you helped produce the final product but you are alienated from affecting the true outcome because you are only one piece of the final product.

I stuck with the caddying job for a few years and it carried me into the summer of my junior year of high school. I never worked during the school year because I was concentrating on my studies. My only wage work during the school year was homework and getting good grades. As the summer of junior year approached I was going to work. But this was going to be different kind of work. In order to graduate from high school all the graduates must complete a one hundred and fifty hour community service project. Community service is one type of **share work**. For my project I worked at a summer camp for kids from the inner city of Boston. It was a stay away camp, where the kids would take a bus to a small town in Massachusetts and stay for about a week. They would participate in group activities, go the beach, make new friends, and hopefully learn a thing or two about the world from the people who are employed there. After I completed my one hundred and fifty hours of community service at the camp I got

a job for the following summer and am still employed there today.

Having the opportunity to work at this camp has made me look at life from a completely different perspective. I never really sat down to think about how lucky I am or about the types of opportunities I have had. The children that go to this camp will most likely never have the same types of opportunities as I have had unfortunately. This issue has really had a strong influence on my life and no longer take anything for granted.

C. Wright Mills wrote about the **sociological imagination** (1959) and stated how important it is to learn about society by developing the ability to relate one's personal troubles to larger social forces and public issues. He noted that a trouble is a private matter and an issue is a public matter. He went on to say "This distinction is an essential tool of the sociological imagination and a feature of all classic work in social science" (350).

I can see that there are both personal trouble and public issues associated with the camp I mentioned above. In terms of personal troubles, these kids deserve better and deserve more opportunities. These kids deserve to go to a good school and get a good education, instead of going to a school that does not prepare them for the world. Because they come from poor neighborhoods they do not have the same resources that wealthier children have. In terms of public issues, I wonder how something can be done to fix the problem at the institutional level. These children should have the same opportunities as every other kid in the state, country, and world. It is troubling to think about the struggles that these kids might and most likely will encounter later on in their lives. And they do not deserve not having an equal chance. These children are starting behind other children because of the house they were born into. And a big part of the larger social forces that are causing troubles for these kids is the government and its policies. It is about time they figured out a way for it to be an equal playing field for all the children. Although I do not feel as though it will

happen anytime soon, I think the world needs to start taking strides, at least, in the right direction.

At the beginning of my volunteer year at camp things were going all right. It seemed as though everyone working there had already found his or her niche, and I was the new guy. At times I felt a little bit awkward, but I tried to be outgoing and ultimately made a few good friends, friends that are still friends now and will be for the rest of my life. I learned the ropes of the camp pretty fast too. I asked many questions and learned the right things to do and the wrong things not to do. When you are dealing with kids they will take advantage of the new guy whenever they can. I didn't want to be "that" new guy.

In his article "Jobless Poverty: A New Form of Social Dislocation in the Inner-City Ghetto" William Wilson writes about these skills that I was acquiring. He calls them **hard skills**. Wilson describes hard skills as the specific skills that can be easily taught. I learned these skills easily. I would float around to the different groups and pick up tidbits from the various counselors who were on duty. Examples of hard skills at camp would be knowing the times of activities, what time bed time is, and things the kids are allowed to do and not allowed to do. I seemed to pick up these skills pretty fast and by the end of my first summer I was pretty confident in my hard skills.

Wilson also talks about soft skills in the aforementioned article. **Soft skills** are much more complex and harder to learn. They take time to develop and master. Soft skills are intangible. I have now been at the camp for four years and still do not know if I have completely mastered all the soft skills that are necessary to be perfect at this job. But then again, no one is perfect. Examples at the camp of soft skills would include leadership qualities in relation to your fellow employees but also to the idea of being a leader or role model to the children. Most of these kids do not have a good role model at home and it is always nice to know that these children

look up to you. Other soft skills may include dealing with certain situations at camp, like how to discipline a child for poor behavior or reward a child for appropriate behavior. It is also important to gain the respect of the children. They sometimes think that because they are away at home they do not need to behave so it is important to make the kids understand that the counselors need to be treated with the utmost respect.

I soon realized that the camp is pretty much a routine that takes place every day, week, or summer; but there are some changes every time it is held. It was hard to notice at first but after four years at the place you begin to realize the routine and understand how to handle a certain situation. It is extremely similar to the routine that people working at MacDonald's deal with. This idea of **routinization** is discussed in Robin Leidner's article "Over the Counter: McDonald's," where she states that "McDonald's had routinized the work of its crews so thoroughly that decision making had practically been eliminated from the jobs" (346). The decisions were made by the higher-ups in the company to make it easier for the people working and dealing with the people who come to the restaurant. This is similar to the camp, such as the idea that my boss has set up a schedule to follow during the day and it is given to the counselors. The boss has taught the counselors how to discipline the children and how to treat certain situations and make certain decisions. The camp is run on the same routine every week of every summer I have been there. There are the same meals, activities, and it is very rare that a situation comes up that has never occurred in a previous summer. Once a counselor has developed his or her soft skills they will notice that camp is a routine that has a few changes every so often.

When thinking about Leidner's article about McDonald's I thought of the movie *Fast Food Nation*. This movie shows the working crew that is in charge of preparing the beef for the restaurants. The **conditions of work** are extremely unsanitary as shown

and were pretty repulsive. I have worked in the kitchen at camp and made sure to wash my hands before and after and also always wore gloves and a hat while working there. The idea that a worker's hands must be washed and that they need to wear gloves is institutionalized. If the camp is audited and a person working in the kitchen is not wearing gloves or a hat, the camp could get into trouble. The working conditions at the camp are immaculate, pristine, and completely different from the working conditions that were shown during the movie *Fast Food Nation*.

The working hours of someone that works at the camp are very similar from day to day. A counselor will either work the morning shift, starting when the kids arise, and going until the mid afternoon or they will work the mid afternoon until the kids go to sleep. And then it is required that two counselors sleep in each bunkhouse. In her article titled "Toward a 24 Hour Economy" Harriet Presser writes about the idea of **rotating**. Rotating is a concept that deals with a person's schedule being different from day to day. At the camp there really is not any rotating. A counselor rotates with another counselor at the break in the mid afternoon and then they are on until night and perhaps the next morning or afternoon when the other counselor is scheduled to show up and relieve that person of their duties for the day (462).

Working at the camp is a lot of fun, but at the same time it is very stressful at times and also it is tremendously tiring. The days are generally very long and after three or four straight days of working there without a break it becomes tiring. The camp is generally understaffed. There should be more counselors so that the ones working there are not as stressed. The counselors that are working there are what Barbara Brandt would call **overworked**. The counselors are worked extremely hard for far too long for the entire summer. In her article titled "An Issue for Everybody" Brandt writes, "in order to maximize profits, companies are "downsizing"—laying off as many employ-

ees as possible and overworking those who remain” (Brandt 13). While this is a non-profit camp and profits aren’t a priority, overworking takes place because there is a lack of people wanting to be counselors, or perhaps a combination of both. Because of these problems the camp is suffering and the counselors are overworked.

Because the camp is overworked, it is obvious that the camp is **understaffed**. The camp really struggles because of the under-employment. This is the sole reason for the overworking. There is only one benefit for the workers of being underemployed. In most cases when there is not enough workers there is usually always plenty of work that has to be done (Brandt 14). This leaves an ample amount of what Brandt calls **overtime**. Overtime is extra working time that you get paid for usually in the form of “time and a half.” Or you are rewarded in a different way that is clearly stated in your working statement. Overtime can be either voluntary or mandatory. At the camp I had plenty of overtime hours which made my paychecks much larger.

All of these extra hours took a lot out of the counselors. I feel they might have taken away from the children’s experiences at the camp. Working at the camp is extremely fun, though. One thing that all the people have to remember is to always be happy and jolly around the kids. Even if you are having a bad day, it is part of the job to make the best out of the day and make sure that the kids have the most fun. Going to camp is like a vacation for most of the children that go there so it would be unfair to take away from their get-a-way. Arlie Hochschild describes this type of work as **emotional labor**. In her article titled “The Managed Heart” she states that emotional labor is the “management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” (73). It is part of the “job.” Working with these kids who are all full of energy and loving every minute of being away from the city are not, it is necessary to be emotionally affectionate. A big part of being a counselor is being happy and joyful

and trying to make the lives of the children a lot better and richer because they are having fun.

Although it is nearly impossible at times during the job, a counselor must not get attached to the children. They are there for the week and you have to make it the best experience for them. When there is a problem that happens at camp each counselor or the boss has to look at the issue with an even eye. There can be no playing of favorites. Each child should get the same opportunities as every other child. Hochschild also talks about this. She defines the term **feeling rules**. According to her article feeling rules “are standards used in emotional conversation to determine what is rightly owed and owing in the currency of feeling” (74). There is a difference between how we actually may feel about something and how we are supposed to feel about it. Feeling rules are how we are supposed and expected to feel according to prevalent cultural norms. If there is a situation where a camper is involved in a fight, for example, a counselor can’t just listen to one side of the story because that child has a better reputation than the other. Rather the counselor must sit down and leave all emotions out of it, and figure out what happened and what went wrong and figure out the appropriate way to solve the problem.

At camp often many problems arise. It is inevitable to have a group of about sixty kids or so in one camp and go through a week without an astronomical number of problems. This can be very stressful for the workers and at times very hard to handle. Simon Head, in his article “On the Digital Assembly Line,” writes about dealing with this type of problem. He talks about **management of stress** and how a worker deal with some of the pressures and anxiety a job may have. I feel like the best way to cope with some of the stresses at the camp is to have a good weekend or have a good night when you have the evening off. Taking the job everyone understands that it is going to be a very stressful job, but at the end of the day you are a better person for what you are doing. So

managing the stress while working at camp it is good to have a strong, close-knit staff that can talk about problems and discuss the day or week. The staff is a veteran staff and everyone knows each other very well so it is easy to go to the other counselors or the boss to get through a difficult time.

Thinking about all the different jobs that I have had and different types of work that I have participated in, I have had time to reflect on what my work utopia would be. When I think of my work utopia, I think about waking up each morning and being happy going to work. I do not envision myself working in an office building crunching numbers. I want to work with children in some way. I desire to graduate from college in the next two years and work toward getting a job that helps children. In my perfect world I would be a guidance counselor and then coach a high school sport. I love children and love the idea of making the lives of other people better. I am a very social person and enjoy a good conversation so I feel like this would be a perfect fit for me. As for work at home I will help with the housework and cleaning and dishes but I am not a good cook so hopefully I can find someone that can keep my hunger satiated.

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