A Conceptual Research Journey on Meaning of Work, Self, and Integrated Women

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The purpose of this paper is to link a number of interrelated concepts (the meaning of work in history and culture, work and self, the “social drama of work,” social psychological effects of unemployment, work as a social process, integrated women and the meaning of work, work and social change) from sociology and social-psychology of work perspectives. The linkage provides researchers a conceptual framework on how work defines self and self defines work. A few empirical studies by the author, based on “work and self” framework, were cited.

Keywords: work, self, unemployment, work as a process, integrated women, social change, the meaning of work

Acknowledgements and Reflection

“Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life”—Confucius.

The author has been interested in studying the sociology of work since her graduate years in 1970-1972 while she was working on her dissertation. That is when her mentor, Dr. Robert W. Habenstein, guided her through a rich compendium of literature dealing with occupations and professions. Her first study of the sociology of work was “Chiropractor, Chiropractic, and Process: A Study of Sociology of Occupations and Professions” in 1972.

For the last 50 years, the author has continued to develop her interest in the study of professional women and their orientation towards work as well as their attitudes toward marriage, family, and career. She has been fortunate to collaborate with diverse colleagues on her research interests: in the United States (“Integrated Women: College Students’ Attitudes on Marriage, Family, and Career” with Dr. Mary Moore in 1983), her own study (“Career Contingencies and Work Orientations of Female College Professors” in 1994); and in Taiwan (“Social Work Education and the Professionalization of Social Workers in Taiwan”) with Professor Lung-li Liao, in 1993; (“Career Contingencies of Women Physicians in Taiwan”) with Dr. Chung-fu Lan and Dr. Li-hui Liu in 1992; (“Daily Life Demands, Social Support, Life Satisfaction, and Health of Working Women and Housewives”) with Dr. Jeaw-Mei Chen in 1992; and (“Stress and Coping of Professional Women in Taiwan”) with Professor Hui-juen Wang in 1987.

These earlier studies reinforced her life-long interest in the sociological study of professional women and their career pathways. These studies also provided conceptual frameworks and inspired her initiative for on-going research (2022) on the “Professional Women’s Meaning of Work and Work-Life Balance in Myanmar, India, and China: Resilience, Social Support, and Job Satisfaction” with colleagues in Myanmar, India, and China. The author would like to express a personal debt of intellectual gratitude to her co-researchers.
and to the many students, who have taken, and are taking, these research journeys with her since 1972. In 1983, she and her research collaborator Dr. Mary Moore and her, coined the term, “integrated women” (Lin & Moore, 1983) to conceptualize an ideal type of professional working women in the East and West (Lin, 1996). The concept of integrated women refers to an ideal type of woman who is a woman who is conscious of different alternatives—feminist, traditionalist, and androgynous—and who has the autonomy to integrate these alternatives within a chosen lifestyle. “An integrated woman is a career woman who has the opportunity to interweave aspects that are feminist, traditionalist, or androgynous within her life by combining behaviors and attitudes from the different orientations” (Lin & Moore, 1983). Despite being faced with many challenges, the author has admired this ideal type of the “integrated woman” in the multiple roles she has played and continued to play as a career woman, wife, mother, daughter, etc. Since starting her teaching career in 1972, the author has strived to fulfill her personal goals and make an impact on society with the help of a solid social support system, faithfully practicing stress management, and emulating great role models.

By exercising her self-efficacy (the capacity of knowing what the author can do with her knowledge, skills, and experiences), she is now, and has always been, in search of a balance in work and life (even while being keenly aware that work-life can never be fully balanced); and she she strives to live as fulfilling and meaningful a life in her old age (just turned 80) as she did in her youth. She is a life-long learner. Career is a long journey, and she has had a wonderful long journey. She was very fortunate to have so many people who paved the way for her. Sociological mindfulness, the sociological lens, and concepts in organization development, leadership (especially the “VIP” model of leadership—vision, integrity, and passion), and a spirit of service-learning have guided her throughout her journey. The author’s sociological imagination and mindfulness are forever active. In fact, she now can see the inter-connectedness (a systems-holistic-humanistic approach to social issues and organization development) of all her endeavors over the years.


Work defines us. It’s an all-consuming part of our society which, as it stands, will continue to dominate our lives for a long time. (Gratton, 2011)

The Meaning of Work in History and Culture

There is no universal definition of work, since work changes throughout history and societal situations (Coates, 2014). Work is contextual—defined by a specific location, time, culture, and varies by individual based on current events/situation and needs (economic or social psychological) (Coates, 2014). The dictionary defines work as “activity involving mental or physical effort done in order to achieve a purpose or result; mental or physical activity as a means of earning income; employment; make efforts to achieve something, etc. or a task or tasks to be undertaken (Retrieved from https://www.merriam-webster.com/). The meaning of work is not easy to define and measure (Pignault & Houssemand, 2021; Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012). The meaning of work to individuals and the factors influencing their employment choices have changed following shifts in times. In the early period of human civilization, work was considered a curse, sorrow, suffering, and caused a
craving for relief. The word labor originates from Latin, and it contains meanings of difficulty, trouble, pressure, et al. In French, the word travail also originates from Latin, which refers to an instrument of torture, tripalium, used in the ancient Roman Empire. Similarly, the Latin origin of the word occupation, oscupare, means to “acquire” or “master”. In Greek, “work” and “difficulty” are synonymous; in the Hebrew Bible, the words “work” and “effort” are interchangeable. Obviously, in ancient Western societies, work was not pleasant.

The ancient Greeks despised work. They believed that those who needed to work could not cultivate virtue. Those who worked in the fields were viewed as slaves and laborers. We find a metaphor for such a relationship in: “The leaders or rulers are the flute players; they enjoy the works of the flute maker.”

Early Judeo-Christian religious orders prohibited people from cursing work. No matter how boring and hard the work, the Jews insisted that people must endure it, because this is God’s great plan. Working well is to honor God. In the 14th and 15th centuries, work was still a “sacred command” for European Christians, and hard work was a way to please God. Protestantism not only changed the Christian worldview, but also affected the work orientation of its followers. The success that hard work can bring became the focus of a person’s life; work was no longer a curse. However, as far back as ancient Greek society, intellectual work was much more respected than manual work. In Chinese society, the work of scholar-officials has the highest social status.

Max Weber (1864-1920) was the first to identify the protestant work ethic. He correlated religion with way of life. He named the desire to invest capital in order to make more money as the spirit of capitalism, which affected the development of industrialization and transformed societies. Work has gradually become a variable for social stratification of occupations and gender, and has also become the defining marker of class and related social-economic prestige.

Around the turn of the century, in 1900, behavioral scientists began to study work management. The focus of the study was not on workers’ meaning of work, but rather on using a scientific management approach to determine the most efficient way of doing work. In “The Principles of Scientific Management”, Taylor (1911, cited in Morgan, 2006) laid out a few principles on work design: (a) shifting all responsibility for the organization of work from the worker to the manager; (b) high pay for high-performing employees; (c) selecting the best person to perform the designated job; (d) training workers to do work efficiently; and (e) monitoring work performance and strict surveillance of employees to ensure prescribed processes are followed and resultant efficiency achieved. Although Taylor’s classical study of work demonstrated the importance of compensation for performance, it did not appreciate the social context of work and workers’ meaning of work and workers’ needs.

Nevertheless, Taylor’s pioneer study of work set the cornerstone for researchers in the next few decades to look into the significance of the meaning of work to workers and factors attributed to workers’ job satisfaction. For example, the research in the 1970s began to focus on social and human factors at work. Researchers began to ask questions, such as, which variables are significantly associated with employee engagement, potential burnout, and job/organizational satisfaction. Researchers advocated for management’s ability to identify early warning signs among employees and timely intervention factors to head off employee disengagement before it sets in (Burnett, 2019).

Job characteristics and work relationships are closely linked with workers’ job satisfaction. Many studies have identified organizational and working conditions as factors for job satisfaction. Factors may also include flexible schedules; hybrid working arrangements; shorter commuting distances; interesting work culture;
prestige; titles; amenities, such as offices, in-house gyms, and day-care centers; overall fringe benefits; adequate resources; interpersonal relationships with co-workers; relationship with the immediate supervisor; job security; overall compensation, and pay (salary) or contingent rewards; stock options; working conditions; organizational policy and administration (management and leadership style); opportunities to use skills/abilities; the work itself; organization’s financial stability; autonomy and independence; variety of work; overall corporate culture; communication between employees and senior management; management’s recognition of employee job performance; organization’s commitment to corporate social responsibility; job specific training; organization’s commitment to professional development and career development opportunities; networking opportunities; career advancement opportunities within the organization, trust between senior management and employees, etc. Of these factors, meaningful work has become one of the most important intrinsic values for contemporary workers; especially for the millennial generation (Coates, 2014; Korolevich, 2021). A recent study by the society of human resource concluded that “employees value, salary, benefits, and company leadership, but meaningful work drives job satisfaction more than ever” (O’Connell, 2019).

Work and Self

The term “work” refers not only to what an individual must do, but also what they do for a living. Work may include paid employment, volunteer work, or “family work.” The concept of work is closely related to the concept of role. What one does refers to the role one plays. Therefore, when an individual is doing several things (or types of work) in his/her life, we conceptualize the image of this individual as playing multiple roles in his/her life. Each of us plays multiple roles in our life time. For example, student, citizen, homemaker, mother, wife, teacher, consumer, etc. We have a tendency to prioritize the roles we play. Some roles may be more important and significant than others. It will be interesting for us to compare behavior across the roles we play to determine the relative importance or salience of a role in comparison to other roles. Self-identity emerges from the roles we play or the work we do. Self-identity may change throughout one’s life course. For example, at some point in a woman’s life, a mother’s role is more important than a career role. When a woman tries to juggle her family role and her work role, role conflict may occur. Societies (or work organizations) define work role expectations. Working women need to define their work role commitment. When there is a discrepancy between role expectations (job demands) and commitment (personal time, energy, and family responsibilities) role strain and stress will surface (Lin, 2000; 2003; 2014). How to maintain work-life balance is one of the most persistent challenges in career women’s lives. This challenge increases at a societal (and organizational) level during times of crisis, including personal life crises and pandemics.

Most people must work to earn a living to support themselves and their families. But it can no longer be assumed that this is the primary reason for working. The evidence is clear that many people work to satisfy a host of inner needs. People have different needs; the work that satisfies the needs of an individual may frustrate the needs of another. At present, “work” is regarded as a means through which people can enhance their images, a place where social relations are established, an indicator of social status, and a process of integration between individuals and society. In other words, “work” not only provides a personal livelihood, but also provides a source of personal satisfaction and joy, or frustration and pressure, as well as a means to enhance image and self-awareness. In our contemporary society, people are pursuing a sense of self-achievement and opportunities for self-realization in their work. Therefore, really good work is work that provides opportunity for self-actualization.
Based on the group structure and interaction reflected in the process of human gathering and division of labor to meet basic physiological, social, and self-realization needs, it can be ascertained that work not only represents a means of earning a living, but also represents the laws governing the distribution of labor and rewards of a society. Work is not only the result of personal self-cognition, but also that of group cognition derived from interactions. At the same time, work also determines a person’s social-economic status. The fact that a certain kind of work should “enjoy” a higher social-economic status indicates the kind of social values prevalent in a society. The social value orientation usually depends on the social contribution, the consumption of manpower and time required by the work (or the depth and breadth of knowledge required by the work). Therefore, the rewards that individuals receive for their work are often measured by their function (contribution) to society. Therefore, sociologically, the meaning of work reflects the value system in the society (Lin, 2000); and in social psychology, the meaning of work reflects an individual’s work experiences in interactions with others at work (Sales, 2015). This applies as well to the experiences an individual has when he/she loses his/or her job (i.e., the social psychological effects of unemployment) (Lin, 1983).

People have to work in various trades and professions due to the complexity of social life. In addition to the division of labor based on industries, society also has a “moral division of labor.” This refers to who has the right to do what and who can serve others and by what means. The contemporary concepts of “license,” “permission,” and “contract” derived from these. The “moral division of labor,” in fact, is a kind of social control on working behavior. It also entails the notion of work ethics. If work is a tool for social survival, the society must formulate a set of rules that apply to this tool, a means for survival. Otherwise, the social order would be in chaos. Therefore, the world of work is actually an indicator of social morality. The observance of work (professional) ethics by contemporary people is the obligation of ideal citizens (Wolfe, 1997).

The social construction of the reality concept of self implies that our sense of self comes from the way we present ourselves to other people (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Lin, 2021). The concept of self is shaped partly by our interactions with others and by our work/life experiences. Our perceptions of reality are colored by our beliefs and social/cultural backgrounds. Our reality is also a complicated negotiated order. What is real depends on what is socially acceptable. While we participate in the construction of reality, it’s not entirely a product of our own doing. It is, primarily, an outcome of social interaction with others (in individual, group, organization, or community settings) in both work and non-work settings. Bailey and Madden (2015; 2016) defined meaningful work as arising “when an individual perceives an authentic connection between their work and a broader transcendent life purpose beyond the self.” Bailey and Madden’s research pointed out that people talked about the impact or relevance their work had on other individuals, groups, or the wider environment. Therefore, work and self are intertwined (Lin, 1972; 2021).

The “Social Drama of Work”

The “Work and the Self” perspective has been applied to processes by which persons acquire work-related identities in and through the “social drama of work,” i.e., the constellation of interactions in a set of situations. Sociologist Everett C. Hughes (1958) detailed his conviction that a person’s work is a clue to the course of his or her life, defining one’s social being and core identity. He also argued that work influences a person’s social outlooks and attitudes, even across class, gender, and racial lines. There are four dimensions in the “work and the self” perspective of the “social drama of work”: involvement of self, maintenance of self-consistency, expansion of self, and the protection of self” (Lin, 1972, pp. 21-22; Habenstein, 1970; Lin, 1994, pp. 4-5):
Involvement of Self
1. The work one does is seen as one of the more important parts of the person’s identity;
2. The variation in degree to which one becomes self-involved is related to the manifold number of jobs differentiated in the social and technical division of labor;

Maintenance of Self-Consistency
1. Through license, that which is socially legitimated as the proper purpose and expected functions of the occupation;
2. Through mandate, the grounded conviction of members of the occupation that they may prescribe “what is good and right” for the individual and for society at large in some aspect of work;
3. The occupation’s search for mechanisms to cope with the requirements associated with the ambivalence of public granting and renewing of professional practice through licensing procedures and requirements.

Expansion of Self
1. Assumption that fulfillment and expansion of ego operates in processes of association in which the self plays an active role;
2. The situation of differential valuation placed on tasks that are performed within an occupation;
3. The reciprocal tendency to delegate lower status “dirty work” tasks to those occupying other levels in the occupation or work organization;
4. The search for symbols and terms of language which, when associated with the work, enhance its prestige.

The Protection of Self
1. Handling personal risks (physical and reputation) with both formal and legal procedures;
2. The necessity to routinize and prioritize one’s work during normal and crisis times;
3. The problem of handling one’s own mistakes and failures in the performance of work as generic to the study of occupations;
4. The assurance structure built into collegiality as a mechanism of protection from criticism and attack.

Each dimension of analytical levels enumerates operations and considerations for studying the relationship between a person’s work and his/her concept of self. For example, some of the research topics related to the drama of work and work-life balance/conflict may include: career contingencies and work orientation (Lin & Liao, 1994); work-life (work-family) conflict and balance (Michel, Mitchelson, Kotrba, LeBreton, & Baltes, 2009); future of work (Gratton, 2011); the meaning of work for Y generation (Coates, 2014); factors that contribute to meaning of work (measuring meaning of work) (Pignault & Houssemand, 2021); working women’s attitude and behavior toward marriage, family, and career (Lin & Moore, 1983); non work-to-work spillover (Kirchmeyer, 1993) work-family balance (Nooyi, 2021); super women (Snyder, 2015); glass ceiling (Azeez & Priyadarshini, 2018); dimensions of meaning of work and self (Puchalska-Kamińska, Czerwb, & Roczniewska, 2019), understanding work ethics (P. Stanwick & S. Stanwick, 2016), job satisfaction (Sales, 2015); etc.

Socio-Psychological Effects of Unemployment
Work is a fundamental aspect of the human experience. A person’s work is one of the things by which he/she is judged, and certainly one of the more significant things by which he/she judges himself/herself. A
person’s work is one of the more important parts of his/her identity. As mentioned earlier, work holds meaning for the individual and society. The meaning of work and the sources of workers’ motivations have changed. During the history of civilization, work has been defined as a curse, and as the path toward salvation. Some of these original meanings have been transformed in the 21st century. Today, the meaning of “work” is seen as a means to provide continuity to a person’s self-image, as a process whereby people sense their individuality and their integration into the larger society. Today, we expect our work to supply us not only with a means of livelihood, but also with personal satisfaction, gratification, and most of all, social identity. Therefore, to lose a job quite often signifies a loss of reason to live, a loss of self-identity, a loss of some aspects of personal functioning, and a loss of the organization of daily life routine. It is a loss of the total being (Lin, 1983; Tausky, 1969; Terkel, 1972).

Change, both positive and negative, can create stress, and stress, if prolonged and severe, can lead to illness. Drs. Thomas Holmes and Minoru Masudu developed the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS). In their study, they gave point values to stressful events and discovered that in 79% of the respondents, major illness followed the accumulation of stress-related changes totaling over 300 points in one year. What is of significance on this scale in relation to working and being out of work (unemployment) is that those rankings were closely related to work and finances. For example, being fired was given eight points, retirement (10), business readjustment (15), changes in type of work (18), foreclosure (21), changes in work responsibilities (22), wife begins or stops working (26), trouble with boss (30), and change in work hours or conditions (31). Stress is inevitable in our lives and stress is evident in daily lives and work-related events (Holmes & Rahe, 1967; Chen & Lin, 1992). To the unemployed person, the socio-psychological experience is deep, real, and it is ingrained into every aspect of that person’s life no matter if he/she finds work again. Unemployment rose in 2020 and 2021, as the US and many countries battled the COVID-19 pandemic. Differential unemployment rates in age, gender and race have caught our attention not only as applied to the national economy but also in relation to social issues in inequality and exclusion (McKinsey & Company, 2021).

The former Secretary of Education Terrel H. Bell, once said, “Work in America is the means whereby a person is tested as well as identified. It is the way a younger person becomes an adult. Work shapes the thoughts and life of the worker. A change in atmosphere and life-style can be affected by the individual by simply changing the way he/she makes a living. For most of us in adult life, being without work is not living” (as cited in Riegle, 1982, p. 114). Unemployment has been a historical phenomenon in the workplace in any industrialized society. Karl Marx developed the concept of alienation as an account of the plight of people in modern industrial societies. Sociologist Robert Blauner, in his social psychological research on industrial workers, identifies four components of alienation, i.e., powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, and self-estrangement (Blauner, 1964). The sense of alienation not only exemplifies the extensive dissatisfaction in certain work forces, it also reflects the socio-psychological experience of the extremely negative social side of the meaning of work. Losing a job is almost synonymous with a loss of self-image, self-identity, and some aspects of personal functioning. A person is not only confronted by the loss of a job, but also with the loss of those functions which the job provides, such as food, shelter, identity, security, competency, independence, and self-esteem. In addition, any job-related activities may be lost in the situation of unemployment, such as work routine and schedule, relations with colleagues, and many other job-related ceremonies and events. The “grief” process when an individual loses his/her job varies depending on how one defines the unemployment situation, the degree of job satisfaction and commitment to work while working, the impact of financial loss, the nature of
the support system one may receive, and an individual’s resilience to the crisis of “loss.” These social-psychological experiences of unemployment (loss of a job and not-working) warrant empirical studies.

**Work as Social Process**

The Hughes-Habenstein’s “Work as Social Process” perspective constitutes a body of references, insights, and problems around which inquiry into professional identification and behavior has been, and may consistently be, organized (Hughes, 1958; Habenstein, 2001; Lin, 1972; Moore & Lin, 1984; Lin & Liao, 1984a; Lin, Lan, & Liu, 1985; Lin, 1986; Lin & Wang, 1988; Lin, 2021). Habenstein, in an extensive guide for the study of occupations and professions, has elaborated the Hughesian “Work as Social Process” perspective as follows:

The “Work as Social Process” perspective, applied to occupations, accepts the premise that the bonds that tie men to one another are compounded primarily out of human association, and further holds that the work experiences in the association of people at their work are as basic to human association as any other quality of experience, in family, church, among neighbors, in the voting poll and swimming pool. By this token, it is not the structures or institutions of occupations or inferred functional requisites that constitute interactive processes in which persons at work collectively face problems of maintaining consistency of self, and of constructing a viable environment in the face of remorselessly changing events…

Further, the occupational sociologist should direct his/her research into the area of agreements men make with each other to establish continuity and certainty in their relationships with each other, and to the sentiments evoked, polarized, and differentiated in the process. (Habenstein, 1972, pp. 17-18)

Following these directives, occupational roles are studied in the context of processes by which persons acquire work-related identities, perspectives, and orientations. The work one does is a significant clue to his/her social identity, and consequently, is a fundamental part of self (Lin, 1972).

**Integrated Women, Self Actualization, Resilience, and the Meaning of Work**

The ideals of equality and inclusion are becoming the new norm in the workplace in America and many parts of the world. Today, women expect to be treated as equals in all aspects of their lives. Outside the home, women expect to receive equal pay for equal work and hope to break the glass ceiling in organizations. Resilience, the ability to cope with adversity, is a key to the success and job satisfaction of many working women. Women are more aware of what they are capable of and more prone to self-determination. Inside the home, women expect to achieve equal conjugal power with equal division of labor, decision-making processes, and sharing family responsibilities. Working women strive for a work-life balance lifestyle. Today’s integrated women expect to have the option of either pursuing a career or playing their traditional homemakers’ roles. They expect to have the option of being married or remaining single, bearing children or remaining childfree. They also expect to have opportunities to combine family, marriage, and career (Lin & Moore, 1996).

The concept of integrated women can be analyzed along three dimensions: attitudinal, behavioral, and cognitive. Timely topics for research and the attitudinal dimension of contemporary working women include: attitudes toward marriage, family, and career; toward the division of labor in the family, the equal importance accorded to the careers of the husband and the wife; and what constitutes the most satisfying way of life. The research must also include life experiences and related behaviors toward: putting the husband through school or sharing family and child rearing responsibilities; coping with job relocation; tolerance for career interruption; the effects of dual career parenting on family life; the impact of the demands of work on family life; the factors of commitment to career; career changes; financial status and its relation to work and the adaptation of the new
work pattern (working from home or the hybrid of working from home and office) due to the recent worldwide health crisis. Additional cognitive dimension topics must include: (a) the perception of women’s socio-economic and education statuses in society; (b) the factors affecting job satisfaction, the perception of women’s status on loan and credit applications; (c) the perception of women’s general social status in organizations and society; and (d) the changing perceptions of gender roles in society.

A 2014 survey of MBA graduates, by Harvard University revealed that when the subjects were asked to rate the importance of nine career and life dimensions, nearly 100%, regardless of gender, said that “quality of personal and family relationships” was “Very” or “Extremely” important. The study also found that “73% of men and 85% of women believe that “prioritizing family over work” is the number one barrier to women’s career advancement. The study addressed the issue of “rethink what you ‘know’ about high-achieving women” (Ely, Stone, & Ammerman, 2014). Is “integrated women” a myth or reality for well-educated women (Lin & Moore, 1984a)?

Becoming the ideal type of “integrated woman” is attainable for well-educated women in the 21st century (Lin & Moore, 1984b). The next stage of the action research shall focus on intervention approaches in assisting working women with stress management at work and in life; designing organizational policies (such as flexible time, working from home, new performance evaluation guidelines, etc.) for promoting ideal working environments and meaningful work for workers; and assertiveness training programs to assist working women to realize their potential, talents, and aspirations.

For most women, work outside the home is both a choice and necessity: It is a source of financial security and independence, of personal accomplishment and fulfillment, and of professional growth and development. Work and self are inseparable. On the whole, women’s commitment to a career is accompanied by their belief that their jobs will not interfere with the well-being of their families even though women show a moderate willingness to modify family roles to meet career demands. An integrated woman is one who has a sense of personal integration between role expectation and commitment. A sense of personal integration is found through the efforts made between what is expected and will be accepted in any particular situation. Instead of stopping at the crossroads of career versus family and marriage, integrated women have the ability and opportunity to combine career, family, and marriage. They are career oriented without rejecting marriage or family (Lin & Moore, 1996). Former CEO of Pepsi Co, Indra Nooyi, is a good model for an “integrated woman.” She advocates family-centered policies: “Stop thinking of family as just a female’s problem. Family is not female. Family is family. And don’t think of women in the workforce as a feminist issue. Think of it as an economist. And if you did that, I believe that the way we discuss all these issues would change” (Nooyi, 2021). As Hildegard Wortmann, Member of the Board of Management of Sales and Marketing, Audi AG, encourages the next generation, “I want to motivate young women to join the automotive industry. This is no longer about the old, metal sheet-bending guys; this is new tech jobs, new jobs profiles” (Wortmann, 2021). The future of work will require new high-tech skills and will also be less gender differentiated (i.e., men and women will become more androgynous) (Lin & Moore, 1983; 1984b).

**Work and Social Change**

In today’s 21st century, the meaning of work has significantly changed. Work is no longer just a means to feed oneself. Work actually represents a person’s self-worth and self-improvement. To make work be a part of oneself, the first step is be enthusiastic and to totally devote oneself to work. Work does not only reflect a
person’s taste, but also his/her morality. Thus, when people ask you, who are you? We often answer by naming our work. That is to say, our work represents our image, skills, hope, and mode of life. Work is not only essential, but also expected to be fun, rather than enslaving (Zanders, 1993). In this era, most of the workers are knowledge workers. This differs from the previous distinction of intellectuals as opposed to laborers. Knowledge workers now have more impact on both individuals and society. In the current networked society, individuals are more in need of building personal relationships based on social networks, often through social media. Therefore, what we want to explore and discuss given this situation, would not be competitiveness or how to compete with others, but what is one’s capability to cooperate and share knowledge together with a group and others. It is important for us to stress that the new meaning of work should focus on how to build cooperative relationships, rather than competing with others and defeating each other. To establish work networks through social networking has also become the trend of the times. Nowadays, interdependence, cooperation, and compromise are more important than independence, competition, and conflict.

The world of work is an indicator of social change. For example, more contemporary women now walk away from their family roles and work for a salary. This causes changes not only in their identity, changing from housewives to working women, but also in their social status and relationships, especially the conjugal relationship.

Work influences and modifies the personal view of self. But how significant is this influence, and what is the relationship between personality and work? This is a very intriguing topic for research. We might think about these questions: Does a person change personality if he/she has been a policeman/woman for several years or decades? Is a particular personality more likely than another to be specifically profiled in certain work? To what extent do environmental factors and rapid social change (including new societal perceptions of equality, equity, inclusion, and diversity); gender role socialization, and structure of opportunity affect an individual’s choice of a career? At which stage do the students of a school of social work (or of any professional programs, such as school of nursing, school of education, or school of medicine, etc.) begin to imagine themselves as social workers? What determines the self-image of these prospective graduates? All these questions merit further elaboration. Work (vocational training) is a long-term process of socialization that includes skills, knowledge, practice, and ethics; as well as personal identification with a professional group. A professional group is a sociological and political concept. Workers are part of a professional group. The social status and political power of a professional group (such as a medical association) in a society will increase or decrease the individual’s sense of self-superiority, self-esteem, or inferiority. Individuals find their belongingness through organized professional associations. Contemporary society is composed of countless professional groups. The culture of professions also reflects social norms, whereby society restricts, sanctions, or rewards certain professional behaviors. Professionalization is a process most occupations strive for (Lin, 1972).

Who knows what jobs will evolve one- or two-decades from now? The world is changing and the work we do is changing as well. The speed of change is ever faster and accelerating. The changes will affect all walks of life. It is evident that hybrid models of remote work are likely to persist mostly for the white collar and high-tech workforce. Some predictable social forces (megatrends) include globalization, digitization, technological developments, demographic change, climate change, urbanization, the rise of the middle class, international migration, women receiving higher education, the development of new talents, even the unpredictable pandemic, all of which will affect the nature, structure, and process of work.
Does work have a new meaning for generation Y? Social change includes change in values. If individualism, democracy, and gender equality in emerging societies are new trends, how can leaders advocate shared governance, inclusion, and shared values in the workplace? In addition, the growing “gig economy” in the U.S. is estimated to be nearly 25% of the total working population. Does the meaning of work remain the same for the gig economy workers as for traditional workers? “Talent management,” “work on-demand,” “agility,” “reskilling,” etc. are examples of some of the new workplace vocabularies, issues, and trends for managers and leaders to deal with. There are new skills for the workforce of the future. The Institute for the Future suggests ten new skills leaders must have: sense-making skills, social intelligence, novel and adaptive thinking, cross-cultural competency, computational thinking, new media literacy, transdisciplinary, digital mind-set, cognitive-load management and virtual collaboration (Blitzer & Lin, 2020, pp. 94-95). Because today’s new breed of workers are better educated than past generations of workers, they: (a) demand more meaningful, challenging and creative work, that provides opportunities for personal growth and development; (b) are more resistant to authority; (c) are more likely to be dissatisfied with routine jobs; (d) show little loyalty or commitment to an organization; (e) require a need for recognition of one’s accomplishments; (f) consider leisure more important than work; (g) appear to have a stronger identification with one’s personal role in all facets of life rather than with one’s work role; and (h) seek a balance between work and family life, especially for frontline health workers during a national health crisis (i.e., pandemic).

It is apparent that there is a new meaning for what work and life’s purpose represent for today’s workers (Lin & Moore, 1984b; P. Schultz & S. Schultz, 1986; McKinsey & Company, 2019; 2021). The organization must create an environment in which people like to work and will accommodate and retain working parents. Work-life balance, employees’ mental health, and work schedule flexibility concerns should be the priority for organizations especially during a pandemic.

Furthermore, the disruption caused by the pandemic is driving a fundamental change in the way we work. Companies are embracing flexibility and remote work at levels beyond our imagination. The shift to hybrid work may be here to stay and it may even become a mainstream work pattern in certain industries. The organization needs to design new patterns of the “flextime” schedule, the boundary of work-family needs to be redefined. The organization needs to adapt to the new culture where gender equality in the workplace must be reinforced and performance evaluation needs to be reexamined as well especially since women were affected more than men workers when the pandemic hit their community. The organization must develop a new organizational culture (and policies) to provide meaningful work for workers and a new leadership style to match changing contexts in the work environment.

**Conclusion**

It is evident that the meaning of work is the foundation of the wisdom and meaning of human society. Work encompasses not only job titles and skills, but also its inherent social rewards, recognitions, devaluations, or stereotypes. An individual must decide what kind of work is worth doing, what kind of commitment (time and effort) should be applied, and what kinds of results are expected. As a result, our understanding of work—including work knowledge, skills, places and institutions, time arrangements, legislative procedures, interpersonal relationships, and personal development in work and life (i.e., “career”), etc. belies our understanding of social contexts and cultural norms (expectations and commitments). Work represents the life of an individual. However, an individual’s life can only be meaningful in the context of a group or society. For
example, when an individual loses his/her job, he/she also loses part of his/her life. Self and work grow together and change together. In sum, the future of work is always evolving. The future of work focuses on connecting people and creating relationships at work. Our focus should be not only on the meaning of work, but also to understand how work affects the meaning of interpersonal relationships in the workplace, in the family, and in any other social contexts. Working women who emulate the ideal of “integrated women” will need self-efficacy, resilience, and a strong social support system from family, work organization, and the society at large. Role conflicts and strains are inevitable for working women (and men); therefore, the research focus should be on analyzing the structure of the roles and the interactions of the roles (identities) working women have to juggle in their daily lives and on the factors that affect their job satisfaction. The conceptual framework of the research focus is depicted in Figure 1.

Conceptual Framework

![Conceptual Framework Diagram]

*Figure 1. Job satisfaction and personal resilience: Exploring meaning of work, integrated women, and work life balance.*

Our focus today should not be on the issue of whether women should have careers outside the home. But rather, on what strategies women should adopt to balance work and family (life). The ideal construct of the “integrated woman” allows us to understand the traditional role and demands society defines for women, a woman’s self-identities (personal role conception) derived from the various roles she plays, and the flexibility and choice at play between work and non-work roles according to the definition of the situation (role behavior) (Hall, 1972; Levinson, 1959; Lin & Moore, 1983; Moore & Lin, 1984; Chen & Lin, 1992).

We are now facing a revolution in the way we work and how we feel about work. The meaning of work may change in the future because the future of work stresses collaboration, teamwork, work autonomy, and meeting the demands/needs of the so-called “new normal.” The essence of the future workplace experience (and career journey) is to integrate all elements of work—emotional, intellectual, physical, technological, social
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(gender, race, etc.), and cultural—into one seamless experience for the workers. Self is the constellation of all our work and life experiences and the roles we play. Self is socially constructed. Self is conscious. Self-awareness is a vital process of becoming who we are and a foundation for meaningful interpersonal relationships (Lin, 2000; 2021). The study of the meaning of work, self, and integrated women allows us to understand not only workers at work but also many facets of human society. Work and self are at once a process and social drama. Work defines self and self-defines work.

References


