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1

Exploring the realities of work

Key concepts

- D global financial crisis
- D definitions of work
- D classifying work
- D socio-economic classification
- D theories
- D deductive and inductive approaches
- D models
- D typologies
- D ideal types
- D methods of data gathering
- D objective and subjective
- D theoretical and empirical
- D qualitative data
- D quantitative data

Chapter aim

To explain the approach this book adopts in exploring, analysing and critically evaluating the experiences of work.

Learning outcomes

After reading and thinking about the material in this chapter, you will be able to:

1. Identify some causes and consequences of the Global Financial Crisis.
2. Define the term 'work'.
3. Outline a system for classifying work.
4. Explain the basic tools a social scientist uses to study work.
5. Summarise the various perspectives from which work can be analysed.
6. Identify the main themes underpinning the rest of the book.

Introduction

Up until as recently as about 30 years ago, coal miners had an unusual, but cheap and effective way of detecting poisonous gases after there had been a fire or an explosion underground. An exploratory team, sent to assess whether the conditions were safe to carry out mining, or to look for survivors, would go underground and take with them a number of canaries in a cage. Canaries are brightly coloured birds, often kept as companion animals because they are pretty to look at, but also because they are known for their singing. ('Sing like a canary' is old-fashioned slang for giving information to the police.)

The person carrying the canaries in the cage would be sent to the front of the exploratory team, and they would then move forward into the mineshaft slowly holding the canaries in front of them, almost like someone using a metal detector to look for buried treasure. There were two main reasons for taking several canaries into the mineshaft rather than just the one. One of these was because canaries regularly chirp or sing, and so a sudden silence would be more noticeable with several birds in the cage. A second was because if one of the canaries died, then there would be a spare, or two (and canaries are comparatively cheap).

What is it that would stop the canaries singing, or even kill them? The canary is particularly sensitive to toxic gases like carbon monoxide. Although people can detect some toxic or harmful gases found in mines, like methane for example, carbon monoxide is odourless, tasteless and invisible. The first clue that miners

would get of its presence was if the canaries stopped singing, started to twitch or became obviously distressed. Signs of discomfort from one of the canaries, or worse still, the death of a canary would be the evidence that conditions were not safe, and the pit should be immediately evacuated.

This may sound callous or cruel on behalf of the miners, but it is certainly true that using canaries has saved many lives and the conditions for miners have historically been some of the most dangerous in any occupation: 'You never get any decent improvement in working conditions until you have a disaster in the mine. That is why they say working conditions are written in blood' (Murray and Peetz, 2010: 37).

The image of the canary and the coal mine has been used in quite a number of settings: to describe some industries' relationship to economic cycles (McKean, 2010); to argue that some locations are early warning sites in relation to climate change (Schendler, 2009); also in the discussion of investment products used in the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) (Davies, 2010). Here we want to use it as one way of looking at GFC.

Using this image as an allegory, or extended metaphor, in the case of GFC, the problems we have been collectively suffering for the last few years were caused by an at first invisible but extremely damaging and widespread problem to do with bad, or 'toxic' debt (i.e. debt that was unlikely to ever be repaid). We will come to the canary in a moment, but let us look at this part of the allegory first, the toxic debt.

Causes: toxic debt, ratings companies and subprime mortgages

Ratings companies in the US (such as Standard & Poor's and Moody's) had categorised debts based on 'subprime' mortgages as secure. Ratings companies effectively either give a bill of health, or raise concerns about investment products – in practice they use a scale. These same organisations have recently been causing widespread alarm by suggesting different governments are not as likely to pay their debts.

Although ratings companies categorised 'subprime' mortgages as secure, in fact these mortgages were very far from secure, and they were actually those that were less likely to be repaid. 'Subprime' mortgages were sold in many cases by people who were acting unethically and were offered bonuses to sell the products even if they were well aware that the people to whom they were selling were unlikely to repay or ever to be able to afford a mortgage.

The term 'subprime' actually means that the people taking out these mortgages were less than ideal (or prime) borrowers. These bad (toxic) debts were then turned into financial products that were sold to investors and used as security against other debts (i.e. to guarantee repayment). Because these toxic debts had been given secure ratings, other investors believed they were more valuable assets than they actually were.

Partly because of the interconnectedness of the global financial markets, and partly because of 'innovations' in the development of financial instruments, there was a multiplier effect. Toxic debts were used as guarantees for much larger sums of money. The crisis came about when some of these transactions began to unravel and when institutions realised the 'assets' they had were actually worth nothing. Panic followed because no one knew the extent of the problem, and it led to a collapse of trust with banks unwilling to lend to each other. This problem was not restricted to investment banks or even just to banks because some of the banks were considered 'too big to fail'. In other words, governments had to bail out these banks by taking on their debt, and in doing so they were financed by taxpayers.

The 150-year-old canary

The canary in this – the first prominent victim to the problem of toxic debt – was Lehman Brothers, one of the oldest, largest and most well-respected investment banks on Wall Street. It collapsed on the 15th of September 2008 – the largest bankruptcy in US history. When Lehman Brothers stopped singing the world went into shock – a global economic meltdown that it has still not recovered from.

Writing in *The Guardian*, Richard Wolff (2011) describes how the collapse of Lehman Brothers made the poisonous 'corruption and theft' by global banks plain for all to see. In the years before its collapse Lehman Brothers executives

had earned what Wolff describes as ‘stupendous’ bonuses – amazingly, their Chief Executive, Richard Fuld, at one stage defended his pay over seven years by saying it had ‘only’ been 310 million dollars (that’s \$310,000,000). A report on its collapse to the US court made it clear that the bank’s executives had made ‘mammoth misjudgments’ and used ‘various legal and semi-legal mechanisms... to manipulate their accounts, and otherwise violate the spirit and letter of laws and regulations.’

Lehman Brothers had failed because of making huge investments in products based on ‘subprime’ mortgages. This was misjudgement, but the bank was guilty of more than just misjudgement. In order to try to make as much money on these products as possible they had committed fraud as well. Wolff describes a report in the *New York Times* showing how Lehman had ‘secretly manipulated its balance sheets’ by disguising its activities. The bank had channelled transactions through Hudson Castle, the name of another much smaller company that was owned by the bank. In 2010, the Attorney General of New York started legal proceedings against Lehman Brothers’ accountants – Ernst and Whitney. In doing so he accused them of having ‘substantially assisted... a massive accounting fraud.’ Wolff summarises the death of what we call the ‘150-year-old canary’ by saying that it:

opened a window on strategies and tactics of many large private banks around the world. The hows and whys of their catastrophic mishandling of their ‘fiduciary duties’ – basically, to be fundamentally prudent and trustworthy in how they manage other people’s money – stand revealed. They no longer deserve public trust.

Lehman Brothers’ collapse and its aftermath threatened global capitalism and not merely other big global banks. ‘Too big to fail’ thus became those banks’ slogan in demanding and obtaining the dominant influence over governments. After Lehman’s collapse, governments bailed out those banks, no matter the cost.

It is because of this that, as Wolff suggests, a – currently still unfolding – crisis directly related to the Global Financial Crisis has been levels of government debt in some ‘Eurozone’ countries (European countries that use the Euro). The most dramatic concerns have been in relation to Greece, but Ireland and Portugal were also unable to re-finance their debts in 2010 because investors had no confidence in their being able to pay further loans back (because they were concerned that further loans to these governments would also be toxic debts). He continues:

Consider the irony: governments today impose austerity [cuts and financial hardship] on the rest of us because ‘the markets’ demand no less to keep credit flowing to those governments. Behind this dubious abstraction – ‘the markets’ – hide the chief lenders to governments. Those are the same global banks that received the government bailouts paid for by massive government borrowing since 2007.

In 2010, European finance ministers agreed a rescue package of 750 billion Euros – the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF). This was increased in 2011. Although greatest concern in the Eurozone crisis has focused on the so-called PIG countries (Portugal, Ireland and Greece); Spain and Italy have had scares relating to rising levels of government debt (sometimes these five are referred to as the 'GIPSI' countries – Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Ireland). This has been an even more serious concern because these countries each have a much larger Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Meanwhile, the UK, though outside the Euro, is also exposed because such a large part of the UK's economy is dependent on financial services (and because the UK government loaned money to Ireland). Even though the UK government would not directly have to bail out the Euro, most overseas trade is with the Eurozone, and the UK has very high levels of foreign debt. The interconnectedness of the world's financial systems, and the severity of the problems of toxic debt mean that, speaking dramatically but also accurately, nowhere is safe from the effects of GFC.

The consequences of GFC

Since 2008 and the collapse of Lehman Brothers, many people now feel far less secure at work. One way to describe the consequences of GFC – and we return to consider this topic in more detail in Chapter 3 – is to use the idea of the psychological contract. The psychological contract is not something that is written down anywhere (unlike the formal contract you would receive from many employers, and unlike any relevant employment legislation). The psychological contract can be thought of as a kind of loose collection of expectations, commitments, unspoken promises, understandings, or agreements between the employer and employee. Some of these are taken for granted, or taken on trust, others are learned during the course of work. No written contract can ever set down each and every aspect of the employment relationship, so the psychological contract is a shorthand we use to describe the normal, unwritten 'rules of the game'. GFC has meant that the rules of the game have changed, and as a result the realities of work are different.

In the private sector, historically the psychological contract has meant something like an expectation that an employee will be treated well if they are loyal and work hard, and (in many, though certainly not all private sector jobs) that they can expect bonuses or additional rewards – such as promotion, or perhaps shares in the company – if they perform particularly well, or if the company prospers. In the public sector, the psychological contract has included some of these aspects (though pay is often on a fixed scale that is agreed collectively, and of course there are no shares or profits to be allocated among public sector workers).

In both sectors employees have had an expectation that the terms and conditions under which they joined the job would be honoured throughout their career.

This is of particular relevance in relation to pension schemes, where a great many public sector workers have been told several years into paying for such a scheme that they will have to retire later, for a reduced pension, and that they will also have to pay more into their scheme. In other words, they have been told to work longer, for less and in the meantime to get paid less for doing so. The case for this is usually expressed in terms of people living longer, and governments often try to marginalise public sector workers by saying that private sector pensions are worse, but the GFC has been a contributory factor because governments have been hit by high levels of debt, and so need to reduce levels of spending. As Wolff says (above), ‘governments today impose austerity [cuts and financial hardship] on the rest of us because “the markets” demand no less to keep credit flowing to those governments.’

The changes imposed on Greek workers (such as a later retirement age and lower pension) led to wide-scale rioting, but there have been less violent protests throughout the world, including the ‘occupy Wall Street’ movement, a protest that began in September 2011. Often using as their slogan the phrase, ‘We are the 99%’, the occupy movement suggests that the vast majority of the world’s citizens are being made to pay for the mistakes of a wealthy few (the 1%) (more is available at <http://occupywallst.org/>). There is a great deal of anger because many people feel betrayed by their governments, who they feel are to blame for the crisis. In a sense, the psychological contract people had with their politicians has also been broken. In everyday speech we might call this a loss of trust in ‘the system’. This means that what is more widespread than changes to particular workplaces is a general loss of public trust, of the kind Wolff describes above.

As well as a more general sense of insecurity and loss of trust, the crisis has had real and lasting implications for how the realities of work are experienced for tens of millions of people, and has been linked to an increase in incidences of depression and anxiety, and poorer psychological functioning (Sargent-Cox, Butterworth and Anstey, 2011). As Marmot and Bell (2009) put it, ‘Global recession is likely to damage our health as well as our wealth’, and because of this, ‘Five billion people in low and middle income countries are at risk’.

In developing countries, though they played no part in the creation of the crisis, the consequences of GFC are devastating. Because of reductions in national income as a result of GFC, a research paper published in 2009 by the World Bank suggested that as many as 30,000 to 50,000 more infants (overwhelmingly infant females) would die in sub-Saharan Africa (Friedman and Schady, 2009). In a review of research carried out by the Overseas Development Institute (ten, country-level case studies), McCord reported that, ‘The global financial crisis has had a devastating effect on poverty levels in developing countries’ (McCord, 2010).

Although GFC is the clearest example in most people’s lifetimes of how capitalism has harmed ordinary workers, there have been no radical attempts

to reform how capitalism operates. This has prompted some to explore when the next similar crisis will be, rather than whether there will be another crisis (Ghosh, Ostry and Tamirisa, 2009). There have also been no policy reforms that would encourage the organization of labour through trade unions, ‘The global financial system is not being revised or scrapped – merely reformed via changes at its margins – while reforms encouraging labor organization have languished’ (Miller, 2010: 437; see also Baccaro, 2010).

One of the most remarkable accounts of GFC was given by the billionaire investor Warren Buffett, who described the complacency and fantasy before the world’s financial systems crashed:

People were having so much fun. And it’s a little bit like Cinderella at the ball. People may have some feeling at midnight it’s going to turn to pumpkin and mice, but it’s so darn much fun, you know, when the wine is flowing and the guys get better looking all the time and the music sounds better and you think you’ll leave at five of twelve [just before midnight] and all of a sudden you look up and you see there are no clocks on the wall and – bingo, you know? It does turn to pumpkins and mice. It’s hard to blame the band. It’s hard to blame the guy you’re dancing with. There’s plenty of blame to go around. There’s no villain. (Quoted in Sorkin, 2010: 548)

The contradictions and complexities in global capitalism, and the sheer mess that was, and is, the GFC mean no one person is responsible, no one person is in charge, and no one institution or government can be believed in. Yet all of us will be feeling its effects for decades. One of the key ways in which GFC will affect us is through changes in how we experience the realities of work.

GFC and the realities of work

What do we mean by the ‘realities of work’? Well, as in previous editions, this book examines work from the perspective of the employee. It does this using both theory and research findings. Plenty of books explain the principles and methods of management, but very few address what it is like to be managed. In other words, the employee’s perspective is often overlooked or taken for granted.

So, we write about the effects of being managed: the experiences of employees in organisations as they cope with the strategies, tactics, decisions and actions of managers. This means that the main character in our discussion is ‘the employee’ – but of course at times other characters feature, such as managers, policy makers, trade unions, the unemployed, academic commentators, and – just as above – those organisations and individuals responsible for GFC. To explore these experiences, we draw widely from the social sciences and we have looked for empirical evidence and theoretical discussions that are not always found in mainstream texts.

We believe employees actively counteract management; in some circumstances this challenges management interests, in others it can help (for example, by creating conformity among workgroups). These counteractions take different forms, but often their focus is on managerial control. Employees can resist or undermine control in a number of ways, for example, by taking additional (unofficial) rest periods or organising work in ways that ease pressures, increase income or create a sense of autonomy. Because these counteractions are widespread, and because they are significant for those involved, it is important to understand that these aspects of work behaviour are not fleeting or frivolous departures from the one true path laid down by management. Instead, they are enduring and entirely rational responses by workers whose interests only partially coincide with those of management. These workers have their own interests, for example, to preserve their energy, maximise income, protect their family life, gain control over their work environment, and, to have fun.

We try to capture the diversity of work – the fact that workers experience both satisfaction and alienation, that they both cooperate and resist, have common interests with management and also opposing ones, and that workers see their distinct interests in both individual and collective terms. The challenge that faces us is to explore the varied experiences of work – in essence, ‘the realities of work’.

Below we identify important aspects of the realities of work by mapping out the terrain this book explores. First though, it is important to make some key points about how work can be defined and classified, and about the particular approach we have taken. To do so we will look at the tools that can be used to explore the concept of work and the perspectives that can be adopted.

Defining work

Before reading this section, try Exercise 1.1 which will help you think about how we should define work.

Exercise 1.1

What do you think?

1. For each of the following situations, decide whether you would classify the task as ‘work’. Justify your decision in each case.
 - (a) You are a wealthy stockbroker and don’t have time for household jobs, so you pay an electrician to rewire a plug in your house.
 - (b) The electrician drives home and then rewires a plug in his own house.
 - (c) Your friend rewires the plug in exchange for a tip on which shares to buy.
 - (d) To relax after a busy day on the trading floor you rewire the plug yourself.
 - (e) When the plug is rewired, you use it to play the multiplayer online game ‘World of Warcraft’, where you and a group of other players combine to rescue a dwarven princess from the evil Dark Iron Clan.
2. Now try to write a short definition of ‘work’.

After Exercise 1.1 you may have arrived at the conclusion that the boundary between work and non-work activity is hazy. You may also have a definition of work that you are comfortable with, even though it is not perfect. If you have accomplished this, you have already developed a way of thinking about the realities of work. In short, this is the view that although complex, contradictory and sometimes frustrating, we can seek to analyse, understand and explain social phenomena.

So how does your definition of work match up to others? The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines work as, ‘application of effort or exertion to a purpose.’ Thomas (1999: xiv) more precisely identifies three components essential to work:

1. Work produces or achieves something (it is not an end in itself).
2. Work involves a degree of obligation or necessity (it is a task set either by others or by ourselves).
3. Work involves effort and persistence (it is not wholly pleasurable, although there may be pleasurable elements to it).

We can test this three-component definition by assessing it against various tasks, for instance serving a customer in a shop, fixing a broken washing machine, phoning a client, digging a hole, giving a presentation and so on. Serving in a shop achieves something (a sale and customer satisfaction), involves obligation (set by the employer) and involves effort (responding to customer needs). The definition also helps to define as work the tasks and chores expected of us in day-to-day life, like driving to work, cleaning and ironing clothes, getting the kids ready for school or engaging in small talk with clients/customers.

Generally the definition holds up to scrutiny, but there is one notable problem. Many activities that might be described as leisure also meet the three criteria. Playing sport (1) achieves something, (2) presents a self-imposed challenge and (3) requires effort and persistence. The same could be said of learning a foreign language or a musical instrument, painting (the house or on canvas), walking the dog, or rescuing a dwarven princess. Also, some activities might fit the three criteria but may be ‘leisure’ in one context and ‘work’ in another. Cooking and looking after children are examples of this. So, it is not only the activity that defines work, but also the circumstances under which the activity is undertaken.

One way of removing some of this confusion is to focus on work that is paid. In fact, most books on work restrict their attention to paid work: employment. Clearly, given the number of people involved, the time devoted to it and its importance as a source of income, this is an important component of work. It is also employment in what might be called ‘visible work’ – that which society views as the principal form of work. ‘Real’ work in these terms is seen to be that which is remunerated. But at the same time, there are huge areas of invisible or ‘hidden’ work which, if paid for, could equal or exceed the total value of paid work. This includes household-based work (cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, home improvement and so on) and a range of activities falling under the heading

of voluntary work. Work can also be ‘hidden’ if it involves illegal activities, or if it is undertaken for payment that is not declared to the tax authorities.

What is needed is to strike a balance that gives greater recognition to the different activities that constitute people’s work. Such a balance is necessary not only because of the scale of different spheres of work but also because of the links that exist between paid and unpaid work, visible and hidden work, and work and non-work activities. The fact that unpaid work is mainly undertaken by women, and that doing unpaid work limits access to paid work, makes the study of the different areas of work important. So, while some of the issues covered in the book pay most attention to work in the form of employment, at several specific points we draw attention to a broader definition of work. This underlines the significance of the different kinds of work in their own right, and the significance of hidden work for a fuller understanding of the nature and character of employment. In addition it is important to consider the balance between work and non-work activities – often referred to as the work–life balance – because this reveals how interrelated people’s work and non-work lives are, and because change in one can have a significant impact on the other.

To sum up

Just because it is challenging to arrive at a definition or understand a concept does not prevent us from attempting to do so. Also, just because there are contradictory opinions does not mean there is no point engaging with the issues. Our immediate task – or if you like, our work – is to try to arrive at usable definitions as a basis for classifying and analysing work.

Classifying work

There are various ways of classifying work; the most common of which are listed in Table 1.1. Such classifications allow distinctions to be made between different groups of employees and so provide a basis to explain difference, such as different pay levels, gender differences, different expectations and orientations to

Table 1.1 Systems of classifying people according to their work

Criteria of classification	Examples
The way jobs are undertaken	Manual/non-manual Skilled/semi-skilled/unskilled
The main purpose of the work	Specific occupational groups
Job status	White-collar/blue-collar
Temporal pattern	Full-time/part-time Permanent/temporary
Work location	Workplace/home Formal economy/informal economy

Source: Based on discussion by Frenkel et al (1995).

work, differences in behaviour at work and so on. This emphasis on classifying and explaining is the purpose of much social science. (The section below explains some of the basic techniques of social science.)

Throughout the following chapters, examples are given of these various methods of classifying work. You will also be introduced to other classification schemes – for example, the distinction between types of ‘knowledge workers’ (Chapter 8) or different types of ‘emotion work’ (Chapter 7). There are also classifications within particular categories of work – for instance, we identify different types of ‘hidden work’ within the informal economy (Chapter 12).

Social scientists are constantly finding new ways of classifying work. One example is the system of socio-economic classification based on a person’s type of employment contract, rather than his/her income. Those at the top have longer-term contracts, receive a rising income, greater opportunities and wider benefits (for a fuller explanation, see Extract 1.1, and then try Exercise 1.2).

New systems of classifying work are being developed for understandable reasons. In particular, changes in the context and nature of work – economic changes, globalisation, new customers’ demands, technological developments, new management techniques and so on – mean that existing classifications can become outdated and misleading. For example, Frenkel, Korczynski, Donoghue and Shire (1995: 777) argue that:

The manual/non-manual distinction is a less meaningful reference point as routine manual work is increasingly automated and the characteristics of skilled production workers become similar to those of technicians... The main purpose of work is also a less reliable criterion as workers undertake a wider range of tasks, for example contributing to improvements in work processes and assuming functions previously undertaken by supervisors and managers.

To sum up

Classification systems are developed to assist our understanding of the dynamic nature of work. They are a way to simplify complexity by grouping people into types, usually based on the work they do. Such systems are important tools to use when studying the realities of work.

Extract 1.1

A new class system

In 2001 the UK introduced a new way of classifying people: National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC). This system is designed to take into account:

- Labour market situations: a person's source of income, economic security and prospects of economic advancement.
- Work situations: a person's location in the systems of authority and control, and their extent of autonomy at work.

The result is a system of eight analytical classes:

NS-SEC categories	Examples
1. Higher managerial and professional occupations	Company directors, senior managers, police inspectors, doctors, architects, academics, lawyers
2. Lower managerial and professional occupations	Teachers, journalists, social workers, optometrists, operations managers
3. Intermediate occupations	Police officers, secretaries, paramedics, driving instructors
4. Small employers (less than 25 employees) and own-account workers (non-professional)	Shopkeepers, farmers, publicans, self-employed electricians, taxi-drivers
5. Lower supervisory and technical occupations	Train drivers, landscape gardeners, railway construction workers,
6. Semi-routine occupations	TV engineers Shop assistants, childcare assistants, receptionists, cooks,
7. Routine occupations	hairdressers Lorry/van drivers, cleaners, waiters, refuse collectors, couriers
8. Never worked and long-term unemployed	

This means the emphasis is placed on the employment contract and the way employees are regulated through these contracts in three forms:

- In a 'service relationship' the employee renders 'service' to the employer in return for 'compensation' in terms of both immediate rewards (e.g. salary) and long-term or prospective benefits (e.g. assurances of security and career opportunities). The service relationship typifies Class 1 and is present in a weaker form in Class 2.
- In a 'labour contract' employees give discrete amounts of labour in return for a wage calculated on amount of work done or by time worked. The labour contract is typical for Class 7 and in weaker forms for Classes 5 and 6.
- Intermediate forms of employment regulation that combine aspects from both forms (1) and (2) are typical in Class 3.

(Quoted from ONS, 2001a: 3–4)

The system also introduces separate classes for those people who have self-employed status or who run small businesses (Class 4) and those who are unemployed or who have never worked (Class 8). Full-time students are excluded from the classification.

Exercise 1.2

What do you think?

Read Extract 1.1 which explains the new way of classifying people according to their employment contract.

1. As a 'student' you are excluded from this classification, but in which class would you put your current part-time job (or a job you have undertaken in the past)?
2. In which class would you put:
 - (a) your mother or father's occupation?
 - (b) your grandfather's and grandmother's occupations?
3. What practical uses for social scientists does such a system of classification have?

Studying work

Conceptual tools of the social scientist

The ideas in the following chapters come from people doing a job of work – most are social scientists (sociologists, psychologists, economists, political scientists and so on). Like any other occupational group, social scientists have a set of ‘tools’ they use. Of course, people are different in terms of how they use specific tools for their jobs. Consequently, the outcome (output) of their work can differ. One characteristic of social scientists’ work is that it depends on conceptual or abstract tools. In particular these include theories but also models, typologies (systems of classification like those above) and different methods of data gathering.

Theories

Theories appear in various of forms, but they often set out a cause and effect relationship, or an association, and present an explanation. An example might be, ‘increasing maternity leave entitlements will allow a firm to attract better female job applicants’ (a cause and effect relationship) because the firm will be at a comparative advantage in the labour market (an explanation). To illustrate this further, below is a list of theories about work. We have included one theory from each of the chapters in this book – so we will be exploring them later, along with many other theories. You will notice that they are all in the form of a proposition or statement that specifies a relationship between concepts, and that (ideally at least, and perhaps subject to more detailed definitions) these propositions are testable:

- Advanced capitalist economies have experienced a decline in manufacturing and a growing dominance of the service sector because of the effects of globalisation.
- Once basic needs are met, people work for reasons other than money.
- Employees are working harder than ever as a result of new management practices designed to address the demands of intensified competition.
- Skilled status has often been denied to women because social relations are dominated by male interests.
- There is an inevitable tendency towards the deskilling of work because of the desire of managers to control and regulate labour.
- Workers are expected to manage the emotions of customers because increasingly, organisations compete on the basis of the quality of the service encounter.
- Irrespective of their conditions of work, all employees find ways of creating time, space and enjoyment in the working day, which helps them to tolerate the oppressive and exploitative elements of work.

- People from minority ethnic groups have fewer opportunities in the workplace because they suffer direct and indirect racial discrimination.
- The knowledge of employees is increasingly being expropriated (taken) by managers to meet the challenges of an information age.
- Employees choose to belong to collective bodies such as trade unions because of a fundamental power imbalance in the employment relationship.
- The formal economy is supported by a vast amount of work that remains hidden from view because it is illegal or unrecognised.
- Changes in employment patterns and the experience of work are leading to greater proportions of people reappraising their work–life balance.

While it is easy to make theoretical statements like these, it is far more difficult to develop methods for testing them. That is the challenge the social scientist is faced with. Typically, this process will involve:

- specifying the concepts involved (defining the problem and reading up on previous similar investigations);
- deciding on a method for investigating the issue (a methodology);
- undertaking the investigation (doing the research);
- analysing and interpreting the findings;
- publishing the conclusions.

Throughout the book you will find examples of how theorists have developed propositions and then how they and others have sought to support, reject or modify theories as a result of the research.

Of course, at each of these stages different decisions and interpretations could be made by different social scientists, which affect the outcome of the investigation. So, any single study might result in acceptance of a theory by some researchers, rejection by others and modification by others. A case in point, as you will see in Chapter 6, is the theory of the deskilling of work: some researchers argue deskilling has taken place, others suggest the opposite – that there has been upskilling, while a third group suggests both effects are occurring simultaneously. Naturally, this is frustrating if you are looking for ‘the answer’, and some people are tempted to ignore certain types of research so as to avoid facing the problem of conflicting evidence. They might even reject the idea of theorising completely and argue that what needs to be applied is simply ‘common sense’ (see Extract 1.2). But explanations are usually more convincing if they weigh up different kinds of evidence.

Extract 1.2

Isn't it just common sense?

You will have heard people say, 'It's just common sense', when they are trying to justify an action or idea. However, the claim that something is 'common sense' is often used by people who do not wish to, or cannot, explain their reasoning. There are two main dangers of saying 'it's common sense':

- It is not always common. When we describe an idea, issue, theory, policy, practice or whatever as 'common sense' we often mean it fits our own understanding of the world. However, the same understanding might not be shared by people from different social backgrounds, ethnic groups, age groups, occupational groups or by people with different values and beliefs (political, cultural, religious and moral). In other words, the idea, issue or theory is not common to them. Just because something is sensible does not automatically make it common. For example, taking a siesta during the middle of working days in the summer is common sense in southern Europe – but not in northern Europe.
- It is not always sense. Albert Einstein described common sense as 'the collection of prejudices we have acquired by the age of 18'. In other words, common sense explanations often close our minds to other possibilities. Just because something is common does not automatically make it sensible. Some common sense understandings are later proven by rational, logical enquiry and experience to be misguided and ill informed. Consider, for example, the now discredited but once 'common sense' beliefs that the world is flat, that smoking does not damage your health, that women cannot be successful managers, and that brown corduroy is sexy.

Typically, therefore, social scientists rarely justify something as common sense. Instead, they try to justify their theories and ideas.

Purpose of theories

The point of theorising is to establish a line of inquiry that will raise some specific questions and hopefully lead to an answer (but see Extract 1.3). So theorising is an important stage in helping to frame the appropriate questions, rather than blundering about unsure of what you are looking for. However, sometimes it can be good to approach an issue without any preconceived theories. Some researchers, for example, prefer to go into an organisation to study a work process or work group with a set of themes, but not developed theories. This alternative approach is often described as 'grounded theory' (a term coined by Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and is designed to uncover concepts, issues and ideas gradually and progressively, from which theory can later be built.

These two approaches can be described as deductive and inductive theorising:

- Deductive theories are based on the principles of developing ideas and concepts into a framework or set of hypotheses that can then be tested by observation or experiment (in other words, by doing empirical research).
- Inductive theories are developed from observation of particular instances and patterns (empirical research) that can then be built into general propositions.

In practice, much social scientific research involves both deductive and inductive theorising.

Extract 1.3*Is there always an answer?*

One of the typical responses of social scientists when asked a question is that 'it depends'. This does not necessarily mean they are failing to give a straight answer but rather that there are many factors that could influence the answer. It might be that the question has not been specified precisely enough, or else there is a range of possible answers to the same question, depending on the frame of reference for the question. It is rather like someone asking 'what one added to one makes'. 'Two' would be an adequate answer, unless they were mixing primary colours, or were referring to different volumes of a liquid, or different products, or opposing magnetic poles ...and so on. In other words, frustrating though it may seem, social scientists must frame and specify questions precisely.

Throughout the chapters you will encounter attempts that social scientists have made to answer questions about working life in organisations. You will see also how different answers emerge to the same questions, and will have to make your own judgement as to which are the most convincing. The more you know and understand, the more you might be inclined to answer, 'Well, it depends' when faced with a question.

Models

Models are simplified versions of the world. They are representations of reality that allow understanding or exploration in an artificial (and safe) environment. For example, airline pilots develop their skills in a flight simulator. This models the real world of flying in two ways: first, it provides an exact copy of an airline cockpit controls and the motion of the aircraft; second, it provides a 3D representation of the approaches to different international airports.

In social science, models typically take the form of a visual representation of processes and actions; they are often flowcharts showing the links between different features (concepts, people, departments and so on). In this sense, models are often synonymous with theories, and there is a tendency in social science not to distinguish between model and theory. We have adopted this convention in the book, so, for example, Figure 9.1 in Chapter 9 is a flowchart of Marx's theory of the labour process and alienation, but it could just as easily be described as Marx's model of the labour process.

In some circumstances you might come across 'idealised' or 'normative' models, which are designed to specify how things should be, rather than represent the current situation. Such models are typically designed to guide action, so they are commonly used by those who wish to persuade others to change current processes or practices – for instance, they are often used by management consultants.

Typologies

Typologies are ways of grouping and classifying different sorts of phenomena. In the previous section we used a typology to distinguish between three different types of theory, and earlier we discussed various classifications of work (which are typologies). The point of typologies is to simplify complex social structures and processes and thereby assist attempts to understand and explain such phenomena. As an example, imagine you are with a group of friends deciding

where to go and eat. You might ask, 'Shall we go Indian, Chinese or Italian?' In effect you have developed a typology of restaurants that simplifies the wide range of possible meals available.

The importance of systematically developing typologies was identified by the influential sociologist Max Weber (1949). He devised the notion of the 'ideal type' (a term often misunderstood because it is sometimes mistakenly thought to mean 'best' type). Weber used the term 'ideal type' to refer to the theoretical classification against which any observed types could be matched. For example, for the classification of restaurants above, the three mentioned are all 'ideal types'. One type is not better than another, but each one is different from the other two. It also means that if, for example, we found a restaurant that sold mostly Indian food but had a few non-Indian items on the menu we would say it approximates the Indian ideal type. In other words, it does not match it exactly. Again we are not saying it is better or worse, merely that it is closer to the 'ideal-type Indian restaurant' than any of the other types of restaurant.

Of course our three-type restaurant classification is incomplete because there are many other types of restaurant (French, Lebanese, Thai, Mexican and so on) outside these three categories. But that is also the point of developing typologies. Such systems allow us to identify exceptions, to seek to explain these, and, if appropriate, modify our typologies accordingly.

Extract 1.4

Using 'ideal types' to classify work

The following quote by Barley (1996: 407) explains how work can usefully be classified into 'ideal types'. However, it also warns how outdated ideal types can become problematic because they provide irrelevant comparisons with which to analyse current jobs:

'The-worker-on-the-assembly-line' is [an] ideal type. It invokes images of an individual, often in an automobile factory, standing beside a swiftly moving conveyor, repeatedly performing the same operation on each assembly that flows by. Boredom, fatigue, routine, lack of autonomy, and little need for thought or education are the hallmarks of such work. Although factory jobs have always been more varied than this, the ideal type nevertheless evokes a constellation of attributes that capture the family resemblance among many factory jobs. The clerk, the professional, the secretary, the farmer, and the manager are other prominent ideal-typical occupations.

Ideal-typical occupations are culturally and theoretically useful. By reducing the diversity of work to a few modal images, ideal types assist us both in comprehending how the division of labor is structured and in assigning status to individuals. They help parents shape their children's aspirations. They provide designers of technologies with images of users. They assist sociologists in developing formal models of attainment. It is not clear how we could think in general terms about worlds of work without such anchors. The problem is that ideal-typical occupations are temporally bound.

Like occupational classifications and cultural dichotomies, ideal-typical occupations lose relevance as the division of labor and the nature of work change. For example, the ideal-typical farmer is an independent businessman laboring in the fields from sunrise to sunset with the assistance of a tractor, a few hired hands, family members, and little formal education, but extensive practical knowledge of crops, weather, animals, and soils. Modern farming bears little resemblance. Today, many farmers are subcontractors for agribusiness, have a college education, understand chemical properties of soils and fertilizers, and manage their farms with the help of computers.

Typologies are extremely popular – see Extract 1.4 for a work-related example. You will encounter plenty more in the following chapters and undoubtedly you will have seen typologies on other courses and in other texts. It should always be remembered that typologies are designed to help simplify the complexity and variety of the social world. This means they are developed to group together similar phenomena. Rarely will you find an exact match between an observed phenomenon and an ideal type.

Methods of gathering data

Social science data typically comes in two basic forms:

- *Quantitative data*: data in numerical form, such as the number of people in a particular workplace, or the percentage of staff on part-time contracts.
- *Qualitative data*: data in non-numerical form, such as employee opinions about their working hours, or a description of a particular work process.

Sometimes the terms ‘hard data’ and ‘soft data’ are used to describe the two types of data described above. Our preference is not to use these labels because they have misleading connotations. ‘Hard’ gives the impression of being strong, fixed and robust, and ‘soft’ gives the impression of being weak, malleable and woolly, but in practice these descriptions can apply to both quantitative and qualitative data. For example, would you trust the supposedly hard data that 90 per cent of hospital workers are satisfied with their salary if you knew that was based on a questionnaire filled in by only ten hospital administrators? Similarly, would you label as ‘soft data’ the description by a heart surgeon of the work process in his/her operating room?

Throughout the subsequent chapters you will encounter both quantitative and qualitative data. In our opinion, social scientists can use both types of data to make sense of the social world. However, not all commentators agree with this view.

Some would argue that the social world, by definition, cannot be measured in the same way as the physical world (they might be called interpretivists, or constructivists). They might suggest it is futile to bring the quantitative methods and techniques used by physical science into the realm of social science, and that the emphasis should be on qualitative data (they would probably also resist the term ‘data’ because they would feel data can not simply be given or collected, but that research itself creates data).

In contrast, others argue the social world does lend itself to being measured and explored in the same way as the physical world, and therefore the same quantitative methods and techniques can and should be used, although applied in different ways (they might be called realists). These two camps – there are many others, and we are speaking very simply here by way of basic introduction – would use different methods of gathering data. The interpretivist would recommend qualitative methods such as interviews, observation, participation and documentary analysis. A recent example of interpretivist analysis

can be found in Leitch, Hills and Harrison (2010). The realist would primarily recommend quantitative methods such as computer simulations, questionnaires, controlled experiments, and statistical analysis (but they could use qualitative data too). A recent example of realist research (in the same broad subject area as Leitch et al) is Haynie, Shepherd and Patzelt (2012).

We draw on both approaches in this book because we believe both kinds of data have much to offer and that their different approaches can:

- uncover different aspects of the same social phenomenon;
- account for the same social phenomenon in different ways;
- encourage us to have open minds on different issues.

By drawing on both, we think it is possible to gain a better perspective of the diversity of the social world and the competing explanations of social action and processes. It also allows us to appreciate and comment on the contradictions and paradoxes in work that surface time and again – as you will see.

Exercise 1.3

What do you think?

Consider the following statement: 'A happy worker is a productive worker.'

1. Is this a theory? Justify your answer.
2. If someone said the statement is 'just common sense', how might you respond as a social scientist?
3. What method of inquiry would you adopt to assess the statement?

Analysing work: ways of looking

From the comments in the previous section, it should be apparent that we have chosen an approach that encourages an open-mindedness when analysing work. In particular, we are advocating that you identify how different approaches can be combined to help more complete understanding. To do this we need to combine different perspectives with a sense of history.

Given the central role of paid work to industrial capitalism, and to individuals, it is not surprising the subject has given rise to extensive theoretical consideration which, at best, offers a stimulating variety of ideas. But, no single theory successfully captures the cross-cutting nature of work experiences: the ways in which work encapsulates both conflict and cooperation, satisfaction and alienation, tension and fit. We draw on various theories to locate and interpret work experiences and worker behaviour within a broader conceptual framework. So, the book does not advocate or adopt a single theoretical perspective but is informed by a range of theories. It seeks to tread the difficult – but ultimately more rewarding – path of incorporating different theories without on the one hand becoming tied to a single orthodoxy, or on the other hand, being lost amid confusion.

We have also tried to achieve a balance between theory and empirical research. There is a rich empirical tradition in academic research that has illuminated our

understanding of the experience of work. Moreover, empirical studies display a variety of research methods, all of which are legitimate and worthy attempts to explore the realities of work – although, of course, they vary in quality and rigour. Throughout we show how different research methods have been used to address a variety of questions: methods which range from ethnography to statistical analysis. Similarly, there is diversity in the levels of analysis: from detailed studies of particular workplaces to international comparative surveys. In some instances too, these different methods have been used to address the same research question, producing a range of interpretations that compete with one another for theoretical supremacy; nowhere is this better illustrated than over the issue of skill discussed in Chapter 5. As committed, active researchers ourselves, we believe theory and empirical research go hand in hand: data without theory is as inadequate as a theory without data.

We reject any idea that the essence or ‘true’ experience of work can be captured in a single theory or argument. The world of work, and people’s experience of the realities of work, is more complex. The activities that make up work are highly diverse, and conducted in a wide variety of settings, with those taking part displaying the full range of character and biographical variation. In addition though, it is clear that people subjectively experience work in a wide variety of ways. So, as this book’s title indicates, what is needed is an understanding of the realities, rather than any all-embracing reality, of work.

Analysing work: a sense of history

Throughout the discussion we draw on perspectives of both past and present. All too often management texts fail to acknowledge the historical traditions of work and working, which means that the reasons why particular practices, policies or ideas came into being are obscured. At worst, such an ahistorical approach means that each issue is dealt with as a contemporary problem that can be solved by a quick-fix solution: typically in the form of the latest buzzword or policy to come from self-styled management gurus. It is little wonder if the result is at best mixed. We feel such an approach shows a contempt for the past that is both ill-advised and anti-academic. In contrast, we have tried to instil in our analysis a respect for the past in terms of ideas, practices, theories and research. Our concern is to show that the realities of work are embedded with resonant themes, abiding struggles and unresolved problems. ‘New’ issues and ideas are often in practice a new expression of the dilemmas and concepts of a previous period.

However, this does not mean we overlook major changes in the world of work. Some commentators suggest that the regimes of the past are giving way to a new era where emphasis is shifting from key sectors of work being organised on the basis of large-scale, standardised, mass production operations (with all that entails in terms of the size of organisations, the nature of jobs and patterns of control) to smaller-scale, more flexible forms of organisation. These can take full advantage

of more flexible technologies to service less standardised, more fragmented and more volatile product markets. It is clear that a combination of factors, including changes in levels of competition, the nature of markets and available technologies, is resulting in significant changes in the character of many work organisations.

In all industrial societies there has been a shift from an emphasis on the manufacturing sector to the service sector. The dominance of the latter as the larger source of employment is well established and increasingly researchers are exploring the impact of this on employees – most notable has been the eagerness of researchers to study call-centre workers. The expansion of service work has brought about an increased interest in how it differs from other types of work (Korczyński, 2002). Two specific examples of this are:

- The increase in activities involving direct contact with the public and the delivery of ‘customer care’ where an explicit part of the job is to display a particular set of emotions (Chapter 7).
- The greater emphasis on knowledge-intensive activities to underpin the information needs of service-sector organisations (Chapter 8).

In other, more immediate ways too, the character of work has been changing markedly in recent years. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the growing feminisation of the workforce, with many industrial societies approaching a point in their history where a majority of the workforce is female. With the sociology of work criticised for being unreflective of women (see, for example, Tancred, 1995), with organisation theory being condemned as frequently gender blind (e.g. Wilson, 2003) and with many individual studies criticised (rightly) as being written largely by men about men working in factories, this point in industrial history, when the balance is shifting towards a majority of the workforce being female, makes it an appropriate time to consider more closely the contemporary realities of work for both women and men.

To sum up

We are interested in:

- seeking to explore diversity and variation in the work experience;
- studying the many interests and struggles within the employment relationship;
- drawing on varied theoretical perspectives on work and methods of research and analysis;
- combining an appreciation of the history of work with contemporary issues.

Mapping the realities of work

Our objective is to convey an impression of work from the perspective of the employee and to explain this through the use of theory and research evidence. We have drawn widely from the social sciences and provide empirical evidence

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