Good Jobs, Bad Jobs? Extending the Alienation Theory beyond Manual Labor

Problem

Suppose we are the lucky few; we behaved ourselves, studied hard and succeeded through high-stakes tests, survived demanding schooling and extracurriculars, successfully graduated from the top colleges, and immediately secured the best corporate jobs in the labor market. In short, suppose we made the globally accepted script of the American Dream come true. What then?

Conventional wisdom prescribes landing high-salary, high-prestige jobs for a happy and content life, particularly witnessing soaring inequalities in the past decades (Piketty and Saez 2014). Indeed, the quality gap between "good jobs"—often white-collar, well-paying jobs that offer some level of job security to workers and relative autonomy over labor—and "bad jobs" has been on the rise (Kalleberg 2011). And yet, many occupants of the so-called good jobs do not report contentment; for example, David Graeber's (2018) electrifying book, "Bullshit Jobs," resonated with them and caught broad public attention. Some occupants of the highest-paying jobs, such as investment bankers, were even dubbed as "miserable" in popular media.[1] It has even been argued that the pursuit of meritocracy hurts us all, including its upper-middle class winners (Lamont 2019; Markovits 2019). Indeed, many business professionals I interviewed complain about a profound disappointment and exhaustion that I interpret as *white-collar blues*. How can good jobs endow their occupants with such a discouraging quality of (work) life? How do we make sense of such *white-collar blues*? What makes a "Good Job" good or bad?

What do we already know?

While much ink has spilled on job quality, highlighting various work features that contribute to job satisfaction, inter alia, pay, status, job security, and control over labor (Findlay, Kalleberg, and Warhurst 2013; Gallie 2007; Kalleberg 2011), a *holistic* inquiry into the *lived* experience of elite white-collar labor has been chiefly missing (for an exception, see Ho 2009), leaving us only with the pieces of the puzzle. The most highlighted piece so far shows how work and family operate as "greedy institutions" for the upper-middle class and how the resulting conflict disproportionally hurts women executives (Blair-Loy 2006), sometimes leading them to opt-out (Stone 2007).

[1] For instance, the New York Times Magazine's February 2019 special issue on the theme of the future of work opens its lead article on American elite business professionals with the title "Wealthy, Successful and Miserable."

Methodology

I build upon the previous research that exploited the deviant cases of bad jobs made good by workers (e.g., Burawoy 1979; Ocejo 2017; Sherman 2007). These studies on manual labor and service sector jobs highlight workers' agency under unfavorable working conditions. Following a parallel logic, I examine the flipside—good jobs experienced as bad. I employ "abductive analysis" (Timmermans and Tavory 2012), focusing on another surprising case, discontented white-collar business professionals. Through more than 100 interviews, mostly with young adult Turkish professional-managerial employees of prestigious transnational corporations, I analyze their job quality narratives, capitalizing on the variance of their (dis-)contentment.

Key Empirical Findings

I find that lacking not only an overall work-life balance (of which work-family conflict is but one aspect), but also intrinsic satisfaction and meaning from their jobs often discourage them from identifying with their corporate careers. Studying hard and being consistently on top of their classes throughout their education, they develop high expectations, making them prone to relative deprivation and resentment. Coupled with a "fear of falling" (Ehrenreich 1990), their consumption practices often make them feel trapped in their high-earning careers and keep their consent to alienating labor fresh. Nevertheless, some can break the "work-and-spend cycle" (Schor 1991, 1998) and end up opting out of their corporate careers. These "corporate dropouts" typically earn less but work fewer hours and get more fulfillment from their new jobs, and hence, become more content with their lives, providing us with an essential benchmark of contentment with work.

Extending the Alienation Theory

Following "analogical theorizing" (Vaughan 2014), as exemplified in (Buchholz 2016), I use these findings to extend the alienation theory[2] toward white-collar labor and middle class, including its privileged, upper and transnational fractions, to better accommodate the contemporary job quality experience in our post-industrial and globalized day and age.

[2] In a nutshell, the alienation theory is fundamentally concerned with degrading conditions of manual labor (Marx 1978 [1844]). With an emphasis on humanity writ large, it highlights that human labor produces capital, and yet capital dominates its creator. The separation of design and execution in the labor process deepened with capitalism reduces manual labor to repetitive and boring tasks, de-skilling workers in the long run (cf. Blauner 1964; Braverman 1974), and they have nothing but their labor sell to keep earning a living. This robs workers of their freedom to engage with creative and intrinsically satisfying activities at work (and in fact, non-working times as well due to exhaustion and minuscule free time) and leaving them with un-exercised human potential.

Reducing the alienation theory analytically to its barebones, the first step of "analogical theorizing," I argue that alienation is driven by work that monopolizes one's life (at the expense of other activities and life spheres, including family and leisure, broadly put) and that does not contribute to one's well-being except providing bare subsistence.

Applying this reduced form of alienation theory to elite white-collar labor, in the second step, I highlight the overlapping aversion from work and the parallels of overwork and unfulfilling work as the underlying drivers of alienation regardless of one's collar color.

In the third step, I incorporate the fundamental differences between manual labor that provides subsistence and high-skilled labor that provides a life beyond subsistence through the concept of relative deprivation. I first show how experiencing underemployment *qua* overqualification is a general issue of skill mismatch that can lead to alienation regardless of where this mismatch occurs on a skills spectrum (typically considered as manual labor on the lower end and knowledge work on the higher); nevertheless, such mismatch can encourage the resentment of elite business professionals due to their investments in their careers. I then show how prevalent status anxiety can make them feel trapped by their corporate careers, and hence feel dominated by their human capital (the product of their *own* hard work) and middle-class lifestyle; they feel they have nothing but their *intellectual* labor to sell to keep earning a *middle-class* living.

Key Theoretical Contributions and Broader Implications

Complicating the conventional "Good Jobs, Bad Jobs" discourse, this article expands upon a classical sociological concept, alienation, and join others (e.g., Guhin & Klett 2022; Skotnicki & Nielsen 2021) in bringing it back in to the center of contemporary debates work and class. It helps to push the envelope of focusing primarily on returns from work, such as pay and status, and emphasizes the intrinsic goods and ills of work. The extended alienation theory I develop can account for the current work-related conditions—a critical missing aspect of the Frankfurt School's latest iteration of alienation theory (e.g., Jaeggi 2014)—that encourage alienation even for middle classes. Moreover, demonstrating the human cost of *workism* or overwork—even under favorable conditions, my extended alienation theory more emphatically makes a case for an overall reduction in working time as a key demand for our individual and collective well-being. Finally, it contributes to de-sacralizing high-salary, high-prestige corporate jobs, which can help to expand our horizon by re-valorizing non-corporate careers, and thereby, bolstering "a plurality of criteria of worth" (Lamont 2019:661), a social good that has long been sacrificed to soaring inequalities.

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