The Evolution of Job Quality

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Context

• Background:
  – affluence, but differentiation
  – age of the computer
  – increasing international competition
  – recession
  – the “Lisbon strategy” – “more and better jobs”
  – increased perceived importance of intrinsic aspects of job quality
Outline

• Concept and theory
• Indicators
• Stories about job quality:
  – increased skill requirements,
  – polarisation,
  – intensification,
  – control,
  – (in)security.
• Some implications for worker well-being consider along the way
Concepts of job quality

• Subjective “Utility” (Economics)
• Job that delivers complexity and autonomy (sociology)
• Needs-based: job that delivers, first, external need satisfaction; and second, internal need satisfaction – e.g. in marxian terms, self-validating labour.
• Competing models in practice:
  – “more and better jobs” (OECD and others) – usually meaning “better-paid”
  – EC: from “quality in work” to “quality of employment” and “flexicurity”
  – “decent labour” (ILO);
Grand narratives

• e.g.
  – Neoclassical/technicist
    • Growth delivers rises in standards of living; job quality is a “luxury good” which we demand more of as we become richer
  – De-skilling and upskilling; Fordism and post-Fordism
  – Declining worker power and ubiquitous lean production systems
  – Precarious work
    • Inevitable combination of intensification of global competitiveness with the feminisation of the workforce?
    • Contingent, non-secular, development shaped by national legal frameworks?
Core Indicators of job quality

• Wages
  – Including fairness of wages
• Job skills
  – Including skill matching
• Effort and hours
• Autonomy/discretion
• Security
  – employment security (financial and psychological)
  – physical
Story 1: SBTC

• A prima facie good-news story for job quality
• Evidence:
  – Direct measures of rising skills use
  – Persistence or increase in education premia, in face of rising quantities of more-educated workers
  – Increased skills use and deployment of educated labour is:
    • in similar industries across countries
    • associated with new technologies

Changes in Skills Indices, 1997-2006

Source: Skills Survey series
Story 2: POLARISATION OF THE LABOUR FORCE?
Explanations

• Technical change and polarisation: a nuanced version of SBTC
• Demographics and inequality
• Structural choice: the “low road”? 
Story 3 Intensification

• Technology and organisation
  – EBTC
  – more effective monitoring technology
• Changing balance of power, linked to intensified global competition
• Insecurity??
• Consumerism: the work/spend treadmill?

• Evidence: typically based on comparison of required effort questions across time or in-depth case study
Proportion in EU12 with high effort more than half the time

Source: EWCS
Evolution of Work Intensity, EU15, 1991 - 2005

1991 for EU12 only
1991 for EU12 only
“Job requires hard work”

Source: Skills Survey series

Related facts: over 2001-6: work intensification notable among school teachers; and in Hotels and Restaurants
Story 4 Autonomy

• Central to marxian conception of job quality;
• Also to psycho-social models of workplace well-being
• On contested terrain, and with contrasting predictions:
  – Post-Taylorism/fordism: rising autonomy
  – Neo-Taylorism: renewed assault on autonomy
Task Discretion in Britain, 1992-2006

Source: UK Skills Surveys
Task discretion in Finland, 1984-2003

Source: Quality of Life Surveys, Statistics Finland.
Implications of Combined Story 3 and Story 4

Proportion of High-Strain Jobs”

Source: Skills Survey series

‘See Green (2008) Work Effort and Worker Well-Being in the Age of Affluence’
Men and women constantly thinking about work and having limited control over their work, 1989-2001, Sweden.

% of women and men who cannot stop thinking about work on their time off, combined with limited control over their work.

Source: ‘The Work Environment survey’
Story 5 Security

- Employment insecurity has several dimensions: including risk of job loss, length of unemployment, loss of wages.

- Influence of external context on perceptions:
  - Perceived risk of job loss rises with unemployment
  - Perceived difficulty of re-employment rises with unemployment and rate of change of unemployment
  - So: must be very poor now

- However, the movement of perceived insecurity, on average, is cyclical not secular, despite the rise in use of temporary labour contracts in many countries
Perceived Risk of Job Loss

% reporting at least an evens chance of job loss and unemployment

Source: UK Skills Surveys
% who disagree or strongly disagree with “I feel my job is secure in this workplace”
Perceived insecurity by unemployment rate across nations

Classification: L: Liberal mkt econ; T: transitional; N: Nordic; C: Corporatist; O: Other industrialised; D: developing

Source: ISSP, pooled 1997 and 2005
Perception that health and safety is at risk because of work
Conclusions 1

Three Unpleasant tales:
- Upskilling but polarisation
- Persistence of low-autonomy jobs
- Intensification, then persistence of high-effort jobs
  - Still increasing high-strain jobs?
  - Emerging gender differences in these trends?
- Perceived insecurity is cyclical, and widely varying, with high impact on well-being; but not secular
Is the recession bad news for job quality?

• Massive increases in perceived insecurity
  – Impact on mental health and well-being

• Wages
  – Likely to be reduced

Less certain:

• Impact on work effort??
  – Labour hoarding
  – Fear effect??
  – Radical work re-organisation

• Impact on autonomy?