

The Future of Work and the Well-Being of Individuals and Communities: Challenges and Opportunities

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Agenda

- ▶ To explore the psychological implications of an uncertain future of work.
- ▶ *Questions to consider:*
 - ▶ What do we know about the psychological impact of work (and non-work)?
 - ▶ How can this knowledge inform our policies for individuals and communities?

My Perspective

- ▶ Researcher, professor, practitioner, and policy advocate on the role of work in people's lives
- ▶ Counseling and vocational psychologist studying the role of work in the lives of people and communities.
- ▶ Major focus has been on expanding the inclusiveness and relevance of psychology to embrace all of those who work and who want to work.
- ▶ Developed the psychology of working framework/theory as a needed counterpoint to traditional theories and practices about work and psychology.

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The Unsteady Moorings of Work

- ▶ We are facing a period of growing instability at work.
 - ▶ While there are some distinctions in predictions about the impact of technology in the labor market, there are some common trends:
 - ▶ Those who do not have 21st century skills, who will increasingly be left behind and marginalized.
 - ▶ Stable and decent work will increasingly decline across the U.S. and the globe.



The role of work in people's lives

- ▶ At its best, work provides people with critical functions in life:
 - ▶ Survival
 - ▶ Social connection
 - ▶ Self-determination
 - ▶ Being part of something bigger than ourselves
 - ▶ Being able to care
 - ▶ Being the best we can be

Being Alive in the World

- ▶ Work offers people an opportunity to feel alive.
- ▶ Consider the way that children play in the sand at a beach...
- ▶ We have a need to create, contribute, and collaborate.



Does everyone feel alive at work?

- ▶ Of course, the answer is a definitive no.
- ▶ Some of the challenges:
 - ▶ Rise in precarious work
 - ▶ An emerging erosion of the workplace



The Challenges: Psychological Implications

► Precarious work:

- Increased precariousness is a function of technology and of a shift in our economic and labor policies
- Consequences:
 - Increase in physical problems
 - Increase in mental health problems
 - A growing disengagement with the social world



The Challenges: Psychological Implications

- ▶ Erosion of the workplace
 - ▶ Growing competition between communities and individuals
 - ▶ Increases in bullying and harassment
 - ▶ Diminishing social support
 - ▶ Unsafe physical conditions and time commitments
 - ▶ Participants in the Boston College Working project describe a hard edge in the workplace



When Work Disappears

▶ **Individual consequences:**

- ▶ Research on unemployment and mental health is very clear:
- ▶ Mental health problems are twice as likely among the long-term unemployed.
- ▶ The causal factor is the unemployment.
- ▶ Mental health problems are more common among....
 - ▶ Men
 - ▶ Blue collar workers
 - ▶ Those who are unemployed for a long period of time

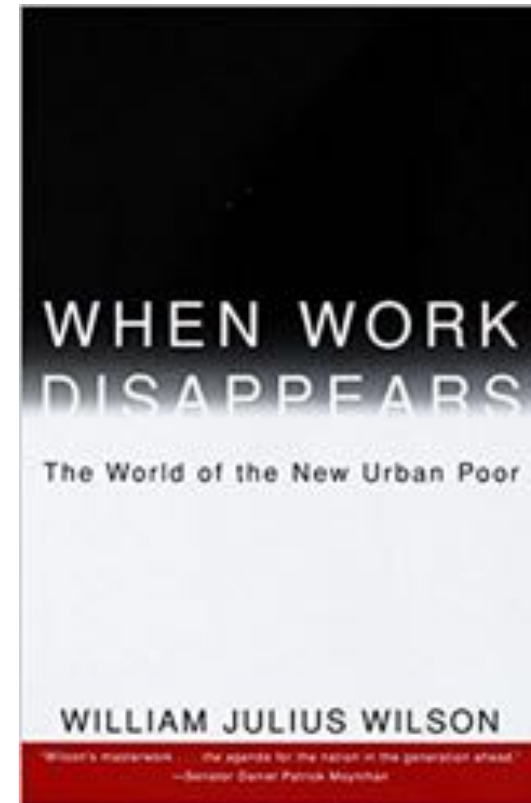
Unemployment and Well-Being

- ▶ Americans who are unemployed tend to blame themselves.
- ▶ Unemployment has devastating consequences for individuals and their families.

▶ *When I saw him standing there I knew that I was next. And I guess I was in kind of a state of shock. You know, you get handed a little severance money. You get told your medical plan is good for the next two weeks...You get a box, and the next thing you know you're out the door. And I had this huge house, my parents were aging, and...I get the box, and...You know? I'm gone. I mean, I would have to say...Without exception, it was the saddest, most depressing time of my life.*

When Work Disappears: Social Implications

- ▶ Wilson's work was prescient and profound:
 - ▶ The loss of work in communities led to devastation...
 - ▶ Loss of identity for men and women
 - ▶ Loss of connection to the community
 - ▶ Disengagement in life
 - ▶ Psychological pain and anguish



A Future without Stable Work

- ▶ Look at examples from history and from our current situation here and abroad
 - ▶ Civil unrest
 - ▶ Increase in substance abuse
 - ▶ Growing individualism and loss of a sense of “we”
 - ▶ A shift toward populist and simplistic solutions about the loss of decent work

The Impact of Work in an Age of Uncertainty

► Challenges

- My research indicates the following:
 - People are suffering, even those working full-time and in seemingly stable jobs.
 - People are anxious and fearful of the future
 - Those who are out of work or in precarious work are particularly hard-hit

- *I see work as...a new form of modern slavery to me...I've been out of work for almost two years now. And right now, I'm in desperate stuff. So I'm willing to...be a slave, to do whatever I need to do... You do whatever the employer tells you to do, to keep the job...As far as survival goals. I don't usually like materialistic things, only for things I need, so that's what I use it [money] for. And now my needs are so big because I've been homeless.*

Two Americas and Two Different Experiences of Working

- ▶ A major theme that emerged is one of two disparate experiences of working....
 - ▶ **Working for survival:**
 - ▶ This encompasses the experiences of the unemployed, underemployed, as well as many others, including people who thoughtfully selected their career plans, but who are out of work or underemployed.

Two Americas and Two Different Experiences of Working

- ▶ **Working for self-determination:**
- ▶ Self-determination captures the sense of feeling connected to a set of activities—
 - ▶ **Being motivated and engaged!**
- ▶ Some of our participants were living out the American Dream.
- ▶ They were able to develop meaningful work lives that reflected their inner values, interests, and aspirations.
- ▶ For many of these individuals, privilege was something that was part of their cultural inheritance.
- ▶ Others worked their way up, often with a lot of help from families, communities, and loved ones.

The Two Americas

► Caveats:

- People often moved between working for self-determination and survival, depending on their access to work and training.
- At times, people had work lives that were focused on survival, but experienced self-determination in their artistic pursuits or avocational lives.

Impact of Work in an Age of Uncertainty

► Opportunities:

- We can rethink the social contract that people have with work.
- Some pluses of technology and jobs...
 - Tedious work can be given to the robots and computers.
 - Work can be more meaningful for people.



How can psychology contribute to humane solutions?

- ▶ Work fulfills important human functions.
- ▶ In a world without work for all, our society will need to consider how we provide people with the means for...
 - ▶ Engage in meaningful activities
 - ▶ Connect to the broader social and economic world
 - ▶ Create and contribute
- ▶ *So work...to me is a vehicle for how people connect their talents to the world... I guess that's how I see work: it's how we get things done. It's how we translate...as a society, as a world, our skills, our abilities, our values...into action, into making things happen, into improving, moving, and shaping...Without work, we don't have a society, we don't have anything.*

Implications: Public Policy

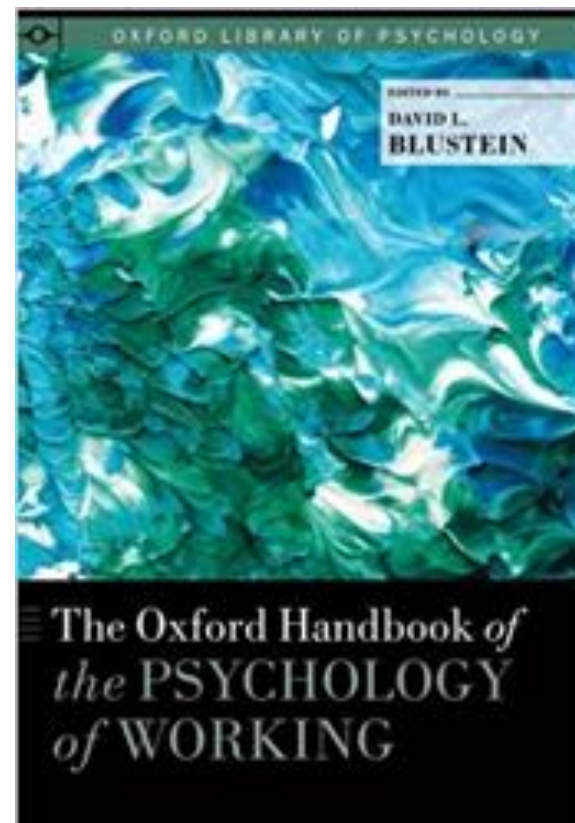
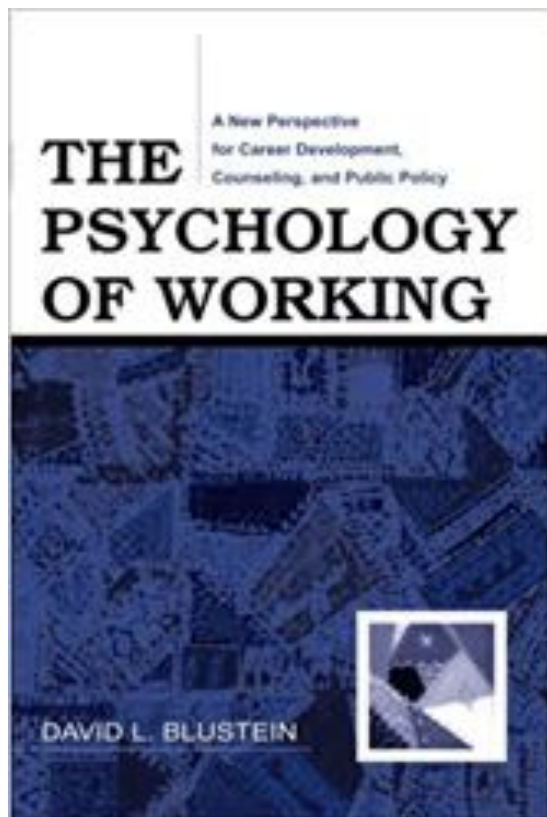
- ▶ Human rights and working
- ▶ Unpacking work from sustainability—basic income guarantees
- ▶ Education and work in an age of uncertainty

Implications: Public Policy

▶ **Developing humane policies about working**

- ▶ Our society can create sufficient jobs.
 - ▶ Empathy and creativity are not easily replaceable by automation and artificial intelligence
- ▶ The ILO's Decent Work Agenda should be incorporated in our policies about working.
- ▶ A work-based safety net is needed for all.

For Further Information...





Thank You!

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