

Livelihood Thinking for Career Development: Rethinking Work from Alternative Perspectives

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Abstract

Work in its generic form is ubiquitous and encompasses almost everything we do. At the same time, all through the course of its evolution, work has been transformed by revolutions, molded by ideologies and shaped by the tenets of a variety of philosophies yielding diverse culturally mediated approaches to work. This essay proposes that while the emergence of occupations is a universal phenomenon, the practice of occupations has differentiated into the livelihood and careerist modes of engagement. The common understanding is that livelihood is related to survival needs and is largely practiced by poorer folk such as farmers, artisans and skilled workers, and mainly in rural areas. Career on the other hand is linked to middle and higher social classes, urban lifestyles and is portrayed as offering better opportunities for higher incomes. Career carries stronger connotations of prestige. Indeed, the drive to abandon rural livelihoods and move toward a 'better future' in the city has been a persistent one. However, a livelihood is not just a means of earning money and achieving financial security. It goes deeper and is rooted in a way of living. This essay explores the dynamic tensions between livelihood and career as forms of work.

Work as a Manifestation of Culture

The propensity to work has been an integral and continual aspect of human existence ever since the hands of our ancient ancestors, grasped a chunk of stone and transformed it into a tool. It is the human being's highly developed capability to intentionally and intelligently direct effort and energy toward reaching a goal and achieving a target, that lies at the heart of not just our survival but of our evolution and progress as a species. Across millennia, human work gradually transformed from being a primordial fight against the elements for survival, to an act of cognition, characterized by consideration, forethought and planning. Formed and forged in the crucible of exigency, human ability began to manifest as skill. Over time, skills agglomerated and clustered into sets and types. And this gave birth to a foundational human institution: the occupation. Gradually, the manner in which an occupation was practiced developed cultural overtones and began to vary across societies and economies. Thus, for example, while carpentry might exist as an occupation in multiple cultures, how it is

practiced, the manner in which the skills of this occupation are transmitted, and the social status of its practitioner is likely to vary greatly.

The Divergence of Career from Livelihood

The Protestant Reformation of the 1500s gave a new direction to the practice of occupations in Western societies. The spirit of enterprise and materialistic individualism promoted by Protestantism freed workers to work for personal profit and wholeheartedly focus on accumulating wealth (Weber, 2002). By the middle of the 18th century, primarily in England and Europe, the first Industrial Revolution created numerous new areas of occupation that called for new sets of skills and expertise. Undergirded by the protestant work ethic, the practice of occupations developed individualistic overtones. These circumstances engendered a new form of work: the career. This new form of practicing an occupation called for fitting into predefined institutional structures and following prescribed rules, while competing constantly to excel against others. Put differently, an individual consciously chooses to engage with the tasks and responsibilities of a career and willingly meets its demands because this investment of effort is expected to yield substantial personal gain. But since the last century of its existence has the career approach to the practice of occupation lived up to these expectations?

The Great Rethink

During the time of this writing, the COVID-19 crisis is waxing and waning around us. Amongst the widespread outcomes of this global event are economic and labour market shocks leading to the derailment of careers and loss of jobs of unprecedented magnitude in all economies. Paradoxically, an opposite trend has also emerged. An increasingly large number of people who have successfully engaged with their careers are beginning to express the desire to exit the 'careerist' path. People are saying that they feel trapped and exploited by their jobs, that modern work is exhausting and stressful, that jobs are abusive and unrewarding and that workplaces are toxic. Millions of workers are reassessing their connections with their careers. Coining the phrase 'The Great Resignation', Anthony Klotz predicted that, a large number of people would quit their jobs in the wake of the pandemic (Jorgenson, 2021). In what Klotz refers to as pandemic epiphanies, being under lockdown has given workers the time and space to reflect upon their lives and the meaning and sense of purpose they derive from their work lives. In fact, we could say that The Great Resignation has been brought about by the opportunity for a great rethink.

Dissonant Equilibrium

The obvious question here is whether this phenomenon has been caused by the pandemic. Will these deep frustrations with work abate as the pandemic declines? A closer look indicates that while the pandemic might have been a trigger, unhappiness with work, not just the conditions of work, runs deeper. Arulmani (2014) points out that reciprocal workings between cultural learning, enculturation, and acculturation bring the individual/group to a unique state of equilibrium that influences engagement with work. When the equilibrium is characterized by contentment and feelings of fulfilment it is consonant with the person's wellbeing. In contrast, persistent and unresolved adversity in people's lives induced by cultural, social, structural or legislative environments accumulating over a period of time could bring about a dissonant equilibrium. Rethinking work could imply reckoning with the

possibility that the pandemic has unmasked not just an immediate, but a chronic unhappiness with work leaving the careerist worker in a state of dissonant equilibrium.

Bidirectional Collaborations between Career and Livelihood

Weary and tired, people are leaving their careers. While what they are abandoning is of significance, of greater import is what they are shifting toward. Many are preparing for new careers. But would fatigue and frustration be reexperienced, once the honeymoon with their new career has passed? Is a more fundamental, attitudinal shift required of the careerist? This essay proposes that livelihood thinking could be an aspect of this attitudinal shift. We present below four themes that emerged from our interviews with workers practicing livelihoods and those pursuing careers who shifted away from the careerist approach.

“Integrates me with my community”: The Collectivistic Perspective

Career has its being in the dynamic interaction between the garnering of personal gain and the services the person renders to society. As we have seen, career progress suffers or even grinds to a halt when this delicate balance is disturbed. Within the livelihood perspective, the practice of occupations tends to be an extension of family and community relationships. The livelihood approach seems to foster a sense of belonging and of being enfolded by the community. This excerpt from our interview with an accountant who quit a high profile city career and returned to his ancestral village provides an illustration, “I’m doing more or less the same thing I did in my career... adding up numbers, but now it’s without the overwhelming need to beat the competition... now I feel my work integrates me with my community”. An important point to be noted here is that this person continues to use the same knowledge and skills that he did as a careerist. It is in the practice of these skills that his way of living changed. Arulmani (2014) points to competition versus collaboration, individual progress versus group success, independence versus interdependence, and duty to the in-group versus personal rights as examples of attitudes to work and occupation that lie along the individualism-collectivism continuum. *Examining these differences and their impact on the practice of occupation could be a guideline for rethinking work.*

“I’m happily sewing buttons now... not tapping them”: Rediscovering Craft and Manual Work

The industrial revolutions of the last two centuries have taken us from direct, human effort-based engagement with work, through mechanization, automation and digitalization. Today the hallmark of the fourth industrial revolution is the autonomisation of work tools and processes (e.g., robots, driverless cars). These innovations perhaps improve the ease and quantum of production. But they lead to an almost forced abdication of human cognitive and cultural engagement with work (Arulmani, 2018). Conversely, manual work is a core feature of livelihood thinking. A clear theme emerging from our interviews was a greater feeling of connectedness with work tasks. A computer scientist who shifted to a much more manual engagement with work said: “It was all very exciting at first... pushing buttons to get machines to do things. But over time, I felt mentally tired... I was not using any actual skills. The algorithm was doing it. I’ve left all that now... some friends and I have gotten together to start a haberdashery. I’m happily sewing and selling buttons now... not tapping them! I’m a craftsperson now...!” Indeed, there are sound work principles to be learned from the craftsperson and artisan who even before the industrial revolution, working by hand, used simple tools with highly developed skill, to weave cloth, construct furniture, build pyramids,

temples and cathedrals and ships! *Efforts at rethinking work could explore what manual work could mean in an increasingly digitalized and virtualized world.*

“Observing and working with my elders”: Alternate Epistemologies

Knowledge pertaining to modern careers is encoded in the written form. It is only when the individual, through a prescribed curriculum, formally acquires this knowledge that he/she is allowed entry to a career. On the other hand, indigenous knowledge pertaining to livelihoods is usually not coded and accumulated in the same way. Songs, proverbs, rhymes, dances, music, art and folklore can all carry information pertaining to the practice of an occupation. Learning is facilitated through observation, continuous conversation and supervised practice in a master-apprenticeship relationship. Having lost employment, one of our interviewees returned to his family occupation of farming and poultry keeping. He says, “My people know about our traditional livelihood. There are no textbooks! I learn by observing and working with elders.” Indigenous knowledge systems lie outside formal schooling systems. They are intangible repositories of the community’s experience over centuries encompassing a wide range of human concerns including food security, human and animal health, education, biodiversity and natural resource management. Since very few of these knowledge systems fall within the purview of positivist epistemologies, these age-old, time-tested repositories of knowledge are often viewed as primitive, unscientific and not relevant to the exigencies of modern times. Increasingly, however, these knowledge systems are being accepted as alternate epistemologies that can guide the generation of hypotheses, the formulation of research designs, and the creation of methods and systems for contemporary practice (e.g., United Nations Interagency Support Group, 2014). Rethinking work could involve engaging with such alternative paradigms to gain broader insights into human engagement with work.

“Going to bring the cows home”: Work as Education

Within the contemporary, career-oriented family, typically, the adults go off to work and the children go to school until they are ready to work. Livelihood orientations seldom separate work from education. The practice of an occupation is a family enterprise. Mahatma Gandhi (a champion of livelihoods), based his educational philosophy (*Nai Talim* – New Education) upon the principle that learning would be located around work. One of our adolescent interviewees, from a farming family said, “I’ve just returned from school and I’m going to bring our cows home. So, hurry up with this interview!” Within livelihood orientations, children are a part of the fabric of the family’s ethos of work. Educating children such that they begin to ponder over the meaning and purpose of work for themselves is a crucial requirement if future generations are to engage with work with perspicacity and discernment. *Rethinking work could consider how modern pedagogical systems might use livelihood thinking as an instrument for education.*

Conclusion

The intention of this essay is not to extol the virtues of one form of work over the other. Instead, the intention is to deliberately blur the lines between artificial dichotomies. An interplay can exist between the preindustrial, the industrial and postindustrial, between the personal and the shared, the handcrafted and the machine-made. Rethinking work would scaffold a continuous, ever-renewing dialogue between career and livelihood.

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