

## **Towards a Theory of Work Satisfaction: An Examination of Karl Marx and Frederick Herzberg**

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### **Introduction**

Americans lead the western world in the number of hours spent at work. Why do we work so hard? One answer is that we enjoy our jobs. Work brings us satisfaction. This essay argues that work satisfaction not only entails enjoyment but also three ethical considerations as well. Two of these ethical concerns speak to the development of talents and community interest; the third addresses the subjective quality of ethical claims. Work is discussed using two models. The ethical model put forth by Karl Marx and the psychological one proposed by Frederick Herzberg. The essay ends with a few comments on how their views should be modified, amended and ignored.

### **Karl Marx's Ethical Model**

Marx begins his analysis of work satisfaction with a look at capitalist production. What is produced is often useless, even dangerous. Production decisions are based on profit rather than public benefit. To use his terms, capitalism is dominated by exchange value rather than use value. What to produce should be based on objective moral criteria, not immoral motives like exchange value. Moreover, work satisfaction cannot be achieved when nature is exploited for small interest. Air and water must be used for community objectives. Marx also cautions that work under capitalism emphasizes competition and selfishness, making friendships unusual. In sum, work alienates us from what we produce, the natural environment,

our latent talents and each another. Work satisfaction should have a moral base and speak to producing useful goods and services, stimulating our capacities, forming meaningful relationships and appropriating natural resources for useful purposes (Marx, 1977, 75-96).

Work alienation refers to the objective social conditions of work and does not depend on the opinion of the worker. Enjoying work is not a guarantee that it is unalienating. For instance, under capitalism people compensate for lack of satisfying jobs by exalting their animal qualities. He observes:

The result we arrive at then is that man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions of eating, drinking, and procreating, at most also in his dwelling and dress, and feels himself an animal in his human functions. Eating, drinking, procreating, etc., are indeed truly human functions. But in the abstraction that separates them from other rounds of human activity and makes them into final and exclusive ends they become animal. (Marx, 1977, 80-81)

Pleasure become the single motive in life since it connects so quickly to part of our humanity. The quick fix before and after work is their daily highlight. Yet, when food, drink, and sex dominate life, they diminish our humanity since they ignore our wider possibilities. Ironically, the morally uninformed may enjoy such a life.

An issue for Marx is how to move from a so-called incorrect moral evaluation of work to a correct one. Why should people agree with his ideas of work if they are happy with their so called alienating jobs? What is wrong with a miner who enjoys his alienating job? Marx insists that the miner suffers from a false consciousness or what Herbert Marcuse calls "euphoria in unhappiness" (Marcuse, 1974, 50). Euphoria refers to their personal reaction while unhappiness refers to missing more reasonable possibilities. According to Marx, workers should be reeducated so they can judge work correctly. V. I. Lenin took this idea a step further and told disgruntled workers that it should be impossible to experience work dissatisfaction since they owned the means of production (Lenin, 1965, 35-277). The personal realization of alienation is the first step towards organizing for better working conditions. On the other hand, the denial of alienation may well retard this movement. Satisfied yet alienated workers are often compliant.

Marx also noted that unsatisfying work can be highly productive. We should endure unsatisfying work when it is the best agent to relieve poverty. The same dull work endured by the miner changes its alienating quality when used to fight poverty. This is a curious idea that concerns the ways ends influence means. In many cases, he thought, the realization of an ideal goal can take the sting out of dull work. How long we can postpone this separation is another issue (Marx, 1977, 115-17). Instead of offering

specific definition of poverty, Marx gives the state the power to declare what constitutes inadequate food, clothing, shelter and medical care.

In sum, Marx looks at work in three ways. The first is alienating work which appeals to morally objective criteria. The second is meaningful work that escapes its unsatisfying dimension when it is used to fight poverty. The third is unalienating work. Unalienating work refers to work as a liberating experience. What are these experiences? Marx notes:

Supposing that we had produced in a human manner, each of us would in his production have doubly affirmed himself and his fellow man. I would have: Objectified in my production my individuality and its peculiarity and thus both in my activity enjoyed an individual expression of my life and also in looking at the object we have had the individual pleasure of realizing my personality was objective, visible to the senses and thus a power beyond doubt. (Marx, 1966, 11)

This view of work addresses communist society where production is not the prime motive to work. These reciprocal connections between producer and consumer involves choices on what to produce based on consumer feedback. It is not an active and passive relationship but a creative concord. In other words, work cannot be gratifying to the producer if it is harmful to the consumer or helpful to the consumer while harmful to the producer.

This thin outline of Marx suggests that work satisfaction has a moral quality. This moral approach to work becomes apparent when contrasted with the psychological approach of Frederick Herzberg.

### **Frederick Herzberg's Psychological Theory of Work**

Herzberg's theory is a reaction to the theories of Frederick Taylor and Elton Mayo. Taylor focused on merit and productivity (Taylor, 1911, 41-47). Employees were tested for skills and attitudes towards money. Jobs were broken down into simple time units that could be easily mastered by certain people. Management's job is to match people with task. In many cases, productivity increased, profits rose and employees paid better. Work had no intrinsic appeal. A good job paid well, a great one even better. Taylor saw good pay as an investment in productivity. V. I. Lenin saw Taylor's ideas as a better way to manage poverty by increasing productivity (Lenin, 1965, 259).

Elton Mayo helped design the famous Hawthorne studies. They found that productivity was controlled by group norms rather than the personalities and talents of employees (Mayo, 1945, 42). Employees banded together to control productivity as a reaction to perceived poor treatment. The studies also claimed that ability did not relate to productivity. Group norms controlled output. Work satisfaction and productivity

were tied to wages and working conditions. Mayo treated employees as a class rather than individuals and concluded “that the behavior of the individual within the factory can be predicted before employment upon the basis of a laborious and minute examination by test of his mechanical and other capacities is mainly, if not wholly mistaken” (Baritz, 1965, 95). Sociology replaced psychology as the way to understand employees motives, productivity, and management-employee relations.

Herzberg views Mayo as an extension of Taylor. Both failed to distinguish between the intrinsic qualities of work, such as developing abilities and the extrinsic qualities, such as salary. Herzberg also questions their other assumption. That the motivation to work could be understood using one class of appeals. Work satisfaction does not stem from our need to make money, as Taylor thought, or the need to be treated fairly, as Mayo argued. Rather, Herzberg argues, work appeals to two criteria—the desire to develop talents and avoid pain. Taylor and Mayo, he argues, speak only to the pain avoidance quality of work.

Herzberg makes a distinction between factors that make for job satisfaction and the development of talent as opposed to those that trigger dissatisfaction and pain. When people feel dissatisfied with pay, they do not feel satisfied after a pay boost. They register no work dissatisfaction, not work satisfaction. Instead, work satisfaction comes from the satisfiers or motivators that include the work itself, achievement, recognition, responsibility, and advancement. The pain avoiders include the relationships with colleagues, supervisors, and administrators, along with working conditions and salary. Herzberg argues:

Stating the concept presents a problem in semantics, for we normally think of satisfaction and dissatisfaction as opposites—i.e., what is not satisfying must be dissatisfying, and vice versa. However, when it comes to understanding the behavior of people in their jobs, more than a play on words is involved. Two different needs of man are involved here. One set of needs can be thought of as stemming from his animal nature—the built in drive to avoid pain from the environment, plus all the learned drives which become conditioned to the basic biological needs. The other set of needs relate to the unique human characteristic, the ability to achieve and, through achievement, to experience psychological growth. (Herzberg, 1968, 147)

Taylor and Mayo use a traditional one-continuum model to measure work. Salary, benefits and other measures of work are plotted on a horizontal line. One end expresses work satisfaction, the other dissatisfaction. Using salary as a criterion to measure work, one would have work satisfaction when pay is high and dissatisfaction when low. When additional standards are used, one would simply add their scores

to calculate an overall score for work satisfaction (May & Decker, 1988, 143-144).

Figure 1 details a one-continuum either or model of work satisfaction/dissatisfaction. Figure 2 summarizes Herzberg's bi-polar theory. Figure 3 speculates on the levels of work satisfaction using Herzberg's model.

Figure 1  
A Traditional Either Or Model of Work Satisfaction

Positive Response	Standards	Negative Response
Work Satisfaction	Achievement	Work Dissatisfaction
Work Satisfaction	Recognition	Work Dissatisfaction
Work Satisfaction	Work Itself	Work Dissatisfaction
Work Satisfaction	Responsibility	Work Dissatisfaction
Work Satisfaction	Advancement	Work Dissatisfaction
Work Satisfaction	Company Policy	Work Dissatisfaction
Work Satisfaction	Administration	Work Dissatisfaction
Work Satisfaction	Supervision	Work Dissatisfaction
Work Satisfaction	Interpersonal Relationships	Work Dissatisfaction
Work Satisfaction	Salary	Work Dissatisfaction

This measure of work satisfaction would weigh each standard in a complex of positive and negative responses to arrive at an overall measure of work satisfaction.

Figure 2  
Herzberg's Theory of Work Satisfaction

Positive Response	Standards of the Motivator Factors	Negative Response
Work Satisfaction	Achievement	No Work Satisfaction
Work Satisfaction	Recognition	No Work Satisfaction
Work Satisfaction	Work Itself	No Work Satisfaction
Work Satisfaction	Responsibility	No Work Satisfaction
Work Satisfaction	Advancement	No Work Satisfaction
Positive Response	Standards of the Maintenance Factors	Negative Response
No Work Dissatisfaction	Company Policy	Work Dissatisfaction
No Work Dissatisfaction	Administration	Work Dissatisfaction
No Work Dissatisfaction	Supervision	Work Dissatisfaction
No Work Dissatisfaction	Interpersonal Relationships	Work Dissatisfaction
No Work Dissatisfaction	Salary	Work Dissatisfaction

Herzberg's theory brings a weighted value, which separates the motivators from the maintenance factors. The motivators are more important in

understanding what motivates people and should increase productivity. We should keep in mind that he does not show that motivated workers are more productive. Herzberg simply assumes, in an analytical sense, that workers who are highly motivated must be more productive than unmotivated ones.

Figure 3  
An Overall Model of Work Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction Suggested by Herzberg's Theory.

In order of preference:		
1. Work Satisfaction	and	No Work Dissatisfaction
2. Work Satisfaction	and	Work Dissatisfaction
3. No work Satisfaction	and	No Work Dissatisfaction
4. No Work Satisfaction	and	Work Dissatisfaction

### Conclusion

Herzberg uses psychological criteria to measure work satisfaction. He fails to understand that decisions on what to produce involve not only moral questions but also how those choices affect nature and a sense of community. He does offer, however, a coherent theory on the relationship between work and the developments of one's capacities. Nevertheless, with his logic, we can enjoy work satisfaction while producing cocaine.

Herzberg sees labor and management cooperating when employees are highly skilled and motivated by the satisfiers. Productivity requires a satisfied employee. Car assembly is another matter. The motivators are not as productive as the pain avoiders, making labor-management relations contentious. Who then gets the lousy car assembly jobs? Herzberg thinks that unsatisfying work might go to people who are motivated by the pain avoiders. Thanks to the American school's loyalty to consumerism and pain avoidance, these people are easy to find (Herzberg, 1966, 83). Ironically, if schools turn out students who are attracted by the motivators, their graduates may not find satisfying work. After all, productivity rather than work satisfaction determines whether the satisfiers or motivators will operate.

Herzberg does not address how personality affects notions of good work. Yet, his research shows a high percentage of people motivated by salary. In fact, all the pain avoiders have a large minority who view them as satisfiers. Furthermore, he studies jobs that are largely male. His analysis is not gender neutral. Women, for instance, may well place more emphasis on relationships with colleagues because of social expectations and more concern on salary because of inequities.

The large difference between Herzberg and Marx is how they measure work satisfaction. For Marx, work must be driven by moral intuitions that concerns nature, the development of talents, the objects of work and human interactions. Herzberg, however, is reality rather than morality bound. What counts is the experience of working people and not what they should experience. He finds an Old Testament base for his moral view that we should seek growth and avoid pain. Yet, the content of this dictum as expressed in the motivators and pain avoiders is not biblical. To argue that the Old Testament provides a moral argument for personal achievement and pain avoidance does not translate into a sharp difference between motivators and pain avoiders. The Old Testament, for instance, does not say that relationships with colleagues and salary are based on pain avoiders rather than motivators.

The point is that Herzberg's model of dividing work into a hierarchy is a moral claim with a psychological justification. The view that professional people experience work satisfaction along these lines does not translate into they should experience work satisfaction along these same lines. He needs to provide a criteria to show that the production of cocaine is a moral issue. Work satisfaction is more than an examination of people's reactions to their jobs. Herzberg, for instance, refers to people who are motivated by "dissatisfiers" as neurotic. A factual claim when he should also rely on a moral argument to judge motivation (Herzberg, 1966, 83-91). People who are motivated by the "dissatisfiers" rather than the satisfiers should be criticized from a moral perspective. Yet, we do not have a logic that can render someone immoral from a descriptive base. Ethical judgment must stand with moral premises, not factual ones.

Herzberg's theory fits well when looking at producing goods and services with market demand. His theory simply falls short of the mark because it fails to give an indication as to what is worthwhile to produce. We should not endorse our jobs when the satisfiers are present and the "dissatisfiers" absent. Job satisfaction, as Marx points out, should include ideas on what is useful and how nature and people are affected. Herzberg's theory is also limited because the satisfiers are tied too closely to increased productivity. Dull work is justified even when it is only slightly more productive than work done by robots.

Marx, on the other hand, argues that unalienating work should be the motive of life. However, his ideas on what constitutes unalienating work are vague, ignores personality and demands state coercion. Personal judgments are unimportant under state domination and should not be excused with his naïve promises of a communist state where subjective notions of work flourishes. Idealized goals are supposed to drive people to postpone unalienating work. When the promised revolution is com-

pleted, work will be linked to achievement through communal living. Such predictions are risky. The state can always rationalized failure to bring about unalienating work by pointing to their self-serving ways to establish poverty. State defined poverty is never quite defeated leaving in place unsatisfying work.

Marx also fails to appreciate the need to couple work satisfaction with liberty. Choice is central to work satisfaction and may be linked to productivity. His scary view that work satisfaction is established when the state owns the means of production ignores choice.

The ideas of Marx and Herzberg variously offer some good and bad advice. They rightly point out that a subjective criterion of work satisfaction ignores our capacity for error. We are capable of understating how work can develop our talents. Yet they go to the other extreme by arguing for a too objective view of work satisfaction. Marx argues from a moral view and Herzberg from a psychological one. Yet Marx's point that job satisfaction must include a moral base seems convincing, even if we rejects his moral conclusions. A blueprint of work satisfaction must include moral hunches on what to produce and how these choices affect the natural environment, the development of talents and the relationships between people.

Ideas on work satisfaction and how they motivate are elusive because of the diversity we bring to evaluate work. Work satisfaction has wide subjective borders. Evaluations on work reflects age, work experience, gender and even whim and fancy. Marx and Herzberg asks us to see work as the dominating motive in life. We should ignore this advice. Keep in mind that we are also mothers, husbands, gardeners, gamblers, and even Red Sox fans. To focus too closely on work is to risk devaluing how these other important roles provide us with perspective, novelty and something worthwhile to do in retirement. We need balance! Too much emphasis on work diminishes these other important roles while too little might allow us to enlarge them.

### **Note**

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