

Work quality as a spiral: A multidisciplinary integration of the concepts of job satisfaction, job quality, and quality of working life

HRM/ Organisational Behaviour/ Organisation Studies

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systematic literature review, work quality, quality of working life, job quality, job satisfaction

Background

The quality of work as a lived phenomenon and as an academic concept faces significant challenges. Work intensification (Adascalitei et al. 2021), increased digital surveillance and algorithmic control (Kellogg et al. 2020), job polarization (Visser 2019), and increased casualization (Olding et al. 2021) have been steadily growing concerns with implications for job quality and job satisfaction. Both these fields of scholarly analysis are mature with distinct disciplinary trends: job satisfaction research is overwhelmingly psychological, while job quality research tends to be either politico-economic or sociological (Kalleberg 2016). Although job quality and job satisfaction are closely related and can be dependent upon one another, the concepts are rarely critically integrated within a single paper. This limits scholars' ability to provide contextualised understandings to both academic and non-academic audiences. Our multidisciplinary review includes job satisfaction and job quality research, bridging them with the quality of working life literature to provide a more integrated, holistic, and human-centred view of work quality to enable better and more impactful theorization (Tihanyi 2020).

Our systematic review has two aims. First, we provide a multidisciplinary and multi-level update on job quality, job satisfaction, and quality of work life research. Second, we integrate the literatures to provide a holistic view of work quality (the term we assign to the collective phenomenon addressed by the integrated literatures). We introduce a spiral metaphor to represent this holistic view, and propose that using the metaphor in problem framing can help work quality scholars identify and address connections and complexities between job satisfaction, job quality, and quality of working life as contextualised phenomena.

Methods

We conducted a systematic literature review of empirical research on job quality, job satisfaction, and quality of working life from 2007-2020. We limited our review by journal, retaining papers published in Academic Journal Guide 3, 4, and 4* rated journals in the areas of general management, social sciences, HRM, organisational psychology, organisational studies, and entrepreneurship and small business. Our initial searches in Scopus and Web of Science with these

parameters returned a combined 2,769 items. Through an iterative review process, we excluded duplicates, book chapters, conference papers, conceptual papers, meta-analyses, and papers which did not have a primary focus on one of the three included concepts. We retained 267 papers which form an integrated work quality literature. Our thematic analysis of the integrated literature identified four broad research focuses: models and measures of work quality, human influences on work quality, workplace factors influencing work quality, and external factors influencing work quality.

Main Findings

Job satisfaction is by far the largest field of literature (n=170), nearly double the size of the job quality field (n=79). We found only 17 papers using quality of working life frameworks, supporting Grote and Guest's (2017) assertion that the quality of working life model has been overlooked in the recent past. Furthermore, we found only 16 papers which meaningfully incorporated two or more of these concepts, supporting our impression that the job quality and job satisfaction literatures are mostly separate.

The first group of research we review includes models and measures of work quality. We conclude that existing empirically tested models are best suited for research questions that focus on either workers, organisations, or institutions. Pluralist models that incorporate the perspectives of multiple actors, such as quality of working life, were not tested or proposed in the literature we reviewed.

Research at the micro level explores human influences on work quality, including personality, work values, congruence between work and worker, life stage, and socio-demographic traits. As expected, psychological research on job satisfaction predominated.

Meso-level research focuses on how the nature, characteristics and organisation of work influence work quality. The majority of the articles reviewed adopted this approach. Job quality and job satisfaction research were most balanced at this level, and most of the quality of working life papers focused on the meso level. The research in this theme examined HRM and non-HRM elements of work.

Macro-level work quality research focusses on trade unions, national cultures, economic systems, and comparative studies. Our findings confirm that research on this level tends to use economic and sociological lenses, and is predominantly concerned with job quality rather than job satisfaction or quality of working life.

Theoretical Contribution

The job satisfaction, job quality, and quality of working life literatures are mature but self-contained, an academic abstraction that we argue bears little resemblance to the complex, multi-level phenomenon of work quality we found through integrating the literatures. Each of the levels outlined in our findings (micro, meso, and macro) simultaneously informs and reinforces the levels above and below. Admittedly, it is next to impossible for a work quality paper to give equal attention to all of these influences. Yet taking an overly narrow view of work quality obscures its complexity and results in less realistic conclusions, making it much more difficult to apply research findings in a way that can actually improve work quality.

We propose that work quality can be more helpfully understood when considered as a spiral. The metaphor's primary advantages are its multi-directionality, dynamism, gradual transitions, and holistic nature. By using the spiral in their problem framing, scholars can help establish the scope and limits of their research within the multi-level phenomenon of work quality. Positioning research on the spiral during problem framing can also serve as a reminder to readers and researchers that there is a complicated reality outside the pages of our journals. The spiral is an easily understood metaphor which can facilitate the transfer of knowledge outside of academia, helping a broad spectrum of thinkers and actors organize, describe, and address the inherently complex relationships that contribute to the lived experience of work quality.

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