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Patricia Findlay, Arne L Kalleberg and Chris Warhurst

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# The challenge of job quality

**Patricia Findlay**

University of Strathclyde, UK

**Arne L Kalleberg**

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA

**Chris Warhurst**

University of Sydney, Australia

human relations

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## Abstract

Job quality is a timely issue because of its potential impact on individual, firm and national well-being. This renewed interest underscores the need for robust conceptualization of job quality. This article provides background to the renewed interest in job quality and, drawing on the contributions to the Special Issue, starts to map the dimensions of job quality, the factors that influence job quality, and the outcomes or impacts of job quality. We identify a number of emergent themes. First, job quality is a multidimensional phenomenon. Second, multiple factors and forces operating at multiple levels influence job quality. Third, the study of job quality is an inherently multi-disciplinary endeavour. Fourth, job quality is a contextual phenomenon, differing among persons, occupations and labour market segments, societies and historical periods. Our mapping of job quality, and the articles in the Special Issue, provide a foundation and springboard for understanding better the theoretically challenging and policy-relevant issue of job quality.

## Keywords

employment status, European Working Conditions Survey, graduate labour, post-Fordism, UK Skills Survey, varieties of capitalism

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## Corresponding author:

Chris Warhurst, Department of Work and Organisational Studies, School of Business, University of Sydney, Sydney, New South Wales, NSW2006, Australia.

Email: [chris.warhurst@sydney.edu.au](mailto:chris.warhurst@sydney.edu.au)

## Introduction

Job quality is back in vogue among social scientists and policy-makers because of its potential impact on individual, firm and national well-being. For economies in trouble, the impacts of better job quality on lower unemployment and higher employment participation means that improving job quality offers the promise of salvation; for economies doing well, the influence of good jobs on innovation and enhanced productivity offers justification for policy (for a summary discussion see Warhurst and Knox, 2013). However, policy interventions to shape job quality – typically to create good jobs or improve bad jobs – are hampered by the need for a robust conceptualization of job quality (Muñoz de Bustillo et al., 2011). Addressing this ‘conceptualization deficit’ matters. Policy-makers in the 1990s adopted the concept of ‘decent work’, which overlaps in some respects with job quality (see, for example, Fields, 2003). However, policy and, through it, the practical leveraging of ‘decent work’ have suffered because of a lack of scientific agreement on its conceptual meaning (*International Labour Review*, 2003). If job quality is to avoid the same fate, it is imperative that debate and discussion among social scientists about how to conceive – and thereby measure and assess – job quality starts now. Although it is not the aim of the Special Issue to identify policy implications, some contributions do make the link to policy. Given the prominence of job quality historically and currently within the social sciences, generating better conceptualization is a key requirement for robust research. It is only through such research that policy thinking can then be developed. The aim of this Special Issue, therefore, is to build on existing conceptual frameworks for analysing job quality, in order to further develop approaches to theorizing job quality in ways that are multi-disciplinary and capable of driving future empirical and applied research, both nationally and cross-nationally.

## Background

The study of job quality has a long history within the social sciences (e.g. Davis and Taylor, 1972; Terkel, 1972) and has previously featured heavily in *Human Relations* (e.g. Donaldson, 1975; Kelly, 1992; Oldham and Miller, 1979; Westley, 1979). Given the new policy push, it is now timely to revitalize academic debate. Recent contributions to academic debate have featured demands for a ‘new deal’, ‘new social contract’ or ‘new strategy’ for workers in bad jobs (Grimshaw et al., 2008; Kalleberg, 2011; Osterman and Shulman, 2011, respectively). Unfortunately, such demands often lack a coherent and agreed upon conceptual framework that might provide a robust evidence base to support interventions that improve job quality. As Sen Gupta et al. (2009) acknowledge, defining and measuring job quality is difficult. Although a number of definitions, measures and even indexes of job quality exist, there is no consensus about what constitutes job quality. At a basic level, there are disputes about indicators: some measures rely on a single indicator (e.g. Osterman and Shulman, 2011), others use multiple indicators (e.g. Clark, 2005) and, when multiple measures are used, there are challenges and disagreements around the weighting of each indicator (e.g. Muñoz de Bustillo et al., 2011). Often measures and assessments are limited simply by the lack of availability of appropriate data from which to develop better – or any – comprehensive (or at

least useful from a policy perspective) understanding (e.g. Leschke and Watt, 2008). Conceptually, there are also differences among disciplines. Economists typically focus on pay, sociologists focus on skill and autonomy, and psychologists focus on job satisfaction (see, respectively, Clark, 2005; Gallie, 2007; Holman, 2010). There are also differences within disciplines – for example, within sociology, over whether or not contingent employment is synonymous with poor job quality (Kalleberg et al., 2000). Moreover, although it is recognized that job quality affects the sexes differently, with more women than men in bad jobs in the advanced economies (Mason and Salverda, 2010), current conceptualizations of job quality themselves might be gendered, with notions of good jobs constructed around male-breadwinner models of employment (Wright, 2013). Furthermore, these characterizations are often underpinned by differences in geography, centred on individual countries or specific regions, or types of countries, for example advanced or developing (Ghai, 2003). For example, there is the challenging issue of whether, as well as how, to include the ‘social wage’ of state-provided health insurance in comparisons of job quality between the US and European countries (Gautié and Schmidt, 2010).

These differences have implications for both scientific understanding of job quality and the capacity for policy interventions to improve job quality. Policy-makers now recognize that the quality, not just the quantity, of jobs is important in improving individual well-being and national competitive advantage. Bad jobs do not provide for sustainable economies. The OECD wants member countries to stimulate not just more, but also better jobs. In its drive for regional recovery, the EU recognizes the need to raise employment participation whilst simultaneously improving job quality. For its part, the International Labour Organisation wants better jobs for a better economy.<sup>1</sup> Even before the current global economic downturn, both the EU and ILO were keen to promote ‘decent work’ among their members. At the country level, the UK government is aware that low-wage, low-skill jobs generate in-work poverty which, in turn, exacerbates child poverty, creates and perpetuates gender inequalities in the labour market and beyond, and constrains job and social mobility (Cabinet Office, 2008; CASE/Government Equalities Office, 2010; HM Treasury, 2008). As the country entered recession, the then UK Labour government also flagged the issue of job quality in its strategies to overcome the recession, arguing for the importance of high-wage, high-skill job growth (e.g. BIS, 2009). Similarly in the US, policy initiatives at national and local levels have focused on improving job quality to deal with social and economic problems (AFL-CIO, 2008; Appelbaum et al., 2003; Brookings Institute, 2007; Parks, 2009), with initiatives such as the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership and the Hosiery Technology Center in North Carolina illustrating the potential for localized cooperation between private and public partnerships to promote training and to create better jobs (Kalleberg, 2011). In Australia, it is recognized that poor job quality has costs for individuals, families and communities and the wider social fabric, and requires national and international policy intervention (Masterman-Smith and Pocock, 2008; Shorten, 2012), but doing so requires a better understanding of job quality to inform policy development (AWPA, 2012). Given the evidence of the scale, costs and consequences of poor quality jobs and the economic and social benefits associated with high-quality jobs, this new policy emphasis is not misplaced (e.g. Clegg, 1983; European

Commission, 2002; Freeman, 1978; Patterson et al., 1997; Siebern-Thomas, 2005; Toner, 2011).

If policy is to focus on job quality and improvements made to the quality of each country's stock and nature of jobs – and academics are to properly scrutinize these policy interventions and their outcomes – there is a need to develop greater consensus around three key areas: the dimensions of job quality; the factors that influence job quality; and the outcomes or impact of job quality. Greater consensus in these areas is a prerequisite to generating more rigorous and robust cross-disciplinary and cross-national research.

## Dimensions of job quality

The quest to establish a single definition of job quality is beset with difficulties. Although absolute standards (in relation to pay, for example) are important in establishing a floor of job quality, they are inevitably limited in their application to comparative research. Similarly, debates over whether job quality should be defined in objective or subjective terms often leads to something of a dead end. Although the articles in this issue do not operate explicitly from a shared definition of job quality, they exhibit a significant consensus on the key dimensions of job quality. To illustrate some of these key dimensions, good-quality jobs allow individuals to develop and deploy their skills and offer some degree of challenge commensurate to the demands of the job and the capabilities of the individual. Similarly, there has long been recognition that good-quality jobs, in terms of both tasks and work organization, offer opportunities for task discretion and control. Another crucial element of job quality is the extent to which individuals can have their voice heard and represented and can participate in relevant decision-making. Using data from a national sample of British employees interviewed in 2006 as part of the UK Skills Survey, the role of task discretion, work organization and participation in decision-making is explored in Duncan Gallie's article in this Special Issue (Gallie, 2013). Gallie identifies three aspects of direct participation: individual task discretion, semi-autonomous teamwork, and participation in decision-making through management created consultative channels. He then examines the impacts of these dimensions on three important dimensions of employee welfare: subjective importance of work (as measured by job satisfaction), skill use and skill development, and psychological well-being. Gallie finds that the most important factor for these outcomes is task discretion, followed by consultative participation in decision-making. Participation in semi-autonomous teams, although important, is the least salient for employee welfare of the three dimensions of direct participation.

Pay and job/employment security are also important dimensions of job quality, as are mutually beneficial forms of flexibility in relation to both working hours and demands. David Holman's article (Holman, 2013, this issue) analyses differences in patterns of job quality among 27 European countries, using data from the 2005 European Working Conditions Survey. Holman starts with 38 measures representing five basic dimensions of job quality: work organization; skills and development; wages; security and flexibility; and engagement and representation. He then uses cluster analysis to derive six different job types or patterns of the job quality measures: active jobs are high in quality on all dimensions; saturated and team-based jobs have many features of

high-quality jobs, but these are partially offset by high workloads, non-standard hours and low flexibility; passive-independent jobs have some high-quality features (high security), but more low-quality aspects (low resources, flexibility and skill development); and insecure and high-strain jobs have mostly low-quality features.

Although there is no established consensus on how these different dimensions of job quality are weighted, many of the articles in this Special Issue illustrate the importance of the idea of 'fit' or 'alignment' in assessments of job quality. For example, Graham Cooke and his colleagues (Cooke et al., 2013, this issue) argue that analyses must take account of the alignment between individual needs and aspirations and the embeddedness of these individuals in family, community, labour market and economic circumstances. More concretely, Cooke et al. stress the importance of analysing job quality in relation to individuals' life stage, the values that these individuals have about work and life, and the job opportunities available to these individuals. Although the key dimensions of job quality are capable of objective definition, how these dimensions align with individual circumstances and preferences is subjective and relative, determined by the individual in the socio-economic context. This argument emerges out of qualitative research on older workers (40+ years) in rural Canada and Ireland. From this research Cooke et al. offer a typology of worker types, across which the definition of a 'good job' varies. Some fit their work around their lifestyle; others fit their lifestyle around their work; and still others have to make do on both or either count. Researchers of job quality thus need to be more attentive to individuals' choices and constraints beyond their workplace job tasks. The upshot, Cooke et al., conclude, is that the search for the 'good job' is unlikely to find an optimal mix of job components: no one shoe can fit all. Instead the same or similar jobs may be perceived and experienced differently by different individuals. This conclusion raises obvious and tricky issues for both academics and policy-makers. If work quality is individualistic, dynamic and context-specific, how can research tools be constructed to measure and assess it? Similarly, how can policy interventions be designed to improve it?

Resonating with the level of analysis of Cooke et al., but with a particular focus on contractual and time flexibility, Loughlin and Murray (2013, this issue) also examine the idea of fit in terms of individual choices and constraints. Their focus is employment status congruence or, more prosaically, the extent to which individuals are employed in standard (full-time, permanent) or non-standard (part-time, contract) work by choice. Drawing on other research, they point out that up to 40 per cent of individuals experience incongruence in employment status. They argue that employment status has been overlooked in analysis of job quality and that bringing it into the analytical fold requires multi-disciplinarity because of its potential impact on psychological, sociological and economic measures of job quality. Their survey findings largely confirm their propositions and open up what they describe as a 'green field' of new research about the need to, as well as how to, align available work with workers' preferences, particularly as the workforce ages in the advanced economies. The upshot, they believe, is that analysis should abandon existing conceptualizations of job quality that centre on full-time, permanent work as the benchmark. In contrast to Cooke et al., Loughlin and Murray identify the policy and practice implications of their findings. They suggest that the task of government is not the creation of new jobs, but the re-aligning of existing jobs with worker

preferences. In addition, employers should rethink money spent potentially on job redesign initiatives (which would be the implication of Gallie's findings) when cheaper options for improving perceived job quality exist, such as allowing workers more flexibility in choosing their employment status.

## Factors influencing job quality

The discussion of fit or alignment raises the likelihood that demographic, occupational and/or organizational characteristics can shape assessments of job quality. Although Gallie's (2013, this issue) analysis shows relatively few differences between men and women in the effects of direct participation on employee welfare, it highlighted some differences by occupational class and individual work preferences, with direct participation being especially beneficial in enhancing skill use and development for those in lower skilled positions and those who attached greater importance to skills.

Moving on to consider intra-occupational variations in job quality, Okay-Sommerville and Scholarios (2013, this issue) focus on the intrinsic components of job quality – and the associated features of jobs – that are traditionally associated with graduate work, such as higher levels of job control and the opportunity to deploy graduate skills and knowledge. This article analyses job quality for graduates in traditional and emerging graduate occupations using data from the UK Skills Survey. This issue is of considerable current interest given the increasing numbers of graduate workers in many countries alongside the emergence of new graduate occupations that were previously intermediate-skilled occupations.

Beyond occupational and demographic factors, other factors can influence job quality, such as the degree of trade union organization. Although Gallie's analysis does not identify strong effects of trade unionism on direct participation, Vidal (2013, this issue) points to a more influential role for organized labour under Fordism in influencing how far management delivered high-quality work and jobs. However, Vidal also makes clear that different institutional regimes of competition have an impact on job quality. He argues that the dominant employment arrangements within different institutional regimes of competition produce particular tendencies in terms of job quality in four distinct labour process types. Vidal's article starts with a puzzle arising from what appears to be conflicting US data on job quality. This data shows that although the proportion of low-autonomy jobs declined slightly from 1960 to 2005, from the 1960s until the 1990s low-wage work constituted an increasing proportion of total employment. The author argues that this puzzle can only be resolved by considering the impact of the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism. Fordism created the conditions in which low-autonomy work could also pay decent wages through the taming of markets by interventionist welfare states and a class compromise between capital and labour. Post-Fordism – with its dominant logic of employment externalization – has impacted negatively on key aspects of job quality, such as wages, opportunities for training and promotion, security and work intensification. Low-autonomy jobs have become low-wage jobs because of the logic of employment externalization. Vidal identifies four generic labour process types within post-Fordism – high-autonomy, semi-autonomous, tightly constrained and unrationalized labour-intensive processes – and constructs a

typology of variations in job quality within each, thus providing a framework for analysing historical and cross-sectional variations in job quality.

Holman (2013, this issue) also draws on institutional theory and uses multi-level logistic regression analysis to explain differences among countries in the patterns of job types. He finds that social democratic institutional regimes (Denmark, Finland, Sweden) have the greatest proportion of high-quality jobs, Southern-European countries (such as Italy, Greece, Spain) have especially high proportions of passive-independent and insecure jobs, whereas transitional institutional regimes (Eastern European countries) have high proportions of high-strain jobs. He argues that these country variations in job quality are rooted primarily in differences among institutional regimes in their employment policies and the relative organizational capacity of labour.

## **Outcomes of job quality**

The articles in this Special Issue also illustrate the key outcomes of job quality, enabling consideration of what good and poor job quality means for individuals, organizations and societies. For individuals, good-quality jobs are associated with greater job satisfaction, commitment, health and psychological well-being. Gallie's analysis highlights the relationship between task discretion and participation and key elements of employee welfare: subjective importance of work (as measured by job satisfaction); skill use and skill development; and psychological well-being. Loughlin and Murray focus on the impact on individual (e.g. health) and organizational (e.g. turnover) outcomes from a lack of fit between job quality dimensions and individual circumstances and preferences of white-collar public sector workers. Similarly, Okay-Sommerville and Scholarios find that graduates in emerging graduate occupations report relying less on graduate skills such as problem-solving, planning and influencing. They also report lower job control, fewer opportunities to use their own skills and lower pay. Moreover, inferior job quality is the vehicle through which under-employment for some graduates leads to negative attitudes and lower psychological well-being. These effects have implications for their employers insofar as the graduates also report lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment. The article suggests that a 'supply-push' approach to job quality may have significant limitations where the supply of more qualified workers is not matched by the supply of higher-quality jobs.

## **Emergent themes in the contributions to this Special Issue**

Taken together, the articles in this Special Issue address a number of aspects of job quality. Some authors have examined job quality in terms of individual perceptions of their jobs and working conditions; others have looked at variations in job quality in different occupations and segments of the labour market; and still others have sought to explain diverse patterns of job quality in different countries and institutional regimes. These themes illustrate both the breadth of issues raised by the idea of job quality and the centrality of this concept to a number of important topics in sociology and related social science disciplines. We learn a number of useful things about job quality from these articles.

First, these articles have demonstrated that job quality is a multidimensional phenomenon. Nevertheless, there is significant consensus around the components of job quality. Whether a job is considered to be good or bad depends on a large number of characteristics of one's work and working conditions, including: how much money and fringe benefits one receives from the job; the degree of job security; the extent to which jobs enable a person to use her skills and to develop further skills; the amount of flexibility allowed in working hours and schedules; and the degree to which workers are able to participate in decisions and to exercise autonomy and control over their work activities.

Second, multiple factors and forces operating at multiple levels influence job quality. It is shaped by: at the micro-level, psychological characteristics such as personality traits and dispositions; meso-structures, such as how work is arranged and ordered within organizational divisions of labour; and macrostructures, such as the institutional regimes, employment policies and capital-labour relations within particular countries. The forces operating at all of these levels of analysis need to be taken into account when explaining differences in job quality.

Third, the complexity of factors involved in producing differences in job quality underscores the fact that the study of job quality is an inherently multi-disciplinary enterprise. Psychologists' insights contribute to our understanding of how individuals' dispositions and values influence their reactions to, and satisfactions with, their jobs. Sociologists have much to say about the ways in which organizations establish and maintain systems of governance and control of work activities. Economists' theories of labour markets and incentive systems are central to explanations of differences in earnings, fringe benefits and other economic aspects of jobs. And political scientists add much to our appreciation of how differences in the institutional regimes among countries help to create variations in patterns of job quality.

Finally, these articles highlight job quality as very much a contextual phenomenon, differing among persons, occupations and labour market segments, societies and historical periods. Thus, one person's idea of what constitutes a good job might be very different from another's, highlighting the importance of 'fit' or 'alignment' between job factors and individuals' life circumstances and preferences. Much of this evaluation process depends on the amount of choice a person has over the kinds of jobs s/he can obtain. People with more education who live in dynamic urban areas are likely to have greater opportunities to choose among alternative jobs and are consequently apt to have higher standards for what constitutes a good job, as compared to people with less education, or those who live in rural areas, and as a result have fewer alternative job opportunities.

Taken as a whole, the articles in this Special Issue provide a useful foundation and springboard for furthering understanding of the theoretically and policy important issue of job quality. If Australian Government Minister, Bill Shorten (2012: 3), is correct in his view that 'what the whole world wants is a good job ... now and in the future', then this Special Issue and its articles represent an important contribution to social science in helping to achieve those jobs.

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## Note

1. See the OECD's LEED project, <http://www.oecd.org/cfe/leed/buildingmoreandbetter-jobs.htm>; the EU's European Employment Strategy, <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main>; and the ILO's *World of Work Report 2012*, <http://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/world-of-work/WCMS>.

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Patricia Findlay is Director of the Scottish Centre for Employment Research and is Professor of Work and Employment Relations at the University of Strathclyde Business School, UK. Her published work spans a number of areas in the study of work and the management of the employment relationship, with recent contributions to debates on workplace innovation, skills and skills valuation, workplace and union-led learning and demand for workplace learning. Her research is funded by research councils, government, public agencies, companies and trade unions. Recent publications have appeared in *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, *Work, Employment & Society* and *British Education Research Journal*. She is co-editor of *Are Bad Jobs Inevitable?* (Palgrave, 2012), a member of the editorial board of *Industrial Relations Journal*, and former editorial board member of *Work, Employment & Society*. She is a member of the ESRC Peer Review College and a lay member of the Employment Tribunal Service. Current research includes technological change and job quality in NHS pharmacy services, pay for public sector professionals, and female academic careers. She works closely with trade unions and other organizations in developing effective approaches to skills, learning and job quality. [Patricia.Findlay@strath.ac.uk]

Arne L Kalleberg is a Kenan Distinguished Professor of Sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the USA. He is also a Global Scholar at Chung-Ang University in the Republic of Korea for 2012–2014. He has published more than 120 articles and chapters and 11 books on topics related to the sociology of work, organizations, occupations and industries, labour markets and social stratification. His most recent book is *Good Jobs, Bad Jobs: The Rise of Polarized and Precarious Employment Systems in the United States, 1970s–2000s* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2011). His major current projects include a cross-national study of the causes and consequences of precarious work in a number of Asian countries and the role of community colleges in workforce preparation. He served as President of the American Sociological Association in 2007–2008 and is currently the editor of *Social Forces*, an International Journal of Social Research. [Email: arne\_kalleberg@unc.edu]

Chris Warhurst is Professor of Work and Organisational Studies in the University of Sydney Business School in Australia. He is also an Associate Research Fellow of the ESRC Centre for Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance at the Universities of Oxford and Cardiff in the UK, and an International Expert advisor to the OECD's Local Economic and Employment Development programme. He has published 96 articles and book chapters and 14 books on work and employment. His latest, co-edited, book is *Are Bad Jobs Inevitable?* (Palgrave, 2012); another, *Job Quality: Perspectives, Problems and Proposals* is forthcoming (Federation Press, 2013). From 2008 to 2010 he was co-editor of the British Sociological Association journal *Work, Employment & Society*. Supported by a FAS (Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research) Visiting Professorship at the University of Lund in Sweden, he is currently developing an internationally comparative project on practice and policy underpinning job quality. [Email: chris.warhurst@sydney.edu.au]