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A glossary for the social epidemiology of work organisation: Part 3, Terms from the sociology of labour markets

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This is part 3 of a three-part glossary on the social epidemiology of work organisation. The first two parts deal with the social psychology of work and with organisations.^{1 2} This concluding part presents concepts related to labour markets. These concepts are drawn from economics, business and sociology. They relate both to traditional interests in these disciplines and to contemporary ideas on post-industrialisation and globalisation,³ particularly the growth of employment in service industries, the development of a 24-h economy, increased participation of the female labour force and the perceived needs of employers in emerging high-tech economies.^{4 5} These changes are of particular interest because they are linked to increasing inequality in earnings and changes in social relationships in employment.⁶ These concepts have the potential to elucidate the pathways through which health is affected by conditions of work as an underlying cause.^{7 8}

Contingent employment

Contingent employment refers to work with unpredictable hours or of limited duration.^{9 10} Work may be unpredictable because jobs are structured to be of short term or temporary, or because the hours vary in unpredictable ways. The US Bureau of Labour Statistics has adopted the first part of this definition, short-term or temporary work contracts, as its definition of contingent employment, and has considered the second part, unpredictably variable hours, as an alternative employment arrangement, a strategy for increasing the flexibility of work assignments.¹¹ Workers are in contingent employment when they are working on limited-duration contracts, working through temporary work agencies or on call. One form of particular interest is the development of firms specialising in the placement of temporary workers. This industry has grown dramatically in recent years and was a substantial proportion of job growth in the US in the 1990s.¹² Some self-employed workers may be considered to have contingent employment because their hours or term of work may be unpredictable. Part-time jobs are not included in this definition because they are not necessarily limited in time, nor do the hours vary. Several reasons exist for public health to be concerned with contingent employment relations.¹³ Contingent workers are often marginalised at work, they have fewer training and promotion opportunities, less predictable and lower incomes, fewer pension benefits and, in countries such as the US where health insurance is primarily derived from work, they are less likely to have health insurance.^{12 14} Also, in a variety of ways, contingent

work is less well covered by government regulations over workplace safety and social safety nets.^{10 15} Nevertheless, some workers may seek temporary work to satisfy personal needs for flexibility, and for some workers temping may provide a transition from unemployment to employment with a standard work contract, although many temporary workers would prefer more regular work schedules.^{10 12}

Downsizing^{2 16}

Informal economy

A sizeable proportion of economic activity, although one that undoubtedly varies from country to country, takes place in an informal economy. What makes these activities informal is that they are not reported to government authorities that measure and regulate the formal economy. Exchange in the informal economy is either for cash or barter, because cash and barter do not create records that can be tracked by authorities. Some activity in the informal economy may be illegal even if the income or the transactions were reported. Work in the informal economy poses considerable health risks because the working conditions are unregulated and workers do not get benefits. The informal economy undermines social welfare systems because production in the informal economy is untaxed. Synonyms for the informal economy include underground, hidden or irregular economy.¹⁷

Job security or insecurity¹⁶

Non-standard work contract

Non-standard work contract is defined relative to an employment standard. Standards are usually set nationally and define what it means to be in fulltime, year-round, permanent employment with benefits. Non-standard employment fails to meet the standards on any dimension. Examples of non-standard employment are any part-time, seasonal, home-based, contingent or informal work. Non-standard work is typically characterised by reduced job security, lower compensation and impaired work conditions.¹⁸

Occupation

The meaning of occupation is usually taken for granted, but the relevance of occupation varies from place to place. Occupation is a social role, a set of expectations with respect to the knowledge, skills and experience of workers. Occupations group skills together into sets. These sets become known to employers and workers, and serve to organise labour markets; they become, for instance, categories in job vacancy advertisements.¹⁹ They facilitate the training

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of workers by providing goals and standards for training, and expectations as to employment prospects for employers, teachers and trainees, which motivate long-term commitments to the transmission and acquisition of skills. Countries differ in the strength of occupational definitions. In the US, for instance, the boundaries of occupations are generally much more flexible and the importance of occupation in employment systems is much less than that in Germany.^{20–21} Survey respondents' occupation may be coded and the codes used to classify respondents according to occupational characteristics or exposures.²² A century ago, Durkheim²³ suggested that, as the division of labour advanced, occupational associations could become a major force in maintaining social solidarity. Recently this idea has been revisited; it has been speculated that strengthening occupational definitions and institutions might be one response to the insecurity created by trends toward precarious and contingent employment.

Precarious employment

This term has been used to signal that new work forms might reduce social security and stability for workers.^{13–24} Flexible, contingent, non-standard, temporary work contracts do not necessarily provide an inferior status as far as economic welfare is concerned. Precarious employment forms are located on a continuum, with the standard of social security provided by a standard (full-time, year-round, unlimited-duration, with benefits) employment contract at one end and a high degree of precariousness at the other. Precarious employment might also be considered to be a multidimensional construct defined according to dimensions such as temporality, powerlessness, lack of benefits and low income.^{25–26} Historically, precarious employment was once common but declined in the now-developed economies with increased government regulation and political influence of labour, and with changes in technology that favour more stable work relationships. Currently, precarious employment is becoming more common in developed economies and is widespread in developing economies.^{15–24}

Project work

Project work is a special case of temporary work where the duration is determined by the production of a specified product or service. Project work is a traditional form of work organisation in the construction industry,²⁷ and is also common in various forms of creative work.²⁸ In these industries, unions and strong systems of occupations provide an alternative to bureaucratic control. Sometimes occupational organisations provide job placement services, training, pensions and health benefits. In many situations, social networks are important because project teams are assembled on the basis of reputation and prior associations. In other industries, project work is becoming more important with the increasing use of subcontracting and outsourcing.

Unions

Unions are organisations that represent the interests of workers with employers. The size of unions and the scope of union activities vary widely across countries and have also evolved over time.^{29–30} High rates of union membership and strong unions are associated with stronger social safety nets, active state labour-market policies and greater employment protections for workers. Yet, even in countries such as the US where union membership is relatively low, unions make a positive contribution to the welfare of workers by raising wages, improving benefits, giving workers a public or political voice, educating workers, and monitoring work safety and labour relationships.³¹

Work–family conflict

Work–family conflict is a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect, causing considerable personal and organisational problems.³² Two main hypotheses regarding gender differences in domain sources conflict have been suggested: domain flexibility and domain salience. The domain flexibility hypothesis predicts that the work domain is a greater source of conflict than the family domain for both women and men. The domain salience hypothesis predicts that the family domain is a greater source of conflict for women than the work domain, and the work domain is a greater source of conflict for men than the family domain. Women may experience more role conflict as a result of simultaneity of their multiple roles.³³ Along with gender, some family domain pressures, such as the presence of young children and spouse time in paid work, and work domain pressures, such as number of hours worked per week, are associated with work–family conflict. Although the influence of multiple roles as employee, spouse and mother on women's health has been examined, results are not consistent. The contradictory findings in the role literature may be attributable to the number or the type of roles occupied, and also to the nature of particular roles. Thus, the exposures related to the job may differ by employment, social class and marital status, as well as by the family demands associated to these roles,³⁴ and the degree of control that people have to negotiate in stressful situations seems to be critical.³⁵

Work schedule

Standard work schedules are defined with reference to tradition, employment contracts, and employment laws and regulations. Although the standard work schedule might vary from country to country or place to place, standard work schedules generally prescribe Monday to Friday daytime hours for work. Shift work refers to work schedules outside the normal daytime hours, typically evening and night shifts. Some shift workers rotate shifts, cycling work times from day to evening to night and back to day. Another non-standard work schedule is weekend work, working Saturday or Sunday. Working shifts or weekends can be physiologically stressful, leading to reduced performance, injury and sleep disturbances.^{36–37} Other forms of non-standard work schedules include part-time and overtime work, and a variety of programmes under which workers are granted some control over which hours they work, including programmes for job sharing and flexible work schedules setting daily start and end times for work. The significance of non-standard and flexible work scheduling is growing; in the US in 1997 only 29% of employed people worked a standard schedule, defined as 35–40 fixed daytime hours from Monday to Friday.³ Flexible work schedules may have positive consequences for workers who can use them to accommodate work to family and social life.^{38–35}

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The labour market concepts presented in this glossary represent attempts to conceptualise terms of employment in ways that relate employment to other institutional structures that may be the subject of policy making—structures such as family, work organisation and occupation, and social safety nets. The terms of employment may influence health by determining uncertainty and stress, concepts dealt with in part I of this glossary,¹ or income and social support, which have consequences for security and general well-being.

Overall, concepts used in the social epidemiology of work organisation (parts 1–3) have been drawn from diverse disciplines. Each discipline has its own set of intellectual problems and theoretical perspectives with which to consider complex and ever-changing practical work-related hazards. In

epidemiology, researchers have pragmatically adapted the concepts and developed measures to fit the occupational health needs that they have confronted. Although this has facilitated building a body of empirical evidence, it has left the field with concepts that are sometimes difficult to integrate theoretically and with conflicting empirical findings that are sometimes difficult to reconcile. Although some problems have already received a great deal of attention, there are also significant problems that have received insufficient attention, partly because they are related to emerging changes in the economy, labour markets and work organisations, and partly because progress requires additional work developing conceptual clarity and practical measures. The establishment of a glossary that encompasses this broad interdisciplinary field of enquiry within social epidemiology is a step in this direction.

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