



# Global Concept: Work

Core Body of Knowledge for the  
Generalist OHS Professional



Safety Institute  
of Australia Ltd



Australian OHS Education  
Accreditation Board

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The Technical Panel established by the Health and Safety Professionals Alliance (HaSPA) was responsible for developing the conceptual framework of the OHS Body of Knowledge and for selecting contributing authors and peer-reviewers. The Technical Panel comprised representatives from:



**The Safety Institute of Australia** supported the development of the OHS Body of Knowledge and will be providing ongoing support for the dissemination of the OHS Body of Knowledge and for the maintenance and further development of the Body of Knowledge through the Australian OHS Education Accreditation Board which is auspiced by the Safety Institute of Australia.



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## Synopsis of the OHS Body Of Knowledge

### **Background**

A defined body of knowledge is required as a basis for professional certification and for accreditation of education programs giving entry to a profession. The lack of such a body of knowledge for OHS professionals was identified in reviews of OHS legislation and OHS education in Australia. After a 2009 scoping study, WorkSafe Victoria provided funding to support a national project to develop and implement a core body of knowledge for generalist OHS professionals in Australia.

### **Development**

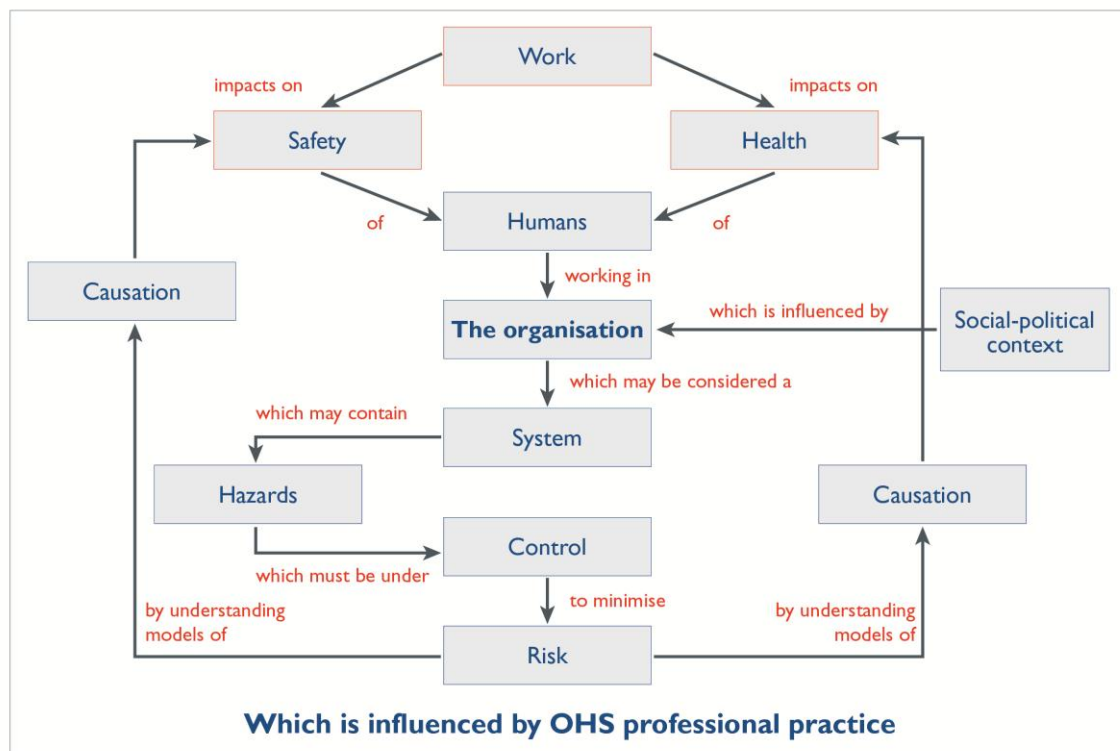
The process of developing and structuring the main content of this document was managed by a Technical Panel with representation from Victorian universities that teach OHS and from the Safety Institute of Australia, which is the main professional body for generalist OHS professionals in Australia. The Panel developed an initial conceptual framework which was then amended in accord with feedback received from OHS tertiary-level educators throughout Australia and the wider OHS profession. Specialist authors were invited to contribute chapters, which were then subjected to peer review and editing. It is anticipated that the resultant OHS Body of Knowledge will in future be regularly amended and updated as people use it and as the evidence base expands.

### **Conceptual structure**

The OHS Body of Knowledge takes a 'conceptual' approach. As concepts are abstract, the OHS professional needs to organise the concepts into a framework in order to solve a problem. The overall framework used to structure the OHS Body of Knowledge is that:

**Work** impacts on the **safety** and **health** of humans who work in **organisations**. Organisations are influenced by the **socio-political context**. Organisations may be considered a **system** which may contain **hazards** which must be under control to minimise **risk**. This can be achieved by understanding **models causation** for safety and for health which will result in improvement in the safety and health of people at work. The OHS professional applies **professional practice** to influence the organisation to being about this improvement.

This can be represented as:



### Audience

The OHS Body of Knowledge provides a basis for accreditation of OHS professional education programs and certification of individual OHS professionals. It provides guidance for OHS educators in course development, and for OHS professionals and professional bodies in developing continuing professional development activities. Also, OHS regulators, employers and recruiters may find it useful for benchmarking OHS professional practice.

### Application

Importantly, the OHS Body of Knowledge is neither a textbook nor a curriculum; rather it describes the key concepts, core theories and related evidence that should be shared by Australian generalist OHS professionals. This knowledge will be gained through a combination of education and experience.

### Accessing and using the OHS Body of Knowledge for generalist OHS professionals

The OHS Body of Knowledge is published electronically. Each chapter can be downloaded separately. However users are advised to read the Introduction, which provides background to the information in individual chapters. They should also note the copyright requirements and the disclaimer before using or acting on the information.

# Global Concept: Work

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## **Core Body of Knowledge for the Generalist OHS Professional**

# **Global Concept: Work<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

The nature of work, its technical quality, and the social relations under which work is undertaken have changed profoundly over time. So too has our understanding and thinking about work and its place within wider society. This chapter explores developments in work, working life and our changing understanding of work with a view to establishing a historical context for current thinking about safety and health at work.

### **Keywords**

work, working life, industrial revolution, division of labour, mass production, work in Australia

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## **1 Introduction**

The nature of work is deeply implicated in individual and social life, and is therefore quite a complex topic. James (1997) suggests that there are at least three ways of thinking about and therefore conceptualising work – productivist, instrumental/rational, and cultural/ontological. In productivist terms, work can be thought of as “efficient, purposive, socially useful activity... that provides or produces useful material or service for others”. In instrumental terms, work is not just about ends, but is also “an externalized, differentiated, performative ...activity” (i.e. work is about means and ends). In ontological terms, work is “practical activity undertaken for the purpose of reproducing and enhancing social life” (i.e. work is purposive and performative but is also fundamental to social and cultural being). Each of these definitions takes us in slightly different directions, and each is underpinned by a rich intellectual and political/cultural tradition that stretches back to antiquity. This chapter examines how the nature of work has changed and how this has changed wider social relations, and our understanding of these concepts of work.

## **2 Historical development of the concept of ‘work’**

The concept of work in its modern form evolved with the development of capitalism and is closely associated with paid employment. Williams (1983) explained:

The specialization of *work* to paid employment is the result of the development of capitalist productive relations. To be *in work* or *out of work* was to be in a definite relationship with some other who had control of the means of productive effort. *Work* then partly shifted from the productive effort itself to the predominant social relationship. It is only in this sense that a woman running a house and bringing up children can be said to be *not working* (p. 335).

Even though feminism made the critical point that paid labour is contingent on much unpaid labour, Williams point is that it is nevertheless implicit in contemporary understanding that a woman who runs a house and brings up children is distinguished from a woman who ‘works.’ Similarly, ‘to be in work or out of work,’ or to be ‘injured at work’ implies a particular relationship with the means of productive effort (the employer) and the means of acquisition (the wage).

### **2.1 Pre-Industrial Revolution (before 1750)**

In the pre-industrial period, there were clear social, political and economic differences between those who worked and those who did not. Ideas about universal equality and civil rights were then still marginal and yet to be translated into political form by radicals such as Thomas Paine. From the point of view of those who did not work, but who lived off the work of others, such as the aristocracy, it seemed logical and entirely natural to think about their wealth in terms of how to maintain themselves via the work of others.

This working 'other' needed to be kept quite poor, because their poverty was understood to be a disciplining force, both in terms of their claim on output and in keeping them engaged in producing that output. In other words, wealth of the few was defined in terms of the poverty of many. Writing seventy years before Malthus, the political economist, Bernard Mandeville, advocated the benefits of keeping a large population of workers not only poor, but ignorant:

From what has been said it is manifest that in a free Nation where Slaves are not allow'd of, the surest Wealth consists in a Multitude of laborious Poor; for besides that they are the never-failing Nursery of Fleets and Armies, without them there could be no Enjoyment, and no Product of any Country could be valuable. To make the Society happy and People easy under the meanest Circumstances, it is requisite that great Numbers of them should be Ignorant as well as Poor. Knowledge both enlarges and multiplies our Desires, and the fewer things a Man wishes for, the more easily his Necessities may be supplied. (Mandeville, 1733).

## 2.2 Industrial and Social Revolution (1750 – 1850)

Two developments from the mid-eighteenth century presented a challenge to this existing state of society - one political and the other economic. The political challenge to European society came from political revolutions in France and America. These revolutions gave voice to the idea not just of a better and more egalitarian society as a possibility sometime in the future, but one that could be experienced/struggled for in the present. These upheavals also provoked a radical restatement of conservative views, especially from writers like Thomas Malthus and Edmund Burke. Malthus is usually remembered as a population theorist/futurist, with the notion that unchecked, the human population will grow more rapidly than can be supported (geometric population growth versus linear growth in food and shelter). But Malthus major work (*An Essay on the Principle of Population*, 1798) was really contemporary social theory. Though couched in the language of natural law, he sought to deny the utopian and radical ideas that the lower classes can be made to live better and more equally, and share in the government of society. Instead Malthus argued that attempts to do so (such as charity, the poor laws and political emancipation) would be self-defeating (Lohmann, 2003).

The second and related development was economic and involved a revolution in the productive power of society, based on new ways of working, and the emergence of new types of (industrial) workers. Ideas about work and its relationship to wealth changed radically with the beginnings of industrial society. The publication of economist Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776 (the same year as the US Declaration of Independence) marked the beginning of the end of the dominance of mercantilism in economic ideology. In *the Wealth of Nations* Smith dramatically re-conceptualised work and wealth:

"The greatest improvement in the productive powers of labour, and the greater part of the skill, dexterity, and judgment with which it is anywhere directed, or applied, seem to have been the effects of the division of labour...It is the great multiplication of the productions of all the different arts, in consequence of the division of labour, which occasions, in a well-governed society, that universal opulence which extends itself to the lowest ranks of the people."

The industrial revolution is associated with both a spectacular growth in output as a result of new industries and technologies, and enormous difficulties faced by the emerging urban labour force at work and in their working lives. Much of the work undertaken in workshops and factories was arduous and dangerous (Steams, 2007; Hopkins 1982). The poet, William Blake, famously referred to these new factories as “dark satanic mills” (*Preface to Milton a Poem*, 1804). Standards of accommodation, food, hygiene and health care in the industrial cities were also often grossly inadequate, and caused human misery and death that threatened to undermine the new industrial system. Conditions in Manchester, the contemporary heart of the Industrial Revolution, were documented by Frederick Engels (*The Condition of the Working Class in England*, 1844) and others. Later, in the United States, writers such as Alice Hamilton (who held the first chair in Occupational Health and Safety at Harvard University, and whose pioneering work is recounted in her memoirs *Exploring the Dangerous Trades*, 1943) and Upton Sinclair (*The Jungle*, 1906) provided accounts of working conditions in the factories in the United States that scandalised society, and helped to give impetus to the first occupational health and safety legislation in that country.

In England, a series of Factory Acts introduced in the early-to-mid 1800s, transformed the government’s role in work by regulating who could work in factories (limiting child labour), and in establishing minimum working conditions (with reference to, for example, air quality and use of toxic chemicals) and maximum working hours (Bloy, 2011; Gray, 1987). In addition to the growing regulation of workplaces and fledgling industrial relations efforts, the origin of sociology, as August Comte termed this new disciplinary area, lay very much in meeting the new challenges of reconciling the productive and destructive forces being unleashed by this emerging industrial order. As Cowen and Shenton (1997) note, while the question of social order in itself was not new, the industrial revolution changed the nature of work, and working life and as such presented a challenge to social order. Sociology began as a way of providing positive laws of knowledge to this problem of order. Most of the greatest sociologists from then on, including Emile Durkheim,<sup>2</sup> Max Weber<sup>3</sup>, and Talcott Parsons<sup>4</sup>, have tackled aspects of the social nature of work and working life, (or in the case of Veblen<sup>5</sup> in the experience of those who live off the labour of others).

Some of the ongoing consequences of industrial life will be discussed shortly, but one way of setting that dynamic of the creative and destructive forces in motion is to think about different phases in the nature of work and working life since the industrial revolution, and in our understanding of those developments.

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<sup>2</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, 1893

<sup>3</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the “Spirit” of Capitalism*, 1905

<sup>4</sup> Talcott Parsons, *The Social System and Toward a General Theory of Action*, 1951

<sup>5</sup> Thorstein Veblen *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 1899

## 2.3 Post-Industrial Revolution (after 1850)

Adam Smith's prediction that an expanded division of labour would produce unimaginable wealth came to fruition as workplaces assembled larger and larger numbers of workers in the same locations, and mechanisation was generalised from steam to electrification and from canal to railway and steamship. However, specialisation in production required many workers to repeatedly perform a single activity and often under conditions of repressive managerial control; and this presented obvious issues related to the immediate physical effects of the work, and less obvious individual and social effects of the labour activity itself and the terms under which it was performed.

One response was the development of forms of organised labour both at the site of production through trades unions, and politically through nascent political organisations, which organised and articulated the experiences and aspirations of workers (see for instance Hobsbawm, 1964; Fitzpatrick, 1940; Thompson, 1966; Geary, 1981; Katznelson & Zolberg, 1986)

Another response to the problem of improving productivity while mediating industrial unrest involved a focus on efficiency by an emerging technical and managerial stratum. For example, the Gilbreths sought the most efficient bricklaying techniques (Gilbreth, 1909; Gilbreth & Gilbreth, 1917). In the steel industry, Fredrich Winslow Taylor (1911) proposed 'scientific management' innovations that included a study of the coal shoveller to identify both optimum shovel load, the best type of person best suited to the task, and the system of reward that maximised output. The promise here was 'scientific' determination of techniques and systems of remuneration (especially piece rates) that both produced more output, and permitted or promised a sharing of those gains. However as Meiksins (1984) has argued, however while Taylorism as a technique promised a more systematic and calculative approach to production, it was in many ways an articulation of the changing position of the engineer and professional manager inside large corporate enterprises, rather than of the (capitalist) owners. Taylorism was in part therefore an attempt to (re-)establish the control of planning and decision making back into the factory by engineers and managers within the changing social organisation of production.

### 2.3.1 Mass production and consumption – the living wage

In the end, however, it was a radical restructuring of production by capital rather than a professional project of technical refinement by engineers that ushered in the next phase of industrial society. Henry Ford applied standardisation and a process technology approach to production that was pioneered in meatpacking to the systematic assembly of motor vehicles. Instead of craftsmen building whole cars, Ford's Highland Park factory in Michigan featured assembly lines that enabled semi-skilled workers to contribute one or a few tasks to a collective labour process where the rhythm and pace of work was regulated by the line (Lazonick, 1991, Williams et.al., 1994). In return for this transformed (and more

monotonous) nature of work, Ford paid his (male) workers \$5 a day, which was at least double the 'going wage' at the time (Lewchuk, 1993). This ushered in the notion of a 'living wage', mass consumption, and the conception of workers as consumers as well as producers (May 1982). Ford famously commented that he wanted to pay his workers enough so they could afford to buy his cars. In his memoirs he recounted that, "I believe in the first place that, all other considerations aside, our own sales depend in a measure upon the wages we pay" (Ford, 1922).

Ford's development of mass production (and of the expanding notion of the worker as producer and consumer) found its economic counterpart in the writings of John Maynard Keynes, whose approach to economic analysis focused not on individuals per se, but on (national) society as a whole. For Keynes, the 'economy' required both production and consumption if stability and growth was to be sustained. Kay and Mott (2004) observed: "Keynes's theory of wages laid greater stress upon the wage as an element in the circulation of capital than traditional neo-classical theory, which took wages one-sidedly as a cost of production." The accumulation of capital requires not only a demand for goods produced but effective demand, i.e. demand backed by the capacity to pay for the goods and services. Fordism and Keynesianism became not just a way of understanding 20th century industrial society; they articulated a project for managing its tensions in the factory, and in society/economy. In 1929 in *Selling Mrs Consumer*, Christine Frederick declared:

Consumptionism is the name given to the new doctrine; and it is admitted to be the greatest idea that America has to give to the world; the idea that workmen and masses be looked upon not simply as workers and producers, but as consumers... Pay them more, sell them more, prosper more is the equation" (Frederick as cited in Rutherford, 2003).

However, the projects of both Ford and Keynes did not play out as harmoniously as envisaged. Ford's use of hired thugs and underworld figures to block union organising initiatives and his fascination with Nazi Germany indicated that there were definite limits to his pioneering approach (Frost, 2000). While Ford did much to revolutionise production and consumption, in many ways he displayed the despotic approach to management that predated the industrial revolution. For Keynes, the promise of managing economic growth for all (a rising tide lifts all boats) and dampening volatility worked surprisingly well for a time. However, as bouts of recession and unemployment returned in the 1970s, the promise of managing economic activity in ways that permitted both growing wages and high profits (balancing what Keynes said was 'fair' and 'reasonable' between the classes) was challenged, and eventually governments revisited the harsher framing of policymaking that Keynes (1925) had criticised as submission of government to the 'economic juggernaut'.

### 2.3.2 Evolution of management

As firms grew in size and technical complexity, more and more people became employed in managerial roles. This presented new challenges for work. In the early phase of

industrialisation, the business owner was typically also the manager; consequently, both owner and manager were motivated by profit maximisation. With the proliferation of joint-stock companies and complex corporate organisation, owners of firms had to employ people to manage on their behalf. While specialist managers offered the prospect of technically superior supervisory skills, the question was how to reconcile their interests as salaried employees with those of the owners - a phenomenon known as the 'agency problem' (Fama 1980, Fama and Jensen, 1983). It is now understood that having a managerial agent acting on behalf of owners of a firm presents a dilemma because there is an inherent conflict of interest between being an employee (with an interest in maximising one's salary) and acting on behalf of the owner (whose interest is in maximising profits). Resolving this dilemma became the province of management training, which rapidly expanded as a field of study, and the development of management compensation systems which attempt to align the incentives of managers with owners.

### 2.3.2 The rise of the 'welfare state'

With the growth of national income, the growing organisation of labour in production, and the extension of electoral franchise to working people, governments had to contend with labour inside the state as subjects, rather just as objects of administration (Kay and Mott, 1982). The growth of branches of the state in improving working and living conditions in housing, education, health and welfare and a greater universality in the terms of public services followed (Dickey 1981). Australia's 'welfare state' took, however, a rather different path from the British and that taken by other nations of northern Europe, which were devoted primarily to the development of the social wage (i.e. social policy delivered by state expenditures and activity) (Harris & McDonald, 2000). Different policy instruments and levers were used in Australia, where the path was directed more towards securing acceptable conditions of work and wage levels; though effectively only for male workers (Castles as cited in Watts, 1997, p. 1).

As arbitration, better regulation of health and safety, and general improvements in the standard of living were associated with the post-World War II period in Australia, the state also began to absorb many other life-course risks. Generally, this is associated with what is called the 'welfare state' and what were then increasingly thought to be the expanding rights of citizenship. Frank Castle's astute observation characterised this as welfare associated with work or in his terms 'a wage-earners welfare state' (Watts, 1997, p. 3). As Castles notes what differentiates Australia's social policy:

...from early on this century through at least until the early 1970s has been the fact that, in general, the institutional arrangements ...used for the achievement of social policy objectives have been found not so much in the functionally differentiated realm of social service provision, but rather in the domain of mainstream economic policy-making, and most particularly, in the realm of wages policy. The development of what is now often characterised as the 'wage earners' welfare state' ... has rested on three aspects of Antipodean economic policy development... These three aspects were the attempted control of wages through the quasi-judicial activity of the state (the arbitration system), the substantial



use of protective tariffs to bolster wage levels in manufacturing, urban service industries and fringe rural production (which became 'protection all around'), and a strong concern with the regulation of manpower through controlled migration with the aim of maintaining the bargaining power of labour (the non-racist side of the White Australia policy and subsequent migration policy).

The simplest way of locating the essential difference between Australia and most other nations is to say that, in Australia, wages policy, in large part, substituted for social policy, with the functional identity between the two being denoted by the peculiar... wage-setting mechanisms or such concepts as the 'fair wage', the 'living wage' and a 'basic' or minimum wage set according to the Harvester criterion of 'the normal needs of the average employee regarded as a human being living in a civilised community' (Castles, 1994 pp123-124).

In more recent times, and since the collapse of Keynesian post-war consensus, the more general nature of rights associated with the welfare state (such as free education and health care) have been gradually eroded or withdrawn, and the link between work (or activity associated with looking for work) and government benefits has been drawn increasingly tightly. In the process, many life course risks in the labour market and in social policy are being shifted back to labour and households (Hacker, 2007; Rafferty and Yu, 2010).

### 2.3.3 The Study of Work - Labour Process Research

The changing nature of work ushered in by the industrialisation of production (Taylorism, Fordism and mass production more generally) became a field of inquiry in its own right, studied under the rubric of 'industrial' sociology, and what became known as labour process theory – an inquiry focusing on issues of power and momentums of skill in the workplace. The seminal study in this field here is Harry Braverman, whose writing on managerial control and labour resistance (notably his *Labor and Monopoly Capital*) at the workplace spurred a generation of industrial sociologists to take the history and sociology of work seriously again (see Braverman, 1974; for retrospective reviews see Meiksins, 1994, Thompson and Smith 2000/01). Among other things labour process research has established that the dynamics of management-labour relation are complex and contested (Edwards, 1979), managerial control is implicated in the dynamics of technological change (Child, 1985), and that management requires the active production of consent (Burawoy, 1979; 1985).

## **3 Factors shaping work in Australia**

Having discussed the historical developments in work and in concepts of work, the next section considers the impact of recent factors shaping work in contemporary Australia. This includes the increased paid employment of women, the decline in the 'standard' working week, changes to the determination of pay and conditions and the re-emergence of the 'working poor'.

### **3.1 Increased paid employment of women**

One of the great social transformations during World War II, and after a brief impasse afterwards, was the increasing participation rate of women in paid work; this enlarged the pool of available workers and re-shaped the nature of work itself. Since the mid-1960s, the

concentration of employment in the services sector has increased substantially. By May 2011, employment in retail, accommodation and food services, and health and community services accounted for 11 per cent, 9 per cent and 11 per cent respectively (ABS, 2011, June 16). Not only do these three service industries now account for almost one third of total employment, they are the areas of the Australian economy where jobs growth is strong. For example, in the twelve months to February 2011, the largest increase in employment occurred in health care and social assistance (up 98,700), retail trade (up 52,400), accommodation and food services (up 35,000) and administrative and support services (up 32,100) (DEEWR, 2011). In contrast, there has been a decline in the share of the traditionally male-dominated areas of employment such as Agriculture, Mining and Manufacturing. For example, in May 2011, these three industries accounted for 3 per cent, 2 per cent and 9 per cent respectively (ABS 2011, June 16).

Significantly, the increased participation of women in paid employment and higher education has not eliminated gender segregation in work and pay. For example, using 2006 ABS Employee Earnings and Hours (EEH) Survey data, Austin et al., found that, on average, women earn 90 per cent of the hourly ordinary-time cash earnings of men (the raw gender pay gap). Most of the low-paid industries recorded wage gaps that were greater than this (Austin et al., 2008 p.19). One factor influencing this may be the greater availability of part-time work in certain industries and occupations. Industries employing a large proportion of women include health care and social assistance, education and training, accommodation and food services, and retail trade. The latter two industries are among the lowest paid (Austin, et al, 2008:11-18). One of the largest industry gender pay gaps is evident in health care and social assistance (where nearly 20% of working women are employed), while the finance sector, another large employer of women, has the largest industry gender pay gap (Austin et al., 2008 p.20).

### **3.2 Fragmentation of work**

The changed composition of the workforce and the growth of jobs in the service sector have been associated with an increase in the incidence of 'non-standard' employment arrangements, such as part-time and casual work, with the majority of these 'non-standard' jobs filled by women (ABS, 2009, June 30). In November 2010, almost 2.2 million workers (about 20%) had no paid leave entitlements (ABS, 2011, April 29). Among part-time employees, less than half (45%) of them were entitled to paid leave (ABS, 2010, May 21). Short-term contracts, outsourcing, labour hire and independent contracting are all symptoms of the growing 'precariousness' of work. In November 2010, for example, 1.1 million people in the labour force were independent contractors in their main job, representing 9.8 per cent of all employed persons (ABS, 2011, April 29).

### 3.3 Demise of the 'standard working week'

Growth in insecure or precarious forms of employment has been compounded by changes in working time arrangements. The 'standard working week', that is full-time hours undertaken on weekdays, is no longer a reality for about two-thirds of workers in Australia; many are working high numbers of (often unpaid) hours, while others do not have enough work (ABS, 2010). Furthermore, despite considerable national discourse about the need for greater workplace flexibility, in November 2009 more than half (58%) of employees in Australia did not have a say in their start and finish times (ABS, 2010, May 21). These data from the ABS and recent findings from the AWALI study suggest that many workplaces lack real worker-friendly flexibility (AWALI, 2010 p.14).

The negative impacts of long working hours are exacerbated by increases in the time spent getting to and from work. With more than 10% of parents in paid employment spending more time commuting than with their children, family life and interpersonal relationships are under considerable pressure (Flood & Barbato, 2005).

For many workers, technology such as laptops, the Internet, mobile phones and iPhones/Blackberrys has led to the expectation that they will be available outside normal working hours. This blurs the boundaries between work and life outside work. Increasingly, many workers associate being available as part of what is expected for career advancement. Research undertaken in the US found that "Employees seem to be responding to company expectations by using this technology to work longer hours" (Fenner and Renn, 2010, p. 64).

### 3.4 Determination of pay and conditions

Also shaping the nature of work in Australia are changes in the way wages and working conditions are determined. According to Stewart (2011):

For most of the 20th century, the overwhelming majority of Australian workers were employees whose wages and working conditions were regulated by awards. Those awards generally standardised conditions across particular industries or occupations.

However, changes in recent decades have included the introduction of enterprise-based bargaining to replace awards, the reduction of the award system to a 'safety net' and an increase in the number of workers who are not covered by industrial arrangements, such as contractors (Stewart 2011). Another significant change is a "trend in the past 30 years [of] people doing the same job but on different employment contracts, hence a separation of work relations and employment relations" (Smith, 2010, p. 277).

With the decentralising and individualisation of negotiations, traditionally vulnerable groups in the labour market such as females, young workers and those from culturally diverse backgrounds are less likely to be able to bargain for better pay or working conditions.

#### **4 Re-emergence of the ‘working poor’**

The proliferation of insecure and poorly paid work has broken the earlier nexus between paid work and escaping poverty. As a result, we have seen the re-emergence of a phenomenon that was thought to be a relic of an earlier era – the ‘working poor’. Journalist Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) carried out a first-hand investigation of America’s working poor by undertaking employment as a waitress, hotel maid, house cleaner, nursing home aide and Wal-Mart salesperson. She discovered that not only were these occupations mentally and physically exhausting, but the pay from any one of these jobs was not enough to live on (Ehrenreich, 2001).

At the other end of the spectrum, there has been a spectacular increase in the salaries of senior executives. In 2010, the ACTU reported that the average total remuneration for a chief executive of a top 50 company listed on the Australian Securities Exchange was \$6.4 million – almost 100 times that of the average wage (ACTU, 2010). Of relevance here is Pocock, Skinner and Pisaniello’s (2010) finding that “there has been a redistribution of GDP from wages to profits: the profit share of GDP is now at record levels in Australia.” Rafferty and Yu (2010) explained:

Despite strong labour productivity gains since the 1980s, returns to labour, as measured by real wages growth, have lagged significantly... Conversely, the returns to capital have grown markedly over time. Profit share expressed as a proportion of national income has grown from less than 35% to almost 45% since the 1970s (p. 37).

As Pocock et al. (2010) conclude, “while many households are giving more to paid work they are taking home a declining share of its reward.”

#### **5 Work and health**

As indicated in section 2, an important outcome of industrialisation was the introduction of OHS laws and regulations. While the increasing regulation of workplace safety has resulted in a significant – and welcome – decrease in the number of work-related fatalities and serious injuries, many workers continue to face significant risks in the daily performance of their jobs. In 2006-07, there were more than 134,000 workers’ compensation claims for serious work-related injuries or illnesses (this includes death, permanent incapacity or temporary incapacity requiring an absence from work for one working week or more); this equates to an incidence rate of 14.1 serious claims per 1,000 employees (Safe Work Australia, 2010). Of relevance is Safe Work Australia’s (2009) observation that:

Both international and Australian studies suggest that work-related injury and illness outcomes are worse for precarious workers and that these workers are less likely to claim workers’ compensation for their injuries than other employees. (p. 1).

In a fascinating history of construction workers in Australia, Humphrey McQueen (2009) probed an inherent contradiction in much discussion about OHS at work; that is, many commentators are critical of various aspects of OHS law or practice, but few make the connection between people killed and injured for profit (that is in paid work) and people killed in civil society by, for example, a reckless driver or a crime of so-called passion. While OHS violations may involve injury or death, they are still rarely treated as real crimes or given the level of media or state attention that, say, drink driving or a random murder receives (McQueen, 2009).

Generally, it is understood that the experience of work, especially low-paid work, can affect workers' physical and mental health and wellbeing<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, "poor work-life outcomes also show a clear relationship to (self-reported) physical, mental and social well-being" (Pocock, Skinner & Williams, 2007, p. 4). In addition, Pocock et al. (2007) found "work-to-life spillover" to be greater for employees in "poorer quality jobs" (i.e. positions with low job security, work overload, low time and task autonomy, lack of flexibility of working time and low job satisfaction) (Pocock et al., 2007, p. 2). A recent study using Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey data (Butterworth et al., 2011, p. 1) found that "those in optimal jobs had better mental health than those in poorer quality jobs." There is now widespread acknowledgement that decent, secure and interesting paid work is linked with many potential health benefits. However, precarious and fragmented work has a greater potential to be dangerous, stressful and alienating, and, as pointed out by Butterworth et al. (2011, p. 1), "gaining employment may not necessarily lead to improvement in mental health and well-being if psychosocial job quality is not considered."

Significantly, inequality has been re-discovered by health sciences as a key factor in life course health. Identification of work as one of the key sources of inequality, especially following the work of Michael Marmot and others in the famous Whitehall studies of British civil servants (Marmot et al. 1991)) reinforces Sennet & Cobb's (1972) notion that social divisions created or sustained through work are responsible for both hidden and visible injuries. For instance, the World Health Organisation Commission on Social Determinants of Health (CSDH, 2008) noted:

...there are dramatic differences in health that are closely linked with degrees of social disadvantage. Differences of this magnitude, within and between countries, simply should never happen. These inequities in health, avoidable health inequalities, arise because of the circumstances in which people grow, live, work, and age, and the systems put in place to deal with illness...The development of a society, rich or poor, can be judged by the quality of its population's health, how fairly health is distributed across the social spectrum, and the degree of protection provided from disadvantage as a result of ill-health.

Rose (2005) made the following observation about low-paid work in the US:

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<sup>6</sup> See BoK: Global concept: Health

And although physical work is safer overall and more protected than in my grandfather's day, certain jobs remain very dangerous – witness the meatpacking industry – and all are driven by intense schedules. Hiring, firing, and advancement are, in some settings, less capricious than they were at mid-century, but blue-collar and service workers still live in uncertainty and live, as well, with the occupational and social assaults on dignity that Sennett and Cobb so aptly call the hidden injuries of class (Rose, 2005, p. 197).

Research and statistics on work-related injuries and illnesses indicate that there have been some significant improvements in aspects of workplace safety and health although much remains to be done on existing and emergent risks to make workplaces safe. It is also clear that the quality of the experience of paid work itself (in terms of control, autonomy, job monotony and satisfaction) can have a profound impact on worker health.

## **6 Summary**

Work has played and continues to play a central role in the broader social relations of society. An individual's experience of work (or lack of work), how and how much they are paid for that work impacts on and indeed structures social relations, life course financial well-being and health. Further, risks and tensions associated with work are long-lasting and can re-emerge in similar forms, despite very different circumstances.

To return to the opening discussion of the concept of work, it is useful to think broadly about work, it is a purposive activity, but not only that, it is also about producing something that fulfills a need, but it is more than that too. Work is and continues to be a defining characteristic of our social and cultural order. It is through understanding the interaction between the nature of paid employment, of the ongoing pressures and antagonisms of relations that these create and maintain, that we can see the context for health and safety both as a profession and as a key factor in determining and resulting from the way we work and the way work affects us.

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