



# **Gender and the Meaning of Work: A Critical Approach to Career Orientation based on the Cases of Women Working at the Megalopolis Mines at the Factory of the Hellenic Public Power Corporation (DEI)**

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## **Author's contribution**

*The sole author designed, analyzed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

The present article examines the meaning of work in relation to gender. For this purpose, it initially proceeds to a brief overview of important sociological studies on the question of the meaning of work, having Goldthorpe and Lockwood's work orientation theory at their core. The text then proceeds to the critical examination of this theory, based on interviews of women engaged in various occupations at the Hellenic Public Power Corporation mines at the Factory of Megalopolis.

**Keywords:** *Gender; work orientation; social division of labor; sociology; industrial sociology.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

In periods of Crisis, we encounter a reinforcement of gender stereotypes, social and race discrimination, inequality, the exploitation of individuals, their dependence on the economy and the state and gender and class-based

conflicts [1-5]. At the same time, social mobility is dramatically limited.

The meaning of work, meaning the way in which men conceive and understand their life, constitutes a very important instrument of interpretation in sociology. This happens

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because the examination of the meaning of work leads to the revelation of the ways, meaning the procedures of the legalization of the ethics of capitalist work, in other words the physicalization of gender stereotypes and roles, as well as class and class discrimination – based on the profession and the hierarchy inherent in it – and the social prestige which derives from work, which also determines the way in which people interiorize the restrictions imposed by social mobility.

Studying the meaning of work sheds light upon the way in which people accept the social division of labor based on the reproduction of gender stereotypes, racial and class discrimination, the relations and the commitments of a feudal type – which seemingly constitute a paradox within the capitalist spirit of work, without, however, being one – the physicalization of the reproduction of social inequalities and the legalization of the existing and the emerging status quo.

## **2. SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACHES CONCERNING THE MEANING OF WORK**

The meaning of work is not something merely constructed through somebody's incorporation into a profession or his insertion in a workplace. The meaning of work is created both before the individuals enter an occupation and after they have entered. It is always a process in evolution.

Before their integration into the labor market, people gradually shape within them the meaning of work through their family, the social groups where their ideas are formed (school, university, neighborhood, friends) the media and the mechanisms of knowledge and information. Which occupation is worthy? Which one is not? Which occupation suits my own desires? Which occupation will please my family and my social milieu? Which occupation do I deserve, according to what I want to achieve? What are the limits of my demands regarding an employment? How do I behave towards my employer, my superiors at work, my colleagues? All these and more of the same kind constitute questions which a person is prepared to form opinions about before he is integrated into the labor market. After he has become a part of the labor market, the opinions he has already consolidated form, in a very dynamic way, the meaning one gives to his own work, yet this meaning is gradually transformed following the

norms inherent in the job itself. The social interaction with the employers, the superiors at work and the colleagues and the social prestige accorded to somebody because of his work from his social milieu (family, friends, neighborhood, colleagues) form a new meaning of work. This meaning also differs enough according to one's occupation, that is his profession, his position in the hierarchy and the restrictions imposed upon him by the stereotypes and the roles based on his gender and his social origins.

For example, Beynon and Blackburn [6] explain that work is a social space which is able to create new needs, new meanings and new conceptions, while Baldamus [7] underlines the importance of the meaning of work in relation to the legalization of hierarchy inside an organization. Both these studies concentrate upon the meaning of work which is shaped in the working space. Dennis [8], on the other hand, in his study concerning the Yorkshire miners, emphasizes upon the strong link which seems to exist between, on the one hand, professional stratification and professional career and, on the other, cultural categorizations, perspectives and life habits which are present in the lives of people in a local community, in other words outside work. He, therefore, concentrates on the formation of meaning mainly outside work and, especially, outside the factory. Brown [9], studying the workers of the Tunisian ship repair company, converges with Baldamus, Beynon and Blackburn, as well as with Dennis, ascertaining that all three of these studies are valid: The meaning of work is simultaneously created both within and outside the working space. Brown, however, contributes with his remark that the meaning attributed by people to their work is diversified according to their position in the hierarchy. This remark brings back to the foreground Goldthrope and Lockwood.

Goldthrope and Lockwood [10] introduce the term "work orientation" as an interpretative tool in order to understand the meaning of work. They explain that the meaning of work is produced by social prestige, motivations and the social behavior they produce, as well as by the social relationships they form and the expectations they have or they acquire, depending on the kind of work they do and, above all, on the status of this occupation in the hierarchy.

In the research they conducted in the Sixties on British Car Industry workers, published under the title «The Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour» (1968), they propose four

categories of distinction of work orientation, which are diversified according to the basic meaning of the occupation, the position of the worker inside the employers' mechanism, as well as the meaning the worker gives to his life within and outside his work. These four potential orientations are:

- a) instrumental
- b) bureaucratic
- c) solidary
- d) higher professional

According to the researchers, instrumental orientation mainly occurs in manual professions, while the other three in non-manual.

In instrumental orientation the occupation is not connected to any meaning, except the medium by which tasks lying outside of it may be achieved. The relation of the worker with the organization is considered as totally calculative, with no particular personal involvement in the production process, while employment and no employment lie in absolutely distinct spheres of everyday life. Instrumental orientation is where we meet more what Taylor [11] calls the meaning of life outside of the factory.

In bureaucratic orientation, a pronounced sense of duty and ascending career felt by the worker are noticed, as, in this case, the meaning of work lies in the promised career and is expressed with docility, consent to power, hierarchy and rules. The prestige of the work position, here, works as a source of social identity, which is transferred by the employee outside his employment, too. The meaning of work in this kind of orientation functions through the creation of motivations constructed by the feeling of ascension, something that brings to surface the meaning of motivations and interest which Weber [11] and Parsons [12] point out.

The solidary orientation, constituting a reinforced development of the bureaucratic one, is characterized by the worker's feeling of devotion to the organization – either the colleagues or the management – with strong social relations within the working environment, which transform the realm of the daily life, making the two almost indistinct. On this scale the meaning of work is reinforced by the perception of “belonging” which the worker holds for the company – a perception acquired through his position inside the echelon, which offers an identification with the

organization. The high levels of trust the employee senses on behalf of the employer are exchanged with his constant daily eagerness for the self-willed compliance to the organization's demands. The meaning of work here is shaped through the reference groups, meaning the employee answers the question “what do I have to do in order to be considered one of them?” and through the significant others, meaning the employee answers the question “what do I have to do in order to look worthy in their eyes”?

Finally, the higher professional orientation, concerning the higher echelons, confers to the meaning of work an expressive quality, considering it as a goal and not as a medium, as the working process is here understood by the worker as an experience full of challenges leading to his personal evolution and completion. The meaning of work becomes here the meaning of life.

### **3. GENDER AND THE MEANING OF WORK: THE EXAMPLE OF THE HELLENIC PUBLIC POWER CORPORATION FACTORY IN MEGALOPOLIS**

Katerina is a heavy equipment operator. Maria is a nurse. Phaedra is a social worker. All three of them have been working for more than fifteen years at the Mines of the Hellenic Public Power Corporation Factory in Megalopolis. Their occupations and the rank of their occupations in the Factory's hierarchy correspond to different types of career orientation – according to the Goldthorpe and Lockwood scale – and, therefore, to different types of meaning of work. Our objective is to see whether this is confirmed – or not – by the field research and the in-depth interviews, with the addition of the question on gender.

#### **3.1 Katerina / Heavy Equipment Operator**

We expect that for Katerina, who is a heavy equipment operator working at a low level of the factory's hierarchy, her occupation would not have any special meaning, except the one of a medium, enabling her to fulfill goals she has set outside her work. We expect that her relation as an employee with the organization should be a purely calculative one, with no personal involvement in the production process, while work and no work should constitute quite separate spheres of her daily life.

Instead, we notice in her words a strong divergence from theory. Katerina considers her occupation as something very important to her as well as the rest of the society. She believes that what she does is an offer and, therefore, she feels very useful exercising this particular occupation. The factor corroborating this is her gender, which has offered her a supplementary motivation to realize the meaning of her work, as, for about two decades, she has strived to prove she deserves to play an equal part in a totally male-dominated environment (two women operators/thirty-six men operators). For Katerina, work and no work are not, as we would expect from a manual occupation, two separate environments. The nature of her work and her alternating work hours are such, that all her life outside the factory is a period of preparation in order to cope with the work. Gender is, again, very important, as Katerina, after she has finished work, returns home to have some rest, while men usually go to the café. Moreover, Katerina cannot have any social life, as her colleagues do, and she is afraid that this prevents her from having a family. Furthermore, as opposed to the claims of instrumental orientation, Katerina has managed to follow a low prestige career in manual occupation and yet, as she cites, while at the beginning she was taking no decisions, she now does. Finally, she complains that, although she has dedicated herself to that occupation for eighteen years, with all the supplementary sacrifices she had to make due to the fact that she is a woman, her career did not result in the professional permanence she aspired to.

What follows here is an excerpt from her interview.

**What is for you the meaning of work?**

*Life, creation.*

**How useful do you believe your work for the Hellenic Public Power Corporation is;**

*I believe I am in the vanguard of the Corporation; it is lignite mining we are talking about. We heavy equipment operators are considered the first line of production. It is the mining of lignite, the raw material.*

**How important is the existence of the Hellenic Public Power Corporation for the country?**

*Very important.*

**What makes you feel the greatest satisfaction during your work?**

*It is a work demanding dynamism and strength in order to be carried out. This makes me happy. The fact that I am able to do it.*

**Is there something that pleases you during your work?**

*The fact that I am in the vanguard. When I was starting out, I felt an even greater commitment, because I had the privilege of being the unique woman operator, I felt this as a challenge, I liked it, although, of course, I had many things to prove, because I was a woman. When I entered the job, I believed all of them were misogynists. It is a kind of race.*

**Are there any other female operators in the Organization?**

*Yes, there is one more girl.*

**What is the most tiring thing in your work?**

*The working conditions. They are terribly adverse. Weather conditions can make the situation even worse. Work shifts are also very fastidious because you have to work in the morning the first week and in the afternoon the next, they are called "the prisons". Working week after week following a different schedule for two or three decades is fastidious. First of all, such a schedule prohibits any social life, you cannot attend a wedding, a christening, or any other social event. I know I will never get married. How can I find the groom with such work shifts? Work shifts destroy our biological clock. It is a disaster. Here you will meet people who, since their young age, work for 25-30 years following these shifts. It is a disaster for both their bodies and their souls. Work shifts are also very tiring because you have to be extremely vigilant at work. To remain concentrated despite this exhaustion of your body and soul. You must remain vigilant because your security and the security of others are at stake, you must watch your steps, not stay up late at night, not drink alcohol or have too much to eat, always be capable, stand firmly on your own two feet and be on hand. Generally speaking, to be well rested and prepared for the rest of the*

day, in order to enter the factory and cope with the work. This is why we are a mini state in here. Your work is your whole life. You come, you work, you go, you sleep, you wake up, you come, you work, you go, you sleep, you wake up, you come etc.

**Where do you usually go after work?**

*I go to my base, I go home, and I try, because of the existing conditions, to do something quite different, in order to change the scenery, because here, in Megalopolis, our problem is not only our work at the factory, we suffer from this disgusting pollution, you see I am native of this town, I do not come from any other. This smell follows us even when we leave work. To our house; during our sleep.*

**Do your colleagues influence the way you think and live?**

*Yes, years ago, when I was younger and more vulnerable. Not now. They cannot influence me anymore now, because I can be the judge of myself. If somebody tells me to go straight ahead with my machine and I think this is dangerous, I will not obey him, I will express my opinion.*

**Do you think your dreams have been satisfied with your work?**

*Not at all. I feel quite disappointed, because I have sacrificed many things as a woman, I have made terrible sacrifices, even concerning my diet. I even have problems with using the lavatory because of the conditions, you see there are no lavatories. A man can find other solutions. At night I did not drink coffee because I could not leave the machine and go to the lavatory. No, I have made terrible sacrifices with no result. I am eighteen years here, facing eternal renewals of eight-month contracts and moreover with rotating shift and I have not been given professional permanence. I must admit I am very sad and very disappointed.*

**3.2 Maria / Nurse**

Maria is employed as a nurse at the Megalopolis mines. Because of her occupation, the meaning she gives her work must be part of bureaucratic orientation. We therefore expect that she is inspired by a considerable sense of duty and

career, expressed by her docility and her consent to power, hierarchy and rules aiming at her professional advancement. We expect that her motivations are mainly connected to this sense of advancement. Finally, we expect that the prestige of her work functions as a source of social identity in her life outside of her work.

We, however, notice, based on what she says, that although she is indeed inspired by a very strong sense of duty and at the same time expresses a pronounced docility and consent to power and the formal and informal rules – also offering services that go beyond her specialization and being a person eager to offer and to assist – this is not connected with a will of advancement. She knows and expresses very clearly that she has no hopes of advancement. Her gender and the gender stereotype of her occupation seem to play a far more important role.

Maria seems to have interiorized and accepted the submissive role of the stereotype connected with her gender and the gender stereotype connected with her occupation. The two environments of her life contribute to this. Her professional environment has a purely gender-specific character: she always says “she” when referring to a colleague, a nurse, a doctor – in Greek “i sinadelfos”, “i nosileftria”, “i yatros” – as if male employees were totally absent, while the cases she treats are all men, thus reproducing the relation “man that toils/woman that takes care of”. And when it comes to her environment outside work, there, too, Maria gives a concise presentation of herself – and her social identity – as house keeper, wife and mother.

What follows is an excerpt from her interview.

**I would like you to tell me exactly what your occupation is.**

*Technically I am a nurse. Essentially there is a lot of bureaucratic work that needs to be done here, apart from my specialization in nursing, working as part of the mines’ First Aid Clinic. We are called to deal with many things, in which I think we are not fully trained.*

**What do you mean?**

*I mean, technically and in essence I have studied nursing. However, I may be asked to act as a rescuer.*

**Are there no trained personnel to do that?**

*No. Yes, we had a workshop, but this is not enough, it does not cover us in essence. Technically perhaps, but not in essence.*

**Is there no doctor?**

*No. There is no permanent doctor. There was an incident a few hours ago and I had to judge what I have to do on my own – and all my colleagues have to do the same during every shift. The doctor is here only a few days every week, twice to be precise, because her contract dictates that.*

**What gives you more satisfaction while you are working?**

*First of all, the commitment I have for my work, that I complete this work and I do so in the right way, the fact that I am of help to people when they need me.*

**What tires you?**

*It tires me that sometimes I feel insecure when I have to take an initiative and I might make a mistake. This is stressful, to judge what I have to do, when my knowledge is not enough.*

**What element motivates you more to work? To come to your work? What do you think when you are coming?**

*I think that I come to my job because, first of all, I like what I am doing here. It gives me satisfaction; of course, it helps me survive, too. I am also having a good time with my colleague here.*

**Did you have when you were young some person you admired because of the way they worked?**

*I started working here when I was very young. When I started there were older ladies who have told me important things and I admired them.*

**Can you give me an example?**

*That, for example, you must regard every person who comes here as a person, as an insured person. Here there is no clientelist system, it is human, it is essential, how can I say that? It is not “I come, I do this and I leave”, you have to be warm about it.*

**Please describe me a day at work.**

*I come in good spirits, regardless of my personal matters, I usually come in good spirits, say good morning to my colleague of the night shift, we say how the night shift went, we make coffee, we drink our coffee for half an hour and discuss what needs to be done, we say our passwords, what took place yesterday and how we should be moving on.*

**When the work is over where do you go?**

*I go home.*

**Whom do you trust?**

*My colleague and the doctor, of course.*

**Do you have another job?**

*Housework, wife, mother.*

**Hobby?**

*I have no time for that.*

**Do you feel that your dreams have been fulfilled through your job?**

*I believe so. With the job I have (says “the job I have” in a dismissive manner) I am covered.*

**3.3 Phaedra / Social Worker**

We expect that Phaedra, working as a social worker as part of the management, because of her profession and her position in the hierarchy gives meaning to her work through the “solidary” and the “higher professional” orientation of the Goldthrope and Lockwood theory [5]. We therefore expect her to be filled with feelings of loyalty towards the employer, her work to have an expressive meaning, constituting a goal and not a means towards a goal, the spheres of everyday life inside and outside the occupation to be hard to distinguish, the occupational process to be understood by her as an experience full of challenges regarding her personal fulfillment and, generally, we expect the meaning she gives to her work to be empowered through the sense of “belonging” to the organization. We also expect the high levels of trust she receives by the employer to be given back in the form of her eagerness to voluntarily submit to the demands of the organization.

All the above seem to apply in Phaedra’s case, according to her replies. Phaedra, through

everything she testifies in her interview, seems to be in total accord with her employer and the organization. The whole language she is using is the language of an administrator. Phaedra is very careful in what she says and not as spontaneous as the other two interviewees. Through her interview she strives to promote the virtues of the company. The matters raised by gender, too, are carefully absent in what she appears to be thinking. It is true that we may have, as in the case of Maria, the nurse, an occupation associated with gender (female colleagues are constantly being mentioned, while the cases they both have to deal with are men), we may have the same motif in all three women, that after work they go straight home, without passing from the café for decompression – something that characterizes this research's interviews of the men – Phaedra, however, does not seem to be raising questions on gender. Not at first, at least. This is happening because her higher professional profile has provoked such satisfaction that matters relating to gender are (consciously or unconsciously) absent, or because she does not allow us to penetrate into matters of gender in relation to her work, as she knows to an extent the techniques of a social study.

What follows is an excerpt from her interview.

**I would like you to tell me what exactly you are doing here.**

*I am occupied as a social worker. The occupation and specialization of the social worker is institutionalized by Law 4491/66. Right from the beginning the Hellenic Public Power Corporation considered this occupation useful, so that it can help and support their personnel, because they consider it the most important asset of the organization, as it consists in its soul.*

**How useful do you believe your work is?**

*It is useful enough. Through the work you detect, understand and realize it. Through helping. And seeing that the whole attempt is worthwhile. You can therefore see that some people are being helped, that they unblock in some ways, sometimes concerning family, health issues or other personal issues.*

**What gives you more satisfaction while you are working?**

*I am satisfied by the fact that I feel useful and this is the feedback that I get from the*

*people I help and this is a source of moral satisfaction from my work.*

**What tires you?**

*I wouldn't say that something does. Sometimes perhaps, when the circumstances are not ideal, perhaps then. However, it is not a matter of getting tired, but is rather a matter of more effort that is required in order to reach each individual goal.*

**Right. In what part of your work do you consider yourself very good?**

*In my profession, my specialization, in relation to the comments of my direct supervisor.*

**Is there something you think you are not good at?**

*I try to be between good and very good.*

**What element motivates you more to work? To come to your work? What do you think when you are coming?**

*It is the feeling of satisfaction you get from the work process. Helping and seeing that eventually some groups of people are being supported, or given useful advice, I believe this is the main thing, the feeling of creativity, that together with them you are trying to support them and give them several alternative solutions to consider, yes, you support them so that, in essence, they can find the solutions themselves. This I consider to be the main thing.*

**Who suggested this work environment to you?**

*Since I was a student, already from the 1<sup>st</sup> grade, I knew that this company has a very well-organized framework for social workers and, of course, the social policy to support it, because, in fact, all of us social workers apply the company's social policy.*

**When you were young whom did you admire?**

*I admired people who were responsible when it came to their jobs and consciously professional.*

**When the work is over where do you go?**

*Home.*

**Is there something at work that you are the only one who can do it?**

*I wouldn't say that. All of us are good and we work as a team, the social workers who work at the Health and Work Insurance Directorate.*

**What do you like more in your work?**

*What motivates me, as we said before, is that I can understand from the feedback I get from my colleagues that I am helpful. I think this is the main motive, helping my fellow humans, the sense of creativity and evolution, collective and individual. This is very important.*

**Does the company help you gain some more professional instruction? Are there any workshops taking place?**

*Yes, there are some workshops that are offered here, however, sometimes, I choose my own workshops to go to and pay for them myself.*

**Do you feel that your dreams have come true?**

Yes.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is demonstrated in the current article that the gender parameter can call into question the traditional study of "career orientation" introduced by Goldthorpe and Lockwood [5]. Through the excerpts of the in-depth interviews conducted with the female workers of the mines of the Megalopolis factory, we find that the strict differentiation of the meaning of work that Goldthorpe and Lockwood [5] support based on the hierarchy in the profession does not exist to the extent that we would expect and the gender parameter plays a special role in revealing this paradox.

#### COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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