

Work Design and Workers' Welfare: Integrating the Work of Lilian Gilbreth

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Extended abstract

Human Relations 75th Anniversary Conference

Preferred stream: Proactivity and job design in employment relations

Over the past century, work design research has shifted focus from job simplification, which is rooted in Taylorism and revolves around functionalization and standardization, to job enrichment, which emphasizes stimulating tasks and autonomy as the key to worker happiness and productivity (Parker et al., 2017). Yet, despite a vast literature on the process of job enrichment, workers' welfare has not necessarily improved (Oldham & Hackman, 2010). Worse still, rising numbers of burn-out (e.g., Threlkeld, 2021) and recent phenomena like "quiet quitting" (e.g., Krueger, 2022) suggest that workers are increasingly struggling with their mental health and desiring to disconnect from work. Moreover, new technologies are jeopardizing workers' welfare across different occupations. Even if organizations design technology to augment human capabilities rather than replace them (Parker & Grote, 2020), the specter of rising technology-induced demands (e.g., increased work pace, mental load, blurred work boundaries) looms large.

An important question thus remains: *How can work design improve workers' welfare and productivity in the 21st century?* Although the job enrichment literature led to tremendous gains in terms of both these outcomes (Oldham & Hackman, 2010; Parker, 2014; Parker et al., 2017), further progress seems to be stifled by a particular view of what work means to workers. In this view, work is the prime source of meaning in life, and workers expect work to satisfy their psychological needs and allow them to fully realize their personal potential (De Boeck et al., 2019). This view, however, may not represent the full spectrum of work meanings. For example, some people do not necessarily wish to constantly challenge themselves at work, or prefer to spend their energy primarily on activities outside of work (Rosso et al., 2010). The binary opposition between "good" (rooted in job enrichment) and "bad" (rooted in job simplification) work design that exists in current debates on the topic (e.g., Humphrey et al., 2019; Mumby, 2019), thus seems unnecessarily limiting. Although Taylor's teachings and the theory of Scientific Management that they helped shape, have

rightly been criticized for their rather economic view of the worker, a nuanced analysis could identify elements of this theory that could help improve work design effectiveness today.

In our effort to move toward a broad-spectrum analysis of worker motivation, we rehabilitate the pioneering—albeit largely neglected—work of Lillian Gilbreth, as outlined in her dissertation *The Psychology of Meaning* (1914) and her book *Fatigue Study* (1916). A contemporary of Frederick Taylor, Gilbreth was among the first to acknowledge the importance of human psychological needs in work design (De Boeck & Parker, 2022). Contrary to what is commonly believed, however, she perceived a human-centric perspective to be compatible with the principles of Scientific Management (Derksen, 2014). As such, in the genealogy of work design, Gilbreth forms a critical bridge between the literatures on job simplification and job enrichment—one that opens avenues for integrative theorization.

Specifically, Gilbreth's perspective on work design challenges present-day research in that work design should not aim to satisfy individual worker needs (e.g., Zhang & Parker, 2019), but to conserve the physical and mental energy in workers, and to provide them with energy for their broader physical, mental, and moral development, both in- and outside of work. Her recommendations therefore depart from mainstream work design research in at least two important ways. First, the latter typically approaches work design in a somewhat isolated manner—leaders design and/or impose work on workers in a top-down fashion, or workers craft jobs based on their own needs from the bottom up (Parker, 2014; Parker et al. 2017). Gilbreth, in contrast, believed that work design should be a collective endeavor, whereby workers express their individuality by focusing on what they were best at (i.e., functionalization) and, together with management, formalize their individual expertise into collective knowledge structures (i.e., standardization), thus enabling them to eliminate fatigue and optimize the energy spent at work. Second, whereas the literature on job enrichment favors the addition of supposedly motivating job resources, such as skill variety and

autonomy (e.g., Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Karasek, 1979), Gilbreth focused on eliminating job demands that are depleting people's energy (Gilbreth, 1914; Gilbreth & Gilbreth, 1916).

Integrating Gilbreth's contributions into the ongoing debate on the relationship between work design and workers' welfare, we formulate an agenda for future research. In it, we propose that there are limits to the good that motivating job resources can do. Therefore, instead of focusing on increasing job resources to mitigate job demands, we call for more attention to the different ways organizations can directly target job demands in work design (e.g., rest, mindless work). Second, considering Gilbreth's cooperative approach to work design, we invite scholars to approach Scientific Management in a more nuanced way. In particular, reconsidering the present-day value of some of its elements (e.g., standardization, functionalization) as tools of collective empowerment could contribute to beneficial outcomes that so far have received little attention, such as moral development and the quality of life outside work. In doing so, research could come closer to transforming work design into a democratic project that, in the words of Gilbreth, could achieve industrial peace.

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