

# Work and social norms: why we need to challenge the centrality of employment in society



*Why do the unemployed often suffer from poor physical health and wellbeing? [Daniel Sage](#) argues that it is the importance we attach to the 'work ethic' that shapes the experience of unemployment, and so to deal with the harmful effects of unemployment we must challenge the centrality of paid work in our lives.*

Unemployed people tend to have significantly worse health and wellbeing compared to people in paid work. With [hundreds of empirical studies](#), this is one of the most persistent findings in social science research and holds across time and place.

In trying to explain the impact of unemployment on health, researchers have often been drawn to the social psychologist Marie Jahoda's [influential theory](#). Jahoda argues that the main problem for unemployed people is that they are unable to access all the positive goods that employment provides: time structure, social activity, teamwork, regular activity and status. In other words, there is something uniquely valuable about paid work for human health and happiness. The best way to deal with the harmful effects of unemployment therefore is to promote work: either through policies like job guarantees or, alternatively, [active labour market programmes](#), which often mimic the environment of work. Promoting, or even enforcing work, can be seen as both a logical and benevolent solution to the maladies of unemployment.

[In a recent article](#) I challenge the view that equates paid work with happiness and human flourishing and, conversely, unemployment with the opposite. Rather than somehow being innate to human happiness, I argue that the reason why people in work report such higher life satisfaction is because of the power of social norms and, more specifically, the dominance of the work ethic. In societies that glorify employment as a signifier of identity, respect, and status – and promote paid work as the overriding route to life meaning and worth – it is little wonder that those who are unemployed suffer terribly.

The power of the work ethic in shaping the experience of unemployment can be seen empirically in numerous studies. Unemployed women in countries with high female employment rates [suffer more](#) compared to unemployed women elsewhere. Unemployed people who retire experience [a significant upturn in their wellbeing](#) irrespective of income gains; they are freed from labour market expectations and there is thus no shame not to work. Daily wellbeing data captured by smartphones [shows how paid work is one of the least pleasurable activities](#) people engage in. People do not find pleasure and satisfaction in the actual activity of working but the status and identity that having a job provides.

My own analysis of the [European Values Study](#) supports this other research, demonstrating how unemployed people who subscribe less to employment norms tend to have higher wellbeing than those who have stronger work ethics. To put it simply, if you care less about the social value placed on paid work, then unemployment is likely to be a less soul destroying experience than if you care deeply about the importance of work.

These studies have important implications for how we understand unemployment and how we deal with its effects. They suggest that the most powerful way of confronting the harm caused by unemployment is to challenge the power of the work ethic. In this light, attempts to combat the negative health effects of unemployment by emphasising paid work – either with job guarantees or activation programmes – is likely to be counter-productive in the long-term. These interventions reinforce the power and centrality of the work ethic, whereby unemployed people are expected to conform or are coerced into subscribing to the very norms that promote their shame in the first place. The work ethic is both the cause of unemployed people's misery and the route to escape it.

To combat the harm of unemployment more effectively and enduringly, it is necessary to challenge the importance paid work has to human identity. The starting point is to consider social policy reforms that change people's relationship with work: including the value we attach to work, the time we devote to work, and how work frames our judgements of other people. This will not be easy. In the UK at least, there is a political climate in which both the mainstream Left and Right see paid work as a solution to all manner of economic, social, and moral problems. We are a society divided into '[strivers and skivers](#)' and where work frames many social interactions and relationships.

Yet it is possible to imagine policies that are viable within current political, economic and welfare state structures that still hold the radical objective of reconstructing work and the work ethic. Universal basic income (UBI) is one such policy. UBI has many admirers and proponents across the political spectrum, yet a particularly powerful case can be made for the potential UBI has to recast what work means. UBI could dilute the work ethic by making it easier and more common for people to opt out of the labour market: to retrain, get more education, care or enjoy more leisure. The boundaries between work and non-work could blur and [our understanding of what 'work' means could widen](#). As the social category of 'the unemployed' became more ambiguous, there could be far less shame, and fewer harmful effects, of not engaging in paid work.

There are also other, arguably less radical and more politically viable, policy alternatives for challenging the work ethic. These include expanding paid parental leave for mothers and fathers, [enabling people to work fewer hours](#) and empowering people to take periods of paid leave (sabbaticals) from work. We could even, as Jeremy Corbyn suggests, have [more bank holidays](#), although perhaps [not only whenever England win a World Cup](#).

Ultimately, the objective of all of these policies would be to obscure the boundary between work and non-work by enabling people to work less. This could expand our common understanding of what 'work' means beyond its current form as a purely economic relation. In this light, people would be empowered to find value, identity, status and reward in forms of work that do not involve wage-labour. And then the misery long found in the experience of unemployment could finally disappear.

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Note: the above draws on the author's [published work](#) in *Critical Social Policy*.

### About the Author



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