

VALUES AND ATTITUDES

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Survival or Self-Actualization? Meanings of Work in Contemporary Poland

Abstract: This paper analyzes the meanings attributed to work in contemporary Polish society in the context of Inglehart and Welzel's claim regarding the passage from survival to self-expression values. Research has documented a systematic decline in the position of work on the list of the most important values. However, work is also documented as being of fundamental importance for identity, self-esteem, and the delimitation of social categories. The authors offer a mixed-methods approach to the issue of work. Based on quantitative data gathered through the EVS, they place Poland in the context of European trends pertaining to the significance and centrality of work. Using qualitative evidence, the authors identify and reconstruct the key social representations employed to think about and discuss work-related issues. In conclusion, they point to structural elements of the social imaginary of work that result in the coexistence of different (often contradictory) perceptions of this sphere of social life.

Keywords: work, social representations, mixed-methods approach, EVS, meanings of work, changes in values

It has been widely acknowledged that work—as a distinct sphere of human activity—serves many more goals than the allocation of goods (at the societal level) and bread-winning (at the individual level). Throughout modernity, work has been conceptualized as an influential factor shaping both individual biographies and societies as a whole (Sennett 1998; Weber 1978 [1922]; Znaniecki 2001 [1934]). These observations were underpinned by the assumption that work is central in both social and individual lives: the work order translates into the social order *en large*, and work as an activity establishes the relationship between the individual and the society.

However, as Inglehart and Welzel (2005) claim, the subjective significance of work in the lives of individuals and the ways in which work is perceived depend on more general value orientations: materialistic ones, in which “survival” values are pursued, or post-materialistic ones, which motivate people to seek self-expression and self-actualization. According to Inglehart and Welzel, the passage from materialistic to post-materialistic values occurs under the influence of economic growth. In a nutshell, the more affluent a society is, the stronger its post-materialistic orientations. Although Inglehart and Welzel claim that the value change is probabilistic and depends on various factors, they expect it to occur in all post-industrial societies. In their view, economic development is supposed to bring about “human development,” and the secular and self-expression values are the axiological “point of arrival.”

In this context, attitudes toward work and the meanings ascribed to it may be treated as an indicator of broader value orientations. In accord with Inglehart and Welzel's reasoning, work as a survival value is seen as a central component of life (it comes first, even if it means less spare time) and is valued mostly for the income it brings. As a self-expression value, it is viewed through the lens of self-actualization, which is achieved through working or thanks to leisure-time activities.

Subsequent editions of the European Values Study (EVS) have demonstrated not only that in post-transformation Poland work has never acquired a fully central position but also—and more importantly—that its significance in Polish society is systematically diminishing and work is gradually being overtaken by values connected with different spheres of life, such as, for instance, leisure or personal needs. This trend was observed both in the late 1990s (Sikorska 2002) and early 2000s (Marody 2012) and was confirmed in the most recent edition of the survey (Bartkowski 2019). The suggestion is that Polish society is moving towards post-materialistic values, at least in the domain of work. However, in order to verify such a thesis we first need to compare the attitudes prevailing among Poles to attitudes in other European countries.

The Significance of Work in Life: Poland in Comparison with other European Countries

The EVS questionnaire uses two measures which indicate the position of work in social life. The first is work significance, that is, the perception of work as an important component of life. The data for the last four editions of the survey indicates that although the significance of work has been diminishing as a general trend, both in Poland and in the societies of the EU, this trend is not linear either in Poland or in other European countries (Tab. 1). Poland is consistently above the European average.¹ Furthermore, the significance of work in Poland rose rapidly in 1999: it ceased to be just “important” and became “very important” and then declined equally noticeably in 2008. Fluctuations in the significance of work are hardly a unique feature of Poland: although some countries (e.g., the Netherlands) demonstrate a consistent decline in the significance of work, the data for some others indicates important shifts in this respect (e.g., a decline in the significance of work in 1999 in Denmark and a rapid increase in Italy in 2017).

The second measure is the centrality of work (a relevant question was introduced in the 1999 edition of the EVS). This measure is stronger because it requires comparing the importance of work with the importance of another value, that is, spare time. The fact that Poles perceive work as more important in life than the European average does not mean that they are also disposed to put work first in their lives (Tab. 2). In this respect, Poland follows the general European trend of the diminishing centrality of work. In the 1999 edition of the EVS, Poland was above the European average in terms of the centrality of work (64.4% respondents vs. 50.2% who said they strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that work

¹ In 1990, 66.2% of Polish respondents declared that work was a “very important” aspect of life, compared to the European average of 57.3% of people making such a declaration; in 1999, that same ratio was 78.5% to 57.2%; in 2008, 56.2% to 52.1%; in 2017, 59.9% to 53.9%.

Table 1

The percentage of respondents in the EU countries, for whom work is a very, rather or not important aspect of life

Country	1990		1999		2008		2017	
	Very important	Not important*						
Austria	61.6	7.3	63.9	7.4	53.2	10.7	50.1	12.0
Bulgaria	56.6	8.9	62.2	10.6	60.3	10.9	63.2	8.5
Croatia	n/a	n/a	47.2	3.8	46.0	7.6	47.8	8.6
Czech Republic	59.5	3.2	53.4	6.4	42.6	17.8	49.8	12.8
Denmark	50.8	9.4	39.5	15.0	50.7	12.4	36.2	19.1
Estonia	31.9	15.8	51.1	11.0	45.3	14.0	41.3	13.5
Finland	54.1	5.7	50.7	10.2	32.4	16.8	51.6	9.3
France	60.9	6.5	69.6	5.0	67.0	5.3	61.7	6.0
Germany	44.9	14.7	50.3	18.6	50.4	19.3	43.9	9.1
Hungary	58.7	8.5	57.6	10.7	56.5	8.1	52.7	9.9
Italy	62.5	4.4	61.7	5.0	63.9	3.5	73.7	3.6
Lithuania	41.6	10.0	59.6	9.0	41.2	15.6	42.3	12.5
the Netherlands	50.4	10.2	47.4	13.2	46.5	14.5	35.1	17.0
Poland	66.2	3.3	78.5	4.8	56.2	8.5	59.9	5.1
Romania	68.5	4.4	70.6	5.1	58.6	8.3	63.6	7.2
Slovak Republic	66.5	4.3	61.9	6.6	62.7	12.2	69.0	6.9
Slovenia	73.4	2.4	61.7	4.2	58.7	5.9	58.3	4.1
Spain	64.4	6.0	63.0	5.4	60.9	8.8	70.6	4.5
Sweden	67.0	3.6	54.5	8.9	47.1	12.7	60.2	7.2
Great Britain	49.0	22.9	40.1	21.2	41.7	30.7	47.8	20.7
Total	57.3	8.0	57.2	9.1	52.1	12.2	53.9	9.9

*The answers “not very important” and “not at all important” were merged.
The answers “rather important” were omitted for the clarity sake.

should come first even if it meant having less spare time), but in 2008 there was a noticeable decline in the number of respondents who agreed (37.8% to 47.2%). A comparison with the data regarding work significance suggests that 1999 might have been a peak and hence there was such a rapid decline in the next edition of the survey. Moreover, data for some other countries demonstrates important fluctuations in the trend (an increase in the centrality of work in 2008 followed by a decline in 2017, e.g., in Germany, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, or an increase in 2017, e.g., in Croatia, Finland, and Italy).

The fluctuations in work significance and centrality are important since they signal that attitudes toward work have a context-dependent character. According to Inglehart and Welzel (2005), this context is determined by economic factors: economic growth is supposed to provide an impetus which brings about a change in values, e.g., in the form of a passage from survival to self-expression values. However, in the cases analyzed here, hard economic indicators, such as GDP per capita, do not fully translate into the fluctuations observed. There seem to be two other crucial factors directly connected with work which, to some extent, explain the dynamics of change in work significance and centrality. The first is the unemployment rate: as a general rule for the EU countries under study, an increase in the unemployment rate (see Eurostat 2020) was followed by an increase in the significance

Table 2

The percentages of respondents in different EU countries, who agree or disagree with the statement that work should be put first in life

Country	1999		2008		2017	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
Austria	n/a	n/a	53.6	23.0	40.2	34.6
Bulgaria	54.8	9.8	67.9	12.6	65.4	14.4
Croatia	47.2	35.1	39.1	38.1	43.3	39.6
Czech Republic	57.0	21.2	48.7	22.2	37.2	35.1
Denmark	49.3	32.9	49.2	34.3	48.8	26.9
Estonia	46.9	32.1	40.6	38.1	33.9	46.2
Finland	35.6	43.0	30.8	49.2	38.1	41.7
France	33.5	48.3	39.1	45.4	41.8	41.1
Germany	54.4	19.6	60.8	18.4	27.2	53.5
Hungary	78.8	8.0	60.6	18.2	49.1	24.5
Italy	49.5	32.0	45.9	32.6	55.0	19.6
Lithuania	58.2	21.2	41.0	23.3	42.4	18.7
the Netherlands	22.4	65.9	31.9	51.9	23.1	51.6
Poland	64.4	19.5	37.8	32.8	37.3	46.1
Romania	80.0	6.6	59.1	12.9	61.3	18.5
Slovak Republic	61.4	19.5	62.3	13.7	60.1	13.0
Slovenia	55.6	25.7	48.6	28.4	47.1	31.0
Spain	50.8	25.3	52.6	30.6	45.5	33.3
Sweden	28.9	51.8	37.5	36.4	35.5	41.1
Great Britain	25.0	54.8	36.3	45.3	27.8	52.5
Total	50.2	30.1	47.2	30.4	43.0	34.1

The answers “agree” and “strongly agree” and “disagree” and “strongly disagree” were merged. The answers “neither agree or disagree” were omitted for the clarity sake.

and centrality of work and vice versa. The impact of the unemployment rate may be moderated by unemployment welfare regimes, which range from types in which benefit recipients are stigmatized and individuals are placed under considerable pressure (both economic and symbolic) to work, to types aiming at full social inclusion of the unemployed (see, e.g., [Bison and Esping-Andersen 2000](#); for an analysis of unemployment policy in Poland, see: [Sztandar-Sztanderska 2016](#)). However, the link between unemployment, welfare regimes, and work orientations might not be that straightforward; [Gallie \(2007, 2019\)](#) suggests considering other factors such as employment regulations, industrial relations and key actors, the structure of unemployment benefits, and—last but not least—cultural values.

The second factor is the discourse on work, which provides the meanings attributed to it. One of the key elements of this discourse are “management ideologies” (see [Bendix 1956](#); [Marody and Lewicki 2010](#)) which provide socially recognized reasons for valuing work. In the contemporary “management ideology,” work is presented as a central activity in the lives of individuals, through which they can develop their aptitudes and abilities, and, by the same token, gain self-actualization and find a sense of life. The question about the “features important in a job” included in the EVS questionnaire gives us an insight into the extent to which this kind of discourse is accepted.

To put the answers of Polish respondents in the wider picture of trends in other European societies, we compared Poland with two countries characterized by a different approach to work: Italy, one of the European societies where work is a very important aspect of life, and the Netherlands, which is located at the polar end of this spectrum. Furthermore, Italy and the Netherlands represent divergent organizational cultures due to their religious roots: Italy is Catholic, while the Netherlands is Protestant and also one of the first capitalist powers. The countries' historic, cultural, and religious legacies translate into their ethics, work ethos (see, e.g., [Giorgi and Marsh 1990](#); [Putnam 1993](#)), and structure of work orientations: the systematic differences between Catholic and Protestant, and western and post-communist countries were demonstrated in previous studies (e.g., [Warr 2008](#); [Hauff and Kirchner 2015](#)).

Table 3

The features associated with work in three selected countries (comparison of the percentages of respondents for whom given features of work are important)

Important feature of work	Poland				Italy				the Netherlands			
	1990	1999	2008	2017	1990	1999	2008	2017	1990	1999	2008	2017
Good pay	79.8	92.3	93.5	80.3	71.7	84.7	76.7	71.3	69.7	72.0	74.6	70.8
Good hours	34.7	50.0	55.3	55.8	40.2	64.1	64.1	46.7	45.3	37.9	60.5	57.6
Opportunity to use initiative	38.4	56.0	48.6	38.5	47.5	64.5	64.5	35.5	63.4	61.8	78.8	53.3
Generous holidays	15.4	29.6	41.8	19.6	20.4	34.7	22.5	13.3	35.1	27.5	47.5	38.0
Achieving something	48.0	66.4	67.2	65.5	54.0	75.4	68.1	65.6	44.3	38.5	63.4	58.9
Responsible job	33.7	53.7	54.2	34.8	33.2	52.7	43.8	28.7	45.3	40.4	52.4	39.9

In all the countries under analysis—Poland, Italy, and the Netherlands—good pay, a key extrinsic value of work ([Gesthuizen, Kovarek, and Rapp 2019](#)), was the most frequently selected important feature of work in 2017. However, in the case of the Polish respondents, this answer was chosen more frequently than in the other two countries. The comparison suggests that Poles, when compared with Italians or Dutch people, are more likely to see work from a perspective of economic duress. At the same time, Poles and Italians—contrary to the Dutch—did not value extensive opportunities to use their initiative in connection with their work, which is a key intrinsic value of work understood as a means of self-actualization. Furthermore, neither Poles nor Italians cared very much about having generous holidays, that is, free time, which is one of the extrinsic but at the same time post-materialistic values and which was seen as important by the Dutch.

In summarizing this part of the analysis, it could be said that Polish society seems to follow the general trend of the diminishing significance of work, which can be regarded as a sign of a passage to post-materialistic values. However, in terms of exact figures, work is still relatively more important in Poland than in some other European countries, especially those strictly post-materialistic ones, such as for instance the Netherlands. The features Poles attribute to work are also connected to survival rather than self-expression values, and this supports previous findings for other post-communist societies.

Moreover, as in the case of work significance and centrality, we notice large fluctuations in regard to the features of work that are considered important. As far as Poland

is concerned, the importance of good pay and having a responsible job increased in 1999, while in 2017 it returned to the 1990 level; the importance of convenient working hours rose consistently through subsequent editions of the survey, while the importance of generous holidays rapidly increased in 1999 and 2008, only to decline again in 2017. Thus, changes in the respondents' declarations do not seem to follow a coherent trend, such as the one from survival to self-expression values. This supports the findings by Turunen (2011), who demonstrated through a comparative study across five countries (Finland, Germany, Great Britain, Spain, and Sweden) that there is no clear evidence for Inglehart's claim about the dominance of intrinsic work values in developed Western societies. Our analysis shows that currently no such coherent passage could be observed regardless of the type of society under study (Western, such as the Netherlands, Southern, such as Italy, or Eastern and post-communist, such as Poland). On the contrary, the respondents' indications of the important features of work seemed to be a reaction to other issues in the public discourse.

In the case of Poland, the contents of the public discourse have been determined mostly by the systemic transformation. In 1990, the social imaginary pertaining to work was still under the influence of communist discourse, as a result of which work was, on the one hand, taken for granted, and, on the other, not perceived as a sphere of self-actualization. In 1999, a decade after the systemic transformation in Poland, the "trauma" of the transformation (Sztompka 2000) was reflected in individual experience in the form of rising unemployment, and the significance of work increased accordingly. Simultaneously, the capitalist discourse provided new meanings connected with self-actualization and self-expression which could be attributed to work. The years 2008 and 2017 do not constitute such clear turns in the trajectory of Polish society. In 2004, Poland entered the EU, which brought about both economic growth and the increased impact of modernizing discourses. In 2008, the financial crisis started in the Eurozone, and although it did not have a large effect on the Polish economy, it influenced the social imaginary and emotions.

We posit that Poland's intense and rapid development after its accession to the EU on the one hand, and the crisis discourse on the other, formed new and probably contradictory meanings in regard to work: economic growth should result in a passage to self-expression values, but the crisis discourse should lead to the return to survival values. To identify and reconstruct these meanings, we had to go beyond the EVS quantitative data and use the in-depth qualitative interviews collected in our project (for details regarding data sources, the respondents' selection and grouping criteria, and analytical procedures and tools, see the Methodological Note at the end of the text).

Social Representations of Work as Sources of Meanings

According to the vast and constantly growing literature on the subject in sociology and organizational studies, the meanings of work are socially and culturally shaped by existing worldviews or value systems (Rosso et al. 2010; Ros et al. 1999). However, such an approach is centered on individuals and neglects the role of everyday experiences and social communication in shaping individual worldviews and values. For this reason, our analysis is based on the concept of social representations (Moscovici 1973, 2000). In Moscovici's

definition, a social representation can be conceptualized as “a system of values, ideas, and practices” (1973: xiii) articulated in and through collective elaborations of social objects by which meanings are ascribed to these objects. Social representations form networks of beliefs, metaphors, and mental images (Moscovici 2000); thus, they shape individual attitudes, for instance, toward work, but are also clearly patterned at the societal level. These networks are not necessarily coherent, and different representations may be activated depending on the context.

In some respects, the concept of social representations comes close—in regard to work—to other notions adopted in cultural sociology, such as ideologies of work and work cultures. However, in comparison to the former, this concept is wider: ideologies of work employ some social representations in order to account for certain features of the systemic organization of work. In contrast to the latter, which stresses the relatively stable and uniform character of culturally shaped attitudes toward work, for example, across nations (Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minkov 2010; see also: Smircich 2016 [1983]), the concept of social representations, adapted to work, allows for the incorporation of ideas of change and heterogeneity due to several features of social representations.

First, diverse and even divergent representations may coexist, resulting in a polyphony of work meanings. Moreover, representations are dynamic, which implies that they may evolve in time (Wagner and Hayes 2005). For this reason, in the case of representations of work, we assume that they are embedded in the social organization of work and will reflect contemporary work conditions. Second, they are primary to the meanings that derive from them and provide insights into the process of the construction of meanings. Therefore, the analysis of representations complements studies that are focused on mapping the distribution of meanings across different social categories. Finally, social representations are not rooted in the experience or working conditions of any particular social group; they are flexible cognitive categories employed in the process of justification, rationalization, and attribution of meanings—“by symbolic interpretation of their [a group’s] practice, or by explanatory justification and assessment” (Wagner and Hayes 2005: 322).

In addition to these features, in studies conducted in Poland the notion of social representations has not yet been applied to work. The notion thus offers a novel insight into a set of questions: what do members of contemporary Polish society actually want to accomplish by working? Does the habit of working derive only from economic dependence, or are there any other meanings that are relevant? Do any patterns emerge from individual narratives about working, that is, what kinds of socially shared meanings are currently attributed to work?

The answers to these questions are to be found in three socially shared representations of work that we reconstructed based on qualitative data analysis.

Work as a basis for stability and security

The data collected throughout the study indicates that work is perceived primarily in financial terms; the level of remuneration was mentioned in all the interviews, both the individual and focus-group interviews, and all the respondents referred to “good pay” as a synonym for a “good job,” for instance:

R: "A good job? If it brings good money, it's a good job."

I: "Well, anything else?"

R: "No, nothing else."

I: "Nothing else matters?"

R: "No. If someone pays good money, you take the job"² (IDI 4).

The amount of pay discussed in this context oscillated around PLN 3,000–3,500 net, that is, approximately the Polish national average. More important than the exact figure, however, was the respondents' understanding of what it meant to have a well-paying job: pay was the core feature attributed to a good kind of work because it provided the ability to consume at a satisfactory level, and, as a result, enabled a person to lead "a decent life"³ (IDI 21).

The satisfactory level of consumption associated with "a decent life" involves the ability to buy quality goods, for example, *Schwarzwälder Schinken* (Black Forest ham). The mention of this specific kind of ham is significant for several reasons. First, it belongs to a category of quality foods that are not a necessity, and, as our data indicates, "decent consumption" implies the ability to consume goods at a level slightly above basic needs. At the same time, Black Forest ham is now relatively inexpensive and available in most popular discount stores, rendering it an everyday treat. Second, it is an imported good, an example of a broader category of foods produced in the West that was for a long time inaccessible for the average Pole. Being able to buy such a product makes Poles feel equal to Europeans, who are still regarded as a point of reference and comparison (Konieczna-Salamatin and Sawicka 2020). Third, this kind of ham is regarded as being a high-quality item due to the positive association with German products that prevails in Polish society (Giza-Poleszczuk 2017). The mention of a German product in the context of consumers' aspirations suggests an important passage from a focus on quantity (when "good" was equated with "abundant") to a focus on quality, when "decent" consumption can be achieved only through access to higher rated products.

Analysis of representations connected with consumption enables us to reveal the perception of different "forms" of life, as articulated by our respondents. They distinguish three levels: survival, a "decent life," and a luxurious life. "Survival" is when a person works but nevertheless balances on the borderline between getting by and debt, and "works every day to pay the bills" (FGI 5) or buy the necessary food. Survival also means that a person cannot afford quality goods and is condemned to using "cheap stuff" (FGI 11) (here referring to second-hand clothes). In some groups, this kind of life was also represented as a life deprived of small everyday pleasures, for instance, a cup of coffee in a café (FGI 4).

"Luxurious" life is represented through a reference not only to quality but also to the originality and inaccessibility of certain goods, for instance, Beluga caviar (compared with the kind sold in a popular discount store), baby squid, or a villa. As an item of luxurious consumption, baby squids have an established meaning and connotations in Polish public discourse due to the political context in which this term was first mentioned (Szalkiewicz

² This paper deals with various meanings of work. The Polish word used in the original study was "*praca*," which is polysemous and can be translated into English as work, a job, or labor. However, in the minds of the Polish respondents, all of these are part of the same semantic field, covered by a single vocabulary item ("*praca*").

³ In Poland the term "decent life" refers not only to moral, but also material conditions of living which have complex associations, as explained in the analysis which follows.

and Sokołowski 2019). These connotations are meaningful because they show that luxury is not a form of life accessible for a “normal person”: it can be achieved only through non-legitimized strategies of enrichment such as abuse of public funds (mentioned in the case of politicians and bankers) or corruption (in the case of doctors). In other words, a luxurious life cannot be achieved through hard and honest work. The highest point of aspiration that work can provide for our respondents is a decent life, without being stuck at the level of survival (*not the maximum but that normal kind of level*, FGI 9). Decent life also involves having a margin of freedom of choice, that is, making choices based on preferences rather than economic constraints:

Entering a store, not checking the prices, just taking what you need or what you feel like having (FGI 10).

Our respondents did not allow themselves to dream of a luxurious life:

I'm not saying it's about living in clover (...) It's about nice and easy living..., just like that, without having to struggle with problems all the time, like paying your bills, 'cause there will always be bills to pay, and it's a constant problem, even though we have jobs and go to work (FGI 6).

This last quote indicates that the deepest layer of meaning of a “decent life” is the psychological well-being it offers. The psychological well-being indirectly provided by good pay has two components: stability and self-esteem. Stability refers to the sense of safety and comfort deriving from the fact that a person’s basic needs are secured (*you can afford to pay for your housing or for your livelihood*, FGI 11), and that a person is not very close to the borderline dividing normal life from survival, owing to a regular salary/wages and the predictability of employment, at least in the short term:

It's not about how much you earn, it's about a sense of security. People in Silicon Valley earn heaps of money but they're only one pay check away from going bankrupt (FGI 11).

The fact that money is a foundation of security and stability was given as a rationalization for claims about the significance of good pay as a component of a “decent life.” For instance, in one of the groups, the moderator asked the respondents to think about aspects of life other than work and remuneration, but the respondents opposed the suggestion:

— *But finances are very important because they determine...*

— *All the rest.*

— *All the rest, those are the essential needs, the need for security, a roof over your head and some food to eat, the primary things* (FGI 4).

Simultaneously, the lack of stability and predictability is perceived as a very heavy burden for an individual, leading to adverse social consequences such as *suicide, divorce, and a variety of other social pathologies* (FGI 12). The psychological benefits of stability were represented by credit capacity and the ability to afford (psychologically) a family. However, our data indicates that stability was a feature of an imagined good job, not of actual work. Actual work was represented as a source of anxiety and uncertainty, of *continual fear for tomorrow* (FGI 6).

This way of thinking is also visible in the following passage, where a less educated person describes the occupational trajectory of his better educated partner:

She has a degree in chemistry, which is a very hard thing to study, and she can't find a job, even at the country's minimum wage, which is quite ridiculous. She's 26 now. She took a one-year sabbatical; she has a master's degree in chemistry and she gets offered PLN 1,570 a month. That's what things are like these days, I guess. Myself, I'm a mechanic, and I got much more money for my entry-level job. Just look at these figures, look at the gap (FGI 11).

The key source of tension experienced by the better educated category of respondents derived from the conviction that the “symbolic prestige [of their occupations] does not correlate with financial prestige” (Kocemba 2018) or—to be more precise—that an overly low income deprives the position of the due prestige. More complex and demanding professions were seen as more prestigious in the symbolic sense, but the financial differentiation was dominant; a person cannot easily derive self-esteem from the symbolic prestige of an occupation if, at the same time, the income it brings is believed to be the same as in the case of much simpler tasks.

The association between good pay and a sense of personal dignity is twofold. First of all, the level of remuneration is considered in terms of dignity—an overly low salary is perceived as derogatory, undermining the feeling of self-worth, whereas good pay is equated with a reinforcement of self-esteem. Second, money is used as an indicator of social recognition in the context of work: for instance, a question regarding the issue of social recognition which was asked during focus-group interviews (“do you think that people in contemporary Poland receive as much social recognition as they deserve?”) automatically elicited answers referring to salaries and money received in return for work.

Work as a threat to the (authentic) self

According to some respondents, work serves as a “social anchor”: in their view, interpersonal contacts at work are a means to social inclusion, enabling an individual to enter a social network offering various psychological benefits, including support and help in the case of an emergency (IDI 21), for instance:

In those relations, eeh, if someone has a problem, with health or domestic life, we try to help one another; there is mutual support and we get on well (IDI 21).

Other benefits include shared fun and entertainment (IDI 7), or even potential romantic relationships (IDI 10). Additionally, work can help a person to be noted and acknowledged by others. This contributes to both self-esteem and the perception of oneself as a necessary and important component of a social network (IDI 14, IDI 8).

Statements of this kind were, however, quite rare throughout the interviews. Basically, work is perceived as an institutionally embedded activity and treated as disjunctive from the self. An important opposition is constructed between work and “real” life:

You can't have a situation where you feel at home while you're at work. This shouldn't happen. That's your job. You need to draw a line (FGI 10).

For this reason, work is expected to elicit different emotions from other, more personal activities. Our data clearly indicates that while at work the respondents very rarely experienced emotions connected with, or resulting from, self-actualization. On the contrary,

intense emotion in regard to work-related tasks was perceived as highly improper. For example, “excessive” engagement in work was perceived by others as irritating (FGI 10). It is implicitly assumed that intense emotions belong to the sphere of close interpersonal relations, not to work, for instance:

I'm not proud when I do something at work. It's just my job (FGI 10).

We meet there for a clear reason, it's not...it's not something...something worth my nerves, something to ruin the quality of my life (...) We might be doing our job and, apart from this essential thing, find fulfillment elsewhere...in different kinds of things (IDI 32).

The negative perception of work as opposed to “real” life was encapsulated by a social representation of “oppressive work”: a corporation as a “forced labor camp.” The metaphor of a forced labor camp expressed the conviction that the individual is “trapped” at work and has to submit to a set of external, imposed “rules of the game.” The workplace was represented as a place where the individual is deprived of human dignity and treated as a mere labor resource (*People are just squeezed like lemons*, FGI 6). The social atmosphere is pictured as threatening, and the employees must both hide their real emotions and engage in emotion work:

In corporate structures everyone is kind and smiling (...) that's enforced because there are certain rules of the game you have to play by. This makes people frustrated after a time (FGI 7).

Here, emotion work is equated with hiding one’s real emotions and renouncing authenticity, which alienates a worker from his or her “real self” (Hochschild 2003). In this context, a key feature of an imaginary good job would be to do something interesting that a person simply enjoys and that enables self-expression: where the self can be developed through engaging in activities that correspond to the person’s own interests and preferences. For example, a good job was characterized in the following way:

And an exciting job, not brain-wasting. When you do something exciting, it doesn't really feel like you're working (FGI 7).

That's the kind of job that feels good; I'm happy to go to work; I need to enjoy what I do (IDI 17).

However, actual jobs were represented as lacking this component: our less educated respondents believed that combining personal interests with work was possible but, in reality, extremely difficult and rare, for instance:

Actually, if you've got a job that you enjoy doing, it means you're really lucky (FGI 11).

In the better educated category, the same belief was articulated differently: those respondents asserted that it is very difficult to find a job where one can pursue one’s own ambitions and interests and, at the same time, receive decent pay.

Work not only alienates a person from his or her real self but was also seen as colonizing the self, as emerged from our respondents’ statements in which they blamed work for not enabling them to do what they really like, or to take care of the people who were significant for them:

I go to work to make sure my son has a good life. But because of the jobs that I work in, one after the other, my contact with my son is limited. (...) And he sometimes says, "Dad, we were supposed to play, but you're working all the time" (FGI 5).

The respondents feel that they invest their private time in work. Their time has an established, financial value because the obligation to work deprives them of the possibility to engage in other aspects of life that are perceived as being more important for the self (*Everything comes at the expense of something else* FGI 3). In other words, working is associated with high opportunity costs, and seen as a factor that limits self-actualization and self-expression.

Work as grounds for social status

The third set of meanings revealed by the analysis indicates that work is also perceived as a means to reach a certain social status, and as a foundation of status. This meaning surfaces in how our respondents distinguish and delineate social categories, and in the social comparisons they construct. Social categories are compared in terms of different levels of education (lower, secondary, or vocational vs. university education). In the case of the less educated group, the tensions connected with work as a "social lift" are focused on the representation of a "skilled worker." In the case of the better educated group, they are concentrated on the representation of a "Biedronka cashier."⁴

A skilled worker, on the one hand, embodies an idea of a good job, as explained in the first section: our respondents believed there is a high demand for the services of skilled workers and this contributes to these workers' financial prosperity, sense of stability, and self-worth. In the respondents' view, such workers are lacking in Poland and training more of them is important for the country. This opinion is also reflected in surveys that indicate the high position of skilled workers in the hierarchies of occupational prestige (see, e.g., [Omyła-Rudzka 2019](#)).

Simultaneously, an in-depth qualitative analysis reveals that a skilled worker is still perceived as a physical worker: his or her job is categorized as a "dirty job." A dirty job, even though profitable, dooms the person to contact with literal dirt: sweat, dust, and grease.⁵ For this reason, although skilled work has all the features of a good job when considered in abstract terms, it is not a fate that our respondents would choose for their own children:

— Even if basic vocational schools still existed, who would attend them? What parent would send their kids to that kind of school? If I had kids, I wouldn't send them to a vocational school. That would make me feel like I'm dooming them to manual labor.

— But what do you mean about manual labor? Is that a disgrace? People earn more money there, in fact.

— Sure, I understand that. But it doesn't matter. Parents want their kids to have a better life. When I work as a mechanic, doing manual work, I have to get my hands dirty and so on. I wouldn't like my kids to get so dirty at work. I'd like them to have better working conditions (FGI 11).

This indicates that apart from remuneration, a good job has another essential feature: the working conditions. Contact with dirt and physical effort is perceived as degrading, while

⁴ A popular grocery discount chain in Poland.

⁵ This is a narrowed understanding of the category of a "dirty job," which in sociological literature is expanded to encompass work involving contact with moral or symbolic dirt (see: [Hughes 1962](#)).

having a job in the clean setting of an office or a bank (“at a desk”) is viewed as ennobling. A transition from dirty to clean work is seen as upward social mobility. However, it can be achieved only in the next generation. According to our respondents, a higher social status in one’s own life trajectory can only be achieved through income and the consumption it permits. In this context, a good job is also a job that opens up new horizons, while a bad job is equated with stagnation and a predetermined fate.

The data suggests that in reality the jobs held by our less educated respondents were not seen as corresponding with their idea of a good job, as outlined above: these jobs were either “dirty” or underpaid (or both). Given the difficulties with attributing the meanings associated with a good job to their own occupations, the respondents developed a new meaning, attached not to a job as such, but to work understood as effort. In this new understanding, working acquires moral value. It is perceived as a means of enhancing the self, even if an individual cannot boast of objective achievements in terms of earnings, social prestige, etc. Our data indicates that *working hard* is presented as valuable in itself, regardless of the results of such work.

This becomes evident when we reconstruct the social categorizations made by the respondents. In the case of some categories of people, their perceived attempts to ease the effort associated with working were criticized and seen as eliminating them from the category of “normal” people. This is revealed through the use of the representation of a “bum” [*patol*] in group discussions. The key feature of the social category so represented was a life on welfare benefits, especially those received for children,⁶ for example:

They make children on purpose so that the kids’ welfare benefits can support them; they feel OK about it. A dad with a bunch of kids doesn’t need to go to work... (...) What’s their situation like? A dad and a mom who have five or seven kids won’t get out of bed before 9 a.m. (FGI 3).

Work is presented as a source of daily values while avoidance of work is seen as a way to renounce those moral values. For this reason, although the level of income and consumption may be similar regardless of the source of subsistence, that is, paid work or welfare benefits, only consumption enabled by hard and honest work is legitimized. For instance, people living on welfare benefits were described in the following way in one of the focus groups:

They didn’t learn the work ethos in their parents’ home. They always feel they’re entitled to everything. And that’s why they don’t know any other way of living (FGI 5).

This representation is used in “boundary work”⁷ (Lamont 2000) and employed in constructing the symbolic boundaries of social categories. More importantly, it also enables people to place themselves higher in the moral hierarchy, which is indicated by the presence of moral emotions (see Turner and Stets 2006) in comparisons between the self and the “bums”:

⁶ The benefit most often mentioned in this context was the so-called “500+” [PLN 500]: a monthly financial transfer allocated for every child in Poland under the “Family 500+” social policy program introduced by the Law and Justice (PiS) government and initiated on April 1, 2016.

⁷ “Boundary work” is a term introduced by Michele Lamont (2000). It refers to the conceptual, emotional, and behavioral effort that individuals put into constructing the symbolic boundaries of social categories and differentiating people perceived as “similar to self” from various categories of “others.”

I'd be embarrassed to go and claim a welfare coupon for something; that would be embarrassing. It would be like I'm a fallen human being, forced to ask people for things, for some aid (FGI 5).

This serves as psychological compensation for failing to achieve work-related success in terms of a good job, that is, well-paid and clean work:

I'm probably not going to make a big career, financially or professionally. I work at a car-garage chain as a mechanic. (...) As for my ambitions (...), I'm going to redirect them to make sure that the garage looks better, to deliver the best customer service, to make sure they have a better opinion of me, to speak well of me, that's the only thing I can achieve (FGI 11).

In the second category of respondents—those who are better educated, with a university degree—the representation employed in discussing work in the context of social hierarchies reveals a specific kind of status anxiety (de Botton 2004). These respondents spoke of a “Biedronka cashier” to represent someone with a simple, monotonous job, not demanding in terms of skills or qualifications, and socially perceived in a slightly derogatory way due to the unfavorable working conditions (time pressure, long hours, a position at the bottom of internal hierarchies). However, simultaneously, this job was thought to be stable and reasonably well paid, which could not be said about more complex and demanding occupations, for example:

The problem is the same as in any administrative structure; I mean that salaries are outrageously low. In other words, a Biedronka cashier earns more than someone with a college degree, and people are expected to have a law degree to get a job in this track. (...) And there are some people with PhDs as well. But the earnings are the same as at a discount-store checkout, or lower (IDI 1).

Self-esteem is a mental derivative of good pay. The question of dignity is intertwined with the issue of remuneration:

I didn't care that much if I earned a bit less or a bit more. But I want to be appreciated for my work, after all. It's about my own sense of self-esteem, job satisfaction, some benefits for me. Motivation to keep on working (FGI 10).

A comparison between representations used in the status-related discussions by these two categories of respondents reveals that the in-depth meanings embedded in these representations overlap to some extent: stressing physical effort as grounds for status claims underpins both the boundary work performed by the less educated respondents and the social comparisons made by better educated professionals. In the former case, effort is viewed as a component of regular work and as grounds for the development of a “disciplined self” (Lamont 2000). This helps to outline the social categories with reference to moral values, and to introduce a new hierarchy which disregards the income and prestige of occupations as a measure of individual worth. In the latter case, effort is referred to implicitly, as a condition for achieving a good education. An adequate remuneration, i.e., financial prestige and symbolic prestige, is postulated as a reward for years invested in learning and the development of skills. Discrepancies between the two types of prestige evoke status anxiety and pose a threat to feelings of self-worth.

Discussion

The reconstruction of the contents of social representations of work basically confirms the results of the EVS data analysis. At the same time, it significantly expands the revealed

repertoire of meanings associated with work and adds new elements. Both quantitative and qualitative data clearly indicate that work is primarily perceived in terms of income in contemporary Polish society. Good pay is seen as an essential feature of a good job. Financial categories are the basic ones used to think and discuss work and related issues, and they dominate over categories of self-expression and self-actualization, which would be a feature of a post-materialistic society and the most evident marker of a transition to post-materialistic values in the context of work (Inglehart and Welzel 2005).

Good pay is a key component of a good job because it is seen as a gateway for the values that are truly sought: stability and safety. Both these features seem to be lacking under the present circumstances: our respondents did not feel that their current job gave them stability or safety. They believed that income in Poland is persistently too low and experienced anxiety about the future based on income-related insecurity. This explains their materialistic values. On the other hand, although the representations employed to think and talk about work referred to basic (materialistic) needs, the way they were used throughout the discussions (both in the individual and group interviews) revealed in-depth layers of meanings. The remuneration received for work was treated as an indicator of social recognition—an overly low salary was believed to show a lack of respect for the effort devoted to work tasks and directly affected self-perception. The implication is that the issue of pay is closely bound to self-esteem.

The search for social recognition and the linking of work achievements with personal dignity corresponds with the post-materialistic value of self-actualization through occupational life. However, in this context, self-actualization is neither understood in Inglehart's terms, nor does it acquire meanings in accord with contemporary "management ideologies" (see Bendix 1956; Marody and Lewicki 2010). These notions present work as a sphere of human development, to use Inglehart's expression (Inglehart and Welzel 2005). Through work, individuals are supposed to develop their own potential and enhance themselves. The analysis of social representations indicates that the actually dominant meanings of work diverge from the above reasoning. On the one hand, work is perceived through the lens of interpersonal contacts and social bonds. In this context, the workplace is considered to be a sphere of self-actualization and self-expression if it becomes a ground for community and communal feelings, giving access to psychological benefits deriving from social anchoring. On the other hand, work is simultaneously juxtaposed with the self and its attributes, which confirms earlier observations (Karlińska and Sawicka 2019). Our respondents clearly separated two spheres of activities: work and "real" life. The relationship between the self and work is presented as antagonistic: work deprives the self of authenticity and limits possibilities for the development of the self.

This suggests that self-actualization is believed to be a function of intimate bonds, either at work or at home: only through the positive emotions deriving from close contacts with other people can the "true" self be developed—primarily in relationships with friends, family, and, most of all, children, where the "real" self can be revealed. In this respect, time becomes the key issue: time is perceived as an extremely valuable, limited resource which may be devoted either to work or to activities through which individuals can both express and construct their own selves, for instance, when spending time with their family. Alternatively, self-actualization could potentially be achieved through work corresponding with

personal interests, which would allow for self-expression. However, our respondents believed that such occupations were scarcely available in reality, and that such work was an unrealistic possibility. This explains why Poland as a society ranks low in terms of work centrality: work is expected not so much to contribute to the self as not to collide with other life goals (Marody et al. 2019). A key threat is that work will colonize the self if too much time is spent on it.

The analysis of social representations of work and of their uses by our respondents also revealed a new realm of meanings beyond Inglehart's categorization, which divides values into those connected with survival or self-expression. These other meanings are related to the issue of social stratification and recognition. To some extent, work is still perceived as a factor that determines the shape of the social structure and the social position that an individual may claim, but the way in which occupational activity translates into social status is by no means obvious. The analysis reveals two coexisting kinds of justifications for status claims, rooted in intersecting sets of meanings: one is market related and justifies status claims based on an individual's potential level of consumption, whereas the other, the "moral" justification, ascribes value according to the effort invested in work.

Level of income translates into capacity for consumption (Omay and Omay 2015; Swadźba 2017). In the case of Polish society, consumption capacity is still perceived quite simply, in terms of access to selected comestibles. However, our analysis demonstrates that the ability to achieve a certain level of consumption has essential significance: it is a factor of social inclusion, transforming individuals into members of society in their full right. On the one hand, this phenomenon reflects Bauman's (2006) argument that consumption is now a key component of a "normal life" and enables full social participation. On the other hand, Bauman also claims that consumption in contemporary societies replaces work in the process of structuring society into a system of social positions. In his view, work is important insofar as it provides internal satisfaction and self-actualization. In contrast, our analysis indicates that work is an essential intermediary variable—different levels of consumption can be achieved by a variety of strategies, for instance, by living on welfare benefits, by hard and regular work, or by illegitimate means of enrichment. In this sense, work is not the only path to consumption: both welfare benefits and other means of enrichment enable consumption and thus social inclusion in Bauman's sense. However, work is the only legitimized strategy and the only gateway to morally acceptable consumption.

The presumed but unclear relationship between work, consumption, and social status gives rise to what de Botton (2004) calls "status anxiety." Our respondents experienced different kinds of status anxiety depending on their level of education. In the case of the better educated individuals, status anxiety derived from the discrepancy between the symbolic and financial prestige of their occupations. In the case of the less educated employees, status anxiety was generated by the belief that work was not the sole means of access to resources and consumption. In both cases, status anxiety was fueled by a lack of certainty that the effort invested in the past in education or currently in work would actually pay off.

A key strategy for dealing with these feelings followed the lines of a process that Mrozowicki (2017) called the "moralization of class divisions." References to work are employed in the process of boundary work and the construction of social divisions, as is especially visible in the case of the less educated respondents. They divide the social space into

two crucial categories: “decent people,” living morally, that is, working, and “cheaters,” who avoid work and gain resources through other strategies. The category of cheaters is further divided into the elite, who lead luxurious lives deriving from illegitimate enrichment, and the poor, who live fairly comfortably thanks to welfare benefits and other financial transfers. The recipients of welfare benefits are perceived as “free riders” who exist at the expense of hard-working people. Thus, social stratification is described with reference to moral terms.⁸

Conclusions

The analysis presented here shows that modern Polish society does not fit into simple dichotomies, including the one that perceives the process of social development as stretching between materialistic and post-materialistic values. On the one hand, based on the quantitative data, Polish society could be classified as halfway between the materialistic and post-materialistic orientation as far as work is concerned. On the other hand, this observation does not fully explain Polish attitudes toward work: the qualitative data reveals the full spectrum of meanings attributed to work and thus allows us to make sense of the ways in which work is valued. The qualitative investigation demonstrates that although the language used to talk and think about the social reality of work employs materialistic categories, the meanings conveyed pertain to issues that go beyond materialistic values: self-esteem, dignity, social statuses, and symbolic categorizations, of authenticity and self-actualization, that is, terms in which post-materialistic values may be expressed. The analysis of work through the lens of social-representations theory reveals ambiguities in the cognitive categories by which social reality is described and interpreted and suggests that Polish society, although firmly rooted in materialism, is also influenced by other discourses referring to competing systems of values.

The analysis presented here is based on the notion of social representations. As Moscovici (1988) suggested, social representations are rarely consistent and coherent: each aspect of social reality might be represented in a variety of ways, inducing different emotions and practices. One path for future research would be an in-depth analysis of the internal differentiation of the representations of work identified and reconstructed here.

⁸ However, in our analysis, contrary to Mrozowicki’s understanding (2017), the moralization does not pertain to class divisions in the strict sense, that is, in the understanding adopted by Marx or Bourdieu. First, boundary work is performed primarily to construct moral dividing lines. This is especially visible in the case of less educated groups of people, who refer to the symbolic category of working people (“decent people”) and contrast it with categories that could be referred to as either the underclass or the elite (“cheaters”). In this sense, the reference is not a simple reference to a class division but a symbolic categorization through which a reference group is both constructed in the discourse and used for means of comparison. Second, analyses conducted in terms of class categories assume that the experience of work is closely connected with a person’s situation on the labor market. In contrast, our analysis demonstrates that differentiating our respondents in structural terms of education translated into their different social representations of work throughout the interviews, but the meanings embedded in these representations overlapped (for instance, effort used as a symbolic differentiating factor). Furthermore, the level of aspirations and visions of a “good life” were similar, with the respondents stressing stability and a sense of security, but not necessarily luxury.

Methodological Note

This study was based on an analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data pertaining to the meanings of work. We used a mixed-methods approach employing an explanatory design (the follow-up explanations model) (see [Creswell, Plano Clark 2010](#)), based on a two-phase analysis in which the qualitative data allowed for understanding and expanding on the quantitative results ([Creswell, Plano Clark et al. 2003](#)). This was the guiding principle of the project generating the data utilized in the study: it encompassed both a quantitative survey and a body of qualitative interviews, which were seen as a means to provide in-depth explanations for the results obtained through the quantitative methods. In this study the quantitative analysis of comparative data allowed Polish attitudes to work to be placed in the wider context of European trends pertaining to the significance, centrality, and values attributed to work (including the differentiation between extrinsic and intrinsic values—see: [Gesthuizen, Kovarek, and Rapp 2019](#)). This component of the analysis followed examples of studies, for instance, by [Inglehart and Welzel \(2005\)](#), which focused on the distribution of values and meanings of work across different social categories or countries. However, as the key point of interest of the present study was the process of constructing and attributing meanings to work, in the qualitative part of the analysis we focused on social representations of work, which are perceived here as intermediary between values, and on both practice and declarations pertaining to values.

The quantitative data was provided by the European Values Study (EVS)—an international research project which has included Poland since 1990. The fieldwork for the most recent survey was conducted at the end of 2017 by CBOS (Public Opinion Research Centre). The sample was randomly drawn from the PESEL (national identification number) register; the sample size was 1,352 persons and the sample was representative of the adult residents of Poland. The questionnaire concerned a variety of issues, including work, family, leisure, religion, the economy, culture, and politics. In the comparative analysis regarding work significance and centrality, only data for the EU countries included in the 2017 edition was taken into consideration.

The qualitative data was obtained from two sources. The first was a series of 12 focus-group interviews (FGI) conducted in three Polish cities (a metropolis, a medium-sized city, and a small city) in April 2018, with four interviews in each. Each of these groups was composed of eight persons, with an equal ratio of men to women. They included people of different educational levels (ranging from vocational to university education). All of the respondents were currently employed (apart from the members of the last group, who were retired). Nine of these groups' respondents were recruited based on their political views (FGI 1 to FGI 3—supporters of the current government, Law and Justice; FGI 4 to FGI 6—supporters of the main opposition party, Civic Platform; FGI 7—persons who voluntarily chose not to participate in recent elections; FGI 8 to FGI 9—supporters of other minority parties). The respondents of the remaining three groups were selected based on various characteristics, such as young age and having a mortgage (FGI 10), subordinate position in a workplace hierarchy (FGI 11), or older age—above 65 years (FGI 12). The second source was a set of 29 individual quasi-biographical interviews with respondents of different ages, genders, levels of education, and places of residence. The sample included people living in

various large Polish cities, well-educated people, and people without any formal education based in the rural regions of the country. The oldest of the respondents was 80 years old, the youngest was 20. Although the composition of samples for qualitative interviews is hardly ever representative of the entire population of a country, the broad choice of respondents and the compilation of two data-collection techniques provided access to a variety of voices and perspectives present in Polish society.

The interviews were not strictly focused on the issue of work. The semi-structured discussion that took place during the FGIs pertained to respondents' general opinions and feelings about the quality of their lives, their expectations, current living conditions in Poland and abroad, and the values and aims that the country should pursue in the future. The IDIs concerned the respondents' individual life trajectories, by which the respondent became "who she or he is right now," their general opinions about life in contemporary Poland, and their visions of the country's future, their family's future, and their own. However, in both cases, direct questions about work were included in the interview scenarios. More importantly, the issue of work emerged as a key subject and was raised by the respondents in other parts of the interviews as well.

The qualitative analysis followed the thematic content analysis (TCA) approach (Braun & Clarke 2006). The coding was conducted independently using Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software Atlas.ti 8 (Friese 2019) by two researchers and allowed the key social representations of work emerging from the data to be identified. The semantic relations between the themes (representations) were established, which enabled connections between the representations—both discrepancies and discontinuity—and mutual reinforcement to be revealed.

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