



The study of occupations: Issues and contributions

O estudo das ocupações: Questões e contribuições

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Recebimento: 1 de julho de 2021

Aprovação: 5 de agosto de 2021

Publicação: 23 de setembro de 2021

Abstract: This article revisits studies of occupations and discuss major theoretical debates within and across different disciplines that are concerned with occupations. Recognising this centrality of work to people's lives, it examines how occupations are understood and how it is an important subject to study and still a challenging subject to be analysed. It argues that the potential contribution of studies of work and occupations can be well developed when analysed through the lens of Labour Process Analysis (LPA), as it is the tradition that attempts to present a picture of what people do and what is in the occupation, the nature of work. The main aim of this article is to review the existing literature on occupations and to acknowledge major contributions to the understanding of occupations. It will conclude by presenting a discussion on those key theoretical issues.

Keywords: Occupations; Labour Process Analysis; Identity.

Resumo: Este artigo revisita estudos sobre as ocupações e discute os principais debates teóricos dentro de diferentes disciplinas que se preocupam com esse tópico. Ao reconhecer a centralidade do trabalho na vida das pessoas, o artigo busca examinar como as ocupações são compreendidas e como este é um assunto importante e desafiador, que deve ser analisado. Argumenta-se que a potencial contribuição dos estudos sobre trabalho e ocupações pode ser bem desenvolvida quando analisada sob a ótica da Análise do Processo de Trabalho (APL), pois é a tradição que tenta apresentar um retrato do que as pessoas fazem e do que está na ocupação e na natureza do trabalho. O principal objetivo deste artigo é revisar a literatura existente sobre ocupações e reconhecer as principais contribuições para a compreensão das ocupações. Concluirá apresentando uma discussão sobre essas questões teóricas fundamentais.

Palavras-chave: Ocupações; Análise do processo de trabalho; Identidade.

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1. Introduction

The conceptual focus of this article is on the study of occupations. The rationale for the focus on occupations is that they are central to people's lives. Occupations are the main mediators between individuals and society (Krause, 1971) and their impact is felt on individual, organisational and societal levels. Occupations have been a common concern of many studies in different disciplines, bringing challenges in relation to the definition and classification of occupation.

The sociology of work and occupations and the related areas also study occupations and present a great contribution and wealth of knowledge of occupations. Those developments and explanations of occupations contribute to studies in different disciplines with different focus and purposes, each of them contributing with further understanding an occupation or an occupation holder. Conceptual developments in the wider study of work also impacted on the study of occupations. Those contributions highlight a component of some kinds of occupations thus providing a useful concept for differentiating between occupations. In addressing these issues, this study suggest that Labour Process Analysis (LPA) contributes to the study of occupations, and so the various bodies of thought within the LPA tradition.

The main aim of this article is to review the existing literature on occupations and to acknowledge major contributions to the understanding of occupations. It will first present the extant literature on issues on occupations and will conclude with a discussion on tkey theories.

2. Occupations Matter

Occupations matter. They matter to society, organisations and individuals. This is clear from the centrality of occupations in major theoretical debates that use occupations as a point of reference, as a data base and even as a variable in analysis of different specialities within sociology (Hall, 1983).

At a societal level, major social and political changes continue to impact on the way organisations are structured and the way people work and interact with wider society. As argued by Krause (1971), changes in the broader organisation of society bring changes to organisations that may

affect career opportunity and the pattern of job recruitment for the new generation of workers. There is no doubt that occupations play a central role in societies and that “occupations represent a meaningful focus in the lives of many people” (Lee, Carswell, & Allen, 2000, p. 799). There is no better or more relevant statement than Krause’s (1971) reflections on the importance of studying occupations:

In an era of political action and rapid social change, when all institutions of society are being re-examined, it is only natural that the central institution of work should come under scrutiny. Occupations and professions are among the main mediators between the individual and society. (Krause, 1971, p. 1).

Krause’s view remains relevant today. Occupational groups play a major role in the social and political spheres of society and thus occupations are worthy of systematic study, both as a process, and as a change-oriented group (Krause, 1971, p. 1) – occupations as societal “mediators” are in a constant process of development, impacting on and being impacted by social and political changes.

At an organisational level, global changes in the labour market today are causing the emergence of a new occupational structure while occupational practice is developing (Bruijn & Volman, 2000). Occupations may shape organisations as occupations provide one form of internal structuring or differentiation within organisations. There are two principles that shape the division of labour and the working relations in organisations: the occupational principle and the administrative principle.

The occupational principle prevails when “decisions about the appropriate bases and form of the division of labour, how to carry out tasks, and how to evaluate work outcomes are left primarily, if not entirely, in the hands of members of a designated occupational group”. The administrative principle prevails when “decisions about the organisation of work and execution of work tasks are vested in organisational agents based on their hierarchical position” (Tolbert, 2005, p. 330). For Watson (1995, p. 170), occupational groupings exist at different levels of the organisation and have implications for society as a whole and for social change; for members of these occupational groups in so far as the groups become collectivities; and, for the individuals engaged in a particular type of work.



At an individual level, it is important to note the impact of occupations. First, individuals may spend most of their time in an occupation thus making it of considerable importance to them. As Hughes suggests (1958, p. 7), “a man’s work is as good a clue as any to the course of his life, and to his social being and identity”. Research on occupations presents good insights into the meaning of occupation and its impact on individuals is informed by sociological perspectives of constructivist and post-structuralist writers such as Giddens (1991) and Goffman (1973).

In theorising the link between occupations and identity, Huot and Rudman (2010) explore the importance of occupations to being a person and to creating and maintaining an identity, which was theorised by Christiansen (1999). Second, there is a complex relationship between the individual and his/her occupation (Krause, 1971, p. 2). Indeed, the latter cannot be disregarded, as it is not possible to understand an occupation without understanding how the individual relates to, understands and identifies with it. This relationship is two way: occupations shape individuals but individuals also shape and make sense of occupations.

Krause criticises sociological approaches to studies of occupation and the individual, as for Krause (1971) sociologists frequently think of jobs or occupations seen as mere categories. This is because sociologists often develop their “own set of socio-economic categories or classes to help in their particular investigations . . . and occupations are brought together in such a way that we can expect incumbents to share in broadly similar market and work situations” (Watson, 1995, p. 175).

Early debates on deskilling and degradation of work have also touched on this issue. One example is Wood’s (1983) comments on debates on, after Braverman’s work, on deskilling. For Wood (1983), it is not possible to have “any general pronouncement” (1983, p. 7) about job redesign, for example, as it is not easy to compare the various aspects of control that vary from one group of workers to another. He exemplifies this with the case of engineers, that after a job redesign, on the one hand, they had more control of their work pace and time, and as individuals they were more visible to management, that on the other hand, had more control over them. In addition, there is a danger in such categorisation of occupations as in the case of skills, which is usually used to categorise occupations. For Wood (1983), there is a need to make a clear distinction between individual skills and the skills needed for a particular job, “as well as in between these and the labelling of particular



jobs as skilled. For certain tasks may be deskilled in content because of technological changes, yet this may not amount to the deskilling of any particular individual” (1983, p. 7).

In addition, occupations matter to individuals because of income. For Levenson and Zoghi (2010, p. 366), there are occupations that are highly correlated with income and this partly reflects the complexity of knowledge acquisition in order to learn specific tasks as well as that supply and demand factors are dissimilar across occupations (2010, p. 366). An occupation is also important as it is an indicator of social class and status to an individual. Prestige and status are derived from one’s job, as well as rewards and job satisfaction, which have great impact on individuals’ lives (Watson, 1995).

3. Definition Issues

Although some sociologists contend that the definition of occupation is of little concern to most people (Watson, 1995), this study acknowledges the importance of the definition as it has implications for how people define other people’s work. It is important to define occupations not only because of its importance as a sociological tool, but also because of its importance for the occupation holder (Watson, 1995). Definitions of occupations matter because they are used to categorise, delineate and measure the work people do.

In the English language, the meaning of the word *occupation* has varied through time. Citing the Oxford English Dictionary, Elias and McKnight (2001, p. 509) explain that from Middle English the word *occupation* was adapted to “denote the pursuit of mercantile employment, a trade, or craft”, but originally *occupation* was used essentially to signify “the possession of space”. The definition from Middle English is in accordance with the sociological perspective that occupation refers to an “economic” relation. Scott and Marshall (2009) explain the word *occupation* as “an economic role separated from household activity as a result of the growth of markets for labour”. This sociological statement can be clarified by examining the meaning of “work” and “job” (Barley & Kunda, 2001). Barley and Kunda argue that in pre-industrial society, work happened as people followed a natural flow of everyday life, “activities were governed by the cyclical rhythms of nature and the necessities

of living: the passing of the seasons, alternations of day and night, pangs of hunger, the need to mend torn clothing, and so on” (2001, p. 82). During the industrial revolution, work started to separate people’s activities: “Segments of the day were set aside for work and separated from family, community, and leisure by the punching of a time clock or a blast of a factory whistle” (2001, p. 82). People then started to separate work in time and space, as people would do work starting at a time and finishing by a set time and the work would be done routinely in a specific place. This “temporal and spatial localisation of work stimulated a change in the meaning of ‘job’ and gave rise to a larger lexicon for talking about work and the division of labour” (Barley & Kunda, 2001, p. 82). Therefore, the authors present a clear picture of pre-industrial society and when “job” became a task with ties to time and location. Abbott (1989) explains that, at that time: “only among craftsmen and soldiers were specific jobs attached to distinct identities and roles. People ‘did’ jobs; they did not ‘hold’ them. By the mid-twentieth century, however, ‘job’ had come to mean a role in a division of labour that was held for an indefinite period of time. Such jobs had clear beginnings, but no foreseeable end”.

This understanding of *job* complies with contemporary perceptions of what the word *occupation* means, the way people use their time in paid activity rather than what they are doing at a given moment. This perception of “holding” a job can also be interpreted, firstly, in relation to the social status or rank in which people find themselves, according to Elias and McKnight (2001, p. 509):

When asked what kind of work a person does, or what type of job he/she may have, the answer is likely to be detailed and/or precise. Asked for their occupation, however, and the reply might reflect more upon a long-term plan or indicate events on a broader time scale. For example: a claims assessment officer in an unemployment benefit office might well respond ‘civil servant’ when asked to state an occupation. Similarly, a university lecturer, professor, or researcher might simply respond ‘academic’.

Secondly, a job can be interpreted in relation to its location. As an example, Watson (1997) argues that most people who work can be assigned an occupation. However, the person may not define his/her job in relation to occupational membership, as sometimes “their location in the work organisation might be more salient than his/her occupational membership” (Watson, 1995, p. 171).

Watson (1995) illustrates with a situation when a stranger is asked “what do you do?” or “who do you work for?” as traditionally a person is located in society by the occupation assigned to him/her. However, sometimes, due to the “growth of bureaucratised work organisations the specific tasks in which a person is engaged and the skills which go with it become less relevant for many people than the organisation in which they are employed” (1997, p. 171). It is common to say that someone works “in an office”, or he works “at the university”, he works “for the council” and associate the person’s occupation to their place of work.

Hall provides a more generic definition of *occupation* from a sociological point of view, suggesting that “an occupation is the social role performed by adult members of society that directly and/or indirectly yields social and financial consequences and that constitutes a major focus in the life of an adult” (Hall, 1969, p. 5). Hall’s definition presents a limitation to the concept of occupation, as Hall (1969), as well as other authors, retains the idea of occupation related to paid activities.

Lee, Carswell and Allen (2000) present a conceptualisation of occupation as “an identifiable and specific line of work that an individual engages in to earn a living. . .” (2000, p. 800). They argue that an occupation is constituted by a range of skills, knowledge and duties, which make it different from another occupation. Lee *et al.*’s (2000) conceptualisation, although focusing attention on a definition of occupation as the “line of work that a person is engaged in over a particular period of time” (2000, p. 800), is also linked to the idea that people may hold more than one occupation during their lives (Lee *et al.*, 2000). Lee *et al.* add that “some types of work allow for multiple ways of constructing the occupation, e.g. a biology professor whose occupation could be educator, biologist, or professor of biology”. Lee *et al.*’s (2000) discussion adds to the limitation identified in the previous definition presented, as it lacks attention to the relation of the work to the occupation holder, his identification with the occupation. It is important to mention, though, that Lee *et al.* (2000) present considerations with regards to the importance of occupation and its concept in analysing occupational commitment. They also argue that “the terms occupation, profession and career have been used somewhat interchangeably in the commitment literature”. However, Lee *et al.* find more appropriate to their analysis of occupational commitment the notion presented above and they add that they

“prefer occupation over profession simply because it is more general, encompassing both professionals and non-professionals” (2000, p. 800).

This article adopts Watson’s (1997, p. 171) definition of occupation, that is, the “engagement on a regular basis in part or the whole of a range of work tasks which are identified under a particular heading or title by both those carrying out these tasks and by a wider public”. This operational definition is a useful definition of occupation and this study restricts occupations to paid employment only. This study acknowledges, however, Watson’s (1997, p. 170) comments that a definition has therefore to “take into account that whether or not any given work activity is to be regarded as an occupation depends in part on the decisions made by those doing the tasks and also by the wider public as to whether such identity is to be bestowed”.

From reviewing the definitions of occupations, it is clear that the main definition of *occupation* is rooted firmly in the idea of paid activity (Hall, 1969; Elias & McKnight, 2001; Scott & Marshall, 2009). Those definitions are limited as they are confined to conceptualisations of work that are based on the contradictions of paid and unpaid work and public and private (Bottero, 2005), failing “to engage with the complexity of people’s working lives, and, in particular, with how work is embedded in other social practices” (Bottero, 2005, p. 56).

Definitions such as Watson’s (1997), that an occupation encompasses various kinds of activities, paid and non-paid ones, have benefits as they present a conceptualisation of occupation that also considers the wide social relationship in which the occupational holder is involved. Although the definitions that rest on the economic labour market characteristics of an occupation, that is “the skill, pay, and labour market conditions of different jobs” (Bottero, 2005, p. 56) that are valuable, they do not consider that the meaning of holding an occupation might be affected by the “social identity, networks and life trajectory of the people in that job” (Bottero, 2005, p. 56). For example, an important view that occupations are more than paid activities can be seen in stratification research as it looks at occupations and their social location.



4. Classification Issues

Beyond issues of defining occupations *per se*, there are challenges in classifying different occupations in relation to each other. There are, of course, a number of standardised classification systems for occupations in the United Kingdom (UK) and those classifications are used for a variety of purposes. “Occupational classifications are essentially ways of grouping and ranking jobs and occupations” (Scott & Marshall, 2009: 523). Occupation data is used by government departments to provide an understanding of the workforce and the skills identified among workers; it is also used for comparative purposes, as government analysis may, for example, compare ethnic and religious populations; in addition it is used “to compile mortality statistics by occupation and for analysis of small groups in society” (Final recommended questions for the 2011 census, 2011, p. 17). Therefore, occupation information is a major way of providing data on the labour market on socio-economic issues. “Other uses of occupation data are as a measure of deprivation and to aid service provision such as skills and training to areas of need. It is also required to monitor and help forecast future occupational structures and hence skill and training needs” (Final recommended questions for the 2011 census, 2011, p. 17). In addition, as Levenson and Zoghi (2010, p. 386) add, classifications are also used by organisations and employees to aid their communication on job content:

Classifications are used by both firms and workers to facilitate communication about the content of a job, which promotes more efficient screening of potential job applicants than otherwise might occur. The job requirements associated with any given occupation (e.g. doctor, lawyer, accountant, labourer, secretary, teacher, computer programmer) also provide a road map for those seeking to enter the occupation, whether by formal schooling, on the job training, or both. Without occupation classifications, therefore, there would be much less efficient resource allocation in the labour market.

One classification system existing in the UK is the Standard Occupation Classification – SOC. It was first developed in 1990, was reshaped in 2000 and revised more recently in 2010. The nine SOC categories are based on the concept of job and on skills (Thomas & Elias, 1989; Anderson, 2009; Elias & McKnight, 2001). The conceptual basis of the SOC remains the same in the revised version



in 2010. It is based on the classification of jobs in terms of skill level and skill content with skill in this context defined “in terms of the nature and duration of the qualifications, training and work experience required to become competent to perform the associate tasks in a particular job” (ONS, 2010, p. iv). The concept of job is defined for the SOC purposes as a “set of tasks or duties to be carried out by one person, the notion of a job represents a basic element in the employment relationship” (ONS, 2010, p. 2). The SOC is commonly used for statistical applications. Thomas and Elias (1980, p. 1) note that there are two important statistical applications: “to show how employment skills and activities are distributed and contribute to the economy; and to give an indication of the lifestyle, earnings or social position of workers and their households by reference to the type of work they do.” Given this aim, the classification of occupations should be:

. . . practical and reliable both in statistical applications and in client-oriented applications such as job-placement and vocational guidance. It should yield reliable results when used to code job titles and descriptions from sources such as censuses, surveys and vital registration and should not depend on types of information or levels of detail which are not typically present in such sources. (Thomas & Elias, 1980, p. 18)

However, there are concerns that the SOC fails to present clear and reliable data on occupations. Although the SOC aims to categorise an occupation within an occupational classification, it does not assist in presenting a clear and accurate coding. The lack of clear distinction in terms of occupational categories represents a challenge in analysing occupational groups. The SOC is limited in its framework by a lack of information on skills changes in some occupational groups (Anderson, 2009). However, the SOC2000 framework “accommodates all UK jobs and is a practical, albeit somewhat crude, vehicle for examining broad patterns across occupational clusters...” (Anderson, 2009, p. 171). Another limitation in the SOC becomes evident when it is used for research purposes, as the main reason for its development was “to provide a genuinely common structure and method of occupational classification for use in government” (Thomas & Elias, 1989). In research, it is used mainly for quantitative analysis (Abbott, 2005) and researchers cannot rely on the SOC when more accurate information on occupations or on occupation holders needs to be developed.



Another criticism of the SOC relates to its outdated information, considering that occupations are in a constant process of change. As argued by Scott and Marshall (2009, p. 524) “social and economic change continually modifies the occupational structure and limits the capacity of any particular classification to reflect this structure over time”, thus creating a tension “between the need for continuity in the application and the use of an occupational classification, thereby providing a stable framework for analysis of trends, and the need for revision of the classification, ensuring the classification is sufficiently up-to-date in terms of its definition, interpretation and use. . .” (Elias & Birch, 2010, p. 18). It is possible to challenge occupational classifications which researchers use to chart occupational trends from categories developed for other purposes and for an economy of over a decade ago. Therefore, the SOC needs to be continually updated (Thomas & Elias, 1989).

Another classification system in the UK is the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification – NS-SEC – used for official statistics and surveys. It is well accepted internationally and considered “conceptually clear”, developed from a sociological classification referred to as the “Goldthorpe Schema” (National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification, page 2). The NS-SEC was developed to measure employment relations and conditions of occupations. “Conceptually, these are central to showing the structure of socio-economic positions in modern societies and helping to explain variations in social behaviour and other social phenomena” (page 3). The aims of the NS-SEC are “to differentiate positions within labour markets and production units in terms of their typical ‘employment relations’. Among employees, there are quite diverse employment relations and conditions, that is, they occupy different labour market situations and work situations.” (National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification, page 3). Adapting from the ‘Final recommended questions for the 2011 census’ (2010, pp. 15-16), listed below are the main usages of the NS-SEC data, which adds to the types of usages of classifications systems, as data is used:

1. to enable research and identify the impact of targeted policy initiatives on specific groups in society;
2. to understand social patterns, local labour markets, employment and unemployment and to develop policies in these areas especially at local and regional levels;



3. in the development of research and policy to understand how social positions are linked to other policy areas covered by the census, such as health, ethnicity, migration, qualifications, education and transport;

4. for the purposes of resource allocation at central and local government level; used in policy development and monitoring, to improve service provision and inform various strategies such as economic development and community regeneration strategies;

5. as a measure of deprivation, to measure inequalities, to understand social patterns and local labour markets and develop policies in these areas.

NS-SEC is an occupationally based classification but provides coverage of the entirety of the adult population. The information required to create NS-SEC is occupation coded to the unit groups of SOC2000 and details of employment status: whether an employer, self-employed or employee; whether a supervisor; and the number of employees at a workplace (National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification, page 3). Contrary to the claim of being a “conceptually clear” classification, some of its classes are contested by researchers, as they might be classes that are formed by a wider number of occupations, arguably reducing the accuracy of the classification. One example is class number 3, Intermediate occupations. There is no agreement in the literature regarding the precise definition of intermediate occupations. This category describes a broader range of occupations that “fall below the rank of professional and management jobs and above the partly skilled and unskilled occupations” (Elias & Bynner, 1997). Other researchers, such as Anderson (2009), derive a skill-sensitive definition of intermediate occupations from other forms of classification. Both the SOC and NS-SEC are, however, useful tools for governments as well as research. As noted by Anderson (2009, p. 171), the SOC is considered a useful tool for “undertaking a skill-sensitive analysis of occupational transformations” and the NS-SEC enables research and policy development.

Despite the evidence of the usefulness of the occupational classification for statistical purposes, there is no consensus as to whether those classifications are useful for empirically based work aimed at understanding the content and context of a specific category of occupation. It is questionable whether it is possible to do a detailed and accurate coding of a category. When the coding is accurate, problems such as “male bias” is avoided, as argued by Scott and Marshall (2009).

They question the embodied “male bias” in most occupational classifications, arguing that this bias is reflected:

. . . in the way occupations are distinguished, grouped, and ranked. Occupations filled largely by women are frequently grouped together at a very low level of aggregation (as for example in the case of clerical occupations) so that they cannot subsequently be disaggregated and relocated as circumstances change. Similarly, the skill and status level of occupations dominated by women may be underestimated, possibly distorting the location of such occupations in some subsequent derived status qualifications (2009, p. 524).

In addition, the occupational classifications presented may not reproduce the actual state of a given occupation, considering that occupational structure is in constant change and social and economic changes continually alter occupational structure (Scott & Marshall, 2009). Indeed, classifications present and induce studies in “mechanical nature” (Krause, 1971), as they present unconnected categories and disregard its *raison d'être*. It also seems to consider more the functioning of the system in which the occupations operate than the individual in the system and their relationship and the social interactions involved. In the existing classifications, it is noted that occupations are brought in a way that it is expected that all occupation holders share the same characteristics and context of the labour market and work situation and experience. This is due to conceptualisation of the SOC, based on the *job*, the set of employment tasks, “different from classifying a person directly in terms of skills or experience” (Thomas & Elias, 1989, p. 16).

Notwithstanding the lack of consensus as to whether those classifications are sufficient for empirically based work, they represent the starting point for any analysis of occupations. However, this article brings this reflection and argues whether classifications contribute to a better understanding of occupations and advocates for a broader approach that allows for greater appreciation and understanding of occupations, not just in terms of job content and skills, but also in terms of how context and individual factors impact on occupations.



5. Labour Process Analysis

One important impact of Marx's ideas on modern work and organisational sociology is the use of his concept of 'labour process' which is a "perspective which combines interests in employee behaviour, employment relations and questions of work design and organisation" (Watson, 2012, p. 69).

Historically, LPA brought together a range of post-Braverman debates on the labour process. It concerns the dynamics of work started since the publication of Braverman's (1974) *Labour and Monopoly Capital* and as noted by Smith (2009, p. 5), "part of a labour process perspective directly given by Braverman's methodology is to look 'behind' the claims of formal classifications and espoused management paradigms and this still informs contemporary debates about a supposed break from Taylorism". Braverman's thesis was that the pursuit of capitalist interests resulted in the deskilling, routinizing and mechanising of the jobs. Considering workplace and employment relations as dynamic issues, "the notion of the workplace as a contested terrain is a central motif of Labour Process Theory" (Thompson & Harley, 2007, p. 149). In considering the contested nature of employment relationships, LPA looks at a number of features as important elements analysing the dynamics of work:

Work tasks and their constitution (including the routine of repetitive or fragmentary work tasks), skill use and control over the method and performance of work (including the deskilling of particular jobs and application of technologies), the intensity of work and the degree of effort exercised by workers in the course of their work, and the level and type of control exercised by management over labour and the labour process (Webster, 1996, p. 19).

Feminist researchers interested in the labour processes of women were usually concerned with more features than the core ones of labour process analysis (Webster, 1996, p. 19) such as the gender content of jobs as well as the workers' experiences. Gender is also important in relation to concepts of control systems. As argued by Thompson (1983, p. 230), "there has been a considerable extension of our understanding of the interrelations between gender and control in the labour process", as gender

is also present in studies on job design and contemporary studies on femininity shaping control practices in the workplace. Although the focus of this study is not on gender issues and although LPA is considered a useful framework, this study considers the relevance of LPA and its contribution to the studies of occupations. However, it extends LPA to include other relevant elements in order to analyse occupations more holistically.

Studies informed by LPA are found useful and appropriate for examining the dynamics of occupational work and it is conventionally used to analyse detailed features of work and the experiences of workers. Some groups of occupations and professions are also studied through those lenses, such as the studies of commercial airline pilots (Maxwell & Grant, 2018) and the work of data scientists (Avnoon, 2021).

LPA thinkers also debated a lack of subjectivity in the Labour Process tradition (Marks & Thompson, 2010). Identity has been the “missing subject” (Thompson & Findlay, 1996) cited in debates of LPA where concerns were related to “how to fill in the hole originally left by Braverman’s objectivism – his self-limiting choice to omit consideration of worker action and attitudes in relation to what he regarded as the long run tendency to work degradation” (Marks & Thompson, 2010, p. 316).

Referring to the analysis of identity within the LPA tradition and as an attempt to further develop a “materialistic reading of identity”, Marks and Thompson (2010) argue that identity has become the focal point of concern across social sciences. They refer to the interest in the connection of identity to mainstream LPA by citing important work developed on the perspective of identity “that can bring something different to the debate and which are compatible with the tradition of LPA” (Marks & Thompson, 2010, p. 318). Among those who added to this debate, they cite Webb’s (2006) contribution to the debate on identities and organisations. Webb (2006, p. 2) argues that “our sense of self and social identities are significantly shaped by our experiences of organisations, our dependence on them for political, economic and cultural infrastructure, and our development of new organisational expertise that reshapes societies”. It is argued that the discussion on work and the debate on identities and how they are shaped and dependent on organisations is again, as raised by Hinings (2005) with reference to the studies on professional organisations, focused on the



organisational-self more than the self in the organisation. There is a growing body of insightful research that gives work the importance it has for people's lives.

6. Conclusion

This article brought, as its main aim, a reflection on the existing literature on occupations and acknowledged major contributions to the understanding of occupations.

Conceptual developments in the wider study of work also impacted on the study of occupations. Those contributions highlight a component of some kinds of occupations thus providing a useful concept for differentiating between occupations. One important aim of this article, however, is to raise the argument that the literature on occupation, as mentioned in this article, needs to consider more deeply a detailed examination of the experience of occupational working from the point of view of the occupation holder.

The contention that occupations matters is a powerful one. Krause (1971) discussed people's relationship to their occupation or profession, and the idea that we cannot understand an occupational group by enclosing it in "a specific time and organisation" (p. 3) and not considering the individual's relationship to his/her occupation. For Krause (1971, p. 2), this relationship "is complex, some dimensions of it being conscious and others unconscious". Krause's arguments strengthen the idea that an occupation cannot be understood if the individual is not considered, not even the complexities involved in the individual's relationship with his/her occupation. A criticism that this study raises is that the sociology of work and occupations and the related areas that also analyse occupations present a conceptual lack with regard to the understanding of occupation as a holistic entity. There is a lack of theoretical development in the direction of understanding occupation, the meaning ascribed by the person to it, the way a person experiences and understands the occupation and the way the context in which the person is inserted may affect or not the perception of the occupation experience.

It is acknowledged here the importance and contribution of studies in many disciplines that consider occupations as being important to the life of people and to the analysis of work. However,

it is questionable whether many studies present a holistic analysis of occupations as a way of understanding them. That is, despite the richness of many analyses of occupations there is still a gap to be explored. This gap relates to a holistic study that provides a deeper and more embedded insight into people's work – their work content, context, and lived experience – by prioritising the voice of the occupation holder. One should argue that theoretical and conceptual debates in the field of the sociology of occupations should not separate conceptual developments from “empirical reality” (Hall, 1983).

It can be concluded with a proposition that those classifications and the common definitions of occupations fail to address the rich and complex world of people's experience at work. It is suggested here that the concept of occupation is embedded in this holistic view of occupational work, holistic meaning that occupations are not only a group of tasks, but that occupations are constituted by the content of work, the context in which work is experienced and by the individual lived experience. These three dimensions are interconnected and together they may present a way forward to understand an occupation and its complexities. The literature has been stimulating more empirical work on occupations from a wider range of perspectives. It is suggested that future research may well assess multiple dimensions of change over many occupations, the nature of their work and their experience, as some debates have not been sensitive to particular themes nor particular occupations.

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