Mapping the Contours of Work

Perhaps more than any other quality, the ability to plan, organize, and collectively engage in work sets human beings apart from other species. Work occupies most of our waking hours, is a crucial part of identities, and influences life chances. At the same time, work creates problems in lives and, at its worst, can become a life sentence to grinding toil in jobs that offer few intrinsic rewards and little financial compensation. Our understanding that work can liberate, but also enslave—and seeing both possibilities exemplified in the modern economy—inspired us to write this book. We wanted to take stock of work today—to consider the types of work opportunities available, chart how these jobs emerged, and gauge the impact workplace practices have on lives on and off the job. Beyond this, we wanted to reflect on how work could be organized so that it makes sense—so that it provides the resources people need and contributes meaning to their lives.

This chapter begins this discussion by considering “the contours of work.” These contours can be thought of as the terrain on which work opportunities are distributed and traversed. The metaphor of contours is useful because, like geographic topographies, work opportunities have been etched into the landscape by long-term historical forces. Some of these forces resulted in profound changes, wherein old ways of working have been abandoned and new methods introduced. This type of radical transformation occurred in the Industrial Revolution of the early 19th century, and some argue that computer and communication technologies are having a similar effect today (e.g., Castells 2000; Piore and Sabel 1984). Other forces, however, shape opportunity landscapes in a more gradual, ongoing, and cumulative process. Gender, with its constantly evolving meanings and practices, is one such force; so is race.
Changing Contours of Work

To consider the impact of social forces on work, we introduce here a shorthand distinction that we will use throughout this book: the division between the old and new economies. This dichotomy helps us identify the very real changes that occurred in work in the latter part of the 20th century, including the introduction of computer technologies, the expansion of a global economy, shifts in the composition of the workforce, new organizational and managerial paradigms, and other changes that we will introduce in the chapters to come. The old economy represents the various ways of assigning and structuring work that developed in the wake of the Industrial Revolution through the mid-20th century. These features include systems that were built around mass production, gendered divisions of labor, unionized labor, and a variety of other enduring workplace practices. The concept of a new economy is intended to pose the question of whether the nature of work has changed, and if it has, the extent to which these changes have affected lives on and off the job. Our frame of reference throughout this book is the changing contours of work in the United States, but as they are connected to the redistribution of opportunities in the global economy.

Although we use the term “new economy,” we have come to conclude that many of the present-day contours reflect the way work evolved in the old economy. Those arguing that there has been a “second industrial revolution” often ignore this. There are new jobs, new workers, and new work designs, and these are changing some of the contours of the economy. But many of the features introduced by the old economy remain. These “old” features are not simply vestiges destined eventually to die out; they are thriving and may be permanent features of the new economy that will continue to develop during the 21st century. Sometimes these old and new features are combined, for example, when old work practices are moved from the developed world to the developing world. The jobs may have not changed fundamentally, but the people who are performing them have. In Chapter 2, we consider the issue of the old and new economies in greater detail and assess the extent to which the new economy has changed and the extent to which it has remained the same.

Our discussion in this chapter is directed to identifying the dominant social forces that shape work opportunity. We organize this discussion by considering three interlocking concerns:

- **Culture**—meaning systems that attach individuals to work, harness their commitments, and direct their efforts.
- **Structure**—opportunities, as well as constraints, that shape what types of jobs can be pursued, and by whom, and the returns received.
- **Agency**—people’s efforts, whether as individuals or in groups, to direct their own biographies, shape the lives of others, and respond to and sometimes modify the structure and culture of work.
To open this discussion, we consider the lives of four workers laboring in the new economy, and the rewards, strains, and constraints work produces in their lives. As you read these examples of what work is like in the new economy, reflect on the ways current opportunity structures fail to provide the resources needed, and think about how work provides meaning but also disrupts lives. The challenge, we argue throughout this book, is considering the best means of bringing culture, structure, and human initiative into harmony. In other words, the goal is to reduce the incompatibilities between how work is arranged and what workers can bring to—and receive from—their work.

Scenes From the New Economy

The experiences of Eileen, Dan, Jamal, and Chi-Ying reveal how work lives on and off the job are being shaped by the contours of the new economy. All of these cases illustrate that the effects of historical change (in this case the transition to a new economy) can vary depending on its timing with respect to an individual’s biography, as well as to his or her gender, class, and race (Elder 1999; Moen 2001b). Their lives are unfolding as new opportunities are being introduced, and as old opportunities are being dismantled—a dynamic Matilda White Riley identified as “aging on the moving platform of history” (Riley and Riley 2000).

Exhibit 1.1  Eileen: A Mother Strives to Mesh a High-Powered Professional Career with Family Demands

Eileen is a busy professional engineer in large corporation. Early in her career, she worked 10- or 11-hour days while her husband was in school and continued to work long hours after he graduated. She was a dedicated professional and was on the fast track climbing the corporate career ladder—until she had her first child. At that point she decided that she should cut back on her hours, something she hadn’t originally planned to do. It wasn’t that she preferred being at home to being at work (she said being home was more “boring”) but she felt someone had to do it and her husband was reluctant to cut back his hours because he had less seniority.

She persuaded her boss to let her try working 60% of her normal hours on a trial basis. He reluctantly agreed. She worked this new schedule for a few months, but found that her boss still expected more output than she could give and that he was unhappy with the arrangement, even though she still was doing a good job in almost everyone else’s opinion.
Changing Contours of Work

When her company reorganized, Eileen was among the first to be laid off. After losing her job, she realized how much she loved her job and the extent to which being a full-time, stay-at-home mom did not suit her interests. She worked hard to find another job at the company, one that required her to return to full-time work. But life has not been easy. Her second child was born with health problems and she and her husband frequently face situations where someone has to leave work to attend to their son. Eileen would like to get another part-time arrangement, but knows that a part-time job where she works means no promotions. So, she continues to work full-time and to wonder why she has to feel bad about being away from work when her child is ill.


Exhibit 1.2 Dan: An Insecure Older Worker in a Declining Industry Strives to Salvage a Career

Dan had been an autoworker at GM’s Linden Plant in New Jersey for about 10 years. He started working there when he was just 20, thinking it would be just for a while, and he never really enjoyed the work. But, the money was good and he found himself thinking about working his way up to a supervisor’s position. While he was working at GM, Dan started a chimney sweep business on the side. He started out small and continued working at both jobs, especially after his wife had kids and quit her job. After a few more years of working two jobs, Dan realized that his GM job was in jeopardy; the union wasn’t as strong as it had been and there were rumors of cutbacks and layoffs. He stayed, though, since it didn’t seem that layoffs would happen tomorrow and his paycheck was important. Then, the company offered workers a buyout. Dan decided that, rather than risk losing his job and the buyout, he’d take advantage of the offer.

He used the buyout money to build up his chimney sweep business, buy new equipment, etc. He did really well at first, and initially felt he had made the right decision—he liked the work better and was making a good living. But, then the economy took a turn for the worse and his business struggled. He hung on by scrambling to find other odd jobs. He likes what he’s doing, but he wonders whether he made the right decision; he knows staying at GM meant doing a job he didn’t like, and he would have continued to worry about layoffs, but he also knows that his business could fail and that he’d have to start over again.

**Exhibit 1.3** Jamal: A Disadvantaged Young Worker Strives to Start a Career

**Jamal** is a 22-year old African-American man living in Harlem with his common-law wife. They live in a tiny, untidy one-room apartment where they have little more than heat and a place to sleep. Jamal didn’t finish high school and eventually got his G.E.D. He is intelligent and ambitious, but was not a dedicated student. He has worked since he was very young, partly because he was determined not to become like his mother, who had a drug addiction problem.

Despite putting a great deal of effort into finding work, he had very little luck finding a good job. The best position he was able to find was at a fast-food restaurant an hour’s commute away, which he found through some of his friends who also work there. The job doesn’t pay well (minimum wage) and he often is not able to secure the full 8-hour shift he needs to get by. His boss often sends him home after 5 hours, but sometimes expects him to work longer if needed, or less if business is slack.

Jamal and his wife do not get help from their parents. His mother-in-law is furious with her daughter for marrying Jamal, his father was never in his life, and his mother is a drug addict. He is pessimistic about his future, and expects to continue working in jobs like the one he has now. But, he keeps working; hoping that, maybe he will be one of the lucky few who gets a job in a car factory.


**Exhibit 1.4** Chi-Ying: A Daughter Strives to Carve a Career in an Industrializing Economy

**Chi-Ying** is a young peasant girl from a rural village in Northern China. Two years ago, she migrated to Shenzen in the South to work at an electronics plant. The work is hard and unpleasant, sometimes exposing her to hazardous fumes. She is required to work 11-hour shifts, and sometimes has to work overtime as well (or she might be fired). Being absent leads to fines and punishment, so she comes to work even if she’s ill. Her apartment is cramped, she lacks access to clean drinking water, and the air that she breathes is often a choking smog. This is the result of both lax regulation and the proliferation of highly polluting industries, which have transformed Shenzen from a rural countryside into an urban center within a few short decades.

Chi-Ying’s move to Shenzen was supposed to be temporary. Her parents actually arranged a marriage for her a year ago, but that fell apart when she said she wanted to continue working for a few more years. She had to use some of her own wages to pay the groom’s parents back for presents and gifts her family had received. Chi-Ying still wants to keep working at Shenzen, despite the hardships. She has her own income, which amounts to more than half of what her father earns back home as a farmer.

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For Eileen and Chi-Ying, economic changes have opened new opportunities, but they coexist with enduring sets of expectations about what mothers and daughters should provide to their spouses, parents, and children. These cultural orientations seem more appropriate to another era and lag behind what these workers ideally want for themselves and, in many instances, what they can provide for others. For Dan, the moving platform of history has introduced new career tensions because the types of jobs he performed during his entire career are becoming more difficult to find. Consequently, his income is in jeopardy, and he faces the daunting challenge of fitting himself into new lines of work that he has little experience performing (Sweet 2007). But because he was born in an earlier generation (and possibly also because he is of a different race), he has had opportunities not available to Jamal. Jamal is doing the “right thing,” working hard and trying to get ahead, but his opportunities are limited by the fact that good well-paid jobs that only require a limited education are disappearing in the new economy.

The careers of these workers are influenced by demands and social ties off the job. All these workers are making career decisions in the context of their linkages to others. In some circumstances, parents hold sway, whereas in other cases, it is the needs of spouses, children, or both (Neal and Hammer 2006; Sweet and Moen 2006). These life stage circumstances play an important role in shaping worker behavior, expectations, and needs. How people respond to these circumstances is heavily influenced by cultural scripts (e.g., assumptions about what parents should provide for their children) and the availability of resources (which varies from person to person, group to group). And beyond family ties, the context of neighborhoods and communities influences their abilities to find work, the resources to prepare for work, and the security to engage in work (Bookman 2004; Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002; Sweet, Swisher, and Moen 2006; Swisher, Sweet, and Moen 2005; Voydanoff 2007).

Culture and Work

Eileen presents an interesting case to consider because she is a worker who could potentially leave her job to tend to her children. She feels guilt about not

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Although she doesn’t have much time for leisure, she does have the opportunity to buy a few things for herself and to experience life outside her village. She has married a boy she met in Shenzen (who comes from her part of the country), and she knows she eventually will return. But, she is pleased that, unlike her grandmother, she has seen life in the city and has had a job of her own.

doing so, but chooses to stay in the labor force and retains ambivalent feelings about her choices. Understanding why workers like Eileen place such a strong emphasis on their work roles requires considering culture—the meaning system that surrounds work and shapes identities in respect to it.

Most classic theories of work embrace cultural perspectives that view labor, in and of itself, as a noble endeavor. Karl Marx (1964 [1844]), for example, argued that work is what distinguishes humans from other species, and highlighted how it enables people to transform their environment to suit human interests. Sigmund Freud (1961 [1929]) argued that work is a socially accepted means by which humans are able to direct their sublimated sexual energies. As such, he saw work as a means of achieving satisfaction when fulfillment in other parts of life is lacking or prohibited. Émile Durkheim (1964 [1895]) offered a different thesis, that work and the complex division of labor in society offered a means to create social cohesion. All these perspectives have in common the assumption that work has the potential to cement social bonds and advance the development of civilization.

But has work always been embraced by cultures as being a central role in people’s lives and the workings of societies? Anthropological and historical studies suggest otherwise. In many cultures, work is defined as the means for day-to-day survival. Subsistence economies operate on the basis of cultural assumptions that work is primarily a means to an end, so that once individuals have enough food and shelter, labor is expected to cease. Such an orientation to work in today’s American culture would indicate a moral weakness and be perceived as a threat to social order. But, from the point of view of many other cultures, our embrace of work could be considered pathological. If one can obtain enough to eat and gain sufficient shelter by working a few hours a day, so be it. Why should a hunter set out in search of game if the supply of food is adequate (Brody 2002; Sahlins 1972)?

One important cultural question concerns why work plays such a central role in some societies, but not in others. Part of the answer, according to Max Weber (1998 [1905]), is that the societies that were in the forefront of the industrial revolution had been swayed by changing religious doctrines. These religious beliefs, particularly those that underpinned the Protestant Reformation, created anxieties about one’s fate in the afterlife. In response, Western European and American culture advanced the value of the work ethic, a belief that work is not something people simply do, but is a God-given purpose in life. Devoting oneself to work and doing a good job were considered to be ways of demonstrating to oneself that a life of virtue reflects grace. And as members of these societies embraced the idea that work is “a calling,” they applied themselves to their jobs with greater vigor, creating wealth and affirming to themselves and others that God was looking favorably on their actions.
Although many now question Weber’s thesis that the Protestant Reformation was responsible for the emergence of capitalism, the central-ity of the work ethic to the development of Western society is widely accepted. So deeply is it ingrained in contemporary American culture that nearly three-quarters of Americans report that they would continue to work, even if they had enough money to live as comfortably as they would like for the rest of their lives. Americans work to affirm to themselves and others that they are virtuous, moral individuals, good people who deserve respect (Shih 2004). Conversely, those who choose not to work, or workers like Jamal who are unsuccessful in securing a job, are looked down upon and stigmatized. In American society, to be without work is to be socially suspect and unworthy of trust (Katz 1996; Liebow 1967).

Although the work ethic defines labor as a virtue, it also has pathological dimensions. The cultural embrace of work may be akin to the flame that attracts the moth. It is telling that many who can afford to work less, and who have the opportunities to do so, choose not to (Hochschild 1997). Psychologists call these individuals “workaholics,” (Machlowitz 1980), but as we discuss later in this book, many of those driven to work long hours do so because they are driven by organizational cultures that bestow rewards on those who live, breathe, and eat their jobs. The suspicion cast upon those who do not hold jobs has created pressures to force work upon those who get little benefit from it. Consider that welfare reform legislation, passed in the mid-1990s, requires even very poor mothers of young children to work to receive welfare assistance. This requirement defines mothering as “not work” (a concept we return to later) and accepts the fact that many of the affected mothers remain in poverty even after they are employed.

Thorstein Veblen (1994 [1899]) in The Theory of the Leisure Class observed that attitudes to work are bound up with materialistic values held in American culture. Markers of status include luxury autos, large homes, and expensive clothing. All these are conspicuously consumed, put on display to be seen and admired, and set standards for others to follow. By the mid-20th century, the drive to purchase social status had permeated American society, compelling workers to labor hard “to keep up with the Joneses” and their neighbors’ latest purchases (Riesman, Glazer, and Reuel 2001 [1961]). Contemporary American workers engage in the same status game that emerged in the late 19th century, but with new commodities (i.e., iPods, BMWs, and flat screen TVs). Their competition now expands beyond their neighborhoods, as they are literally saturated with media images of success and have developed numerous ways to accumulate debt (home equity loans, student loans, and credit cards) (Gergen 1991). The result, some have argued, is “affluenza,” the compulsion to purchase and spend beyond one’s means (Graff, Wann, and Naylor 2001). For some
members of the new economy, work has become the means to manage spiraling debts, incurred while striving to keep up with others who are also spending beyond their means (Schor 1998).

Culture also shapes the attitudes workers and employers have toward each other. One means by which it does this is by constructing social divisions and setting group boundaries. Racial and gendered divisions, for example, are based on assumptions that different social groups possess different capabilities. In turn, these beliefs contribute to the formation of self-fulfilling prophecies. Whether or not these differences were originally real is immaterial; as the early 20th-century American sociologist W. I. Thomas noted, what people believe is real often becomes real in its consequences (Thomas and Thomas 1928). As we discuss later in this book, these self-fulfilling prophecies about gender and race shape social networks, influence access to resources, and funnel people into different lines of work.

Culture even extends into the design and management of jobs and technologies. Consider, for example, the enduring legacy of scientific management. Frederick Winslow Taylor introduced this managerial philosophy (also known as Taylorism) at the beginning of the 20th century to increase the productivity of workers laboring in factories. He advocated the benefits of redesigning work to wrest control from workers and place it in the hands of management. His *Principles of Scientific Management* (1964 [1911]) argued for the separation of “thought” from “execution” to establish clear divisions between managers (whose job was to think and design) and workers (whose job was to carry out managers’ instructions). He used time-motion studies to decompose production jobs into the simplest component tasks, to increase worker speed and accuracy. And managers’ jobs were redefined to absorb worker skills into the machines and organization and to keep the flow of knowledge going in one direction—from the shop floor into managers’ hands. The result was the creation of legions of deskilled jobs, the dissolution of many craft skills, and a decline in the individual worker’s ability to control the conditions and rewards of work (Braverman 1974; Noble 1979; Pierykowski 1999). It also fostered distrust and hostility between workers and their bosses (Montgomery 1979).

Why did Taylor advocate this way of organizing work, given its obvious negative consequences for the quality of work life and its negative effects on labor-management relations? In part, it was a response to something real—the fact that workers often did not work as hard as they could. His experiences had taught him that they did not show up to work consistently, took long breaks, and that they worked at a more leisurely pace than owners desired. His interpretation of this behavior, however, was culture-bound. Taylor interpreted workers’ behavior not as a rational, class-based resistance to employers but as an irrational unwillingness to work in the right
way. Taylor, like many Americans of his time, was embracing a cultural denial that class divisions within the workplace existed. His solutions also reflected the culture in which he was living. He advocated a reorganization of the workplace based on scientific methods, something that resonated tremendously in a society where science had come to be seen as the solution to many human problems. And he depicted the worker as essentially unintelligent and easily manipulated; Taylor was fond of using an example involving a worker named Schmidt, (whom he described as “oxlike”) whom he persuaded to adopt his new system through a combination of simple-minded arguments and limited incentives. This, too, was typical of American culture at that time; many Americans believed that members of the lower classes, immigrants, and others at the bottom of American society were inferior in various ways (including intelligence) to the more successful members of society. Taylor’s ideas also reflected an abiding cultural belief in the correctness of capitalism, particularly the proposition that it is natural that some should be owners and others labor, that the efforts of those at the top were more important and valuable, and that an

Exhibit 1.5  The Film Modern Times Offered a Poignant Illustration of the Alienating Nature of Work in Factory Jobs in the Old Economy
extremely unequal distribution of the fruits of labor was not just defensible but actually desirable (Callahan 1962; Nelson 1980).

The legacy of managerial philosophies—in this case, scientific management—highlights how culture and social structure intersect. Managerial perspectives that embraced the proposition that workers are indolent and should not be trusted are directly responsible for the creation of many of the alienating low-wage “McJobs” present in America today. These philosophies initiated the development and application of assembly lines, promoted the acceptance of the idea that some people should be paid to think and others to labor, and fostered divisions between “white-collar” and “blue-collar” jobs. Dan performed blue-collar work during the bulk of his career, and these approaches to organizing work are directly responsible for shaping Jamal’s tasks in the fast-food restaurant.

Culture, then, is an important force shaping the contours of work. These examples of how culture shaped workplaces in the past suggest interesting questions about culture’s role in carving out the contours of the new economy. Have cultural attitudes about the role of work changed, and, if so, have workplaces changed along with them? How long are people working and why do they work so much? Have Americans begun to abandon longstanding (Taylorist) cultural assumptions about the proper way to organize work, or do we continue to construct workplaces on the assumption that workers are lazy, ignorant, and not to be trusted? To what extent are perceived divisions between the members of society continuing to deprive some people of access to opportunity?

Structure and Work

Although culture creates meaning systems that orient people to work, social structures involve enduring patterns of social organization that determine what kinds of jobs are available, who gets which jobs, how earnings are distributed, how organizational rules are structured, and how laws are formulated. Social structure does not exist independently of culture. Often, social structure reflects cultural attitudes (because people tend to create institutions that are consistent with their beliefs), but, it also can be in conflict with aspects of culture, creating tensions and contradictions with which individuals and societies must grapple (consider how the structural reality of unemployment creates particularly difficult problems in a society where work is “mandatory”). Throughout this book, we will discuss various aspects of social structure, the access to different types of work, the division of labor, the social organization of workplaces, and legal and political arrangements that structure workplaces. Here, we simply illustrate how social structures
affect individuals’ experience of work by considering how a few aspects of social structure—social class, job markets, and labor force demographics—may be affecting opportunities and workplace practices in the new economy.

Class Structures

Witnessing the changes wrought by industrialization, Marx (1970 [1867]) focused sociological analysis of work on class structures, the socio-economic divisions between different segments of the workforce. In his classic analysis of the industrial capitalist economy, he argued that employers’ profits depend on the effort put forth by employees, which created incentives to limit wages and to push workers to labor as hard as possible. He also observed that the efforts of workers created far greater wealth for employers than it did for employees. Considering these class relations, Marx argued that the tendency for work under capitalism would be toward the creation of a polarized class structure, comprising a disenfranchised working class (the proletariat), and an affluent owner class (the bourgeoisie).

The class structure of the United States is more complex than the polarized structure Marx described. Although workers and capitalists exist, large portions of the workforce seem to fit into neither category. For example, numerous professional and managerial workers have substantial education, some (or even considerable) workplace authority, and higher salaries than the typical front-line worker. Yet, it is difficult to describe them as captains of industry or members of the dominant class, given that they are not in charge and work for someone else (who has the ability to fire them). Sociologists have argued long and hard about how to describe these intermediate class positions. One neo-Marxist sociologist described such workers as occupying “contradictory class locations,” combining elements of the classes above and below them (Wright 1985).

Although the precise shape of the class structure of capitalist societies is a matter for dispute, what is not disputed is that class matters. For example, class affects people’s access to work opportunities, although the precise way in which it does so has changed over time. Before the Industrial Revolution, most children inherited their line of work from their parents through a process known as ascription. Farmers’ children tended to become farmers themselves, and craft workers would often learn their trade from their fathers. Women’s roles were largely ascribed as well. One’s occupation, then, was to a great extent one of the things one inherited from one’s parents; the cross-generational effects of class were obvious and straightforward. With industrialization, however, the range of jobs expanded profoundly, many new occupations were introduced, and other occupations became less common or actually disappeared. As a result of these changing
opportunity structures, fewer children could follow in their parents’ footsteps or inherit occupations from the previous generation. By the late 19th century, geographic mobility (and social mobility) was common, as children ventured further from their home communities to find work (Thernstrom 1980). Class still mattered, however, because it affected one’s access to resources such as education, skills, and connections that determined access to jobs in an economy where jobs no longer were inherited.

The existence of class also affects the structure of workplaces. Marx felt that the antagonism between labor and capital inevitably produced antagonism at work and led to the development of hierarchical, top-down managerial structures designed to control workers and ensure that the interests of employers predominated. Although the polarized workplaces envisaged by Marx may not be the dominant organizational form, Taylorist ideas about the need to control labor reflect a strong desire to respond to class antagonisms. They reflect the reality that the workplace is a zone of contested terrain, one in which class conflicts take place, with each side using the weapons at its disposal—including layoffs, speedups, technology, strikes, and even sabotage (Edwards 1979; Montgomery 1979).

Throughout this book, we argue that social class remains one of the most powerful forces shaping employment opportunities and access to resources in the new economy. We examine how a changing economy has altered the reality of class and the extent to which changes in class structure have led to a fundamental restructuring of workplaces away from the familiar patterns of industrial America. We will also examine how gender and race matter and how they interact with class to shape complex, contemporary structures of opportunity and workplaces.

Job Markets and Job Demands

Jamal’s and Dan’s problems involve not so much finding work as finding work that pays a reasonable income. Eileen, on the other hand, possesses highly marketable skills and can command a handsome salary. For her, the problem is securing a job that is designed to correspond with what she can bring to the job. All three of these workers have concerns that are structural in nature and involve the way opportunities are configured. All have to adapt themselves to the existing range of jobs and the prevailing ways in which jobs are organized. Their personal problems reflect the fact that workers—especially those laboring in times of economic change—face challenges in locating and adapting themselves to opportunities.

The Industrial Revolution of the early 19th century was clearly a watershed, one that profoundly reshaped the types of jobs available to workers. The most obvious consequence of industrialization was that far fewer
people were employed in agriculture and many more were employed in factory work. However, the changes were not limited to the shift from agriculture to industry. Traditional occupations outside agriculture were also transformed, as new technologies and new ways of organizing work pushed older approaches aside. Weaving, for example, was once a task performed in the home. The mechanization of weaving during the Industrial Revolution, however, completely eliminated this form of work and transformed the skills into those fitting factory labor. Similar stories can be told about many other traditional occupations, including hat making, shoe production, tanning, and tinsmithing (Thompson 1963).

Is the range of employment opportunities available to American workers changing again? It certainly seems that way. Some jobs that used to be plentiful in America have virtually disappeared, and the skills needed to obtain jobs are changing as well. In the old economy, for example, it was common for children to follow their parents into the mill or factory and receive good wages for performing jobs that required little education. But today, few young people aspire to becoming steelworkers or factory operatives, largely because many of these jobs have disappeared. As steel mills and factories closed in the 1970s and 1980s, the impact reverberated throughout industry-dependent “rust belt” communities, forcing their residents to rethink longstanding beliefs about jobs, futures, and how one makes a living (Bartlett and Steele 1992; Bluestone and Harrison 1982; Buss and Redburn 1987).

One way of considering the changing opportunity landscape is to consider the process of creative destruction, a phrase introduced by the economist Joseph Schumpeter (1989) to describe the tendency for old methods of production to be replaced by newer, more efficient approaches. In some cases, new technologies make old needs obsolete, as when the automobile extinguished the need for buggy whips. In other instances, technological innovation can replace workers with machines, as was the case with cigarette rollers (Bell 1973). New methods of organizing work can also be used to reduce production costs, for instance by moving jobs to locales where labor costs are lower (Cowie 2001). And in the case of computers, technologies have not only replaced workers, but also introduced entirely new markets and jobs.

The drive to create ever more efficient and profitable enterprises is influencing the distribution of work opportunities around the world. Production now occurs on a global scale, and the forces that disperse work to far-flung locations such as Indonesia (where athletic shoes are assembled) and Vietnam (clothing) shape the life chances of workers both at home and abroad. Understanding the reasons why work is being dispersed, and the impact on workers’ lives at home and abroad, is essential to revealing the trajectory of work and opportunity in the new economy. Throughout the 20th century, the
United States held a dominant position in the global economy. But in the new economy, jobs previously held by Americans such as Dan are increasingly being exported to countries like China and India and being performed by workers like Chi-Ying. Is this resulting in deteriorated or enhanced opportunities? And for which workers?

Changing employment opportunities also have redefined what skills are needed, reshaped job demands, and introduced new rewards. They also take new tolls on workers’ lives. Consider the large number of jobs available in various kinds of interactive service work that emerged in the latter part of the 20th century. These jobs require a different type of work than that performed in the factory, in that the employees typically do not manufacture anything. Their jobs (such as teacher, therapist, or server) involve providing a service for someone else with whom they are in direct contact. Sociologists have noted that this kind of work places different demands on the worker (Mills 2002 [1951]; Paules 1991). He or she must learn interaction skills—how to make others feel comfortable, how to produce the desired kind of social setting, how to deal with various kinds of difficult social situations—because the interaction is a significant part of the product being sold. The work of airline flight attendants offers a compelling illustration because they are trained to make customers feel safe and at home in the rigid and sometimes frightening environment of an airplane. To do this, these workers are coached on techniques to change their internal emotional states to generate the display of warmth or sex appeal required by their employers. As a consequence, however, these types of workers are especially prone to experiencing emotional numbness or burnout (Hochschild 1983).

Although new jobs demand new sets of skills, new technologies and organizational systems are also transforming many familiar jobs. A secretary’s job, for example, is quite different than it once was because computers have eliminated aspects of the old job (repetitive typing) and created new ones (basic graphic design, data analysis, electronic communication). Bank tellers once were simply clerical workers who processed clients’ financial transactions. Now, however, computerized information systems provide tellers with information about clients’ financial position, prompt tellers to sell various products to the client, all while maintaining a close electronic eye on what the worker is doing (Smith 1990). Even traditional manual labor is affected. For example, production workers who used to rely on their senses of touch and smell as guides, now work in clean settings and operate sophisticated computerized systems that make some of their old ways of working obsolete (Noble 1979; Shaiken 1984; Vallas and Beck 1996; Zuboff 1988).
Finally, job opportunities may be less rigidly tied to space and time than they were in the old economy. Today, many workers have opportunities to telecommute and work from home offices. The economy operates 24/7, introducing the prospects of working alternate shifts, and reconfiguring work around family lives. This may open opportunities to liberate workers from the traditional 9 to 5 grind and introduce new flexible schedules that more harmoniously mesh work with life—a work arrangement that Eileen’s boss was reluctant to accommodate. However, it may also open prospects that work will intrude on lives in ways not possible in the old economy. Understanding the impact of these new structural configurations is essential to charting the contours of work in the new economy.

Demography and the New Labor Force

The composition of the work force is also undergoing change. As a result, sociological analysis of work requires consideration of demography and of how the composition of a society affects the placement of workers into jobs and the distribution of opportunities to prepare for and obtain work (Farnesworth-Riche 2006). The paid labor force is quite different today than it was in the mid-20th century or earlier. It contains a far higher percentage of women, and its racial and ethnic make-up is different. We devote two chapters of this book specifically to the issues of gender and race/ethnicity; here we introduce the importance of demographic forces by considering how age structures affect the availability of jobs, the availability of workers, the need to work, and the returns received from work.

The U.S. labor force, along with those of many other developed societies, is aging. Americans today can expect to live 12 years longer than could those alive in 1940, and 26 years longer than those who were alive in 1900. Workers are living longer, and they are healthier when they reach ages that used to be considered “old.” This presents new opportunities, as well as new challenges, to American workers and their employers, such as the approach to dealing with retirement. Should workers continue to stop working at 65 if they are going to live for many years after that? If people are living longer and staying healthy longer, perhaps work careers should be lengthened. However, older workers generally do not want jobs that demand heavy schedules. More common are desires to enter into second or third careers and to pursue work situations that focus less on earning money (although for many that remains important), and more on satisfying creative desires or making a difference in the lives of others. Unfortunately, most employers do not offer “bridge jobs” that accommodate the possibility of the types of scaled-back employment that fit the skills and interests of these workers (Hutchens and Dentinger 2003; Moen and Sweet 2004; Moen, Sweet, and Swisher 2005).
Exhibit 1.6  Age Distributions in the United States: 1940 and 2000

Source: Statistical Abstracts of the United States
The changing age structure of the workforce presents challenges to society as a whole, not just to employers. Exhibit 1.6 shows how the age structure of the United States has changed from 1940 to 2000. Note that in 1940 the age structure of the United States resembled a pyramid, with most of the population in the younger age groups, with a steady attrition as one approached old age. Only a relatively small group lived beyond age 70. In contrast, in 2000 the age pyramid looks more like a skyscraper, albeit with a bulge in the middle. This bulge is the baby boom generation, a birth cohort that is steadily aging its way into retirement years. A key structural question concerns how an aging society will provide economic support for the growing numbers of older people. Will they be required to work? Or, will society continue to provide post-employment pensions for them? And, if the latter, how will that expense be financed? The Social Security system, the most important source of retirement income for many Americans, is funded through taxes on currently employed workers. Those taxes become part of the general pool of Social Security revenue, which provides pensions to those who have retired. Some policymakers are concerned that if the pool of retired workers becomes larger and the pool of employed workers becomes smaller, the revenues available to fund the system will be squeezed (Weller and Wolff 2005). There is much controversy about whether this should be called a “crisis,” but there is general agreement that ways need to be found to ensure that adequate revenues will be available for the growing population of retired workers.

Demographic factors such as age, gender, and race affect virtually all aspects of the economy and workplace. Demographics play a role at the organizational level, as the experiences of ethnic minorities and women are commonly shaped by their scarcity at the top levels of organizational hierarchies. They are critically important at the community level, as neighborhoods that lack job opportunities hinder the socialization of children into the types of workers needed in the new economy. We will return to the critical issues of aging, gender, race, education, and immigration throughout this book.

Agency and Careers

Sociologists are often accused of arguing that people are simply “pawns” or “cultural dopes” of the larger social structural and cultural contexts in which their lives are lived. The depiction of individuals as victims of external forces ignores agentic capacities—their ability to direct their own lives and those of others (Garfinkel 1967; Wrong 1961). All of the workers we considered made
choices. Jamal got married at a young age and dropped out of high school, Eileen elected to have two kids and pursue a high-powered career, Dan took the initiative to start his own business, and Chi-Ying chose to move from her village to the city. These observations highlight the ways in which different people direct their life courses and how access to different resources and constraints shape how lives are constructed over time (Elder 1998; Moen 2001a; Sweet and Moen 2006). The life course perspective is essential to understanding the contours of the new economy because it focuses on careers—the patterns of entry, exit, and movement between jobs.

Agency, of course, depends partly on resources. People with unlimited resources at their disposal are in a far better position to design their own lives than are those who have few resources. The new economy may be creating a context that is expanding the control individuals have to direct their life courses, in essence making lives less scripted than in the old economy (MacMillan 2005). Many old structural barriers have been removed (such as segregation laws), and so have the cultural barriers that funneled women and ethnic minorities into restricted ranges of occupations. Before the enactment of civil rights legislation and the women’s movement, the prospect of a woman like Condoleezza Rice moving into a position of power were slim to nil. Today, one can quickly generate a sizable list of minority group members and women who have moved into professions in which they had been entirely absent. Still, there is ample evidence to indicate that women and minorities are at distinct disadvantages in securing many types of jobs (Grusky and Charles 2004; Reskin, McBrier, and Kmec 1999). Whether the new economy is fundamentally altering the possibilities for people to shape their own biographies is one of the central questions posed in this book.

Agency also plays a critical role in shaping the how work is performed. Numerous ethnographic studies reveal that workers are not simply passive recipients of culture and structure; they use personal initiative to influence how their jobs are performed and the returns they receive from work (Darrah 2005; Montgomery 1979; Richardson 2006; Roy 1955; Tulin 1984). To illustrate agency at work, consider Michael Burawoy’s (1979) observations of production workers in the machining industry. These workers’ jobs were regulated by quotas, wherein they had to make a specified number of parts to earn their base pay. But when they surpassed those quotas, they could “make out” and earn additional money. In one respect, this system was rigged by management to increase productivity. However, Burawoy observed that the machinists invented a variety of tricks to game this system. For example, they would keep quiet about the easy jobs in which quotas were underestimated, and complain incessantly about the
impossibility of meeting quotas on virtually all other jobs. They would bribe supervisors to get the easiest jobs and curry favor with coworkers to provide parts stock needed to get their jobs rolling. When given an easy quota, workers overproduced and then hid their “kitties” that could be turned in for extra compensation at a later date. In sum, these machinists showed that when workers are confronted by cultural and structural arrangements, they also engage in strategic action to influence how these arrangements affect their lives (Moen and Wethington 1992; Sweet and Moen 2006).

Finally, it should be added that agency also operates at a collective level. Workers make efforts to carve out work lives for themselves, but they also collaborate with others to reshape the contours of work and create more satisfactory work opportunities for themselves. An obvious example is that workers band together in organizations such as unions or professional associations that use the strength of numbers to press for needed changes. Union publicity materials that describe unions as the “people who brought you the week-end” remind us that collective action obtained the taken-for-granted days off workers now enjoy. Similarly, the professional associations formed by doctors, lawyers, and others help protect those workers from competition, define what are acceptable (and unacceptable) professional practices, and generally shape the conditions under which those types of work are performed. Throughout this book, and particularly in the concluding chapter, we will examine how collective action has shaped workplaces in the past and how it might do so in the future. Is the new economy making certain forms of collective action by workers obsolete? Is it creating openings and needs for new kinds of collective action? What are the key issues around which workers are banding together to effect change?

Conclusion

In this first chapter, we focused on the ways sociological perspectives reshape the consideration of work. Although work is commonly considered a means to obtain a paycheck, we argued that it is much more than that. The design of work corresponds with cultural templates that guide workers to their jobs and script social roles. Workers live within social structures that both allocate opportunities and construct social inequalities of access to meaningful employment. And within these contexts, workers have responded both individually and collectively to manage their responsibilities and reshape society.

The stresses experienced by workers like Eileen, Chi-Ying, Dan, and Jamal are probably familiar to many readers of this book. Because of the
instability of jobs, changing opportunity structures, the challenges of meshing work with family, and the challenges of finding good work, many workers find themselves struggling in the new economy. One of the great contributions of sociology is its capacity to reframe these types of personal problems as being public issues (Mills 1959). In the chapters that follow, we will consider the extent to which work opportunities are changing, and the impact these changes are having on lives on and off the job. Our focus, throughout, is on considering stress points and gaps, how workers adapt to these stresses and opportunity divides, as well as what can be done to close the chasms that separate workers from fulfilling jobs held on reasonable terms.

Notes

1. Of course, these are not the only phrases used. Others use the term “Fordism” to describe the old economy, and depending on the political slant of the analysis, “post-Fordism” and “flexible specialization” are used to describe the new economy, as are “knowledge economy,” “global economy,” and “post-industrial economy” (Bell 1973; Hirst and Zeitlin 1991; Piore and Sabel 1984).

2. It is worth emphasizing that describing societies such as these as “poor” is misleading. Although they lack the variety of possessions contemporary Americans enjoy, their members often live healthy and fulfilling lives.


4. Approximately one-third American families rent their homes, one-quarter live at or near the poverty level, and nearly one-half will experience divorce. These facts are seldom represented in television’s portrayals of the “typical” American family. Stephanie Coontz, 1992, The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap, New York: Basic Books.

5. American men now live, on average, to be 75 years old, and American women have a life expectancy of 80 years.