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Job quality toward an inclusive economy: A critical review and reassessment

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Abstract

In recent years, the United States has seen both an increase in the percentage of low-quality jobs and an increase in the percentage of the workforce made up of marginalized groups (women and people of color). Traditional explanations tend to see these concurrent trends as associated, but not causally. Through a synthetic review of the relevant literature, this paper suggests that devaluing the workforce contributes to a degradation in job quality and offers propositions to guide work toward a more equitable future.

Introduction

At the start of 2020, just before the COVID-19 pandemic seized the United States, job growth across the economy was robust, and the economy was at near-full employment. However, the quality of employment was unequal across broad demographic groups. While some earned high wages, a vast workforce was experiencing low wages, volatile incomes, and part-time employment when they wanted full-time employment, and they were lacking benefits like employer-provided health insurance, paid sick leave, and retirement plans (Albiston & Fisk, 2021; Western et al., 2012). This employment situation left many families living paycheck to paycheck and was inequitable. Notably, members of this workforce were disproportionately women and workers of color (Fee, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic hit low-wage workers the hardest. 37% of them lost their jobs in the first four months of 2020, compared to 14% of high-wage workers. High-wage workers quickly regained their jobs, while gains for low-wage workers were slower and more uneven (Chetty et al., 2020).

Low-wage workers face a number of disadvantages: in addition to constrained household budgets, low-wage work also negatively affects workers' health and well-being (Godøy & Jacobs, 2021). On average, low-wage jobs are associated with increased health-related worker absence, low self-reported health, and increased risk of being overweight (Leigh & Du, 2018). Low wages are also associated with increased suicide and drug-related deaths among workers and low birth weight and higher infant mortality among children of workers (Dow et al., 2020; Komro et al., 2016). Low wages are associated with feelings of distress among workers, which affect parent-child interaction, and low wages can divert parents' attention when they have to compensate for low wages by working long hours (Raissian & Bullinger, 2017). Conversely, research shows that increased incomes can lead to a host of positive individual outcomes, including increased educational attainment among children of workers (Parcel & Menaghan, 1997) and better health in adulthood (Bastian & Michelmore, 2018), translating to cost savings for society and greater economic output (Godøy & Jacobs, 2021). These broader implications for society and the economy (Appelbaum et al., 2003; Hansen, 2001; Meuris & Leana, 2015) have increasingly led policymakers to recognize that strengthening job quality can be a means to reduce inequality, increase economic growth, and decrease the costs of public programs (Karabchuk, 2015; Findlay et al., 2017).

When COVID-19 became a major public health threat, policies intended to slow the spread of the disease led to an economic recession, and as the economy recovered from the early steep job losses, some noted a trend of workers quitting their jobs. For low-wage workers, the "Great Resignation" (Klotz, 2021) often translated to job churning: staying in the labor market and getting a better job. When the recession abated and the labor market tightened, workers used their relative strength in the tight post-pandemic labor market to improve their working conditions, with the majority citing low pay as their reason for seeking a new position (Parker & Horowitz, 2022). Because workers were not seeking to leave the labor market but to advance within it, White House economists relabeled the trend "the Great Upgrade" (Cassidy, 2022). This brought acute attention to disparities across demographic groups in such desired job features as good wages and working conditions. As the economy recovered, Federal Reserve policymakers elevated the need to engender a more equitable economic recovery, one concerned not just with the numbers of jobs but the quality of those jobs and their distribution across groups (Rosengren, 2021). Even in a context of rising wages among lower-wage work in the post-pandemic economy, the tight market also signifies a reluctance to return to work or desire to take a different job with better conditions (P. Chakrabarti, personal communication, April 17, 2023).

This paper examines the concept of, implications for, and prevalence of low-quality jobs in the United States. First, it addresses two contemporary job quality concerns, then examines three alternative explanations for these concerns, and finally proposes considerations for policymakers looking to respond to them. The first concern addressed here is the "overall degradation in the ability of many American jobs to support households" (Alpert et al., 2019, p. 5). Compared to earlier eras, a higher percentage of U.S. workers work in lower-quality jobs. The second concern is the significant disparities by gender, race, and ethnicity in access to both wages and non-wage job conditions (Congdon et al., 2020; Dwyer & Wright, 2019). Generally, scholars offer three broad kinds of explanations for the decrease and disparities in job quality, each that has implications for policy solutions. Some indicate that increasing workers' knowledge skills and training would help them escape low-quality jobs. Others suggests that policies that protect workers and increase their bargaining power during wage setting would help improve job quality. Finally, explanations from outside the job quality literature suggest societal bias is a cause of increases in low-quality jobs, indicating that policies should directly address bias and inequality. These analyses lead this paper to offer six propositions for policymakers and researchers to consider in working to ensure workers have increased and equal access to more quality jobs.

What makes a quality job?

It may be helpful to review and analyze the definition of job quality before looking into the two broad job quality concerns and three alternative explanations that this paper will present later. Policymakers and scholars struggle to define what constitutes a high- or low-quality job (Howell & Kalleberg, 2019; Schmitt & Jones, 2012). Hourly wage is a commonly used indicator, being an essential feature of a quality job and because wages have the advantage of being eminently measurable. The United States has an abundance of low-wage jobs. In late 2019, researchers calculated that 44% of all workers nationwide filled jobs that qualified as low wage (defined as two-thirds median hourly wages for full-time/full-year workers).

The majority of these workers (56%) were in their prime working years of 25–50, and many (43%) were raising children (Escobari et al., 2019).[1] The prevalence of low-wage work among prime-age workers and parents suggests that for many adults, low-wage work is a primary source of financial support (Ross & Bateman, 2019). Many of these low-wage workers struggle to make ends meet, even those working full-time. Household labor income is low because hourly wages are low, leading many people to seek informal work or work multiple part-time jobs (Abraham & Houseman, 2019). Research finds that low-wage workers experience material, financial, and medical hardships, with one study finding that 35% of full-time working American families do not make enough to afford rent, food, transportation, medical care, and basic household expenses. This percentage is even higher for working Black and Hispanic families, 50% of whom cannot afford these costs (Joshi et al., 2022).

Many scholars argue that other features contribute significantly to whether a job is considered high or low quality: benefits such as health insurance and a retirement plan, access to family and medical/sick leave, stable and/or standard schedules, career-building opportunities, and working conditions that are safe and respectful, promote worker voices, and provide workers with autonomy and fulfillment (Cazes et al., 2015; Dawson, 2017; Kalleberg, 2011). Non-standard work schedules[2] can lead to family conflict, sleep disorders, and increased rates of heart disease and ulcers (Kawachi et al., 1995; Knutsson, 2003; Presser, 2005), substance use, and recreational screen time, as well as worse dietary practices, obesity, and depression (Winkler et al., 2018), with broader repercussions that reverberate through the economy. Stability and security over time contribute to job quality (Kalleberg, 2016). Upward mobility is also often considered an important aspect of job quality (Congdon et al., 2020).

Importantly, a critical look at these features reveals that not all features of high-quality jobs are inherent in the job itself. Job quality features can be divided into two categories: (1) those that only an employer can control and therefore alone can provide, or *conditions inherent in the job*; and (2) those that U.S. employers have provided historically, though often only to a segment of the workforce, and that can be offered separate from employment conditions *conventional to*, but not inherent in, the job.[3] Distinguishing between conditions inherent in and conventional to the job may be useful, as this can

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[1] "Low wage" was defined by the authors as less than two-thirds of the median hourly wage rate for full-time, full-year, male workers, adjusted for the regional cost of living. The median annual earnings for those who qualified as low-wage workers were about $18,000.

[2] Scholars contrast non-standard work schedules (NSWSs) with standard work schedules, which involve regular and predictable daytime hours. NSWSs typically consist of non-daytime hours, irregular hours, or both. Recent studies estimate that slightly under a third of the U.S. workforce has a NSWS (Alterman et al., 2013).

[3] A third category—benefits conditional on having a job—also plays a significant role. This category includes several public benefits that people can access but are required to work to do so. Survivors and disability insurance (Social Security) may be the most familiar of those benefits, but others are refundable tax credits like the Earned Income Tax Credit and housing assistance.

help orient job-quality policy. Policymakers focused on job quality might center their efforts on improving workers' conditions inherent in the job, as those fit squarely and exclusively within the employers' control and therefore may be more clearly the employers' responsibility.

Conditions inherent in the job

Job quality characteristics that fall in the category of "conditions inherent in the job" are those a person encounters or is exposed to while performing the job. The most basic of these is payment.[4] While current programs such as the Earned Income Tax Credit and Universal Basic Income function to supplement wages, an employer compensating the employee for their time and labor is fundamental to the work relationship. Other conditions inherent to the job include the physical working environment, the safety of the workers, the work tasks, the workplace climate (the style of management and employee interaction, as well as whether or not there are avenues for workers to voice their concerns and complaints) (see also Ghai, 2003; Howell & Kalleberg, 2019), and the nature of scheduling. While policy can mandate aspects of these conditions and public or private actors can monitor them, the conditions themselves cannot be outsourced. In other words, external actors can seek to compel employers to provide, for example, safe working conditions and stable schedules, but those conditions exist only in the workplace. A worker can only access them as a function of their employment.

Conditions conventional to the job

Job quality characteristics that can be described as "conditions conventional to the job" are those that, in the United States, employers provide but *could* be provided by external actors. Conditions conventional to the job can make jobs more appealing, as the word used to broadly describe them—"benefits"—implies. The most familiar examples of conditions conventional to the job are health insurance and pension plans. These supports do not need to be provided through work; in some other countries, they are part of the government-provided social safety net. In the U.S., in some cases, federal and local policies mandate that employers provide some of these conditions, and some avenues exist outside of work to acquire them.

Many conventional conditions that characterize a quality job in the United States are a result of the history of provision through the workplace. Employer-provided health insurance, for example, was popularized during the 1930s, when a federal wage cap required employers to find other ways to compete for workers (Morrisey, 2013). In contrast, after World War II, other industrialized nations began implementing publicly funded healthcare systems. Great Britain established their National Health Service in 1948. That same year, the Truman administration attempted to implement a universal health insurance plan, but all that passed was medical care for the elderly, which

[4] Work for pay is what separates employment from voluntary or involuntary labor. Just how much constitutes equitable pay is debated.

ultimately became Medicare (Morrisey, 2013). Today, employers sometimes use these conditions along with wages to aid in recruitment and retention or to compensate for other poor conditions (Dulebohn et al., 2009).[5,6] Moreover, workers have uneven access to the conditions conventional to the job, with it being more expensive for low-wage workers to access those conditions. For example, low-wage work tends to be concentrated in certain firms, which partially explains why low-wage workers pay more for employer-provided health insurance (Levin-Scherz & Nyce, 2019; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2018; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019).

The U.S. government plays a larger role in the provision of retirement income, but its ties to employment also make access uneven. Social Security[7] is the primary public retirement income program and the source of more than half of all retiree income (in 2009, 58% came from Social Security benefits [Moore, 2011]). Regardless, a person's primary old-age income is conditional on their (and their spouse's) earnings during their years of employment. Many employers provide additional retirement benefits, either defined-benefit pensions or, more commonly today, pre-tax deductions (often matched) into retirement accounts (Moore, 2011).

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[5] Both retirement/pension and healthcare serve a recruitment/retention function for employers, but that is in part because they are not universally offered.

[6] While the Affordable Care Act (ACA) of 2010 expanded health coverage for millions of Americans, it does not provide universal healthcare—a striking contrast with the "vast majority" of post-industrial, Westernized nations, in which the state entirely or largely subsidizes universal healthcare for all citizens irrespective of employment status or ability to pay (Zieff et al., 2020). Instead, the United States has a patchwork of public and private (i.e., employer-provided) healthcare insurance. Currently, about 50% of Americans receive healthcare through employer-provided health insurance (Kaplan & O'Neill, 2020; Kristal et al., 2018, 2020). Other sources include Medicare, Medicaid, direct-purchase coverage, TRICARE, and Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) or Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs (CHAMPVA) coverage. Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2020 (census.gov)

[7] Social Security is an income support for those over age 65 who have worked for at least 10 years or were married to someone who worked for at least 10 years in their lifetime. Payments are scaled to lifetime income, and the scale is heavily progressive. Social Security benefits are typically computed using "average indexed monthly earnings." For example, a person born in 1956 currently earning $150,000 who plans to start taking benefits at age 65 would receive $2,507 per month until death. However, a person with the same birth year but who currently earns $25,000 would receive $899 per month until death (Social Security Administration, 2014). Social Security originated with the Social Security Act of 1935.

Table 1 | Features of a high-quality job

Conditions inherent in the job	Conditions conventional to the job
Good wages	Health insurance
Safe working conditions	Retirement/pension
Predictable scheduling	Child care
Possibilities for advancement	Life insurance (beyond survivors' benefits)
	Family and medical/sick leave

Currently, policies mandate the provision of some elements of job quality, though, as the above discussion of healthcare indicates, these policies vary in their ability to support workers equally. Employers offer others without specific policy mandates.[8] This uneven system creates significant disparities in access to quality jobs and, ultimately, disparities in worker well-being. This distinction between conditions inherent in and conventional to the job is important for policymakers to understand, as it provides potential levers for creating job equity going forward. It might help policymakers delineate what only employers can supply and what can be (and sometimes is) supplied by other social policies. For example, in the case of a conventional condition of jobs like healthcare, workers can (and do) substitute employer-provided healthcare with externally provided healthcare (either private or government healthcare). If a job lacks healthcare, a worker can purchase health insurance elsewhere. A social policy such as universal healthcare would lessen the pressure and expectation that employers provide it. By contrast, there is no external substitute for conditions inherent to a job like safety conditions. If a job is unsafe, nothing outside of that job will make it safer. Because this condition is inherent to

[8] Some employers offer benefits after unions bargain for them or concede them in response to worker protests or other worker actions.

the job and only employers can provide a safe working environment, only labor market policies can mandate employers' providing conditions inherent to the job. Thus far, such mandates have included safety conditions and a minimum wage. As workplace practices evolved, advocates added additional mandates, such as scheduling ordinances. Overall, concentrating on policies to improve these inherent conditions could add a dimension of focus and logic to job quality advocacy. Discussion that clarifies which conditions are absolutely necessary to jobs might lead to a reconsideration about when labor market policy and when social policy may be most effective in lessoning disparities. Policymakers focused on job quality might especially attend to labor market policies that increase access to conditions inherent in the job, as those are most within the employers' control.

Bad jobs in the United States: A brief history

As noted in the introduction, one big job quality concern is the present-day low quality of many American jobs on measures both conditional and conventional. Many describe present-day job quality as not only low but declining (Henly et al., 2021; Dwyer & Wright, 2019; Carlson et al., 2022). To contextualize that perspective in the present, I will very briefly review the history of the labor market over the last century and how it relates to job quality. I focus on four perspectives: demand for workers, supply of workers, role of policy, and prevailing trends in job quality. The goal here is to trace the narrative of declining job quality and place it alongside the secondary concern that women and workers of color have perennially worked in and fought against low-quality jobs. After documenting two concerns that have operated in tandem over time, I will examine different explanations for why contemporary jobs are often low quality and unequally distributed, and I will analyze how these explanations address these concerns. This analysis will then inform a set of policy propositions to conclude the paper.

A century ago, male workers and the manufacturing sector dominated the labor market. From 1920 to 1945, the U.S. labor market grew increasingly concentrated in manufacturing. At the conclusion of World War II, the manufacturing sector accounted for 38% of non-farm employment, while services comprised 10% (Meisenheimer, 1998). After the war's end—a period some call the "Golden Age of Capitalism" (Marglin & Schor, 1992)—manufacturing continued to dominate, reaching what would be its historical numerical peak in 1953 (Harris, 2020). However, by 1982, the service sector had "surpassed manufacturing as the largest employer among major industry groups" (Meisenheimer, 1998). In 2019, 71% of all non-farm payroll employees were in the service sector (DeSilver, 2019), while manufacturing employment had fallen to 9% (Harris, 2020). The service sector is a heterogeneous category in terms of products and jobs and is even more heterogeneous than manufacturing in terms of job quality (Carré & Tilly, 2017).

Major shifts in the demographics of the U.S. workforce occurred during this period. The U.S. workforce quadrupled from 42 million workers in 1920 to 164 million in 2020 (U.S. Department of Labor, 2023). In the 1920s, though both Black men and women had high labor force participation, Black Americans constituted just under 10% of the U.S.

population, and the Hispanic and Asian share of the population was under 1% (Gibson & Jung, 2002). Women of all races constituted about 20% of the workforce, making the paid labor force in 1920 about 70% male and white. Many people of color moved out of agriculture, and both women and people of color moved from unpaid to paid employment. Due to changes in policy, cultural norms, immigration, and the economy, the representation of women and workers of color generally increased after World War I and accelerated in the post-WWII era. In 2013, 35.8% of workers were people of color (Indicators, 2013), and by 2019, the labor market had almost reached gender parity (Martinez & Christnacht, 2021). In 2021, the combination of female-identifying people of all races and ethnicities and male-identifying people of color accounted for 60% of the workforce, a dramatic shift from these groups' representation a century before.

Policymaking particularly affected the labor market. Following the Great Depression, President Roosevelt and policymakers enacted the "New Deal," which promoted economic recovery through federal labor programs, policies, and initiatives (Rauchway, 2008). Keynesianism, which relied on state intervention and regulation of markets, guided policymaking in the U.S. (Djelic, 2006). For the first half of the 20th century, governments wielded relatively high amounts of power, vis-à-vis corporations. The union-enabling Wagner Act passed in 1935 (also known as the National Labor Relations Act or NLRA), allowing workers to deal with employers collectively rather than individually, and union coverage rose to historical highs. Union membership grew from 14% in 1922 to 33.4% in 1945, and more than 80% of workers in basic manufacturing were unionized (Renshaw, 1986). However, protective labor legislation of the 1930s, such as the Social Security Act, the NLRA, and the Fair Labor Standards Act, did not extend to sectors with high concentrations of Black workers, such as agricultural and domestic care workers (Cassedy, 1997). Following WWII, policymakers continued to expand "New Deal"-style institutions of social protection and regulation (Palley, 2005). Black Americans organized the civil rights movement, enabling the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, which prohibits discrimination based on race, color, national origin, sex, and religion (Sherman, 2003). In the 1970s, large institutional changes in U.S. policy and in employer practices accompanied economic changes, with some labeling the 1970s as a "paradigm shift" in these institutions. Oil shocks in the 1970s created significant turmoil that was "reinterpreted as revealing structural fragilities" (Djelic, 2006). Policy responses included reducing trade barriers, loosening controls on capital, privatizing state-owned companies, deregulating industries, and lowering both corporate and individual taxes.

Norms of employer practices also began to change. Many employers reorganized production by externalizing core production (Weil, 2014, 2017; Appelbaum, 2017; Handwerker & Spletzer, 2015; Wilmers, 2018) and offering fewer opportunities for internal promotion (Noyelle, 1987). Companies began to consolidate into "superstar firms"— a few select firms that gain larger shares of sales (Karageorge, 2017). Also starting in the 1970s, due to sectoral change, corporate resistance, and institutional challenges, the U.S. private labor market largely de-unionized, falling to approximately 6.5% of the workforce participating in 2019 (Santos, 2019). Public sector union density increased dramatically in the 1960s and 1970s and showed some continuing growth at least into the 1980s. While private-sector unions are majority men, public-sector members are majority women, with over a third of public-sector workers unionized in 2020 (Dunn & Walker, 2016; Santos, 2019).

The quality of work in America broadly improved up through the post-war years but then, for many, declined into the present. From 1918–1945, real earnings (after taking inflation, unemployment, and short hours into account) of all employees doubled (U.S. Census Bureau, 1976). Both union and non-union workers enjoyed the protections and benefits, like minimum wage and maximum work weeks, afforded by policy and the fight for unionization.[9] This balance of power gave workers more standing in negotiations with employers (Palley, 2005), increasing job quality. Post war, job quality continued to grow, making the era not only as a golden age for capitalism but for some workers too. During the post-war boom period, for most workers, economic compensation generally increased. In terms of white male workers, who were still the majority of the labor market, the number of workers whose jobs provided a living wage, secure employment, and fringe benefits increased significantly (Kalleberg et al., 2000).

Post-war wage growth was also relatively equally shared during the three decades after World War II (Schmitt et al., 2018) with a wage structure that would prove “more egalitarian than at any time since” (Goldin & Margo, 1992, p. 1). Racial gaps in wages converged rapidly in the 1960s. Between 1940 and 1970, Black male wages increased relative to those of white men. The typical Black male worker in 1940 earned only 43% as much as his white counterpart; by 1970, this figure was 64% (Smith & Welch, 1989). Black female workers also made gains relative to Black men: the unadjusted Black female to Black male earnings ratio rose significantly from 58% in 1955 to 78% in 1982 (O'Neill, 1985). Earnings disparities between men and women gradually declined. The decline was especially evident after the mid-1970s, although its pace has slowed in the new millennium (Blau & Kahn, 1997; McCall & McCall, 2007).

While disparities lessened, they persisted, and relative gains accompanied absolute differences. Black male incomes still significantly lagged behind those of white men and women’s behind men’s. Many unions excluded Black men or routed them into segregated “Jim Crow” locals, which prevented them from obtaining jobs in many skilled blue-collar professions. (Aizer et al., 2020). Firms and industries in general systematically excluded Black workers from better job opportunities (Aizer et al., 2020). While significantly narrower, researchers have thoroughly documented that the gender wage gap has persisted into the 21st century, with some scholars finding evidence of “implicit gender discrimination” in the contemporary labor market (Gharehgozli & Atal, 2020, p. 207).

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[9] The Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) is a federal law that sets minimum wage, overtime pay, recordkeeping, and child labor standards. It was enacted in 1938 in response to the Great Depression. The FLSA minimum wage is currently $7.25 per hour. Overtime pay is required after 40 hours of work in a workweek. The FLSA prohibits employment of minors in "oppressive child labor" (Mayer et al., 2013).

Following some mid-century progress in job quality, many scholars report a broad-based decline in job quality starting in the 1970s. After decades of post-war growth, U.S. workers' real median pay remained flat or declined from the 1970s to the mid-1990s (Bivens & Mishel, 2015; Piketty et al., 2018). Wage inequality continued to rise through the 2000s (Gould, 2019). While real wages grew rapidly for those with bachelor's degrees (Groshen & Holzer, 2021), most workers did not have a college degree; in 2021, 65% of the workforce did not have a college degree. After the post-war narrowing, the racial gaps in wages contracted little after 1980 (Aizer et al., 2020). Similarly, for women, the racial wage gap narrowed (Gould, 2020) but persisted (Paul et al., 2022). Overall, categorial inequality in the form of the over-representation of Black, Hispanic, and female workers among low-paid work continued. Thus, while Black and female worker representation in low-wage work declined substantially between 1950 and 2000, it remains disproportionately high (VanHeuvelen & Copas, 2019).

From this brief history of job quality, four prevailing trends are noteworthy and relevant to the explanations that follow in the next section:

1) an "industrial restructuring" (Lorence, 1991) from a concentration in highly unionized manufacturing to a concentration in less unionized service sector jobs

2) a growth in the workforce fueled by increasing racial, ethnic, and gender diversity

3) persistent categorical inequality, which featured persistently low job quality for women and people of color

4) the pivotal role of policy in both instituting improvements upon and weakening job quality.

Officials project many of these historical trends will continue into the future. Demographically, the labor force will be equalized along gender lines and continue to diversify ethnically and racially. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that the working age population (those between the ages of 18 and 64) will be the "majority-minority" by 2039 (Toossi, 2012). By 2042, although the non-Hispanic white population will remain the largest single group in America, the combined populations of all non-white racial and ethnic groups will make up more than half of the U.S. workforce (Wilson, 2016). The U.S. Department of Labor reports that the top three occupations with the most job growth between 2020 and 2030 will be in the service sector: home health and personal care workers, restaurant cooks, and fast-food workers (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Absent policy change, they will be low-wage positions, with median pay at two-thirds of the median annual full-time wage for all workers in the U.S. in 2020 (Lopezlira & Bernhardt, 2021).

How did these trends come to be? Why did the quality of work decline in general and categorical inequality persist? Most scholars agree with this general history but offer various explanations. Below, I categorize and review some of the most generally accepted explanations and examine the degree to which they attend to these main concerns.

Explanations for bad jobs in the United States

Many researchers have explored the question of job quality and the reasons behind wage inequality and why it is distributed across the workforce in the gendered and racialized patterns that we see in the data. The different perspectives that the scholars bring to these questions—some emphasizing technology and skills, others the political and economic institutions that influence work and the economy more broadly, and those who draw attention to the racism and discrimination that has shaped much of our history and continue to have strong influence even still today—offer helpful insight and guidance for policymakers who want to improve the quality of jobs for American workers. Below is a very brief review of the dominant explanations of the growth and inequitable distribution of bad jobs (see, for instance, Holzer et al., 2011; Kalleberg, 2011; Schmitt & Jones, 2012). Recent research has pointed to a number of causes for low-quality jobs from the economics and social science literature. These explanations have helped researchers and policymakers understand the dimensions of the job quality problem.

(1) The competitive model

One of the dominant economics explanations for the rise in low-quality jobs—the competitive model (Howell & Kalleberg, 2019)—traces this rise to shifts in competitive and global market forces. From the competitive model perspective, technological progress has led to increased automation, decreasing the need for low-skill labor, while demand for workers with highly technical skills remains high (Autor et al., 2017; Goldin & Katz, 2009). Additionally, globalization has reduced the cost of offshoring routine work to low-wage countries (Blinder, 2009). This has compressed demand for labor in the United States into two groups: highly skilled workers, for whom a small labor pool has driven up wages, and low-skill service work, for whom a vast labor pool has driven down wages (Holzer et al., 2011). Autor (2019) found that large categories of the U.S. workforce, particularly lesser-educated workers, have experienced stagnating or declining real wages in recent decades. Acemoglu and Restrepo (2022) found that these declines were primarily caused by automation. Goldin and Katz conclude, “Stripped to essentials, the ebb and flow of wage inequality is all about education and technology” (Goldin & Katz, 2009, p. 28). The role of higher skill was particularly pronounced from 1980–2000, when the increased college wage premium explained about 75% of the rise of U.S. wage inequality (Autor et al., 2020).

However, the competitive model has its critics. For example, several studies find that the timing of computer diffusion does not match the timing of wage changes (Borghans & Ter Weel, 2007). Others point to the lack of evidence that the diffusion of computers has led to strong productivity improvements (Baily & Montalbano, 2016). Moreover, the growth in wage differences is linked to characteristics that seem more associated with status than computer use (Spitz-Oener, 2008). For example, there is a premium for working sitting down or using a pencil, even after controlling for computer use. These premiums may be due to the fact that sitting down and using a pencil are seen as more "professional" or "prestigious" tasks when compared to standing up and using a computer (Spitz-Oener, 2008). Additionally, the competitive model does less to address two other aspects of the labor market: first, the widely recognized variation in the quality of jobs held by equally skilled workers across countries (Carré & Tilly, 2017) and within the United States (Card et al., 2018).

Researchers argue that this theory does not take into account certain essential societal factors. The first is discrimination, one of the four trends present throughout the history of job quality. Half a century ago, Becker (1971) made a well-known argument that discrimination by race and gender impeded efficient market transactions and therefore was likely to be overridden in the long run by the imperative to generate profit. However, contemporary studies find persistent differences in wages and conditions between equivalent male and female and white/non-white workers (Pager et al., 2009). Wage gaps between women and men have narrowed but persist (Blau & Kahn, 2020). And a meta-analysis of field experiments regarding hiring found that despite increasing societal endorsement of the idea of equal hiring treatment regardless of race, racial discrimination has not changed in the last 25 years (Quillian et al., 2017).

The competitive model is also less attentive to another major historical trend: the proliferation of low-wage service sector jobs, especially those not easily automated (Fuchs, 1980; Kongsamut et al., 2001; Schettkat & Yocarini, 2006). From the 1990s on, service occupations (jobs that involve helping, caring for, or assisting others) have grown. While the canonical model predicts that technological improvements will boost the real earnings of *all* workers, "this prediction appears strikingly at odds with the data that demonstrate" that real wages have been declining for low-wage workers (Acemoglu & Autor, 2012).

The widely acknowledged labor market trends of discrimination and growth in low-wage sector jobs complicate the account that pure market dynamics and differential individual investments in human capital determine wages (Elger, 2015). Additional economic theory focuses on the effects of large, dominant employers on job quality. When a single employer dominates a labor market, workers in particular types of jobs have few, if any, alternative employment options. This increases employer bargaining power (Manning, 2011; Lazear & Shaw, 2007) and results in workers being paid less than the value of their marginal product (Manning, 2003). This outcome "has been explained as a synonym of the single firm exploiting its workers since its creation by Joan Robinson" (Lin, 2015, p. 11). Many agree that while such monopsony power has been a long-standing aspect of the labor market, it has intensified in recent decades (Kreuger, 2018).

Modern monopsonies have developed additional dimensions that affect the quality of jobs. These include the rise in "superstar" firms highlighted in the history section and changing relationships between lead firms and suppliers. With a small number of firms dominating the labor market, employers have more monopsony power to restrict wages and lower job quality. Workers have fewer employers to choose from, reducing their ability to demand higher pay and better jobs. Indeed, a number of studies have demonstrated that a higher concentration of monopsonies is associated with lower wages. And while the studies do not claim that rising concentration alone can explain wage stagnation or inequality, monopsony power does factor into the reduction of and disparities in job quality (Bivens & Mishel., 2015).

Another set of economists attempted to address the role of discrimination in the labor market and the continual poor quality of some service sector jobs. While they concurred with the competitive model that some workers' wages depend on their level of human capital, they argued that there is a dual labor market (DLM). DLM scholars calculate that just over half of American workers (Ahn et al., 2022) occupy these types of "primary" jobs: ones that reward workers' human capital and offer relatively high wages, good working conditions, and opportunities for advancement into higher paying jobs. They identified a significant segment of the labor market consisting of "secondary jobs," which offer low wages, bad working conditions, unstable employment, and little opportunity for advancement (Doeringer & Piore, 1971). DLM theorists further argue that primary sector jobs are "rationed" rather than being responsive to the relative availability of skilled workers (Sakamoto & Chen, 1991). In particular, women, Black adults, and other minorities are sorted disproportionately into secondary jobs and find it difficult to obtain primary employment. Subsequent work such as that of Andersson et al. (2005) demonstrates substantial mobility out of low-wage jobs, though certainly many low-wage workers stay stuck.

Early studies confirmed this duality of two distinct labor markets—a primary labor market with a wage profile similar to that predicted by human capital theory and a secondary market with a low wage profile. Studies also provide support for the hypothesis that there are non-economic barriers that prevent workers of color from entering the primary sector (Dickens & Lang, 1993). Scholars were particularly focused on the policy implications since their findings suggests that expansion in human capital alone would not lead to advancement for low-wage workers in secondary jobs (Wachter, 1974). Dual labor market theory evolved over time to what is now labeled "segmented labor markets."

DLM scholars made more strides than those working within the pure competitive framework in identifying how discrimination plays a role in the workings of the labor market and provided some empirical evidence of discrimination (Dickens & Lang, 1988). However, they did not develop a generally accepted theory of discrimination, such as specifying *why* the segmented labor market took on a discriminatory character (Mhone, 1983) or offer any explanation of discrimination (Lundahl, 2020). Although Piore (1979) made an important start, DLM theorists did not identify or clearly theorize if the barriers to upward mobility occurred due to societal or employer discrimination (Wachter et al., 1974). Segmented labor market theory had more success attributing the lack of movement across labor market segments to corporate practices and a mirroring of societal racial stratification (Edwards, 2015).

Thus, the competitive model has been more useful in explaining the decline in wages than in explaining the persistence of categorical inequality. It also does not engage with the final historical trend, that of the role of policy in job quality. Scholars in the following section attend deeply to the role of policy.

(2) The political economy and institutionalist model

Other social scientists offer an explanation for the prevalence of low-quality jobs using institutionalist theory and a political economy lens, which means a special focus on the pivotal role of policy in both instituting improvements upon and weakening job quality. However, like the competitive model, these explanations are less attentive to disparities in quality jobs and their persistence across sectors. Broadly, these perspectives posit that low pay and low job quality results in part from policy choices and institutional changes (Mishel et al., 2020; Stansbury & Summers, 2020) and “the balance of power between employers and workers” (Krueger, 2018). On one side of this balance of power are workers, who are helped by policies and institutions promoting a minimum wage, employment rights, and full employment. For example, research found that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 accounted for more in the narrowing of the wage gap between white and Black workers than improvements in the labor market resulting from overall economic growth (Card et al., 2018). Unions are an important institution in this respect. Historically, through collective organizing and bargaining, unions gave workers greater power when negotiating with employers. Even in the current era, when union membership is low, unions effectively increase the wages of non-union workers because unions set pay and benefit standards that many non-union companies follow (Card et al., 2017).

On the other side of the power struggle are employers, with their superior political connections and access to state power. Some scholars point to the ways employers’ practices and policies have contributed to low-quality jobs. This line of scholarship examines employers’ influence over policies related to minimum wage, deregulation, privatization, trade, and immigration, as well as educational, medical, and financial assistance policies for working-age families (Howell & Kalleberg, 2019). While the New Deal resulted in quality of work improvements for some, objections from Southern employers ensured it never fully included single women, Black workers, migrants, and domestic and agricultural workers (Katznelson, 2013; Lichtenstein et al., 2000).

Many firms have also successfully suppressed private sector unionization. Firms often seek to limit the union collective bargaining relationship (Jacoby, 2001; Lawler, 1990; Logan, 2006), some argue increasingly, as U.S. firms faced an intensification of challenges to their global dominance (Cheffins, 2015; Mishel et al., 2020). While the decline in private sector unions correlates to the decline in manufacturing, research also demonstrates how it resulted from firms contesting unionization in their firms and in the courts. This included attacking new organizing efforts. The number of union avoidance consultants grew tenfold from the 1960s to the 1980s and became part of mainstream industrial relations (Logan, 2006). Employers mounted legal changes that undercut the ability of workers to organize and bargain collectively, while the NLRA increasingly weakened to favor employers, with long procedural delays and minimal remedies for violations. Thus, “by the 2010s, then, the New Deal labor relations system was a dead letter for all practical purposes” (Milkman, 2013) with, many argue, grave effects on job quality.

Related to this shift in power is a shift in ownership structure that has pushed employer behavior toward diminishing job quality. Some scholars attribute contemporary low job quality to increases, beginning in the 1970s, in "financialization": the influence of financial institutions on companies and the conceptualization of companies as assets to be bought and sold and as vehicles for maximizing profits (Batt & Appelbaum, 2013; Palley, 2005; Useem, 1996). Others have focused on the shift toward making maximizing shareholder value and shareholder returns the sole priority, often at the expense of "the interests of employees, consumers, and even society at large" (Goldstein, 2012; Gelter, 2013). Evidence links both financialization and preoccupation with shareholder value to consolidating jobs, downsizing, hiring more temporary and part-time workers, shifting to subcontractors, and lowering wage and benefit standards (Hacker, 2019; Lazonick & O'Sullivan, 2000; Lin & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2013). Further, observers argue that shareholder primacy contributes to racial exclusion and the racial wealth gap: 92% of corporate equity is held by white households (Palladino, 2020).

Overall, these explanations center on the impact on job quality as employers use their strength over economic and political resources and their control over the means of production and workers to try to counteract the use of collective strength against them. These explanations illuminate the fourth trend highlighted in the history of job quality: the institutional factors and policymaking that have stopped service sector workers without a college education from experiencing the same job quality upgrades that manufacturing workers without college degrees had in the past. The explanations acknowledge disparities that paralleled the rise of service sector jobs and the decline of unionization but are less focused on explaining the origins and persistence of these trends (Dwyer & Wright, 2019). This scholarship illuminates many dimensions of political economy but addresses less directly categorical inequality, the striking association between the increase in the non-white and non-male share of the workforce and the increase in low-quality jobs. The next section of this paper asks what unequal treatment of workers and work had to do with contemporary trends in job quality. Addressing that question may open up new avenues for improving jobs and creating a more equitable society.

(3) The racism and sexism model

The theories laid out above tell a story of declining job quality. These stories assume a golden period when job quality was high—due to a smaller labor pool and limited technological innovation to replace human capacity (competitive model), as well as due to unions, regulation, and firm ownership structure (political economy model)—and then global political and economic changes created the conditions for job quality to decline. This story is true for some groups of workers, primarily white men. However, it is important to point out that, as evidenced by historical trends, *job quality for women and people of color has been perpetually precarious*. This, alongside the other historical trend of increasing representation of women and people of color in the American workforce, merits some more deliberate explanations. Here, a large literature not exclusively focused on job quality helps explain the many present-day mechanisms through which racism and sexism embedded in policy and practice have maintained poor working conditions for these groups, beginning with the enslavement of Black workers and the treatment of women as subordinates.

For some scholars, many of them working outside of the job quality sphere, these widely acknowledged inequalities function as causes, rather than effects, of the degradation in job quality. The disproportionate distribution of women and people of color into low-quality jobs, their concentration in the service sector (and the low quality of service-sector jobs, generally), and their persistence in these jobs through their lives indicate discriminatory sorting mechanisms somewhere (e.g., in hiring or access to human capital, for example). Incorporating scholarship that looks not to race but rac*ism* and not to sex but to sex*ism* to explain this sorting may be helpful.

While many characterize job quality as worsening since the 1970s, it is widely accepted that the problem of unfair treatment of workers based on race and gender is long-standing and ongoing (Allport, 1954; Dovidio & Gaertner, 2004). As explained earlier, the labor market has consistently marginalized people of color and women. Scholars have demonstrated that since at least the first industrial revolution, employers have tended to assign the more insecure jobs to the least powerful workers in the labor force (i.e., women and people of color) (Wallerstein, 1983). Present-day studies show how discriminatory hiring and human resource management processes racially stratify job structures. This means some occupations are dominated by minorities, and high-level positions are dominated by (mostly) white (male) workers, with little mobility between strata (Carré et al., 2000).

One critical approach considers how this discrimination structures the labor market. Dual labor market theory characterizes the structure of the labor market as segmented into high- and low-quality jobs, and at some point, processes of discrimination function to disproportionately sort and trap women and people of color into the segment with bad jobs. However, some of the scholars covered in this section posit that certain low-quality jobs are devalued precisely because they are performed by devalued people. For example, sociologists introduced the concept of the social construction of skills in the 1970s. Researchers observed that a person's gender, race, ethnicity, and class influenced how employers recognized and valued their skills, which in turn influences the types of jobs employers assigned to them and the rewards they received (Braverman, 1974; Moss & Tilly, 2003; Steinberg, 1990; Kilbourne et al., 1994).

Scholars argue that skills, which refer to the technical requirements involved in a job, are not objective qualities inherent to individuals and rather that the conceptualization and naming of “skills” is itself a process of “social construction” and happens prior to recognition in qualifications or job descriptions (Hampson & Junor, 2015). The identification, evaluation, and valuation of skills depend on various factors such as who is doing the evaluation and in what the context the process is taking place.

Race and gender influence the valuation of skills. Scholars have noted, for example, the complexity of tasks often assigned to women can be underestimated relative to similar tasks assigned to men: “Occupations such as nursery school teacher and child-care worker that are female-dominated are often assessed as less complex…[than]

others such as the dog pound attendant and zoo keeper" (Steinberg, 1990). Scholars tie the lack of recognition of these technical skills and the subsequent devaluing of similar work for pay to women's unpaid, devalued work in the home (Rigby & Sanchis, 2006).

Some suggest tasks widely undertaken outside the workplace without formal training are more often judged as unskilled (Grimshaw et al., 2017; Rigby & Sanchis, 2006). Thus, "women are taught from the time they are children to play a serving role" (Goldberg, 1970, p. 35)—which is to say, the education necessary for those skills comes from a lifetime of training—but the labor market does not compensate for that tutelage. The traditional model of the skilled worker is someone who has access to formal learning and is qualified to practice an explicit body of knowledge (Thompson et al., 2000). This model contributes to low labor market status for service sector employees, and employers use it to justify poor terms of employment (Korczynski, 2002).

Racial and ethnic discrimination also impacts the valuation of skills for people of color. For example, domestic and care work, performed largely by women or people of color, is often labeled "low skill" without careful consideration about how this work requires a variety of skills and abilities to manage the tasks. The fact that the tasks are often linked and operating simultaneously adds to their complexity (Rigby & Sanchis, 2006). Researchers argue that the subjectivity involved in valuations of "soft skills"—those "skills, abilities, and traits that pertain to personality, attitude, and behavior rather than formal or technical knowledge" (Moss & Tilly, 1996, p. 253)—allows for discriminatory processes. Evidence points to discrimination against native Black people and immigrants for lack of soft skills, using it to justify lower wages and job mobility, despite the fact that the assessment of soft skills allows for bias and contains inherent subjectivity (Warhurst et al., 2017; Zamudio & Lichter, 2008). Interestingly, these two effects are opposites. One effect is the devaluation of soft skills because they are seen as less important than hard skills. The other effect is the overemphasis of soft skills, which can lead to discrimination based on perceived differences in these skills (C. Tilly, personal communication, March 30, 2023).

Researchers have not yet established the precise role that the undervaluation of skills plays among the multiple intersecting factors that influence contemporary job quality. The above scholars have identified compelling ways in which skills are socially constructed, but few argue skills are complete social constructions. Different service jobs require different sets of skills and therefore are not complete equivalents (Ra et al., 2019; Rodrik & Sabel, 2019). For example, early child-care and healthcare jobs require a different set of skills than retail or food service. However, overall, this literature points out that across occupations and time, valuations of skill have a subjective nature that many argue can reflect the value society places upon the workers as people. Similarly, most agree that discrimination continues to be a reality for labor markets, but again, researchers debate the scope of its influence. The point here is to utilize these alternative explanations in order to develop a more complete understanding of the sources of low-quality jobs and disparities across groups, especially because these considerations have increased relevance as the labor market continues to diversify demographically and concentrate in the service sector.

Table 2 summarizes the three perspectives on the proliferation of low-quality jobs discussed: the competitive model, power shifts and institutional changes, and discrimination and devaluation.

Table 2 | Three perspectives on the proliferation of low-quality jobs

Perspective	Explanation	Outcome
The competitive model	Technological advances mean there is less demand for workers with lower levels of education.	Large groups of people with lower levels of education are unqualified for high-quality jobs for which education is a requisite; employers who offer low-quality jobs, having an abundance of potential workers, have no incentive to increase their quality.
Power shifts and institutional changes	An erosion of institutions protecting workers and the simultaneous increase in power for corporations has shifted the balance of power away from workers, especially workers in low-quality jobs.	Workers have little recourse or power to improve their situation.
Discrimination and devaluation	Long-standing societal biases lower pay for certain work and workers.	As undervalued workers comprise a larger share of the workforce, societal biases affect the improvement of job quality.

The different perspectives imply different policy solutions. The competitive model suggests that increasing workers' knowledge skills and training would help them escape low-quality jobs. The second perspective suggests that policies that protect workers and increase their leverage during wage setting would help improve job quality. The third perspective, which hypothesizes that societal bias is a cause of increases in low-quality jobs, suggests that policies should directly address biases and inequalities.

Discussion

The work of the many scholars and researchers cited in this paper suggests that power, policies, and perception shape job quality. In the above sections, I attempted to examine the concept of, implications for, and prevalence of low-quality jobs in the United States. I focused on two major contemporary job quality concerns: the prevalence of low-quality jobs and their disparate distribution. I attempted to place these concerns in the context of four historical trends in the labor market over the last century: 1) a restructuring from a concentration in highly unionized manufacturing to a concentration in less unionized services; 2) increasing racial, ethnic, and gender diversity of the workforce; 3) categorical inequality in the form of persistently low job quality for women and people of color; and 4) the pivotal role of policy in job quality. Then, I considered three alternative explanations for contemporary low job quality and noted their strengths and weaknesses in explaining prevalence of low-quality jobs, their concentration among service sector workers, and their disparate distribution. I outlined how some of these theories sought to explain how the economy produces good jobs and bad jobs and some further sought to explain how social processes can sort and trap workers into these jobs by identity. I also introduced theories that suggest that there are valued identities and devalued identities and that this valuation can also partially explain why some people get good jobs and others get bad ones. This work suggests that social inequalities and discrimination don't just intersect with job quality; they shape it.

Rigorous research projects, like the ones cited above, can usually only explain a dimension of a phenomena. This leads them to be attentive to some aspects of the job quality problem and sometimes unable to address others. To explain something well, researchers must focus on a part of a phenomenon, rather than trying to address the problem in its entirety, and let other researchers or additional projects address other aspects. Policy responses, however, can be multidimensional, ideally working synergistically.

Six propositions to consider when working to improve jobs

Given the possibility that societal biases are a cause of the proliferation of low-quality jobs, what steps can we take to address the problem? The following policy propositions will point the search for solutions in the right direction.

(1) Conceptually distinguish between conditions necessary and conventional to the job

I wish to suggest that a useful way to approach job quality policy may be via the taxonomy of conditions presented in this paper: that is, conditions inherent in the job and conditions conventional to the job. Conditions inherent in the job, like wages and schedules, can only be provided by employers. Currently, provisions of these conditions vary dramatically. Other conditions, like health insurance and retirement, have, in the United States, conventionally been provided by employers, again unevenly. Conventional conditions can be provided by external actors, and doing so more broadly or universally might reduce inequality. For example, in countries with national health insurance and medical services, it is funded by general taxation—with a significant employer contribution (Cazes et al., 2015). The current system leaves workers experiencing access to some conditions inherent to the job and some conditions conventional to it dependent on their place in the labor market and their employer's discretion. This access often mirrors and may contribute to group disparities in the labor market and in society. Employment then is a potential axis of inequality along two dimensions: one that employers necessarily control and one that they only conventionally do. A clearer understanding of which conditions are truly inherent to jobs and which could be provided by other actors could therefore help both improve job quality and enhance equity.

(2) Balance equitably upgrading the worker with upgrading the job

Research in the tradition of the competitive model has presented empirical evidence that consistently confirms that both workers and the economy advance with increases in education. The embedded challenge, and one well-recognized, to increasing educational attainment is assuring that educational opportunities are equally available to all. Expanding and equalizing access to higher education, training, skills building, and human capital development can help workers improve their employment outcomes and contribute to economic growth.

However, the expansion of low-wage, low-quality jobs in recent decades does limit the effectiveness of this approach. Currently, only slightly over a third of all jobs require a college education or higher. The structural factors behind job polarization discussed in this paper and the accompanying expansion of low-wage work have fundamentally shaped the demand side of the labor market. Therefore, many, starting with dual labor market theorists, have long emphasized that supply-side strategies focused on upgrading the worker should be balanced by demand-side strategies of upgrading the job (Wachter et al., 1974; McGahey, 2023).

Moreover, discrimination, a recognized problem in the labor market, remains a significant issue. As noted earlier, at least half a century ago, classical economic theory held that because discrimination is inefficient, market forces will eventually eliminate it (Becker, 1971). But discrimination is still with us. Employers do not operate independent of this discrimination, and policymaking has not been fully effective in eliminating it. Differences in job quality suggest that job quality depends on group identity; not only are workers sorted into jobs by identity (Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993), but that identity continues to inform their treatment in the labor market (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004). And making connections between pay disparities and job quality is important: if policymakers succeed in improving job quality but don't eliminate discrimination, then discriminated groups will always have relatively less, regardless of gains.

Finally, the competitive model is necessarily an abstraction. Most scholars recognize that in practice, most real-world labor markets reflect the social and political context in which they operate. Ideas, values, companies, politics, and laws all shape labor markets. In short, labor markets are socially constructed—which means there is an opportunity for social and policy action. Rather than being predetermined, job quality is the result of "choices made by countries, industries and firms" (Findlay et al., 2017, p. 7). Policymakers can construct policies that push for more quality employment and, crucially, more equality in quality employment.

(3) Recognize the importance of law and public policy

Scholarship also points to how power shifts between workers and employers and a set of institutional changes have led to lower-quality jobs. Private market actors like individual companies can choose to increase job quality by, for example, individually raising wages, offering additional benefits, and addressing scheduling issues. Such an approach will benefit only employees of those individual companies, and so long as the changes are at the will of the company, they can also be withdrawn at the will of the company (Chakrabarti & Fuhrer, 2018). Moreover, patterns thus far suggest when employers introduce quality improvement measures, disadvantaged groups have unequal access. Voluntary improvements may also disadvantage—or favor— the businesses that make the changes, resulting in further asymmetries for workers overall. Making policies more widespread, universal, and mandatory increases equity by ensuring the benefits are accessible to all workers.

Research demonstrating that law and public policy have historically been effective means to improve job quality further supports this proposition. Law and public policy established the floor that many workers still stand on today, and the 1974 enactment (and subsequent enforcement) of the Equal Educational Opportunities Act produced some of the most measurable gains for marginalized groups. However, policy shifts in recent decades have "increasingly individualized employment relationships" (Autor & Dorn, 2013, p. 1561), and these have lowered the pressure on employers to invest in good job quality.

Moreover, other research shows that some employers have played a role in undermining job quality in a number of ways, such as lobbying for deregulation, breaking down production into smaller tasks, or even breaking the law (Grimshaw et al., 2017). Employers who offer low-quality jobs may be responding to market constraints such as low profit margins and significant competition, and companies may argue they are unable to raise wages without losing profits, market share, or both. Many employers already generate a significant public cost, as federal programs offering earned income tax credit and food assistance serve to supplement wages. Shareholder primacy, mentioned earlier, has incentivized reducing labor costs over making investments in workers. Moreover, corporate law is limited in its ability to compel management to take action to improve job quality. "Rather, it gives management a shield to protect initiatives it chooses to adopt—as well as to protect the choice not to adopt them" (Joo, 2004, p. 362). Changes in law and policies can disrupt these dynamics.

(4) Consider collective bargaining

Unions have used collective strength to improve job quality for members, and as noted earlier, these gains have spilled over to non-union workers. Although only approximately 6.5% of private-sector workers were unionized in 2019, public-sector workers' union participation in the United States remains steady and high, at 34.8% in 2020. It is true that inequalities are present in private-sector unions, which were slow to come to terms with the rising importance of the service sector. Recently, however, established industrial unions have worked to unionize at universities and among groups like nurses, car wash workers, and other service workers (Milkman, 2013). But the positive influence of U.S. unions can be seen in organized labor's successful advocacy on behalf of workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Unions representing transportation workers, other essential workers, and teachers negotiated for safety measures and increased pay and benefits.

How to revive unions in the private sector or create other means for building collective group agency among workers remains an open question. Legal scholars suggest that labor law is so compromised and obsolete that we need to start over with a clean slate if it is to meet the needs of workers in modern times (Block, 2020). American's approval of labor unions has increased significantly in the past decade. In 2009, only 48% of Americans approved of unions, but by 2022, that number had risen to 71% (Reddy, 2023). Worker organization comes in many forms, including union renewal strategies, new organizing initiatives, worker forums, worker centers, and worker cooperatives. Advocates and scholars have proposed different forms of worker organizations, including quasi-unions and worker centers (Fine, 2006; Heckscher & Carré, 2006; Lesniewski, 2012).

(5) Consider how discrimination may be affecting more workers

As scholars of inequality who look at its effects on the labor market have documented, for groups subject to discrimination, jobs were never good. While there is a narrative that our present era is witnessing a decline in high-quality jobs, that narrative does not fully reflect the historical reality of discriminated groups. It is curious how in such a dynamic economy, the social constructs used to hold people back remain so durable. Research might be able to address the question of if and how much the rise in labor force participation of these key groups relates to the overall grim state of job quality. For policymakers, rather than aiming for a return to a golden age, which never existed for marginalized groups, aim for an inclusive future. Given the persistence with which women and people of color are sorted into low-quality jobs, the ultimate goal of policy should be to improve the quality of all jobs.

(6) Recognize subjectivity in how skills are defined and valued

Research has established that sorting mechanisms operating in areas like hiring or access opportunity drive some of the disproportionate distribution of women and people of color into low-quality jobs and concentrate them in the service sector. Policymakers and progressive employers are trying to find ways to combat this sorting by raising wages and improving other job conditions.

Additionally, within these occupations, the assessment of skill, which often correlates with pay, is guided by criteria such as formal qualifications held by an individual, the amount of training required for a job, or the ability of an individual to perform complex job tasks. But “perceptions of skill are highly subjective and relative” (Riley et al., 2002, p. 143) with skills often tied to gender and race. Supposedly neutral measures of skill are “overlaid with the social construction which tradition, gender and ethnicity impose on our interpretation of what is skilled work and what is not” (Baum, 2008, p. 75). What follows is that the assessment of skills is at least in part a social construction and results in an undervaluation of certain kinds of work and workers. This undervaluation likely shapes employment policies and practices and welfare and family policy regimes. It may also be worth exploring how undervaluation may also contribute to sorting of this work into secondary jobs and function to justify low wages and mobility within secondary jobs. Given the proliferation of demand for undervalued service sector work and the rise in marginalized groups’ share of the workforce, it may be that this undervaluation has moved from the periphery to the center of the labor market.

Conclusion

The propositions outlined are all important considerations for policymakers who are looking to improve job quality. By distinguishing between essential and conventional job conditions, policymakers can ensure that all workers have access to basic necessities, regardless of their employer. By balancing efforts to upgrade workers and jobs, policymakers can help to create well-paying, safe, and healthy jobs for all. By recognizing that labor markets are socially constructed, policymakers can take steps to address the role of discrimination and the undervaluation of skills in the labor market. By considering collective bargaining, policymakers can give workers more power to bargain for better wages, benefits, and working conditions. Finally, by addressing the undervaluation of skills, policymakers can create a more just and equitable economy for all workers. Improving job quality is a complex issue, and addressing the complexities is essential to the future of American work.

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