The importance of work in an age of uncertainty: the eroding work experience in America

by David L. Blustein, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, 266 pp., £22.99
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BOOK REVIEW

The importance of work in an age of uncertainty: the eroding work experience in America, by David L. Blustein, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, 266 pp., £22.99 (hardback), ISBN 9780190213701

This is an important new book by one of the most eminent vocational psychologists in the USA. Based at the Department of Counselling, Developmental, and Educational Psychology at the Lynch School of Education at Boston College, Blustein is best known for spearheading the “psychology of working” approach, a perspective that informs and infuses this volume whose fundamental premise is that, for better and (unfortunately too often) for worse, work remains at the core of who we are as humans, and in many ways defines us. Work thus provides some with opportunities for personal growth, purpose, passion and connection, while others experience it as a bane, a source of frustration and misery, and merely a means to an end, where surviving rather than thriving is the goal.

Blustein has scores of publications to his name, comprising a body of work that has garnered a wide readership and several awards and accolades both nationally and internationally. *The Importance of Work in an Age of Uncertainty* builds on this impressive scholarship, but admirably manages to wear its erudition lightly: it is a book from the heart, a labour of love, constituting nothing less than a manifesto in favour of decent work – a goal that is as important as it is increasingly out of the grasp of many in America, and elsewhere.

The book is comprised of a Preface, eight data chapters, and a Conclusion. The Preface helpfully sets out the story behind the project, details the methodology used, and immediately sets the tone for the rest of the volume, not only by outlining the main thesis – i.e. that despite epochal changes in the workforce brought about by the wholesale adoption of neoliberal economic policies and new technologies, work retains a central role in our life – but also by weaving into the narrative Blustein’s own personal voice, which comes across in many ways, but perhaps most poignantly when he meditates on the death of a dearly beloved brother, an event that plunged him into a seemingly bottomless pit of grief, motivating him to take time out to further examine what it might mean to live, and to do so meaningfully.

The book is driven by this pivotal experience, and in many ways shaped by it, in that the personal leads to and informs the analytic reflections as well as the consequent political commitments. The eight chapters that follow the Preface are in fact all structured in such a way as to discuss central work-related themes, presenting first an introductory “frame” or lens through which to consider a particular aspect of the world of work, which is then fleshed out thanks to the voices of 58 people interviewed by Blustein and his team in the context of the Boston College Working Project. The interviewees represent a broad array of occupations, ranging from unemployed and underemployed individuals to persons working in trades and service occupations and a few at the top of the career ladder. Each chapter has a concluding third section that draws on the key findings of decades of research by psychologists (in the main) and social scientists, helping to bring the different insights together, with the scholarly voices and the vignettes, as well as Blustein’s experience as a therapist, working in harmony together to drive the message home.

And the message is clear: there is a lot of pain and suffering out there in the workforce, and the American dream is, for many, nothing less than a nightmare. There is also, of course, a lot of bravery, resilience, creativity and gumption in the face of adversity: Blustein is careful not to represent people as helpless or lacking in the agentic struggle against precarity and a merely survival mode, and in search of self-determination, even as the Great Recession casts its long, dark and heavy shadow over them. And yet one cannot engage with these human stories and lives without asking oneself a set of fundamental questions: is this the best we can do? Is it possible that we cannot organise

work in such a way that more and more people find it a source of joy and fulfilment? Who stands to gain by rendering work too small for our spirits, and by making it insecure, precarious, and replete with drudgery?

Blustein constantly keeps these questions in mind as he addresses the eight themes arising from the interviews, allocating a chapter to each. We thus explore how the experience of work colours our experience of life, helping us understand who we are in the world (chapter 1), and how for some, work is basically about survival, while for others it also provides an opportunity to thrive as a human being (chapter 2). Work supports human flourishing by providing a space and structure for people to satisfy important basic needs, such as connecting with others (chapter 3), having a sense of purpose by being part of something bigger than ourselves (chapter 4), and by finding the motivation to transcend mediocrity and to be the best that we can be (chapter 5). Work provides some with the opportunity to care for others – even if much care work is undervalued and underpaid in economically advanced societies (chapter 6) – and yet for many work itself does not afford a caring environment, but is instead a source of daily oppression and harassment (chapter 7). For all that, being without work (chapter 8) is experienced as a calamitous event, triggering much material and psychological distress. The book concludes by drawing together the insights, evidence, arguments and voices in order to make a case for the right of all to be able to work with dignity and opportunity (chapter 9).

There is much that I liked about this book, and many reasons why I would heartily recommend it to those working in career development and related fields. First, the volume is written in an engaging style, with excellent summaries of some of the most important and relevant literature from vocational psychology and, occasionally, the social sciences. The references to scholarly work – which, remarkably for a US author, also acknowledges the efforts of European scholars rather than remaining provincially and narcissistically American – are bundled together as endnotes, thus leaving the main text uncluttered and easy to follow. Blustein, moreover, is a gifted writer: he has the rare knack of writing simply without being simplistic, and of articulating complex ideas in a limpid prose devoid of jargon and pretentious obfuscation. The vignettes are priceless: they bring key themes and issues to life, constantly serving to remind the reader that what is at stake here are people's experience of life, and that decisions made by those in power have enormous consequences for workers, especially for those caught in survival jobs.

Second, what makes the narrative especially compelling is another voice, that of Blustein himself. His presence, value position, and pledge to decency and social justice in an increasingly non-decent unjust world drive the book forward, establishing a unity of tone and purpose that is as satisfying as it is exceptional: not many American psychologists of Blustein's generation and standing, steeped (and often still stuck) in an indefensible positivistic posturing, would be willing to take the risk of suspending their authoritative and distant academic authorial voice in order to lay bare their political and ideological commitments, and to do so with such sincerity and transparency.

Those commitments represent what I consider to be a third strength of the book: there is a humane vision at work here, such that the engagement with the world as it is – as portrayed by both empirical scholarship and individual life stories – leads to a consideration of the world as it *could* and *should* be. This comes through, for instance, in the discussion about ways of crafting work arrangements such that they foster greater meaning and connection to the broader social good, or about the potential of Guaranteed Basic Income in ensuring dignified living for all (even if, as acknowledged, discussions around such a proposal are complex and inconclusive, as the Finnish experiment with GBI has shown). There is a clear normative stance quilting all the chapters together, inviting us to accept the collective responsibility for shaping a just world of work for all. While I sometimes felt that Blustein was a bit too restrained in his critique of the capitalist world order, to the extent that he ultimately comes across as a social democrat reformer rather than a hard core challenger of the system, there is nevertheless a clear condemnation of the way neoliberal policies have put profits before people, deepened the chasm between the haves and have nots,

caused havoc to the environment, and rendered livelihood unstable and insecure for many, thus increasing misery and distress in ways that put America to shame.

Blustein's sympathies are unequivocally with those who have to face the daily struggle for survival, who have jumped through all the hoops and hurdles and who are nevertheless underemployed or unceremoniously dismissed from work without as much as a second thought to their welfare, who have to face obstacles, harassment and unfair treatment due to their class, gender, ethnicity, age, able-bodiedness, and/or sexual orientation. There might not be rage against the system, nor the cutting structural analysis that one finds in critical and liberation psychology (as represented by, among others, Ignacio Martín-Baró, for instance) but there is nevertheless a commendable effort to constantly take social and economic forces into account, and not just internal psychological states and resources, when trying to understand the positions that people occupy inside, at the edge of, and outside the labour market.

Underpinning Blustein's narrative is a deep and heartfelt sadness at the wasteland that characterises many working lives – a sadness that also wells up from memories of the author's own modest beginnings in a working class family, and his subsequent rise to privilege. Unlike many who made it, however, Blustein does not pull up the ladder behind him: he is well aware of the forces that push others off the rungs of that same ladder, requiring them to prop it up with their labour so that others can enjoy the goodies of life. It is this visceral experience that helps him bridge the personal with the political, and to work creatively with the dialectic between structure and agency. Blustein's measured tone draws on liberal humanistic and positive psychology, but successfully sidesteps the ultimately dangerous individualising tendencies in both traditions – which would have us address misery through cognitive rather than systemic restructuring, and through fostering resilience rather than rebellion. Here Freire is an inspiration, given his injunction to name injustice (conscientisation) and to overcome it through collective action.

Blustein's book resonates with other books about the world of work that have inspired me, such as *Working* by Studs Terkel (1972), *The Corrosion of Character* by Richard Sennett (1998), and *Nickel and Dimed* by Barbara Ehrenreich (2001), to mention just three. *The Importance of Work in an Age of Uncertainty* will, I am ready to wager, join these volumes to establish itself as yet another classic indictment of the eroding experience of work, in America and beyond.

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