Workers Without Work: Injured Workers and Well-Being

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the views of injured workers in Northwestern Ontario to show that when individuals are deprived of the opportunity to engage in occupations that they find meaningful, their sense of well-being suffers. Injured workers were interviewed to learn how they cope with their situation and a prominent theme to emerge was the strength of a worker identity even in the face of being unable to work as before. The paper reviews evidence that they strive to maintain a sense of themselves as "good" workers, and evidence that this is difficult, as significant others regard them differently because they can no longer work as before. This paper also contributes to the "orientations to work" literature by highlighting the importance of taking social context into account when considering worker identities, orientations, and commitments to work.

Keywords
Injured workers
Worker identity
Occupational deprivation
Qualitative research

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Contemporary Western society is said to be a consumer culture (Featherstone, 1991; Jagger, 2000; Rose, 1989). As such, "sources of identity and a sense of self are derived less from work and production than from consumption and leisure" (Jagger, 2000, p. 45; cf. Tomlinson, 1990). Indeed, popular discourse suggests that people work because they have to, not because they want to. This maxim seems to be all the more compelling for those at the lower ends of the occupational prestige hierarchy, such as manual labourers. About these labourers, Bauman (2001) theorizes:

> They know they are disposable, and so they do not see much point in developing attachment or commitment to their jobs, in entering into lasting associations with workmates. They tend to be wary of any loyalty to the workplace or of inscribing their own life purposes into its projected future. (p. 28)

This perspective on sources of identity in contemporary Western society is in keeping with research suggesting that social changes have led workers to take a largely instrumental approach to their work. Yet, social changes permeate society in uneven ways and there are still those who consider work in exchange for wages as intrinsically meaningful. Based on a qualitative study of injured workers and their attitudes towards their situation, this article shows that injured workers typically cherish their identity as *worker* and that this identity is central to their sense of self. Being injured at work means that not only is their livelihood threatened but also their place in the world.

This argument is in keeping with insights from the discourse of occupational science. In particular, it is argued that occupation (defined broadly) is related to well-being (Law, Steinwender, & Leclair, 1998; Whiteford, 2000) and there are important links between occupation and identity (Christiansen, 1999; Laliberte-Rudman, 2002). This research suggests that when individuals are deprived of the opportunity to engage in occupations that they find meaningful, their sense of well-being suffers. However, Whiteford notes that "there is a lack of existing research dealing with the negative consequences of occupational deprivation" (2000, p. 202). Thus, by considering injured workers and the significance they attach to defining themselves as workers even when they cannot work as before, this paper offers a contribution to the evolving discourse on links between occupation, identity, and sense of well-being.

Concerning the argument that contemporary workers regard their work in instrumental terms, it is instructive to consider points made by Goldthorpe, Lockwood, Bechhofer, and Platt (1968) in their landmark study of the work-related attitudes

held by male manual labourers in the English industrial town of Luton. They found that workers were for the most part attached to their jobs for purely economic reasons and that "there was no indication that the majority of our respondents were greatly concerned to maintain close relationships with their workmates, either within or outside the workplace" (p. 145). At the same time, Goldthorpe et al. pointed out that their sample was distinctive in three ways. First, most of the men they studied were married with young children at home, so that "family life is looked to as a major source of expressive and affective satisfactions, while little is expected or sought from working life other than the wherewithal for the pursuit of extrinsic ends" (p. 149). Second, since Luton was "a town of migrants" (p. 151), men who had migrated there "specifically in search of material improvement, notably in regard to housing and jobs" (p. 152) predominated in their sample. Third, many respondents had experienced downward social mobility which led Goldthorpe et al. to suggest that "feelings of 'relative deprivation' have [probably] been comparatively frequent" (p. 158).

Thus, Goldthorpe et al. (1968) considered their respondents atypical of industrial workers generally but speculated that they "may perhaps be revealing a pattern of industrial life which will in the fairly near future become far more widespread" (p. 174). They saw "such factors as urban redevelopment and greater geographical mobility" leading to the steady erosion of "more traditional modes of working-class life" (p. 174). As well, they argued that a largely economic orientation to work could in future be reinforced by the growing expectation that men should have their expressive and affective needs met through family relationships.

The Luton study has been criticized as methodologically flawed and as offering unwarranted generalizations (Krahn & Lowe, 1998; MacKinnon, 1981). Subsequent research attends to the significance of gender in mediating work orientation (e.g., Crompton & Harris, 1998; Duffy & Pupo, 1992) and suggests that workers typically embrace more than one work orientation (Blackburn & Mann, 1979; Crompton & Harris, 1998; Loscocco, 1989). Yet, this research does not deny the general point that economic rewards have become increasing important in a society that has become ever more individualistic and consumerist.

My argument in this article does not run contrary to the argument that social changes encourage workers to take a largely instrumental approach to their work. Rather, the argument highlights the importance of taking social context into account when considering worker identities, orientations, and commitments to work. Moreover, this article suggests that what workers say about their orientations when they are gainfully employed and not worried about being deprived of the opportunity to work, may not be what they say when they face occupational deprivation.

The Research Setting

Northwestern Ontario is a vast and isolated geographical region with unique characteristics. In the middle of the region is Thunder Bay, the largest city with a population of 109,016 (Statistics Canada, 2001). Both east and west of Thunder Bay are smaller towns and communities spread out over a distance of hundreds of kilometers. The second-largest city in the region is Kenora, 500 kilometers from Thunder Bay with a population of 15,838.

These communities developed largely in conjunction with the growth of forestry and mining in the region and resource extraction remains important in terms of employment opportunities. Nevertheless, the changing global economy and declining natural resources have led to diminishing employment opportunities, and the region has seen its population steadily decline over the past few decades. For the most part, workers live in the region because it is where they were born and raised, and they have strong ties to the people and the land. Thus, this is not a region characterized by urban redevelopment or populated by workers who are geographically highly mobile.

Geographical isolation also means that the population as a whole can be slow to adopt new ways of understanding identity. Indeed, Dunk (1991) has called Thunder Bay a "working man's town" and highlights the pervasiveness of male working-class culture in the region generally. Of particular relevance here are the strength of the work ethic and the idealization of the self-reliant worker who engages in manual labour to support his family. This mentality is even stronger in the non-urban parts of the region. Moreover, as discussed below, this working-class culture includes the valuation of work-based identity, along with the tendency to look to work associates as important for satisfying expressive and affective needs. These are quintessential male values but the research discussed below suggests that women workers in the region may be as likely as men to value their work in waged labour as an important source of identity. The region of Northwestern Ontario, in sum, provides a specific social, cultural, and economic context mediating the ways in which workers participate in contemporary, postmodern society.

The Research Project

The data discussed in this paper are taken from the results of an exploratory, participatory action research project in Northwestern Ontario that examined the extent to which injured workers look to each other for help as they deal with recovery and return to work issues following workplace injury (Stone et al., 2002). The project was a collaborative effort between injured workers in Thunder Bay and university-based researchers who agreed that data should be collected using semi-structured focus group interviews. Decisions about where to hold a focus group were based partly on an interest in ensuring that different parts of the region were represented, and partly on expectations about

where it would be easiest to recruit injured workers. Approximately half of the interview participants were recruited after learning about the research from the mass media and calling the research office. The rest were recruited through word-of-mouth.

Between March and June 2001, twelve focus group interviews were held in seven different communities: Thunder Bay (5), Fort Frances (1), Kenora (2), Dryden (1), Geraldton (1), Longlac (1), and Marathon (1). One of the Thunder Bay groups was restricted to aboriginal injured workers, and another in Thunder Bay was restricted to youth. In the interviews, participants were encouraged to elaborate on how their injuries had affected their lives, to speculate about what might have helped them cope better, and asked about contact with other injured workers. A total of 54 injured workers participated in an interview. Table 1 gives an overview of selected participant characteristics. The interview transcripts were analyzed inductively using tactics identified by Miles and Huberman (1994). Particular attention was paid to themes, patterns, and anomalies in the experiences of injured workers as they dealt with the consequences of their injuries.[1]

Table 1: Selected Characteristics of Focus Group Participants

Male	36
Female	18
Age Range (at time of injury)	21-57
Union member at time of injury	31
Cultural groups	Anglophone Allophone (English, Italian, Finnish, Swedish, German, Ukranian) Francophone Aboriginal

The interviews produced rich data about the variety of issues that injured workers typically deal with, the difficulties they face, and where they go for help. Significantly, of all the various people that injured workers turn to for support, other injured workers consistently give the most useful help. It is in their casual conversations with each other that injured workers learn the most useful information, get the most helpful advice, and find the most empathy.

The interview excerpts presented below are selected from 10 of the 12 focus group transcripts and represent 20 different informants. Each excerpt is illustrative of comments made by numerous participants in different groups. To protect anonymity, participants who are quoted are not identified by place of residence but only by gender and former occupation.

Injured Workers and Worker Identity

One of the themes that emerged from data analysis was the strength of a worker identity. This emerges from the findings that injured workers identify more with other injured workers than with disabled people in general, and they are more interested in looking to other injured workers for support than to their families.

Interview data show that injured workers who are unable to return to work are forced to re-evaluate their sense of identity. Following workplace injury, a number of changes take place: the loss of gainful employment challenges a worker's own internal sense of well-being; it is frequently cause for friends and family to regard them differently; and it leads to new people intruding into their lives. These changes, along with the necessity of dealing with health professionals and claims adjudicators, serve to reinforce the sense of having a new and less socially valued identity to get used to: the identity of injured worker.

The strength of the worker identity, and the way it is tied to a sense of well-being, was apparent as participants talked about what it meant to them to no longer be able to go to work. For several participants, being unable to work made their experience of workplace injury one of the most devastating of their lives. For example, one man did not like to dwell on the implications of his injury and became overwrought after talking about the issue in the focus group. He reflected:

> *You know, I haven't cried a whole lot in my life, I've cried a few times, I cried when I couldn't go to work, you know, I cried when my boy got hit last year by a car, almost killed, and I cried today.* (Man, former construction worker)

Indeed, in all focus groups every participant commented on their distress about being unable to perform the same work they had before injury. One of the more passionate comments about this was:

> *The hardest thing of my life was not being able to go back to nursing. That's what I loved. I truly loved it, and I was working towards my RNs, I was working and going to school, unions, Friday night and Saturday.* (Woman, former nurse)

Along the same lines, others commented on the psychological distress they suffered as a result of workplace injury. For example:

> *I didn't even think I was going to go back to work, I just, you get so low and depressed, you know … I broke down. And uh, I just, I thought I was one of the toughest guys around town.* (Man, mill worker)

Moreover, interviews produced considerable evidence of the strength of the work ethic. Some workers wanted so badly to work that they would go even when they were in

pain. For example:

> *The day that I was going to return to work I couldn't get out of bed. But, you know, like I mean uh, I'm, you know, not one who really wants to be off work and stuff, so popped a few extra pills, roll out to work. When I got there, I was pretty, you know, I didn't really belong there, and I couldn't sit I couldn't stand I couldn't do anything.* (Man, former miner)

Another, in a different community, said:

> *I fought for months in order to, to hold my job. And uh, they really try to get rid of you, as soon as they think you're gonna be a liability in any way, they just, try to get rid of you.* (man, general labourer)

In yet another community the following observation was made:

> [I know lots of workers] *who* [don't] *go and seek medical treatment. They just tough it out. You know! Because they don't want to go through the hassle of being off work. So they won't go off work unless they absolutely positively have to, and they work in pain and, everything else.* (Man, mill worker)

Maintenance of Worker Identity

Once injured, workers need to file a claim with the Workers Compensation Board (WCB), known in Ontario since the mid-1990s as the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB). Whether or not the claim is allowed, merely getting involved in the claims process serves to reinforce the identity of worker. At a minimum, injured workers are mindful of the fact that they sustained their injuries in the course of performing work-related duties. As "good" workers, they believe they are deserving of compensation. However, many complained that they were not treated with due respect as they attempted to get compensation:

> *You know, I've worked hard at my job. I respected people. And, some of these adjudicators, they don't respect anybody.* (Woman, former health care aide)

Similarly, in a different community a participant complained:

> *Well, I guess when this first started I was hoping the adjudicator and I were going to work on this together. Took me a while to realize she wasn't on my side.* (Woman, secretary)

Many participants spoke about having to fight for years in order to be adequately compensated for their work-related injuries and the longer they fought the more their identity as injured workers was reinforced. Another participant told about WSIB's attempts to argue that he was not injured at work but was suffering health problems caused either by high blood pressure, MS, or diabetes:

> *And this is coming out of the mouth of a general surgeon! Who's not even a qualified individual to be telling me this stuff! This is how, this is how, this is how poor it is! "Now, Mr.* [name], *you can go back to work! Driving transport truck or whatever you want! Because you're no longer our problem. You've got a health problem. It's not a work-related problem at all."… Ugh! I was devastated!* (Man, former long distance truck driver)

The strength of the worker identity was also clear as participants talked about their difficulties with adjusting to WSIB's demand that they attend school to be retrained. For example:

> *Let me put it this way. I, I only had grade 7 level, okay? Because I went to work, at 15. I, I quit high school and I was OFF, and I, I couldn't handle that crap! I was not, the school type. So, I was working! And I worked all my life ... till I was 31 years old. Or thirty years old. And I made it from, waitressing, to short order cooking, to bartending. I was management at* [my place of employment]*! That's how I got, and now, I'm right back to where I started from. I can't do noth - I don't have an education. I tried the schooling and it's just like, this is all foreign to me.* (Woman, former store manager)

The former Workers Compensation Board, however, was not always willing to send injured workers for retraining. Some participants wanted to be retrained but for various reasons were denied the opportunity. For example:

> *Well, in 1985 I got, hit by a, a, trees. I broke uh, my uh, knee, got dislocated, and my back was broken. And, I didn't know anything about WCB. Nothing! So, I mulled around like I had to wait a long time for my first payment. Then I got my payment. Then they wanted me to go back to work. I said, "Okay, I'm a pulp cutter. Can't go back to work." Asked for retraining. They say, "no, because you went to university. You took 1 credit in university, so therefore you don't go to, you can't get retraining because you're retrained enough!"* (Man, former pulp cutter)

Meanwhile, another had been with the same employer for years and wanted to stay there, but WCB refused to allow him the opportunity for retraining.

> *The employer, I happened to have a good employer* [name of employer]. *They were wonderful. They bent over backwards. They wanted to retrain me, for grain testing, just to test the grain, what types of grain were being used. I coulda done that job, but I had to get an upgrading in my schooling. They were willing to do that. But the Board whitewashed it. They said, "No. He's too old to be retrained and reschooled." And I looked at them, I says, "Geez, I got millwright's papers. That didn't take me 20 years." But that's the way they dealt me. That's the way the cards fell for*

me. (Man, former millwright)

Participants denied retraining were willing to be flexible in terms of the jobs they did. At the same time, though, they did not lose sight of the fact that the need to be flexible only arose because of the working conditions in which they were forced to labour. They were injured while being "good" workers, which meant that it was incumbent on the WCB to help them retrain and return to being good workers in a different job.

Other participants were also keen to maintain a sense of themselves as good workers, and when employers offered them modified work, they were eager to take it. However, in practice participants reported that few employers offered appropriate work to injured workers. For example:

> *When I had my next back injury, actually it was neck, shoulder, and back, I was off six months … finally, they said I could go back to work and, modified duties. Well, the employer's idea of modified duties was put me on a wheelbarrow, wheeling cement!* (Man, former equipment operator)

Injured Workers: A Stigmatized Identity

Injured workers are stigmatized no matter where they live but in the small and isolated communities of Northwestern Ontario, where it can be impossible to remain anonymous, the stigma can be especially difficult to get away from. Participants talked about the negative repercussions attached to having an injured worker identity. The impact was felt in all areas of life, including relationships with family, friends, co-workers, and others.

Several participants talked about knowing other injured workers who had their marriages break up because their partner could not or would not come to terms with the impact of the injury. Others talked about the break-up of their own marriages. For example:

> *I would say that, well … speaking of marriage break-ups, yeah, my husband and I did break up … It wasn't that we didn't love each other. We, we did. Um, but I had a hard time accepting it. My husband had a very hard time accepting it.* (Woman, former sales worker)

Many in different communities talked about the lack of sympathy from their own families. For example:

> *Even family members uh, have a low tolerance to uh, acceptance. They uh, they still have the general mind set that, that you will recover and you will recover right away. And unless, unless you're uh, you're still trying to put your face back together, then you know, it's very provisional. If you can, walk and talk and tie your own shoelaces, well, you should be out there working. And, anything short of that, you're uh, well a liability I guess. You're a cost, you're not producing, you're consuming.* (Man, former long distance truck driver)

> *It's difficult when you, you know, you talk to family and friends that are healthy and that. And like I said, my example being, is that I don't have anybody approving, my injury. You know, because I don't look sick.* (woman, former knife grinder)

> *And it's a fact that people from your own family in some cases, yes, will alienate you and see you with different eyes. You're not the same person no more.* (Man, former equipment operator)

> *With my family I think I was totally rejected, because I wasn't working. My father is very traditional where, you know, you never miss a day. You work, and you work no matter whether it's raining or, if you are sore, whatever.* (Man, former bulldozer operator)

Relationships with friends, co-workers, and others also suffered. The theme of co-workers' lack of understanding was repeated in several groups. For example:

> *My co-workers are something else. They make you feel like you're, this high, cause you can't do something. And, they've actually, voiced it. "Do we have to do everything around here?" … And I don't appreciate them rubbing it in my face on top of it. Because an injury is not just, it comes with a lot of other problems. And, that you have to deal with. So you don't, you don't need that. You don't need the BS from co-workers that don't understand it.* (Woman, customer service clerk)

> *The hardest part is when you get some co-workers saying well, I wish I could be off like you, and stuff like that … It's tough, tough yeah. You know, for the company you can say well, you know, that's them, but some of the people you work with closer, it's very hard to uh, accept.* (man, pipe fitter)

Others, who are not currently engaged in paid labour, talked about being shunned by former friends and co-workers.

> *Actually my uh, uh, fellow workers that I worked with all the years, all the people that I had contact with, as soon as I was injured I was out of it. Uh, still to date yet. You know, I still don't talk to almost all the men that worked for me for all those years, no. No. I don't get to see them. Uh, before that, we were, do you know, we might well have been sitting in the bar together all evening, or spent the weekend in, do you know, whatever. But, you know, as soon as I was hurt, hey, you're an outcast, you're out of it! On the construction site, I would, I was a pretty heavy concrete man and, and, no, I didn't have any friends anymore. I'm an outcast now. And, and, they didn't really, wish to associate me in any way.* (Man, former construction worker)

> *When I was working … I got along with everyone, and I was a good worker, and all this. But once you're off work for a while, and you are not working, then people look at you differently … All through, your, your co-workers, your ex-co-workers, they look at you differently, when you're not working. You're not, one of the boys no more. You're, you're some bum on the street, not working.* (Man, former bulldozer operator)

Tied in with feeling misunderstood is the realization that being an injured worker means being marked as someone who is not pulling his or her weight. This was especially noticeable in the smaller communities and one participant commented that "*they think it's a sign of weakness, a stigma, being an injured worker*" (man, former equipment operator). Another participant in this group concurred, saying:

> *It's uh, it's like becoming a leper … To an injured person, the stigma is uh, how should I say it now, uh … you're still um, counter-productive. You're not, you're not producing and you're uh, like dead weight to the system.* (Man, former construction worker)

In yet another community, the only participant to have migrated into the region offered the following insight:

> *Because I'm new in town, and I'm also new up north, I notice one thing. People up here* [chuckle] *seem to have, like a real strong, uh, like a, honour for work. You know, if you're not working, I've met people, if you're not working 16 hours a day, you are basically uh, lazy. My boss told me, when he was working in the bush, when he was younger, you know, full of pride, he told me that a tree fell on him, he was knocked out for an hour, and just got up, and kept walking. That seems to be the attitude. It's not, honourable to go and, seek help, or, this kind of stuff. Where you don't want to be seen, sitting at the coffee shop, not working. Stuff like that. It's honour, I think.* (Man, former cabinet maker)

As well, a few participants talked about how the stigma attached to being an injured worker spread to affect their family members so that they too suffered on a psychological level. For example:

> *I didn't want my family, and I mean, they were suffering already, because, people were talking, my daughter felt uncomfortable, people were talking at school, I mean, it was tough on them, and that was the one thing I didn't prepare for, um, all the other things I'd been prepared for, I didn't realize that because I was using the counselling service, and because I was trying to do all the right things, that people were going to talk and victimize me and my family.* (Man, former steam fitter)

Links between Occupation, Identity, and Sense of Well-Being

The current fashion of analyzing society through the lens of postmodern theory can lead theorists to overstate the extent to which people in particular localities willingly embrace larger social trends towards individualism and consumerism. For the injured workers discussed in this paper, there is little evidence that they are moving away from modernist values such as the work ethic, or attachment, and commitment to place. For these injured workers, regardless of age, gender, or ethnicity, the work ethic remains a source of pride and maintaining a worker identity is important to them. This is true even though most of those interviewed were unable to work in exchange for wages. Moreover, when working, they were attached to both their jobs and their workmates. Being unable to work as before meant that their sense of well-being suffered.

While it is patently true that "working life is saturated with uncertainty" (Bauman, 2001, p. 24), it does not follow that workers necessarily accept this uncertainty with equanimity. For example, Morgan (2002) is a former pulp and paper mill worker in Thunder Bay and has written about the anger and sense of betrayal that he and his co-workers experienced when their place of employment was permanently closed in the early 1990s. Discussing how a sample of these displaced workers made sense of their experience, Dunk (2002, pp. 878-879) points out that they were "part of the privileged segment of the Keynesian/Fordist-era working class. Despite relatively low educational levels, they enjoyed high-wages, relative job security, and union protection." The mill was widely perceived as providing "a reliable source of well-paid employment," (Dunk) and when it was closed, many of the almost 500 employees were shocked.

Similarly, the injured workers interviewed for this study were ill-prepared to face the contemporary reality of an uncertain labour market. Participants, as this article describes, saw themselves as workers: workers who were injured in the course of performing work-related duties. They did not see it as incumbent upon themselves to take responsibility for their own retraining so that they could adjust to the new world of work. Rather, they considered this to be the responsibility of the WCB/WSIB: the organization that is supposedly in place to help them return to suitable employment.

Much to their chagrin, they discovered that in the face of a demonstrated inability to satisfactorily perform the identity of good or honest worker, others questioned whether they were worthy of continued respect. They found that relationships with family, friends, co-workers and, others typically changed for the worse as others regarded them in a new, less favourable light. In the face of an inability to physically demonstrate an ongoing commitment to the work ethic, maintaining a sense of self as a productive worker became a challenging task. As Christiansen (1999) argues,

"identity is the pathway by which people, through daily occupations and relationships with others, are able to derive meaning from their lives" (p. 556). For these injured workers, dependent as they are on work for a sense of well-being, being without work means that their place in the world is open to question. Clearly, occupational deprivation has negative consequences.

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[1] For more details of the complex recruitment strategies, data collection, and analysis see Stone et al. (2002), and Stone (2002).

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