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Sociology of Work: An Encyclopedia

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Despite its centrality to society, what constitutes work remains contested terrain. For example, whereas driving a cab or performing surgery tend to be perceived as real work, many other activities—equally labor-intensive and as widespread—often do not gain such recognition. In particular, activities such as child care and cleaning within the household tend not to be seen as work. These activities can be labeled “invisible work.” More generally, any activity entailing work that goes unnoticed by others in society is said to constitute invisible work.

Invisible work is a concept that emerged primarily from feminist scholarship, intended to analyze gender inequality in the wake of women's movements of the 1970s. One such movement was the Wages for Housework movement in Great Britain, which campaigned to legitimize child care and housecleaning as work that created economic value and deserved pay. Prior to these movements, child care and housework had traditionally been seen as natural acts following from gender roles in the division of labor, rather than as actual work. Feminist scholar Arlene Daniels noted in 1987 that the traditional conception of work assumes that work is performed in public and is paid. Such work also tends to be conducted by men. By contrast, invisible work is often confined to the household, unpaid, and conducted by women. Further labor shifts led scholars to recognize that invisible work was not only a gendered phenomenon, nor was it limited to the household setting. Labor trends in the late 20th century, such as outsourcing and downsizing, highlighted employment hierarchies; certain jobs were outsourced or downsized because these jobs were seen as routine and less valuable. Scholars like Susan Leigh Star and Anselm Strauss broadened the definition of invisible work to encompass activities traditionally recognized as work but routinized and seen as low value, such as factory assembly work.

When Work is Invisible

Several factors in the nature of work tend to be associated with invisible work. One factor is when work is literally unseen by others in broader society. For sociologist Erving Goffman, work—like all social activity—is a performance for an audience. Traditionally, the private sphere of the household, family, and personal life is regarded as outside the view of a public audience, and thus outside the bounds of traditional understandings of work. Child care and housework, then, can be invisible work in that they are rarely performed before a public audience. A second factor is when work is unpaid. For example, even though volunteering takes place in public, the fact that volunteers are not paid can preclude their activities from being characterized as work. Daniels has suggested that women volunteers have difficulty being taken seriously as workers by wider society. Yet, unpaid work is important to consider, because from one-third to one-half of valuable economic activity remains unaccounted for in standard metrics of economic value like gross domestic product per capita, according to Veerle Miranda.

A third factor is when work is highly routinized. Star and Strauss note that work that is repetitively performed can fade into the background and become taken for granted. For instance, observers seeing assemblers in a factory, repetitively performing the same task of fitting parts together, might take assembly work for granted. Observers may thus recognize it as work, but not as important, high-value work worthy of attention, rendering such work effectively invisible. A fourth factor is when work is associated with marginalized groups. In particular, activities long associated with the role of women might go unnoticed because women have been historically relegated to a lower status in many cultures. Marginalization and invisible work can be correlated not only along lines of gender but also along lines of race and ethnicity. For example, the labor of black slaves in the United States prior to the Civil War may have been invisible work, unacknowledged because of slaves' lower status compared to those of other social groups.

Challenges of Invisible Work

Performing invisible work is challenging for a variety of reasons. First, activities not acknowledged as work lack the respect, legitimacy, and value ascribed to work. Participation in work is generally seen as a contribution to the moral order of society; work is viewed as a moral good, worthy of respect and payment. Activities that are denied the status of work are thus viewed as lesser tasks—taken for granted as duties to be performed without pay. Thus, the people who perform invisible work are seen as people of lower worth relative to those who do visible work. Furthermore, because invisible work is denied the status of work, people engaging in invisible work are less able to derive the individual, social psychological benefits that usually come from visible work. They are less able to gain a sense of identity and self-worth from being self-sufficient and income-generating workers.

Invisible work can also take a toll on motivations, especially in the case of invisible work that is repetitive. Invisible workers might also adopt the societal views that the tasks they perform are not legitimate work. Daniels writes that housewives often do not perceive their homemaking activities as work, partly because they have adopted the view that their cultivation of the home is an expression of love for their families. That invisible work is most prevalent among marginalized groups, then, also means that it promotes a self-fulfilling prophecy of disempowerment among these groups, at both a societal and an individual level. Another challenge of invisible work is that because invisible work is often associated with lack of payment, the costs of the activities must be absorbed by invisible workers. Women who do domestic work in the home must work what Arlie Hochschild calls a “second shift,” bearing the costs of child care and housework in the form of time and labor. Furthermore, tasks with a long history of not being paid—including domestic work—are difficult to monetize. Rachel Sherman shows this in her study of personal concierge services, struggling to make businesses out of previously unpaid tasks that were historically expected to be performed by housewives.

Potential Benefits of Invisible Work

On the other side, invisible work can have some benefits. Goffman notes that the backstage of a performance is a useful place to rehearse, shirk, or otherwise contradict the impressions engendered by the front stage performance because it is shielded from the eyes of the audience. Since invisible work is unnoticed, it can provide a space for autonomy and even resistance. Judith Rollins considers how black female maids from lower socioeconomic backgrounds—invisible to their white, upper-class employers—resist the dehumanization of their work through small acts of sabotage. This could involve, for instance, purposefully leaving soap on clothes while washing. In addition, work that is unnoticed can enable discretion about how to perform the work. As Star and Strauss note, people who do invisible work can gain some degree of autonomy. For instance, nannies can organize some of their required outings with the children they care for in ways that allow them to meet with other nannies in public parks. Because their work is invisible, they can organize it with little supervision from their employers.

Redefining Invisible Work

What is defined as invisible work is contingent on the conditions of a given society at a moment in time. Power relations, in particular, should be considered. Society members with the most power have the most influence in shaping definitions of legitimate work and activities not acknowledged as work. However, power relations can shift, and what is considered invisible work today might be seen as legitimate work tomorrow. Temporary work, au pair work, and elderly care, for example, are increasingly seen as work in many Western societies.

- invisible work
- housework
- child care
- unpaid work
- nannies
- domestic work
- labor

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See Also:

[Child Care](#)[Disposable Workers](#)[Feminist Theories of Work](#)[Housework](#)[Jobs, Marginal](#)[Stay-at-Home Mothers](#)[Volunteer Work](#)

Further Readings

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