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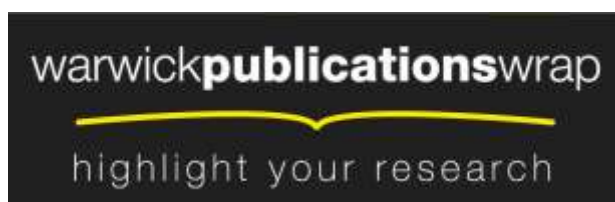
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# **The nuanced nature of work quality: evidence from rural Newfoundland and Ireland<sup>1</sup>**

*Gordon B Cooke, Jimmy Donaghey and Isik U Zeytinoglu*

## **Abstract**

This article explores the relationship between job and work quality and argues that while it is important to examine job quality, to understand workers' experiences fully, the focus should be on the broader concept of work quality which places the job against its wider socio-economic context. Based on the experiences of 88 rural workers gathered via interviews in Newfoundland and Ireland, it appears that the same or similar jobs can be regarded very differently depending upon the context in which they are embedded, since people at different locations and/or stages of life have an individual set of aspirations, expectations, and life experiences. The study found that the factors that affect work quality are moulded by broader aspects of life –family, friends, community, lifestyle and past experiences– that shape an individual.

## **Keywords**

Job quality, Work quality, Rural workers, Work environment, Employment, Work & family, Job/employee attitudes, Part-time workers, Pay / rewards, Life satisfaction, Ireland, Newfoundland, Contingent work

## **Introduction**

Job quality is an issue that has attracted increased attention from both the academic and policy communities in recent years (Gallie et al., 2004; Burgess and Connell, 2008).

Analyses of job quality come from a variety of perspectives including economic approaches which prioritise pay and benefit levels (e.g. Goos and Manning, 2003; Kalleberg et al., 2000), psychology which focuses on mental well being (Warr, 1999) and sociological approaches which focuses on issues such as job autonomy (e.g. Taylor et al., 2002). While some studies have attempted to bring a wider disciplinary approach to job quality (Sengupta et al., 2009; Hannif et al., 2008; Kalleberg and Vaisey, 2005), most previous work tends to stress the importance of factors that are believed to be intrinsic to the specific job and to specific employment relationship and organisational work characteristics. Sengupta et al. (2009:27) argue that it is necessary to “understand the ... specifics of market and work situations”. Yet even their approach to wider market and work situations is focused on the job and the individual’s relationships on the specific job measured through formal job characteristics.

This research focuses on individuals’ views of *work* rather than specific *jobs* that they are employed in because work is a broader concept encompassing one or more jobs an individual can hold. In this study, a ‘job’ is defined in the traditional way: it is a paid position in an organisation consisting of a number of tasks. While a job could be unpaid due to a barter or trading arrangement of some sort, the usual situation involves undertaking a set of tasks, specified by an employer, ostensibly in return for financial compensation. In contrast, work is defined as a purposeful human activity involving physical or mental exertion that is not undertaken solely for pleasure and has economic value (Budd, 2011) and it includes paid and unpaid tasks inside and outside the home, volunteering and seeking employment (Budd, 2011; Forrest, 1993; Zeytinoglu et al., 1999).

In this article, based on the experiences of participants in the study and the social and economic contexts in which they live, the relationship between job and work is explored. The argument is that while it is important to examine *job quality*, to understand workers’ experiences fully, the focus should be on the broader concept of *work quality* which places

the job against its wider socio-economic context or, as Ackers (2002:4) discusses for industrial relations, in relation to “family, community and the wider society”. Similar to Pocock and Skinner’s (2012) discussion that a good or a bad job varies according to workers’ circumstances such as ‘health, household situation and life stage’, work quality is dependent on the worker’s individual circumstances such as age, family/personal relationships, location, life stage and their ‘values’ on life and work, along with available alternatives in achieving personal life goals. That is to say, job quality is one part of the wider issue of work quality.

The contribution of this research on job quality is that it reconfigures the frame of analysis to work quality, since the same or similar jobs may be regarded differently between different people and against the context in which they are embedded. In addition, the article argues that, in each of these areas, subjective evaluations of the desirability of available alternatives, such as availability of continued employment and government social schemes and the ‘fit’ between available alternatives and personal life goals are necessary.

The next section of the article presents an overview of relevant existing literature starting with a brief review of job quality literature and followed by a discussion of broadening it to work quality. This section ends with the gaps this study aims to fill and the argument for studying work quality. This section is followed by methodological details, including a brief description of the labour market situation in both of the locations where the study took place. Findings are then provided and the discussion and conclusion sections present an argument for analysing work quality in a more comprehensive way.

## **Review of literature**

Job quality is studied in a variety of social sciences disciplines, though depending on the social scientist’s disciplinary background, the approach to the study of job quality differs (Kalleberg and Vaisey, 2005). The economics approach generally uses remuneration levels as

a proxy for job quality. Goos and Manning (2003, 2007), for example, argue that there has been a bifurcation of the labour market into good jobs and lousy jobs. This analysis is based upon a purely economic classification of job quality, which approximates well-paid jobs as good and poorly paid jobs as bad. Going back to Herzberg et al. (1959), organisational psychologists have focussed much attention onto intrinsic job factors identified as providing work satisfaction, with extrinsic job characteristics not being of themselves sources of job satisfaction. The sense of achievement, recognition from supervisors and the organisation, liking the task itself, feeling of responsibility, perceived opportunities for advancement and growth have been the focus of analysis for intrinsic job factors (Herzberg, 1976). Work and industrial sociologists have focussed their attention on job features such as job autonomy, skill levels and effort. This literature, finding much of its roots in labour process theory, highlights that the better jobs are those jobs that emphasise worker autonomy and discretion over the job (Taylor and Bain, 2001; Kalleberg and Vaisey, 2005; Lowe, 2007).

Not only have there been different approaches to study job quality, there have also been a variety of meanings and measurements of job quality in the academic literature (see Hannif et al., 2008). The quality of a job is often evaluated based on its pay level, its benefits and other entitlements, the working conditions and the expectation of job continuity (Burgess and Connell, 2008). In defining and measuring job quality what should be important is workers' "own experience and expectations, the standards of the community and what they see from the experiences of other workers" (Burgess and Connell, 2008: 411).

Characteristics that are often included in examinations of job quality are pay and benefits (Caroli et al., 2010), opportunities for advancement (Kalleberg et al., 2000; McGovern et al., 2004; Olsen et al., 2010), autonomy, skills and effort (Gallie et al., 2004; Kalleberg and Vaisey, 2005, Sengupta et al., 2009), continuous or 'standard' work arrangements (Zeytinoglu et al., 2009), job security (Clark, 2005; Gallie, 2007; Lowe, 2007),

work intensity (Green, 2006; Olsen et al., 2010; Zeytinoglu et al., 2007), training and participation (Gallie, 2003), social conditions of work (Olsen et al., 2010; Wright and Dwyer, 2006) and the location of the workplace along with the economic conditions of the region (Cooke, 2007). Others have created an index of job quality such as the European Trade Union Institute's *European Job Quality Index* (Leschke et al., 2008) or have created a composite measure of job quality conceptualising a number of the above listed dimensions of jobs (Brisbois, 2003; Hannif et al., 2008; Hunter, 2000; Lowe 2007). Not surprisingly, job quality, if measured objectively, can vary sharply across or even within industry, region or occupation (Bambery, 2011; Clark, 2005; Cooke, 2007).

Job quality is important because it affects several outcomes. Research has identified on the one hand, the quality of a job as an important factor affecting job satisfaction (Brown et al., 2008; Clark, 2005; Lowe, 2007; Olsen et al., 2010; Pouliakas and Theodossiou, 2010). On the other hand, Deckop et al. (2010) note that one's personal well-being, including but not limited to job satisfaction, can be affected by the degree to which a worker craves materialistic (i.e. extrinsic) rewards. The corollary is that an individual with more modest financial requirements could benefit, physically and mentally, from a seemingly lower quality job, if that job provides the particular (although not necessarily) extrinsic aspects that a worker seeks. While many studies explicitly recognise the insufficiency of assessing job quality merely via a checklist of job components, seemingly few have shifted sufficiently to the wider contexts in which individuals work and live.

The quality of work is important because it is linked to other outcomes as well, such as employee and company performance. Lowe (2007), using *Rethinking Work, 2004 Worker Survey* conducted by The Graham Lowe Group and Ekos Research Associates in Canada, shows that job quality affects workers' attitudes and behaviours and their work performance. In another example, Oxford Research (2011) focuses on workplace performance and, using

*European Company Survey* data and in-depth case studies, shows that improving quality of work for employees and achieving better financial performance for the workplace are linked (see also Eurofound 2012a and b), though this relationship is not recognised well even by the parties themselves.

#### *A wider meaning and measurement of job quality*

In addition to the lack of academic agreement over the meanings and measurement of the job concept, policy makers have been identified with a number of different meanings and measurements as well. This plurality of meaning has led, at the policy maker level, some movement towards developing a wider understanding of job quality. For example, as part of the Decent Work Agenda, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) sought to conceptualise job quality broadly, using *Key Indicators of the Labour Market* data on unemployment, labour force participation rates, status in employment, employment by sector, part-time workers, temporary work, youth employment, education attainment and illiteracy and poverty and income distribution, average monthly wages and employment by occupation (ILO, 2011a and b). The ILO's *Key Indicators of the Labour Market* is an aggregate level analysis of job and employment quality examined at the national level. In another example, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of job quality, the Eurofound (2002) has focused not only on job quality but broadened that to employment quality and in its later publications referred to this concept as work quality (Eurofound, 2011; Eurofound, 2010a and b; Oxford Research, 2011). The Eurofound defines work quality broader than the traditional job quality definition making its approach closer to the work quality conceptualisation developed in this article. Using the *European Working Conditions Survey* (EWCS), the Eurofound identifies income, employment security and social protection, health and well-

being including workers' rights, skills and career development and work-life balance as dimensions of work quality.

In the Irish context, the national *Changing Workplace Survey*, conducted in 2003 and 2009, provides more specific data on job quality (O'Connell et al., 2009) and has been used to analyse worker autonomy, work pressure, perceived job security and job satisfaction (O'Connell and Russell, 2007), though data do not focus on the broader work quality discussed here. In the Canadian context, a variety of national surveys conducted by Statistics Canada, such as *Workplace and Employee Survey*, *Labour Force Survey* and *General Social Survey*, exist to provide an overview of job quality trends though not only it is difficult to link these data for a comprehensive analysis but also none of these surveys provide data for a broader analysis of work quality as developed here.

#### *Towards developing work quality and addressing gaps in research*

While job quality is important to examine, it is focused on an individual's job experience in an organisation and this article goes beyond this focus to a fuller understanding of work quality. In discussing work quality, all types of jobs an individual holds concurrently have to be considered, creating a definition of work that includes paid and unpaid work, volunteering and seeking employment. The understanding of work quality should also consider the wider organisational, social and economic environment that can affect an individual's perceptions. Work quality can be affected by the intrinsically task- and job-based enabling factors, extrinsically job- and organisation-based enabling factors and can be extrinsically temporally enabling. Intrinsically task- and job-based factors include autonomy, skills and effort, and extrinsically job- and organisation-based enabling factors include pay and benefits, and opportunities for advancement. Work quality can also be affected by how



work can create opportunities for life enhancement and fulfilling personal goals, i.e., extrinsically temporally enabling.

In addition, the discussion of work quality should take into consideration, in each of these areas, subjective evaluations of the desirability of available alternatives, such as availability of continued employment and government social schemes and the ‘fit’ between available alternatives and personal life goals at the stage of life of an individual. In particular, workers’ individual circumstances at a specific stage of their life such as their age and family or relationships expectations, along with their ‘values’ on work and life and available alternatives in achieving personal life goals are important in defining work quality. Thus, the same or similar jobs may be considered differently between different people and against the context in which they are embedded. Pocock and colleagues’ research on job quality in Australia (Pocock and Skinner, 2012; Masterman-Smith and Pocock, 2008) share this wider view of work (or, as they say, job) quality. Though, due to unavailability of data on some factors, their analysis necessarily focuses on a narrower set of features of work quality: pay, job security, access to holidays and sick leave, working time and work-family arrangements. This study goes beyond their approach and provides a more comprehensive examination of work quality by placing more emphasis on personal, social and community factors that also shape work quality, in addition to the job, workplace and industry factors analysed by Pocock and her colleagues.

As the above literature shows, much of the published research seeks to compare jobs and the quality of jobs according to intrinsic factors. Another body of research seeks to analyse extrinsic job factors and how individuals assess these factors in determining job quality. While this work is valuable, research generally focuses on only one of these two viewpoints and operates within relatively closed disciplinary silos that utilise, often narrow, disciplinary-based measures of job quality. These approaches try to establish ‘checklists for

job quality' (Bamberry, 2011). In contrast, this research goes beyond these disciplinary approaches and develops a broader understanding which brings together the contributory factors of different viewpoints of research but stress the relativity involved in the evaluation made by individual workers in work quality. The research to date generally fails to acknowledge that job quality is a highly relative concept determined by the opportunity costs of the other opportunities available.

Despite the extensive research across several disciplines, an under-researched area has been the role which non-job factors plays in determining work quality since existing studies often consider only internal organisational factors when assessing work quality. Thus, the gap this article seeks to address is to conceptualise how job and work quality is embedded in wider societal relationships. The argument presented is not that such intrinsic job quality factors and the normative approach to researching job quality are unnecessary to understanding work quality, but rather that to understand what work quality means in a comprehensive manner it is necessary to develop an understanding of how it relates to the context within which it is placed. Thus, the evidence is presented to develop an understanding for analysing work quality as a relative concept.

## **Methods**

### *Research design*

This study was undertaken as part of a broad comparative exploration of the employment prospects and effects on one's personal, family and community life, of rural individuals in Ireland and the Canadian province of Newfoundland. In contrast to most studies in the area, a qualitative approach was adopted. One of the main criticisms of quantitative research methods, especially surveys, is that they provide snap shots of views and attitudes at the time the survey research is conducted. On the other hand, qualitative

methods are more adept at explaining the development and evolution of complex social phenomena. This approach fits readily with Leavy's (1994: 108) view of qualitative research, as focusing on dynamic rather than static phenomena and focusing on meaning rather than quantification. This research thus complements the quantitative studies undertaken on job quality to date.

This research focused on rural individuals since academic research has long discussed the challenges they face, including a tradition of outmigration, rural to urban migration, challenges within traditional primary sector industrial activity and broadly different lifestyle choices (Shucksmith et al., 2009; Partridge and Nolan, 2005; Zenou, 2011). Depending upon the degree of remoteness and level of population, rural individuals could have fewer local employment options and might have to manage their lives despite having only limited employment income (Anam and Chiang, 2007; Partridge et al, 2010; Vera-Toscano et al., 2004). This research focused mainly on 'older' workers (of 40+ years of age) among rural workers, since it was presumed that, relative to younger workers, they might have different perceptions of work and different financial expectations and requirements and because rural communities are grappling with the impacts of aging populations (see Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2005).

Newfoundland and Ireland have much in common: they are island communities, have similar cultural backgrounds and both have endured a long period of economic weakness though Ireland had more than a decade of economic boom until 2008 and Newfoundland has economic prosperity now due to its off-shore oil. This research was initiated with a focus on Newfoundland workers and with the view that Irish workers formed a natural comparison group. Until its well documented boom earned it the nickname of 'Celtic Tiger', Ireland had endured high unemployment, low per capita incomes and generally stagnant economic conditions that were among the poorest in Europe. Roughly in the span of a decade,

however, economic growth had been so robust that Irish per capita incomes had reached or exceeded the European average (Murphy, 2000). Moreover, as a result of the bursting of a domestic housing bubble and credit bubble, coupled with the global economic crisis of 2008, Ireland's economy was badly wounded and has been struggling to find a path to recovery (Bank of Ireland, 2010; O'Connell et al., 2009). Like Ireland, Newfoundland has long endured weak economic conditions, high unemployment and outmigration of its workers, especially from rural areas (see, for example, Felt, 2003). Similar to Ireland's turnaround in the 1990s, Newfoundland has enjoyed an economic boom in recent years notwithstanding the recent global crisis and in fact is now enjoying stronger economic growth than much of the rest of Canada (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2010; Industry Canada, 2010). Another similarity is the pattern of regional disparity, with the western and rural sections of both islands generally enduring lower per capita incomes compared to the eastern and urban areas (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2005; 2010; Morgenroth, 2007; Border, Midlands & Western Regional Assembly, 2012). Given the above, it was appropriate to compare the views of rural participants in Newfoundland to those participants in Ireland.

#### *Data collection and analysis*

The findings in the study are based on analyses of the responses from 88 individuals who participated in either semi-structured individual or group interviews of two to eight people. This approach was suitable for this project for two reasons. First, interviews were the appropriate method of data collection since the nature of this study required asking probing questions to understand fully the job and life circumstances of participants. Second, there had to be flexibility regarding the interview format given the varying availability and interest levels of participants in rural locations and the financial and time constraints to collect data in a short period of time.

Of the 88 rural participants, 34 participated in (individual) semi-structured interviews, while 54 participated in group interviews. Participants for this study were recruited via newspaper advertisements, door-to-door flyers and by word-of-mouth. To ensure that the research accessed different types of individuals in different types of rural communities, the research used purposive sampling, which is commonly used in and advocated for qualitative research (see Creswell, 1994; Marshall and Rossman, 1999). In this study, once in rural communities, individuals in a variety of occupations and of varying ages over 40 were sought.

Semi-structured and group interviews were conducted between February 2009 and September 2010, using a number of standard questions that could be augmented by supplementary questions. When two individuals within a particular location volunteered to participate in the study, they were given the option of being interviewed separately or jointly. Several couples opted for a paired interview, as did a few other pairs of friends or family members. The length of those interviews varied from 20 minutes to 75 minutes. In a handful of cases where a larger number of participants was available and comfortable with the format, group interviews of up to eight individuals and of up to two hours duration, were held.

The interview questions were designed to gather information from each participant in terms of their perceptions of the types of employment and work schedules that exist in their communities, as well as the effects on workers, their families and the community itself. This information also shed light on the role that work plays in the lives of the participants and in the communities that were visited. The questions were about where people lived throughout their lives and for how long; the types of work in which people were currently engaged and in which they had previously engaged; what they perceived to be good jobs and why; and what was the relationship between their work and wider life choices.

A typology of workers emerged in a bottom-up fashion from participants' responses to the range of questions. In relation to the interview data, the subsequent material generated in the fieldwork was analysed as follows. The semi-structured approach to interviewing produced a sizeable amount of open-ended qualitative data. The approach used in this regard was to organise the raw data into conceptual categories or "units of meaning" (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 56) which could then be used to analyse the data. The first stage was essentially 'open coding', where particular conceptual categories were located to particular paragraphs of fieldwork notes and assigned initial labels. The second stage was 'axial coding' where concepts were further broken down, if possible, into more specific sub-categories of response, which was subsequently followed by a cross-comparison of transcripts. The final stage was 'selective coding', where previous codes were analysed and combined into pieces of evidence presented in the findings section. This process incorporated analytic comparisons of methods of agreement and methods of difference. The former focused attention on what was common across the interviews, whilst the latter focused on responses that lacked common features and outcomes.

The characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 1. Of the individuals who participated in this study, 55 reside in rural Newfoundland and 33 in rural Ireland.

Insert Table 1 about here

## **Results**

Seven categories of worker types illustrated the range of the perceptions of quality of work held by the participants. Although not mutually exclusive in all cases, nor even fully

capturing all of the views of participants, they are representative of the different ways in which people articulated the notion of a ‘good job’, other jobs, the decision to stay in their rural location or to seek ‘better’ opportunities elsewhere and especially the role that jobs play in their lives. This approach reinforced the merits of an inclusive notion of work quality in which paid employment is only one issue—sometimes an important one but sometimes less so—within the lives of the participants.

While the typology is intended to describe participants’ work orientation and work quality issues, it was sometimes necessary to focus on the employment history of some of the participants, since that history shapes their wants and needs in life and thus affects the way they view the work they hold. It is also worth noting that very few differences between the views of participants from Ireland versus Newfoundland were detected. The main one, which is beyond the scope of this article, involves the higher level of social policy intervention in Ireland. For this study, that apparent policy difference affects the quality and quantity of rural employment opportunities and hence some participants’ actions. Thus, while it had been expected to present comparisons between participants in the two locations, the seven worker types apply to and are drawn from both subsets of participants.

Finally, the research found that some participants chose to speak about local living and labour market conditions generally, rather than their own specific details. As a result, not all of the participants can be formally designated as belonging to one of the seven worker types, per se.

#### *Type 1: Life first, work seconders*

In defining what a good job might entail, these individuals focused on the quality of work and life relationship. They tended to choose quality of life first and then to seek available work that facilitated that life choice. These respondents were looking for work with

specific traits: they had certain hours that they wanted, or wanted to avoid; they had a workweek length in mind; they had a work day and/or work location in mind; they might have had a work intensity in mind; they did not want work spilling over into family time, in terms of hours, extra work, or feeling worn out or stressed. An example was a mother in rural Ireland seeking a job that would allow her to drop off her children to school in the morning and pick them up in the afternoon, while working during the interim. The individuals who specified this type of job were almost always female and usually with children ranging from kindergarten age to older teenagers. In many ways, individuals in this category viewed work as being good quality when it could be integrated seamlessly into more important life activities, like attending to family, hobbies, or other responsibilities (see Pocock and Skinner, 2012).

For a job to be viewed as good quality, a worker would need to be able to take time off in emergencies and would have a work location in close proximity to the family home. When a specific workweek was articulated, this workweek was usually part-time in the range of 20-30 hours per week and involving a schedule picked by the worker. The lack of detail of tasks, skills and work environment that they provided is further evidence that a good job provides sufficient financial returns yet is otherwise of secondary importance and must not hinder other higher priority aspects of their lives outside of the workplace. Thus, it appeared that these individuals wanted the benefits of another income source, rather than to derive or even seek intrinsic benefits. In fact, a few individuals went a step further, by indicating that a good job should not be stressful or challenging to such an extent as to distract or impact a worker during non-business hours. People with this view of a good job required convenient hours and a chance to make employment income, but not to be affected otherwise by that job; a highly utilitarian view of work.



In addition to the working mothers in this category, there were also workers 40+ years of age who were either interested in a job as a second income source, or as a means of facilitating a transition to retirement. For example, one Newfoundland female (in her 50s), who worked in a clerical civil service job, was pleased to have a ‘mindless job’ since it had a high hourly rate, yet was only seasonal full-time. This participant retained this job because it provided her with enough annual income and security to be able to devote her attention to her other preferred job as a part-time administrative assistant for a small business; a job she found to be satisfying and stimulating, albeit with a low hourly wage and few benefits.

There were also artists among this group seeking a stable income yet sufficient time to pursue their true passion. An individual in Ireland who defined herself as an artist and art instructor said that her current arrangement of working as a (government-sponsored) art instructor job for two-and-a-half days a week was a good one, because it paid the bills and allowed her time to establish her career as an artist. This person was in her mid-40s and lived in a rural area. She moved to this rural location from Dublin because it was expensive in the city and she could not make ends meet and was not able to work on her art. She considered her part-time government-sponsored job to be a good one. While the money earned from the part-time job was insufficient to cover all expenses, artists like herself also used a bartering system with others in the community to ‘buy’ services she needed such as home repairs and to ‘pay’ with her art work.

#### *Type 2: Intrinsic reward seekers*

These individuals are the ones who derive a range of intrinsic benefits from employment. Consistent with the ideas articulated from Herzberg et al. (1959) to Olsen et al. (2010), one way that job quality is judged is by one’s level of job satisfaction, but also broader feelings of accomplishment and fulfilment. Individuals in this category typically

mentioned something like ‘A good job is one that lets you do something that you want to do, so that it doesn’t seem like work’, or even ‘the recession could actually be a good thing, in a way, since it will get us to re-evaluate our priorities and get back to the things that matter’. However, there was an added element. Several of the participants live in rural regions where social support schemes are available to unemployed workers, including some of the individuals in the study. Many in this category had similar views to the individual who stated that

‘I don’t make much more doing this than sitting at home and getting my cheque, but it feels good to earn my money. Plus, I get to help out my community and to help visitors coming to our community’.<sup>2</sup>

In a sense, this work is essentially unpaid, because non-participating individuals received virtually the same financial rewards via social assistance. Other individuals, on similar social schemes or with friends or neighbours participating in them, pointed out other community benefits such as maintaining local parks and playing fields or helping seniors stay in their own homes in a dignified way. Thus, in addition to intrinsic job factors, individuals in this category outlined broader community and social benefits from work, as envisioned by Ackers (2002) and others (e.g. Burgess and Connell, 2008). People in this category believed that while pay and benefits matter, they placed a value on earning it to cultivate a sense of self-worth. Several individuals indicated that their job helped them be productive, contributing member of their community. Merely performing meaningful tasks— perhaps while volunteering—was not optimal either, but neither is merely being able to afford to live. Members of this group sought both. Regardless of their occupation, individuals with this perspective often felt that they personally held a good job and focused on the intrinsic benefits gained from working, rather than extrinsic rewards. Moreover, since these people

valued any type of employment as a way to contribute to the local community, it is unsurprising that essentially any job was considered to be inherently good (and intrinsically rewarding).

These individuals were mostly older rural workers, of either gender, employed in the secondary labour market. In one group interview in rural Newfoundland, several participants suggested that a great job would be to run a local business. They mentioned hairstyling or pet care and that while fairly low paying, part-time and seasonal, the individuals performing this type of work are valued and respected for providing services to the community. Another participant, who had left a demanding management career, ran a seasonal adventure tourism-related business in rural Newfoundland. This participant was pleased to be able to do something that he loved, to have downtime part of the year and to provide employment to others within the community. He had to work very long hours on a seasonal basis, but found the interaction with out-of-province visitors to be stimulating. Other participants were interviewed who were active in social and or economic development initiatives at a local level. While these activities were unpaid, they were demanding, important and necessary work to help communities, yielding a feeling of accomplishment for doing something worthy. On the other hand, similar to 'Life First, Work Seconders', 'Intrinsic Reward Seekers' prioritised other aspects of life ahead of work. In turn, this prioritisation seemed to inflate the perceived quality of local job opportunities, because these individuals were simply pleased to have something meaningful and enjoyable to do, since it allowed them to stay in their preferred rural location.

### *Type 3: Social butterflies*

'Social Butterflies' indicated that a good job is 'one where you work with a good group of people', or 'I enjoy the atmosphere here, we have a really good group and the boss

treats me well'. If someone had a job like this one, then 'you are doing something that you want to do' and it can be enjoyable that 'it doesn't feel like work'. These individuals are the ones who indicated that a good job is one providing a chance for social interaction (with co-workers, managers and/or clients/customers). Most of the individuals in this category are female. As with 'Intrinsic Reward Seekers', the majority of 'Social Butterflies' indicated that they personally have a good job because they enjoy the atmosphere within their organisations and enjoy interacting with co-workers, management and/or clients/customers.

Among the people having this perspective of a 'good job' and who indicated that they have a 'good job' themselves, the majority were in a job that, viewed objectively, was of lower quality in terms of extrinsic rewards such as pay and status. One example was a Newfoundland female working in the health care field in a secretarial role. She had changed organisations to her current one, since she had felt something was missing. She described her current job as an excellent one since she enjoys the work atmosphere and her set of co-workers. Nonetheless, the secretary described above had a permanent job and enjoyed her daily tasks as well as the social interaction, which provided a clue that her particular job was objectively of good quality as well. Importantly though, several of these same individuals had changed jobs in the past while looking for a work opportunity with a better social atmosphere. In terms of job characteristics, though, workers in this category were likely to have lower levels of compensation and responsibility. Thus, instead of finding professionals (having a white or blue-collar occupation), the research tended to find retail assistants, or others in so-called 'entry level' retail or hospitality-related jobs.

On the whole, the individuals in this category had an image of what they wanted yet generous pay and/or benefits were not a necessary condition for work to be considered of good quality. While these workers undoubtedly preferred better financial rewards, the views of the participants had seemingly been shaped by the economic realities in their communities

(see Burgess and Connell, 2008; Pocock and Skinner, 2012). As such, they might *prefer* to have job security and high financial rewards, but they *require* a good atmosphere at work and opportunity for social engagement.

*Type 4: Extrinsic reward seekers*

These individuals are the ones who specified that a good job is secure, pays well and provides good pension and fringe benefits. When asked which jobs they thought would have these characteristics, they typically described professional occupations like doctors, nurses, lawyers, accountants and teachers but also frequently noted that public sector jobs, with the Federal or Provincial (in the case of Canada) and National or County (in the case of Ireland) governments, met the conditions of good quality jobs. Participants were thus very likely to identify public-sector (i.e. civil service, police and post office) jobs as being good quality. Some of the participants went on to provide a logical explanation. They indicated that government workers have substantially higher job security than private sector workers. Moreover, public sector pay is based on national pay and pension scales in Ireland and federal pay scales in Canada. Thus, a civil servant in a relatively isolated rural community received the same wages and benefits as a civil servant in a large urban centre. This public-sector job provided stability allowing workers to stay in their small rural community and accumulate a good pension. Multiple participants in both locations noted that workers in past generations could get a good quality local civil servant job by being persistent. Nowadays, however, they said that only the lucky few with education or specialised training were able to acquire those increasingly scarce jobs. The rest faced a choice of low-paying seasonal or part-time employment in retail, to generate self-employment, to commute to an urban centre, or to relocate to where there were more opportunities.

Interviewees in this category typically indicated that they did not personally have a ‘good quality’ job. That is, they wanted to acquire a job with good (i.e. sufficiently enabling)

extrinsic rewards (or more accurately, better than their current pay, benefits, stability and job security). Several respondents added that education and patience are needed to get a good job when living in a rural community since vacancies arise very infrequently and often the successful applicant must have very specific skills or education. One Newfoundland participant, for instance, mentioned that to get a technical government job in her isolated community, a person might have to work for 20 years in a casual/seasonal entry-level job while waiting for the incumbent to retire and then there was always the chance that the vacant job would be eliminated, or would be filled with an outsider holding a particular qualification.

As another example, a clerical job in a post office in Newfoundland was considered to be a good one even though the rural post offices only provide part-time employment. In addition to a good hourly wage, it had extensive benefits and a good pension. In another example from rural Ireland, a participant described the benefits derived from a fishery scientist job held by her son-in-law. She said that the job paid very well which allowed her daughter and family to live in a nearby community. She was happy that, in her old age, her daughter was able to provide living assistance. This participant also added that her son-in-law had to earn a very specialised Masters degree to get his current job. From time to time, there have been rumours that his employer, a fish transportation facility, might close. In turn, he (and his wife and family) would be forced to choose between being underemployed and living locally, or moving away to find work suiting his experience and education. This participant was thus anxious about the future for her daughter's family. In addition, this person said that her daughter was in a part-time, administrative assistant job within government. That job was also described as a good one due to national pay scales, since her daughter earned 'city' wages (plus good benefits and a pension) while enjoying the relatively lower costs of rural living. For individuals in this category, their assessment of work quality

appeared to be shaped by comparisons (of extrinsic rewards) to jobs in other locations with more favourable employment opportunities rather than to the typically poorer local economic conditions.

#### *Type 5: Modest budgeters*

These individuals are the ones who specified that a good job is one that pays well *enough* and provides *enough* benefits to be able to meet one's financial obligations and provide for one's family. Among this type of individual were the ones who viewed local employment opportunities as 'good enough', while others viewed local employment opportunities as not even meeting that low threshold. While the former are happy to take whatever work is available locally, the latter do so reluctantly. Comments like "any job around here is a good job!", 'I would do anything', 'people around here have two or three things on the go' and 'you do what is necessary to make a go of it' were received by the happy ones, 'people learned not to put all of their eggs in one basket' was a typical comment by those reluctant 'Modest Budgeters'. The research even found a few people who had relocated from an urban centre to a rural community for the different lifestyle, or had resisted moving to an urban centre to access better employment opportunities.

It appears that most 'Modest Budgeters' remain in the hometown in which they were born and raised. If that hometown happened to have weak economic conditions, then many individuals were simply prepared to find the best job that they can and to make the best of it, such as 'by making our own fun around here'. In essence, they adjusted their spending and lifestyle depending upon their income levels. Thus, even if they have relatively low incomes, many were inclined to indicate that it was 'good enough' and that they are lucky to have that job, since it allowed them to enjoy the social, leisure and other lifestyle activities they crave.

Several individuals mentioned that their current location was the place where everyone knew and supported each other within the community. One participant in rural

Newfoundland said that she did not have to worry about where her children were when she was at work or home - others in the community looked after her children while they played outside. Neighbours would call if something went wrong or her children were misbehaving. She and her husband each had seasonal jobs, but at opposite times of the year. In her case, this job was part-time employment, during summer months, in an entry-level type hospitality job. While they had low family income, they were very happy with their lives and felt very fortunate to be able to provide the safe, secure, carefree lifestyle to their children that they had enjoyed when at that age. The participant had commuted in the past and had lived elsewhere, but was gladly willing to make financial sacrifices to live in her 'home' community. Amongst interviewees were young adults, who had decided to stay in their hometown after second-level school, who explicitly recognised that their choice (to be close to friends, family and the lifestyle they seek) was likely to involve menial future employment in a small retail shop or hotel and sacrifices in terms of salary, benefits, job security and promotion possibilities. Some 'Modest Budgeters' were bed&breakfast owners who found it appealing to be able to live and work at home, notwithstanding the long hours and hard work and to be able to piece together a modest living with their small business and other income opportunities that arose from time to time.

A smaller number of 'Modest Budgeters' were newcomers who have relocated to a rural area. A couple from Dublin, both of whom had post-secondary education and were 'white-collar professionals', had moved to a rural area to change lifestyles. Both said that here they did not have the well paying jobs they had in Dublin but those jobs were stressful and required long daily commutes. Since they have moved to this small community about two years previously they had temporary and/or part-time jobs. Nonetheless, they said that their lives were good and that they enjoyed not having a long commute between work and back home and having daily family time after work. They said that this location was a small



community where people cared for each other and their children enjoyed the community life and the outdoors, whereas in large cities people were busier and had less time for friends, family and hobbies. Thus, these participants were satisfied with work and life despite the relative lack of earnings.

The same scenario and communication were repeated almost verbatim by a woman from Newfoundland. She said they moved to a rural area in Newfoundland from Toronto, Ontario (the largest city in Canada). Her children were now able play outside the home and others in the community looked after her children if she was not around. She considered jobs in this community to be good enough for the area. Similar to 'Social Butterflies', individuals in this category also seem to assess work quality on the basis of local employment realities, although the focus of 'Modest Budgeters' is on a minimally acceptable level of financial rewards (having had their views shaped by a knowledge of the local socio-economic realities, as envisioned by Ackers (2002)).

#### *Type 6: Grateful returnees*

These individuals were the ones who, having out-migrated in the past, have returned 'home' by choice, for a specific reason. Typically, they had longed for the lifestyle at home and were willing and able to accept any type of available work. While these people could be slotted into other categories (like 'Life First, Work Second' or 'Modest Budgeters' in particular), they are a stand-alone group because living away has affected their view of 'good quality work'. Often, these people returned to raise a family or spend more time with friends and family. Many highlighted that they could make much more money in a different location and virtually all had done so in the past.

A woman in rural Ireland said that, in the 1970s, almost everyone from her secondary school moved away immediately after completing since there were very few jobs in the

community and area. People had to move away to be able to find work and earn a living. She had lived in the northeast U.S. for about 20 years and had been well compensated as a medical secretary and had accumulated substantial savings. When her parents started to get older she realised that she was earning good money but was without nearby family or relatives, and her parents in Ireland would need living assistance from someone soon. She returned home knowing that she would have to accept temporary jobs with substantially reduced extrinsic rewards. However, she has not regretted the decision. In addition to being close to her ailing parents, knowing that she would eventually inherit the family home provided additional security. Since then, both her parents died, yet she intended to stay. She was content with her life in this rural area, although 'only' working as a part-time receptionist/secretary in a local community centre in a government-sponsored programme.

Similar scenarios were heard from other participants. In Canada, most 'Grateful Returnees' had worked in the oil sands sector or other related businesses in Alberta. The working conditions were harsh and demanding but the pay was very generous relative to the average Canadian wage and certainly to most jobs in rural Newfoundland. After saving sufficient money, they went back to their original hometown and bought land, renovated their ancestral home, or built a dwelling on inherited land. In defining a good job, these 'grateful returnees' focused on what the community meant for them and how meaningful it was to be back in a caring and friendly community. They often despised the city life where children were 'stuck' in an apartment with little freedom, with strangers for neighbours and where people emphasised conspicuous consumption. 'Grateful Returnees' returned home knowing that job opportunities were scarce and insecure, but friendships and lifestyle benefits were plentiful. For some, having ancestral land, or inheritance (home or land) in their community meant that they could 'survive' and live a 'good' life albeit without the luxuries of the material world. These participants did not talk about a specific job or characteristics of a good

job. Instead, they spoke about their lives and how happy they were to come back and live in the community. They also appreciated that earnings pieced together from a variety of (mostly casual) jobs enabled them to live the rural lifestyle they wanted to have.

There were semi-retired respondents, typically with retirement savings or a partial company pension, in this group as well. They were often in their late 50s and had out-migrated for steady, well-paying work years earlier prior to returning 'home' a long time ago. They were settled in the location and having accomplished whatever they wanted in life (and perhaps accepted the limitations of their accomplishments) they seemed to be content in part-time and/or seasonal jobs they found in the community and tended to speak more of their lives than their jobs. One example was a man who had spent many years working in mining throughout Canada but had returned to rural Newfoundland in order to semi-retire but also to be closer to the young family of his daughter.

Finally, a younger Newfoundland male had moved to an urban location to acquire post-secondary education, but viewed himself as fortunate to find community-development work in his chosen field in his hometown upon graduation. While his compensation is low, he indicated that he enjoyed significant intrinsic and extrinsic rewards with his job. He also indicated having significant gratitude that he had found this attractive opportunity. Like others in this category, he had a realistic view of the availability and quality of local jobs (in terms of extrinsic rewards), but placed work as only one item among the important elements in life.

#### *Type 7: Restless returnees*

'Restless Returnees' have lived away and have returned 'home' for some reason. Unlike 'Grateful Returnees', these ones are receptive to emigrating again for high quality employment if a sufficiently good job is not available locally. While these people could be

slotted into other categories (such as ‘Extrinsic Reward Seekers’), they are a stand-alone group because their view of work quality is based on the higher extrinsic rewards available in jobs in other locations where they have lived or visited. They view the local work opportunities to be either poor, or not good enough, when compared with options elsewhere. As a result, this type of individual is likely to be frustrated with local employers (who do not pay enough) and/or governments (who need to do something so people can afford to stay). These individuals, typically male and in their 40s and 50s, are also likely candidates to out-migrate again, or to commute long distances to better work opportunities in other (larger) communities.

They were back home mostly because of the economic downturn and related layoff or not renewing of the contract in their previous workplace. They were waiting for the economic conditions to improve and were eager to go back to where they worked before – for those participants from Canada this move would mean returning to Alberta where the recent past has witnessed an energy sector boom and for those participants from Ireland this move would mean moving back to the UK, US, Canada or Australia or to Dublin within Ireland itself. When they spoke of good jobs, they generally referred to rewards from previously held jobs in terms of money, security and stability. Simply put, this type of worker has been shaped by the labour conditions– and quality of jobs – in other places and now has potentially developed ‘a taste for money’, according to detractors (who, instead, emphasise intrinsic rewards from work). As a result, ‘Restless Returnees’ found it difficult to manage because they perceive that local employment options were poor or limited. Moreover, their perceptions were shaped by the seemingly higher quality of work available in other locations where they have lived in terms of objective measures of job quality like pay, benefits and security. While they did not ignore the social and lifestyle benefits available in their current

rural setting, they simply were not willing to endure fewer financial rewards if that was required to remain in these communities.

#### *Similarities and differences between worker types*

Despite the differences between the views and work experiences, among the seven worker types identified, there were some common threads as well. First, the views of most of the participants, for better or worse, were shaped by the realities of the labour markets in and around their rural communities. It was also found that most of the participants had relatively low annual employment earnings regardless of education level, gender, age, work experience and current employment. Admittedly, this finding might have been affected by the weak economic conditions occurring, especially in Ireland, while conducting the study, since amongst those interviewed were managers and professionals who were currently unemployed or working temporarily on social schemes. Finally, most participants had a similar view of the objective quality of local versus outside work opportunities in terms of financial and other rewards. Moreover, it was not found that the degree of ruralness of participants tangibly affected the way that they viewed work quality, although the objective quality of and opportunities for their paid employment tended to be inferior the ‘more rural’ participants were located.<sup>3</sup> As mentioned earlier, the research looked for, but did not detect, meaningful differences in the views of Irish participants compared to those participants in Newfoundland.

The main difference, as discussed in detail, is the degree to which rurally located individuals in the study were willing to consider their work to be of sufficiently good quality. Those respondents who focused on objectively better quality employment available elsewhere were less enamoured with their current work and life, whereas others viewing their current work as being ‘good enough’, tended to be satisfied with their lifestyle and community. Thus, like Ackers (2002), Masterman-Smith and Pocock (2008), Pocock and Skinner (2012) and Sengupta et al. (2009) among others, it was found that work quality needs

to be interpreted broadly given personal, family, lifestyle, community and other considerations.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This exploratory research aimed to develop a more nuanced understanding of the way people perceive the quality of work. In particular, the research sought to consider two issues; first, to identify how rural individuals assess work quality and second, to investigate empirically the extent to which these perceptions about work quality are shaped by social, economic and community factors as opposed to (narrower) job components.

To date, some authors have suggested that wider societal factors are important components when considering work quality (e.g. Ackers, 2002; Pocock and Skinner, 2012). Consistent with the themes within these more inclusive studies, many participants in this study de-emphasised specific job characteristics while accentuating the extent to which work enabled them to live in their chosen community and with their preferred lifestyle. The worker typology presented affirms that the process of evaluating good jobs is far from straightforward. Rather, assessing work quality is a highly relative process which varies greatly depending on the priorities individuals identify in their lives and the economic and social context within which they are set.

For instance, many of the respondents focused on their family, lifestyle and community, rather than employment earnings. Many were also very frank about the limited (or non-existent) access to local permanent, full-time 'career-type' jobs. Instead, they tended to discuss a variety of work one can hold at the same time, such as self-employment, temporary or part-time paid employment and/or seasonal or sporadic access to paid work under various social schemes. Having a job, while important, was only one example of the work they undertake. For example, several gave examples of unpaid activities that they considered to be equally valuable. Others explained the bartering system of work that they do

to survive and prosper in rural communities. Thus, similar to Budd (2011), Forrest (1993) and Zeytinoglu et al.'s (1999) findings, participants in this study also view work as encompassing paid employment, self-employment, unpaid work for the employer and the family and the activity of looking for work.

In discussing job quality, the participants broadened the concept to the quality of work incorporating intrinsic factors along with extrinsic factors and providing a holistic and more subjective, definition of the *quality of work*. The research, as outlined in the typology above, highlighted that individual perceptions of work quality were heavily influenced by factors external to the organisation and that work was viewed as a means rather than as an end. Second, individual perceptions of job quality were highly relative concepts which involved linking job quality to wider social relationships. This finding is not unsurprising as current debates around job quality are linked to normative and somewhat political conceptualisations of good jobs and work. This agenda is not dismissed; rather it is argued that attention needs to be placed on the more sociological aspects of job quality in linking it to how individuals make choices and its relationship with wider society. Individuals' values, personal life goals and their preferences are important in the conceptualisation of work quality. When reflecting upon the findings as a set, it also seemed like the degree of loyalty to their local community shapes the way that they viewed the locally available work opportunities. The ones most committed to living in their rural communities seem to have among the most inclusive interpretation of work and work quality. For those people, priorities are on intrinsic rewards from work and time for family, friends and community, while extrinsic rewards from paid jobs are de-emphasised.

*Towards conceptualising work quality*

In this article, the argument is made that while quality of job may be to some extent measurable, work quality is a broader concept and must place the job against its wider socio-economic context. Thus, while not dismissing the focus on job quality, this research highlights that the quality of work and the extent to which it links economic and social life warrants more attention than it has done to date. Work quality, as distinct from job quality, is a broad and nuanced phenomenon intrinsically linked to the wider social, economic and community relationships into which workers are embedded. The findings indicate that determining the quality of work is more complex than the identification and quantification of selected criteria but must be understood as a dynamic and highly relative concept.

The focus of the literature to date has been heavily on elements intrinsic to the task and intrinsic to the job (Goos and Manning, 2003, 2007; Taylor and Bain, 2001). Yet, this research argued that factors external to the direct employment relationship were central to the respondents in describing “good work”. Thus, work was viewed as being good if it enabled particular lifestyles and/or the ability of people to live in certain locations. One of the central findings is, as demonstrated in the worker typology, that there is not an optimal set of job components. Rather, the same or similar jobs may be regarded differently between different people and against the context in which they are embedded. As such, a central element running through all the typology is that the range of relative available alternatives, whether job related or lifestyle related, was a key factor in determining work choice. In addition to these factors, it shows that in each of these areas there are subjective evaluations of the desirability of available alternatives. Based on the analysis above, other important factors related to perceptions of job quality appear to be age, family status, gender, local labour market conditions, proximity to one’s ancestral home, community vibrancy and lifestyle preferences outside of work.



Within the study, many older individuals valued family, social and leisure activities, to such an extent that they were prepared to make financial sacrifices to have a job that fit within their lives. Examples of this thinking were found within the workers types of ‘Life First, Work Seconders’, ‘Intrinsic Reward Seekers’, ‘Social Butterflies’, ‘Modest Budgeters’ and ‘Grateful Returnees’. Conversely, younger individuals tended to leave for work or adventure, even if they had a strong attachment to their home community. This finding does not mean that people when younger did not value leisure, friends and family time. On the contrary, the majority did. However, many also felt the need to relocate to make money or gain enough work experience to facilitate the possibility of returning and living comfortably in their preferred ‘rural home’ location at a later date. The research also found that many rural individuals, even among those interviewed with post-secondary education, simply view part-time and/or seasonal work as being ‘good enough’. It is an oversimplification to conclude that these participants had low expectations. Rather, most of them had made a conscious decision to live in their preferred community. Many had lived ‘away’ for various durations and typically had made much more money while ‘away’.

In essence, the research found a number of fulfilled individuals who enjoy work, or more accurately, ‘make the best of work’, yet focus much more on personal, family and leisure activities. Consistent with Deckop et al. (2010), these individuals enjoy a high level of personal well-being, even if not enjoying many extrinsic rewards from work. Yet, within the same communities and from seemingly similar individuals, the research also found opposite perspectives. The interpretation is that, as Pocock and Skinner (2012) envisioned, one’s perception of the quality of work that they have – whether in a paid job, self-employment, or some other form – is shaped by a broad range of personal and environmental factors. For some people, high quality work simply means something that does not interfere with the real things in life that matter. To others, extrinsic rewards are the things that really

matter. To others still, the work itself must be intrinsically rewarding. In the end, the study found that the factors that affect work quality are moulded by broader aspects of life –family, friends, community, lifestyle and past experiences– that shape an individual.

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2. This particular participant worked in the hospitality industry, on a part-time basis under a short term job creation scheme, at a government-run tourist attraction. By ‘cheque’, he was referring to the receipt of an unemployment insurance payment if he did not work, versus the pay received if he did work.

3. Since tangible differences were not found in participants’ views of work quality between communities or between Ireland and Newfoundland, location details where particular individuals live have been withheld.

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**Table 1: Participants' demographic information**

Characteristics of 55 Newfoundland participants				
Gender				
Male	Female			
29%	71%			
Age group				
Under 30	30-39	40-49	50-59	60+
5%	7%	40%	36%	11%
Industry sector				
Primary	Manufacturing		Service	
11%	2%		87%	
Marital status				
Married/cohabitating	Never married		Other	
67%	14%		20%	
Has dependent child(ren)				
Yes	No			
51%	49%			
Characteristics of 33 Ireland participants				
Gender				
Male	Female			
24%	76%			
Age group				
Under 30	30-39	40-49	50-59	60+
9%	9%	39%	36%	6%
Industry sector				
Primary	Manufacturing		Service	
28%	14%		59%	
Marital status				
Married/cohabitating	Never married		Other	
66%	31%		3%	
Has dependent child(ren)				
Yes	No			
38%	63%			

Note: These statistics exclude missing data.

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