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Is happiness at work a class privilege? Subjective relationships to work and class boundaries in Europe

Etienne Penissat (CMH), Cécile Rodriguès (CERAPS) et Alexis Spire (IRIS)

Introduction

The issue of class boundaries is usually addressed with reference to the possession of cultural and economic capital, the scale of wealth inequalities, and people's living conditions. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the workplace in the reformulation of these class boundaries: While the overwhelming majority of managers and professionals in Europe have been able to work remotely, only a small minority of manual workers and blue-collar workers have been able to protect themselves from infection, and the vast majority of these have found themselves on the front line of the pandemic. As Pierre Bourdieu (1979/1984) showed, class boundaries cannot be reduced to these objective inequalities, as they also have a symbolic dimension. In the field of work, the positions of the workers' class structure objective and subjective oppositions. In Europe, the polarisation of employment structures (Goos, Manning, & Salomons, 2014), together with the development of new low-skilled and high-skilled occupations, the intensification of work (Green & Mac Kintosh, 2001; Green, 2004), and the transformation of tasks associated with jobs (Gallie, 2019), call into question the forms of subjective relationships that Europeans have to work, with regard to their class, gender, and country of residence.

In recent years an increasing number of studies have made comparisons between European countries from the perspective of working conditions, job satisfaction, and happiness at work (de Witte, Halman, & Gelissen, 2004; Gallie, 2013). On the other hand, very few studies address the question of the relationship to work at the European level in relation to social class. In terms of objective working conditions, the differences between countries are still very significant, particularly because of a diversity of forms of work organisation (Lorenz & Valeyre, 2005) and the different forms of social protection that employees receive (Marsden & Belfield, 2010). The choice of organisational structure may also vary from one company to another within a given country (Paugam, 2000). Nevertheless, despite national differences, some characteristics are shared by members of the same social class: For example, the presence of hardship at work is a structuring dimension of the working classes across Europe, whereas the ability to have a certain degree of autonomy and to be able to organise one's own work is shared by members of the middle and upper classes (Hugrée, Penissat, & Spire, 2020). The question then arises of whether Europeans' subjective relationships to work depend on the social position they occupy or on the national space in which their professional activity is carried out. In this chapter, following Bourdieu's reflexions on the homology between social positions and social representations of the social world (Bourdieu, 1979/1984), we propose to establish, beyond national differences, a relationship of homology between the objective membership to social classes and subjective representations linked to work.

To measure the subjective relationship to work we use self-reported indicators, which should not be used to measure an objective truth about work, but rather to understand representations, which are significant in their own right. In the 2000s a debate arose among economists, with some authors using job satisfaction criteria to measure job quality (Vecernik, 2003, p. 460) and others rejecting the hypothesis that workers can rationally evaluate the quality of their jobs (Llorente & Macías, 2005), on the grounds that their statements contain an element of affect (Rose, 2003).

In this chapter, our aim is not to contribute to this debate on the right indicators to use for measuring job quality, happiness (Layard, 2005), or well-being at work (Clark, Etilé, Postel-Vinay, Senik, & Van der Straeten, 2005; Senik, 2011), but rather to seek to understand the symbolic representation that workers make of their place at work, their working conditions, and the possibilities—or not—for them to modify their situation. To achieve this, we propose to draw on the EWCS 2015 survey,¹ and to work with data from 29 European countries (see Table 13.1), with a twofold shift in focus. Firstly, our approach to “well-being” at work is multidimensional in the sense that it combines dimensions related to individual fulfilment, integration into work collectives, and the social recognition that work provides. Secondly, our approach leads us to study the relationship to work in a relational manner, that is, by situating each socio-professional group in the social space and each country in the European space as a whole. Our aim is not to define specific organisations of work that would be conducive to workers’ happiness, but to show the importance of work in the economy of symbolic relations between social groups.

I. The nuances of happiness and unhappiness at work

Subjective relationships to work are difficult to measure because they always cover a plurality of aspects. Clark identified several factors that can explain job satisfaction: good social relations at work, job content, opportunities for promotion, income, job security, and the degree to which working times match the worker’s preferences (Clark, 2005).

A) The three dimensions of well-being at work

To account for the diversity of relationships to work, we use variables from the EWCS survey, most of which are both subjective and objective (descriptions of actual working conditions). Thus, rather than using a single composite indicator of well-being at work (Senik, 2020), we use 12 variables which we dichotomise, covering three fundamental areas of the relationship to work: safety and security in their broadest sense, individual fulfilment, and social recognition. For each variable listed below, we indicate in parentheses the responses that correspond to a positive perception by the respondent, consistent with well-being at work.

- **Safety and security at work (4 variables)**

- I might lose my job in the next 6 months (somewhat disagree, strongly disagree)
- Do you think your health or safety is at risk because of your work? (yes/no)
- Being in situations that are emotionally disturbing for you (never, almost never, up to half the time)
- You experience stress in your work (never, rarely, sometimes)

- **Individual fulfilment (4 variables)**

The issue of individual fulfilment concerns both the sphere of work and the potential to reconcile professional constraints with other spheres of life (domestic and leisure activities).

- You are able to apply your own ideas in your work (always, most of the time)
- Generally, does your main paid job involve learning new things? (yes/no)
- Your job gives you the feeling of work well done (always, most of the time)
- In general, how do your working hours fit in with your family or social commitments outside of work? (very well, well)

- **Social recognition (4 variables)**

- I generally get on well with my work colleagues (strongly agree, somewhat agree)
- I receive the recognition I deserve for my work (strongly agree, somewhat agree)
- You have the feeling of doing useful work (always, most of the time)
- Considering all my efforts and achievements in my job, I feel I get paid appropriately (strongly agree, somewhat agree)

This approach makes it possible not to reduce the subjective relationship to work to a single dimension or to a generic indicator (for example, general satisfaction with working conditions). We favour a multidimensional approach which takes into account the diversity of forms of happiness or unhappiness at work, and which is based on the construction of clusters on the basis of these different dimensions. Some clusters are associated with several positive perceptions of work while others are associated with several negative perceptions; some clusters differ from certain others only with regard to one or two dimensions. The aim here is to reconstruct a space of subjective relationships to work that can then be related to the socio-economic characteristics and concrete work situations of Europeans.

B) A typology of subjective relationships to work

In order to differentiate between relationships to work on the basis of variables that may be either cumulative or opposed to each other, we use a clustering unsupervised partitioning method (k-means). In this model, individuals who are close on the basis of one or more variables can be grouped together and distinguished from other clusters of individuals.²

The k-means clustering method based on the 12 variables selected produces five clusters of different sizes, representing five different types of relationship to work. These clusters can then be described by cross-referencing the individuals belonging to them with socio-demographic variables (age, sex, born in the country or abroad), social positioning (ESEG,³ level of education, employment contract, whether or not they belong to the public sector), objective working condition variables (atypical working hours, hardship and work environment, work content), and country of residence.

Table 13.1 Share of positive results for each indicator used by cluster

<i>Indicators</i>	<i>Happy dominant workers</i>	<i>Fulfilled but unrecognised workers</i>	<i>Distanced and relaxed workers</i>	<i>Insecure suffering workers</i>	<i>Undervalued and dominated workers</i>	<i>Overall average</i>
<i>Share of the population</i>	29	17.6	22.9	12.4	18.1	100
Not at risk of losing job	89.1	89.1	88.5	81.1	79.1	86.2
Health or safety not at risk	88.3*	84.4	87.6*	18.9**	79.7	77.3
No emotionally disturbing situations	93.8	93.5	95.5	64.1**	93.3	90.3
No stress at work	79.6	82.9	86.4*	11.9**	80.1	73.4
Putting ideas into practice	100*	100*	0**	50.8	7.5**	54.3
Learning new things	83.8*	80.1	66.3	82.2	46.8**	72.3
Sense of a job well done	93.7*	93.8*	88.7	76.5	45.9**	81.8
Working hours that allow for a balance between work and other commitments	90.7	87.3	90	39.2**	78.2	81.3
Good relations with colleagues	88.2	76.7	94.4*	80.9	71.4**	83.6
Being recognised for your work	90.8*	62	92.4*	34.5**	7.4**	64.0
Doing useful work	95.1*	96.1*	89.4	83.9	51.8**	84.8
Considering yourself well paid	100*	0**	73.4*	21.4**	11.4**	50.5

Under-representation of respondents (**) and over-representation (*) is indicated, based on a 10-point difference from the overall average.

Note: 0% of the members of the “fulfilled but unrecognised workers” cluster consider themselves well paid, compared to 100% of the members of the “happy dominant workers” cluster, and 50.5% of all respondents.

Scope: 2015, respondents currently in work, weighted data.

Source: EWCS

- **Cluster “Happy dominant workers” (29% of the working population)**

This cluster is associated with a positive response for all the indicators of well-being at work. For each of the twelve variables selected, the respondents consistently provide positive responses above the average. They benefit from both individual fulfilment and social recognition, notably including satisfaction with their pay, all of which guarantees them a feeling of happiness at work. This positive relationship to work is in homological relation to the objective material conditions of their professional situation: They are more often involved in highly engaging work (the complexity of tasks, the need to solve problems themselves, the use of digital tools) which is rarely monotonous. They are rarely called upon to experience physical hardship, or subjected to intense work rates or physical strain, and they enjoy a high degree of autonomy in their work. However, these workers are just as likely as the others to have atypical working hours (Sundays) or long work weeks, and they are more likely than the average to have to work in their free time. Overall, they are fully committed to their work and derive great satisfaction from it.

The vast majority of the members of this cluster have the social characteristics of the socially dominant. All other things being equal, they are more often men, possessing higher education qualifications, and belonging to the middle and upper classes: managers, in particular higher managerial employees, professionals, small entrepreneurs, and to a lesser extent technicians and associate professional employees. Workers in the skilled service sector are more likely to belong to this cluster, in contrast to workers in industry and in functions of general interest (administration, education, health and social service activities). This advantageous position is accompanied by a very high sense of well-being in life outside of work and more frequent involvement in voluntary work.

- **Cluster “Fulfilled but unrecognised workers” (18%)**

This cluster groups together workers who, for the most part, are fulfilled and feel secure in their jobs, but who suffer from a lack of recognition. This feeling of being poorly recognised is expressed in two ways: Firstly, with respect to hierarchy, which is reflected in the belief that they are poorly paid, and secondly with respect to their colleagues, which is reflected in poorer quality relationships within the work group. The “fulfilled but unrecognised workers” therefore consider that they are not well paid, even though they are not the workers who experience the greatest financial difficulties. Their subjective relationship to pay must be analysed in relation to the position held or the work done, and not just in relation to the actual level of income.

All other things being equal, small entrepreneurs and professionals are more likely to belong to this cluster, as are workers in functions of general interest (administration, education, health and social service activities), especially teachers and care staff. These “fulfilled but unrecognised workers” usually share certain working conditions: They are more likely than the average to work on Sundays and to work more than 42 hours in a week, but are less often exposed to physical hardship, a poor work environment, difficult (violent) working relationships, or intensive work rates. They often enjoy a high degree of autonomy at work (both decision-making and organisational autonomy).

- **Cluster “Distanced and relaxed workers” (23%)**

This cluster groups together workers who combine a number of factors of well-being at work: They consider themselves well paid, recognised for their work, and they manage to avoid stress. On the other hand, they are not fulfilled intellectually: They usually perform simple, repetitive, prescribed tasks with little autonomy; they declare that they “do not put their ideas into practice” and are not in a position to “learn new things” at work. Their high level of integration in work groups enables them to distance themselves from certain forms of hardship and to avoid suffering too much from it. Those

who work in a company with more than 10 employees are also more likely to have access to a committee dedicated to improving working conditions. Their resistance to aspects of their work is therefore probably dependent on the collective resources that they can mobilise.

Women, young people (15-25 years), part-time employees, and those who report a trade union presence in their company are more likely to belong to this cluster, whereas small entrepreneurs, managers, professionals, and higher education graduates are less likely to do so. This cluster is therefore more likely to be found among the middle and working classes.

- **Cluster “Undervalued and dominated workers” (18%)**

This cluster brings together workers who combine several negative dimensions in their relationship to work: They very rarely feel well paid and suffer from feeling consistently undervalued. They do not report feeling any form of professional fulfilment: They very rarely report that they can put their ideas into practice, they are not in a position to learn new things, they do not report feeling the satisfaction of a job well done, and they have difficulties in reconciling their professional life with their family and social life. All of these characteristics make these workers socially dominated, especially if we add that they are less likely than others to have a sense of job security.

All other things being equal, they are more often less skilled workers, industrial and agricultural employees, and clerks and skilled service workers; they combine the characteristics of having a low level of education (almost 80% of the members of this cluster have a level of education lower than the bachelor’s degree) and of being obliged to work on fixed-term contracts. In contrast, highly qualified workers (with a qualification higher than a bachelor’s degree), skilled service workers (finance, insurance, information-communication, scientific and technical activities), and workers in public service roles are unlikely to belong to this cluster.

The workers in this cluster experience poor working conditions: They are more often exposed to physical or psychological hardship (violence, discrimination), they have very little autonomy (organisational autonomy, control of their own time), and they carry out monotonous and unrewarding work in which they do not use digital tools (computer, mobile phone). They are more likely than the average to suffer from financial difficulties and they generally belong to the lower working classes. Their position as undervalued and dominated workers seems to have an effect on their life outside of work: They are less often involved in voluntary work and are more likely than others to experience forms of depression.⁴

- **Cluster “Insecure suffering workers” (12%)**

In contrast to the “undervalued and dominated workers,” the members of this cluster are positive about their work and value it: They often consider it to be useful, they are satisfied with a job well done, they enjoy learning new things, and they get along with their colleagues. On the other hand, they report suffering from several aspects of their work: They experience difficulties in balancing work and private life, and they have feelings of insecurity, both because of physical risks and the threat of losing their job. They consider themselves to be poorly paid for the work they do and they suffer from a lack of recognition.

The working conditions of the members of this cluster are very poor: They are more likely than the average to report that they are exposed to fumes, noise, or toxic products, and they suffer from physical hardship, atypical working hours (nights, Sundays), long work weeks, and intense work rates. Their work is very demanding and gives rise to ambivalent attitudes: They are more likely than the average to consider their work to be monotonous, but they also consider it to be complex, constantly

requiring them to solve problems. The members of this cluster have suffered the full force of the intensification of work that has affected low-skilled workers (Lopes, Lagoa, & Calapez, 2014): They are more likely than average to experience illnesses that they attribute to their work, or even to experience accidents at work. This suffering at work has consequences for their general well-being: They are more likely to report problems of fatigue, sleep, and anxiety, as well as depression.

The characteristic feature of this cluster is that it is linked to forced over-investment in work, which explains why it affects all social groups in a cross-cutting manner. Workers of foreign origin (born abroad or of foreign parents) and those with little educational capital (a level of education below the baccalaureate or equivalent) are more likely to belong to this cluster. This is also the case for employees working in the construction industry and, even more so, in the public sector, particularly those professions exposed to the public, such as doctors, nurses, and care workers. The characteristic features of workers in this cluster are that they tend to be at the bottom of the social ladder (but this is not always the case), and they are physically and emotionally affected by the deterioration of their working conditions (Baudelot & Gollac, 2003): They work under multiple forms of constraint, particularly in public services that are subject to both austerity policies and the social distress of users.

C) The space of subjective relationships to work

In order to create a synthetic representation of the space of subjective relationships to work, a multiple correspondence analysis was used on the 12 selected variables. The clusters are represented as additional variables.

The first axis distinguishes individuals according to their degree of well-being at work. It contrasts the “happy dominant workers” on the left with the “undervalued and dominated workers” and the “insecure suffering workers” on the right, or in other words, those who report negative perceptions or even unhappiness in their relationship to work. The second axis distinguishes two forms of job dissatisfaction: those who are insecure and lack recognition despite a strong commitment to their work, and those who consider that they do a job with little value. This axis contrasts, on the one hand, forms of over-investment in and over-valuation of work, and, on the other hand, forms of disinvestment from and devaluation of work, without any indication of the degree of satisfaction. Indeed, over-investment in work can be a source of satisfaction but also of great disappointment (Baudelot & Gollac, 2003). The third axis makes a distinction among those who are ambivalent or mixed in their relationship to work: on the one hand, the “fulfilled but unrecognised workers,” and on the other, the “distanced and relaxed workers,” who are not fulfilled in their work. Among managers, professionals, and small entrepreneurs it is the question of recognition in terms of pay that separates the middle classes from the upper classes, whereas it is more specifically working conditions that tend to create divisions within the working classes.

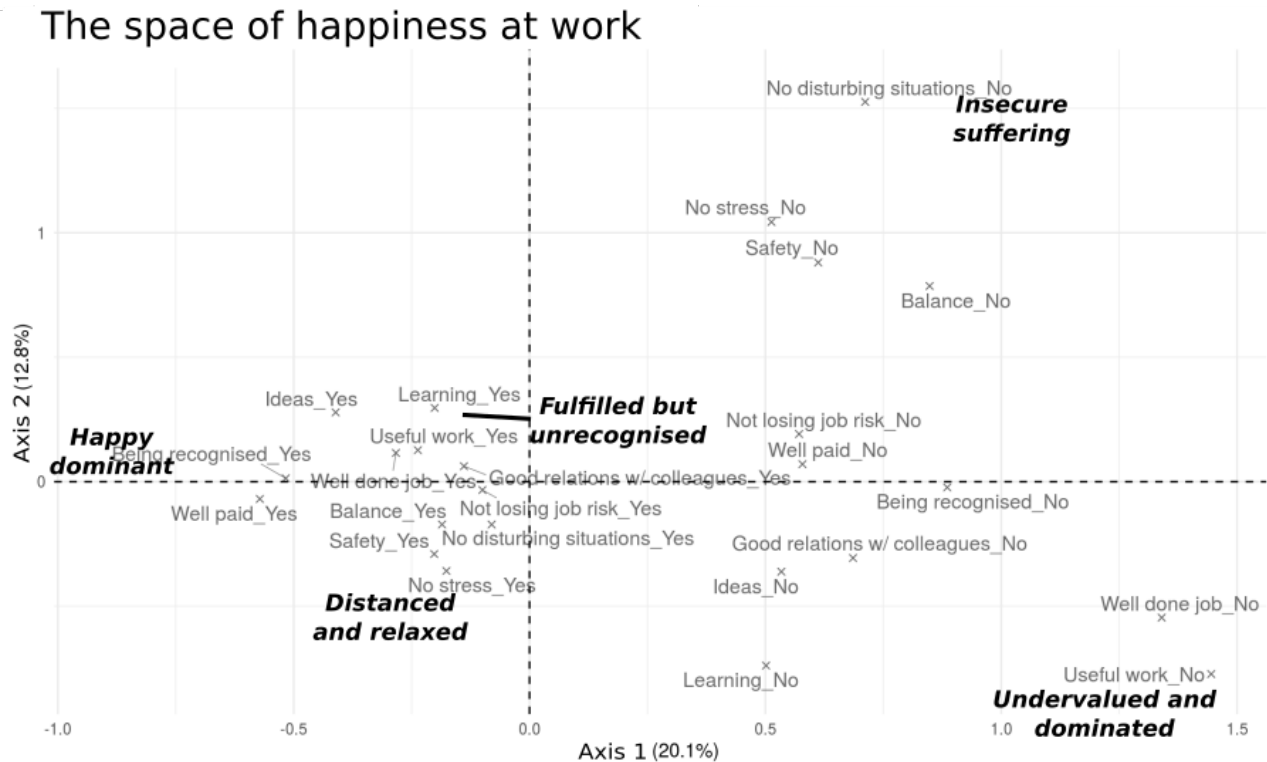


Figure 13.1 Multiple correspondence analysis of the indicators used to build the clusters—projection of the modalities of the indicators on the first two axes (inertia = 33%), with the clusters represented as an additional variable

Scope: 2015, respondents currently in work (or on leave)

Source: EWCS

II. Social and national boundaries in the relationship to work

Differences in subjective relationships to work are partly determined by the positions occupied in the economic field. Homologies between class position and subjective relationship to work can thus be identified, but other factors must be taken into account: The working conditions specific to each profession and national affiliation as an indicator of position in the division of production labour in Europe can also influence or even determine the subjective representations associated with work.

A) *The homology of class positions and subjective positions at work*

The respective positions of the clusters reveal a strong homology between class affiliation and the degree of happiness in relationships to work. Members of the upper classes are mostly “happy” at work; middle-class workers (small entrepreneurs, technicians, and associate professionals) show more contrasting opinions (“fulfilled but unrecognised workers,” “distanced and relaxed workers”); members of the working classes are mainly found in these last two clusters and in those marked by suffering or being undervalued at work.

Economic status (employee or self-employed) can play a large role, but class position should also be taken into account to capture distinctions between clusters. For the self-employed there are three main ways of perceiving work: 40% of them belong to the “happy dominant workers” cluster, 36.5% to the

ambivalent clusters (most of them are in the “fulfilled but unrecognised workers” cluster), and 23.5% belong to the “unhappy” clusters. The fact of being attached to one or other of these subjective relationships to work is partly due to social characteristics: On the one hand, the “happy” self-employed workers are more likely to be men, with extensive higher education qualifications, who run their own business or are associated with another business owner, employ several employees, and work for a number of different clients; on the other hand, the “fulfilled but unrecognised workers” and “unhappy” self-employed workers are more often women, with few or no qualifications, who are freelance workers (or employed through precarious subcontracting or temporary employment statuses), do not employ any workers, and who are dependent on a single client.

The “happy” self-employed workers are less likely to experience long working hours, to work on Sundays, or to have intense work rates; they more often report that they have chosen this status out of personal preference, whereas the “unhappy” self-employed workers more often report that they have done so because they had no other professional opportunities. The heterogeneous group of self-employed workers is therefore split in two, with consultants, qualified craftsmen, and professionals on the one hand, and agricultural workers and small traders on the other.

This homology between class position and subjective relationship to work is important because it sheds light on class boundaries beyond the world of work. The same individuals who report a “happy” relationship to work are also those who experience the best physical and mental health and are more involved in community activities, whereas the opposite is true for those who have a more unhappy relationship to work. Thus, the place occupied in the division of labour remains not only a marker of symbolic boundaries between social classes but also a powerful determinant of inequalities in all spheres of social life.

B) Working conditions and internal class divisions

The overall homology between class position and subjective relationship to work does not mean that representations can be deduced automatically from socio-professional position: Social boundaries and symbolic divisions do not always overlap perfectly. Thus, 21% of members of the working classes (less skilled employees, industrial skilled employees, and skilled service employees) are found in the cluster of workers who are happy at work; on the other hand, 26% of the upper classes (managers, professionals) belong to the clusters marked by a lack of well-being at work. The internal divisions within these classes make it possible to grasp what, beyond socio-professional position, influences the subjective relationship to work. The working classes that are “happy” at work do not differ significantly from other members of the working classes in terms of their demographic characteristics or their educational capital. On the other hand, they are more likely to be on permanent contracts and to supervise other employees, which suggests that the status associated with work can protect members of the working classes from the forms of dissatisfaction experienced by those who are assigned to subordinate positions. At the other end of the social scale, the determining variables are different: Women are over-represented among the unhappy upper classes, as are public sector employees. It seems likely that the discrimination experienced by upper-class women (pay inequalities, imposed part-time work)—which is corroborated by the fact that these female unhappy upper-class workers more often report experiencing discrimination or harassment—exposes them to forms of dissatisfaction at work.

Working conditions are a factor of internal differentiation within both the upper classes and the working classes. The happy members of the working classes almost all benefit from more favourable working conditions than other members of the working classes, whether in terms of physical hardship, the working environment (presence of smoke, noise, toxic products, etc.), or work intensity. They also enjoy greater support from their professional associates (colleagues, bosses) and greater autonomy at work, particularly in terms of the organisation of their time. For example, compared with the other working classes, twice as many of the happy working classes are able to take a break when

they want to (60% compared to 31%), and they are much more likely to be able to easily take an hour off work to deal with a personal problem (78% compared to 55%). Conversely, the unhappy upper classes suffer from worse working conditions than other fractions of the upper classes, similar to the majority of the working classes: They more often experience atypical working hours (working at night) or physical pain, even though these are experienced by only a minority of workers in these fractions of the social space. These unhappy upper-class workers are not particularly distinguished by a need to perform more complex or less interesting tasks. Instead, their work is more intense (high work rates, tight deadlines, strong constraints on their work rhythm) and offers less autonomy to manage this pressure. In addition, their work more often involves dealing with complicated situations: angry customers and violence at work.

Working conditions and the organisation of work thus contribute to creating divisions within in each class by modifying both the objective conditions of work and the subjective relationship to work. Good quality working conditions may therefore make it possible to consolidate the objective stability and subjective well-being of a part of the working classes; at the other end of the social scale, a deterioration in working conditions may lead certain fractions of the upper classes to experience a “misery of position” (Bourdieu, Accardo, Balazs, & Beaud, 1993).

III. The structuring of European capitalism and symbolic subordination at work

The forms of work organisation and the use of labour structure the symbolic relationship workers have to their work. As they can vary considerably from country to country, the nation where the professional activity is carried out plays an important role. For example, the fact of belonging to the “undervalued and dominated workers” cluster depends on factors related to the country and social position: All other things being equal, residents of the Baltic, eastern, and southern countries are more likely to belong to this cluster. The role of national affiliation is less important for the “fulfilled but unrecognised workers” and “distanced and relaxed workers” clusters. For the “insecure suffering workers” cluster, geographical distribution is less significant, even though it is more prevalent in countries that have been marked by the intensification of work for a long time, such as France (Paugam, 2007; Parent-Thirion et al., 2016), or those that have been affected more recently by the crisis and austerity policies, such as Greece (Fotinos-Ventouratos & Cooper, 2015) and Spain.

In order to identify the reciprocal effects of social position and national affiliation on the subjective relationship to work, we have constructed two regression models: one on the probability of belonging to the “happy dominant workers” cluster at work (29% of the working population), and the other on the probability of belonging to one of the two “unhappy” clusters (“insecure suffering workers” and “undervalued and dominated workers”) at work (30% of the working population). In both cases, the reference modalities are identical and the results indicate the chances of being part of these groups in comparison with the rest of the respondents. This approach breaks with that of a number of studies that focus solely on the question of happiness at work, as if this were the only perspective for all European workers.

A comparison of the two regressions confirms that class position is a determining variable in the subjective relationship to work. All other things being equal, it is managers who are most likely to belong to the “happy dominant workers” cluster, followed by professionals and small entrepreneurs. This tendency for people at the top of the social ladder to be happy at work is reinforced by the presence of higher qualifications: Graduates with extensive higher qualifications (masters level and above) appear to be in the best position, and the same is true, to a lesser extent, of graduates who spent a shorter time in higher education (qualifications less than or equal to bachelor’s degree level). Symmetrically, members of the upper classes have the least chance of belonging to the two clusters characterised by unhappiness at work, unlike industrial skilled employees and less skilled employees.

This correspondence between social position and subjective relationship to work is again confirmed by the variable of educational qualifications: Those whose highest level of educational qualification is lower than the baccalaureate or equivalent have, all other things being equal, a greater chance than those with a baccalaureate or equivalent of being unhappy at work. Working on temporary contracts and being of foreign origin are also correlated with reporting unhappiness at work. Although women are not more likely than men to belong to the unhappy clusters, they are less likely than men to belong to the “happy dominant workers” cluster.

Given the differences in sample sizes between countries, it is difficult to interpret the “country effect,” especially as the national variable combines a number of dimensions. Schematically, three types of situation can be distinguished. Working in the northern countries strongly favours being happy at work (Norway, Denmark) and/or protects against unhappiness at work (Finland, the Netherlands). These countries have extensively developed highly skilled services and have adopted a model of work organisation described by some sociologists as “learning forms”: In all categories of employees, workers are not obliged to follow an intense pace of work, employee autonomy is high, and priority is given to teamwork (Lorenz & Valeyre, 2005). In the Netherlands, the organisation of work has similar features to that of the Scandinavian countries: Work is more subject to quality standards, and employees benefit from a high degree of cooperation. The case of Sweden is worth highlighting because it differs from the other Scandinavian countries: Working people are no happier there than elsewhere, even though this country has long been valued for its policies in favour of the quality of work (Gallie, 2003) and its efforts to facilitate professional integration (Berglund, 2014). In contrast, working in eastern and southern countries decreases the chances of experiencing well-being at work and very often increases the chances of belonging to the unhappy clusters. This is particularly the case in Lithuania, Latvia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Greece. In Greece, only 13% of the employed belong to the “happy dominant workers” cluster which clearly demonstrates the powerful effect of the economic and financial crisis on the destabilisation of the whole social body. In the countries that occupy a dominated position in the division of production labour in Europe, the agricultural, industrial, and low-skilled service sectors (e.g., retail or tourism) are predominant, and labour law and, more generally, the protective role of the state, are weaker than in the rest of the continent. This weaker regulation is reflected in the subjective relationship to work (Cottini & Lucifora, 2013). Finally, the paradoxical situation of countries such as Germany, France, and the UK should be highlighted. Although the mixed clusters are most prevalent in these countries, working in these countries does not increase the chances of being happy at work; on the contrary, it increases the likelihood of feeling unhappy and dissatisfied in one’s work. In these dominant countries, the reforms aimed at making the labour market more flexible and the intensification of work since the end of the 1990s have contributed to a deterioration in the working conditions of employees.

This distinction between countries and regions of Europe corresponds in part to the results highlighted by theories of varieties of capitalism (Hall & Soskice, 2001; Amable, 2003; Gallie, 2003). The Scandinavian countries associated with a social democratic model are characterised by a better quality of jobs within the framework of a regulated labour market, a generous social state, and investment by employers in the training and skills of employees. On the other hand, in the southern and eastern countries, which are marked by ungenerous employment policies and specialisation in low-skilled blue-collar and white-collar occupations, the feeling of well-being at work is less widely shared. However, there are exceptions to these geographical oppositions. In our results, Sweden is closer to the continental model countries while the Netherlands is closer to the social democratic model countries. Above all, the French, the Germans, and the English seem to be relatively close in terms of well-being at work, a finding which contradicts the differentiations between the liberal and the continental model. Perhaps we can see convergences in the organisation of work and the functioning of labour markets since the 2008 crisis.

Conclusion

This exploration of the symbolic boundaries between social classes from the perspective of workers' subjective relationship to work has certain limitations due to the use of the type of sample survey used. The absence of variables on the vocational relationship (work as a passion) or on the critical relationship (a sense of being exploited, for example) to work reduces the range of subjective relationships that can be quantified. Moreover, in a context of internationalisation of workplaces and production, companies have more and more leeway to set their own rules for work organisation, and it is particularly difficult to measure this.

This work-centred approach nevertheless highlights class divisions in Europe. Indeed, the concrete conditions of work strongly contribute to the differentiation of social classes from one another, and to creating internal divisions within each class. We might add that this homology extends beyond the economic field: Having a positive or negative relationship to work is correlated with differences in living conditions, as well as with differences in physical and psychological health.

Although there is a general correspondence between objective class position and well-being at work, this homology is never automatic and the differences observed in working conditions invite us to reconsider the characteristics generally attributed to national determinisms. Our approach allows us to show that not only class boundaries but also national and regional boundaries are linked to the transformations of European capitalism, and that these can be identified when we target the 30% of European workers who are exposed to forms of unhappiness at work. This proportion results on the one hand from the increase in low-skilled and undervalued jobs, particularly in the dominated countries of Europe, and on the other hand from the intensification of the performance required in menial jobs or in the public services, particularly in the main powers of the European Union (Germany, France). These developments are creating divisions in the relationship that the working classes have with their work and destabilising the generally positive relationship experienced by certain fractions of the middle and upper classes. From this point of view, the difficulty in implementing policies to protect workers at the European level allows inequalities between classes and between countries to persist and increase, as long as there is no effective curb on the pressures on work generated by the financialisation of the economy. The inequalities in working conditions brought about by the pandemic, particularly in terms of access to remote working and the tightening of safety regulations for those who are faced with customers or users, risk reinforcing these social and national boundaries, as long as the European Union remains unable to adopt policies to protect workers.

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Notes

¹ The European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) is a European sample survey which covers a representative sample of around 1,500 working people, who are interviewed in person in each country. We focus on 34,394 employed and self-employed workers in 2015.

² We prefer the k-means clustering method to the hierarchical classification based on factorial analysis for two main reasons. On the one hand, the size of the distance matrix would, due to the number of variables retained and the number of observations in the EWCS survey, make these treatments extremely cumbersome, whereas unsupervised partitioning produces more fluidity and reduces calculation times. On the other hand, clustering by k-means seems to be more adapted to our approach.

³ The European Socio-Economic Groups classification is a socio-professional classification used by Eurostat, constructed from the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) and from employment status (employed or self-employed).

⁴ The WHO-5 Well-Being Index is used here, a standardised index for measuring psychological well-being.