

Work as a Cultural and Personal Value: Attitudes Towards Work in Polish Society

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The meaning of work for Poles is analyzed here from 2 perspectives: macrosocial and individual. From the macrosocial perspective work attitudes are explained by 3 factors: traditional Polish Catholicism, cultural patterns (influence of noble class tradition), and experience of "real socialism." From an individual perspective some psychological and demographic predictors of an autonomous (intrinsic) work attitude are empirically tested. The autonomous attitude towards work is understood here as treating work as an important autonomous value versus only an instrumental means for earning money. The data was collected by means of standardized interviews run on a representative random sample of adult working Poles, $N = 1340$.

attitude towards work	autonomous work attitude	good job
traditional values	postmaterialist values	attribution of success

1. THE MACROSOCIAL APPROACH

Attitudes of Poles towards work have been the subject of national stereotypes and jokes. Generally speaking, our disregard for honest work, pretended work, a perceived lack of relationship between work quality and income, long vacations, have all been indicated as salient characteristics of these attitudes (Falkowska, 1997; Poleszczuk, 1991).

Researchers of social processes claim these attitudes result from experiences of "real socialism:" centrally-planned national economy and, say, "naturalization" of personal employment, that is, a common expectation that everyone had a natural, inherent right to work with unemployment reserved almost solely for political objectors. The senselessness of work and the instrumental approach to it were a consequence of pervasive disinterest in real capacities of employees and dysfunctional work organization coupled with no relationship between personal work input and one's material and social status. The transformation that started in 1989 implied the adoption of market economy mechanisms expected to play a crucial role in changing work attitudes.

It is not only contribution of economy that matters. Polish attitudes towards work are also determined by cultural factors. Dominating cultural patterns and prevailing religion also determine people's attitudes towards work. We have known since Max Weber that prevailing religion promotes or inhibits respect for work and co-defines its social and personal significance. Traditional Polish Catholicism contrary to the Protestant approach does not comprise work ethos (Doliński, 1995; Hofstede, 1991; Mirels & Garret, 1971). Work is perceived here as a sort of punishment for sins rather than a vital, constructive element of life and a means of salvation.

Our society is still somewhat influenced by the tradition of Polish nobility who explicitly disregarded any kind of work and instead praised conspicuous consumption. It was poor people's destiny to work. Polish collective cultural patterns still prefer romantic fighters for freedom to those who committed their life to down-to-earth work. This means strong obstacles to changes in work attitudes even in times of profound system transformation.

What is it like now? Evidence on work attitudes gathered in the 1990s is incoherent. We experience unemployment rate as high as 16%, but only 25% of Poles claim that a person who does not satisfy job requirements should be fired. In 1995, a sample of 100 inhabitants of a medium-sized city in southern Poland (Opole) were asked whether they would continue working if they had enough money to live. A small fraction of 11 persons answered they would like to work 8 hrs or more a day. About one fourth would prefer not to work at all, with 48% of those who would like to work wanting to work "a little," about 2 hrs per day. Furthermore, Poles often do not consider poor work as something definitely negative (Doliński, 1995).

In the end of the 1990s it was found that the number of working hours per week was, paradoxically, negatively related to the subjective sense of

success (Skarżyńska & Chmielewski, 1998). So, short working hours seem to be a predictor of social success for Poles. We can only presume what factors are responsible for this effect. It might be either a result of high work organization skills and high productivity or distant consequences of the mentality of Polish gentry. In general, it is still not work that ennobles people.

On the other hand, nationwide representative surveys show a systematic increase of an intrinsic value of work. In 1994, 70% of Poles declared they would not quit their jobs if they had a sufficient amount of money, against 22.8% of respondents who would cease any professional engagement (Marody, 1996). Three years later as many as 85% of adult Poles revealed work was of high importance in their lives, 75% claimed they did their best at work (regardless of their earnings), 20% considered work solely as a means of earning their living, 11% would enjoy not working if they could afford that (Falkowska, 1997).

2. THE INDIVIDUAL APPROACH: WORK AND OTHER VALUES

Like other attitudes, work attitudes are usually strongly related to other attitudes and values, and they function together as an element of a broader mental syndrome. So far, there is no unambiguous evidence that an autonomous work attitude (work as a life goal) belongs to (a) a set of so-called traditional values (sometimes referred to as conformist or collectivist ones) or to (b) developmental values based on self-directiveness (sometimes known as individualist values or self-centered achievement, see Kohn & Schooler, 1986), (c) materialist or (d) postmaterialist values (Inglehart, 1990), or to (e) modernist or (f) postmodernist values (Akker, Halman, & deMoor, 1993). International research on work attitudes among students showed that respect for work as such and the level of industriousness were highest among students from countries with lowest Gross Domestic Product (India and Zimbabwe), moderate in Israeli students, and lowest among students from the UK, USA, and New Zealand (Furnham, Bond, Heaven, & Hilton, 1992). According to the authors of the research this means that high work evaluation is typical of traditional or conservative beliefs. Congruent data were gathered in the early 1990s in the *European Value Survey*. Here work as a value was found to belong to the syndrome of conformism and not to the syndrome of individualistic achievements (Akker et al., 1993). Comparisons in time show work gets higher and higher

evaluations in the course of modernization processes like in Eastern Europe, and loses its inherent significance, which decreases in modern, affluent societies that have developed an effective system of social services (e.g., Denmark, Sweden; Inglehart, 1990; Siemieńska, 1996).

The aforementioned studies employed either the Protestant Work Ethics Scale or ratings of parental values. Autonomous aspects of work (work undertaken as a result of an inner need) were not considered here. The theoretical aim of the present research can be defined as an attempt to find the "localization" of the autonomous work value in the framework of other personal attitudes and values. It is presumed here that an autonomous attitude towards work (treating work as an intrinsic, personal value or a goal of life, not as an instrument of earning money) is close to postmaterialist values and related rather to the need for personal growth or personal achievements than to traditional, collectivist values or authoritarian attitudes.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The analyses were undertaken to answer the following questions:

1. What are the declarative attitudes of Poles towards work (work as an autonomous, intrinsic vs. instrumental value)? What percentage of Poles demonstrates an autonomous approach to work?
2. In what ways are different aspects of work—related to existence, social relatedness, and personal growth needs—important for Poles?
3. What are the relationships between autonomous attitudes of Poles towards work and the type of individual values, specificity of success attributions, and sociodemographic variables of gender, age, education level, personal income, occupation type (employers vs. employees), self-evaluation of personal success in social life (as defined by the ladder of social status)?

We expected that the more the attitude towards work is autonomous,

- a. the more work is appreciated in terms of its self-growth significance,
- b. the more individualist values (life goals) such as harmonious development and personal achievement (career and social influence) are appreciated,
- c. the more personal life success is attributed to intraindividual capacities,
- d. the higher personal education.

No specific relationships were hypothesized between the attitude towards work and age, personal income, occupation type (employers vs. employees), and the place of residence (size of the town), and self-evaluation of social success.

4. METHOD

The data were gathered by means of a standardized interview. Age, gender, personal income, place of residence, social status (in self-perception), and the level of education were controlled. A representative sample of adult working Poles was used in the present study as part of a larger research effort ($n = 1340$). The study was conducted in December 1997.

4.1. Measures

The autonomous attitude towards work was measured on a 4-item Likert-type scale. Each item was rated on a 5-point scale. The items of the scale are as follows:

1. Work is nothing but earning money (reverse scoring).
2. Even if I had enough money I would like to work.
3. Work is the most important thing for human.
4. If I only could I would give up any job (reverse scoring).

The internal consistency of this scale is not very high: Cronbach's $\alpha = .49$ (for 4 items).

The individual's values measurement: Two aspects of values were measured:

1. The importance of the need fulfilled by a "good job:" The respondents rated personal importance of different aspects of work on a 4-point scale (4—*very important*, 1—*not important at all*). These aspects of the job were related to several needs work can fulfill: related to maintenance or existence (high income, stability of employment), social needs (helping other people, social utility), and personal growth (development of personal interests or qualifications, independence, and work advancement).
2. Evaluation of life goals: Respondents rated 15 life goals (values) on a 4-item scale. This list of values has been applied in Polish value surveys for many years (Nowak, 1989; Pankowski, 1997; Skarżyńska, 1991, 1995). The estimations of life goals (values) were factor analyzed.

The three-factor solution was obtained with as much as 70% of variance explained:

- a. Traditional values (family life and stability values: happy family life, sense of security, peace of mind);
- b. Values of harmonious development (intellectual development, a sense of personal influence on national affairs, having friends, healthy life style);
- c. Individualistic values of achievement (financial and professional career, a sense of achievement in life).

Based on the results of the factor analysis three indices of mean acceptance of each of these value types were determined (the items—life goals—with factor loadings higher than .50 were taken into consideration). These measures (three average indices) were used as predictors of work-attitude in the next analyses.

The attribution of causes underlying life success measurement: Respondents rated the relative importance of a series of factors potentially important for success in life. Factor analysis revealed four factors:

1. “Inherited” resources: affluent family, high education of parents;
2. Individualist resources (own capacities): personal industriousness, ambition, personal abilities;
3. Collectivist resources: connections, luck, chance;
4. Structural or demographic resources: place of residence (small town, village, etc.), gender.

The relevant four indices were constructed based on average estimations of the elements the factors consisted of. These indices were used as predictors of work attitude in the next (multiple regression) analysis.

5. RESULTS

5.1. Attitudes Towards Work

It turned out that the declarative attitudes towards work in Poles tend to be more often autonomous than instrumental: 30% of adult Poles declare autonomous attitudes, against 12% who declare purely instrumental ones. The other respondents declare “mixed” work attitudes. This finding is congruent with the data gathered in the research from the late 1990s (Cichomski & Morawski, 1996; Falkowska, 1997).

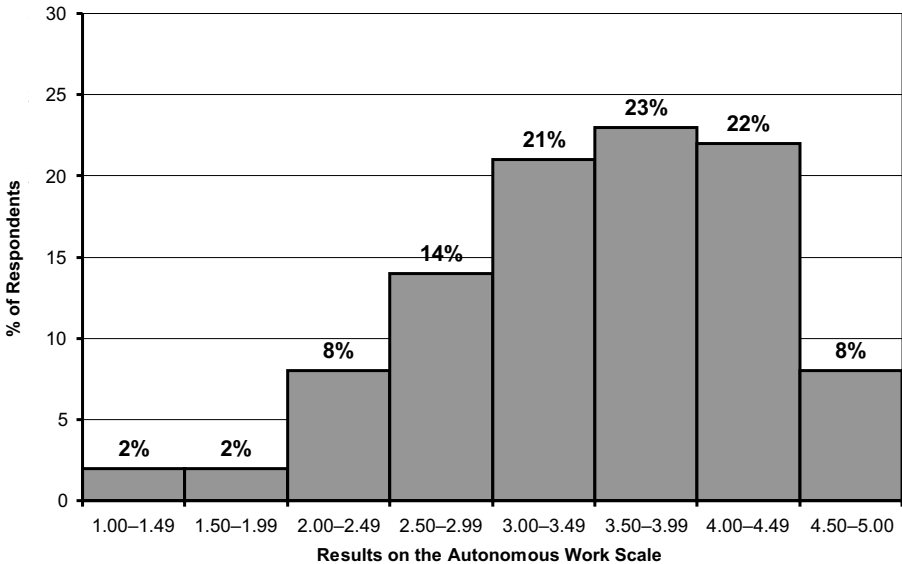


Figure 1. Attitudes of Poles towards work (frequencies of results on the Scale of Autonomous Attitudes).

5.2. What Is Valuable in Work: Attributes of a “Good Job”

A relative importance of the listed work attributes was rated on a 4-point scale (1—*not important at all* through 4—*very important*). Average ratings of each of the nine work attributes together with standard deviations are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Personal Importance of Different Attributes of “Good Work” (Needs Fulfilled by Work)

Attributes of “Good Work”	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
High income	3.57	0.61
Employment stability	3.56	0.72
Interesting work	3.52	0.63
Self-direction at work	3.42	0.73
Profitable for society	3.39	0.64
Improving own qualifications	3.36	0.72
Related to helping others	3.34	0.66
Independence in work-time organization	3.08	0.90
Opportunities for promotion	2.86	0.93

The most important features of the job are as follows: (a) high income, (b) employment stability, (c) interesting work. The chances of promotion turned out to be the least valuable attribute of a “good job.” However, all the work features taken into consideration in the questionnaire were rated relatively high. A similar hierarchy of good work attributes was found for West European societies in the early 1990s (Akker et al., 1993). However, at the end of the 1990s in those countries the most important aspect of good job was a “life-long continuation of career” (Derbis, 2000).

Principal Component Analysis was carried out in order to reveal the structure underlying these subjective ratings of work features (see Table 2).

TABLE 2. Structure of Importance of Different Features of Work (Factor Analysis Results)

Features of Work	Factor 1 Interesting and Senseful Work	Factor 2 Existence Related Needs	Factor 3 Self-Direction at Work
Related to helping others	.85		
Profitable for society	.85		
Interesting work	.58		
Improving owns qualifications	.55		
Employment stability		.63	
High income		.74	
Opportunities for promotion		.70	
Independence in work-time organization			.82
Self-direction at work			.64

Notes. The numbers are factor scores > .50.

Factor analysis yielded a solution with three distinct principal components.

- Factor I: interesting and meaningful work: socially profitable work (profitable for society), interesting, related to helping others, improving one’s qualifications (34.6% of variance explained);
- Factor II: existence-related needs: high income, opportunities for promotion, job stability (14.3% of variance explained);
- Factor III: self-directedness at work: relative independence both in work time organization and in ways work is carried out (11.9% of variance explained).

Pertaining to the aforementioned factor analysis three scales capturing the needs fulfilled by work were constructed:

- scale of work-meaningfulness ($M = 3.42$, $SD = .51$), Cronbach's alpha = .78;
- scale of existence (maintenance)-related needs ($M = 3.33$, $SD = .54$), Cronbach's alpha = .76; and
- scale of self-directedness needs ($M = 3.25$, $SD = .69$), Cronbach's alpha = .75.

Mean scores for these scales were used as predictors in the next multiple regression analysis.

5.3. Predictors of an Autonomous Attitude Towards Work

A series of multiple regressions was carried out to identify those demographic and psychological variables that are significantly related to an autonomous attitude towards work. The variables were introduced in two blocks: sociodemographic variables and psychological variables, respectively.

The variables introduced as primary ones—education, age, gender, income, place of residence, type of employment—explained 5% of the autonomous attitude towards work. However, certain regularities were observed: More autonomous are the attitudes of women and those respondents who had a higher education, were older, and lived in a small town. Income and the type of employment appeared not to differentiate significantly the autonomous attitude towards work.

As mentioned before, psychological variables came next. This operation increased the total percentage of the variance explained to 14% of the variability of the attitude. Figure 2 presents the results of the regression analysis reflected in relevant betas of the variables that finally entered the equation.

Respondents' personal conviction on the meaningfulness of work, or doing something useful for others and something personally interesting, turned out to be the best predictor of the autonomous attitude towards work. Other predictors are as follows: education, age, and place of residence: More educated persons, older respondents, and those who live in small towns are more of the autonomous type. Similarly, individualistic attribution of success in life (i.e., perceiving one's own efforts, ambitions, or abilities as instrumental for success) as well as low appreciation of material success and professional career, favor autonomous attitudes.

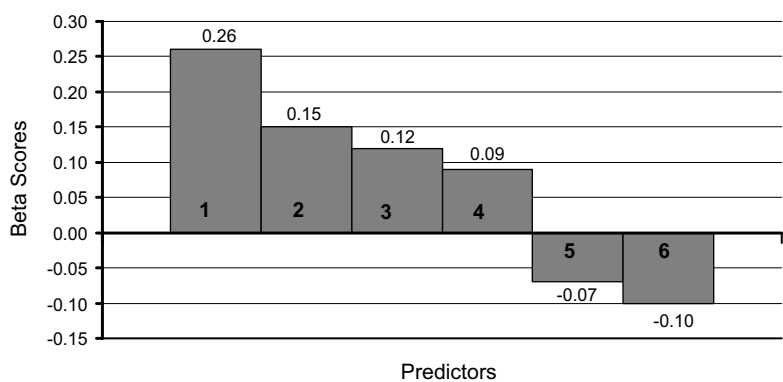


Figure 2. Predictors of an autonomous attitude towards work: Analysis of multiple regression. Notes. 1—sense of work, 2—education, 3—age, 4—individualistic attribution of life success, 5—materialistic values, 6—place of residence.

Other variables, taken into consideration in multiple regression analysis (orientation towards traditional values, harmonious development values, individualistic achievement values, self-evaluation of social success [self-placement on the ladder of social structure], type of employment, and personal income) were statistically excluded from the final equation of regression.

6. DISCUSSION

Towards the end of the 1990s more and more Poles declared preference for an autonomous (and not solely instrumental) attitude towards work. For 30% of adults work was crucial as an autonomous, intrinsic value. For them work had an intrinsic value regardless of its significance as a source of financial resources. The number is not particularly impressive, but the evidence gathered shows that most respondents rejected a uniquely instrumental treatment of work. An autonomous attitude towards work is not related significantly to either the status determined by income nor to the type of employment (employer vs. employee). The finding seems obvious in the situation of a relatively low living standard of Poles and still prevailing high “materialism” (hoarding material goods and treating them as an accurate indicator of social position). Namely, a relatively small number of Poles both discover a sense of life in working and value work as such, regardless of its financial aspect. Those “living for work” experience little social support and understanding in the collectivist culture.

Nevertheless, in general, the attitudes of Poles towards work have been changing slowly but visibly. This phenomenon is salient while comparing the number of hours spent at work under the former regime and nowadays. Research conducted by Poland's national survey agency (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, CBOS) shows a substantial change of awareness in this respect. In 1998, 75% participants from a national representative sample declared that today Poles work more, and 65% believed Poles worked better than 10 years earlier. Those who work more have higher income. So the positive relationship between work and income has become clear (Skarżyńska & Chmielewski, 1998). Extrinsic or material work motivation currently seems not to lead to the autonomous value of work. Even more, our subsequent results suggest an opposite tendency: Strong orientation towards material success diminishes the autonomous value of work.

Individual attitudes of Poles towards work in the late 1990s were more under the influence of psychological than structural determinants. The more work is treated as autonomously important the more it is found interesting, socially useful, and facilitating individual growth. It is not individualist self-directedness at work nor the capacity of work to fulfill existence needs, but its meaningfulness (both individual and social usefulness) that best predicts autonomous attitudes towards work. In other words, we cannot treat work as inherently important if it is not interesting or developing and useful for other people or society. The autonomous meaning of work for Poles seems to be of social-individualistic character. Personal independence resulting from work and the sense of self-directedness at work are not enough to make work a source of sense in life.

A high evaluation of individualistic life goals (material and professional success and achievements) is a negative predictor of autonomous attitudes towards work; we can presume that it weakens this attitude. It is another proof for the claim that work must comprise broader than only individual aspects. Poles, oriented mainly to material success, treat work merely as an instrument for realizing their individualist values. This means an interest in working as long as it brings considerable income. This sort of attitude is now popular in Poland and is reflected in a dominating belief that people who have money and are focused on consumption are respected and those who treat their work as a life goal are not.

Moreover, the more subjects believe they have a direct influence on their life success (through effort, ambition, or abilities), the more their attitude towards work is autonomous. This sort of individualist attribution is

coupled with a sense of greater possibilities of choosing a place and type of work. Indirectly it has an impact on the meaningfulness of work: I choose a job that suits my capacities, ambitions, or interests. As a result work gets an autonomous sense: On the one hand, I do things I myself consider important and on the other hand I have some influence on the effects of work. Those who do not believe their efforts and intentions can influence their work effects are likely to devalue the sense of their work.

Education is conducive to autonomous attitudes towards work due to (usually) greater opportunities of educated people to choose a preferred and personally interesting job.

Older persons are likely to perceive more relationships between work and personal values and needs, and they are less materialistic and also less success-oriented than younger people. This probably facilitates more autonomous work attitudes.

In smaller towns work is treated more autonomously probably because, in general, people face more often the danger and potential consequences of unemployment. Availability of work is a factor probably the most responsible for differences between small towns and large cities in Poland. Being involved observers of both material and psychological suffering of those deprived of work and of systematic closing of large and small companies, most of these small town inhabitants probably treat work as more inherently meaningful. Furthermore, the individualist orientation towards material success (negative predictor of autonomous attitudes towards work) is weaker in small towns, compared with large urban areas, which attract success seekers.

Our results show two different "paths" leading to autonomous attitudes towards work. The first path was described before as (a) prosocial self-realization, supported by (b) a personal belief that success mainly depends on one's effort, ambitions, and abilities, and (c) opportunities resulting from education (work matches personal preferences, is interesting and developing), and also (d) low appreciation of material success. This path can be labelled "personal-educational."

The second path results from the experiences of inhabitants of relatively small towns. The people there are exposed to the effects of potential and actual unemployment. So negative economic, psychological, and social aspects related to losing one's job are salient and cognitively easily accessible. This makes these people evaluate work in more autonomous categories. Social comparisons with those who are unemployed induce an autonomous attitude towards work. However, this path of "social comparisons" accounts for a small fraction of variability of the autonomous attitude towards work.

How can the data on an autonomous attitude towards work be interpreted in terms of broader value conceptualizations (traditional vs. post-materialist values, or collectivist vs. individualist values)? The answer is complex. The autonomous value of work for Poles is, on the one hand, linked with the acceptance of prosocial values (a good job is good for others and for the society) and non-material individualistic values such as developing one's own interests and qualifications and low appreciation of material success. The work attitude we are analyzing here is also related to a conviction about the possibility of influencing one's own life through personal efforts, ambition, and abilities. An autonomous work attitude in contemporary Poland is not associated with a traditional set of values (family life, peaceful life, etc.). It seems to belong to the realm of postmaterialist values or social-individualist ones. If this statement is true its broad acceptance in society would be particularly desirable. It seems to soothe, in a way, the rough postcommunism capitalism, and simultaneously it is connected with a proproductive set of values.

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