

Work and Human Development

Using the perspectives of and experiences with Erich Fromm, the author examines case studies and organizational projects to explore the influence of work on human development. Of the individual cases cited, a process of cure calls not for treatment but for social change. The process of cure depends not only on making the irrational conscious, but on improving work, family, and, in general, the practice of life that supports the internal and external struggle for health. Work is considered as a way of relating to the world. Illustrations of work in favorable settings are described, including the similar situations of the Harman International factories in Bolivar, Tennessee and Coatbridge, Scotland. For most Americans, work is essential directly and indirectly to self-definition and personality development. Although people will accept stressful employment out of necessity, work that does not stimulate human development will weaken the democratic society.

At a time when many people limit the issue of employment to one of providing jobs for everyone, less attention is paid to *what* people are employed to do and *how* they do it. Work stimulates feelings and attitudes that can lead either in the direction of human development or of psychopathology. If a job contributes to an individual's development, it will strengthen our society; if it does not, both the individual and society will suffer.

How does work influence human development?

In his approach to psychoanalytic theory, Erich Fromm suggests that development, when described as a process strengthening capacities for reason and love, be contrasted to both psychopathology and normality.¹ This approach clarifies and provides a way for psychologists to evaluate work in terms of whether it stimulates human development, psychopathology (mental illness), or normality.

The very concept of mental illness has been challenged by writers who maintain that the concept is meaningless or misleading and that either so-called "normals" are sick (Laing, 1967) or that much so-called sickness is merely a label for bad behavior (Szasz, 1960). On the other side, the mental health profession tends to label all psychic suffering as treatable illness, to the point where psychotherapists sometimes seem out of touch with the experience of those who suffer.

For example, a psychiatric institute established a pilot project to treat factory workers. One of the project directors invited me to study intake interviews, as possibly useful for the study of social character. The interviews were of no use because the mental health workers explored neither the goals and strivings nor the actual conditions of the factory workers. Rather, they assumed psychopathology and illness from the presence of symptoms such as extreme anxiety or feelings of persecution by the foreman without even asking whether these symptoms were rational reactions to the working conditions or real persecutions by the foreman. The worker might be extremely neurotic, but the symptom might result from his efforts to adapt to, or struggle with,

¹ On Fromm's approach to human development and psychopathology, see Fromm (1941, 1955, 1964).



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humanly destructive conditions. To find out which is the case, a psychologist must explore the relationships among work, character, modes of adaptations, and symptoms. If the work causes inner conflict, which may not even be conscious to the worker, this cannot be determined merely by describing symptoms, but must be explored; sometimes psychoanalytic methods are required.

Elsewhere I have cited (Maccoby, 1976) the case of a Mexican factory worker interviewed by Dr. Alejandro Cordova (Note 1). This automobile worker said that he was satisfied with his work, which consisted of mounting the suspension of the car (i.e., he tightened screws in the same way hundreds of times a day). Although he was a craftsman before becoming an auto worker, he even maintained that fractionating improved the work, and he offered no criticism of his job, at least consciously. Despite these opinions, there were other indications that he was far from happy with his work. He complained that he often felt nervous at the factory and tended to take it out on other workers. When he got home, he felt exhausted and was often in a bad humor, which was not the case when he worked in a small craft shop. He also reported that since he had begun working in the factory, he had suffered from constant headaches, frequent colds, and colitis. In contrast to his statement that he was satisfied with his work, these symptoms suggested a deep conflict between what he (consciously) thought—that the work was satisfying—and what he knew in his body and spirit—that the work was infuriating. This conflict appeared to be expressed in a repetitive dream, “I dream that at my work there is a man who is a stranger and we are arguing. I don’t know who he is, and I don’t remember what I am arguing with him about.” This dream helped clarify why this worker did not connect his anger and symptoms to his experience at work. I suggest that it is a precise symbolization of alienation. Unconsciously, this worker was two people. One was the conscious self who was satisfied at work. The other was the unconscious “stranger” who had a different point of view. These two aspects of the self were constantly arguing with each other. What were they arguing about? The dreamer could not remember. What the evidence of the interview points to is that the unconscious stranger was telling the dreamer that he had to leave the workplace if he were to become whole and remain sane. That this knowledge remained repressed is understandable especially when we consider that the worker needed this job to support his family and could imagine no way of changing the production technology or organization to improve the quality of his work.

Is this automobile worker mentally ill? I would contend that he is not. He is extremely disturbed by the conditions of work, but there is no evidence of the deep-rooted

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psychopathology that should be part of the definition of mental or emotional illness. He is like the American automobile workers studied by Kornhauser (1965), who found that routine and repetitive jobs led to feelings of hostility and anxiety. These workers suffered from a reactive condition that could not be treated by a doctor except in terms of symptomatic relief through tranquilizers that merely exchanged one symptom for another, that is, insensitivity in place of anxiety. In these cases, a “cure” would have required social change, not treatment.

But this does not mean that there is no such thing as psychopathology or mental-emotional illness. Workers themselves understand better the distinction between mental illness versus suffering due to dehumanizing conditions than do many health professionals. In a report from Bertram S. Brown (Note 2), then director of the National Institute of Mental Health, we discover that the two groups view reality differently. Brown asks why so few workers sought treatment, even when it was offered free of charge. The reason why, he maintains, is that workers and union officials are uneducated about the benefits of psychotherapy, but the evidence of a study he cites suggests that the mental health professionals are the ones who most need education. Samples of workers and providers of care were both asked whether they thought that mental health care was required in a number of situations. In some cases, a large majority of both groups agreed that an individual needed psychotherapy. Examples were the man who drinks too much or the one who often fights on the job. But in some cases, the two groups disagreed. For example, a large majority of the psychotherapists thought that a husband and wife who have “marital problems and seldom see each other because they both work and they work on different shifts” needed psychotherapy, whereas the workers thought they did not. I assume that the more intelligent psychotherapists would argue that if the couple did not have problems, they would arrange their lives in order to be together. But the workers know this may not be possible, and most workers are not fools who need a professional to tell them the obvious.

The biases of the mental health providers are expressed in their responses to the following situation: A woman works at a job every day and goes home to cook and clean at night and feels that no one appreciates what she does. How is one to respond to such a situation?

A majority of the psychotherapists thought she needed treatment. We are not told why. Is it so she will adapt to her role and not complain? Or should she get angry and leave the situation in which she is unappreciated? The fact that an overwhelming percentage of workers thought that she did not require treatment is interpreted by Brown as a lack of sympathy. But is it? More likely, the workers considered that the family of this woman needed a talking-to and that it was not a problem that could be solved by treating the woman as a patient.

When I have made this point with psychotherapists, they have defended themselves by maintaining that they would help the woman to confront her family and to demand more respect. However, unless the psychotherapist understood the husband, such a process might lead to a conflict that the woman would not choose to initiate. Even if the therapist were able to start a dialogue in the family, it would not be a case of curing a patient but of encouraging her and others to consider alternatives.

Workers are sensitive about being labeled mentally ill. Those surveyed did not reject the concept of mental illness. Rather, they distinguished clearly between probable symptoms of illness needing treatment (alcoholism, aggressiveness) and problems caused by situational factors. They are aware that to earn a living they may have to accept



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stress. The question is, At what point does this stress become so great that it causes mental illness?

Symptom Versus Cause

Although workers may be able to distinguish mental illness from symptoms of stress, the mental health professional will be confused as long as the *cause* of the symptom is not questioned. To avoid confusion, the psychoanalytically oriented investigator should withhold diagnosis until the roots of symptoms in an individual's character structure have been explored.² This does not require a lengthy psychoanalysis or study of the individual's early childhood experiences. The method may be an interview or open-ended questionnaire (Fromm & Maccoby, 1970). The essential question for the psychoanalyst should be whether any symptom—destructive behavior, fear, inability to act, and so forth—is a rational reaction to a threatening situation or whether it would persist even if the situation from an objective point of view were benign. If the symptom appears irrational, the psychoanalyst should expect to discover unconscious strivings, motives, and passions that, when brought to light, account for the individual's thoughts, feelings, and behavior. However, psychoanalytic theory has paid little attention to work, and psychoanalysts have little experience with factory or clerical workers. To make use of psychoanalysis in better understanding the relation between work and mental illness, we must examine critically Freud's theory of psychopathology.

When the psychoanalyst speaks of psychopathology, he or she refers not merely to symptoms but also to unconscious and irrational strivings, wishes, or fears such as hatred, cannibalistic impulses, lust to kill, incestuous desires, or the wish to return to the womb. Freud's genius was to develop a technique to bring these hidden emotions to consciousness through talking and taking seriously communications such as dreams, slips of the tongue, and inadvertent expressions. However, it is one thing to confront the unconscious in the consulting room and another to understand theoretically the causes of irrational passions. Freud constantly revised his theory of psychopathology, although he never wavered in his view that infantile sexuality and destructiveness were to be found in all serious neuroses.

An unresolved question is whether irrational strivings are part of human nature or whether they are caused by negative circumstances. Freud's view is complex. On the one hand, he recognized that severe frustration or oppression of children would increase the incidence of neurosis, particularly in those individuals with a constitutional (genetic) vulnerability. On the other hand, Freud (1927/1975) believed that certain "instinctual wishes" are born afresh with every child and "among these instinctual wishes are those of incest, cannibalism, and lust for killing" (p. 10).

From Freud's point of view, neurosis may be caused either by too much frustration in childhood of instinctual wishes for pleasure or by too little socialization of inborn destructiveness, because of the child's failure to resolve the Oedipal struggle (rivalry with the father) and develop a superego (a punishing conscience that turns destructiveness inward).

One can accept Freud's basic clinical discoveries about unconscious irrational

² Erich Fromm has clearly presented a model of forces leading to psychopathology and health in *The Heart of Man* (1964). In what follows, I have essentially followed this model but changed some of the names Fromm uses to describe pathological forces.



strivings and the strategy of psychoanalysis (including the role of resistance and transference), which are confirmed time and again by the practicing psychoanalyst, and at the same time reject his unproven theories about the nature of man. As Fromm (1973) argues, Freud himself, while holding to his view that destructiveness was instinctual, constantly revised his metapsychology and failed to resolve important contradictions between his earlier libidinal theory and later more vitalistic theory.

Without ignoring the importance of genetic factors in vulnerability to experiences, evidence from anthropology and developmental psychology supports Fromm's view that destructive urges are not innate but are the result of unfavorable early childhood experiences, such as oppression or smothering, that provoke hatred or set the stage for sadomasochistic attitudes. Clinical evidence further indicates that incestuous strivings often are provoked by incestuous parents, that narcissism results from lack of love and ambitious parents, and so on.

In revising Freud's theory of psychopathology (emotional illness), Fromm (1964, 1973) proposes that emotional illness implies some combination of regressive incestuous strivings, narcissism, and hatred of life that is unconscious and in conflict with healthier attitudes. Alcoholism, destructive behavior, paranoia, and other symptoms of mental illness are fed by these emotional attitudes that are deeply embedded in character. Character syndrome of dynamic traits or emotional attitudes is a key concept in understanding the meaning of a symptom and its resistance to change.

Fromm integrates psychoanalytic findings with the humanistic, philosophical, and religious traditions that have defined human development as the process of overcoming childishness, egocentrism, and resentment. Fromm conceives of normality in relationship to both illness and human development in terms of three character vectors: independence versus passive dependency (symbiosis); love and concern for others versus egocentrism and narcissism; and reverence for life, joyful spontaneity (biophilia) versus deadening control, hatred of life (necrophilia). The positive role of human development represents conscious, spontaneous, and humanly responsible activity, whereas the negative pole of psychopathology represents unconscious, regressive infantile strivings—a primitive illusion of total security that resists all reason.

These irrational strivings are expressed in complex beliefs and actions described by both Fromm and Harry Stack Sullivan (1956), who show how the deeply regressive and distrustful individual manipulates the environment to prove irrational beliefs (e.g., the paranoid creates enemies). Without skillful treatment, such a person remains locked within a system that blocks the chance for healthy development (see lower part of diagram, Figure 1). Theories of psychopathology also influence treatment techniques. Some psychotherapists believe that by exclusively exploring infantile experiences they will uncover and correct the causes of neurosis. Although this is a misunderstanding of Freud's technique, his instinctual theory lends itself to this approach in contrast to Fromm's, which focuses attention on the individual's *present practice of life as well as origins in childhood*. A process of cure depends not only on making the irrational conscious, but on improving work, on the family, and in general, on a practice of life that supports the internal (and external) struggle for health.³

On the negative side, but less extremely regressive, are the orientations of dependency,

³ This is not to contradict evidence that some mental illness may be totally or partially caused by a physiological imbalance and can be cured by medication (e.g., manic-depressive illness and lithium treatment).



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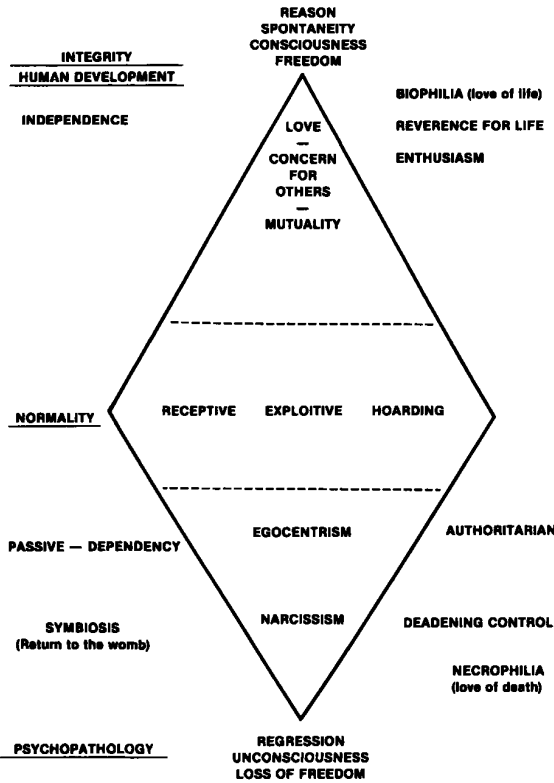


Figure 1. Human development versus psychopathology.
(Adapted from Erich Fromm, 1964.)

egocentrism, and authoritarianism that approach the range of “normal character.” As Fromm points out (1964), there is a wider variety of character types within the normal range than at either the regressive or progressive extremes.

Normality and Social Character

Normality, as it is defined in any particular society, describes the “social character” types shared by a class or group that are adaptive to particular social and environmental conditions. For example, in rural villages throughout the world, the “normal” people tend to be cautious, self-protective, methodical, thrifty, and self-reliant, with the character orientation Fromm has called “productive-hoarding” (Fromm & Maccoby, 1970). Such individuals express traditional values of self-reliance, respect, and personal integrity. These character traits and values are adaptive to the life of a small farmer who must depend on himself and his family against the uncertainties of the weather, natural disasters, changing markets, and tricky middlemen. Only those with such inner-directed emotional attitudes survive and prosper; these same attitudes are taught by parents to children from early infancy and become the message of religion and folk culture.

Within the normal range there are, of course, extensive variations of temperament

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and talents. Subtypes can also be distinguished in terms of character. For example, some craftsmen are more receptive and life affirming, whereas others tend to be more dutiful and unbending. These differences may stem from the constitutional endowment of the individual and/or from variations in family subculture.

The quality of the social character and of normality in terms of its developmental level depends, in large measure, on how it fits with the social conditions, particularly modes of work that determine survival and security.

For Freud (1927), work is inevitably oppressive to the masses because it blocks the expression of instinctual drives. Only the elite are able to sublimate their instinctual drives in their work and thus gain pleasure from it. For Fromm (1955), in contrast, work is a way of relating to the world. He writes,

But work is not only an inescapable necessity for man. Work is also his liberator from nature, his creator as a social and independent being. *In the process of work, that is, the molding and changing of value outside of himself, man molds and changes himself. . . he develops his powers of cooperation, of reason, his sense of beauty.* (pp. 177-178)

Modes of work can either stimulate life-affirming attitudes or depress them through frustration and oppression. Work is thus necessary for human development, but this depends not only on the nature of work but its relation to social character. According to Fromm's theory, if a social character adaptive to one environment is thrust into another, a situation of stress can stimulate negative traits. The farmer-craftsman forced to work in a factory experiences frustration of his characteristic self-reliance and sense of respect. Behaviorally he adapts, but like the Mexican auto worker described above, he unconsciously rebels and suffers the symptoms of his conflict. Or he may consciously rebel if he can join a union. In other cases, the frustrating social conditions stimulate the negative side of the social character, for example, obstinacy in place of self-reliance. At a certain point, the individual can no longer adapt and may be driven toward psychopathology.

The often-used concept of "stress" becomes mechanical, unless it is understood in terms of experience: frustration of creative strivings, heartbreak, hardening, despair. Some individuals near the borderline between normality and pathology may be pushed over the edge by "stressful" work that blocks their creative impulses (Caplan, Note 3). They may respond by fear and anger and then regressive escape, narcissistic isolation, or deep hatred of life. To measure the limits of stress, one must understand individual and social character. Cordova (Note 1) describes how stress results when engineers install new safety measures in coal mines without considering the miners' attitudes. From their dreams, Cordova finds that miners repress their feelings of fear and powerlessness, but they gain confidence from their keen sensing of changes underground that might threaten safety. When the engineers substituted metal beams for wood underground, the miners became anxious. They had learned to detect slight changes in the creaking of wood, but the "safer" metal provided no clues and thus diminished the feeling of having some control over the environment.

A normal social character is vulnerable to stress that might affect other social characters differently. Erik Erikson (1963) describes how the Sioux Indians became depressed and hostile when they were deprived of the right to be hunters and warriors. The Sioux could not develop the social character of farmers. Their traditional daring and discipline learned in childhood became meaningless without the chance to hunt or fight; the result was apathy and impotent anger.

In studying the relationship between character and work, like Fromm (1947), I have



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asked not only how individuals adapt to their work (and at what cost) but how they potentially might work to develop the most creative or productive aspects of their character, given that character sets boundaries and directions for change (Maccoby, 1976). My colleagues and I have studied different types of workers and managers not only in factories but also in business and government offices.

Based on interviews with individuals about their values and goals, emotional attitudes and conflicts are explored and social character types are determined inductively. This method is in contrast to typing workers only in terms of their attitudes toward a particular job, as though that expressed a character orientation to work.

For example, Jacob and Jacob (1976) distinguish two personality types among auto workers: those who work for “self-expression” and are satisfied by greater challenge, autonomy, and responsibility versus those who work for pay and promotion and are more concerned with material rewards and physical conditions of work. In light of our findings in an auto parts factory (Duckles, 1977; Maccoby, Note 4), this dichotomy is misleading. It describes two modes of adaptation to factory work, but not necessarily different character types. Many workers who do not find self-expression in factory work do so outside the plant in arts and crafts, gardening, housework, or farming. In some cases, their most meaningful work is not what they are paid to do. These workers may not want more challenge or responsibility at the paid job, but they do respond favorably to respect and the chance to have a say in how work is organized. Projects to improve work can make the factory less oppressive and encourage increased concern for others. However, human development would be stimulated more in an environment where individuals could be paid to develop their creative interests.

Human Development

Just as we can evaluate work organizations according to whether they push people toward psychopathology, so can we assess whether they stimulate human development. Human development or character development is a process leading to an integrity of character that is at the opposite pole of psychopathology. Psychopathology implies a regressive attempt to rediscover the infant’s sense of total protectiveness by controlling the world with a sense of omnipotence, resulting in becoming more unconscious, helpless, and despairing. Integrity of character describes the process of individuation and mutuality that unfolds the human potential for reason, independence, courage, love, spontaneity, and confidence.

All the great religions and humanistic traditions agree that the process of human development is one of liberation from greed and egocentrism, with the goal being development of one’s capacity for love and knowledge. The most developed people are typically those who have struggled with impulses that enslave them. This development can itself heighten the conflict between individual and society as a person becomes more aware of social pressures that limit human development.

Ultimately, human development depends on individual decision making, discipline, and everyday practice. It requires caring for others and commitment to goals and projects beyond oneself. The organization of work cannot determine this development, but it can either stimulate or limit it. Furthermore, in our society both education and family are responsive to what pays off at work. Therefore, the workplace plays a particularly important role in determining human development.



What are the conditions that will stimulate human development in the workplace? To some extent, that depends on both the character and life goals of workers. Different people may respond differently to the same conditions because of character. Herrick's (Note 5) research shows that the most humanly developed workers—those who have a sense of independence, mutuality, and love of life—suffer and protest under dehumanizing conditions; whereas more hardened, self-protective, and less hopeful workers are more satisfied with these conditions. These latter conditions parallel the reactions of managers to their work (Maccoby, 1976). Successful managers are competitive and detached. Those who experience the most painful conflict are those who care most about people.

Almost everyone can be stimulated to examine work in terms of its effects on him or her, especially if social circumstances encourage hope of improving conditions. At the Harman International factories in Bolivar, Tennessee, and Coatbridge, Scotland, management and union (United Auto Workers, and General and Municipal Workers Union) have sponsored projects to improve work, based on interrelated principles of human development (Harvard Project, Note 6). These principles can be summarized as security (of employment, health, and safety), equity (fairness of rewards in relation to contribution), participation, and individuation. Security and equity are basic protection against exploitation, and these principles encourage the individual to contribute ideas for improving work. The principles of participation and individuation are the basis of democratic practices, respect for different viewpoints, and creative needs.

The Harvard Project on Technology, Work, and Character was invited by management and union to help establish these programs (Maccoby, Note 4). Part of this role has been to initiate discussion about the relationship between work and human development. At Bolivar we began by interviewing individuals about their work and stimulating them to analyze and evaluate it in terms of the principles. A next step was to open up the study and raise it to the level of public discussion. Together management and union committees began to analyze work and were encouraged to experiment with alternatives that were evaluated according to the principles (Duckles, Duckles, & Maccoby, 1977).⁴ As individuals discovered that they could influence change, many were stimulated to think of new possibilities and to take more account of other people with different goals. A result of this exercise in making work more satisfying was increased cooperation and productivity.

The Harvard Project is now developing a similar program in the federal government, including managers and office and production workers. A central element is the exploration of social character and its implications in creating an effective and humanly developing organization.

All persons have the potential for human development, but the path will be different for each person, according to his or her individual experiences. Since human development depends so much on social relationships, each society must be organized to stimulate this development. Human needs for physical survival and sanity must be met in such a way as to protect the individual's sense of security and dignity. Otherwise, fear, distrust, and resentment inevitably increase psychopathology. Ideally,

⁴ This involves the kind of active learning, essential to developing independent and critical thought, described by Piaget (1973).



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society will also be organized to provide a meaningful and productive role for individuals, depending on age and ability, and will encourage the fullest possible development of individual talents.

Although this ideal and these principles are totally consistent with the official values of our society, they have not generally been applied to work organization in America. A hundred years ago, it might have been argued that a large percentage of the work force was self-employed and no one was stuck in an organization. This is no longer the case. Today, many Americans have given up hope that work will be fulfilling. They seek their main satisfactions at home and in leisure activities. However, to be creative at leisure while feeling dehumanized at work requires superhuman detachment. For most Americans, work is central to self-definition and personality development, both directly and indirectly. Although people will accept stressful employment out of necessity, work that does not stimulate human development will weaken a democratic society.

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