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Sven Hauff and Stefan Kirchner

Cross-national differences and trends in job quality

A literature review and research agenda

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- * Dr. Sven Hauff, University of Hamburg, Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences, Von-Melle-Park 5, 20146 Hamburg, Germany. Email: sven.hauff@uni-hamburg.de
- ** Dr. Stefan Kirchner, University of Hamburg, Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences, Welckerstr. 8, 20354 Hamburg, Germany. Email: stefan.kirchner@uni-hamburg.de

Abstract:

This paper summarizes existing studies on cross-national differences and trends in job quality to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the current state of research. In particular, we compare different conceptualizations and analytical approaches. The review reveals the lack of a general concept of job quality which influences the comparability of previous findings. There are also very different approaches to analyze cross-national differences and trends in job quality, each with its own advantages and disadvantages. Our review concludes by identifying opportunities for future research.

Introduction

To evaluate whether work and employment conditions are either ‘good’ or ‘bad’, we need a point of reference. This can be a certain group of employees (e.g., gender, occupation) or a point in time. In order to decide whether job quality within a country is or changed for good or bad, it may also help to look beyond national borders. Indeed, along with the renewed interest of social scientists and policy makers in the topic of job quality (Findlay et al., 2013), we lately find an increasing number of studies that focus on cross-national differences and trends in job quality. A difficulty of these studies is, however, that they differ essentially with regard to their conceptual perspectives. Additionally, different approaches to analyze cross-national differences and/or global trends are undertaken: Some studies look at differences and trends regarding specific job quality dimensions, others try to empirically find interrelations between different dimensions or construct indices of overall job quality.

This paper summarizes the existing findings on cross-national differences and trends in job quality providing a more comprehensive picture of the current state and directions of research. In this respect, we understand job quality as the sum of work and employment conditions related to a job that influence the physical and psychological well-being of employees as well as job related attitudes, such as job satisfaction, commitment and turnover intentions (Green, 2006; Holman, 2013b). As such a concept of job quality embraces various work and employment conditions, we focus on studies which explicitly address cross-national differences and/or trends in job quality as a multidimensional construct using several variables.

Conceptualizations of job quality

Jobs are complex and influenced by many aspects. Accordingly, different theoretical traditions indicate different dimensions of job quality (Muñoz de Bustillo et al., 2011a). For instance, the theory of compensating differentials highlights the importance of wages, while behavioral theories focus on hierarchy and possibilities for employee participation. Traditional sociological approaches highlight the relevance of the potential for self-determination as well as the meaningfulness of an occupation for intrinsic job quality. Institutional approaches refer to the importance of contract status and period of employment. Reports on the relation between physical and psychological risks and job quality are found in the literature on occupational medicine, health, and safety. Finally, studies on work-life balance concentrate on aspects such as work hours and duration as well as the intensity of work, that is, the level of stress or physical exertion during work.

However, up to now there is no general agreement about the dimensions of job quality. Instead there are many different conceptualizations in which various work and employment conditions are integrated as determinants of job quality. The disagreement about the dimensions of job quality becomes most apparent when we compare different studies on cross national differences and/or trends in job quality using the same data sets. Common data sources are either the European Working Condition Survey (EWCS) or the work orientation modules from the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) which both provide valuable information about the work and employment conditions in several countries. Using the same data sets, different authors choose and analyze different dimensions of job quality (Table 1).

The only dimension accounted for in almost all studies is job autonomy. Also frequently used are variables concerning variety, physical and ambient demands, wage level, duration and scheduling of work, training and development opportunities, and perceived job security. Other variables, such as dependency of work, clear formulation of tasks and requirements, work life balance and the boundaries between work and private life, or aspects concerning fairness at work, are used rather seldom.

Also, there is no general agreement about the measurement of single dimensions. For example, regarding job autonomy, the EWCS data from 2005 provides information on the ability to change the order of tasks, work methods, speed or rate of work; the influence on the choice of working partner; the ability to apply own ideas; the assessment of the quality of own work; the influence on the division of rotating tasks; and team-autonomy. This full range of variables was only used by Tangian (2009). In contrast, Smith et al. (2008) as well as Leschke and Watt (2008) referred only to the ability to change the order of tasks, methods of work and speed or rate of work. The information on autonomy is further limited in studies using the ISSP data (Clark, 2010; Olsen et al., 2010), because there, autonomy is measured through one item only which captures the agreement or disagreement with the statement “I can work independently”.

Furthermore, some studies integrate additional aspects that are not necessarily dimensions of job quality. For example, Leschke and Watt (2008) also used trade union density to make statements about overall job quality in Europe. Davoine et al. (2008) further integrated aspects such as unemployment rates, employment gap between man and woman, productivity or length of maternity leave. If job quality concerns conditions which determine employees' well-being, these variables represent either possible influencing factors of the work and employment conditions (e.g., union density) or labor market conditions.

Table 1: Dimensions of job quality captured in EWCS 2005 and ISSP data and their use in different studies

Dimensions of job quality		Availability in EWCS 2005	Studies using EWCS 2005 data						Availability in ISSP 1989; 1997, 2005	Studies using ISSP data	
			Gallie (2007)	Davoine et al. (2008)	Smith et al. (2008)	Leschke/Watt (2008)	Tangian (2009)	Muñoz de Bustillo et al. (2011)		Holman (2013b)	Clark (2010)
Autonomy and involvement	Autonomy (e.g., ability to change order of tasks, methods of work)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Dependency (e.g., pace of work depends on colleagues, machines)	✓				✓		✓			
	Involvement (e.g., employees are consulted about changes in work organization)	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓			
Job content	Clear formulation of tasks and requirements	✓				✓					
	Variety (non-monotonous work, interesting job)	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Intellectual demand	✓		✓		✓	✓	(✓)			
	Emotional demands	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓			
	Contact with others (colleagues, customers)	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓			
Meaningfulness (useful to society)	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Social relations	Relations to/support from management	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Relations to/support from colleagues	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Working conditions	Physical demands (e.g., carrying or moving heavy loads)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Ambient demands (e.g., noise)	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Workload	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Work intensity (high speed, tight deadlines)	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Wage and payment	Wage level	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Type of payment (e.g., fixed salary, performance pay)	✓				✓	✓				
Working time and work life balance	Full time vs. part time	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓				
	Duration (exact hours/week)	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
	Scheduling (work at night, weekend)	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓			
	Flexibility (possibility to adapt working hours, to take an hour off or to take breaks)	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	(✓)		
	Work life balance	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	(✓)		
	Clear boundaries between work and private life	✓				✓	✓	✓			
Skills and development	Training	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	(✓)			
	Development opportunities	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	(✓)	✓	✓	
	Skill utilization	✓				✓	✓	(✓)			
Contractual status and stability	Type of contract	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	(✓)			
	Perceived job security	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Workplace	Workplace (e.g., working at company premise; working at home)	✓						(✓)			
	Distance between home and work	✓				✓					
Fairness	Physical violence	✓				✓	✓				
	Bullying/harassment	✓				✓	✓				
	Discrimination	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓				
Outcomes of job quality	Physical well-being	✓	✓			✓	✓				
	Psychological well-being	✓				✓	✓				
	Absenteeism	✓				✓	✓				
	Job satisfaction	✓	✓			✓	✓		✓	✓	
	Engagement	✓				✓	✓				
	Commitment							(✓)			
	Turnover intentions							(✓)			

Note: The depiction for Davoine et al (2008) refers to their second taxonomy; checkmarks in parenthesis: not available in all three waves. Source: Own depiction.

Summing up, it can be stated that we are far from having a reasonably common concept of job quality. The existing studies on cross-national differences and trends refer to different dimensions of job quality, which is partially a result of subjective views but also a result of the choice of data and specific items. Thus the comparability of their findings is severely limited. In addition, different methodical approaches are undertaken to analyze cross-national differences and/or trends in job quality. This will be the subject-matter of the next section.

Analytical approaches

A glance at the literature reveals very different approaches to analyze cross-national differences and trends in job quality (Table 2). In the following we will give a short insight into these approaches and highlight some key findings. Further we will discuss main advantages and disadvantages associated with the several approaches.

Table 2: Approaches to analyze cross-national differences and trends in job quality

Approach	Authors
Analysis of discrete dimensions	Clark, 2005; 2010; Green, 2006; De Grip and Wolbers, 2006; Gallie, 2007a; 2007b; Smith et al., 2008; Peña-Casas and Pochet, 2009; Drobnič et al., 2010; Greenan et al., 2010; Olsen et al., 2010
Analysis of patterns on job level	Lorenz and Valeyre, 2005; Valeyre et al., 2009; Holman, 2013b
Analysis of patterns on country level	Davoine and Erhel, 2006; Davoine et al., 2008
Composite indices approaches	Anker et al., 2003; Bescond et al., 2003; Bonnet et al., 2003; Brisbois, 2003; Ghai, 2003; Avirgan et al., 2005; Commission, 2008; Leschke et al., 2008; Leschke and Watt, 2008; Tangian, 2007; 2009; Muñoz de Bustillo et al., 2011a; 2011b; Antón et al., 2012; Erhel et al., 2012; Leschke et al., 2012; Holman, 2013a

Source: Own depiction.

Analysis of discrete dimensions of job quality

A basic approach to analyze cross-national differences and trends in job quality is to look at discrete dimensions of job quality (e.g., autonomy, job security etc.) and describe the respective differences between countries as well as developments within countries or general trends. For example, Olsen et al. (2010) analyzed the cross-national differences and global trends in job quality based on the data of the ISSP from 1989, 1997, and 2005. They included four countries (USA, Great Britain, West Germany and Norway) and a wide range of job aspects in their analysis. Their results indicate that job security, the ability to work independently and the quality of physical working conditions and interpersonal relationships tend to be better in Norway and West Germany than in the USA and Great Britain. In contrast, advancement opportunities, the possibility to help others, utility to society and overall job satisfaction tend

to be higher in the USA. Olsen et al. (2010) also found evidence for convergence of job security, work intensity, working conditions and social relations. The convergence regarding job security and work intensity is strongest: There is a deterioration for all countries, and country differences have become smaller over time (except for Great Britain between 1997 and 2005).

This example shows that the analysis of single dimensions can provide detailed information on cross-national differences and trends regarding specific job aspects. This allows, for example, targeted intervention through policy makers. A disadvantage of such a kind of study is that an interrelation of the discrete dimensions of job quality might not be accounted for. Combined effects of separate aspects (e.g., a higher degree of autonomy together with a lower job security) are not considered. Thus, a comprehensive evaluation of overall job quality cannot be made. A further problematic aspect of such an approach is that it can attain a high degree of complexity. In case a large number of dimensions, time periods and countries are integrated into the analysis, the overall picture is likely to become fussy and general explanations become increasingly difficult. For example, Olsen et al. (2010) tried to link their results to institutional literature, namely the varieties of capitalism and the employment regime approach. However, the two approaches cannot fully explain their findings because the differences and developments are too heterogeneous.

Analysis of patterns on the job level

There are good theoretical reasons to assume that discrete dimensions of job quality are interrelated, forming either ‘good’ or ‘bad’ jobs (Kalleberg, 2011). For example, labor market segmentation theories assume that certain aspects of job quality connect, resulting in “particular sets of characteristics or governing rules” (Tilly, 1997: 269). Likewise, human resource management literature assumes that human resource practices are not used isolated but rather form distinct bundles or configurations (Lepak et al., 2006).

A comprehensive analysis in this direction was conducted by Holman (2013b). Using the fifth wave of the EWCS from 2005, Holman was able to develop a taxonomy of job types in Europe which does not only give insights into the interrelations of different job quality dimensions, but also the quality of these different job types and their prevalence in different institutional regimes. In detail, Holman (2013b) identified six job types: active jobs (characterized for instance by high levels of job discretion and social support); saturated jobs (similar to active jobs, but with higher demands such as longer working hours); team-based jobs (e.g., team-based work with high levels of autonomy); passive independent jobs (e.g., low work

intensity, few contacts with others, low intellectual and emotional demands); insecure jobs (e.g., non-permanent contract, low pay); and high-strain jobs (e.g., high work intensity, physical and ambient demands). He further showed that these job types differ in regards to job quality. Measured upon job satisfaction as well as psychological and physical well-being, active jobs are characterized by high job quality, saturated and team based jobs by moderate quality, passive jobs by low to moderate quality and insecure and high-strain jobs by low quality. Finally, he can show that the distribution of high- and low quality jobs across Europe is largely in line with the expectations based on the employment regime approach. Accordingly, the proportion of higher-quality jobs is highest in social democratic regimes (Denmark, Finland, Sweden). Continental regimes (e.g., Germany, Austria) have a higher proportion of higher-quality jobs than liberal regimes (UK, Ireland) and southern European regimes (e.g. Italy, Spain, Portugal). Liberal regimes have a higher proportion of higher-quality jobs than southern European regimes. However, the proportion of higher-quality jobs in transitional regimes (e.g., Czech Republic; Hungary) is not significantly different from that in continental and liberal regimes, but significantly higher than in southern European regimes.

An analysis of the interrelations between single job quality dimensions on the job level gives valuable insights into different forms of work organization, their distribution across countries and the related overall job quality. It also reduces complexity by analyzing and describing differences and trends on the aggregate job level. The relatively pronounced degree of abstraction, however, naturally limits the possibilities for detailed assessments, for example with respect to distribution and variance of single job quality dimensions within countries or their contribution to overall job quality.

Analysis of patterns on country level

The idea of interrelations between different job quality dimensions can also be transferred to a macroeconomic perspective. Institutional regimes may not only influence the prevalence of a single dimension of job quality (e.g., the degree of autonomy) but rather have an effect on the typical combination of work and employment conditions leading to “national employment systems” (Dobbin and Boychuk, 1999). The shaping of these national employment systems will affect job quality in a country.

Such an approach has been presented by Davoine et al. (2008) who sought to identify different national “models of job quality” in Europe. They used multiple sources with mainly macroeconomic indicators but also data from employees’ self-reports. Applying a principal components analysis, they showed that different job and labor market features covary. For exam-

ple, relatively bad working conditions (health at risk, long working days) tend to occur with a bad labor market performance (long-term unemployment; involuntary part time work). In contrast, high levels of mean wage, training, productivity and job satisfaction manifest simultaneously.

Through a subsequent cluster analysis, Davoine et al. (2008) identified four models of job quality across Europe. The northern cluster (e.g., Finland, Sweden and the UK) is characterized by high wages, good working conditions and high participation in training/education, but also by a comparatively high intensity at work. The continental cluster (e.g., Germany, France and Ireland) displays high wages and productivity, but average rates of training and education. The southern cluster (e.g., Italy, Spain and Portugal) is characterized by little employee involvement and narrow gender pay gaps. The cluster of the new member states (e.g., Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland and the Slovak Republic) is characterized by low socioeconomic security (low wages, high long-term unemployment) and bad working conditions (long working days, health risks), but the intensity of work is comparatively much lower compared to other clusters.

The findings of Davoine et al. (2008) highlight the interrelations of certain work and employment conditions on the country level which in turn influence job quality. However, the results are less clear because positive and negative features occur together (e.g., good working conditions but high intensity in the northern cluster). In general it seems promising to analyze the patterns on the country level in order to compare different settings of work and employment conditions and their effect on job quality within countries. Such an approach leads, however, to a loss of information because it is blind towards variety within countries.

Composite indices approaches

A further possibility to analyze cross-national differences and trends in job quality is to design an index of job quality which comprises various work and employment conditions. This has been done in many studies but up to now there is neither agreement about the dimensions to be used (see above) nor about the weight of each dimension (for an overview and discussion on various index approaches see Muñoz de Bustillo et al., 2011a). Accordingly, the results differ depending on the construction of the index.

In order to illustrate this, Table 3 presents the findings of three index approaches which all refer to data from the EWCS from 2005. The comparison shows some similarities: Overall job quality is highest in the northern countries together with the UK, Ireland, the Netherlands, Luxemburg and Belgium. Average values are mostly achieved in continental European coun-

tries, followed by southern European countries. Job quality is lowest in most of the eastern European countries. However, there are also some remarkable differences in the assessment of the overall job quality within the European Union. For example, Slovenia scores place 12 in the ranking of Leschke and Watt (2008), which is slightly above average of the EU27. In contrast, it is on the 24th out of 27 places in the ranking of Tangian (2009).

Table 3: Index approaches based on the EWCS 2005 data

	Leschke/Watt (2008)	Tangian (2009)	Muñoz de Bustillo et al. (2011)	Max. differ- ence in rank- ing places
Denmark	1	1	2	1
Netherlands	2	2	5	3
UK	3	4	3	1
Sweden	4	8	6	4
Finland	5	7	9	4
Luxemburg	6	6	1	5
Belgium	7	5	7	2
Ireland	8	3	4	4
Austria	9	9	10	1
Malta	10	12	15	5
France	11	17	8	6
Slovenia	12	24	17	12
Cyprus	13	11	13	2
Germany	14	10	11	4
Italy	15	18	12	3
Estonia	16	21	20	5
Czech Republic	17	23	19	6
Portugal	18	20	16	2
Latvia	19	15	24	5
Lithuania	20	26	25	6
Spain	21	13	14	8
Hungary	22	19	23	3
Slovakia	23	16	21	7
Bulgaria	24	14	26	10
Greece	25	27	18	7
Romania	26	22	27	4
Poland	27	25	22	5

Note: □ = top 20%; ◻ = upper 20 to upper 40 %; ◻ = middle 20 %; ◻ = lower 20 to 40 %; ◼ = lowest 20 %; Leschke and Watt (2008) used several other data sources beside the EWCS 2005 data. Source: Own depiction.

Index approaches can also be used to analyze developments within countries. For example Leschke, Watt and Finn (2012) analyzed developments between 2005 and 2010 and found a small decline in overall job quality between those years in the EU. Within this developments there are countries with pronounced deteriorations (Ireland, France, UK and Sweden), but also countries with an improvement in overall job quality (Poland, Czech Republic, Belgium and Denmark).

Index approaches aim to analyze cross-national differences and trends in job quality on a highly aggregated level. The results are rather accurate, because countries can be compared and positioned unambiguously according to their overall job quality. This, however, has to be bought with a loss of information on a less aggregated level. Thus, index approaches are rather negligent towards the specific differences in particular dimensions across and within countries. They provide little basis for targeted policy interventions at that level. Accordingly, authors who aim at constructing an overall job quality index often provide information on a less aggregated level. For example, Leschke and Watt (2008) also analyzed country profiles on the basis of sub-indices and revealed heterogeneity within and between countries. Leschke, Finn and Watt (2012) used the same sub-indices to show developments regarding specific job aspects. Further, based on the approach provided by Muñoz de Bustillo et al. (2011a), Antón et al. (2012) showed that overall job quality differs across sectors and occupations. Thus, differences in job quality do not only result from different work and employment conditions in the same type of job but also from the distribution of jobs within a country. Hence some (especially less developed) countries have a larger proportion of jobs that are bad everywhere so that overall job quality in these countries is worse.

Unaddressed issues and open questions

The subjective nature of job quality

Changes in some dimensions of work and employment conditions are directly related to changes in job quality. For example, when work becomes more dangerous, this directly affects job quality negatively. In other dimensions, observation of the subjective perception alone may not be sufficient because employees can have different demands regarding their workplace, and similar situations can then be evaluated differently. This concerns the question of workers' discretion, for example. Whereas some employees will readily accept the offer of more independence and responsibility because this corresponds with their interests, others may be unable to cope with such a situation. The same is true for job security because different groups of employees may have different demands regarding the security of their job. These examples illustrate that the assessment of job quality sometimes implies an evaluative perspective. Thereby, the match between workplace situation and work values is particularly relevant. Work values signify what people desire from work and serve as points of reference to assess working conditions (e.g., Dose, 1997; Ros et al., 1999; Bu and Mckeen, 2001).

Whether or not a job is considered “good” or “bad” may depend on the workplace situation *and* on individual work values at the same time.

For the question of cross-national differences and trends in job quality this evaluative perspective seems to be particularly necessary, since the values and views on occupation and work may differ substantially between countries (e.g., Kaasa, 2011). Further, work values seem to have fundamentally changed in the past few decades (Ester et al., 1994; Yankelovich et al., 1985). An integration of these issues into the future analysis of cross-national differences and trends in job quality poses some methodological problems (Muñoz de Bustillo et al., 2011a), but could certainly deepen our understanding of the nature of job quality.

Job quality as a relational concept

Closely related to the evaluative perspective on job quality is the question of the relative influence of single dimensions on job quality as a whole. This is a highly relevant issue for the analysis of cross-national differences and trends in job quality because the relative influence of different job aspects can be assumed to vary across countries and time. “Employment is embedded within an institutional and economic context: the characteristics of employment interact with the features of social systems in ways that can make similar employment characteristics have very different implications for the well-being of the worker in different countries” (Muñoz de Bustillo et al., 2011a: 69). Up to now, this issue has received little attention. Tangian (2009) and Drobnič et al. (2010) have shown that the effect of different job aspects on overall job satisfaction differs across countries. However, job satisfaction is just one outcome of job quality. Thus we still need to fully understand the relative influence of different dimensions of job quality.

Lack of sound theoretical explanations

Several studies on cross national differences refer to institutional theories, such as the varieties of capitalism and employment regime approaches, in order to explain country differences in job quality (e.g., Davoine et al. 2008; Gallie, 2007a; 2007b; Olsen et al., 2010), but so far none of the theoretical assumptions is fully supported. For example, Gallie (2007a) concluded from his findings that the varieties of capitalism approach helps little in explaining cross-national differences. In contrast, Olsen et al. (2010) found some support for the approach. The employment regime approach is supported by Gallie (2007a) and Holman (2013b) and to some extent by Olsen et al. (2010), but it has also been challenged. Davoine et al. (2008) found high work intensity in their northern cluster, which questions the assumptions of the

approach. Leschke and Watt (2008), Tangian (2007; 2009) and Muñoz de Bustillo et al. (2011a) stated that the northern countries, together with Ireland and the UK, have the highest job quality in Europe which also contradicts the approach.

The same applies for explanations of trends over time. It is often assumed that international markets force organizations and nations to adopt common logics (Gallie, 2007b). Indeed, there seem to be some general trends, as has been shown by Olsen et al. (2010), but there are also country specific developments which stand against the idea of an increasing convergence (e.g., Green, 2006; Greenan et al., 2010; Leschke et al., 2012; Peña-Casas and Pochet, 2009).

A further important avenue for future research is thus to better explain cross-national differences and trends in job quality. A promising approach in this direction seems to link the distribution of different job types to the socio-economic development of different countries (Antón et al., 2012). Also, we need more long-term oriented analyses to distinguish temporary within-category variations from actual convergence or divergence developments.

Conclusions

A major obstacle in comparing and integrating previous findings on cross-national differences and trends is the lack of a general concept of job quality. Existing studies address various aspects of job quality, yet there is no general agreement on the question of what job quality is and how it is constituted. Accordingly, the conclusions on cross-national differences and trends in job quality differ depending on the variables integrated in the analysis. Furthermore, there are several approaches to analyze cross-national differences and trends in job quality. Each of them has its merits but also weaknesses.

Our review revealed important implications for future research. First, we need a more comprehensive concept of job quality. Only then will we be able to better compare and integrate previous findings on cross-national differences and trends. Second, so far the evaluative character of job quality has largely been neglected. However, work values, respectively the match or mismatch between workplace situation and work values, could prove to be a key to understand cross national differences as well as the effects of potential shifts and transformations of workplace situations. Third, the relational character of job quality has also received little attention. The influence of a certain job aspect on job quality can differ across countries and across time. Therefore, it is necessary to further determine the roles of specific aspects or variables for job quality as a whole. Fourth, we need to better understand why countries differ

in their level of job quality and how job quality changes over time. Therefore theoretical advances are necessary to conceptually frame and explain differences, shifts and continuity.

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