Job Quality in the European Policy Debate: Conceptual and Methodological Considerations

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Job Quality in the European Policy Debate: Conceptual and Methodological Considerations

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ABSTRACT

Job quality is the precondition for achieving welfare policy goals of social inclusion, as well as the foundation of functioning social security systems. In recent decades, both the academic and institutional literature has emphasised its importance, yet both European Union (EU) and national employment policies continue to address the quantity rather than the quality of jobs. This article explores the reasons for which job quality and related concepts have been side-tracked in the current EU employment and social policy process. Our analysis attempts to generate clearer parameters for understanding and measuring what constitutes a good quality job, so that such measurements can effectively guide policy formulation and comparative analysis. We argue that what is needed for placing concerns about job quality high on the EU policy agenda is methodological, conceptual and theoretical clarity in defining what job quality is and from whose perspective it should be assessed.

KEYWORDS: comparative policy analysis, job quality, quality of employment, social policy, European Union.
“This contract governs your engagement from time to time by [Name of Employer] (Company) as a casual worker. This is not an employment contract and does not confer any employment rights on you (other than those to which workers are entitled). In particular, it does not create any obligation on the Company to provide work for you and by entering into this contract you confirm your understanding that the Company makes no promise or guarantee of a minimal level of work to you and you will work on a flexible, “as required” basis. It is the intention of both you and the Company that there be no mutuality of obligation between the parties at any time when you are not performing an assignment.”

INTRODUCTION

When potential employment contracts in the European Union (EU) are prefaced by a paragraph such as the one cited above, the quality of jobs must surely jump onto the list of top priorities of the EU’s social and employment policy agenda. During the last two decades an increasing amount of academic and public policy attention has focused on different aspects of the quality of employment, especially since the International Labour Organisation (ILO) launched the concept of ‘Decent Work’ in 1999. The post-2008 recession, followed by economic stagnation and imposed cuts in public spending across most European countries, in conjunction with widespread changes in workplaces, work organisation and working conditions, render the analysis of qualitative features of jobs ever more pressing. As the dual processes of globalisation and liberalisation have generated continuous calls for more flexible labour markets, employment conditions such as wages, job stability and career prospects have diverged, exacerbating differences between jobs. Yet although ‘more and better jobs’ has been a catchphrase of European social policy since the Lisbon summit in 2000, both European Union (EU) institutions and individual governments continued to be concerned more with the quantity of jobs - as measured by the rate of unemployment, or the rate of participation in the labour market, than the quality of available positions (Muñoz de Bustillo et al., 2011; OECD, 2014). Increasing the employment rate

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1 Introductory paragraph governing the “Status of this Agreement” from the template of a zero hours contract downloadable from www.simplybusiness.co.uk, which has partnered with Clarkslegal LLP to provide templates of employment contracts that can be used by UK businesses. Downloaded from: https://www.simplybusiness.co.uk/media/legal-documents/downloads/pdf/zero-hours-contract-template-free-download.pdf (27th November, 2018).
has become the central policy orientation, expected to achieve both social and economic goals.

Nevertheless, as argued by Gallie (2002), the objective of mobilising more people into paid work can at best be only a partial solution to social policy goals. It is the quality, not just quantity, of jobs that determines to which extent employment will remedy, for instance, social exclusion or poverty. Moreover, the sustainability of social policy is contingent on job quality as lower or interrupted contributions to social protection systems limit future benefits (Myles, 2002), or increase the need for state subsidies for low wage work (Rubery, 2011). Furthermore, the effectiveness and take-up of certain welfare measures, such as those targeted at working parents, are found to be positively related with recipients’ job quality, and are therefore regressive (Dean and Shah, 2002; Piasna and Plagnol, 2015).

The effectiveness of employment policy schemes cannot be usefully analysed without attention to the quality of jobs created (Taylor-Gooby et al., 2015). Thus, if both economic and social goals are equal objectives in the policy-making process, there is a strong case for constructing indicators that can guide policy in both areas. However, progress towards articulating job quality in social policy, not only in terms of overarching principles but also concrete actions, has been slow (see Burchell et al., 2014 for a discussion).

One important impediment has been the difficulty of reconciling contradictory interests that influence the policy debate on the quality of employment. The ILO, the EU, and (to a lesser extent) the OECD have had to take into account the conflicting interests of different social actors (employers, unions, and governments), as well as the policy recommendations of experts advocating for the quantity and/or the quality of jobs. Thus, recommendations to flexibilise labour markets, for example, through the increased use of short-term contracts or diminished protection for permanent employment, clash with recommendations to prevent the overuse of precarious forms of hiring (e.g. European Commission and Council, 2015; ETUC et al., 2015). These often contradictory and conflicting points of view influence policy debates, and spill over into the definitions and methodologies used to measure the quality of jobs. Unrelated variables are therefore often included in definitions, as discussed below.

Another impediment in policy formulation has been the conceptual confusion and the lack of agreement about what exactly constitutes job quality. Theoretical attempts to conceptualise job quality have been diffuse, thus limiting their academic and political impact. Institutional initiatives in this area have not seen much success either due to the combined effects of political pressures and a lack of agreement on definitions of the quality of
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employment. As Sehnbruch et al. (2015) argue, the overall impact that the concepts ‘job quality’ or ‘Decent Work’ have had on both research and public policy is extremely limited compared to the influence achieved, for example, by synthetic indicators such as the Human Development Index (HDI), published by the United Nations Development Programme, which is a summary measure of life expectancy, education and standard of living, and which has made substantial progress towards shifting the policy focus from economic growth to people and their capabilities.

The purpose of this paper is to review the job quality and related concepts in the context of the current policy debate within the EU with the objective of generating clearer parameters for understanding what constitutes good quality jobs and the possibility of quantifying their features. Placing concerns about job quality high on the policy agenda has a much better chance of success if globally relevant operationalisations suitable for cross-national comparisons are developed. The arguments in this article are broken down into two main sections. The following section summarises the academic debate on what constitutes a good job that originates in the ‘quality of working life’ concepts of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as various institutional initiatives to measure job quality. This in turn spills over into methodological discussions of measurement, including shortcomings of existing measures of the quality of employment and their potential to guide international policy. In section 2 we develop a conceptual framework that defines different levels of analysis which can be applied to employment and labour markets to help establish what job quality essentially should include. We argue that the focus on a job as the unit of analysis and assessment of its value from a worker’s perspective introduces much needed accuracy and simplicity. This is vital for the development of job quality framework appropriate for guiding social policy formulation and its comparative analysis.

1. Review of different approaches to measuring qualitative aspects of jobs

1.1 Academic origins of the debate

First steps towards the development of ‘quality of working life’ concepts and measurements can be traced back to the late 1960s and 1970s. They originated in the context of the ‘quality of life’ approach, which challenged attempts to quantify living conditions on the basis of economic dimensions - such as GDP or unemployment - alone and thus came to be seen as promising a better grasp of the human meaning and consequences of major social and technological changes (Land, 1975). This perspective, emerging in the mid-1960s in the United States and often referred to as the ‘Social Indicators Movement’, gained significant scientific influence (Noll, 2004). The launch of
the movement was marked by the publication of Bauer’s edited volume *Social Indicators* (1966) which advocated the development of a system of social accounts suitable for guiding policy decisions. However, despite a number of excellent company- or occupational-level case studies, the ‘quality of (working) life’ research was deficient in the types of data and methodology required to produce measurements amenable to international comparisons.

One of the first ways in which the academic literature then approached the question of what constitutes a ‘good job’ was by focusing on non-pecuniary aspects of work and on workers’ subjective perceptions of their jobs (Staines and Quinn, 1979; Yoshida and Torihara, 1977). Davis (1977) envisioned the quality of working life as an array of traditional individual aspirations combined with new ones reflecting the entry into the post-industrial era. Seashore (1974) and Land (1975) defined good jobs as those possessing attributes or consequences which are valued by the worker and are thus conducive to job satisfaction. Wnuk-Lipinski (1977) subsequently argued that job satisfaction is a vital component of quality of life and thus an end in itself. On the basis of this perspective, a number of criteria for assessing the quality of work were devised, encompassing both general measurements of job satisfaction and specific measurements of workers’ contentment with an array of job facets (Kalleberg and Vaisey, 2005; Krueger et al., 2002; Land, 1975; Staines and Quinn, 1979).

Even though no consensus has ever been reached as to what constitutes a good job, a range of primarily psychological theories identify ‘objective’ features linked to workers’ well-being at work and which should thus be taken into account (Warr, 1987; Burchell, 1992). For instance, occupational psychologists, following in the footsteps of ergonomists, focused on the determinants of subjective well-being and productivity at the level of task characteristics, including variety, challenge, meaningful nature of the work performed, autonomy and team work (Hackman and Oldham, 1975). Karasek and Theorell (1990) focused on psychological stress and proposed a ‘job-strain model’ based on a balance between job control and demands. Another notable approach to measuring job quality was proposed by Jencks et al. (1988) whose ‘index of job desirability’ included objective features contributing to job quality, ranked according to workers’ assessment of their relative contribution. Within the scope of these early studies, specialist surveys of some aspects of job quality were undertaken, and psychometric techniques were used to predict worker well-being, motivation or productivity. Predominantly, however, the focus of these studies was firm specific rather than comparative, being aimed at achieving improvements in individual workplaces. Additionally, the subjective component in the
measurement proved problematic for cross-national analysis and inappropriate for the role of policy levers.

1.2 Institutional and policy proposals

Aside from the academic research described above, theoretical efforts to conceptualise the quality of employment were also undertaken within the institutional settings of large international organisations. Arguably the pioneering and most important example of this is the decent work concept, which was launched and declared an institutional priority by the ILO in 1999. The concept was devised following the increased importance taken on by aspects of the quality of employment during the 1980s and 1990s as a result of the visible impact of globalisation and market liberalisation on employment conditions. Juan Somavía, the Director-General of the ILO at that time, gave expression to this priority when he stated that ‘the primary goal of the ILO today is to promote opportunities for women and men to obtain decent work and productive work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and dignity’ (ILO, 1999). This definition was formulated in a deliberately broad manner that took into account the priorities of the ILO’s tripartite constituency: governments, employers and unions. The immediate question that arose from this all-encompassing definition based on the rights and entitlements of workers was how the approach could be operationalised, a question which remains largely unresolved.

Almost in parallel to the ILO’s launch of decent work, the EU institutions began to focus more explicitly on the quality of jobs. Promotion of good working conditions and provision of social security have long been core elements of the European social model and a basis of democratic welfare states. However, not until the Lisbon Treaty of 2000 did the quality of work become institutionalised as one of the EU’s employment policy objectives, with the goal of achieving ‘sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs’. Despite the conceptual weakness of the job quality dimension in the Lisbon strategy, the European Council meeting in Laeken in 2001 agreed on a portfolio of 10 dimensions encompassing 25 statistical indicators to monitor the progress towards the goals set in Lisbon (European Parliament, 2009). These indicators were presented at the time as a political breakthrough (EUROPA, 2001), yet their impact (whether on statistical measurements of European labour markets or on actual employment policy), even within European institutions, has been negligible.

Various subsequent initiatives to improve the Laeken proposal sought to incorporate missing yet crucial dimensions of job quality (such as wages or work intensity) and propose alternative indicators of job quality (e.g.
European Commission, 2008). However, many of the initial weaknesses remained, resulting in a disorganized aggregation of variables describing jobs, individual attitudes, policies, participation rates and various forms of distributional inequalities. Furthermore, the issue of quality for whom remained unresolved. Different actors involved in the process of articulating job quality within the EU employment debate represented divergent views on what constitutes desired aspects of jobs, with wages and non-standard contracts being among the most contentious issues.

Nevertheless, the efforts to measure job quality at the EU level continued. In 2000, institutions with close links to the European Union launched a series of seminars as the Joint UNECE/ILO/Eurostat task force. Its aim was to create a comprehensive framework for the comparative measurement of the quality of employment, bringing together elements of the ILO's decent work and of the EU's quality of work concepts and policy initiatives (UNECE/ILO/Eurostat, 2007). This initiative was based on the highly accurate diagnosis of the outstanding need for a single, coherent framework within which statistics on quality of employment can be developed and organized. The process leading to a publication of a statistical framework for measuring the quality of employment took 15 years (UNECE, 2015), demonstrating how difficult reaching a compromise between the institutional actors and policy agendas can be. This framework has been developed as a statistical toolbox, and not a monitoring tool linked to any particular policy, providing measures on a very broad range of job, employment or social protection features. Authors themselves emphasise that the framework does not make value judgments about what is considered “high quality” or “low quality” employment. Moreover, a toolbox character precludes any international policy lever, as countries are free to pick and choose items that they find relevant based on their requirements and according to the current political needs. Thus, each country can come up with its own measurement of job or employment quality, potentially subject to change over time and susceptible to a policy climate.

Another much-anticipated proposal came from the EU’s Employment Committee (EMCO) Indicators Group, which conceptualises job quality on four dimensions, subdivided into 10 further sub-dimensions with 55 indicators (European Commission, 2014b). However, some of its weaknesses are manifest and cast doubts on whether it will make any discernible policy impact. For instance, several indicators refer to the population at large (e.g. early leavers from education), people not in employment altogether (e.g. inactivity due to family responsibilities) or social services (e.g. childcare coverage). Furthermore, features of jobs (e.g. temporary employment) are confounded with labour market dynamics and levels of segmentation (e.g. labour
transitions from temporary to permanent employment), as well as with workers’ characteristics (e.g. educational attainment, computer skills). Overall, a focus is largely shifted from assessing working conditions of a particular job to the flexibility of the labour market, the quality of labour supply or the social infrastructure that enables workers with caring responsibilities to join the labour market actively.

More recently, the OECD, with the financial assistance of the European Union and as a part of an on-going collaboration in this area, has put forward a proposal for measuring and assessing job quality based on three dimensions (earnings, labour market security and quality of the working environment) which are further divided into two sub-dimensions each, and summarised as a dashboard (i.e. multiple indicators) rather than as a single synthetic indicator (OECD, 2014). The simplicity in terms of dimensions of this initiative is a welcome step forward in the measurement of job quality, but as it creates a dashboard of indicators its results are not easy to interpret because they group countries together according to their performance rather than producing a ranking. We can therefore identify which countries are in the group of good, median or bad performers, but we cannot see by how much they differ from each other. Finally, breaking down this dashboard of indicators into dimensions such as gender, age group, ethnic composition or other sub-groups would make the dashboard even more difficult to interpret.

The main weakness of the aforementioned institutional initiatives is, however, the lack of a coherent theoretical framework that informs the selection of items used to compute an index and allows their meaningful interpretation. The selection is driven instead by pre-existing policy objectives and availability of data rather than by any explicit reference to social or economic theories such as those advocated in Green (2006) or Sehnbruch et al. (2015). Many key dimensions of work quality thus tend to be omitted, for political or practical rather than for conceptual reasons. The complexity, lack of transparency and flexibility in accommodating many of the proposed thematic indicators are partly to blame for the limited impact of these initiatives, whether as an advocacy tool or in the academic debate (Ward, 2004; Hoffmann and Dooren, 2015).

Many of the weaknesses of the initiatives within the EU institutions, as well as the ILO and the OECD, have been overcome by independent academic efforts, largely emerging with the support of the information provided by large scale surveys, such as the European Working Conditions Survey (EWCS) carried out by the Eurofound, the European Social Survey and the European Labour Force Survey. Prominent examples include the job quality index developed by Green and Mostafa (Eurofound, 2012), the ETUI Job Quality
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Index (Leschke et al., 2012), as well as various specifications largely based on the EWCS data (e.g. Holman, 2013; Muñoz de Bustillo et al., 2011).

These proposals not only facilitated statistical comparisons of national labour markets; they also provided a fertile environment for rapid theoretical developments in the understanding of the drivers of job quality. While they stimulated policy debate on job quality also within EU institutions, including direct exchanges between researchers and representatives of EU bodies such as EMCO or the European Commission’s DG for Employment, Social Affairs & Inclusion, little perceptible impact on actual policy development can be found.

A failure of job quality indicators to feed into the policy process is manifest, for instance, in the EU Employment Guidelines and their impact on policy formulation. In 2010, one of the Guidelines explicitly argued for ‘Increasing labour market participation of women and men, reducing structural unemployment and promoting job quality’ (emphasis added)’ (European Commission, 2010). However, since the only concrete and measurable target included in the guideline was the employment rate, job quality was not even mentioned in the annual evaluation of the implementation of these guidelines across the EU member states (European Commission, 2013 and 2014a).

In the following Guidelines published in 2015, quality of employment was referred to by listing its broad dimensions, largely overlapping with the EMCO indicators, with the recommendation that it ‘should be ensured in terms of socio-economic security, education and training opportunities, working conditions (including health and safety) and work-life balance’ (European Commission, 2015: 3). However, a lack of specific targets or measures to be applied with the aim of boosting employment quality allowed for reproduction of an earlier bias towards quantity of jobs and employers’ perspective in policy formulation and evaluation based on these Guidelines. In particular, the evaluation of the employment quality Guideline was limited to the quantification of labour market segmentation through the share of temporary employment and transition rates from temporary to permanent jobs, while stressing the costs for employers associated with employment protection (European Commission, 2016: 52-56). Accordingly, policy responses across Member States that were positively evaluated included ‘streamlining’ employment protection legislation, mainly by easing individual dismissals. As this translates into less job security for workers, it arguably has a negative impact on job quality rather than promoting it. Attention to the quality of working time boiled down to the policies towards increased flexibility to allow economic adjustments and to improve cost-competitiveness (European Commission, 2016: 60-61).
Furthermore, the difficulty of building effective policy measures based on the existing framework for job quality stems from tensions between different perspectives - those of a worker, an employer or economic efficiency. The extent to which various actors take differing views on job quality is reflected in their use of diverse measurements, with productivity and flexibility emphasised by employers, sustainability of public finances stressed by governments, and job stability and collective bargaining being a priority for trade unions (see discussion in Freistein, 2016).

While the bulk of the tension is due to the political struggle between various policy actors, or pro-regulation and de-regulatory coalitions (Mailand and Arnholtz, 2015), much of it is due to a conceptual deficiency in definition and measurement of job quality. Many examples can be found among country-specific policy recommendations (CSRs), the tailored policy guidance to EU Member States under the European Semester, issued by the European Commission and Council (see review in Clauwaert, 2016), such as the very vague stance on non-standard employment contracts, which are commonly regarded as indicative of poor job quality (e.g. Eurofound, 2012; Muñoz de Bustillo et al., 2011). Despite this, Lithuania in 2011 was advised to “Enhance labour market flexibility by amending its labour legislation to make it more flexible and to allow a better use of fixed-term contracts”, while Poland in 2015 was given the contradictory advice that permanent employment is burdensome, costly and not attractive for employers, but that a high proportion of non-standard and weakly protected contracts may reduce the quality of available employment (European Commission and Council, 2015). Similar inconsistencies can be found with respect to wages, another important dimension of job quality. In particular, in the CSRs for Bulgaria in 2015 and Latvia in 2016, the recommended direction for policy was wage moderation, with wage increases evaluated as distortive for the labour markets and harmful for competitiveness. At the same time, both countries were warned about high levels of poverty.

Another illustration of the weaknesses created by the complexity of measurement and a lack of clarity about the subject of analysis can be found in the Employment and Social Developments in Europe (ESDE) report (European Commission, 2014b). It explores developments in various job quality indicators, which are largely similar to the Eurofound or ETUI indices, but policy conclusions formulated in the report do not seem to take the analysis into account. There is also a confusion in the ESDE as to whether increasing work intensity, one of the dimensions of job quality, is to be deplored as a negative development for workers’ well-being or applauded as means for achieving higher productivity (European Commission, 2014b: 145-6).
2. Towards a policy-oriented framework for the comparative measurement of job quality

From the plethora of variables and methods discussed in the previous sections, the question arises of how to whittle them down to a more manageable framework that is policy oriented. To this end, in this section we distinguish between different levels of measurement that must be taken into account in framing the job quality debate. We consider subjective and objective dimensions of the concept, and distinguish between the different perspectives that the subject can be approached from.

2.1 Subjective and objective measurements

The development of a measurement of overall job quality based on subjective evaluations such as job satisfaction proved problematic and was not without its critics for, depending on workers’ preferences and expectations, similar job characteristics may indeed be valued quite differently (Taylor, 1977). Davis (1977) claimed that the widely differing and contradictory meanings attributed to job quality by various groups of workers are to blame for the lack of agreement on how to define the quality of work. In a similar vein, Agassi (1982) argued convincingly that the measure of job satisfaction is the relationship between the quality of an employee’s current job and the same employee’s notions of what might reasonably be expected of a job. Insofar as expectations vary considerably between countries, it will often turn out that a developed country may have lower aggregate job satisfaction than a developing one (i.e. adaptive preferences may reduce or eliminate variation between countries). Analysis based on the International Social Survey Programme, for example, shows that a broad range of countries shows remarkably homogeneous indicators of job satisfaction (Muñoz de Bustillo et al., 2011:10).

The same question of adaptive preferences may explain why some less advantaged groups of workers (e.g. women) display higher satisfaction levels than others enjoying objectively better working conditions. More advantaged workers might also expect more, in terms of personal satisfaction, from their jobs (Muñoz de Bustillo et al., 2011), while those in less favourable employment conditions may display a tendency to adapt to circumstances (Comin and Teschl, 2005; Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999). Whilst this is an interesting psychological phenomenon, it renders measurements of job satisfaction completely unsuitable for comparative research on job quality and as a basis for policy formulation.

Furthermore, while indicators like life expectancy or literacy can really only be improved by better health and education, there are, in principle, two
ways to improve job satisfaction: either by changing employment conditions, or by changing workers’ perceptions of these conditions. Job satisfaction, in other words, can be increased either by improving jobs or by lowering employees’ expectations. As the latter approach is likely to prove cheaper and easier than the former, job satisfaction measurements are in fact poor policy levers.

It should be pointed out that there is considerable confusion with regard to the way in which the terms ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ are applied, more generally, to debates concerning the quality of life and well-being and, more specifically, to job quality. According to Veenhoven (2002), ‘subjective’ is usually taken to mean not only self-reported, but also pertaining to an attitude or psychological disposition towards an attribute, such as ‘life satisfaction’. ‘Objective’ is taken to refer to the measurement of ‘hard facts’ such as longevity or weekly hours of employment. Thus, self-reported measurement does not necessarily fall into the ‘subjective’ category. Moreover, for many ‘objective’ things that could be measured by other means - for instance weekly hours of employment - self-reporting is the method most frequently used. However, we argue that a distinction that is more central to the development of job quality measurement is not whether we measure something by self-report or by other means, but rather whether we are interested in the reality and actual features of jobs, as opposed to individuals’ attitudes, opinions or evaluations concerning their jobs, such as their job satisfaction. Job quality indices can be most effective in social policy analysis and formulation when their focus is clear, and when they take a job as the unit of analysis.

2.2 Levels of analysis

The overview of the job quality literature described earlier reveals the extent to which multiple and relatively diffuse concepts have developed in parallel. The terminology used creates additional confusion: expressions such as ‘quality of working life’ (predominantly linked to subjective evaluations of one’s job), ‘job quality’ or ‘quality of work’ (often focusing on the job content and work environment), and finally ‘quality of employment’ (usually also including a broader overview of labour relations, policies, participation or equality in income and job distributions) are often used interchangeably and without clear definitions. This inconsistency reflects the complexity of the concept. There are not only multiple facets of jobs that should be taken into account, but also multiple levels on which jobs can be analysed, ranging from a subjective evaluation of a particular working environment to broad labour market systems in which jobs are performed.
The theoretical and conceptual confusions have led to a significant additional problem, which is a failure to distinguish between different levels that are relevant to the labour market analysis. This is particularly the case of efforts that have covered a greater number of employment characteristics as a result of the political struggle between actors with divergent interests and a result of political compromises. Specifically, they mix up characteristics of individual workers, jobs themselves, the regulatory environment, or the labour market as a whole. Such approaches that preclude operationalisation at the level of the individual job limit the comparability across groups of workers, countries and over time. They also hinder the formulation of concrete policy measures as the scope of interest is simply too broad and may even generate conflicting recommendations, as demonstrated by the EU country-specific recommendations discussed earlier.

Therefore, one of the unresolved issues in the literature on the quality of employment involves deciding what types of information should be included in measures of job quality. At the simplest and most individualistic level, some models only consider the attitudes of individuals (e.g. their job satisfaction) and ignore details of the job itself or the context of the job. At the other extreme, some models are concerned more with the macro-level context of jobs such as the level of legal protection of workers provided by the state, types of welfare systems that reduce the costs of job loss, and the economic conditions that account for the risk of job loss and unemployment. The most extreme case of methodology that mixes up different levels of analysis is the ILO's decent work approach. Some aspects of decent work are aimed at the individual worker (e.g. child labour and forced labour), some at the work environment (e.g. health and safety), and some at the aggregate level (e.g. social protection).

To better illustrate how job quality can be positioned within a broader labour market context and where to draw a line between other indicators of employment, we develop a simple but useful framework for analysis in the table below.
**TABLE 1. Levels of Analysis in the Measurement of Job Quality**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels of analysis</th>
<th>Examples of measurements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Workers</td>
<td>Age, child labour, forced labour, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic origin, level of education, skills, job satisfaction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobs</td>
<td>Health and safety, ergonomic and ambient features of the work environment, accident rates, employment contract, job security, autonomy, working time arrangements, work intensity, wages.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal framework</td>
<td>Right to unionisation, employment protection legislation, antidiscrimination legislation, equal opportunity legislation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare policy</td>
<td>Pensions, unemployment and health insurance, active labour market policies, childcare services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural features of the labour market</td>
<td>Unemployment and participation rates, transition rates between labour market statuses or employment contracts, vacancy rates, unionisation rates, macroeconomic environment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Workers**

Much attention in some measures of quality of employment is paid to workers rather than jobs. Some people should not be working at all, such as young children, or people forced to work against their will, and the eradication of child and slave labour have been a priority for international development organisations such as the ILO. They are also quite correctly concerned about discrimination in labour markets, which can exclude groups of workers from jobs by virtue of their age, gender, sexual orientation or ethnic group. We might also be interested in the workers’ internal mental states, such as their happiness or job satisfaction. However, from the perspective of an analytical framework, these dimensions should be considered as an important but distinct set off actors that impinge on labour market outcomes.

**Jobs**

Jobs are at the core of our job quality model. However, note that we are not interested in what workers think of the job. They might think that their job is of high quality because of limited knowledge of alternatives or low expectations. Thus the role of a job quality measurement is to ascertain the true or objective quality of a job. This is complicated by the fact that, as discussed earlier, the most feasible way to measure job quality is through self-report of the job-holder, which is subject to bias. However, the important thing is to ask about ‘objective’ features of the job, such as specific ergonomic and ambient features of the working environment, not how
satisfied the jobholder is with these elements. We would naturally expect some correlation between the quality of a job and the job satisfaction of the holder, but ontologically they are distinct.

**Legal framework**

The quality of employment is dependent on the national legal framework. Therefore, a comprehensive model of quality of employment needs to take account of legislation such as employment protection legislation, laws against gender and racial discrimination in hiring, and health and safety protection. National legal systems can achieve the same ends by very different means, thus it is inherently complex to make quantitative comparisons between legal systems. Nevertheless, indices of labour market legislation have been created for this purpose and are used in debates on the importance or otherwise of employment protection legislations in creating efficient and fair labour markets (see Rubery, 2011 for a critique). Furthermore, without inspection and enforcement, labour market legislation is likely to be ineffectual. Thus the accessibility of legal redress to employees is also important. In some countries the courts are the main enforcers of legislation, in others this might be done by trade unions or labour inspectors.

**Welfare policy**

When employees lose their jobs they need to be assisted in times of unemployment to give them an income that at least partially substitutes lost wages. When they retire, they need a pension. Many countries operate active labour market policies to assist employees back into work through mentoring and training. Some employees will also need welfare policies to help them retain jobs, such as parents of young children needing parental leave provisions to remain in employment. In addition, welfare policies can be used to support low-income earners through such mechanisms as minimum wage setting or income tax credits, while affordable childcare can assist individuals and families through the lifecycle (with the reciprocal provision of welfare and social support by families, see House and Kahn, 1985).

**Structural features of the labour market**

We can further situate jobs in the context of the supply and demand in a labour market through measures such as the rates of unemployment, participation rate or the pattern of job vacancies. Without the dynamic systems to continuously generate and allocate jobs, whole segments of the population could be excluded from access to good quality jobs, or from the labour market altogether. Industrial organisation and labour market composition can impact the career structures of individuals, thus influencing the access to good or bad jobs over their life course and over the course of the economic cycle. The distribution and access to good quality jobs is crucial
in describing the conditions of labour markets; it does not, however, affect the evaluation of certain features of jobs. A well-paid, secure job in a safe environment and without long or unsocial hours can be assessed positively irrespective of the wider socio-economic structure in which it is performed.

The model sketched above introduces a much-needed conceptual clarity to the debate about job quality and its measurement. By distinguishing a job from its holder and from a wider environment in which it is performed, including labour market policies, social provision and structural factors, we can achieve a more focused subject of study. This way we can arrive at an indicator, or a concise set of indicators, that overcomes the difficulty of quantifying the contribution of a certain job to wider societal goals of equality, freedom or development. While particularities of national labour markets are important in understanding how progress towards better quality employment can be achieved, they do not negate the importance of the quality of a job.

Limiting the analysis to ‘a job’ while putting aside other possible levels--such as workers, labour markets, legal frameworks or welfare policies--has several clear advantages. First, it is simpler - and once the analysis has been done adequately at that level, then other levels of analysis can be added, such as the welfare state and legal regulation of labour markets. More importantly, this allows for evaluating the effects of social polices without precluding that their outcomes might be different than expected or disentangle conflicting outcomes of various welfare interventions. Second, by focusing the analysis on jobs, any groups can be compared, such as men and women or indigenous and migrant workers, whether locally, regionally or nationally. Third, to analyse labour markets at this level requires only one type of data, easily collected by surveys of employees, making international comparisons relatively straightforward. Finally, it clearly illustrates that each level requires different policy responses and that policy measures which address any other aspect of labour market functioning (e.g. the employment rate) do not necessarily benefit job quality. For instance, policies aimed at mobilising and up skilling the workforce can be associated with higher employment rates yet may fail to improve job quality (e.g. Taylor-Gooby et al., 2015), even if they have been intended to achieve both social and economic goals.

Like all frameworks, this model has its limitations. One shortcoming is that it treats the employee in an individualistic way, whereas in reality workers are embedded in a family and a community. The important point is that, as the OECD’s (2011) report emphasises, most aspects of job quality have direct implications for the family of the worker. But the most obvious way in which the job affects the quality of family life is through work-life
balance, which becomes more difficult to achieve for low quality jobs, for instance involving unsocial and irregular hours or with little job security (Lyonette and Clark, 2009). And, as Giele (1996) points out, the relationship between employment and family is complex and contested, with the employer also benefitting from the support given to the employee by the family. A similar point could be made for the worker’s community (Kamerade, 2009) or natural environment.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has considered reasons for the lack of effective progress observed thus far in the development of job quality indicators capable of guiding European social and employment policies. We examined how different levels of measurement in schemes of job quality, both academic and institutional, have been mixed together contributing to methodological, conceptual and theoretical confusion about what job quality actually is and from whose perspective it should be considered. We argue that in order to integrate job quality analysis better into a comparative social policy framework, it is necessary to carefully define and consider what the relevant dimensions of job quality are, on which level the analysis should focus and ensure that these choices are consistently applied in the analysis and cross-national comparisons.

The review of academic research and institutional initiatives reveals that the very limited progress in articulating job quality in public policy is linked to the conceptual confusion around what should be included in the analysis. Such lack of clarity in conceptualising job quality hindered progress toward elaboration of a sound and composite measure. The institutional proposal of decent work, but also the quality of employment framework elaborated within the EU, faced additional barriers. The tripartite organisation and involvement of employers and country representatives into the process of defining job quality, showed how difficult any compromise can be. Moreover, without clear demarcations between what constitutes a ‘good job’ and what represents a ‘good labour market’ or social policy, it is difficult to arrive at a set of job characteristics that are desirable irrespective of a context. As a result, the decent work proposal renounced some of its potential cross-national impact by emphasising the importance of specific circumstances of individual countries in assessing the status of each national labour market on decent work and progress they have made over time. The ILO effectively recognised the difficulty of using its decent work initiative in this way, and after several false starts, it openly discouraged any attempts to compute a composite index of decent work after 2008 (ILO, 2008).
The scarcity of measurement tools comes from two important steps: deciding what to measure and deciding how to measure it. In this paper, we argue that the idea of measuring quality faltered at the first hurdle, as there was conceptual confusion over what to measure: approaches that included a broad range of variables ranging from the micro- and macro-economic to demographic and attitudinal variables (e.g. including job satisfaction) were bound to fail. In addition, tension between different policy interests, which at the EU level include macro-economic and sectoral policymakers (e.g. social and employment directorates), influenced not only the selection of variables for measuring job quality, but also their normative interpretation, as was illustrated in this paper by the contradictory advice given to some countries with regard to labour market flexibility, on the one hand, and employment protection policies, on the other. As we argue here, these contradictory perspectives can be addressed with by clearly focussing on the job as the unit of analysis. Then, developing universally applicable, reliable and valid measures, which focus on asking workers about specific features of their jobs, can follow.

Thus, we argue that what is needed is conceptual clarity in defining the object of study, the definition of boundaries that delineate what job quality is (and what it is not), as well as from whose perspective it should be considered. Moreover, initiatives to measure job quality have a much greater chance of guiding common policy formulations if they originate directly from within the EU policy-making bodies. Only with advances on these fronts will we be able to focus necessary attention on the improvement of people's working lives that could parallel the attention that the human development indicators directed towards human development.
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NOTES

1. The seven main dimensions include: Safety and ethics of employment; Income and benefits from employment; Working time and work-life balance; Security of employment and social protection; Social dialogue; Skills development and training; and Employment-related relationships and work motivation.

2. The ILO’s country reports on decent work undertake a similar exercise of evaluating employment conditions with a plethora of different indicators that are difficult to interpret and that are not comparable across countries (see discussion in Sehnbruch et al., 2015).
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