


Please cite the Published Version

Christie, Fiona  (2020) Book review: The importance of work in an age of uncertainty: the eroding work experience in America. Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling, 44 (1). pp. 64-65. ISSN 1472-6564

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20856/jnicec.4410>

Publisher: NICEC

Version: Published Version

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Book reviews

The importance of work in an age of uncertainty: The eroding work experience in America. D.L. Blustein, New York. Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. 264, £22.99 (Hardback), ISBN: 9780190213701

Reviewed by Fiona Christie, Fellow of NICEC and researcher at the Decent Work and Productivity Research Centre, Manchester Metropolitan University, f.christie@mmu.ac.uk

The 'Importance of work' is an academic monograph that blends reflections on existing scholarship about work together with reporting on findings from a large, longitudinal research project about working lives in the United States. It is written in an accessible, engaging and personal way so would attract policymakers and practitioners, not just academic readers. Blustein pulls together threads from his life's work of both academic research as well as practice in counselling psychology and career development. It packs a punch in its tone and content.

The book is about work in the United States but has relevance beyond that nation as it raises important points about work across the Global North and OECD countries. There is a strong and impassioned authorial voice throughout. His perspective is an unusual one as his career has included both academic research and teaching alongside a counselling psychology practice; a combination which is not common in the UK where I am based, where there is a clearer divide between research and practice. Anyone who is concerned about the quality of working lives today will benefit from reading this book. If you have fears about the uncertain context of the labour market, you will find this book illuminating and insightful.

The author is David L. Blustein, Professor of Psychology, Department of Counselling, Developmental, and Educational Psychology, Boston

College. He has a long and high quality record of accomplishment, having published over 120 journal articles and book chapters on the psychology of working, career development, work-based transitions, the exploration process, the interface between work and mental health, and the future of work. Specifically, he is the author of *The Psychology of Working: A New Perspective for Career Development, Counselling, and Public Policy* and the editor of the *Oxford Handbook of the Psychology of Working*.

However, many NICEC journal readers may not be familiar with his body of work. He occupies a school of thought within psychology from the United States, so that readers, whose interest in career development is grounded in other domains, such as sociology and education, may not have encountered him. Despite my own long career in career development practice and now research, I confess I only recently discovered his work, thanks to an excellent keynote he did at the ICEGS conference in 2018.

The book begins with an ambitious and personal Preface in which the author talks about the bereavement of his brother and how that contributed to his motivation to write the book. His brother was one of the participants drawn upon in the study reported upon. He also introduces us to the Boston College Working project, a longitudinal and qualitative research study, on which the book is based. Blustein states that his 'underlying message' is 'a clarion call for work as a human birthright' and that he wants his research to be 'viewed as part of the solution in creating a more just, inclusive, and dignified working life for all'.

The book is clearly structured around a series of chapters:

1. Being alive: Work as a Central Role in Life
2. Being Able to Survive and Thrive
3. Being with Others
4. Being Part of Something Bigger than Ourselves
5. Being Motivated and Being the Best We Can Be
6. Being Able to Care

7. Being Able to Work Without Oppression and Harassment
8. Being Without Work
9. Being Able to Work With Dignity and Opportunity

Each chapter begins with an overview of foundational literature about the topic, it goes on to present and analyse data from the Boston College Working Project and concludes with reflecting on new ideas and research that can helpfully illuminate the challenges and reflections presented by participants in the chapter. Blustein and his co-authors' work on the psychology of working theory is an important frame for the book and threads into different chapters and is recognisable in his exposition of different themes, e.g., around survival vs self-determination, the importance of social connectivity at work, and the role of social support and work volition.

The book expertly threads older but seminal theoretical ideas (e.g., from Freud, Maslow, Freire, Bowlby) with newer writing. Readers may acquire an extended reading list as he describes the work of Duffy and Dik on career calling, Sharone on unemployment, Richardson on the gendering of care work, and Neville on colour-blind racial ideology. Many of the newer work he mentions may not be familiar to NICEC journal readers and will give you avenues to pursue and puzzle out. Writers that NICEC readers may be more familiar with such as Watts, Law, Hooley, Bimrose, or even philosophers within Education such as Bourdieu and Foucault do not appear to any great extent in Blustein's writing which made me pause and reflect upon the multiple groupings of scholars that write about work and careers. Bodies of work in this field risk addressing similar topics, while operating in separate spheres. This has been a long-standing issue in the crowded field of career development, in which there are a number of siloes.

In both early and later chapters, Blustein positions his work in a global public policy context referring to the ILOs' Decent Work agenda and supporting arguments for better public policy to act as a safety net for citizens. In policy terms, he favours a universal basic income, and policies that give greater protection against discrimination at work and recognition for caring work. Conceptually he makes a strong argument against contemporary individualist ideas which lead

people to blame themselves or blame the system if they cannot secure work.

The presentation of data from participants is clearly and evocatively done and makes a refreshing change from much psychological writing that tends to be more quantitative and positivist, presenting tables, charts and hypotheses rather than the words of real people from interviews.

This is an excellent book, and I am not aware of anything similar. Blustein's emphasis is on the eroding experience of work. He manages to do this while maintaining the dignity of his participants and argues for individual, community, national and global actions that can improve work.

We are living in a world where for some, work is a source of pride, accomplishment, connection and creativity. For many others, regrettably, work is a source of enduring anguish and anxiety, particularly given the reality that there does not seem to be enough decent work within the United States and across the globe, for all of those who need work to sustain themselves.

A number of questions struck me as I read the book. Not all, but many of his participants were from an older generation. I suspect that if his participants were all younger, his findings may have been slightly different. However, it is also quite probable that older workers face some of the biggest challenges in the work-place today, which he chronicles expertly.

In my view, one area that other countries may have a different analysis to, is around social class. I was struck that in places, he collapses poverty and being working class together. Certainly, in the UK, discussions of inequality around social class are not just about poverty. Scholars on this side of the Atlantic have done excellent work in considering issues of social class and how aspects of 'habitus' influence expectations and confidence, even for working class people who are not poor.

In conclusion, I would wholeheartedly recommend Blustein's book to those who may or may not be familiar with his work, and praise his commitment in illuminating the difficulties that many people experience in their working lives.