

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A JOB, AN OCCUPATION AND A PROFESSION?

In engagement with stakeholders it became apparent that there was a marked tendency by employers to confuse the concept of job and occupation. The OFO is indeed a flawed system but nevertheless a desire to seek a 1:1 match between a job and an occupation is potentially indicative of a lack of conceptual clarity on the part of users of the system. Conceptual clarity needs to be established between three interrelated but distinct concepts: job, occupation and profession.

These three concepts may share some similarities but are in actual fact distinct concepts. The lack of conceptual clarity exists for understandable practical reasons but nonetheless can cause a range of problems if not rectified. The primary issue from a mapping and occupational data perspective being that multiple jobs can be categorised under a single occupation.

Occupation has many meanings and can be approached from various theoretical, conceptual and methodological perspectives but **can in short be defined as:**

“...socially constructed entities that include: (i) a category of work; (ii) the actors understood—either by themselves or others—as members and practitioners of this work; (iii) the actions enacting the role of occupational members; and (iv) the structural and cultural systems upholding the occupation.” (Anteby, Chan, & DiBenigno, 2016, p.187).

As can be seen from the definition above the primary emphasis is placed on occupations as socially constructed entities. If we are to re-imagine and re-design our occupational classification system in South Africa how do we capture the social dimension of occupations that many argue is so essential? Is it even possible or necessary for an occupational system classification to do so? Maybe our goals should be far less ambitious at first with our primary focus for now being the building of systemic capacity in order to improve the quality of occupational data.

A sub-set of occupations that has attracted extensive research attention over the past few decades is that of professions. **Professions can be defined as:**

“...a certain type of occupation that has succeeded in convincing audiences they are characterized by (1) abstract, specialized knowledge, (2) autonomy, (3) authority over clients and subordinate occupational groups, and (4) a certain degree of altruism.” (Hodson & Sullivan, 2012, p.260).

It is also worth noting that professionals often make use of credentials to establish and illustrate their specialised knowledge (Freidson, 1988, p.59). As can be seen from the definition provided above professions may be a sub-set of occupations but is conceptually distinct from both occupations and jobs.

The most important definition by far for purposes of this report, as it has as its main focus the mapping of jobs to occupations, is that of jobs. Just as with occupations there are multiple definitions of a job/s. A clear distinction needs to be drawn between a job and an occupation—although this is not always easy as the reality of the workplace is often complex and in a state of flux. **A job and its relation to the concept of occupation can be defined as:**

“Jobs are bundles of tasks performed by employees under administrative job titles; a given job is thus particular to a specific workplace, just as a job title is often particular to a specific workplace. An occupation, on the other hand, is broader membership in a shared community that spans across jobs. A

given occupation is therefore a category of work that is concretely instantiated as particular jobs in particular organizations under particular job titles.” (Cohen, 2013, p.243; Grant, Berg & Cable, 2014).

Jobs are related to occupations but conceptually distinct. Seeking a 1:1 match between a job and an occupation is therefore not only conceptually unsound but also raises serious practical challenges. There is therefore a need for DHET as well as SETAs to provide clear and detailed definitions and explanations of especially the concepts of jobs and occupations to stakeholders. The implications of a conceptual blurring between the two concepts should also be explained and illustrated.

Why has the use of occupations as a descriptive and analytic category become so prevalent not only in South Africa but internationally as well? Occupations and professions have a long history but the use of the concepts has become more pronounced in recent times due to the changing nature of employees’ affiliation with employers (Anteby et al., p.184). In short there has been a shift towards employees having a stronger occupational affiliation and identity as opposed to an organisational identity as lifelong employment or employment for a substantial amount of time at a single organisation has become somewhat of a relic of the past.

A longitudinal study in the United States indicated that employed Americans born between 1957 and 1964 had had an average of 11.7 jobs (Bureau of Labour Statistics, 2015). Even a country renowned for lifelong employment and loyalty to a single organisation such as Japan has seen a recent decline in this type of employment relation. According to some studies lifelong employment in Japan applied to less than 20% of the working age population as far back as the mid-2000s (Wolff, 2008, p.53).

The shift to a greater focus on occupations as a unit of categorisation and analysis has a dark underside that cannot be ignored and to view it as a neutral phenomenon could itself be construed as an ideological exercise and epistemologically disingenuous. Some scholars argue that one of the antidotes to increased employment insecurity and all its attendant socio-economic ills is the development of stronger occupational identities and communities (Standing, 2014). This may be the case but it could also be argued that the wide-spread movement from organisational affiliation and/or occupational affiliation towards a stronger or sole affiliation with one’s occupation is itself a sign of the shift in power from labour to capital (Streeck, 2016) with employment conditions globally tending to favour employers as opposed to workers. Another concept that is to an extent the antithesis of occupation and all it connotes is that of the precariat. Guy Standing defines the precariat or precarious class as follows:

“One defining characteristic of the precariat is distinctive relations of production: so-called ‘flexible’ labour contracts; temporary jobs; labour as casuals, part-timers, or intermittently for labour brokers or employment agencies. But conditions of unstable labour are part of the definition, not the full picture. More crucially, those in the precariat have no secure occupational identity; no occupational narrative they can give to their lives.” (2014, p.10)

Although there are over 1500 occupations currently on the OFO it could well be argued that many of those working in these “occupations” are indeed not participating in and belonging to occupations at all but merely have jobs and bad jobs at that. Bad in the sense that they are low-wage, low-skill, routine and offer little prospect of progression (Keep & James, 2012). Or bad in the sense that they are high-skill and high-wage but still precarious. The extent of precarity in all sectors of our economy, warrants further research.

It is indeed necessary to improve the quality of occupational data and to better link skill supply and demand in South Africa. High level theoretical critique and analysis will only take the PSET system part of the way towards substantive and meaningful progress and improvement. However, it would be deeply problematic to ignore these types of

debates completely. Even from a purely technical perspective conceptual clarity, at a minimum, is required as a lack of clarity affects the job to occupation mapping process.

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