

Unpacking the Concept of Decent Work in the Psychology of Working Theory for Blue-Collar Workers

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Abstract

Our research aimed to expand the understanding of decent work at a micro level by exploring the concept among the intended target group for which the Psychology of Work Theory (PWT) was developed for (unskilled and semi-skilled workers). By using an interpretive phenomenological approach and drawing on 13 focus group discussions (with 71 South African blue-collar workers), our findings revealed both objective (e.g. job characteristics and resources, working conditions and skills reproduction) and subjective dimensions (e.g. challenge and mastery and fairness) of decent work. We expand existing knowledge about the work experiences of blue-collar workers as an underrepresented research sample, specifically within a non-western context (i.e. South Africa). Furthermore, we provide some in-depth nuances when considering the PWT for blue-collar workers. Based on our empirical findings and extant literature, our study shows ways in which the existing conceptualizations of decent work can be expanded in order to reflect the perceptions of blue-collar workers in South Africa.

Keywords: decent work, psychology of working theory, unskilled and semi-skilled workers, South Africa, blue-collar workers, subjective experiences, objective dimensions

Introduction

Globalisation has formed the world of work as the evolution of technology has shaped what skills are required to compete in the active economy (Bayo & Onyenma, 2019). As such, globalisation refers to the growing interdependence of the world's economies and societies that is brought on by the increase in international trade and technology (Bayo & Onyenma, 2019). Although the changes in the world of work have brought about new opportunities especially in the digital space, the increase in automation has placed traditional jobs at threat of becoming redundant (Thompson & Dahling, 2019). As a result, there is generally an increase in the sense of job insecurity, rising inequalities, impoverishment of the poor and increased incidences of human right violations (Murari, 2017). This is because the demand for new skills has increased, but the supply thereof is lagging behind, especially in the case of developing economies (Bayo & Onyenma, 2019). Consequently, an acute sense of insecurity is evident among the working class, which mainly consists of unskilled or semi-skilled workers such as blue-collar workers. Because of the increasing supply of unskilled labour and the decreasing demand for it, the majority of these workers are at risk of being exploited (Blustein, 2011).

The United Nations (UN) foresaw this predicament and initiated the development of the Decent Work Agenda by the International Labour Organization (ILO). The Decent Work Agenda focuses on endorsing the promotion of safe, fair, dignified and equitable formal and informal work for men and women worldwide (Nizami & Prasad, 2013). Generally, literature conceptualises decent work as an objective entity (Blustein, 2008). In response to various calls for vocational practitioners to study the concept of decent work from a psychological perspective (Blustein, 2001, 2006, 2008), Duffy et al. (2016) developed the psychology of working theory (PWT), in which decent work is a central variable.

Empirical studies incorporating the PWT, can be criticised for two reasons. First, the majority of these studies excluded the intended target group (unskilled and semi-skilled workers). Second, the measurements and conceptualisations of decent work in these studies were

Table 1

Summary of the alignment of the Qualitative Findings on Decent Work (as published in Journal of Vocational Behavior, 2019) with the ILO and our findings

Qualitative findings on the dimensions of decent as reflected in the JVB special edition 2019		Part of ILO	Our study findings	
Objective aspects of decent work	Authors		In line with literature	New unique findings
Contingency plan in case of loss of income: •Paid sick-leave benefits, •Access to healthcare •Retirement funds,	Dodd et al. (2019); Nam & Kim (2019); Ribeiro et al. (2019); Vignoli et al. (2020)	Yes	Working conditions Work hours	1) Job characteristics and resources Physical challenges Tools and materials Skill level and co-workers support 2) Working conditions Safety Health
Working hours that allow for adequate rest and leisure time: • Hours that are not excessively long, Sufficient time for leisure activities, Work flexibility, Travel time, Manageable workload, Non-precarious working hours	Buyukgoze-Kavas & Autin (2019); Dodd et al. (2019); Di Fabio & Kenny (2019); Ferreira et al. (2019); Masdonati et al. (2019); Nam & Kim (2019); Vignoli et al. (2020)	Yes		
Opportunity for employees to take part in negotiations and decision-making that will affect their working conditions within the organisation: • Observing labour laws; Protecting workers' rights; Union representation	Buyukgoze-Kavas & Autin (2019); Di Fabio & Kenny (2019); Dodd et al. (2019); Nam & Kim (2019)	Yes	Skills reproduction Development programme On the job training	
Opportunity to enhance skills , thereby remaining competitive in the current and future labour market: • In-service professional development; Career advancement; Training	Buyukgoze-Kavas & Autin (2019); Di Fabio & Kenny (2019); Dodd et al. (2019); Ferreira et al. (2019); Nam & Kim (2019); Ribeiro et al. (2019); Vignoli et al. (2020)	Yes		
Adequate livelihood that enables employees to take care of themselves and their family : • Fixed salary; Adequate salary and benefits; • Market related; Pay aligned with experience, devotion and accomplishment; Payment aligned with work done; Ability to take care of necessities; Financial freedom	Buyukgoze-Kavas & Autin (2019); Di Fabio & Kenny (2019); Dodd et al. (2019); Ferreira et al. (2019); Masdonati et al. (2019); Nam & Kim (2019); Ribeiro et al. (2019); Vignoli et al. (2020)	Yes	Working conditions Being able to provide	
Job security: • Security of consistent income ; Ability to continue working; Employment security	Nam & Kim (2019); Masdonati et al. (2019); Ribeiro et al. (2019)	No	Working conditions Nature of employment	
Subjective aspects of decent work			In line with literature	New unique findings
Control: • Control and autonomy ; Independence; Influence at work; Freedom of choice	Dodd et al. (2019); Nam & Kim (2019); Ribeiro et al. (2019)	No	Challenge and mastery Using discretion Fairness Having a voice	1) Challenge and mastery Cognitive challenge 2) Fairness Distributive fairness Equal treatment Interpersonal fairness

Congruence between company culture and family and social values: • Work-life balance; Family-centred work policies	Di Fabio & Kenny (2019); Nam & Kim (2019); Vignoli et al. (2020)	No		
Meaningfulness: • Finding one's identity in the work; Satisfaction with work; Person-environment fit; Interesting work; <i>Growth at and through work</i> ; Passion	Buyukgoze-Kavas & Autin (2019); Di Fabio & Kenny (2019); Dodd et al. (2019); Masdonati et al. (2019); Nam & Kim (2019); Ribeiro et al. (2019); Vignoli et al. (2020)	No		Challenge and mastery Learning new things
Positive organisational culture/effective management: • Expectations clarified; <i>Fair management and respect from management</i> ; Positive interpersonal climate ; Sound relationships • Opportunity for collaboration; Support; Possibility for dialogue; Being valued	Buyukgoze-Kavas & Autin (2019); Di Fabio & Kenny (2019); Dodd et al. (2019); Nam & Kim (2019); Ribeiro et al. (2019); Vignoli et al. (2020)	No		Fairness Equal treatment Interpersonal fairness
Work characteristics: • Calmer work in terms of manageable workload; Alignment between work and abilities; Realistic goals and targets; Challenging tasks; Limited stress	Ferreira et al. (2019); Ribeiro et al. (2019)	No		Fairness Distributive fairness
Recognition: • Recognition by company; Recognition by manager	Di Fabio & Kenny (2019); Dodd et al. (2019); Vignoli et al. (2020); Ribeiro et al. (2019)	No		
Equality: • Equal treatment for all	Di Fabio & Kenny (2019)	No	Fairness Equal treatment	
Contribution to society: • Ability to contribute to others; Job esteem in society	Buyukgoze-Kavas & Autin (2019); Ferreira et al. (2019)	No		
Work environment that enhances human dignity by providing a safe and healthy work space (both physically and psychologically): • Safe and clean work environment; Disability needs are met; Dignity and respect; Physical security; Absence of harassment; Healthy working conditions	Buyukgoze-Kavas & Autin (2019); Di Fabio & Kenny (2019); Dodd et al. (2019); Ferreira et al. (2019); Masdonati et al. (2019); Nam & Kim (2019); Ribeiro et al. (2019); Vignoli et al. (2020)	Yes	Working conditions Work hours	Working conditions Safety Health

Note. All articles were sourced from the special issue of the *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 2019 (<https://www.journals.elsevier.com/journal-of-vocational-behavior>).

approached from an economical perspective (i.e. economic indicators of decent work). Furthermore, based on the evidence from qualitative findings (see Table 1), various subjective elements seem to be at play when it comes to the experiences of decent work. In this regard exploring the psychological impact of precarious work seems significant, specifically for underrepresented samples (i.e. unskilled and semi-skilled workers from non-western contexts).

Our study aimed to remedy such shortcomings and contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it expands on existing knowledge about the work experiences of blue-collar workers as an underrepresented research sample, specifically within a non-western context (i.e. South Africa). Second, it provides insight into some in-depth nuances when considering the PWT for blue-collar workers. Third, based on our empirical findings and extant literature, our study shows ways in which the existing conceptualizations of decent work can be expanded in order to reflect the perceptions of blue-collar workers in South Africa (see table 1).

Decent Work as a Central Variable in the PWT

The concept of decent work has received the attention of various researchers across disciplines. Low levels of decent work as measured by economic indicators have been linked to increased crime, depletion of economic welfare, deterioration of neighbourhoods and social instability (Thompson & Dahling, 2019). Recent arguments are that decent work is not one-dimensional but multifaceted and that it is impacted by factors that transcend the economics discipline. In this sense, the PWT aims to address the insufficient understanding of work experiences from the perspective of the working class (Blustein, 2006). People of the working class often have limited education and are likely to occupy low-earning positions that require few or no skills, such as blue-collar work and are also most susceptible to or affected by economic instability (Agars & French, 2016; Ribeiro et al., 2016). From a psychological perspective, the PWT proposes that having decent work can fulfil a person's three basic human needs: survival and power, social relatedness and self-determination. The fulfilment of

these needs is likely to result in the experience of overall well-being and work fulfilment (Blustein et al., 2018; Duffy et al., 2016).

Understanding and conceptualising the central variable (i.e. decent work) within vocational research is crucial (Edmondson & MacManus, 2007). In the PWT, decent work refers to work that offers safe working conditions, allows for leisure time and rest, supports social and family values, offers adequate compensation, and provides access to health care (Duffy et al., 2017). However, from a vocational research perspective this definition is being criticised. Apart from being derived from the field of economics qualitative research on the topic of decent work appears to be sparse (Pereira et al., 2019), with recent research revolving around the development and validation of the decent work scale of Duffy et al. (2017). This measurement was validated in studies across a variety of countries and the results were published in a 2019 special issue of the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* (see summary in Table 1). Although some of these quantitative studies did pose open-ended questions to participants about decent work, (which can constitute as first attempts to understand and define decent work qualitatively), we argue more qualitative research is required to solidify the PWT's proposed variables. Table 1 provides an overview of these collective qualitative findings and how they compare with the ILO's definition of decent work.

Collectively, these findings seem to suggest that researchers' concepts of decent work may have moved beyond only objective dimensions (as defined by the ILO) as they include subjective elements as well. Although the well-known decent work scale of Duffy et al. (2017) do already include some subjective components of decent work (such as organisational culture), notably, samples from these studies (in Table 1) are not from the blue-collar (unskilled or semi-skilled) population and participants had some form of higher education qualification. Given the intended target group of the PWT, we believe that more in depth exploration of the decent work variable is needed among semi-skilled and unskilled workers. According to Blustein (2008), research among blue-collar workers are invaluable to vocational scholars, as they constitute around 70% of workers globally and for research on the current world of work to have any merit, it should include this previously excluded group.

The Blue-Collar Worker in the South African Context

The South African context provides an example of the extent to which external factors can influence a person's choice of work. Since apartheid, which restricted non-white and female citizens (now referred to as previously disadvantaged groups) (Ozler, 2007) in accessing opportunities, marginalisation has remained ingrained in the country. Due to decades of oppression and limited access to resources (e.g. work opportunities and education), a large part of the South African population currently falls within the blue-collar work group (Department of Labour, 2018; Statistics South Africa [Stats SA], 2018), and 49.2% of the total population live in poverty (Stats SA, 2015). Currently South Africa have the highest unemployment rate in the world at 34,3% (Stats SA, 2021. p2). Most research involving blue-collar workers has investigated objective aspects of work such as health and safety, ergonomics and productivity (Blustein, 2008), whereas limited research is available on the subjective elements of blue-collar workers' experience of work (Koekemoer et al., 2018). The purpose of our study was to qualitatively explore the concept of decent work in order to show how existing conceptualizations of decent work can be expanded in order to reflect the perceptions of blue-collar workers in South Africa.

Method

An interpretive phenomenological approach was fitting, as it focuses on, and allows us to learn from the lived experience of participants in relation to their perspective, as blue-collar workers (Neubauer et al., 2019). We conducted 13 focus groups with a total of 71 blue collar workers at a South African manufacturing company. The company specialised in branding products through embroidery, screen printing, and laser engraving. At the time of the data collection, the first author was working at the HR department as the talent manager at the company. From an interpretive phenomenological point of view, the researcher will always bring certain experiences and frames of meaning to the understandings established during the research (Bradbury-Jones et al., 2009). We argue that the experience and frames of meaning brought about by working in the same organisation as the participants enlightened rather than skewed

our understanding of decent work for blue collar workers (Greene, 2014). As such, although being part of the organisation may introduce an element of bias in the study, it may also provide a source of credibility to its interpretation and findings (Sloan & Bowe, 2014).

Sampling and participants

The sampling included elements of both purpose and convenience sampling methods. Inclusion criteria included being a South African blue-collar worker who are employed on either an A- or a B-band Paterson job grade, and are directly responsible for output (i.e., excluding team leaders who were on a B4 Paterson job grade). Patterson job grade A is synonymous with unskilled work that is defined as work that is general in nature and does not require specific skills (for example *runners* who move stock between different departments), whereas job grade B positions are referred to as semi-skilled positions which are defined as work that occur within predefined processes, and the skill required is trained on the job, such as machine operators (Department of Labour, 2011). After institutional permissions were obtained, all qualifying workers were invited to participate. To ensure that participants are not coerced a proper briefing to the potential participants about the project took place before they consented to take part. Participants signed an informed consent after the briefing, before the data collection. From the initial 171 employees who showed interest in participating, a random sample were selected to present the different employment contracts, shifts, production area and language preference. Demographical information of the participants is reflected below.

Table 2*Number of Participants and Focus Groups per Focus Group Category*

Category	Number of Focus Groups	Language	Total Number of Participants	Males	Females
Day shift permanent	6	Afrikaans, Tshivenda, Nguni, and Sotho	34	8	26
Day shift non-permanent	3	Nguni and Sotho	16	8	8
Night shift permanent	3	Nguni and Sotho	17	9	8
Night shift non-permanent	1	Sotho	4	4	0
Total	13		71	29	42

Note. Participants of the first pilot focus group are excluded from Table 2 because the data from this group was excluded from the study.

Data collection

Although the use of focus groups in phenomenological studies has been a debated issue, we agree with Bradbury-Jones et al. (2009) that its use is justified, especially in explorative studies. Our focus group design provided for multiple categories (as reflected in Table 2), enabling us to make comparisons between workers occupying jobs at the same level but performing diverse forms of precarious work. Six participants were invited per focus group as per recommendation of Fusch and Ness (2015). To ensure the focus group will deliver rich information that will answer our research question, we conducted a pilot focus group. The pilot focus group data was not used in the final analyses due to the changes made to the focus group guide that ensured richer and more detailed data could be elicited. No changes were made between the second and the third focus group, as the questions elicited detailed and appropriate information. Data from the second focus group onward were included in the final analysis. We determined the number of focus groups based on data saturation (Hancock et al., 2016). Although we followed an iterative process of collecting the data, transcribing voice recordings of discussions, identifying units of meaning, and creating and reviewing themes, the practicalities of arranging the focus groups forced us to plan a number of focus groups

Table 3

Objective Dimensions of Decent Work

(1) <i>Job characteristics and resources</i>	(2) <i>Working conditions</i>	(3) <i>Skills reproduction</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical challenges The physical requirements of a position <i>Example excerpts</i> "I was working as a picker. I also had to use my power (strength) picking generators and that is why I stopped." (Non-permanent worker) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Safety The physical safety offered by the job itself or the work environment <i>Example excerpt</i> "Myself, I'm using chemicals. It is very dangerous. Sometimes a chemical is very strong. When you open it, once you open it, you can feel it. I don't have the equipment. I need something to protect my eyes. We have plastic gloves, but the chemicals eat the gloves." (Permanent worker, working night shift) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Development programme Formal development opportunities provided by the organisation that result in a qualification <i>Example excerpt</i> "The programmes the company offers is a nice initiative, because, you know, some of us, we didn't go to school." (Permanent worker, working day shift)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tools and materials Having the tools and materials that enable performance <i>Example excerpts</i> "Having the equipment to do that makes the job go decent." (Permanent worker, working day shift) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Health The health consequences of the immediate work environment <i>Example excerpt</i> "The first company that I worked it was too cold ... I was always getting sick." (Permanent worker, working night shift) Work hours Hours that enable a person to take care of responsibilities outside of work "I can say it's not decent because it's night, I have to sleep. And I have to take care of my kids. I have to look after everything in the house. Even though I get money from it, it was not decent, as I had to come late." (Non-permanent worker, working day shift) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On-the-job training Informal development opportunities provided by the organisation that result in a tangible skill <i>Example excerpts</i> "We went inside and they showed me this big machine. I was shocked when I saw this big machine. I didn't know how I was going to work with it. It was an embroidery machine, 15 heads. The guy started teaching me. I was happy to work. He showed me the bobbin and how to thread. I learned that machine within three months. After three months I was making good scores." (Permanent worker, working night shift)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Skill level and co-workers' support The level of competence of co-workers or supervisors <i>Example excerpt</i> "There by our side you have to wait maybe two hours from early morning to start work at 09:00 because of QC. I don't want to lie, it [the delay] is because of QC. But they must then tell you how to set the machine. Then she can come and tell me it is wrong." (Permanent worker, working day shift) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nature of employment Being permanently employed <i>Example excerpts</i> "Money for UIF [Unemployment Insurance Fund] and the provident fund are some things that you don't qualify for as you are not permanent. There is a difference between a permanent and temporary employee. Also, if I have a problem or get injured, who is going to help me or pay for me?" (Non-permanent worker, working day shift) 	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being able to provide Being able to take care of oneself and family without having to supplement an income <i>Example excerpt</i> "Me, I make food. I make fat cakes and cake. I do my own things. I will put it there outside and sell it for maybe R10. I sell it from my house. At least I get that extra income. Then tomorrow I go buy meat and pap and sell it for R55." (Permanent worker, working day shift) 	

ahead of assessing saturation (Kerr et al., 2010). We initially scheduled 13 focus groups, with the intention for more if needed. However, from the 13 focus groups data, it became apparent that no new ideas emerged from the data after the tenth focus group. The focus group discussions were facilitated using a focus group guide of themes. Questions that tapped into the participants' meaning of decent work, included for example: What does the word "decent" mean? Can you think of the most decent job that you have had? If someone asked you, what would you say made that job decent? Can you think of a job that you had that you don't think is decent? What about the job was not decent? General questions about work provided context to the meaning of work to the participants. The facilitator asked questions in English, but the participants could answer in their home language. South Africa has 11 official languages. We used interpreters during the focus group sessions to ensure that the participants understood the questions asked and that the facilitator in turn understood the responses. Although all the participants can understand and speak English as a second or third language, it was important to us that the finer nuances in the questioning and responses are not lost in translation. The interpreters were fellow employees of the participants, and the relationship of trust among them encouraged active and open participation (Temple & Young, 2004).

At the time of the study, the first author had already worked at the company for a number of years in the capacity as HR practitioner and was considered beneficial since the collegial trust relationship between a researcher and participants can deepen the discussion around work related issues (Costley et al., 2010). This played a significant role in "breaking the ice" and establishing deep seated conversations during data collection, as well as enabling us to contextualise conversations and clarify final themes (Unluer, 2015). After each focus group discussion, the recording was transcribed and checked for accuracy by listening to the recordings and reading the transcription at the same time. To ensure confidentiality we removed all personal identifiers from the transcriptions and assigned numbers to the participants (e.g. Participant 1).

Data Analysis

During our analyses we applied the hermeneutic circle, which allowed us to expand our understanding and interpretation of the phenomenon by reiteratively reading thoughtfully through the texts, writing down our reflections on the texts, and interpreting the phenomenon (Neubauer et al., 2019). Our reflective stance as well as the concurrent collection and analysis of data ensured trustworthiness in our analysis process (Morse et al., 2002). The first author used Atlas TI 8 during the initial categorisation of the statements derived from the transcripts into units of meaning, after which she scrutinised each unit of meaning and removed redundant units (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After deliberating the merits of the units of meaning, they were finalised and exported into Excel, and then categorised into themes (Groenewald, 2004). There are two stages in reviewing themes: The researcher 1) confirms if the codes are related to the theme and 2) decides if the theme fits in with the overall data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While following this process, the first author merged some themes and defined each theme and subtheme according to the data description, which enabled her to compile a brief overview of the themes and support it with statements. The thematization was conducted in two phases, where the first cycles of analysis was conducted by the first author and then presented to a panel which included the second and third author as well as an independent expert in the field. During the presentation each theme was scrutinised and discussed. The thematization was finalised only when all involved agreed on the fit between the category definition and statements for the focus group that support it. Using this process during thematization allowed us to ensure that interpretation of the data is not biased because of the closeness of the first author to the organisation and the participants (Unluer, 2015). The final themes were also presented to 10 participants for member checking (Groenewald, 2004), who indicated that no amendments were required.

RESULTS

Overall, our results yielded two broad dimensions of decent work (e.g. objective and subjective).

Objective Dimensions of Decent Work (see table 3). First, job characteristics and the resources required to successfully perform one's duties were elements that participants considered when deciding whether work was decent or not. Overall, work was considered as decent when it did not expose participants to physical challenges, when they had the correct tools and materials to do their job and their co-workers or supervisors were skilled to do what is required of them. Work was considered as not decent when it involved intense physical labour (e.g. standing for long periods); when tools are not available or of the required quality; or when working with people who were not competent or lacked expertise but had the authority to stop their work.

Second, the working conditions under which participants performed their work, would indicate if their work was decent or not; for example, matters relating to their safety, health, working hours, nature of employment, and being able to provide. Participants considered being exposed to harmful chemicals without protective gear and being exposed to extreme temperatures as not decent work because such working conditions often led to physical ailments. Furthermore, working excessive hours were considered as not decent, but when their workhours enabled them to attend to family responsibilities and own personal needs it was experienced as decent work. Interestingly, working precarious hours was not necessarily considered not to be decent, as some participants (working night-shifts) indicated it allowed them to study during the day or run errands at a time when most other people were at work which makes it decent work. However, remarkably, participants indicated that for work to be considered decent it needed to be permanent, as such employment provided them with social protection against unemployment and with the ability to purchase things on credit. Temporary employment placed them in a constant state of anxiety as they were at the mercy of the manager to decide if they would continue working. This had the potential to result in a situation where workers were exploited. In addition, work that enabled participants to provide for their own and their family's needs without their needing to engage in activities to supplement their current income were considered decent. Third, opportunities employers offered to enhance employees' skills and enable them to remain competitive in the labour market (i.e. skills

reproduction) were seen as forming part of decent work. Having access to formal development programmes and on-the-job training allowed participants to gain knowledge and develop skills that were important for progressing in their current jobs or were transferable to jobs in other organisations or industries and therefore considered decent work. Participants saw such opportunities as decent because many of them had had to start working immediately after finishing school due to the financial situation of their family. This was quite a significant finding because many of the unskilled blue-collar workers (Paterson job grade A) were stuck in an endless loop of finding unskilled positions, whereas semi-skilled blue-collar workers (Paterson job grade B) all started off as unskilled workers but were given opportunities to improve their skills/knowledge (e.g. how to operate a machine), resulting in improved future work prospects.

Subjective Dimensions of Decent Work (see table 4). Two broad sub-themes related to participants' personal perceptions or the psychological aspects of decent work were extracted (i.e. challenge and mastery, and fairness).

First, participants indicated that if they were cognitively challenged or in a position to learn new things and use their own discretion, they experienced their work as decent. They wanted to be able to figure out how to resolve a challenge without escalating it to supervisors. Some participants indicated that they enjoyed being thrown in at the deep end and having to figure out how to make production happen. Second, work was deemed decent if treatment was impartial (i.e. if favouritism and discrimination were absent). Elements relating to fairness included distributive fairness, equal treatment, having a voice, and interpersonal fairness. Overall, participants regarded work as decent if the workload was distributed fairly, if work expectations were reasonable, if the right people received the credit for performance, and if their remuneration was aligned with the work they performed. In the participants' view, unequal treatment (favouritism) qualified work as not decent. Examples mentioned were managers providing opportunities (vacancies or overtime) to a select group of employees or exempting a group from disciplinary action. Thus, equal treatment at work was likely to render work as decent. Work was also considered decent if employees had a voice in terms of proactively

Table 4

Subjective dimensions of Decent Work

Two Overall Subjective Dimensions of Decent Work	
(1) Challenge and Mastery	(2) Fairness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Cognitive challenge Work that tests ability and requires some mental effort <i>Example excerpts</i> "When I am doing it [work], I am using my brain. It is a challenge to me." (Permanent worker, working night shift) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Distributive fairness The extent to which work or rewards are allocated and/or recognised fairly <i>Example excerpt</i> Because sometimes I can see that they will not be able to finish the job in the time they think and then I went to the manager or supervisor. You can't get finished by that time, so what are you going to do? They say we have to. But I know it won't be finished. Maybe get someone to assist us. I asked them if someone can help, but he says we can finish it. Then later we find out we can't finish it. I told you before that we can't finish the job, but I am nothing." (Permanent worker, working day shift)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Learning new things Being provided with the opportunity to learn new things daily or gaining an understanding of how things work <i>Example excerpts</i> "The only thing I find decent is the experience that I get. Because I came here knowing nothing. Now at least I know a lot about the machine. So, yeah, I can say that is something." (Non-permanent worker, working night shift) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Equal treatment The extent to which the same rules apply to everyone and everyone is treated fairly <i>Example excerpts</i> "The treatment [from the manager] is not right. There are some other people, those who are special." (Permanent worker, working day shift)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Using discretion Being able to influence aspects of work that have an impact on their ability to achieve goals <i>Example excerpt</i> "I like to fix it myself. I like this job. I wouldn't like the job if I had to go to my supervisor with every problem." (Permanent worker, working night shift) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Having a voice The opportunity given to employees to raise their opinions or defend themselves <i>Example excerpts</i> "And don't blame me for something I didn't do, especially when I try to explain something." (Permanent worker, working day shift)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Interpersonal fairness The extent to which someone feels acknowledged and is treated with respect when they feel they deserve it <i>Example excerpts</i> "We did the job. It was a long run, and we finished the job before the deadline. Then when they come back, they will never come to you and say thank you, well done." (Permanent worker, working day shift)

engaging with managers on how to get the job done and being provided with an opportunity to explain when something went wrong. Lastly, interpersonal relationships were significant; participants considered work as decent when managers approached employees in a respectful manner if things went wrong and when managers/supervisors acknowledged employees' hard work.

Discussion

In relation to the objective indicators of decent work, six specific facets are significant according to the ILO and previous definitions (i.e. *full employment, social protection, working hours, social dialogue, skills reproduction, and respect for human dignity*).

The facet of *full employment*, although not part of the PWT, is included in the ILO's definition of decent work, and is operationalised as the successful employment of people who are willing and able to do work that provides an adequate income and good working conditions (Anker et al., 2002). In this regard, literature points to work being decent if it provides job security in terms of enabling workers to plan based on expected income (being permanently employed); if the income is adequate or fair; if it allows for them to reach end of the month without challenge and allow for some indulgence for themselves from time to time (Di Fabio & Kenny, 2016; Dodd et al. 2019; Ferreira et al., 2019; Masdonati et al. 2019; Vignoli et al., 2020).

Our findings provide a more nuance picture and detail on how nature of employment and adequate pay influence blue-collar workers' experiences of work as decent or not. Although aligned with the findings of other qualitative studies, it provides a bit more insight in terms of how being employed temporarily impacts employee's ability to spend on credit which ultimately reduces their cashflow. In this regard our findings revealed that the non-permanent workers end up sending most of their money back to their families because they were not sure when they would have access to financial resources again. This notion supports the findings of other qualitative studies that the main objective of adequate income is the ability to take of their family responsibilities. Remarkably furthermore, our findings show how exploitation can easily occur for the non-permanent group specifically. The desperation of having an income caused

them to take all the overtime shifts and nightshifts and did the work that no one else wanted, all so that they could catch the attention of the manager who was their point of access to permanent employment. Thus, for our blue-collar worker sample it seems that securing permanent employment was decent because it enables them to take care of their family responsibilities with a consistent income and empowered them to plan with the limited financial resources that they had. However, interestingly, our findings revealed that when participants had to find other means to supplement their income, such as gambling and selling goods or services, they considered their work as not decent, whether they were permanent or not.

The second facet concerns *social protection*. According to the ILO, decent work is work that provides people with a contingency plan (i.e. social protection) in case they are unable to work. Similar to other qualitative studies (see table 1), our findings indicated strong support for the inclusion of social protection in the conceptualisation of decent work. Participants suggested that work would be decent if it provided a future to a person who had to stop working. Our findings resonated with study findings that permanent employees in South Africa had access to benefits that non-permanent employees did not have. Section 27(1)(c) of the South African Constitution (South Africa, 1996) states that “everyone has the right to social security”. To ensure this right, the Unemployment Insurance Fund is legally mandated to collect monthly contributions from both employers and employees (whether permanent or not) in South Africa. This fund provides temporary financial support to employees whose earning ability has been disrupted for a variety of reasons but not if a non-permanent contract comes to an end (South African Government, 2020). In many South African organisations, permanent employees enjoy benefits such as retirement funds and risk benefits, which is often not extended to non-permanent employees. This further supports our finding of why permanent employment is seen as decent over non-permanent employment. Permanent employment provides access to full social protection, from governmental structures and company benefits, whereas non-permanent employees do not enjoy this protection to the fullest extent.

The third facet concerns *working hours*. According to the ILO, decent work should provide free time to the worker to rest, recover from work, and enjoy leisure time (Anker et al., 2002) and

are somewhat reflected in the DWS of Duffy et al., 2017 (e.g. free time and rest). Although literature mainly points to objective aspects of hours of work (meaning numbers of hours worked, work schedules etc.) it can also refer to the impact of work hours on employees' personal life and achievement of work-life balance (Di Fabio & Kenny, 2019; Masdonati et al., 2019). Our study found a similar trend but mainly focused on working hours that enabled the person to do what is important to them – whether it was to take care of family responsibilities or to upskill themselves – and was not necessarily related to whether the hours were worked during precarious hours. For example, working nightshift was a preference for most of the permanent nightshift group because it freed up some hours in the day to run errands or to complete classes. However, for the non-permanent group, nightshift was seen as not decent because they felt like they did not have a choice, and had to accept any shift over no shift at all. Furthermore, working excessive hours, was seen as not decent by most participants because it prevented them from spending time with their families or take care of errands. Thus, our findings provide finer nuances when it comes to experiencing work as decent because of work hours. In this regard our findings suggested that not only the objective aspects but also the subjective aspects of working hours were important to enable workers to achieve a satisfactory work-life balance (i.e. one that gives employees time to take care of family responsibilities).

The fourth strategic pillar of the decent work agenda is to strengthen *social dialogue*, which relates to the extent to which workers can express themselves on work-related matters and can take part in defining their conditions of work. In South Africa, the right to take part in industrial action is a constitutional right (South Africa, 1996). Labour unrest is familiar to most South Africans, and reports of workers striking for a variety of reasons are plentiful. In fact, from 2017 to 2018 the percentage of workers involved in strikes increased by 11% (Department of Labour, 2018). This might be considered indicative that employees in South Africa do voice their concerns through protests. The company under study did not experience any form of formal labour unrest at the time of the study, but 50% of the sample population were part of a bargaining council and about 50% of them belonged to a union. Interestingly,

taking part in negotiations did not come up during participants' discussion of decent work, even after probing. This could be because within the SA work context, participants are used to having their working conditions set by a bargaining council and might be accustomed to having their voices represented by an employee representative or shop steward.

The fifth facet concerns *skills reproduction*. Skills development, personal development and professional growth have been associated with decent work in many recent qualitative studies (see table 1) but are lacking in quantitative decent work measures (Duffy et al., 2017). In this regard our findings specifically makes reference to on-the-job training and development programmes. In South Africa it is understandable for skills reproduction to be an essential part of decent work, as the country faces a constant skills crisis (Daniels, 2007). Development opportunities for our participants appeared to be constrained by their degree of family responsibility or family resources (social class) and it was evident that any type of development that the organisation offered, was seen as decent. In fact, on the job training seemed to enable previously unskilled participants break out of the seemingly endless cycle of unskilled work. This was the career story for most of the semi-skilled workers as they explained their journey towards becoming an operator. Once a participant became an operator, it provided a better salary and also opened up job prospects.

Finally, the ILO advocate decent work as work that *respects human dignity* through providing safe and healthy working conditions that are free from physical and psychological threats. Physically safe work forming part of decent work was supported not only by our findings but also by other qualitative findings (mainly captured under working conditions) (Buyukgoze-Kavas & Autin, 2019; Di Fabio & Kenny, 2019; Dodd et al., 2019; Ferreira et al., 2019; Masdonati et al., 2019; Vignoli et al., 2020). Worth highlighting is our unique identification of the theme of job characteristics and resources as an objective dimension of decent work. According to our findings, job characteristics and resources can be defined as the physical demands on and resources required by employees to successfully perform their duties. If an employee felt sufficiently equipped with the right resources, they experienced work as decent. The resources referred to tools and consumables available to the participant to perform their

task, but also referred to be able to rely on others to perform their work. Specifically, the impact on our participants' experience of decent work was other people's (in)competence. It was frustrating to have one's work checked by people (notably the quality control team or management) who did not understand the job or did not have the technical competence to judge the work. Therefore, participants would experience their work as not decent if others who lacked the technical know-how of their work were in a position to criticise the quality of their work (i.e. the performance of employees).

As indicated earlier, subjective aspects of decent work have been neglected in current definitions of and most research on decent work. Our findings and the findings of relevant reviewed literature highlighted four significant subjective aspects of decent work, namely, *company culture aligned with personal values*, *work content*, *social connection opportunities*, and *effective management*.

Concerning the first aspect relating to the degree to which *company culture is aligned with personal values*, Duffy et al. (2016) argued that, even though this aspect was not part of the ILOs definition of decent work, it could be said that a company culture that was congruent with family and social values made for decent work. The ethos of decent work is work that offers dignity and respect through providing safe and healthy working conditions free of physical and psychological harm and work that provides adequate remuneration (monetary and other benefits) that enables employees to take care of themselves and their family even if they are unable to continue working (Anker et al., 2002; Nizami & Prasad, 2013). It can therefore be argued that a company whose culture aligns with this ethos is likely to offer decent work. Qualitative studies on decent work refer to specific values that should be upheld (e.g. respect, dignity, equality, work-life balance, recognition, appreciation, and being valued) (see Table 1). In this regard the DWS of Duffy et al (2016), quantitatively measures the dimension of the degree to which organisational values compliment social family values. Interestingly our findings provide more detail with the notion of how a company with an organisational culture that displayed fairness and justice through practices such as equal treatment, interpersonal

fairness, and giving employees a voice are likely to be experienced as a provider of decent work.

Second, the aspect of *work content* is important. Massoudi et al. (2018) posited that decent work could also include subjective factors such as work content which includes the general characteristics of an everyday task that make performing the task a meaningful experience even if the task itself might be unpleasant. For example, dirty work could be deemed physically, socially or morally tainted due to its content but acceptable because it provides access to external benefits (Duffy et al., 2017) (e.g. a salary). Blue-collar work is labour intensive, and tasks are often monotonous, tedious, repetitive and intrinsically unrewarding (Blustein, 2011). However, Duffy et al. (2016) assumed that people doing this kind of work experienced introjected regulation, that is, the work's external benefits (e.g. being able to support their family) extrinsically motivated them to do the work. In this regard, some qualitative research has suggested that work is decent when it is meaningful on account of allowing self-expression, self-actualisation and autonomy in the workplace (see Table 1). The qualitative studies we reviewed found that work would qualify as decent if: it was not stressful because of work overload or because it was not aligned with a person's competence; its goals were clear and its targets realistic and; the task itself was challenging, interesting, motivating, and a source of job satisfaction and enjoyment (see Table 1). However, the samples these studies used were not representative of the low-skilled population. In the qualitative study conducted by Koekemoer et al. (2018) it was found that blue-collar workers appeared to prefer manual work and to enjoy feeling competent in a variety of technical skills. Our study's findings relating to the dimension of challenge and mastery were similar; participants perceived work as decent if it challenged them cognitively (i.e. to solve problems), provided them with the opportunity to learn new things, and allowed them to use their discretion at work instead of relying on their manager for guidance. The importance of work content in experiencing work as decent illustrates that there is a misperception surrounding the sources of motivation in low-skilled or blue-collar work and that, indeed, intrinsic motivation is derived from work that is challenging and interesting and provides variety—whether the work requires skills or not.

Third, the aspect of providing *opportunities for social connection* is imperative for work to be considered as decent. Such connection is deemed to contribute significantly to how people experience work, and it is posited as an outcome of decent work (Blustein, 2011; Duffy et al., 2016). In our study, socialising was found to be an outcome of being employed, although it was not clear from our data whether socialising was directly related to decent work or not, because employment was regarded as providing people with the opportunity to give and receive emotional support and also to learn from other people's life experiences.

However, according to the findings of other researchers, work is defined as decent if it provides the opportunity to build good relationships with colleagues based on mutual respect, safety and honesty, resulting in a good working atmosphere (Di Fabio & Kenny, 2016; Dodd et al., 2019; Masdonati et al., 2019; Vignoli et al., 2020). Therefore, it seems that the opportunity for social connection is an essential characteristic of decent work and that such connection gives rise to a sense of relatedness as defined by Duffy et al. (2016).

The fourth significant subjective aspect of decent work is *effective management*. Studies found that decent work operated in a positive organisational climate governed by a management team that was fair and that practised a culture of respect for employees, and in an organisation where management structures were good and job descriptions were clearly defined (Buyukgoze-Kavas & Autin, 2019; Dodd et al., 2019). Dodd et al. (2019) made specific reference to strong leadership. Although our findings did not produce the theme of strong leadership, we did find that empowerment from management's side played a significant role in the experience of decent work. Our findings indicated that decent work was often secured specifically because managers recognised people's potential and provided them with opportunities to gain work experience in different roles (enabled them to move from unskilled to semi-skilled positions due to on the job training) and offered them a permanent position (providing them with an opportunity to move from non-permanent to permanent). In this sense, our findings suggest that the presence of effective management or management that empowers is likely to enhance a person's ability to secure and maintain decent work.

Practical Contribution of the Study

The key practical contribution of our study is that the conceptualisation of decent work, which includes both objective and subjective dimensions, can be used in measurement studies. This conceptual framework can serve as a basis for developing a scale to measure both these dimensions. Application of this scale can be useful, for example, in organisational climate or employee satisfaction surveys to assess the presence of decent work. These surveys can reveal organisations' strengths and/or weaknesses in terms of decent work, and the information can assist them to improve as and where required.

Our practical contribution to the South African context also relates to assisting in considering making changes to the administration of social protection. In South Africa, a temporary employment contract can be renewed numerous times (this can happen over a number of years) without the employee having the prospect of being appointed in a permanent position. Many companies still use fixed-term contracts, which leave employees without protection once these companies decide not to renew these contracts. Given the sentiment that permanent work is considered decent because of its associated benefits, it is recommended that organisations consider offering temporary or fixed-term employees the same benefits that permanent employees enjoy (e.g. ensuring that temporary or fixed-term employees are also protected against loss of income).

Furthermore our findings underscore the importance of giving on-the-job training to blue-collar workers. Those who do not receive such training are stuck in an endless cycle of unskilled work, whereas those who receive such training are more employable and can access better opportunities. Our study draws attention to training practices and calls on organisations to take up the responsibility of investing in both the formal and informal training of low-skilled employees, giving those who are willing and able the opportunity to develop their skills and be appointed to better positions. In South Africa, which has critical skills shortages, it is imperative for organisations to accept responsibility for closing existing skills gaps and improving the lives of their employees.

Limitations of the Study

Our study included only blue-collar workers and excluded other types of low-skilled workers (e.g. administration clerks or data capturers). Furthermore, our study did not cover low-skilled workers who are classified as pink-collar workers (e.g. administrative or sales clerks) but may be at the same Paterson job grade level as blue-collar workers. Another potential limitation was the use of interpreters. Although necessary since the researchers did not speak the participants' African languages, this might have influenced the researchers' ability to do a full in-depth exploration of the concept of decent work. Furthermore, the focus groups consisted of women (59%) and men, and their combined views were considered as the views of the blue-collar worker. Gender differences may have a role to play as Ribeiro et al. (2016), explain that women do double work—they work to earn an income and do household chores when they return home. Importantly, the ILO includes household chores under its definition of work, and holds that, compared to countries such as Argentina, India, Japan, South Korea, Nicaragua and Tanzania, the gender difference in relation to the performance of household chores is larger in South Africa (International Labour Organization, 2011). Our study confirmed the existence of a gender difference: the men regarded the physical challenges of their blue-collar work as not decent, whereas women regarded blue-collar work that impacted on their ability to take care of their children as not decent. If we had split the focus groups according to gender, our research could have yielded more insights into the gendered experience of blue-collar work. Therefore, future research could perhaps focus on obtaining the views of male and female blue-collar or low-skilled workers separately. Lastly, even though the focus groups were grouped into different language groups (cultural groups), the focus of the study was not aimed at finding differences and similarities across these language groups.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future qualitative research could explore our findings further using in-depth individual interviews or focus groups consisting of different types of low-skilled employees in different

industries and in other developing countries. Furthermore, future researchers should define the antecedents and outcomes of decent work qualitatively to add to the PWT. More specifically focusing on studying the relationship between family responsibility and the experience of decent work qualitatively, as our study seems to have found preliminary support for a relationship between these variables. For example, the degree of family responsibility seems to influence how working hours (shift times and number of hours), income and nature of employment is perceived. Working conditions were experienced as not decent if it encroached on a participant's ability to take care of their family responsibilities. However, it was not clear if this perception would change if a person had no or varying family responsibilities. We therefore recommend that future research explore this relationship more comprehensively.

Conclusion

In most studies, decent work is measured as an objective construct and as part of economic, social or political research. Our study findings elaborate and build on earlier qualitative research on decent work specifically within the context of the PWT and underrepresented samples in non-western countries (i.e. South African blue-collar workers). Our findings revealed that decent work include subjective aspects (e.g. challenge and mastery and fairness) along with newer objective aspects (job characteristics and resources, working conditions and skills reproduction). Our findings provide a more nuanced conceptualisation of decent work within the framework of the PWT for blue-collar workers in South Africa.

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