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COMMENTARY

A tale of two antiworks

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Antiwork is a relatively new and complex concept. As such, our field needs to consider how to optimally conceptualize antiwork in a way that facilitates knowledge creation and accumulation. Alliger and McEachern (2023) position antiwork as a philosophical perspective that can be used to enhance or expose problems within existing research paradigms. We suggest an additional view: that antiwork is an attitudinal construct on which workers vary. As such, antiwork may be measurable, and attempts to measure antiwork may yield new insights into workers' different beliefs about work, where such antiwork sentiments come from, and how they influence worker behavior. In this commentary, we aim to raise awareness of the necessity for a concept such as antiwork attitudes and establish a foundation for its exploration.

Specifically, we perceive two different conceptualizations of antiwork:

Conceptualization #1: Antiwork as a philosophy. The antiwork philosophy, as described by the focal article and often expressed in online forums such as the r/antiwork subReddit (r/antiwork, 2023), is a multifaceted idea that holds that work is exploitative and, as a result, harmful. It is represented by a set of tenets (identified in Table 1 in the focal article) that suggest that the way work is structured in society is degrading, authoritarian, and violating. The focal article explored this philosophical side of antiwork as a lens by which to examine research and challenge existing assumptions.

Conceptualization #2: Antiwork as a construct. Another conceptualization of antiwork is referenced in the focal article but has yet to be explicitly discussed. It is the idea that antiwork is a "multifaceted, negative *appraisal* [emphasis added] of work (i.e., the tradition of paid employment) in and of itself" (p. 4). It is an *appraisal*, an attitude or belief held by individuals about work that may be based on individual perceptions, philosophy, political viewpoints, and experiences. As an appraisal, it is a construct that could (a) be measured, (b) be felt and expressed by individuals, and (c) predict and be predicted by nomologically related industrial and organizational (I-O) constructs.

Alliger and McEachern dismiss the second conceptualization, positing that "antiwork is not a discipline, domain, or even a construct" (p. 4). Rather, they suggest that antiwork is best represented by a set of tenets, and that, therefore, it is a philosophy. We do not challenge the idea that antiwork as a philosophy is interesting or important. Rather, we see value in an attempt to understand and operationalize antiwork as an individual-level construct.

The case for antiwork attitudes

Antiwork as a sentiment and appraisal of the workscape (Mills et al., 2018) is undoubtedly a real attitude experienced by a sizeable number of workers (and nonworkers), and to ignore this conceptualization of antiwork would be a shame. Indeed, a visit to the popular r/antiwork subReddit (r/antiwork, 2023) shows that many individuals experience work as exploitative. Indicators of the existence of the construct outside of social media include research findings that most workers who quit in 2021 cited low pay, no opportunities for advancement, and feelings of having been disrespected (Parker & Horowitz, 2022). Moreover, burnout and lack of engagement are pervasive in the modern workforce (Hemphill, 2022; Clifton, 2017), with only 25% of employees feeling that their employer cares about their well-being (Harter, 2022a). Relatedly, quiet quitting is on the rise, with at least 50% of the U.S. workforce self-identifying as quiet quitters (Harter, 2022b). Taken together, these findings suggest a very real possibility that many employees have a very real negative appraisal of work that goes beyond traditional job satisfaction (or lack thereof).

As such, neglecting the construct of antiwork attitudes could deprive the field of new and interesting insights. Antiwork as a construct operates at a more micro level than the philosophy, primarily existing within the individual's experiences, perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs. As an individual difference variable, the antiwork construct concerns itself with the nuanced and personal dimensions of how individuals perceive and relate to work. It is influenced by various factors, including personal experiences, philosophical leanings, political ideologies, and situational contexts. Examining antiwork as a construct opens opportunities to explore a diverse range of research questions pertaining to individual differences in the appraisal of work. Such questions have the potential to facilitate further understanding of the factors that shape an individual's negative appraisal of work, the consequences of holding such beliefs, and even the potential for interventions to better understand or modify these attitudes.

For example, antiwork attitudes can help researchers and psychologists better understand how people relate to their jobs. Individuals with strong antiwork sentiments may not envision their job as central to their core identity (Scruggs, 2023). Antiwork attitudes may add important nuance to research concerning popular constructs such as job satisfaction and turnover. For example, an individual working in a job they dislike is likely to have a relatively *job-specific* assessment of dissatisfaction. If this employee is low in antiwork sentiments, they may have a more macroscopic understanding that they may find the sought-after satisfaction in other jobs, though not in this *particular* job. Compare this to an employee with antiwork sentiments who has made an evaluation that *work itself*—not just a particular job, but more broadly the traditions, norms, and practices that surround the concept of work—is faulty and contains one or more toxic elements either for them personally or for society more broadly. Practically, employees with a more general negative appraisal of work may go about rectifying their job dissatisfaction differently because they have doubts that *any* job will likely serve their desires or needs. Individuals with antiwork attitudes may not perceive the potential existence of valuable alternatives and may stay in their current jobs even though they do not like them. Or, in the case that they actually do find their job satisfying, they may strive to keep it as they may perceive it to be a rare gem in an otherwise broken institution.

Employees with strong antiwork sentiments may be predisposed to be disengaged at work, as they do not view work as a priority. They may therefore be less likely to display organizational citizenship behaviors and more likely to exhibit counterproductive work or quiet quitting behaviors. Employees who believe the social institution of work is broken may see their antiwork mindset and actions as extracting justice for the system of wrongs that have been foisted onto them. Organizations attempting to remediate this disengagement will likely find their efforts ineffective because employees with antiwork sentiments may perceive organizational attempts to shift worker attitudes as manipulative, exploitative, and/or authoritarian.

Also, individuals with strong antiwork sentiments may be more prone to experiencing higher levels of despair or burnout both within and beyond the workplace. Individuals holding negative perceptions of work who also experience poor work conditions may not see an escape from their current predicaments. This perception could lead to feelings of depression and hopelessness, similar to how individuals who face job insecurity experience distress when they perceive a lack of available alternative jobs (e.g., Taing et al., 2011).

Finally, I-O psychology should consider how antiwork attitudes could be shared within or between organizations. As a movement that exists primarily online, antiwork sentiments can be easily spread through social media via a contagion effect (e.g., Grover et al., 2019). What are the consequences of a society that increasingly believes the institution of work does not serve individuals? Does this phenomenon create an opportunity for work reform? What does that mean for individual organizations and for industries more broadly? Are such sentiments more likely to be proliferated in some industries than others, and what are the downstream effects of that?

Future work on antiwork

Alliger and McEachern state that antiwork is multifaceted and then make the cognitive leap that it is therefore best represented as a philosophy. As we see it, the challenge presented is not that we need to learn how to approach a multifaceted attitude, I-O as a field as a variety of literature to drawn on in order to solve this problem. Rather, the challenge is how to define what is and is not an appraisal of work. Unlike previous studies of appraisals like job satisfaction, which are constrained to a specific situation, "work" is a wider and infinitely more complex construct. Thus, a definition of antiwork would need to consider what parts of work should be included in the appraisal. For example, do appraisals of wage gaps and other such inequitable disparities count? What about opinions regarding social injustices in the workplace, like gender or race discrimination? Discontent around work and childcare conflicts? An individual's own experiences at work and their levels of job satisfaction? The possibilities are many.

Toward a definition of antiwork attitudes

"A negative appraisal of work" is a good preliminary definition of antiwork, but it does not unpack what "work" itself means. Alliger and McEachern (p. 7) refer to the idea that antiwork is a dissatisfaction with the "institution" of work (e.g., "it might be said that antiwork sees the institution of paid employment as a vehicle for maintaining seemingly unjust social power dynamics"). We argue that a definition of an antiwork attitude should reflect an appraisal of one's individual experiences at work *but also* acknowledge the importance of capturing one's experiences and perceptions of the institution of work as it is governed by societal norms, rules, and expectations. As an appraisal of an institution, the definition and subsequent measures of antiwork should capture both formal aspects of work (e.g., laws and policies) and informal components (e.g., traditions and norms).

Alliger and McEachern's tenets of antiwork offer insight into what parts of the institution of work should be included. They observe that antiworkers may express dissatisfaction with rigid schedules, advocating for more flexible and autonomous *approaches to structuring their time*. Antiworkers may reject the *hierarchical power dynamics* within organizations, challenging the authority of managers and supervisors. They may question the notion of wage labor, perceiving it as inherently exploitative and inequitable, and seek alternative economic models that prioritize fair *compensation* and shared *ownership*. Antiwork attitudes may also extend to cultural *norms surrounding productivity, consumerism, and materialism*, as antiworkers often question the pursuit of endless growth and consumption that can lead to negative health or emotional consequences for those who must work to produce those goods. In correspondence with these

observations, antiwork attitudes may be defined as a multifaceted negative appraisal of work, including the negative evaluation of how work is structured (i.e., use of time, ownership, and compensation), the power structures it upholds, and the societal values it perpetuates (i.e., productivity, consumerism, and materialism). These are some of the aspects that we expect would be included in the construct of antiwork attitudes, though it is not an exhaustive list.

A more complete definition of antiwork as an individual construct should capture how personal beliefs and experiences, social interactions, and global perspectives combine to form an antiwork attitude. Not all of the tenets of the focal article have been incorporated here. As Alliger and McEachern observe, antiwork tenets may overlap and do not have a distinct structure. We have attempted to identify themes in the tenets to construct the definition, but the development of an official antiwork definition and measurement scale should systematically tackle construct and content validity. The conceptual and operational definitions of antiwork attitudes need to ensure that the entire construct is represented to facilitate good content validity. Antiwork attitude scale development should explore similarities and differences across cultures and demographic groups (e.g., education, age, and gender). Development of such a scale is outside the scope of this commentary; rather, our goal is to offer a starting point for productive conversations of an antiwork construct.

Nomological network

Research on antiwork attitudes should also consider its nomological network. Antiwork demonstrates some similarities to other job attitudes, such as job satisfaction, work engagement, and organizational commitment, such that they are all subjective, influence well-being, and have motivational implications. The difference between antiwork and other job attitudes is the scope of the evaluation. That is, job attitudes are primarily concerned with one's specific job or work environment, whereas antiwork attitudes represent a critique of work as a broader social and structural institution. The construct of work role centrality likewise represents a broader approach, though this approach focuses more on how important work is to the respondent's life and sense of self, which again differs from the holistic appraisal of the institution of work that is represented in one's antiwork sentiments.

Research addressing antiwork attitudes should also consider distinguishing the construct from disengagement, burnout, justice perceptions, and negative affect. Individuals with antiwork attitudes may experience disengagement and burnout, but being disengaged and burnt out is different from having a general negative appraisal of work. One factor to consider, however, is how personal experiences with burnout, disengagement, and justice may shape one's global appraisal of work. Employees dissatisfied with their jobs may find global negative perceptions to resonate well with their personal experiences of work. In this way, disengagement, burnout, and justice appraisals may be antecedents to antiwork attitudes. Individual differences, such as a personal disposition of negative affect, may also influence these relationships.

From this perspective, we can investigate and better understand antiwork as a distinct construct that emerges through observations of practices and events within and outside of one's organization. For example, a worker's antiwork sentiments might shift after listening to a friend describe an abusive supervisor, even though this experience has nothing to do with their own job or organization. Another worker might develop antiwork sentiment after learning about widespread corporate practices that contribute to carbon emissions, even if those practices are not carried out by their own organization. Additionally, some antiwork sentiments may be based on one's own negative employment experiences. At issue is the extent to which workers generalize those experiences into a general antiwork sentiment. By defining and measuring antiwork sentiment, we can learn about its causes as a distinct attitude that is related to other work attitudes.

Understanding the outcomes of antiwork

It is worth reiterating our position that understanding antiwork attitudes has the potential to improve our understanding of crucial workplace outcomes such as turnover, engagement, organizational citizenship behaviors, counterproductive workplace behaviors, and mental health outcomes, among others. We would expect that antiwork sentiments should influence these outcomes above and beyond attitudes toward one's particular job. Moreover, antiwork sentiments may be more important than job-specific attitudes insofar as an influence on political activism related to work (e.g., labor unions), early retirement, or attempts to achieve financial independence through leisure-based entrepreneurship in which passions are turned into sources of income. To that end, however, although it may be tempting for organizations to use an antiwork measure as a proxy for pro-union attitudes, as noted by a reviewer, we emphasize that it is illegal to discriminate on the basis of intent to unionize (National Labor Relations Board, n.d.). Thus, such an application would represent a misuse of the measure, which should primarily be used to better understand employee and organizational outcomes while facilitating scholarly research and theory development to that end.

Conclusion

No one can deny the viral nature of antiwork as a philosophy and social movement. However, individuals vary in their antiwork attitudes, and this individual-level construct is worth exploring in the I-O literature. The study of antiwork attitudes may help develop an understanding of what drives people to believe in the antiwork philosophy and join social movements or engage in popular work-related social media forums such as r/antiwork. The construct of antiwork can supplement the philosophy by helping to identify to what degree individual employees or applicants experience work as coercive, and to what degree the tenets of the antiwork philosophy are expressed and espoused by individuals. As such, individual differences in antiwork attitudes may explain more global employee goals and outcomes than existing job attitudes. Thus, establishing antiwork attitudes as a construct may facilitate our understanding and evaluation of antiwork as a philosophy and social movement.

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