

# A framework for international comparative analysis of the determinants of low-wage job quality

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## I. Introduction

Much, indeed most, analysis of job quality is carried out within specific national contexts. But globally, the largest differences in job quality are cross national; these comparisons potentially offer the greatest analytical leverage in understanding the determinants of job quality. They also enable us to consider policy options not otherwise considered when we focus on a single national context.

Analysts have proposed varied frameworks for such cross national comparisons of job characteristics and quality (for example Bamber et al. 2004; Hall and Soskice 2001a; Maurice et al. 1986). However, these frameworks have typically been induced from, and applied to, manufacturing and other higher wage or unionized industries. As contributors to a six-country (US and Europe) comparison of low-wage industries, predominantly in services (see Gautié and Schmitt 2010) we became convinced that existing frameworks must be extended in order to adequately characterize and explain differences in low-wage jobs.

In this chapter, we build on, adapt, and extend existing frameworks to understand forces shaping the quality of entry-level, low-wage jobs. We argue that such jobs offer a distinctive and useful vantage point on the sources of cross-national job quality differences. In particular, they spotlight government mandates and supports, and the influence of institutions supporting the reproduction of the workforce. Both macro-level comparative analyses of dominant national institutions and average labor market outcomes, and micro-level comparisons of matched plants or of jobs in the same company, while valuable, leave important analytical gaps.

Meso-level analyses address these gaps; they entail comparing the same *sector* across countries and capturing within-sector, within-country variation as well as cross-country variation. They are useful for understanding variations in job outcomes because they shed particular light on how national-level institutions and organization-level strategies and histories interact. Here we rely on, and build upon, the contributions of meso analysis to develop a flexible framework for cross-national comparisons of job outcomes with broad applicability to low-wage service work--at least in wealthier countries.

A meso-level analytical framework achieves many objectives of comparative analysis but nonetheless encounters three familiar challenges. First, it needs to address the complex interactions between labor supply and demand on the one hand, and institutional and

cultural forces on the other. A second challenge is the need to carefully contextualize institutions to avoid unwarranted presumptions of equivalence. A third challenge is presented by the issue of balancing structural influences with employer agency and strategy, as well as considering reactions of other social actors (e.g. worker organizations) to employer strategies.

We use entry-level retail jobs as the illustrative lens through which to apply existing notions as well as elaborate a meso analysis. We draw on our own fieldwork in the US (Carré and Tilly 2007) as well as comparative analysis conducted jointly with others (Carré et al. 2009, Askenazy et al. forthcoming, Esbjerg et al. 2008) and comparative work by other researchers (Baret et al. 2000, Jany-Catrice and Lehndorff 2005). In this earlier comparative research, we and others have wrestled with the problems highlighted in this chapter, and we build very directly on these earlier insights.

Why retail jobs? As a sector, retail generates high volumes of entry-level, low-wage, jobs in wealthy countries. In several nations, it has taken the lead in labor deployment practices that tend to erode conventional tools for safeguarding labor standards and sustaining the social safety net. It has also led the push for labor deregulation. Retail work per se is service work, indeed increasingly so, as is a growing segment of low-wage jobs (and of jobs in general). Furthermore, on the face of it, service producing processes may be more susceptible to national norms and customs regarding work and consumption than manufacturing processes that offer far greater opportunities to implement machine-driven work processes.

In the remainder of this chapter, we start by briefly reviewing macro and micro comparative approaches, and argue for the unique contributions of a meso-level analysis. We continue by elaborating why examining entry-level jobs presents particular vantage points for analysis. We sketch out some of the key elements of a meso-level analysis, using retail jobs as our example. We review what we have learned from conducting such analysis and sketch out areas that require further exploration. We close with brief conclusions. Throughout, we primarily reference the US and the five European countries (Denmark, France, Germany, Netherlands and the UK) that we studied with other colleagues internationally.<sup>1</sup>

## **II. From macro and micro analysis to meso analysis**

Most international comparisons of work take the form of macro or micro analyses. *Macro* analyses take as their unit of analysis the national system as a whole, typically as captured by a small number of indicators. Economic models of trade and development (Samuelson 1948, Solow 1956) predict economic convergence and early sociological models of industrialization (Kerr *et al.* 1964) identify sources of cross-national convergence in industrial relations and labor regulations. But stubborn evidence of divergence has directed most macro research energy to explaining differences. Scholars have put forward macro comparisons of the broad mode of economic regulation (Hall and Soskice 2001a), the welfare state (Esping-Andersen 1990), labor relations (Bamber et al.

2004), and many other elements of national political economies (Hall and Soskice 2001b, Whitley 1999). Their typical mode of argument is to identify key institutional differences and then draw out their consequences in terms of national averages or of some set of jobs viewed as typical or archetypical. Much recent work takes the form of construction of a new typology based on some overlooked dimension of work (Dieckhoff 2008, Gash 2008, Hult and Edlund 2008). Some macro analyses examine national systems of stratification, segmentation, and inequality (Kalleberg 1988, Kerckhoff 1995). Macro-level analyses provide valuable insights into broad cross-national differences, but because they necessarily focus on a small number of factors and on the average or typical job, they are not well suited to exploring the interaction between varying business strategies and different national institutions.

Micro studies, on the other hand, match a small number of workplaces (often a pair) across different nations, often within the same company, in order to control for as many sources of variation as possible and focus on the impact of differing national contexts (for example Bank Muñoz 2008, Ferner and Almond 2007). Often, this scholarship examines the practices of multinationals abroad to sort out the relative effects of the multinational's home country institutions and those of the host country (Meardi et al. 2009, Royle 2006). Again, these studies have yielded important understandings of how and why jobs differ across national environments. And by construction, they typically omit within-country variation and varied employer strategies.

Meso analyses bring something new to the discussion. Meso analyses examine a single sector across countries, offering a more fine-grained look than macro analyses but capturing intra-industry variation in a way that micro studies do not (e.g. Coiling and Clark 2002, Katz 1997, Katz and Darbishire 2000, Kochan et al. 1997). Such meso analyses are particularly apt at examining the interaction between business strategy and institutions. Much of this work, though not all, looks at unionized sectors, often manufacturing. It is important to extend this level of analysis to less unionized and lower paid service work. In this regard, the contributions of Baret et al. (2000) and Bosch and Lehndorff (2005a) are significant. Both ground their analyses of institutional effects in multiple domains, building on the seminal work of Maurice et al. (1986) on societal effects. Though the two formulations are distinct, they are closely related. Jean Gadrey's (2000) chapter in Baret, Lehndorff, and Sparks specifies domains of market structure, organizational structure, industrial relations, and the domestic sphere (gender roles and social protection). Bosch and Lehndorff (2005b), in their introduction to their edited collection suggest a somewhat different, but related, set of domains: product and consumers, management strategies, labor markets and labor market institutions, and the welfare state and gender relations. The last sphere in each case focuses particular attention on the welfare state and gender relations. In this chapter, we build on these contributions, and most particularly Gadrey's classification of spheres, seeking to strengthen and more fully operationalize a framework derived from this earlier research.

### **III. The particular vantage point of entry-level jobs**

Examining interactions of labor supply and demand with institutions as they affect *entry-level, low-wage* jobs in particular—rather than employment systems as a whole—offers particular expectations. First, we expect that national institutions, differing in their role, function, and ‘bite’, will matter more for such jobs. These are jobs that employers have not upgraded – making it difficult to find an important role for organization-level factors and skill/technology factors in job outcomes. To experience job improvement or to make their job ‘work’ for them, workers in low-wage jobs are likely to rely more than average on standards set in governmental labor regulation, or on aspects of the welfare state.

Gautié and Schmitt (2010) have provided a macro-economy argument for how the volume of low-wage work<sup>1</sup> in a country is affected by the degree of inclusiveness of national labor and social insurance institutions (see also Gallie 2007). A (negative) correlate to inclusiveness is firms’ access to exit options from national labor regulations and social insurance standards. But the focus on a particular sector and jobs inherent in meso analysis warrants moving beyond the broad characterization of national institutions to explore how multiple spheres/domains interact with employer strategies.

Second, we also expect an outsized role for emphasize institutions and social norms that constitute the reproductive sphere (rather than labor regulation or firm strategies). The performance of low-wage work—particularly *service* work—is less determined by labor-market institutions (e.g. training or labor standards) than other work and more affected by other domains, particularly the reproductive domain (gender roles and responsibilities in the household, welfare state institutions, customary practices).

### **V. A meso comparison framework for low-wage work: What we have learned**

We discuss what we have learned about conducting cross national meso analysis of low-wage jobs using retail trade as an example. We also discuss unresolved dilemmas we have encountered and raise questions for future work.

#### ***V. 1. Labor supply and demand...in context***

A typical analytic approach would seek to explain the separate effects of labor supply, labor demand, and institutions on job outcomes. However, we argue that labor supply and labor demand are so crucially shaped by institutional context that this exercise would be misleading. Here we briefly lay out an exposition of labor supply and demand *in theory*, then suggest how thoroughly social institutions condition these nominally economic forces.

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<sup>1</sup> Defined as receiving pay that is two thirds of the economy-wide hourly median.

In a simplified economic model, the demand for any particular type of labor is a derived demand: that is, it channels final demand for goods and services. Thus, it is the outcome of (given) consumer preferences, available technologies of production, workers' potential productivity as a function of their skills and capacities, and the market power of businesses as sellers of goods and as buyers of labor. Similarly simplified, labor supply results from demography (population size, age composition, family structure, immigration) and the preferences of potential workers (in particular, the perceived tradeoff between goods and leisure).

However it is not meaningful to describe these factors determining labor supply and demand in some 'pre-institutional' way. Consumer preferences, an element of Gadrey's (2000) market structure sphere, are molded by norms of prestige and emulation. Technology and the level of worker productivity stem crucially from businesses' choices about the organization of work (Gadrey's organizational structure sphere), choices that involve constant consideration of institutional strictures (the sphere of industrial relations) and 'exit options' from those strictures, such as union avoidance or outsourcing. Thus, although part of the explanation for US retailers' heavy use of short-hour part-time workers is the goal of matching staffing to fluctuating consumer demand, much of the explanation, especially in comparative context, is the lack of restrictions on store opening hours and worker schedule variations, and the low level of worker protection, which allow retailers (and others) to construct part-time work as a second-class status receiving different hourly wages and fringe benefits. Skill development institutions differ greatly across nations. Market power reflects both business structures (corporate governance, systems of finance, nature of business associations) and government regulations (antitrust, but also a variety of other levers: for example, land use practices condition retailers' market clout), thus building on both the market structure and the organizational structure spheres. The availability of workforce groups depends on institutional factors in the domestic sphere such as the availability of child care, requirements and norms regarding schooling, and so on. In short, employers and workers do weigh their tradeoffs but in ways that are thoroughly structured by institutions and norms.

## ***V.2. Thinking through the institutional effects***

As noted, in the simplest sense, institutions include laws and regulations, and labor relations institutions. They also include institutions regulating the reproduction of the workforce. Finally, social norms and customs, whether encoded in law or recognized practice, play an equivalent role. Here we discuss, direct and indirect institutional effects.

### *Direct institutional effects:*

The first point of inquiry are the institutions of labor regulation. The comparison of retail jobs in the US and five European countries provides ample examples of direct

institutional effects on job quality. For example, the US does not mandate hourly wage and benefit parity between full-time and part-time workers whereas the five European countries do. Descending to the national level, France has set a high relative value for the minimum wage whereas the US has failed to raise the minimum wage over long periods of time. In 2006, the French minimum wage stood at 68% of the median wage. In contrast, in 2007, the US minimum wage declined to only 30% of the median wage. The minimum wage affects retail workers in two ways: through entry level wages and the reservation wage. In turn, these differences have much to do with the fact that 42% of retail workers were ‘low-wage’ in the US as compared to 18% in France for 2002 (Carré et al. 2010).

Strong union representation with active collective bargaining has an impact as well. In Denmark, collective agreements enforce significant wage compression that contributes to the low percentage of low-wage retail employment in that country (Esbjerg et al 2008). Collective bargaining coverage was 69% in 2004-2006 (Tijdens et al, 2007). This direct effect has ripple effects as even non-signatory retailers obey the terms of collective agreements. In contrast, US retail collective bargaining coverage is very low (less than 6% in 2007; US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008); the union threat effect is minimal.

There are also striking US-European differences in retail industry scheduling practices, in particular regarding advance notice and the workers’ degree of control over their schedule. While retailers in these countries share some practices, such as heavy reliance on part-time, workers’ day-to-day schedule predictability and control nevertheless varies substantially. For example, in Germany and Denmark, collective bargaining agreements require significant advance notice of schedules (26 and 16 weeks respectively). Though practice falls short of these requirements, retail workers in these countries receive far greater advance notice than US counterparts. The US lacks any mandated notice period; retail workers typically receive three days’ to two weeks’ notice of their schedule, and frequently have schedules adjusted on the spot (though with perfunctory request for permission).

### *Indirect institutional effects*

As expected, institutions affect low-wage work outcomes most in indirect ways. By indirect institutional effects we mean those affecting behavior of key actors—employers or workers—rather than job outcomes per se. Indirect effects occur primarily as institutions interact with social norms and cultural practices, factors that are less formalized than regulations but are impactful all the same. Through these interactions, institutional effects are mediated, reinforced, or weakened.

In short, societal norms have bearing on *how* labor market institutions affect jobs indirectly. In retail, norms governing shopping hours and shopping frequency have clear impacts on worker schedules and overall staffing patterns. For example, limited US labor conditions regulation combined with social norms have driven 24-7 operation for supermarkets, a pattern that drives the high use of short-hour part-time, pressure on full-

time and part-time workers maximize availability, unpredictable schedules, and a generalized pressure on compensation. In the European countries, cultural norms encoded in regulations or collective bargaining have so far yielded more circumscribed opening hours (restricted Sunday openings, no instances of routine 24 hour operation) resulting in less scheduling pressure on workers, less wage depression but, in some countries such as France, concentrated rush shopping hours and thus great workload pressure on cashiers.

In a comparison of cashier jobs in France and US supermarkets, we and co-authors found that French women's preference for full-time work—reinforced by institutions such as child care that make it feasible—and the limited supply of teenagers (who face long hours in school) limit retailers' ability to staff with numerous workers on very short schedules. In contrast, short-hour work is an important tool for US grocery stores which face a ready supply of child-care-constrained women and high school students (with lighter class schedules) who seek short work hours. .<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, performance of entry-level work invariably relies heavily on skills and behaviors acquired outside the labor market, but this pattern is more marked with low-wage *service* work because the work process is less structured through technology. While externally acquired skills and behaviors are important in the performance of higher skill service work as well, training credentials matter far more in these jobs. For example, in retail, behavioral requirements entailing social skills, reliability, timeliness, ability to adjust to varying schedules are seen in part as built-in personality factors. Employers, however, also recognize that they are shaped by household or school commitments, and by national institutions that affect the reproductive sphere (e.g. access to child care or maternity leave).

#### *Social norms may have more direct effects on job outcomes*

Social norms can affect staffing patterns and job outcomes quite directly. We expect that service work settings are particularly susceptible to these effects because 'production' occurs at time of delivery, and is interpersonal in nature. Cashiers are expected to be friendly and chatty in the US, but not Germany.

Social norms can also trigger institutional changes which in turn have job impacts. For example the strong culture of consumer rights in the US has led to regulatory mandates for individual labeling of products. This results in significantly greater tasks and a strong pressure to generate large numbers of jobs at low hourly wages. This is in sharp contrast to the shelf-stacking function in France where electronic labeling of shelves has replaced individual labeling.

### ***V. 3. Employer strategies (and worker responses)***

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<sup>2</sup> In 2007, in the US, 34% of retail workers worked less than 20 hours; as compared to 16% in France (Askenazy et al. 2010).

Naturally, employers and workers do not passively observe and react to the institutions that shape labor outcomes. On the one hand, large corporations or employer associations actively seek to alter, evade, or game institutions to exert more control over their environment while, on the other hand, unions and worker organizations seek to resist these moves. Both groups are strategists. Differing strategies are particularly important in explaining variation *within* countries, but particular strategies also have varied degrees of success in different institutional environments. Here the focus is employers, who generally dispose of more resources in this contest.

A common channel for strategic action by employers is innovation, both in technology and in management technique. Wal-Mart provides examples of both. Because of its mastery of advanced logistical technology, Wal-Mart was able to dominate retail in the US and Mexico via rapid organic expansion, altering market structure and evading antitrust regulation in both countries (Wrigley 2002, Tilly 2006). On the side of management technique, Wal-Mart developed a low-compensation, paternalistic model incorporating evangelical Christian notions of ‘servant leadership’ in white rural areas of the US South, which has been highly successful in repelling attempts to unionize in the US, but far less so in some other countries (Moreton 2009, Tilly 2007). Of course, worker organizations also strive to develop more effective organizational models in order to reshape industrial relations; for example, a retail union in New York City has used community-based unionism and global solidarity to win unexpected victories (Gleason 2011).

Sometimes a key innovation simply involves newly expanded use of an industrial relations exit option. Thus, in the US, retailers’ tilt toward short-hour part-time employment served to evade both norms associated with full-time work, and unions focused on serving full-time workers. In Germany, likewise, retailers’ rapid expansion of short-hour ‘mini-jobs’ has allowed them to dodge normative and collective bargaining restrictions as well as achieve savings from tax exemptions. In both cases, organizational innovations pioneered in retail have subsequently diffused to other sectors.

Most fundamentally, businesses have a choice among competitive strategies. In US retail, Wal-Mart’s ‘low road’ approach based on low costs and prices is well known. Among Wal-Mart’s competitors, we found many attempts to develop some variety of the high road via greater product variety and quality, or better service—though in most cases this was coupled with cost-cutting in ways that often undermined attempts to upgrade. Other, less common strategies included achieving greater operational efficiency through a highly paid, experienced, and highly productive workforce, and locating in small rural communities underserved by other major retailers. In France, in contrast, the high minimum wage forecloses low-wage competition, and competition based on efficiency or the exploitation of geographic monopolies is far more common (Askenazy *et al.* forthcoming). Institutional configurations thus channel competitive strategies, but do not fully determine them.

At a certain point, strategy can move from artfully responding to institutions, to seeking to shape the institutions themselves. In the US, associations of retailers, fast food restaurants, and other businesses fight for a lower minimum wage; unions fight for a higher one. Unions and allies seek to use land-use restrictions and approval processes to set required labor standards for new stores (again, Wal-Mart and other ‘big box’ chains are major targets).

Furthermore, economic actors can have an impact on *consumer* norms, once more altering the market structure. The late-2000s economic crisis has led retail customers to focus much more on price, but the degree to which this strategy will persist as economies improve will depend significantly on the marketing success of differing business models (*Planet Retail* 2010). Meanwhile, major US unions have sought, with some success, to make worker treatment a criterion in consumers’ choice of where to shop.

## VI. Conclusions

In this chapter we have reviewed how a cross national meso analysis framework might be applied to understanding effects of institutions, norms, and employer strategies on job outcomes. In this section, we explore challenging issues for analysis to address.

*High road and low road.* Job characteristics and job quality differ within countries as well as across them, and even within local labor markets governed by the same local and national institutions. One reason for this variation is simply ability to pay. But we and other researchers have long for the importance of a distinction between the ‘high road’ based on better compensation, more investment in skills as well as greater productivity; and the ‘low road’ (see, for example, Appelbaum, Bernhardt, and Murnane 2003). Cross-national comparisons should allow added perspective on the degree to which this dichotomy corresponds to workplace reality. What are the circumstances that permit better outcomes? Addressing within-country differences, some researchers (e.g. Batt 2000, Cappelli and Crocker-Heftler 1996) have maintained that distinct market niches are often important in underpinning these differences, and we have argued that this is an important element of the oft-cited difference in job quality between Wal-Mart and Costco (Carré, Tilly, and Holgate 2006). Is it more accurate to characterize job variation as a spectrum or scatter than as a distribution segmented between high road and low road? And how do these patterns differ by sector; is the story different for low-wage service jobs than for higher-wage manufacturing ones?

*Resilient social norms?* Our discussion of the role of social norms and customers, and particularly our accounts of how they interact with institutions and contribute to the latter’s indirect effects on firm behavior and job outcomes, provide explanations of where things are, and how they got to be this way. There remain ambiguities about the predictive capability of this approach. Of course, history matters either through complex influences or simply path dependency. Nevertheless, accounts that give importance to social norms and customs—particularly those not encoded in law—must be held to special scrutiny. Social norms and customs can be eroded, amended or even overthrown

at the instigation of employers. While change in social norms is expected progressively over time, sometimes it can occur surprisingly fast.

Important questions then follow. What is the predictive power of analyses that hinge on the interaction of institutions and social norms? Do such analyses help reasonably predict what will happen to jobs? How resilient are norms that safeguard job quality in the face of forces that erode job quality? And when looking across national settings, how can we tell where protective social norms will remain strong in the foreseeable future? What else should be assessed in order to make a reasonable prediction? Do countries fare better where there is a good 'fit' among different areas of regulations and with existing norms?

*Industrial convergence reloaded.* Debates about the likelihood of the convergence of the nature of work in industrial societies date back at least to the eighteenth century and Adam Smith's (year) *Wealth of Nations*. Despite the appeal of convergence arguments, researchers have consistently found that national institutions do indeed put work on divergent paths. Thus, our emphasis on the importance of institutions is certainly not a new one. However, our focus on consumer services, and retail in particular, as distinct from the manufacturing adds some new twists to the argument. On the one hand, it is hard to think of anything more culturally embedded than the merchandise offered by retail and consumer services: food, clothing, prepared meals, hair styling, and the like. Moreover, such services are predominantly place-based: while apparel or food can be manufactured distant from the consumer by workers unfamiliar with local tastes and customs, it continues to mostly (despite the online sales exception) be sold via direct interaction with the customer in ways that assume knowledge of those tastes and customs. This portion of the 'technology' of retail sales is less likely to homogenize than manufacturing production processes. On the other hand, the global penetration of giant retailers (starting with Wal-Mart, Carrefour, Metro, Tesco, which between them sell in over 50 countries containing the great bulk of the world's population) and the rapid diffusion of technological innovations in retailing and food preparation (especially in logistics and point-of-sale), suggest powerful forces for convergence. So a question worthy of further exploration is just how the convergence-divergence dialectic differs for place-based consumer services.

In this chapter, we have attempted to extend the argument that national institutions continue to matter to job outcomes when we consider specific jobs in particular sectors. Our contention is that meso-level analysis, comparing particular *sectors* across countries, sheds added light on *how* institutions matter in differing circumstances. We have focused on low-wage service work, using entry-level jobs in retail trade as examples. We have sought to illustrate that low-wage job outcomes are more susceptible to cross national differences in labor market regulations than those involving other kinds of jobs, precisely because workers lack other protections. In general, low-wage workers depend more on national institutions than on employer practices or organizational characteristics for improvements in wages and working conditions. Because low-wage jobs draw heavily on 'non-standard workers,' (that is, secondary workers) reproductive institutions shaping the availability of women and young people weigh particularly heavily on job outcomes. And because service is "produced" partly in person, characteristics of service work are more

prone to be affected by cross national differences in norms, for example those regarding service style and intensity.eds

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## **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> Maarten van Klaveren and Dorothea Voss-Dahm, and Philippe Askenazy Jean-Bapiste Berry and Sophie Prunier-Poulmaire, with publications pending (see references section in the chapter).