

IWER: Selected Doctoral Theses

“Tasks, Stratification and Occupational Change: Evidence from the Legal Profession”

Author: Christine Riordan (2019)

Committee: Paul Osterman (chair), Thomas Kochan, Emilio Castilla, Susan Silbey

Abstract:

This dissertation consists of three essays on change in the legal profession, specifically focusing on the organization of legal tasks and implications for occupational trajectory of lawyers in large corporate firms. The first essay develops a theory-based argument for conceptualizing occupational change through market dynamics and task organization. I show how incongruities in law firm business models and the changing nature of firm-client relationships affect the division of labor within law firms, leading to work and task reorganization that eventually extends beyond firm boundaries—as evidenced by the growing use of third-party suppliers (e.g., temporary staff, outsourcing firms) by law firms and their corporate clients. This reorganization of legal tasks is associated with changing occupational trajectories within law firms as well as the broader profession.

The second essay investigates how the organization of tasks drives occupational change and stratification among entry-level lawyers in large firms. An emerging model of task-based stratification in work design and organizational scholarship posits that through their technical, social and subjective characteristics, tasks underpin divergent outcomes among those who perform them. I draw from qualitative data collected in the New York City and Boston legal labor markets to show how the disaggregation of tasks, and their allocation to distinct groups of lawyers, shapes divergent opportunity structures along these dimensions. Specifically, these include opportunity structures related to skill, social resources, and nuanced signals of professional status, such the demonstration of professional expertise and autonomy. This reinforces existing patterns of stratification among lawyers, albeit in new ways.

The third essay builds upon the aforementioned qualitative findings, assessing task-based stratification through qualitative and quantitative data. Using a nationally-representative survey of lawyers in large firms and their work, I test the relationship between tasks that differ by status—a key predictor of task-based stratification—and the accrual of social and relational resources that are crucial for professional advancement in law. My findings show that certain high- and low-status tasks are associated with three forms of social resources, mostly in the expected direction. Yet exceptions and nuance in these relationships suggests further refinement and new conditions of the model. These findings raise implications for task-based stratification and stratification in the legal profession more generally.

Essays on Job Search, Unemployment and Regulatory Compliance”

Author: Gökçe Başbuğ (2017)

Committee: Roberto Fernandez (co-chair), Thomas Kochan (co-chair), Emilio Castilla, Paul Osterman, Ofer Sharone, Susan Silbey

Abstract:

This dissertation is composed of four essays, each studying limits to the means that are famously known to be effective. In the first essay, I investigate the effect of using social ties on the quality of opportunities pursued in job search. Using fixed effects models, I show that when the job seeker uses contacts, she pursues jobs that pay less than the jobs she pursues through formal methods. In addition, the analysis show that networks limit the geographical and occupational diversity of jobs pursued.

In the second essay, using a mixed methods approach I examine how the negative emotional toll of long-term unemployment (LTU) is shaped by the interaction of gender and marital status. The interviews reveal a pattern with more marital tensions that exacerbate the emotional toll of LTU reported by married men than married women. The analysis of survey data show that overall marriages are helpful to the wellbeing of both unemployed men and women. Yet, for married men but not for married women, the analysis revealed that the significance of the benefits derived from marriage disappears once household income is controlled.

The third essay examines whether introducing choice into a mandatory training program makes any difference in Unemployment Insurance recipients' job search performance. Using a field experiment design, I compare job search outcomes of individuals who have unconstrained workshop choices to others who only have a constrained option. Analyses show that providing the option of selecting which workshop to attend does not improve outcomes for unemployed. In the fourth essay, using data from safety inspections in laboratories at a large university, I investigate whether conducting semi-annual inspections and reporting findings back to responsible constituencies decreases the number of violations. The analyses show that the Environmental, Health, and Safety Management System did not reduce the number of violations. Rather, the results show a widening gap between compliant and non-compliant scientists. Using both lab-level quantitative data and interviews with inspectors and EHS personnel, I delineate the factors that impede the success of the system.

“(Trans)National Rules and Local Performances: Sustainability Standards in the Cocoa Sector of Ghana, Ecuador, and Brazil”

Author: Maja Tampe (2016)

Committee: Thomas Kochan (chair), Richard Locke, Michael Piore, Matthew Amengual, Rodrigo Canales

Abstract:

Sustainability standards have been construed as potent solutions for agricultural producers in the Global South to solve major issues around poverty, inequality, bad labor and environmental conditions, and they have been spreading rapidly. Standards promise better livelihoods for producers through higher prices, farmer organization, and compliance with improved labor, environmental, and managerial practices. Yet actual improvements occur inconsistently. This dissertation examines this inconsistency by asking under what conditions and through what mechanisms sustainability standards improve livelihoods for producers in their labor and economic conditions.

I find that producers, themselves, must make standards work and discover how to translate transnational rules into locally suitable practices. This process of discovery comprises two challenges: to upgrade by adding value to the adopting rural enterprise and to turn rules into practices. Overcoming these challenges is contingent on two conditions. First, adopters must integrate this process of discovery with a high-performance work system that mobilizes the skills and motivation of employees for productivity and quality gains. Second, adopters' learning depends on external reinforcement, positive through support for learning or negative through a threat of sanctions. The empirical material for this argument stems from a multi-method study of sustainability standards in the cocoa sector of Ghana, Ecuador, and Brazil. A five-year panel study from Ghana shows that, on average, livelihood improvements with standards are underwhelming. In Ecuador, my findings from comparing two certified farmer groups show that the path to better outcomes leads through upgrading, and not through standards by themselves. In Brazil, evidence from a participant-observation and interview-based study with cocoa plantations demonstrates that adopters must be able to proactively turn rules into on-the-ground behaviors.

Theoretically, this dissertation contributes a practice and labor lens to transnational private governance research and, in doing so, theorizes relationships between adopters' practices, private standard implementation, and market and regulatory contexts. Empirically, I propose that mitigating the weaknesses of private governance cannot be solved by adding more public regulation or more governance from buyers. Instead, I recommend to support agricultural producers by complementing transnational rules with local communities of practice in order to speed up processes of upgrading and discovery.