

Good Work Project Report Series, Number 7

Good Work in a Complex World: A Cross Cultural Comparison

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The Good Work Project

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Since 1995, three teams of investigators, under the direction of Howard Gardner, of Harvard University, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi of Claremont Graduate University, and William Damon of Stanford University, have been researching the ways in which leading professionals in a variety of domains carry out good work. "Good work" is used in a dual sense: 1) work that is deemed to be of high quality and 2) work that is socially responsible. Through intensive, face-to-face interviews, the researchers have investigated several domains, including journalism, genetics, business, jazz music, theater, philanthropy, and higher education. Pilot studies have been conducted of medicine and the rapidly emerging domain of "cyberlaw", with plans to explore these areas more fully in the future.

In addition to this central line of study, several other related lines of investigation have been launched:

1. The Origins of Good Work project is an examination of teenagers who excel in extracurricular activities.
2. The Dedicated Young Professionals Study focuses on those who have just begun (or will soon begin) promising professional careers.
3. Good Work in Interdisciplinary Contexts. Pilot studies of new arts/science media and of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab have been completed. Plans are underway to study interdisciplinary work at the pre-collegiate, college, and research institution level.
4. The Role of Contemplative Practices investigates the ways in which contemplation/meditation influence how professionals carry out work.
5. Encouraging Good Work in Journalism. This project, carried out in conjunction with the Committee of Concerned Journalists, is currently developing a "traveling curriculum" for use in newsrooms around the country.
6. Good Work as Transmitted through Lineages examines how the principle of doing good work is passed down through continuous generations of teachers to students or from mentors to less experienced professionals.
7. Good Work in Other Societies is a project spearheaded by colleagues at Denmark's Royal Danish School of Education that investigates good work in Denmark and Latvia. In the future, additional international components will be added.

The Project expects to issue a variety of books, reports, and related documentation. The present series, launched in early 2001, includes reports on several of the lines of research mentioned above. For further information on the Good Work Project, contact Professor Howard Gardner's office at 617-496-4929, via email at hgasst@harvard.edu, or through regular mail at 201 Larsen Hall, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, MA, 02138.

Papers On Good Work
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1. The Project on Good Work: A Description (April, 2000), Howard Gardner, Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi, and William Damon.
2. The Ethical Responsibilities of Professionals (July, 1998), Howard Gardner
3. The Empirical Basis of Good Work: Methodological Considerations (June, 1997), Howard Gardner, Anne Gregory, Mihalyi Csikzentmihalyi, William Damon, and Mimi Michaelson.
4. Good Work in Business (August, 2000), Kim Barberich and Howard Gardner.
5. Good Work Among Dedicated Young Professionals (July, 2000), Becca Solomon, Greg Feldman, and Marcy LeLacheur.
6. Contemplation and Implications for Good Work in Teaching (August, 1998), Laurinda Morway, Jeff Solomon, Mimi Michaelson, and Howard Gardner.
7. Good Work in a Complex World: A Cross Cultural Comparison (November, 1998), Hans Henrik Knoop and Howard Gardner.
8. Opportunities and Obstacles for Good Work in Medicine (August, 2000), Jeff Solomon, Jennifer DiBara, Sara Simeone, and Dan Dillon.
9. New Media Art: A New Frontier or Continued Tradition? (January, 2001), Kaley Middlebrooks.
10. The Origins of Good Work (April, 2000), Wendy Fischman and Grace Lam.
11. Good Work among Albert Schweitzer Fellows (April, 1999), Wendy Fischman, Becca Solomon, and Deborah Shutte.
12. High Abilities and Excellence: A Cultural Perspective (2000), Jin Li
13. Interdisciplinary Research and Education: Preliminary Perspectives from the MIT Media Laboratory (January, 2001), Dan Dillon.
14. Good Work in Cyberlaw (August, 2000), Evan Zullo.
15. Getting Kids, Parents, and Coaches on the Same Page (2000), Becca Solomon and Howard Gardner.

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I. Introduction

In 1996 an informal collaboration was initiated between Project Zero, in the Harvard University Graduate School of Education, and the Royal Danish School of Educational Studies (RDSES). Called “Good Work”, the project is a study of socially responsible creativity and leadership. This collaboration has resulted in various interesting preliminary insights that are now being examined in greater depth through a formalized collaboration between our institutions and the other partner institutions in the Good Work project: Stanford University and Claremont Graduate University. In this paper we attempt to illuminate some of the key features in the project. We hope by this presentation to evoke interest among potential future funding partners and colleagues alike.

II. Background: The Dissociation between Expertise and Morality

Every society has its major spheres of concern, among them the assurance of survival, the care of the sick and weak, the preservation and transmission of knowledge, the upbringing and education of the young generations, the securing of justice, and the psychological well-being of the population. While these concerns are perennial, the manner in which they have been addressed has changed over time. In traditional societies, responsibility for these spheres was often shared and overlapping across the population; in contemporary societies, these concerns have become largely the responsibility of separate groups of skilled professionals. By the same token, in traditional

societies the responsibility for these spheres has featured an ethical or moral dimension; in contemporary societies, the realms of expertise, skill, and inventiveness have become quite sharply distanced from the ethical or moral concerns of the majority.

Nowhere have these trends been more fully realized than in the contemporary West, and particularly in the United States. The West has done a remarkable job of divorcing the knowledge and skills involved in major spheres of endeavor from the beliefs and values involved in securing an ethical and morally responsible society. It was less than four hundred years ago that Galileo was brought before the Inquisition because of his heterodox scientific claims, and forced to renounce them; and well into the last century, school and college teachers were expected to be moral exemplars for the community. Now, however, we (as a society) embrace the ideal of the skilled and disinterested professional, and are even made uncomfortable by the intrusion of ethical concerns into the workplace of the professional. Angered by reports that J. Robert Oppenheimer felt guilty about his association with the atomic bomb, President Harry Truman muttered to his Secretary of State: "Don't you bring that fellow around again. After all, all he did was to make the bomb. I'm the guy who fired it off."

In many ways the dissociation between professional skill and a concern with the moral (and the moralistic) has been a benign development. Individuals have come increasingly to be judged in terms of their knowledge and skill and not by the virtue of some kind of possibly irrelevant set of moral standards. The

control of thought once in the hands of totalitarian regimes has been replaced by encouragement of the unfettered exploration of the unknown. Professions have been largely depoliticized, while market forces continue expanding into new territories, apparently aiming to dominate every public sphere of human interaction. In these settings, cutting-edge work has been fostered as never before. Many of us are the beneficiaries of a world in which there is protection from disease, ready transportation and communication, and the opportunity to follow our own personal beliefs and aspirations, without fear that we will lose our livelihoods or even our lives.

III. A Period of Malaise and Alienation

Despite the positive dividends of this separation of spheres, the current situation in society has come to worry most thoughtful observers, irrespective of political perspective. Indeed, in virtually every realm, there are signs of distress as well as a sense of growing distance between those at the forefront of domains and the remainder of the population. The crises in medicine and law are well documented, as practitioners worry about their autonomy and the unruly forces of the market, while clients express frustration with the distrust of the once-admired professionals. Distress with journalism, and with the media more generally, is nearly universal; the newsworthy appeal of controversy and the lure of scandal have seemingly overwhelmed any sense of objectivity, truthfulness, or sympathy for the human subjects of the story. Educators are condemned for the high costs of education and the poor performances of their

students. At the same time, educators themselves are confused about what should be taught during a time in which both the cartography of knowledge and the structure of the workplace are being continually redefined.

Those involved in “cutting edge” work feel these strains as well. There is a widespread belief that certain contemporary art forms, such as painting and classical music, lack strong directions; they are not meaningful to the larger public, and especially to the younger audiences on whose support their future depends. Politicians ridicule avant-garde work and find at least tacit support for their uncomprehending position. Scientists may find their own work of continuing interest, but the merits of “big science” are being challenged; reports of fraud and merciless, destructive competition are widespread. And there is little chance that support for research will continue on the scale to which scientists have become accustomed during the last half century.

Many factors have been proposed as possible sources of the current uneasy situation that characterizes innovators as well as professionals, more broadly speaking. For example, both leading professionals and thoughtful members of the public point to the loss of common values; the separation of moral concerns from effective practice; the emergence of a professional climate that is market-driven rather than client-oriented; training that focuses on the transmission of knowledge apart from any sense of underlying responsibilities to the profession or the community; institutional rewards that privilege bottom-line, short-term performance at the expense of a broader sense of responsibility. Such authorities as Ulrich Beck, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, William Damon,

Amitai Etzioni, John Gardner, Anthony Giddens, Jane Jacobs, Per Schultz Jørgensen, Peter Kemp, Christopher Lasch, Jane Mansbridge, Geoff Mulgan, Robert Putnam, Peter M. Senge, Ebbe Vestergaard and Cornell West, point to the rapid fraying of those communal ties that once counterbalanced a focus on the bottom line.

Observers may still prefer to view all this as a problem of special relevance in the US. Scandinavia is seen as being more egalitarian and socially balanced. Eastern Europe is seen as having other and more basic needs to attend to before undertaking large-scale investigations on this matter.

However, for good reasons, we do not subscribe to such objections. As sociologist Anthony Giddens has put it: “If there is one theme which unites nearly all authors who have written on the self in modern society, it is the assertion that the individual experiences feelings of powerlessness in relation to a diverse and large-scale social universe.”¹ The problems created by the dissociation between expertise and morality are truly global concerns. Clearly, they are not just going to disappear by themselves. It is naïve to think that the alienation and sense of powerlessness in people is not undermining society and the communal values that ultimately conditions its very existence. We are confronted with one of the most fundamental and disturbing cycles of modern times, and must deal with it as such. And we must admit that we are only at the very beginning of understanding in detail².

¹ Giddens, A. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. 1991 p. 188.

² For comprehensive outlines of new understandings across the domains, see:

IV. Attempts to Deal with this State of Affairs

In light of the factors alluded to here, many thoughtful observers and activists have sought (and continue to seek) to ameliorate this unsettling situation. Interventions have assumed various forms. Professional schools have embraced courses on ethics and morals. In many countries, organizations devoted to social responsibility have sprung up in spheres ranging from business to medicine to education. Concepts such as “civic journalism”, the “lawyer-statesman” or even a “Hippocratic oath” for professors are gaining favor.

Much faith is invested in establishing higher and firmer standards at national and international levels across the domains, aiming to balance the untamed forces of the evolving new markets everywhere. These approaches are often based on traditional bureaucratic expertise rather than on the insights of the professionals creating domains, although efforts to balance top-down and bottom-up strategies are emerging. In fact, one of the keys to improved quality of professional life and quality of work may well rest in this balance. Ironically, reports of failing reforms and the lowering of professional standards following premature governmental interventions are many, which, moreover, leads us

Csikszentmihalyi, M: *Creativity – Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*. HarperCollins Publishers, 1996.

Damon, W. *Greater Expectations*. The Free Press, 1995.

Gardner, H. *The Disciplined Mind*. Simon & Schuster, 1999.

Vestergaard, E. & Knoop, H. H. *Kreativitet og lederskab i uddannelsessystemet*. DLH, 1999.

back to the essential understanding of the importance of the individual's commitment to societal matters.

Indeed, we believe that one key to understanding these complex matters is held by those actually prevailing in this turbulence: highly creative individuals. These individuals often have the ideas and competence to inspire and enable peers and followers, and are often capable of handling the social dilemmas felt so strongly by those at the cutting edge where competition is often most severe. These are the people whom we are studying in the *Good Work Project*, which we shall briefly introduce in the following section.

V. The Good Work Project

Based on their previous work, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi of Claremont Graduate University, William Damon of Stanford University, and Howard Gardner of Harvard University have developed a new approach in response to the above critique. We believe that the Good Work approach provides important new leverage on this state of affairs. Hans Henrik Knoop of RDSES, is the first non-American collaborator, responsible for Scandinavian and Latvian branches of the project.

After having been introduced to the project in mid 1996, Hans Henrik Knoop of RDSES, was invited to conduct a number of pilot-interviews to evaluate the early versions of the US interview protocols in Eastern and Western European contexts. Approximately 25 interviews were conducted from November, 1996 to July, 1997. In September, 1997 results of the effectiveness of protocols in Denmark and Latvia were presented to and discussed with the U.S. team. Careful attempts were made to gradually internationalize the project within Scandinavian and Latvian contexts. At present this internationalization is in its early stages. Already some highly intriguing cross-cultural insights are emerging from the experiences of the many creative and socially committed individuals whom we have interviewed.

In Denmark, so far the main focus has been on the educational domain. Approximately 40 educators, as well as experts on creativity and ethics, are being interviewed in-depth to understand the minds of some of those who are most influential in selecting and transmitting cultural content to the next

generation. Truly fascinating insights about education and educators are emerging, which we expect to begin publishing shortly. Studies have also been done in journalism, for which we expect to complete 20 interviews with leading figures by May, 1999. In parallel, links have been established to geneticists and business people, whose domains we hope our funding will allow us to study.

In Latvia leading figures in many domains have been interviewed to gain preliminary insights about the appropriateness of the protocol that we use, and to “test” the relevance of the study among Latvians. Approximately 35 interviews have been conducted so far, and the response has been positive overall. A number of more or less foreseeable, culturally determined problems have also occurred, which we are currently addressing.

For obvious reasons, the cross-cultural comparisons from both countries hold a great deal of potential for new understanding. A few special aspects deserve to be highlighted:

- 1) Under the influence of a 50 year heritage of “Soviet-Union-membership”, where creativity and breaking out of the order often would have severe, negative personal consequences, Latvia has a very special interest in understanding creativity on the one hand, and in developing new, sustainable communities, on the other. Of course, this double interest is shared with every post-communist country. Our preliminary findings indicate the tremendous importance of addressing these issues in a firm yet respectful, manner, and the necessity of working around the many practical and cultural obstacles with sensitivity. In fact, many Latvians are not yet entirely comfortable about

personal communication with researchers. On the one hand this points even more to the importance of our study, and yet, on the other, demands treading delicately in this context.

2) Like many other countries, Denmark is currently struggling to reform its entire educational system to meet the needs and demands of the third millennium. As such, our study of the world of creative educators may come at the right time. Interestingly, by the same token, it must be mentioned how Denmark's success as "the most pleasant place to live in the world", according to recent large-scale studies on quality of life, might well be understood as, at least in part, a consequence of a relatively balanced and egalitarian model of society. Everyone is actually expected to be educated to his or her full potential, at the cost of initial benefits for the intellectual elite, which, as it turns out, is *not* an obstacle to ultimately maintaining their status in their respective domains. This indicates the possibility of actually combining broad care for the weaker without losing the competitive edge, leading us back into the heartland of the Good Work Project: our aim to contribute to a more socially balanced and harmonious world through the understanding of the lives of creative and socially committed exemplars of our societies.

Every care is taken to ensure the compatibility of the various methods applied across the domains within each country and cross-culturally, and ongoing adjustments are taking place.

VI. Conclusion

As we continue our work of understanding creativity, leadership, and the scope of good work displayed in the lives of our subjects, it is becoming increasingly clear that our results will not merely be of scholarly interest and of relevance to leading decision makers in the professions. We anticipate that insights about learning, thinking, creativity, values, and organizational development across the domains and professions of our global society will have broad applicability. New understandings are emerging about the formative background, education, mentoring, creative leverages, and constraints experienced by the creative individuals, and the understandings may apply to many people. We hope that the Good Work Project in itself will exemplify the potential of serving our community through the study of individuals.

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