

How to Thrive While on Sabbatical: a review of evidence

Abstract

The case for a universal right to sabbaticals can be made on a number of grounds. What is not known, however, the conditions under which people are most likely to thrive on sabbatical. The paper reviews the evidence concerning satisfaction following various exits from the labour market (both temporary and permanent), before proposing a number of ways in which sabbatical satisfaction could be researched.

Introduction

My starting point is the belief that individuals and households should have as much freedom as possible to determine their own choices as to how they run and plan their lives. Any liberal democracy should be committed to promoting this kind of liberty. As things stand at present, this is certainly not so in the world of work. You are not expected - or even allowed - to take paid work if you are below a certain age or above a certain age. If you are between these ages, you are expected to work - unless you are sick, severely disabled or bringing up very young children. There are a number of variations on this. In the UK, if you are mother and have a high earning partner you have the choice to take paid work or not, but if you are single mother on welfare benefits it is increasingly expected that you should take paid work. If you are about to give birth or have just given birth, most countries have maternity benefits of one kind or another, with various rules about how long the benefit will last, how long your employer must keep your job open for you, and so on (McRae 1991). In the UK, the circumstances in which parents and people with disabilities can exit the labour market change each time the welfare regulations change. The point I am making is that entering and leaving the labour market, temporarily or permanently, is not a free choice, but heavily influenced by the state.

So, the state dragoons some of its citizens into paid work who would rather not, while there are doubtless others who would like to leave their jobs - at least for a while - but cannot. Quite why the state should be so obsessed with controlling its citizens' lives to no obvious purpose is not something I want to discuss here. Rather, I want to point to an obvious solution, which is for the state to provide the means by which people can enter and exit the labour market as and when they wish. This could be enabled by a basic income substantial enough to enable people to take time away from paid work, or it could be enabled by a state-funded sabbatical scheme in which up to a certain number of years per lifetime can be taken away from paid work (one year in seven fits the original biblical idea). Either way, people can pursue unpaid projects as and when they wish, rather than as and when the state dictates and only for purposes of which the state approves.

Regular full-time paid employment is a smaller and smaller proportion of many people's lifespan, often from years 25 - 55 out of a total lifespan of perhaps 85 years. That seems to be as much as late capitalist economies seem able to offer them in the way of paid work. Is it really so politically unacceptable that they should be able to exercise more control as to which 30 years out the 85 they work? Can one call a society free in which that choice is not made freely? In so far as sabbaticals enable some over-busy people to take time out, thus releasing paid jobs for those who

want them, the requirements not only of liberty but also of the more equal distribution of paid and unpaid activity will be met.

To thrive or not to thrive?

I won't pursue the argument for sabbaticals any further here. It has been well made by Claus Offe and Johan de Deken (1999), and I am highly sympathetic to it. My concern here is rather different: under what conditions do people thrive while on sabbatical? Evidence concerning retirement, motherhood and other self-chosen exits from paid work indicate that individuals do not necessarily thrive on non-market activity any more than they necessarily thrive on marketised activity. If we are to maximise the benefit of instituting sabbaticals, or a generous basic income that makes self-chosen sabbaticals possible, we need to know the circumstances in which people are most likely to benefit from them. I had hoped to be able to review the relevant literature, but - the pressures of work and the lack of a sabbatical being what they are - I haven't had time to do that yet! Instead, I will briefly discuss the major exits from the labour market, and list some notable examples of sabbaticals and sabbatical-like schemes which could be researched. My hope is that those attending the session will be able to provide me with more information than I currently have.

Humans are, and long have been, ambivalent about work, both paid and unpaid. In several European languages, the word 'labour' signifies not only dignity but also both the pains of childbirth and to stumble under a burden. In the Genesis story of the Garden of Eden, long before industrial capitalism, work is portrayed as both a blessing and a curse. In capitalism, in addition to a wage, paid work provides all the social and psychological benefits listed in Jahoda's (1972) classic study *Marienthal* - it provides regular activity, it structures the week, it enlarges social experience beyond the family, it enables the worker to participate in a collective effort, it provides status and identity. At the same time, as E.P. Thompson (1967) and others have demonstrated, the very structure and regularity of factory and office work has been resisted by workers ever since the industrial revolution, while more recently feminists and others have pointed to the psychological damage done by the notion that we are defined by our work. So, if paid work can have very definite plusses and minuses, so too can release from paid work.

Motherhood

This is, in fact, what we find. Those who leave paid work in order to have a baby can be thrilled at being involved in something inherently more meaningful than working 9 - 5 at the office. They may value the ability to structure their time as they please - or as their mewling and puking infant pleases, but in so far as this infant is part of them, this is not the alienation of being structured by an employer. Yet at the same time, the things that at-home mothers of young children complain of are precisely the things that Jahoda found demoralise unemployed people: the lack of a structure to the week, the restriction of social activity, the loss of status and identity. Oakley (1976) in particular has documented the low status of childcare and housework, though she also shows the benefits of being able to structure one's own time.

Education

What about leaving paid work in order to take a full-time course of study? My impression as a university teacher is that mature students are very much better organised than students who come straight from school. This is not necessarily just because of having learnt time-management in their paid employment, but may also be due to the necessity to organise one's time when one has had to balance work and family commitments. On the down side, however, study skills learned decades ago at school may be very rusty. And having not done particularly well at school, self-confidence may take a dent as the older person moves from the world of work to that

of college. It can easily take a year or more for the older student to gain the study skills and self-confidence to enable them to thrive in the second or third year of their course.

Unemployment

My own research on unemployment (Walter 1985) critiqued Jahoda's argument that unemployment is necessarily demoralising. I sought out a number of people who were unemployed yet content, happy even, in order to discover what was the key to their contentment. What I found, in a way consistent with Jahoda, is that what demoralises is not the lack of paid work per se, but the lack of money, the lack of meaningful activity, the lack of status, the lack of social contacts, and especially the inability to plan. My happily unemployed interviewees usually had managed to find an extra little bit of money (from working illegally, or from relatives) which enabled them to fund other meaningful unpaid activities, which in turn provided status, identity and social life - and often in the long run, a full-time paid job.

One of the most difficult things for unemployed people is not knowing how long their unemployment will last. In one study of how firms responded to the need to reduce their labour force (McKenna & Fryer 1984), workers who were laid off with the commitment that they could go back to their jobs after eleven weeks fared a lot better psychologically than those made permanently redundant. Many of the laid-off workers spent the time renovating their homes, fixing their cars and doing all the things that you put off for a rainy day but actually require a rainy month. Effectively, they treated it as a sabbatical, because they were able to plan. This particular study provides evidence that sabbaticals are a user-friendly way for a firm, or an entire economy, to reduce its overall labour force.

Retirement

There is a large literature on retirement which I am not at present competent to summarise. As with those who leave work to have children, some thrive, others get depressed, and for very similar reasons - this at any rate is the thesis of role theory. A considerable amount of research was done in the USA in the 1950s on the activities of older people, and how these related to their pre-retirement activity (both paid and unpaid). There is some evidence that those who expand their activities in middle age are more active in retirement. (Of course, those who were less active during middle age may well have been suffering ill-health.) Overall, it seems likely that the people most likely to initiate and complete chosen projects while on sabbatical are those who have already managed to fit a lot into their lives, and probably also those who are in good health.

Sabbaticals

My proposal - perhaps when I have a sabbatical!! - is to interview a number of people who have taken sabbaticals of one kind or another, in order to discover the conditions under which they have, or have not, thrived. Some likely candidates are:

- The state sabbaticals available in Belgium, the Netherlands, Sweden and (until 1999) Denmark. (The Belgian and Danish schemes are discussed by Offe and de Deken). In the Belgian scheme, the temporarily vacated job is given to an unemployed person, so that two people benefit and there is no, or little, net cost to the state. With a low level of sabbatical benefit, most people who use it are mothers, but some use it to go travelling or for other projects. If anyone knows of other state-funded sabbaticals, please let me know!
- Employees of EU institutions can have up to three years unpaid leave (Congé de Convenance Personelle). Some take time off to further their career by going on courses, or trying freelancing; others take the time to see more of their family.

- Sabbaticals from private firms.
- Australian long-service leave, frequently used for travel - often with and in order to visit family. (As with EU employees, there is a recognition that families may be separated by considerable distance, and time needs to be allocated for visiting family; weekends may not be enough.)
- The gap year before university, also frequently used for travel.

In addition, there are sabbaticals that do not entail removal from the labour force:

- Academic sabbaticals. Nowadays, academics are not free to do what they want on sabbatical; they must do research, or write a book, or in some way pursue their scholarly calling. At the end of their sabbatical, my own colleagues often bemoan that they did not get done all that they had hoped. Of course, this may be simply that, as modest Britons used to understatement, they don't like to embarrass their colleagues by boasting of all they got done. But it may reflect a real difficulty of adjusting from the high-pressure, high-structure work of term-time to the total liberty to organise the work on sabbatical. In a word, they may experience the anomie (lack of norms, lack of structure) experienced by some mothers, many unemployed and some retired, or at least they may take some weeks to devise a new working structure. Or, they may simply be tired, and need a few weeks to recover, and they hadn't planned for this. But these are anecdotal comments. A systematic study of the use made by academics of their sabbaticals may be instructive.
- Marriage sabbaticals. The two instances I know concern middle aged mothers who took a year from home, one to travel around the world, the other to do a masters degree in another country.

Just as there has been considerable research into the conditions under which people thrive in paid work, in motherhood and retirement, so research needs to be conducted into the conditions under which people thrive on sabbatical. Then we will have more idea of what the 'basic income society' might look like.

- Jahoda, M. et al (1972) Marienthal, London: Tavistock (first published 1933)
- McKenna, S. & Fryer, D. (1984) 'Perceived Health During Lay-Off and Early Retirement', Occupational Health, 36(5): 201-6.
- McRae, S. (1991) Maternity Rights in Britain: the experience of women and employers, London: Policy Studies Institute.
- Oakley, A. (1976) Housewife, Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Offe C. & de Deken, J. (1999) 'Work, Time, and Social Participation: policy options for dealing with labour market precariousness'. Paper given to the Basic Income European Network, Brussels 5 Nov.
- Thompson, E.P. (1967) 'Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism' Past & Present, 38: 56-97
- Walter, T. (1985) Hope on the Dole, London: SPCK.

Tony Walter is Reader in Sociology at the University of Reading, UK, and author of Basic Income: Freedom from Poverty, Freedom to Work (London: Marion Boyars 1989).

Home address: 15 Southcot Place, Lyncombe Hill, Bath BA2 4PE, UK.

Telephone 0044-(0)1225-314833

Email: <j.a.walter@reading.ac.uk>