“So you are off to London, David, to begin the world on your own account,” said Mr. Murstone. Though I quite understood that the purpose of this announcement was to get rid of me, I have no distinct remembrance whether it pleased me or frightened me. My impression is, that in a state of confusion about it, and oscillating between the two points, touched neither.

CHARLES DICKENS, *David Copperfield*

Here is David, an adolescent boy, about to enter the world of work. One foot in the family and the other in the factory, David is struggling with one of the most significant developmental tasks of human life: the transition from school to work. Perhaps though this is only the best known signpost of the place of work in the life cycle. We have childhood memories of parents and grandparents at work or changing jobs, retiring, or losing work. “Someday,” we are told, “you will become a doctor, a painter, a politician” and each occupational name is loaded with moral charge and the weight of gender and class. We move from one stage to the next in paradigmatic fashion, our progress in life defined by attainment and our happiness generally contingent on the fulfillment of work responsibilities.

What follows is an overview of this paradigm and an attempt to explore both the sociological and the psychological sides of the meaning of work in human life. Some fundamental issues underlie this exploration of “work” as a psychological entity and work as a sociocultural construct. These points are: the nature of a specifically American culture of work and its intersection with concepts of social class, stigma, and personal responsibility; the constitution of work including employment, underemployment, and unemployment; the role of work and its developmental impact from infancy through old age; and the function of work in mental health with a focus on individual identity and social values.
THE CULTURE OF WORK

The United States is a country of workers for whom the idea of “work” is far more important and complex than mere economic well-being. As individuals our psychological sense of self is bound up with who we are as workers. In groups, our social identity is defined by our affiliated work institutions. Our family life is regulated by work life: who goes to work and when is intertwined with childcare plans, care of the elderly, even location and type of housing. Work also determines the boundaries of our communities: educators define college towns, government employees settle state capitols, and ranchers establish farmland. While the idea of work is clearly central to our identity as people and as a society, our relationship to work—employed, unemployed, well employed, volunteer, underemployed—is even more important because it defines for us and for others our position in the social structure. This relationship is so important throughout the life span, and work is experienced at such a meaningful level in our psychology, that it now can serve as an “essential other.” The term “essential other” was coined by modern social scientists to convey “our experience of other people and entities in the environment that support the sense of a coherent and vigorous self and its development” (Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 1993).

Work takes many forms but workplaces are the physical spaces where these forms take shape. The workplace provides workers with direct benefits (wages) and, often equally important, indirect benefits. These include social support, professional status, relationships, and collegiality. The workplace can be a family support system providing flexible scheduling of work hours, part-time work on a full-time basis, maternity and paternity leave, and sponsored childcare and other measures that support family cohesion (Swick & Rotter, 1981). But the workplace can also be a source of stress and dissatisfaction that intrudes on family life, reinforces racial and gender discrimination, and fails to meet human needs for respect and autonomy. Work tends to reflect educational status and to define economic status, so people need jobs that are both interesting and that pay adequately. But one sphere often supercedes the other, resulting in either personal or social conflict. Yet we value the idea of work above all else, and it is not long before we question whether “problems at work” result more from personal psychological dysfunction than from organizational problems.

THE WORK ETHIC: HISTORY AND THE CULTURE OF INDIVIDUALISM

How did we develop such a passion for work? Work has become the defining value of our culture. Known virtually worldwide as the “American model,” this culture dominated by individual ambition and competitiveness is both admired and mocked. To convey the meaning of work in our culture, I am using concepts developed by the pioneering anthropologist, Clyde Kluckhohn. Culture is a “product; is historical; includes ideas, patterns and values; is selective; is learned; is based upon symbols; and is an abstraction from behavior and the products of behavior” (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1955). While on one level we may believe that work and society are separate, in truth no individual lives outside of their environmental context. The two aspects of our lives, the social and the personal, co-exist in a dialectical paradigm called “person-in-environment.” Table 2-1 employs the “person-in-environment” paradigm to show how each of Kluckhohn’s variables of culture has both an environmental