

CHAPTER III

EXTRINSIC THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 History of American Work Culture

3.1.1 Early Industrialization and Labor Development

The early U.S. industrial era was marked by transformative changes pushing the nation from agrarian roots into manufacturing dominance. The American system of manufacturing, which leveraged interchangeable parts and mechanization, drastically improved production efficiency while enabling deskilling and the division of labor (Goodfriend & McDermott, 2021:32). Parallely, the Waltham–Lowell system in textile mills exemplified regimented factory life workers (mostly young women) lived in company boarding houses, adhered to strict schedules, worked up to 80 hours per week, and followed moral codes imposed by management (Schneider, 2025:4).

Labor unrest began shaping work culture early on: in the 1830s and beyond, workers in Philadelphia and Boston campaigned for ten-hour, then eight-hour workdays. By 1866, national labor entities formally demanded the eight-hour day as an essential freedom from capitalist exploitation. This period laid the groundwork for the rise of labor rights movements, embedding demands for humane hours, safety, and worker dignity into American labor culture.

3.1.2 Evolution of Work Practices and Social Changes

By the late 19th century, the U.S. had become an industrial powerhouse. The post–Civil War era saw rapid expansion in steel, railroads, petroleum, and electrification industries central to modern industrial capitalism (Rise of Industrial America, 2025:13). Immigrants constituted the backbone of this labor force: by 1920, over half of U.S. manufacturing workers and up to two-thirds including second- and third-generation descendants—were of recent immigrant descent (Olmstead & Rhode, 2009:57).

These demographic and industrial shifts catalyzed the institutional evolution of labor. Unions, social reformers, and progressive legislation began to reshape labor norms and rights. For instance, immigrant workers, women laborers, and child workers formed the core of organized efforts calling for fair wages, regulated hours, and safer conditions. The cumulative pressure led to major labor reforms through the early 20th century, influencing norms across the economy.

3.1.3 Modern American Workplace Dynamics

In the 21st century, the American workplace has entered a phase of rapid transformation driven by globalization, technological innovation, and evolving cultural expectations of work. One of the most visible shifts has been the growth of the gig economy, in which digital platforms connect companies with workers on a short-term, contract, or freelance basis. This model provides greater autonomy,

geographic flexibility, and the potential for diversified income streams, but it also introduces significant challenges, including income volatility, inconsistent work availability, minimal social protection, and weaker bargaining power compared to traditional employees (World Economic Forum, 2024:1.). Legislative responses have begun to emerge, such as proposals for portable benefits systems designed to extend healthcare, retirement, and other protections to gig workers while preserving their classification as independent contractors (Vox, 2025:3).

At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the normalization of hybrid and remote work, fundamentally reshaping daily routines, organizational cultures, and performance management systems. This shift has redefined the traditional workplace, allowing employees to operate from diverse locations and enabling employers to tap into broader talent pools. Surveys reveal that 83% of U.S. workers now prioritize work–life balance over salary, highlighting a cultural pivot toward flexibility and personal well-being as key determinants of job satisfaction (Tanwar, 2025:1). The prevalence of remote work has also facilitated an increase in multiple-job holding, particularly among college-educated professionals, with the number of Americans juggling more than one job rising from 2.4 million pre-pandemic to roughly 4 million in recent years (Financial Times, 2024:2.). These patterns indicate that the modern American workplace is becoming more decentralized, diverse in its employment arrangements, and driven by values that emphasize autonomy, inclusivity, and balance, even as it confronts

persistent challenges in ensuring economic stability, equitable access to benefits, and maintaining organizational cohesion in a distributed work environment.

3.2 American Work Culture: Hicks' Soft Work Theory

Heather J. Hicks's Soft Work Theory conceptualizes the characteristics of contemporary American work culture that go beyond traditional notions of productivity by emphasizing affective, symbolic, and relational dimensions of labor (Hicks, 2009:64). In this research thesis, Hicks's theory is applied to identify the characteristics, challenges, strengths, and weaknesses of American work culture as reflected in the main character of *Five Nights at Freddy's*.

3.2.1 Characteristics of American Work Culture

American work culture is shaped by a combination of historical, economic, and social factors that emphasize both productivity and adaptability. Contemporary American work culture can be understood through the lens of "soft work," which highlights not only the physical aspects of labor but also the emotional and relational dimensions embedded in work practices (Hicks, 2009:64). This theoretical perspective enables researchers to see how certain types of labor are systematically undervalued within American society, especially when they involve routine manual work or heavy emotional demands.

Characteristics of American work culture are often reflected in two key dimensions. The first is manual labor, which is frequently associated with low wages, limited protections, and economic instability. The second is emotional

labor, which requires workers to regulate and manage their emotions in order to meet organizational expectations, often leading to stress and burnout. Both of these dimensions provide critical insights into how American work culture operates, particularly in low-paying, high-stress occupations.

3.2.1.1 Manual Labor

In Hicks' framework, manual labor represents a category of work that is economically necessary yet socially marginalized. Manual labor within soft capitalism is frequently associated with low wages, unstable schedules, and limited institutional protection (Hicks, 2009:70). Despite its physical and temporal demands, this form of labor is framed as replaceable and lacking prestige. Workers engaged in manual labor are often required to endure monotonous routines while maintaining compliance and emotional restraint. This condition reinforces economic precarity and reflects a broader cultural tendency to devalue physical work in favor of symbolic or affective labor.

3.2.1.2 Emotional Labor

Hicks' concept of soft work places emotional labor at the center of contemporary American employment. Emotional labor is a requirement for workers to manage fear, stress, patience, and emotional responses as part of their job performance (Hicks, 2009:72–75). Emotional regulation becomes a form of labor that is expected but rarely compensated. In soft work culture, emotional endurance is framed as professionalism and personal strength. However, this

expectation places psychological strain on workers, particularly in isolated or high-risk occupations. Emotional labor thus becomes a mechanism through which workers absorb stress individually while structural support remains limited.

3.2.2 Challenges of American Work Culture

Challenges within American work culture arise from the increasing dominance of soft work, where labor is no longer defined solely by productivity but by emotional endurance and psychological stability. Workers are expected to internalize stress, uncertainty, and risk as part of their professional responsibility. Soft work reframes instability as a normal condition of employment, positioning endurance and emotional control as essential worker traits rather than responses to structural inequality (Hicks, 2009:78). As a result, many difficulties faced by workers are no longer recognized as systemic problems. This condition reflects how American work culture prioritizes perseverance and compliance, encouraging workers to adapt continuously while institutional responsibility remains minimal.

3.2.2.1 Monotonous and Repetitive Tasks

One of the most prominent challenges in American work culture is the prevalence of monotonous and repetitive tasks. These tasks often require workers to perform the same routines continuously, frequently under conditions of isolation or surveillance. Although such labor may appear simple, the repetition in soft work environments demands sustained emotional regulation and vigilance, especially when mistakes carry significant consequences (Hicks, 2009:80). Over time,

monotonous labor contributes to emotional exhaustion and detachment. Workers are expected to suppress boredom and frustration while maintaining discipline and compliance. In this context, repetition becomes a mechanism that normalizes emotional strain, reinforcing the idea that endurance itself is the primary measure of worker value within American work culture.

3.2.2.2 Family Responsibilities

Another major challenge within American work culture is the tension between occupational demands and family responsibilities. Workers are often required to prioritize availability and commitment to work, even when such demands conflict with caregiving roles or personal obligations. The soft work culture tends to overlook the boundaries of personal life, expecting workers to manage family responsibilities independently without disrupting productivity (Hicks, 2009:83). This condition places emotional pressure on individuals who must constantly negotiate between economic survival and familial responsibility. Rather than addressing this imbalance structurally, American work culture frames work-family conflict as a personal issue. Consequently, guilt and stress become internalized experiences, reinforcing emotional sacrifice as a normalized aspect of professional identity.

3.2.3 Strengths of American Work Culture

Despite its challenges, American work culture also produces certain strengths that allow workers to survive within unstable labor conditions. These strengths

emerge not from institutional protection but from individual adaptation to uncertainty. Soft work culture emphasizes flexibility, emotional control, and perseverance, encouraging workers to continuously adjust to shifting demands (Hicks, 2009:86). However, these strengths function primarily as coping strategies. While adaptability and resilience enable workers to remain productive, they also conceal systemic inequality by framing survival as success. In this sense, the strengths of American work culture sustain the labor system rather than challenge its structural limitations.

3.2.3.1 Adaptability and Resourcefulness

American work culture highly values adaptability and resourcefulness, critical capabilities for navigating rapidly changing economic and technological landscapes. Adaptability and resourcefulness are highly valued traits within American work culture, particularly under soft work conditions. Workers are expected to adjust rapidly to new roles, environments, and expectations, often without additional training or support. The emphasis on adaptability, shifts responsibility from institutions to individuals, which positioning flexibility as a moral obligation rather than a response to instability (Hicks, 2009:88). Resourcefulness further reinforces this expectation by encouraging workers to rely on personal initiative when facing constraints. Although these qualities enable workers to cope with uncertainty, they also normalize the absence of organizational support, reinforcing unequal labor relations within American work culture.

3.2.3.2 Resilient Under Pressure

Resilience under pressure refers to the ability to endure prolonged stress, emotional strain, and uncertainty while maintaining functional performance. In American work culture, resilience is frequently celebrated as a sign of strength and professionalism. The workers who persist despite hardship are often praised, reinforcing endurance as an ideal worker characteristic (Hicks, 2009:90). However, this celebration of resilience can obscure the harmful effects of constant pressure. Rather than addressing the sources of stress, soft work culture frames endurance as personal achievement. As a result, resilience becomes a tool that sustains exploitative conditions by masking systemic problems beneath narratives of perseverance.

3.2.4 Weaknesses of American Work Culture

Weaknesses of American work culture are the structural and systemic aspects of the workplace that can negatively impact employee well-being, motivation, and performance. These weaknesses stem from the emotional demands of soft work combined with minimal institutional care. When emotional investment replaces material support, workers become increasingly vulnerable to disconnection and exhaustion (Hicks, 2009:92). Two key weaknesses emerge from this condition: alienation and insufficient support. Both reveal how American work culture prioritizes productivity and endurance over sustainable labor relations

3.2.4.1 Alienation

A significant weakness within American work culture is the phenomenon of alienation a disconnection from work, colleagues, and the broader organizational purpose. Alienation within American work culture manifests as emotional and psychological disconnection from work. In soft work environments, workers are often detached from the meaning and outcomes of their labor, as work is framed primarily as endurance rather than contribution. Alienation is a condition where emotional labor replaces social recognition, intensifying isolation within the workplace (Hicks, 2009:94). This alienation becomes more pronounced in isolated or repetitive work settings, where interaction and affirmation are limited. Workers experience labor as an obligation rather than a source of fulfillment, reinforcing emotional distance from both work and self.

3.2.4.2 Insufficient Support

Insufficient support represents a fundamental weakness within American work culture, particularly under the dominance of soft work. Workers are frequently expected to manage emotional strain, risk, and responsibility independently, even when performing tasks that involve isolation, danger, or psychological pressure. Institutional support such as training, supervision, and long-term protection is often minimized, while emotional endurance and self-management are framed as professional obligations. This condition shifts responsibility away from

organizations and places the burden of coping entirely on individuals, reinforcing vulnerability within the labor system (Hicks, 2009:96).

The lack of adequate support also deepens precarity and intensifies emotional exhaustion among workers. Without sufficient guidance, resources, or protection, workers are left to rely on personal resilience to survive demanding work environments. When support is absent, soft work culture sustains exploitation by normalizing risk and insecurity, ultimately weakening workers' capacity for long-term well-being and stability (Hicks, 2009:98).