THE FIVE PARADOXES OF MEANINGFUL WORK:

INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE 'MEANINGFUL WORK: PROSPECTS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY'

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ABSTRACT

In this introduction to the Journal of Management Studies Special Issue on Meaningful Work, we explain the imperative for a deeper understanding of meaningfulness within the context of the current socio-political environment, coupled with the growing use of organizational strategies aimed at 'managing the soul'. Meaningful work remains a contested topic that has been the subject of attention in a wide range of disciplines. The focus of this Special Issue is the advancement of theory and evidence about the nature, causes, consequences and processes of meaningful work. We summarize the contributions of each of the seven articles that comprise the Special Issue and, in particular, note their methodological and theoretical plurality. In conclusion, we set forth a future research agenda based on five fundamental paradoxes of meaningful work.

Keywords: meaningful work; employee engagement; worthy work; volunteers; paradox; temporality

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INTRODUCTION

The impetus for this special issue on meaningful work arose from an awareness that, despite the level of interest in meaningful work that has emerged in recent years, there are still important gaps in our knowledge of how a sense of meaningfulness arises, persists, or is challenged. This is of particular concern in light of the far-reaching changes that are taking place to the nature of work, and the sites where work takes place. We are witnessing the growing precarity of employment under neo-liberal regimes in many Western democracies, with the onus shifting onto the individual to manage their work and careers in many cases without the safety-net of a stable contract of employment. Human-machine interactions and technological surveillance are growing, with unknown consequences for meaningful work (Barratt, 2003). Organizations themselves are under pressure from globalization, new technologies and new modes of organizing, creating interconnected systems of dynamic complexity. There is rising demand that organizations pay attention to their extended social and environmental responsibilities, generating the need for new types of inter-organizational partnerships and representative bodies (Lips-Wiersma, 2019). In these changing circumstances, how can individuals satisfy their innate 'will to meaning' (Frankl, 1959), and how can organizations create the necessary conditions for meaningfulness so that workers can avoid the tedium of 'a Monday through Friday sort of dying' (Terkel, 1975, p. 1).

The extant research base on meaningful work has recently been subject to critical scrutiny (Bailey, Yeoman, Madden, Thompson and Kerridge, 2018; Both-Nwabuwe, Dijkstra and Beersma, 2017; Chalofsky, 2003; Lepisto and Pratt, 2017; Lysova, Allan, Dik, Duffy and Steger, 2018; Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski, 2010). What emerges from these varied reviews is that meaningfulness is a multi-level construct. It has garnered attention across many academic fields including management studies, psychology, social psychology, human

resource management/development, political theory, theology, philosophy, ethics and sociology, but with little consensus emerging over what meaningfulness means, theoretically or empirically. While meaningfulness will always be an 'essentially contested concept' (Gallie, 1956), nonetheless there seems to be agreement that it signifies a 'positive, subjective, individual experience' in relation to work (Bailey et al., 2018). That said, it is important to note that the majority of literature on meaningfulness defines it as multi-dimensional; for example, Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012) argue that meaningful work arises along two dimensions: 'being' (eg belonging) versus 'doing' (eg making a contribution) and 'self' (eg self-actualization) versus 'other' (eg serving others' needs). According to this perspective, work is meaningful when the various dimensions are held in balance yet, at the same time, this balancing leads to inevitable tensions that may be hard to resolve.

Despite the controversy over what meaningfulness actually signifies, the weight of evidence tends towards conceptualizations of meaningfulness within positive psychological models and frameworks (Seligman and Czikszentmihalyi, 2000), an experience that is amenable to influence by job design, leadership and management styles, work cultures and workplace relationships, and that is associated with a range of positive individual and organizational outcomes (Bailey et al., 2018; Lysova et al., 2018). Questions have, though, been raised about the multiplicity of ways in which meaningfulness has been operationalized and measured within these studies; for instance, in a synthesis of the empirical evidence, Bailey et al. (2018) uncovered 28 different measurement scales that have been utilized, many of which contain non-specific items or items that conflate meaningfulness with other constructs such as callings. There is therefore no clear agreement about the best way to evaluate people's subjective experience of meaningfulness (Both-Nwabuwe et al., 2017) and, in consequence, it is uncertain whether all studies purporting to describe meaningful work

actually do so. A further consideration is that, as Lepisto and Pratt (2017) note that many workers in ostensibly fulfilling occupations fail to find meaning in their work, suggesting that merely attending to contextual issues such as job design is insufficient to ensure meaningfulness.

The theoretical literature and the emerging critical and qualitative literatures on meaningfulness moreover challenge some of the assumptions underpinning the prevailing positivist and unitarist models. Where the focus is solely on the individual, then the relational and processual aspects of meaningful work tend to be downplayed or are poorly understood. For example, scholars within political theory and philosophy have argued that organizations and national policy-makers have a moral responsibility to ensure the widespread availability of meaningful work that provide the goods of autonomy, dignity and freedom (Bowie, 1999; Wolf, 2010). The absence of work that is meaningful exposes the individual to harms, since they are unable to satisfy their inescapable need for meaning and to live a flourishing life (Yeoman, 2014). This perspective introduces the notion that meaningfulness is not purely a subjective assessment of work experiences as suggested by psychological approaches, but rather encompasses both subjective and objective features in a 'bipartite value of meaningfulness' (Wolf, 2010). Thus, meaningfulness, instead of being solely within the purview of the individual, instead becomes a moral and institutional imperative.

Social constructivist accounts similarly place meaningfulness within a broader societal and cultural context (Boova, Pratt and Lepisto, 2019). Here, however, the purpose is to question the basis upon which the individual judges their work to be personally meaningful. Lepisto and Pratt (2017) argue that the perception of one's work as meaningful or meaningless is predicated on the degree to which the individual believes that their work has wider value beyond the self. Modernity poses particular challenges for individuals in their efforts to find moral anchors to signify the worth of their work in view of heightened

ambiguity and uncertainty (Sennett, 2007). Thus, meaningfulness is not inherent in specific tasks but rather 'must be interpreted and constructed' in circumstances that may offer only impoverished opportunities for meaning (Lepisto and Pratt, 2017, p. 108).

Critical and labour process scholars additionally raise questions about who has the power to determine whether work is meaningful (Harding, 2019; Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009). Tourish (2019) argues that much of the scholarship on meaningful work is based on the assumption that the powerful will craft meaning for the powerless. Thus, leaders develop organizational values and purposes, and HR departments design jobs and develop HR practices and processes that should imbue individuals' work with meaning. Yet, as Kunda (1992) observes, strong organizational cultures may clash with individual values, evangelical organizational aspirations may be disconnected from the mundanity of daily work (Carton, 2017), and the ends towards which leaders strive may fail tests of legitimacy (Willmott, 1993; Tourish, 2019). Enforcing organizational practices aimed at controlling individuals' sense of what is meaningful may lead to 'existential labour' or acting 'as if' work were meaningful, instead of authentically-felt meaningfulness (Bailey, Madden, Alfes, Shantz and Soane, 2016).

It is against this backdrop of questions over the moral legitimacy and contextual fabric of meaningfulness and the management of meaning that we situate our special issue. We called for articles that push forward the boundaries of scholarship within the field, whether from a mainstream or a critical perspective, and that integrate theoretical perspectives from the wider social sciences to explore, challenge and shed new light on meaningful work in contemporary society. To help potential contributors develop their ideas, we held a dedicated conference in Auckland, New Zealand in December 2016 linked to the special issue. This conference was one of an ongoing series of biannual international symposia on meaningful work founded and organized by the authors. Each of the seven

articles that form this final collection makes a unique and important contribution to developing core debates about the experience of meaningful work.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

We now turn our attention to the seven papers that constitute this special issue. These articles cover a wide range of perspectives on meaningful work and raise many new questions for future research in the field. We first summarize each article's contribution, before drawing out the underlying themes and highlight what we see as the resultant paradoxes and questions for future research. Beforehand, it is worth noting the methodological plurality of the articles; they include one meta-analysis, a two-wave survey, one study based on interviews, one on participant videos and interviews, two ethnographies including participant observation and interviews, and one utilising interviews, archival data and observation. This methodological diversity and weight of qualitative, inductive research is to be welcomed, and is indicative of the broad conceptual and epistemological footing of the meaningful work literature, as well as the expansive nature of debates within the field.

Research participants include employee groups as well as volunteers, aid workers, social entrepreneurs and academics. Where authors have chosen to focus on particular types of workers, there is a tendency to select occupations where one might reasonably expect there to be high levels of meaningful work. This opens up the opportunity to explore not only the processes by which work is rendered meaningful, but also to challenge and question existing theorizations.

Blake Allan, Cassie Batz, Haley Sterling and Louis Tay draw on Hackman and Oldham's (1995) job characteristics framework to present the results of a meta-analysis of the outcomes of meaningful work based on 44 articles including a total of 23,144 participants.

First, they tested for concept redundancy with work engagement, job satisfaction and commitment. Their analysis showed that meaningfulness represents a unique construct that adds value to the literature, however it is measured. The subsequent meta-analysis found that meaningful work predicts work engagement, job satisfaction and commitment and that these, in turn, positively predict performance and organizational citizenship behaviours (OCB) and negatively predict withdrawal intentions. Their analysis also brought to light differential effects between the variables, with engagement acting as the strongest predictor of performance, job satisfaction the strongest predictor of withdrawal intentions, and both engagement and commitment predicting OCB. Based on the job characteristics model, the authors argue that meaningful work leads first to attitude change since it reflects the belief that one's work is valuable and worthwhile, and these positive affective states then initiate behavioural changes.

An additional finding was that meaningful work has moderate to large positive associations with life satisfaction, life meaning, and general health. Allan and colleagues explain these results through the notion of spillover effects; where meaningfulness leads to positive affective outcomes, these then improve overall functioning which predisposes individuals to derive more satisfaction from their life in general. Since we spend so much time at work, meaningfulness in this domain is likely to have a disproportionate effect on attitudes towards life as a whole. A somewhat surprising finding was that meaningful work has a small to moderate association with general negative affect. The authors conjecture that meaningfulness may function better in promoting wellbeing than in reducing negative emotions where the effects may be indirect rather than direct. As the first meta-analysis that has been published on the topic of meaningful work, Allan et al.'s article constitutes an important contribution to the psychological literature on meaningfulness by providing

evidence that experienced meaningfulness is a valid construct worthy of further research, and by demonstrating the positive outcomes associated with meaningful work.

Giverny De Boeck, Nicky Dries and Hans Tierens adopt a temporal lens to focus on the question of how individuals develop a sense of the meaningfulness of their work. The authors draw on two streams of research, the job characteristics framework (Hackman and Oldham, 1975), and literature on the self-concept and untapped potential. They argue that untapped potential, or the discrepancy between an individual's actual self in the present and their desired future self, serves as a meaning-making mechanism by providing a cognitive bridge between the present and the future. Since self-actualization, or the realization of one's full potential, is often regarded as the bedrock of meaningfulness, the more opportunities that work offers to aid the development of the individual's potential towards a desired future self, the more meaningful work will be in the present.

Their approach is based on a considered combination of both work and worker-centric approaches to meaningful work, whereby the former denotes organization-based interventions aiming to manage meaning (such as job design, feedback and autonomy) and the latter reflects a more individual, agentic approach. The authors propose that it is between these approaches that temporally-based opportunity structures arise in which workers' potential might be realized or frustrated. Potential is thus hypothesized as an important and valenced factor that directly impacts on the experience of meaningful work, as well as having a mediating effect on the relationship between organizational interventions and the experience of meaningfulness. As this is proposed as a dynamic, temporal model, De Boeck et al.'s paper is based upon a two-wave time-lagged panel survey in Belgium conducted over eighteen months.

The findings affirm that skill variety, autonomy and job feedback are salient for work meaningfulness. The authors also found that the experience of untapped potential not only

predicts meaningful work but that it also partially mediates the positive effects of job characteristics on experienced meaningfulness. Work is rendered meaningful when it enables individuals to realize their potential at work and to minimize the distance between their actual and ideal selves. De Boeck and colleagues expand the hitherto limited literature on temporality and meaningfulness (Bailey and Madden, 2017) by showing how employees make connections between their present experiences and their desired future selves. Finally, they integrate the strands of work-based and worker-based perspectives on meaningfulness by showing that both work experiences and the self-concept are salient for meaningfulness.

In her study based on 82 interviews with international aid workers, **Carrie Oelberger** poses the question of how close non-work personal relationships are experienced by individuals engaged in work that they find deeply meaningful. Using the grounded theory method to analyse her data, Oelberger found that the work-relationship conflict experienced by these individuals comprises two different facets: time-based conflict due to the partner's absence, and trust-based conflict due to unreliable work scheduling. Those who experience the most conflict also find their work the most meaningful and demonstrate high levels of work devotion. These individuals struggle to erect personal boundaries to limit their work dedication, referred to as boundary inhibition. However, where occupational value homophily exists, in other words, where individuals feel that their close partner values and appreciates their work, then the perceived conflict is reduced. Conversely, where the partner does not value their work (occupational value heterophily), then the conflict grows, resulting in work-relationship turmoil. These mechanisms help to explain how deeply meaningful work can lead to poor outcomes for employee wellbeing. The research has important implications for the developing literature on the 'dark side' of meaningful work (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009; Michaelson, Pratt, Grant and Dunn, 2014) by suggesting that although many people may desire meaningful work, in practice diligent individuals who find their work meaningful

can find themselves drawn into working long, erratic hours that may serve to undermine their close relationships, thereby depriving themselves of an important source of meaningfulness in their wider lives.

Another contribution which focuses on situations where individuals may experience the negative effects of 'too much' meaning in their work is the article by **Mona Florian, Jana Costas and Dan Kärreman**. The authors conducted an 'extreme case' longitudinal participant observation study of volunteers working in a refugee shelter in Germany during the recent refugee crisis. The focus of their analysis is an examination of how socio-historical discourses may serve both to shape and to challenge work meanings. In 2015, millions of Germans initially volunteered to provide primary care to refugees with the desire to make a meaningful contribution to helping people in need. However, after a few months, the public debate shifted to the supposed negative effects of the refugees' presence. Florian and colleagues argue that societal discourses can create an 'overflow' of meaningfulness by framing certain types of work as exceptionally meaningful. This can serve as a mobilizing force but, when the context shifts, it can also deepen individuals' resulting sense of meaninglessness, causing them to compensate across meaning domains, or to reframe their work and working environment in dysfunctional ways in an effort to sustain meaning. This led in some cases to stress, anxiety and burnout, or the adoption of a paternalistic and culturally superior stance towards the refugees. There has been a dearth of prior research that has placed meaningfulness in its wider societal and cultural context (Lepisto and Pratt, 2017), and so a particular contribution of this article is the development of arguments concerning the link between societal discourses and individually experienced meaningfulness.

The article by **Maria Laura Toraldo, Gazi Islam and Gianluigi Mangia** also focuses on volunteers, in this case, volunteers working at music festivals taking place in the UK. Toraldo and colleagues explore how voluntary work in a festival context, at the nexus

between paid work and leisure, can become a site of exploitation and subversion. They situate their analysis within the context of the literature on liminal or transitory work spaces where social norms may be temporarily set aside, raising questions of how ostensibly meaningful work may obscure exploitative and instrumentalized working conditions.

Toraldo et al. report on an ethnographic study using participant observation and interviews which took place during a voluntary work placement at three different music festivals taking place in the UK. Rich descriptions of the process of applying for this work and the intense patterns of the work itself expose the contradictory nature of festival volunteering. On the one hand, the mundanity of day-to-day work tasks and the instrumentalized nature of volunteering as a 'factory production line' characterized by manipulative discourses of efficiency and commitment emerge. On the other, a sense of solidarity and belonging develops among the volunteers. The findings reveal three alternative frames through which such work is rendered meaningful. According to the first, a commodity frame, volunteers report their work as boring and alienating, a price to be paid in order to engage in the more rewarding and meaningful consumption activities of attending festival events. In contrast, when viewed according to the second frame, work as communitas, volunteers found even mundane work tasks meaningful through a sense of camaraderie and community formed within the liminal space afforded by the festival. By focusing on communitas, the work/fun distinction is blurred and the work itself becomes meaningful. Finally, when communitas is viewed as ideology, managers are able to manipulate feelings of community to maintain neo-normative control over the volunteers, while volunteers use the festival community to achieve personal instrumental goals such as career development or free festival entry. The authors argue that this frame is the most instrumentalized, serving to obscure the economic realities of festival work behind a discourse of community. In all, the research brings to light the 'shadow of cyncisim' that hangs over ostensibly meaningful

voleerism in liminal contexts, and the central role that communitas plays as a rhetorical device in supporting neo-normative processes of commodification and control.

Gillian Symon and Rebecca Whiting's article addresses the hitherto unexplored domain of the interaction between human actors and materiality in the practice of meaningful work, drawing on a participatory video study and interviews involving 15 social entrepreneurs based in the UK. Similar to the international aid workers in Oelberger's study, social entrepreneurship may be regarded as an occupation with a strong potential for the experience of meaningfulness, although social entrepreneurs face the added dilemma of providing social value while also generating independent revenue. In contributing to the emerging literature on the tensional processes inherent in meaning-making (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009; Mitra and Buzzanell, 2017), the authors draw attention to the potentially ambiguous role digital technology may play in constructions of meaningfulness.

Symon and Whiting elaborate three tensional narratives of the human and material constitution of social enterprise as meaningful work. First, meaningfulness is in part constituted through social entrepreneurs' intense engagement with their work which is juxtaposed with its intrusiveness into other life domains. Second, meaningfulness is associated with a community-based business model and the rejection of traditional commercial enterprise. However, social entrepreneurs also express doubts about the extent to which they are able in practice to achieve the authentic goals they had set. Finally, social entrepreneurship is seen as the pathway to creating an authentic, holistic life but it also exposes the social entrepreneurs to uncomfortable tensions such as that between wanting to be 'private' and having to engage widely with the public through social media.

Drawing on the literature on materiality, the authors argue that material agency is deeply embedded in the achievement of meaningful work, but that unintended outcomes arise

through the 'mangle of practice' (Pickering, 1995). In consequence, the positioning of social entrepreneurship as inherently meaningful is subject to ongoing contestation, the resolution of which is in many cases beyond the control of the entrepreneur. For the entrepreneurs, meaningfulness is a constant struggle to resist the inauthentic, or to formulate consistent narratives of meaning.

In the final article of this special issue, **Mari-Klara Stein, Erica Wagner, Pamela Tierney, Sue Newell and Robert Galliers** examine how the proliferation of digital means of tracking worker activities, or 'datification', can facilitate or hinder the experience of work as meaningful. On the one hand, datification has been associated with reductionist and controlling managerial practices which can serve to undermine meaningfulness. However, on the other, datification can also provide workers with the means for self-reflection and development, thus opening up possibilities for enhanced meaningfulness.

The dataset comprises interviews, direct observation and archival documentation gathered from two universities based in the United States at a time when they were implementing accountability systems to codify the teaching, research and service activities of faculty members. The findings show that datification work can help with account-making as a means to justify the worth of work and to showcase one's achievements, thereby adding to the experience of meaningfulness. However, differences emerged across the two sites, suggesting that where conflicting values exist between the stated aims of the system and those of the faculty members, meaningfulness is impaired due to a perceived devaluing of the academics' contributions. Moreover, faculty members were not passive users of the system, but rather engaged in appropriation work to either augment meaningfulness or to offset a lack of perceived meaning.

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Stein et al. argue that less restrictive system designs coupled with an institutional framing based on logics that align with individual values may aid self-actualization and development, thereby bolstering meaningfulness. The article contributes to understandings of the role of contextual factors in framing meaningfulness experiences, and to the literature on the interaction between accountability systems and human agency in meaningful work.

THE FIVE PARADOXES OF MEANINGFUL WORK: TOWARDS A RESEARCH AGENDA

These seven articles make a number of significant contributions to the meaningful work literature that advance scholarship in the field by extending, expanding or challenging the existing evidence base. They also point towards a rich future agenda for research on the topic of meaningful work by raising a series of questions that remain unanswered and, in particular, by drawing attention to five core paradoxes that lie at the heart of debates on meaningful work.

It has previously been argued that meaningfulness is inherently tensional, a 'dynamic and contested negotiation' (Mitra and Buzzanell, 2017, p. 1), where tensions are defined as inescapable 'practical dilemmas' (Trethewey and Ashcraft, 2004, p. 32) and are conceptualised as natural and ongoing in the search for meaningful work (Lips-Wiersma and Wright, 2012). However, we go beyond this by drawing on the articles in our special issue to suggest instead that meaningfulness is characterized by non-resolvable paradoxes, or intricate tensional knots (Sheep, Fairhurst and Khazanchi, 2017; Symon and Whiting) which encourage researchers to explore integrative and holistic approaches to understanding and theorizing complex and contradictory phenomena (Raisch, Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2018;

Schad and Bansal, 2018; Smith, Erez, Jarvenpaa, Lewis and Tracey, 2017). Paradoxical thinking enables researchers to problematize the 'messiness of meaningful work' (Mitra and Buzzanell, 2017, p. 4) and address challenging or controversial features of the topic that remain unanswered when framed within existing thinking.

Paradox 1: individuals have an innate drive to seek out meaningful work to satisfy their inner needs, yet this same drive can push them to harmful excesses.

The humanities perspective on meaningful work suggests that 'it is a condition of being human to make meaning' (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009, pp. 503-4). In other words, we cannot avoid seeking out meaningful experiences, even if we wanted to. Conversely, as Oelberger, Toraldo et al., Symon and Whiting, and Florian et al. show, it is possible to have 'too much' meaning, giving rise to damaging consequences for the individual such as overwork, the acceptance of poor working conditions, cynicism, or negative attitudes towards others. This echoes themes within the related work on callings, which shows that those who feel 'called' to undertake particular types of work are prepared to endure significant hardships to sustain their calling work (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009). Although Allan et al.'s meta-analysis shows that those who find their work meaningful also enjoy higher levels of life satisfaction, meaning and general health, they also found that there is a small to moderate association between meaningful work and general negative affect. This hints at the experiences of the international aid workers in Oelberger's research whose engagement in deeply meaningful work was often associated with negative spillover effects on their close personal relationships, and the social entrepreneurs in Symon and Whiting's study who found that work intruded excessively into their private time. In sum, the research lends weight to the argument that undertaking meaningful work is not necessarily associated with a wider, meaningful life. In this sense, meaningful work is both 'binding and ennobling' (Bunderson

and Thompson, 2009, p. 32), drawing the individual into behaviours that may run counter to their ultimate human interests.

This raises a number of unanswered questions that researchers might seek to address. What is the 'right amount' or 'right type' of meaningful work? Are certain types of meaningful work experiences more prone than others to draw the individual towards harmful outcomes? How is the excessive pursuit of meaningful work linked with other attributes, such as workaholism or extremely high levels of engagement? What is the interactive relationship between meaningful work and a meaningful life and how do individuals compensate for the absence of meaningfulness across domains? What are the implications for individuals holding down a number of temporary jobs or short-term contracts? What are the power relations that underpin or foster the potentially harmful outcomes of meaningfulness?

From an epistemological perspective, is a complex and profoundly human experience such as meaningfulness readily amenable to quantification? By focusing on questions such as these, researchers will be able to explore how individuals might achieve a balance between work that they find profoundly meaningful, and their wider life and work experiences.

Paradox 2: meaningfulness arises in the context of self-fulfilment and self-actualization, yet it is dependent on the 'other' for its realization

Seminal frameworks of meaningful work have posited 'self' and 'other' as diametric poles that are held in tension in the realization of the experience of meaningfulness (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009; Rosso et al., 2010). To find their work meaningful, individuals need to satisfy their own personal motives and goals through their work, as is well illustrated in the paper by De Boeck and colleagues who argue that the more individuals can work towards a desired future self the more meaningful they will find their work. Yet, at the same

time, work is rendered meaningful with, through, and by others, either by a sense of belonging or a sense of having made a contribution (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009). Toraldo and colleagues for example show how communitas can elevate boring, repetitive tasks into meaningful work through camaraderie and communitarianism.

This line of argument encompasses the notion of pro-social motivation developed by Grant (2007), yet it goes beyond the simple idea that work becomes more meaningful when the individual can see how they have touched the lives of others in a positive way. If meaningfulness implies going 'beyond the self', this raises questions about the nature of the 'self' and what lies beyond, the 'other', as well as the processes by which meaningfulness arises within this ontological space. As Simpson (2015, p. 66) argues, the self is constituted relationally and unfolds through encounters with others, a process referred to by O'Mahoney (2011) as 'othering', whereby the self is reflexively co-constituted in interaction with others (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). Heidegger's (1996) concept of 'da-sein', interpreted as *being-in-the-world*, implies that the self cannot be understood in isolation from or without reference to the other, without whom the self is 'no-one' alone. According to Note (2010), da-sein renders accessible a broadened awareness of the individual's situation in the world, in contrast to the flattened awareness associated with a purely instrumental orientation towards society that serves to stunt meaningfulness; recognition of the broader horizon and meaningfulness are thus inextricably connected (ibid., 147). The self is reliant on the other, since notions of the self can only arise through the existence of 'another, a not-self, [that] allows the possibility or recognition of a self' (Schalk, 2011, p. 197). However, the self is itself not a unitary being; processes of meta-perception (Cooley, 1902), or what people think others think of them, can give rise to the formation of an 'other-self', 'counterfactual self', imagined future self (as per de Boeck et al.), or repertoire of relational selves, crafted by the self to fit with others' expectations in pursuit of recognition, acceptance and integration

(Frazier, Hooker, Johnson and Kaus, 2000; Kenny and West, 2008; Schalk, 2011; Obodaru, 2012). Collinson (2003, p. 534) sums this up when he notes: 'rarely, if ever, do we experience a singular or unitary sense of self'. The self, then can be considered as a 'mode of being' or becoming, embedded in society rather than an autonomous entity (May, 2011). Given this, as Wrzesniewski (2003, p. 95) suggests, 'the role of others in the construction of the meaning of work is an important one'.

If the self is co-constituted in interaction with others, interpersonal cues can grant or deny an individual's sense of self and self-worth (Dutton, Debebe and Wrzesniewski, 2012; Kenny and West, 2008; Margolis, 1999). One of the primary processes through which the individual receives and interprets these cues is recognition. Although she does not use this term, this is a theme picked up by Oelberger in her analysis of how their close personal partners help international aid workers to realise the meaningfulness of their work when they share a belief in the importance of their work. Based on the Hegelian perspective, it can be argued that autonomously given recognition involves both recognizing others and being recognized by them through an inter-subjective exchange (Ikäheimo and Laitinen, 2007; Note, 2010; Taylor, 1994; Wynne, 2000). Honneth's (1995; 1997) theory of recognition proposes a philosophy based on social acceptance of others as the cornerstone of self-realization and self-identity, as well as of meaningful social relations (Baxter and Margavio, 2010; Hancock, 2016). It is through recognition, according to Honneth (1997, p. 29), that 'human subjects can develop an intact self-relation only by virtue of the fact that they see themselves affirmed or recognized according to the value of certain capabilities and rights'. As Honneth (1997) argues, the underlying tension between the pursuit of distinction and the pursuit of connection leads to a struggle for recognition that renders us vulnerable to harm and moral injury. However, the organization of modern work and management practices is such that securing stable and enduring recognition becomes increasingly problematic.

These notions give rise to a number of unanswered questions. How can a balance between the needs of the self, or multiple selves, and those of the other be achieved in the realization of meaningful work? Which 'others' are most or least significant in rendering a sense of meaningfulness, and how do individuals determine who those others are and why they matter? What are the inter-personal or interactional sensemaking processes that give rise to meaningfulness? In an increasingly complex and inter-connected working environment, how do individuals negotiate between a multiplicity of 'others' to develop a sense of meaningfulness?

Paradox 3: meaningfulness is a subjective assessment, yet it is also grounded in an external, objective context that shapes and legitimizes what may be considered meaningful by the individual.

The debate over whether meaningfulness is purely subjective, or incorporates both subjective and objective elements as suggested by political theorists (Ciulla, 2012; Yeoman, 2014) remains unresolved (Michaelson, 2009). Yeoman (2014) draws on Wolf (2010) for example to argue that work activities should be constituted by the goods of autonomy, freedom and dignity in order to be considered meaningful, before considering whether or not the individual finds their work subjectively meaningful. Bowie (1998) identifies meaningful work as that which is freely entered into, autonomous, developmental, pays sufficient salary, supports moral development and does not stand in the way of the pursuit of the worker's happiness. But what happens when the individual finds their work subjectively meaningful, yet it fails to meet the objective criteria: can the work be deemed meaningless, even though it is not so in the eyes of the individual? On what basis should criteria such as these be imposed, rather than others?

Beyond the normative stance adopted within political theory, it has recently been noted that what individuals consider to be subjectively meaningful is governed by their wider societal and cultural context which frames notions of the inherent worthiness of work (Lepisto and Pratt, 2017; Michaelson, 2009; Mitra and Buzzanell, 2016; Pratt and Ashforth, 2003). Here, the sense of having made a worthwhile contribution is positioned as an integral component of meaningfulness, termed by Lepisto and Pratt (2017) a 'justification' perspective. This sense of worth is not pre-determined or inherent in particular tasks, but rather is open to interpretation through a process of account-making, whereby the individual will develop an account of the worthiness of their work as 'a function of social, cultural and institutional contexts' (ibid., p. 112). At different times, and in different places, alternative conceptualizations of what may be considered meaningful and worthwhile will emerge. Thus, individual accounts that resonate with social norms and values are most likely to confer worthiness through social validation and support: 'the value or worth of an individual's work is not predetermined, known, or easily accounted for. Worth is not inherent in the tasks one performs' (Lepisto and Pratt, 2017, p. 10). As Note (2010, p. 140) argues, people are 'inherently embedded in discursive and social contexts which influence their underlying ontological assumptions, their self-understanding, their "choices" of what they do and do not consider meaningful'.

This perspective raises the further question of what activities become legitimized as worthwhile and hence form a potential source of meaningfulness. Here, we can draw links between the meaningful work literature at the micro level and the institutional theory literature at the macro level. According to Reinecke et al. (2017), at a general level the institutional logics literature proposes widespread moral schemes that integrate cognitive, normative and coercive features into a set of prevailing logics relevant for each institutional field. However, a more nuanced approach is suggested by the orders of worth framework

(Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005; Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006; Lafaye and Thévenot, 1993). This framework proposes a normative basis for legitimacy that foregrounds a number of ideal-type constructions, all of which contribute in some way to the higher-order principle of the common good. Thus, any activity that does not contribute to the benefits of wider society in some way fails to meet the criteria for legitimacy. There are eight potential sources of moral legitimacy that actors or institutions may draw upon to substantiate their worth: inspired worth (creativity); domestic worth (kinship); fame worth (reputations); civic worth (the common good); market worth (reciprocal profit); industrial worth (efficiency); projective worth (connectivity and flexibility); and green worth (environmental) (Reinecke et al., 2017, p. 41). Thus, under situations of dispute over the worth of a particular activity when there is an imperative to justify, actors can draw upon one or more of these to show how the activity contributes to issues of shared humanity and thereby be deemed worthy. Nevertheless, accounts of worthiness remain fragile and subject to challenge and contestation, and the dominance of one at a given time may be considered merely a 'temporary truce' (Reinecke et al., 2017). This is illustrated in Florian et al.'s study, where volunteers' framing of their work as meaningful was embedded within a shifting discursive context concerning the status of refugees. This led in in some cases to a changed perception of how meaningful the work was, but in others to dysfunctional reframings aimed at sustaining meaningfulness despite the altered context. Beyond this, the notion of value pluralism implies that conflicts between values and orders of worth are inevitable and enduring.

There is scope for future research on meaningful work to build on insights from the wider orders of worth literature to explore the interplay between individuals' perceptions of the societal worthiness and the subjective meaningfulness of their work. For example, are some orders associated more strongly than others with meaningfulness? How do individuals switch between orders to sustain meaningfulness or, conversely, avoid meaninglessness?

How do individuals negotiate meaningfulness in situations of moral multiplexity (Reinecke et al., 2017).

Equally, individuals have the capacity to re-interpret their work in the face of wider society's evaluation of their labours. For example, Doherty (2009) found that work viewed from the outside as unskilled, poor quality work is nevertheless often seen by the workers themselves as invested in complex social interactions and meaning. The butchers in Simpson, Hughes, Slutskaya and Balta's (2014) study justified the value of their work by drawing attention to the sacrifice and self-denial they endure in order to provide for their families rather than highlighting the social worth of their labours. Purposes judged as less worthwhile by society can acquire valuable meaning for those doing them, which in turn has the potential to reframe society's valuation of the worthiness of activities (Yeoman, 2014). According to this line of reasoning, it might be conjectured that if work tasks alone do not create an opportunity for self-respect, other sources of judgement are applied. Unfortunately, none of the studies in our special issue reflected on workers in occupations that may be regarded as tainted or dirty, and so further research that explores the construction of meaningfulness in the context of such types of work would make a valuable addition to the literature.

Paradox 4: meaningfulness is subjectively 'found' (Thompson and Janigian, 1988) and is not amenable to managerial control, yet it is also normatively regulated

This paradox goes to the heart of the agency – control debate as it pertains to meaningful work. On the one hand, it has been argued by many scholars that meaningfulness cannot be engineered since it is personal and subjective (Ciulla, 2012; Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009). However, Michaelson et al. (2014) point to the ambiguous role of organizations in the meaning-making process and a number of commentators have suggested

that meaningfulness is malleable by the employer through such activities as job design, human resource management, values and culture, and leadership (Cartwright and Holmes, 2006; Ghadi, Fernando and Caputi, 2013; Jiang, Tsui and Li, 2015; May, Gilson and Harter, 2004; Pratt and Ashforth, 2003). The articles by both Allan et al. and De Boeck et al. corroborate earlier research which has posited a link between job design and perceptions of meaningfulness, lending some weight to this argument (Hackman and Oldham, 1975; Kahn, 1990).

Prior empirical research on the possible negative or counter-factual implications of meaningfulness management has conversely been sparse (Bailey et al., 2016; Gross, 2010). However, it has been suggested that where managers seek to control or prescribe meaning, then the individual's own meaning-making process becomes subverted (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009; Michaelson et al., 2014). Normative controls or the 'symbolic manipulation of meanings' (Gabriel, 1999, p. 184) can serve to coerce employees into the acceptance of poor or even harmful working conditions, the felt need to act 'as if' work were meaningful, or engender a sense of alienation (Bailey et al., 2016; Cartwright and Holmes, 2006; Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009). The articles in this special issue extend the evidence on the potentially negative outcomes of efforts to manage meaningfulness in several important ways. Toraldo et al. for example show how not just leadership style but also a sense of communitas can be used to support efforts towards the neo-normative control over workers. Since, as we saw earlier, belonging and unity with others have been identified as a core element of meaningfulness (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009; Rosso et al., 2010), this reaffirms the commoditisation of belonging as one further way in which meaningfulness may be recruited to a managerialist agenda (Gross, 2010; Kunda, 1992).

In a digital environment that enables widespread surveillance even of professional workers, Stein et al. demonstrate how overly standardized datification systems may corrode a

sense of meaningfulness by undermining autonomy and conflicting with professional values. Conversely, their optimistic scenario posits the notion that less structured and more qualitative systems may facilitate personal development and self-actualization through creating a space to reflect on the self (Bailey and Madden, 2016), opening up pathways to meaning. Yet, even under such more overtly benign circumstances, the 'regime of control' (Harding, 2019) remains, with individual workers required to account for the minutiae of their daily activities.

However, individuals are clearly not always passive the face of efforts to manage the meaningfulness of their work. Toraldo et al.'s study shows how volunteers shift between passivity, such as the times when work was framed as drudgery and therefore lacking in meaning, and agential accounts of work where meaningfulness arose in varied ways, such as through re-framing work as communitas, willingly undertaking meaningless, unpaid work tasks in order to gain access to more highly-prized and meaningful leisure time at the festivals, or even, more cynically, for personal instrumental purposes. This reflects Heine et al.'s (2006) assertion that people reaffirm alternative frameworks of meaning when faced with a threat in one domain.

To develop research in this domain further, researchers could extend the literature on individual responses to corporate programmes aimed at managing meaningfulness. For example, are there some firm ownership types or sectors that create more opportunities for individuals to find meaning than others? What theories of power are needed to illuminate processual, social constructivist, or multi-stakeholder perspectives on the production of meaningfulness? How are organizational efforts to manage the meaningfulness of peripheral workers experienced? Research focusing on the nexus between employee and employer or employee and line manager in the construction of meaningfulness would shed light on the sensemaking and sensegiving processes of meaning making in an organizational context.

Research has hitherto focused on the individual experience of meaningfulness, but considering meaning in its organizational context opens up the possibility of examining collective meaning-making and managing.

Paradox 5: meaningfulness is a pervasive sense of the value of one's work, yet it is also linked with spatial, temporal and material contexts which may be temporary, partial or episodic.

The assumption within much of the writing on meaningful work is that it is a sustained, pervasive positive attitude towards one's job. Yet the question remains over how frequently and how intensely the individual needs to find their work meaningful for it to be deemed 'meaningful work'. Bailey and Madden (2016) argue that meaningfulness is necessarily episodic, since many of the participants in their research found that the sense-making process was connected to specific, isolable events rather than to the job as a whole. Similarly, Mitra and Buzzanell (2017) found that meaningfulness is in a constant state of flux. Toraldo et al.'s study extends the question of temporality by drawing together the divergent literatures on liminality (Turner, 1969) and meaningfulness to explore how meaningfulness arises and is manipulated in impermanent, in-between times and spaces bracketed away from everyday norms. What their study suggests is that such liminal spaces create a site where temporary meanings are created, but also that work framings vacillate even within such impermanent sites. Symon and Whiting's research similarly found that meaningfulness waxes and wanes as individuals capture, lose, and re-capture control in the face of material agency in the form of digital technologies.

An alternative temporal perspective is provided by De Boeck and colleagues who argue meaningfulness arises when the individual can perceive how their work activities help them work towards a desired future self; feeling 'stuck' in an 'eternal present' (Stolorow,

2003, p. 160) that does not lead to any potential improvement conversely leads to lost meaning. In consequence, meaningfulness is raised beyond a sense that it is an immediate response to what is happening in the here-and-now, but rather is enmeshed in a wider temporal landscape (Bailey and Madden, 2017). Juxtaposing these findings with those of Brannan et al. (2015) whose study of the manipulative use of employer branding alerts us to the potential use of the promise of a future career and thus an improved future self that involves individuals in an endless quest of becoming. A desired future self is thereby used as an aspirational rhetorical device and disciplinary mechanism. Through ambiguity and implicit promise employees are invited to identify with the brand through their own free will, a self-disciplining form of employee subjectivity.

Together, the studies question static accounts of meaning-making, expose core conceptual tensions and open up the possibility for a broader inter-temporal and inter-spatial account of meaningfulness. Future research could explore how individuals draw on temporal and spatial resources in generating and sustaining a sense of meaningfulness. This could be extended into a consideration of the role of materiality, building on the work of Stein et al. and Symon and Whiting, for instance, examining how the interaction between humans and material artefacts is implicated in experiences of meaningfulness.

CONCLUSIONS

The papers in this special issue make a significant empirical and theoretical contribution to the meaningful work literature and, together, they encourage us to question some of the taken-for-granted assumptions that we have held about what makes work meaningful or meaningless. They pave the way for scholars to develop a renewed and more critical research

agenda and to expand the theoretical and conceptual foundations of the field. We hope that this special issue will promote interest in the topic and provide the catalyst for important new research in the future.

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