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Giving Meaning to Everyday Work After Terrorism

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Abstract

Global terrorism in the early 21st century appears to be an inevitable part of organizational life. Even among people not personally injured in an attack, the immediate aftermath can be a period of hardship, stress, and sensemaking. This paper develops theory about how people give meaning to their work after terrorism. In contrast to views of everyday work as something that loses significance in times of such tragedy, I outline the conditions under which individuals are also likely to find positive meaning in it. Doing so, I integrate varied findings about workplace responses to terrorism and provide a basis for empirical testing rooted in theories of work meaning, sensemaking, and the cultural response to disaster. The paper concludes with implications for research and practice.

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For the first time I really feel like my accomplishments don't mean anything. Sure, I went to the best business school in the world, but what does that do in a crisis? It was really sad, I spent all this money and all this time and all I really want to do is be a firefighter, or be a doctor. Not having something practical to do was really difficult [in the days following the September 11 attacks] … It was very strange to feel like, you're in demand for every job in management, and yet you can't even volunteer… I really question what I've chosen to do.
–Harvard Business School graduate (Lowe & Fothergill, 2003, p. 302)

I'm not a doctor. I couldn't rush to the hospital to put people back together. I'm not a construction worker, so I couldn't dig. I tried to give blood but the line was four hours long… So the way I fight back is to make sure our company is not affected.
– Investment banker (DiMarco, 2007, p. 162)

Prominent, indeed, omnipresent in the [trading] room were American flags. A huge American flag hung in the middle of one wall, and small flags were on nearly every traders' desk or attached to monitors. In these first days after the attack, to the question, "Who am I?" the answer was "an American." The task of re-opening the securities exchanges in which the traders were participating was cast as an act of patriotism.
– Beunza and Stark (2004, p. 12)

Introduction

Though terrorism injures only a small part of society physically, for far more people its

aftermath can be a period of hardship, stress, and sensemaking, one in which they question

their choices about life and work (Inness & Barling, 2005; Wrzesniewski, 2002). The

quotes above illustrate the meanings some New Yorkers found after September 11. The

first appears consistent with observations that everyday work loses personal significance in

times of tragedy (Dutton, Frost, Worline, Lilius, & Kanov, 2002). The second and third are

more surprising. These quotes suggest that to some New Yorkers the work of securities

trading or investment banking became a means to show patriotism, to be 'an American',

and indeed to 'fight back'. Why, in the wake of terrorism, do some people find their work

has lost meaning, while others find positive meaning in it?

Studies on workplace responses to terrorism do not have a consistent answer. Though agreeing terrorism reaches 'far and deep' into organizational life, researchers provide opposing accounts about what work means to individuals in the days and weeks following attacks (Mainiero & Gibson, 2003, p. 131). Across studies, the workplace is shown to be a burden for those coping with an already stressful time (Inness & Barling, 2005), a place to find and express compassion (Dutton et al., 2002), or something infused with moral purpose (Beunza & Stark, 2004; Freeman, Hirschhorn, & Maltz, 2004). Missing is an explanation for such contrasting findings.

In this paper, I develop theory about how people give meaning to their work after terrorism, both positive and negative. I focus on everyday work in organizations not directly involved in society's response to terrorism as rescue or military work might have seemed, for example, after 9/11 (Singh, 2008). To explain why our experiences of work after terrorism vary so greatly, I draw on research about the meaning of work (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003), sensemaking (Weick, 1995), and the cultural response to disaster (Wuthnow, 2010).

Researchers in this last area come from different social scientific disciplines but reach a similar conclusion: people respond to terrorism by searching for order and belonging (Collins, 2004; Hogg, 2007; Lambert et al., 2010; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1999; Simko, 2012). My theory builds on this idea. I propose that a) societies rally around moral narratives after terrorism and b) people try to integrate these narratives into their work to make sense of who they are and where they stand. Individuals who construct a plausible story about their work contributing to society's response to terrorism find positive meaning; otherwise, work becomes a burden.

I contribute to the workplace responses to terrorism literature with a set of propositions that explain people's contrasting experiences of work after an attack (Inness & Barling, 2005; Freeman et al., 2004; Wrzesniewski, 2002). The propositions are not exhaustive but provide a multilevel framework for scholars to test, elaborate, and revitalize our understanding of organizational responses to terrorism as it evolves and takes new forms. I also contribute to research on the cultural response to disaster. That social solidarity tends to rise after terrorist attacks is documented (Wuthnow, 2010); my theory goes further by showing how workplaces provide opportunities for people to express public sentiments in concrete interactions with colleagues.

Finally, I provide practical recommendations for organizations managing through terrorism. Understanding how individuals find meaning has value beyond satisfying curiosity. People who find positive meaning in work experience less stress, feel more fulfillment, perform better, and report higher health satisfaction, negating some hardships of terrorism and enabling organizations to respond resiliently (Inness & Barling, 2005; Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010).

Terrorism and Everyday Work

According to the *Global Terrorism Index*, terrorist attacks were recorded in 92 countries in 2015, leading to over 29,000 deaths – an eightfold increase since 2000 (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2016). From 2015 to 2017, the US and Europe experienced a series of highly publicized attacks involving bombings, mass shootings, and vehicular assault, including ones orchestrated or inspired by ISIS in San Bernardino, Orlando, Paris, Istanbul, and Nice. While social scientists eschew exact figures about attacks, given that politics and

worldviews influence what gets designated as terrorism, terrorism's presence in the early 21st century appears lasting.

Terrorism has been defined as 'the deliberate targeting of more or less randomly selected victims whose deaths and injuries are expected to weaken the opponent's will to persist in a political conflict' (Turk, 2004, p. 273). Those who orchestrate attacks seek death and destruction less as an end and more as a means to disrupt a population's beliefs and morale. In Western societies, terrorism has frequently consisted of attacks 'massive in scale and directed at critical infrastructure sites or targets of symbolic significance' (Spilerman & Stecklov, 2009, p. 169). Al-Qaeda's September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon exemplify this sort of terrorism – a dramatic challenge to the symbols of American economic and military might.

The psychological, cultural, and economic impacts of terrorism reach far more people than those injured directly or through a close relationship (Woods, 2010). Exposure to news about terrorism is associated with stress and trauma symptoms among broad segments of targeted populations (Holman, Garfin, & Silver, 2014; Mehl & Pennebaker, 2003). Moreover, terrorism's inherent symbolism distinguishes it from mass casualty incidents like natural or industrial disaster. Terrorists design attacks to be dramatic, to interrupt ordinary life and, through manifestos issued afterward, to blame or intimidate populations (Abrahms, 2006). Yet, exposed to violence and suffering, threats too about their own safety and culpability, everyday life does not pause for most people. How does this affect their work experiences in the weeks ahead?

Organizational theorists provide some insight on this question, rooted in studies and perspectives that sought to make sense of the unprecedented events of 9/11 (Fukami, 2002;

Inness & Barling, 2005; Wrzesniewski, 2002). Since then, interest in workplace responses to terrorism appears to have waned, leaving the literature fragmented. The area of agreement is that major terrorist attacks cause at least temporary behavioral, emotional, and attitudinal changes in workplaces across society (Burke, 2005). Delving deeper, the literature shows that everyday work means different things to people living through terrorism. Most studies portray work as something stressful or trivial for people coping with tragedy (Inness & Barling, 2005). Others suggest positive meaning can be found, primarily in places like hospitals but sometimes in businesses too (Dutton et al., 2002; Freeman et al., 2004). Few studies engage those presenting contrasting views. Boundary conditions unclear, a reading of the literature concludes that work usually becomes stripped of meaning after terrorism but sometimes people find profound meaning in it.

The first set of studies conceptualizes terrorism as a strain against which employees must devote psychological and social resources to cope. Inness and Barling (2005) propose that terrorism acts as a stressor which threatens individuals' wellbeing because it violates their personal control: 'people may live in fear of future attacks or face uncertainty regarding the future of their job, their organization, and their lives' (p. 378). Studying US employees three months after 9/11, Mainiero and Gibson (2003) conclude 'Though for most employees this crisis occurred outside their workplaces, the subsequent trauma from these events reached far and deep' (p. 141). Here, work becomes a *burden* when its demands drain employees' resources needed to recover from trauma.

Conceptualizing terrorism as a stressor on employees, Byron and Peterson (2002) find some evidence that it increases absenteeism and job dissatisfaction. This view predicts that terrorism creates more distress in occupations responding directly to attacks, like

firefighting, whose members can experience 'fear, horror, or helplessness' (Bacharach & Bamberger, 2007, p. 850). While this set of studies does not focus on work meanings, it presents evidence that terrorism leads people to search for meaning outside of work. Burke (2005) describes a post-9/11 survey showing 'employees indicated a shift in work-life balance priorities with more employees wanting to spend more time with their families' (p. 632). In sum, these studies focus on individuals' limited resources, implying that employees cope better when freed from work demands (Inness & Barling, 2005).

A second set of studies agrees that terrorism casts doubt on the significance most people attach to work, but highlights positive meaning emerging in service or volunteer causes that let people express *compassion* or contribute to the world directly (Dutton et al., 2002). Wrzesniewski (2002) presents evidence of individuals from various careers migrating into fields like firefighting, medicine, and teaching after 9/11. Wrzesniewski speculates that these migrations result from tragedy prompting people to find their calling. Singh (2008) concurs some occupations will naturally seem more meaningful after terrorism. Finding moral purpose among staff at a New York hospital near Ground Zero, Singh attributes this to a service mission, stating 'In general, hospitals provide care, and healthcare workers are devoted to their profession… Many employees saw their responses as natural, given their training' (p. 224).

But why some occupations should innately attract people's sense of calling after an attack is unexplored. Firefighting and caregiving at the site of terror allow individuals to respond directly to tragedy, but the connection to occupations like teaching as described in Wrzesniewski (2002) is more tenuous. Organizational theorists document people finding their calling in occupations ranging from animation to zookeeping, so it is unclear where to

draw the line between mundane and innately meaningful work after terrorism (Berg, Grant, & Johnson, 2010; Wrzesniewski, 2012).

Scholars of compassion organizing, on the other hand, argue positive meaning is attainable in any organization that provides opportunities for members to address suffering (Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2006). The idea is that tragedy brings attention to human suffering and motivates people to express compassion. Workplaces can let employees express compassion by redirecting resources to help victims. This creates positive experiences and, by association, identification with the organization. For example, employees may coordinate donations from the office or organize vigils (Dutton et al., 2006; Rhee, Dutton, & Bagozzi, 2006). However, compassion scholars also conclude that everyday work loses personal significance. They warn managers from attempting to restore 'business as usual' too quickly because tragedy also brings attention to uncompassionate actions: 'loyalty to the organization erodes not just among people who have directly suffered a tragedy but also among their colleagues who witness the lack of care' (Dutton et al., 2002, p. 61).

Finally, a third set of studies suggests work can be imbued with moral purpose – particularly a sense of *defiance* – after terrorism in many organizations, not just those responding in a direct way. As before, researchers here agree terrorism encourages people to seek meaning in their lives (Grant & Wade-Benzoni, 2009). Drawing from terror management theory, Carnahan, Kryscynski, and Olson (2017) propose that death anxieties motivate people to find meaningful work. Studying attorneys affected by 9/11, the researchers show that terrorism induces organizational turnover, including migrations to startups giving people freedom to pursue social missions. Surprisingly, law firms encouraging members to engage in prosocial activities experienced higher turnover than

comparable firms, leading the researchers to suggest models that 'clearly isolate meaningfulness' would provide insight to the results (p. 1957).

There is also evidence that people imbue their everyday work with new meanings. Beunza and Stark's (2004) ethnography of one Wall Street trading firm shows national identity integrated into work meaning after 9/11. For a time, the authors argue, 'The neutral, impartial activity of capturing bits of financial value through arbitrage suddenly became laden with ethical and national value' (p. 11). Nationally, political leaders associated financial work with moral purpose by making Wall Street's recovery a symbol of US resilience against terrorism. In the workplace, Beunza and Stark observe flag displays and televisions tuned to the War on Terror, suggesting that employees received reminders of their national identity. Despite these observations, Beunza and Stark's research questions do not lead them to theorize what conditions are sufficient to associate work with nationalism.

Freeman et al. (2004) present another valuable account of a financial firm after 9/11, one which suffered horrific casualties. Freeman and colleagues propose that a combination of moral purpose, career advancement opportunities, and support from business partners motivated employees to rebuild their organization. They find moral purpose in organizational leaders' decision to direct revenues to deceased employees' families, so that employees were selling stocks 'for the dead colleagues emotionally and literally', as well as a sense of defiance to 'deny the terrorists a victory' (pp. 73-74). Yet, the boundary conditions of finding moral purpose are nebulous. The researchers report it even among business partners who, though not themselves damaged, saw positive meaning in maintaining business transactions with the damaged firm.

Beyond this, numerous accounts in articles and books describe professionals across the country experiencing their work as defiance, but no predictive theory (e.g. DiMarco, 2007; Lucchetti, 2011). In sum, the cases about moral purpose are compelling but do not allow researchers to predict for whom and in which organizations work is likely to acquire new meaning. My goal is to provide testable propositions allowing researchers to do so, thus integrating opposing views of everyday work after terrorism: as a burden, a means to experience compassion, or something infused with moral purpose.

Giving Meaning to Everyday Work

My theory is that people restore a sense of order and belonging by creating stories about how their work contributes to society's response to terrorism. The process, illustrated in Figure 1, has three parts. Part one proposes that people make sense of what their work means by paying attention to moral narratives in society emerging after terrorism (proposition 1). Part two proposes that individuals attempt to create positive meaning by integrating into their work the identities ('who or what is under attack') and values ('what must we do about it') esteemed in these narratives. Where individuals create a plausible story about work defying outgroups (p2a) or supporting ingroups (p2b) they will experience positive meaning; where they are unable, work becomes a burden (p2c). Part three examines how answers to two questions managers ask after terrorism – 'do we continue business as usual?' and 'how do we discuss the attacks?' – facilitate employees' success in giving meaning to work (p3a, p3b, and p3c).

As a boundary condition, I develop the theory with western societies in mind. Terrorism in these societies is less common and highly publicized, making attacks attention-focusing events that trigger public reflection (Spilerman & Stecklov, 2009). Moreover, western

societies legitimate the belief that individuals should find fulfillment through their careers (Wrzesniewski, 2012). In societies where formal work is less central to the self, the theory presented may be less applicable.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Before continuing, it is helpful to clarify the term *meaning of work*. Meaning refers to 'the output of having made sense of something, or what it signifies; as in an individual interpreting what her work means, or the role her work plays, in the context of her life' (Rosso et al., 2010, p. 94). Meanings may be positive (e.g. 'this is high status work' or 'this work helps others') or negative (e.g. 'this is low status work' or 'this work harms others'). Research shows much of the meaning of work is constructed through social interaction within the organization (colleagues and leaders) and broader environment (families, communities, and institutions). Positive or negative meanings do not arise innately from job characteristics, but through conversations and observations. Meanings attached to the same work vary across organizations (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003).

Based on these findings, Wrzesniewski et al. (2003) have proposed a sensemaking model explaining how individuals give meaning to work. The underlying idea is that individuals create accounts or stories to explain situations that violate their expectations (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). Wrzesniewski et al. (2003) note that employees are 'continuously exposed to cues that convey others' appraisals of their worth and the worth of their roles and jobs… these evaluations, in turn, [have] a direct and indirect impact on the meanings employees [make] of their jobs, roles, and selves in the organization' (p. 95).

Individuals pay attention to social cues at odds with previous assumptions about the meaning of their work, assess whether these cues affirm or disaffirm its value, and respond based on needs to maintain positive self-esteem. This means spending time with activities and colleagues that provide affirmation, and avoiding those that do not. In this respect, sensemaking is motive-driven: we attend and interpret workplace cues according to personal needs (Weick, 1995).

Individuals often ignore minor violations of their expectations. But disruptions that threaten beliefs about identity or control motivate individuals 'to re-consider the sense that they have already made, to question their underlying assumptions, and to re-examine the course of their action' (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, p. 69). This view accords with the cultural response to disaster literature, which has investigated how people make sense of major disruptions like terrorism. This literature consists of studies conducted by psychologists, sociologists, political scientists, and others interested in how existential threats shape the attitudes, cultures, and institutions of societies (Wuthnow, 2010). Across this research, Webb (2007) summarizes one consistent finding: '[Popular] myths suggest that disasters create chaos, panic, looting, and other antisocial behavior – that is, complete social breakdown… 50 years of social science research demonstrates that the opposite occurs in the wake of disaster – crime rates go down, solidarity increases, and pro-social behavior prevails' (p. 436). Below, I use theories accounting for this behaviour to theorize the context in which individuals give meaning to work after terrorism.

Part one: Exposure to terrorism

At the micro-level, several theories propose that the psychological fallout of highly publicized terrorist attacks, including loss of meaning, uncertainty, and closeness to death,

motivates people to search for order and belonging in their environment. The idea is that these negative experiences threaten our ability to answer 'who am I?' and to feel our actions have significance. In turn, by attaching ourselves to some group or social institution, we restore our sense of identity and control, validating who we are and where we stand (Hogg, 2007; Kay et al., 2010). Researchers find two ways in which people fulfill their motive to validate: group identification and value affirmation.

The notion of group identification is rooted in social identity theory, according to which individuals build self-esteem through belonging in culturally esteemed groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Here, individuals feeling uncertainty emphasize their membership in groups when answering the question 'who am I?'. Developing this idea, uncertainty-identity theory proposes that uncertainty about our perceptions, attitudes, and social position motivates us to identify with groups with clear boundaries and a common fate (Hogg, 2007). Stereotyping oneself as a typical group member is comforting because it 'provides a clear sense of self that prescribes behavior and renders social interaction predictable' (p. 88). Using these theories, researchers find among individuals experiencing terrorism both increased uncertainty and a greater willingness to categorize themselves in terms of nationality (Dumont, Yzerbyt, Wigboldus, & Gordijn, 2003; Van de Vyer, Houston, Abrams, & Vasiljevic, 2016).

Value affirmation is a second way in which individuals cope with terrorism. Individuals seek attachment to cultural values and institutions, the stability of which compensates for a diminished sense of control. Terror management theory provides evidence that when we are exposed to reminders of our mortality, we are more likely to express faith in our cultural worldviews, reward those who uphold them, and punish deviants (Pyszczynski et al., 1999).

The idea is that living to the standards of enduring social institutions allows us to overcome the meaninglessness brought about by the knowledge of our inevitable physical death. Likewise, compensatory control theories suggest that people flexibly compensate a loss of certainty in one domain by reaffirming their commitment to another (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006). Individuals whose personal control is threatened strengthen their ties to external systems such as religion or government (Kay et al., 2010). The implication is that people invest themselves into any institution, whether work, family, religion, or government, so long as it compensates the loss of meaning and control (Carnahan et al., 2017).

Individuals can go to creative lengths to invest a domain with meaning (Heine et al., 2006). After terrorism, some people may find existing work meanings fulfill their needs for identity and value affirmation. Others may engage in more elaborate meaning construction to find a plausible story (Tajfel & Turner, 1987). This accords with the sensemaking view that individuals resourcefully attend cues, modify their roles, test interpretations, and update stories about who they are and what they are doing to produce meanings that fit personal needs (Weick, 1979; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). After 9/11 for instance, business professors might focus less on theoretic research and more on community outreach (Wrzesniewski, 2002); bankers less on paychecks and more on how revenues support victims (Freeman et al., 2004), and securities traders less on their organization's global identity and more on its American roots (Beunza & Stark, 2004).

Together, these theories suggest that terrorism increases motive for work meanings associated with order and belonging relative to other possibilities – as whether the work is associated with wealth or independence (Rosso et al., 2010). In part two, I will examine

how moral narratives emerging from terrorism define culturally esteemed ingroups and values. Here, on the logic that disruptions prompt individuals to engage in sensemaking, that terrorism specifically motivates individuals to affirm identities and values, and that individuals creatively attend information that fulfills personal needs, I propose that:

> Proposition 1: *Exposure to terrorism will increase individuals' attention to culturally esteemed identities and values (expressed in societal moral narratives) when making sense of work.*

This proposition assumes that individuals' exposure to terrorism will vary, depending on factors like physical location, whether significant others were affected, and indirect exposure through conversation and media consumption. While I do not elaborate such factors, I note that most people will experience attacks indirectly (Holman et al., 2014). Indirect exposure, however, functions like direct exposure to terrorism: prolonged or repeated experiences are more significant because they keep the threat in one's mind, reactivate anxieties, and encourage rumination (Lambert et al., 2010).

Part two: Sensemaking with societal moral narratives

At the macro-level, social scientists document a 'rally 'round the flag' effect: surges of prosocial attitudes, leadership approval, and other indicators of societal solidarity following events of national significance, including terrorism and the onset of war (Lambert et al., 2010). As individuals spend time with others, listen to officials, and consume media to learn how significant others have been affected and determine their responsibilities, they are likely to notice public attention converging on a set of narratives that express society's moral response to terrorism (Abrams, Albright, & Panofsky, 2004; Simko, 2012; Wuthnow, 2010).

In this section, I argue that attention to these moral narratives will both facilitate and direct individuals' attempts to give meaning to work after terrorism by defining culturally esteemed identities ('who or what is under attack') and values ('what must we do about it'). These narratives should provide frames for sensemaking both as an input, because individuals make use of salient identities and values to construct meaning (Weick, 1995), and as a goal, because individuals construct accounts of work to fulfill needs for esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). My argument is that individuals who integrate these moral narratives into a plausible story about their work contributing to society' response to terror will experience positive meaning – work as an expression of defiance or of compassion, depending on the narrative; otherwise, work will more likely be experienced as a burden.

Days and weeks after an attack, public attention converges as political leaders, counterterrorism agencies, journalists, and the terrorists, among others, attempt to give it meaning. Our understanding of this process is limited but public discourse appears dominated by narratives which identify ingroups, outgroups, and appropriate moral responses (Wuthnow, 2010). Such narratives seem to originate from early reports and rumors, statements of responders, and impromptu gatherings; and spread through journalism, political leadership, and national ceremonies (Collins, 2004; Kitch, 2003). The narratives do not achieve full and lasting consensus, but some become publicly widespread, creating an interpretive context for individuals making sense of their own identities and values (Abrahms, 2006; Abrams et al., 2004).

Simko (2012) suggests moral narratives emerging from terrorism take the form of either dualism or tragedy. Studying 9/11 commemorations held at different sites, Simko finds one

or the other of these narratives dominate depending on organizers' preferences, audiences, attack characteristics, and collective memories of similar events. These narratives explain suffering differently. Dualistic narratives emphasize unambiguous distinctions between good and evil. They offer strong moral prescriptions. They also valorize those who fight on society's behalf. In contrast, tragic narratives emphasize what was lost in the attack. They offer open-ended prescriptions about moral worth. Rarely do they describe heroes and villains.

Simko provides a useful conceptual scheme to examine post-terror public discourse, if we can generalize from her context of commemoration. Commemorations are tightly regulated events, allowing organizers to impose their preferred narrative, whereas public discourse is loosely controlled, letting parties debate different narratives (Abrams et al., 2004). Nevertheless, some narratives spread more widely (Wuthnow, 2010). First, even in public discourse some speakers receive greater attention (Turk, 2004). Large media organizations, political leaders, advocacy groups, and the terrorists themselves each of have interests leading them to prefer dualistic narratives that legitimate aggressive military intervention (so-called 'hawks') or tragic narratives that do not ('doves'). Second, attack characteristics may favor some narratives over others. Emerging stories and images variously bring attention to the helplessness, the compassion, or the defiant behavior of bystanders, forming a basis for stories people tell about the attack (Dutton et al., 2006). It is difficult to imagine tragic narratives being absent, but they may be sparser when there are no civilian casualties, as for attacks directed at infrastructure or military targets (Abrahms, 2006).

Besides explaining suffering, dualistic and tragic narratives should provide unique frames for people giving meaning to work. The more attention individuals pay to these narratives,

the more their sensemaking should be drawn to specific social categories, values, and identities (Simko, 2012). I propose that the more individuals pay attention to dualistic narratives, the more likely they will be to create work meanings about defiance. The more individuals pay attention to tragic narratives, the more likely they will be to create work meanings about compassion. Individuals might pay attention to narratives of either or both genres by seeking information through media, attending commemorations and rallies, engaging in conversation, or ruminating (Holman et al., 2004; Mehl & Pennebaker, 2003). While I do not elaborate such factors, how much someone attends dualistic versus tragic narratives may depend on the narrative's availability as well as personal factors like personal identities, relationships, and life structures (Collins, 2004; Weick, 1995).

When individuals make sense using dualistic narratives, we should expect them to attend cues about ingroups-outgroups, conflict, and aggressive behavior. First, dualistic narratives' focus on good versus evil intensifies social categorization, bringing attention to outgroups held responsible for the attack, as in the case of US President Bush's 9/11 statements: 'Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists' (Simko, 2012, pp. 886-887). Attacks leave room for interpretation about the ingroup: 'who or what is under attack'. People and leadership in targeted societies may conclude that the terrorists had attacked something ranging from a nation, regime, or minority group to Western civilization itself (Abrahms, 2006). By receiving attention, these categories frame individuals' evaluations of their own and others' moral worth (Feinstein, 2017). It is partly because national identity becomes salient after foreign terrorism, researchers theorize, that rally 'round the flag effects occur. As individuals categorize

themselves and others in terms of nationality, their attitudes toward national leaders and compatriots improve (Dumont et al., 2003; Van de Vyer et al., 2016).

There is evidence that intensifying social categorization outside the workplace spills over to how members categorize their organization. Tilcsik and Marquis (2013) show that localized disruptions, like natural disasters, bring local organizations' attention to shared membership in a community, encouraging cooperation. Conversely, Vergne (2012) shows that terrorism can increase the salience of stigmatized categories. Organizations in the global arms industry faced more public disapproval when post-9/11 discourse brought attention to their dealings with oppressive regimes. Employees found themselves questioned by business partners and friends about their morality, and their booths segregated from less tainted firms at trade fairs. In short, dualistic narratives may encourage individuals to evaluate work as an expression of belonging to publicly salient ingroups or outgroups.

Second, besides encouraging individuals to make ingroup-outgroup distinctions, dualism discourages reflection about the underlying causes of an attack, preferring immediate conflict with outgroups (Abrahms, 2006). It is easy to see those employed in military and law enforcement, or who represent populations as political and religious leaders, concluding that their work defies terrorists directly (Kay et al., 2010; Lambert et al., 2010). However, people elsewhere might construct stories about their work defying terrorism symbolically. Where moral narratives make national defense salient, individuals may find positive associations in organizations that, through history, branding, or company culture, have become symbols of national identity (Foster, Suddaby, Minkus, & Wiebe, 2011; Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler, 2010). Employees and public discourses may also imbue activities within specific industries with symbolic value (Vergne, 2012). For example,

discourse following the 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* magazine and 2016 Orlando *Pulse* nightclub shootings highlighted the role of the press in defending freedom of speech ('Je suis Charlie') and nightclubs in fighting for LGBT causes, respectively (Brooks, 2015; Denver Post, 2016).

Third, dualistic narratives' focus on conflict encourages emotions associated with aggression. Lambert et al.'s (2010) research on rally effects finds that when people are exposed to terrorism, simultaneous feelings of anger increase prowar attitudes, whereas those of anxiety dampen them. Aggression may thus increase the attractiveness of work meanings about confronting terrorists. In sum, because dualistic narratives encourage people making sense to focus on ingroups-outgroups, conflict, and aggression towards outgroups, I propose:

> Proposition 2a: *Paying attention to dualistic narratives will make individuals more likely to construct stories about their work defying culturally defined outgroups (positive meaning: work as defiance).*

Infusing work with the meaning that one is participating in a moral narrative should compensate individuals' desire to restore order and belonging after terrorism (Hogg, 2007; Kay et al., 2010). From a terror management perspective, it should let individuals feel they are upholding cultural values, alleviating the threat of mortality (Grant & Wade-Benzoni, 2009). Because work will fulfill individuals' personal needs, people should regard defiance stories about their work as positive meaning – as it appeared to be for many financial workers after 9/11 (Beunza & Stark, 2004; DiMarco, 2007; Freeman et al., 2004; Lucchetti, 2011).

When individuals engage in sensemaking with tragic narratives, the literature suggests we should expect them to attend cues about victims and helpers, human suffering, and compassionate behavior. First, while ingroup-outgroup distinctions are weaker, tragic narratives still identify esteemed social categories: victims and helpers (Simko, 2012). Some organizations and occupations are culturally associated with care, and their members may easily categorize themselves as helper ingroups. This is consistent with researchers who argue people in services directly responding to tragedy will be most motivated after terrorism (Singh, 2008; Wrzesniewski, 2002). In other cases, individuals may seek evidence that they are helpers by modifying tasks, how they frame their work, and how they categorize their organization (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). For example, business professors may emphasize their contributions to the community by increasing time spent on service, or they may direct research and teaching to compassionate topics (Clair, Maclean, & Greenberg, 2002).

Second, compassion scholars propose that 'stories of care' direct organizational attention to victims' needs following a disaster (Dutton et al., 2006). Describing prior acts of compassion toward victims, such stories generate empathy, inspire others to emulate the acts of compassion, and convey positive emotions linked to helping behaviors (p. 82). Dutton et al. propose 'The greater the number and spread of caring stories, the greater the attention and empathic concern directed toward those in pain… the greater the scale, scope, speed, and customization of responses directed toward those in pain' (p. 82). Thus, individuals paying attention to tragic narratives appear likely to reflect on whether their work does or can address victims' needs (Wrzesniewski, 2002).

Third, Rhee et al. (2006) argue that tragedy leads individuals to engage in sensemaking

through 'virtue frames', cognitive filters which capture whether something has the quality

of 'moral goodness'. While organizational actions can be interpreted in many ways (e.g.

profitability or innovativeness), virtue frames lead people to consider whether the

organization is humane, just, and courageous. Compassionate action includes donations to

salient victims as well as managerial acknowledgements of tragedy, ranging from

impromptu meetings to organized vigils (Rhee et al., 2006). In sum, because tragic

narratives encourage people making sense to focus on helpers and victims, human

suffering, and compassion towards victims, I propose:

> Proposition 2b: *Paying attention to tragic narratives will make individuals more*
> *likely to construct stories about their work supporting culturally defined ingroups*
> *(positive meaning: work as compassion).*

When attention is drawn to suffering, compassion scholars showed that people will be

attracted to compassionate workplaces (Dutton et al., 2006). Moreover, individuals who

consciously reflect on loss of life appear likely to transform death anxieties into prosocial

behaviors (Cozzolino, 2006; Grant & Wade-Benzoni, 2009). Therefore, people should

regard compassion stories about work as positive meaning – as it appeared in studies

finding people attracted to services like medicine and firefighting or identifying with

organizations responding to victims' suffering materially and symbolically (Lowe &

Fothergill, 2003; Rhee et al., 2006; Singh, 2008).

Finally, having paid attention to moral narratives, individuals who fail to find a plausible

story of work contributing to society's response to terrorism should be more likely to attach

negative meanings to work (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). First, compensatory control

theories suggest work will be less important to these individuals, who should turn instead to

institutions like family or religion to restore order and belonging (Carnahan et al., 2017; Kay et al., 2010). Activities that lack personal significance are associated with lower engagement, higher stress and absenteeism, and job dissatisfaction (Rosso et al., 2010). Second, terror management theory suggests that failure in attempts to either uphold cultural worldviews (expressed in dualistic narratives) or concretely address mortality (expressed in tragic narratives) will lead to stress-related withdrawal behaviors, including turnover and absenteeism (Grant & Wade-Benzoni, 2009). These outcomes accord with those described by researchers who portray work after terrorism as a burden (Inness & Barling, 2005): people experiencing work as onerous, withdrawing from it, and seeking fulfillment in other life domains.

> Proposition 2c: *When lacking a plausible story about work defying outgroups/supporting ingroups, paying attention to moral narratives will make individuals more likely to find negative meaning in work after terrorism (work as a burden).*

In sum, the overarching idea I present in this paper is that individuals in search of order and belonging look to work as one way to affirm their identity and values. Individuals draw on societal moral narratives – either dualistic or tragic ones – to construct stories of their work's meaning. For those for whom work becomes a means to participate in society's moral narratives, work acquires positive meaning (work as defiance or compassion); otherwise, work is likely to acquire negative meaning (work as a burden). With this process outlined, it appears worthwhile to consider how managerial responses to terrorism may affect individuals giving meaning to work. I turn to this task in part three.

Part three: Organizational policies facilitating story construction

Prior research suggests that, aside from operational concerns, organizational managers struggle with two questions after a large-scale terrorist event: 'do we continue business as

usual?' and 'how do we discuss the attacks?' (Clair et al., 2002; North et al., 2013).

Extending the theory developed, I suggest their answers will influence whether members give positive meaning to work. Managers cannot determine what employees will think. But managers do guide sensemaking because they 'construct, rearrange, single out, and demolish many 'objective' features of their surroundings' (Weick, 1979, p. 164). After terrorism, such managerial actions may influence what structures members use to make sense and what information becomes salient.

In answering, 'do we continue business as usual?', managers decide whether employees should return to workplaces and schedules. Policy choices range from directing employees to work as usual, to facilitating voluntary returns, to encouraging employees to stay home (Burke, 2005). We saw some research dissuading managers from restoring business as usual too quickly: employees may need time to recover from trauma (the burden view) or may be alienated by managers' insensitivity to grief (the compassion view). Then again, we found employees eagerly returning to workplaces in search of community and purpose (the moral purpose view). Both individuals and organizations might benefit in the latter cases: individuals by restoring order and belonging and organizations by retaining engaged employees. The question is whether the benefits of asking employees to come to work immediately after terrorism outweigh the risks.

Based on sensemaking theory, I propose that managers will help employees find positive meaning in work by encouraging them to return to workplaces voluntarily. The advantage of returning to workplaces is that it restores structures, which helps reconstruct meaning (Weick, 1993). There are also advantages to voluntary rather than mandated return to business. First, voluntary return may encourage employees to find intrinsic work value

through the principle of insufficient justification (Weick, 1967). Second, voluntary policies are less likely to violate virtue frames (Rhee et al., 2006).

Weick (1993) proposed that increasing structure is one way for organizational members to rebound from meaning loss. His proposition arises from his reanalysis of the Mann Gulch disaster: an outfit of 15 smokejumpers ambushed by a wildfire, becoming disorganized, soon thereafter – save but three – perishing in the flames. The wildfire's sudden appearance had shattered the smokejumpers' expectations, nor could they reorganize around updated expectations since they had been spreading out and losing communication. They were experiencing a vicious cycle of decreasing meaning and structure (p. 646). Finally, told by their leader 'throw away your tools!', the smokejumpers lost the last bit of structure that would help them reorganize – their roles within an outfit of smokejumpers (pp. 635-636). Reflecting on this, Weick suggests 'When meaning becomes problematic and decreases, this is a signal for people to pay more attention to their formal and informal social ties and to reaffirm and/or reconstruct them. These actions produce more structure, which the increases meaning' (p. 646).

Weick's proposition might generalize to a group of employees whose expectations have been shattered by terrorism. Though occurring over days rather than minutes, we find similar sensemaking patterns: a sudden sense one is no longer living in a familiar world, diminishing role systems ('are we supposed to go to work?'), and attempts to restore meaning by seeking social connections ('where is everyone?') (Mehl & Pennebaker, 2003; North et al., 2013). When workplaces provide structures – including roles, relationships, and colleagues – they may provide a context for individuals to find work-related cues, interpretations, and actions that can be integrated into moral narratives.

Already, Beunza and Stark (2004) have suggested that reaffirming structures restores meaning in their ethnography of a Wall Street trading firm. Having lost their offices in the 9/11 attacks, employees recreated their organization by assembling in a backup facility, reproducing physical elements of their former office, and engaging in trading. Instead of 'drop your tools', the authors note 'the traders were told, in effect, 'pick up your tools' – begin the process of sensemaking and orienting yourself in the world by affirming your identity as a trader and through the act of trading' (p. 14).

The case might also be interpreted as workplace structures helping individuals integrate moral narratives into work. Since announcements about the War on Terror affected stock prices, televisions in the trading room were tuned to news channels; traders discussed the war and brought their identities as Americans into their work roles (p. 11-12). Clair et al. (2002), North et al. (2013), and others (DiMarco, 2007; Lucchetti, 2011) also illustrate workplace structures helping employees gather information, test interpretations, and exchange plausible stories that integrate moral narratives into work after terrorism, while Petriglieri (2015) does so in the case of industrial disaster. In short, workplaces provide structure – especially professional tasks and roles – with which to construct plausible stories about work defying outgroups or supporting ingroups.

A second reason why voluntary return should support positive meanings is the principle of insufficient justification (Weick, 1967). The idea is that people rely on retrospective sensemaking to explain task desirability. When extrinsic rewards – like money – are introduced to a task, they reduce individuals' attention to its intrinsic rewards. When individuals volunteer for poorly compensated tasks, the intrinsic rewards not only become more salient, but more credible: individuals engage in sensemaking to justify to themselves

and others that there were good reasons for accepting the task. It seems plausible that, after

witnessing horror and voluntarily leaving home, employees who ask 'why did my

colleagues and I return to work?' may conclude 'because we do something important.' If

management had obligated employees to return, they may instead think 'because we were

told to' and stop searching for deeper meaning.

The third advantage is that voluntary returns avoid violating virtue frames (Rhee et al.,

2006). Tragedies not only increase attention to compassionate acts but also to ones that

appear aloof from human suffering. When managers impose on grieving employees after

terrorism, they risk alienating them (Dutton et al., 2002). Through softer measures, such as

offers to facilitate commuting or reminders about who the organization benefits, managers

might encourage employees to return without seeming uncompassionate (Burke, 2005). In

sum, because actions restoring structure increase meaning, insufficient justification prompts

individuals to enhance intrinsic task value, and voluntary returns avoid violating virtue

frames, I propose:

> Proposition 3a: *Return to work policies moderate the relationship between attention to moral narratives and work meaning such that individuals will be more likely to construct stories about defying outgroups/supporting ingroups when returning to work voluntarily, as opposed to returning involuntarily or taking an absence.*

The second question likely to be on managers' minds was 'how do we discuss the attacks?'

Using different words, the question might be: 'how should managers support employees'

sensemaking after terrorism?' The literature describes at least three different approaches:

some managers discourage employees from reflecting on terrorism, some actively guide

employees' sensemaking towards moral narratives, and others provide spaces for

employees to discuss the attacks in open dialogue (Burke, 2005). To generalize slightly

from Clair et al.'s (2002) terminology, I refer to these approaches as, respectively,

'limited', 'integrative', and 'events-processing'. Based what I proposed in part two, the appropriate response should depend on genre: integrative responses will support employees making sense with dualistic narratives, and events-processing will support employees making sense with tragic narratives.

Clair et al.'s (2002) terminology comes from studying how business professors structured their classes after 9/11 but captures alternate approaches to sensemaking facilitation taken by CEOs, managers, and other organizational leaders. With limited responses, managers briefly acknowledge terrorism, then initiate business as usual. They increase employees' attention to work and reduce it to terrorism; no effort is made to associate work with society's moral responses. For example, managers stick to schedules and restrict interaction with members to work-related topics (Dutton et al., 2002). Because it lacks the advantages of other approaches, I argue that a limited response should less effectively help employees construct stories of work defying outgroups/supporting ingroups.

With integrative responses, managers initiate discussions and guide them towards an assertion about the organization's worth in the context of terrorism. Managers increase members' attention to both work and terrorism, and they explicitly associate the work with moral narratives. Efforts to guide sensemaking might involve verbal statements, as well as symbolic or substantive actions. For example, managers at Sandler O'Neill and KBW, two financial firms suffering casualties after 9/11, issued statements pledging that their firms would survive in order not to 'let the terrorists win and undermine America' (Freeman et al., 2004, p. 73) and 'We [don't] want the bad guys to win' (Lucchetti, 2011, para. 17). By hanging flags in the office, managers may highlight the organization's national origins and encourage ingroup categorization; by setting ambitious goals for restoring operations,

managers may make a statement about the organization's resilience (Beunza & Stark, 2004; Lucchetti, 2011).

This approach seems suitable for facilitating stories about work as defiance. In part two, I argued that dualism oriented individuals toward ingroups-outgroups, conflict, and aggression. Managers who frame the organization as defying terrorists should highlight their organization's unambiguous belonging to the ingroup, and therefore its attractiveness as a category in which to belong (Dumont et al., 2003; Hogg, 2007) (e.g. Lucchetti, 2011). Second, because dualism reduces desires for lengthy reflection, managers' promulgation of a conflict frame – instead of open dialogue – should be more readily accepted (Abrahms, 2006). The third point is related, which is that when feeling aggression, individuals tend to esteem hawkish policies and strong leaders (Lambert et al., 2010). Thus, managers' direction-giving should be attractive. Based on these arguments, I propose:

> Proposition 3b: *Sensemaking support moderates the relationship between attention to dualistic narratives and work meaning such that individuals will be more likely to construct stories of work defying outgroups when management takes an integrative response, rather than a limited or events-processing response.*

Finally, with events-processing responses, managers initiate discussions but allow employees' reactions to shape the conversation. Managers increase employees' attention to terrorism and reduce it to work; they welcome employees' attempts to integrate moral narratives into work but do not impose such interpretations. For example, managers can organize meetings where employees share experiences with one another (North et al., 2013). Managers can also communicate empathy, facilitate volunteering, and provide work arrangements that help members spend time with family (Dutton et al., 2002; Mainiero & Gibson, 2003).

This approach seems suitable for facilitating stories about work as compassion. In part two, I argued that tragedy oriented individuals towards looser social categories, human suffering, and compassion. Here, managers may not need to unambiguously define ingroups and outgroups – employees may accept multiple voices and not feel threatened when colleagues' views differ (Cozzolino, 2006; Simko, 2012). Thus, open discussions where multiple meanings about the organization's work are proposed may profit employees gathering plausible ideas with which to construct their stories (Weick, 1995). Second, because tragic narratives bring attention to human suffering, discussions allowing employees to reflect on it may be more attractive than those structured to return employees' attention to work (Dutton et al., 2006). Though insufficient attention to work might hamper stories about its moral worth, compassion scholars argue that employees identify with organizations that help them fulfill desires to express compassion (Rhee et al., 2006). Feeling positive about their organization, employees might retrospectively ascribe positive meaning to its work (Weick, 1979). Third, managers avoid violating virtue frames by refraining from uncompassionate actions. By giving employees opportunities to reflect, rather than imposing schedules or interpretations about work, managers should avoid seeming unselfish (Dutton et al., 2002). Therefore, I propose:

> Proposition 3c: *Sensemaking support moderates the relationship between attention to tragic narratives and work meaning such that individuals will be more likely to construct stories of work supporting ingroups when management takes an events-processing response, rather than a limited or integrative response.*

Discussion and Conclusions

Why do some people feel their work has lost meaning after terrorism, while others find new meaning in it? I proposed that people find positive meaning by constructing plausible

stories about participating in society's response to terrorism through their work, and negative meaning when they fail to. This theory is rooted in a sensemaking perspective, according to which people give meaning by noticing and interpreting social cues, along with research suggesting that people are motivated to identify with the ingroups and values expressed in moral narratives about terrorism. I proposed to integrate contrasting views about workplace responses to terrorism, and particularly to challenge the idea that everyday work necessarily depletes people's coping resources after an attack (Inness & Barling, 2005). When workplaces fulfill needs for compassion or moral purpose they may instead replenish members' coping resources, offsetting the psychological distress of terrorism (Bacharach & Bamberger, 2007; Rosso et al., 2010).

Moreover, I challenged the idea that some lines of work are innately more meaningful to people living through terrorism (Singh, 2008; Wrzesniewski, 2002). While agreeing that hospitals and firefighting units provide members moral responses to terrorism, I proposed that, under the right conditions, so too will investment banks and nightclubs. Though others have argued this before (Beunza & Stark, 2004; Freeman et al., 2004), I provide a theory spanning individual and organizational factors for predicting settings in which positive meaning is likely to be found. I suggested that workplaces serve as an important institution that intermediates public discourses and individual experiences of solidarity. Social scientists studying the cultural response to disaster usually look to national ceremonies, commemorations, and political rallies to learn about solidarity, not banks and business schools (Simko, 2012; Wuthnow, 2010). Yet, workplaces are where most people will spend their time and, as I argued, can let them express solidarity in concrete ways – discovering identities, enacting shared values, or redirecting resources to victims. The workplace's role

in encouraging or stifling solidarity in societies after terrorism seems a compelling area for collaboration between organizational theorists and disaster researchers.

Future research directions

I presented a theory that is not exhaustive, but which can be a basis for scholars to test and elaborate in future research. Experiments, surveys, and unobtrusive measures are available for empirical studies of workplace responses to terrorism (Woods, 2010). Testing the model in non-Western contexts would be valuable too. It is after all, where organizations face terrorism most often (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2016).

Our understanding of workplace responses to terrorism would also benefit from research exploring moderators and implications of the theory. It seems worthwhile asking how much personal factors influence narrative selection. I theorized that dualistic and tragic narratives serve similar functions for people giving meaning and so to some degree they should be substitutes. However, most people will probably not see defiance and compassion as perfect substitutes, even if disruptions like terrorism open them to new worldviews (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Personal identities and life structures might lead some people to reliably make sense of work with one narrative genre and not the other. Another simplification I made was that 'defiance', 'compassion', and 'burden' meanings are mutually exclusive. By sacrificing simplicity, researchers may better capture reality's messiness: people often find multiple, ambivalent meanings in work (Berg et al., 2010).

For implications, of note is Berg et al.'s (2010) finding that people often have 'unanswered' callings – that we can feel strong attraction toward occupations which did not become a part of our careers. Research might examine why some people pursue unanswered callings

after terrorism while others stay put in their jobs. Moving up the level of analysis, I provided propositions to explore Wrzesniewski's (2002) and Carnahan et al.'s (2017) idea that terrorism affects occupational entry and exit. It would be interesting to know whether societal responses to terrorism create enduring labor market changes by altering the desirability of various occupations. At the organizational-level, both researchers and practitioners should benefit from insights on supporting employee sensemaking after terrorism. Many managers are not confident in this role, but their interventions to terrorism can inspire and unite members in the darkest days of an organization's history (North et al., 2013).

Practical implications

Everyday work can rally or burden people in the aftermath of terrorism. Managers concerned with the wellbeing of their employees and organizations might benefit by supporting efforts to find positive meaning in work. People who find meaning at work experience more fulfillment, less stress, and improved health satisfaction (Rosso et al., 2010). Organizations too may respond resiliently to terrorism when members find returning to work has positive meaning: they should be more engaged, less absent, and better performing (Rosso et al., 2010).

I theorized how managers' answers to two questions, 'do we continue business as usual?' and 'how do we discuss the attacks', affect meaning construction after terrorism. Answering the first question, I proposed managers should encourage employees to return to work voluntarily – by contacting them, reminding them who will benefit, and providing logistical support (North et al., 2013). This approach should embed employees in structures that help them find meaning, while not imposing a burden or appearing insensitive.

Answering the second question, managers should watch emerging moral narratives about terrorism and employees' reactions to them. I argued that when employees are searching for stories about work defying outgroups, they should appreciate managers taking a strong stance – offering interpretations and enacting environments that demonstrate the organization's resilience against terrorism. When employees are searching for stories about work supporting ingroups, managers should foster open discussions where employees can share experiences and acknowledge human suffering.

Finally, managers should recognize situations where positive meaning is unlikely, and alleviate burdens on employees' recovery from trauma. Bacharach and Bamberger (2007) find workplace resources that give members a sense of control can offset terrorism-induced distress. Inness and Barling (2005) suggest that temporary upticks in absenteeism may benefit organizations in the long run, observing 'It may be preferable for employees to take time away from the workplace in order to recover as opposed to either remaining physically present and unable to concentrate on their work or leaving the organization' (p. 385).

Given terrorism's enduring presence in world society, managing through an attack is something many people will find themselves doing at some point in their careers. In this paper, I developed theory to explain one aspect of that role. Integrating research on work meaning, sensemaking, and the cultural response to disaster, I presented the view that most of us respond to terrorism in some way – even when we are neither physical victims nor direct responders – when we give meaning to our work and shape the meaning others give to theirs.

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Figure 1: Giving Meaning to Everyday Work After Terrorism*
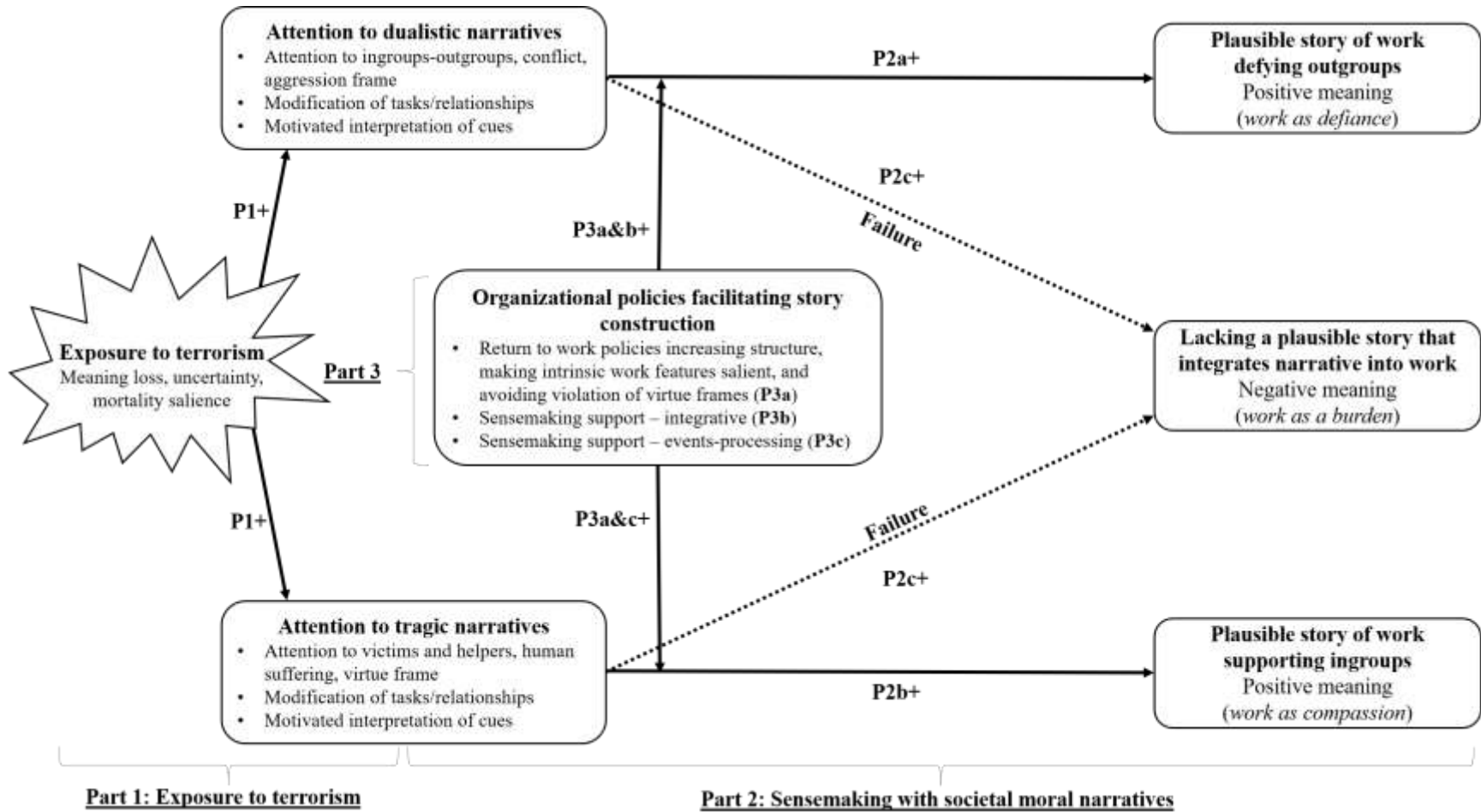
*Solid arrows indicate main variance outcomes; dashed arrows, alternate ones.