FINDING AND FEELING MEANINGFULNESS IN AN INVISIBLE OCCUPATION

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ABSTRACT

Evidence is mounting that recognition from others may play a critical role in shaping an individual's experience of meaningful work; so how do workers find meaningfulness when their work is "invisible"? I examine this tension through a qualitative, inductive study of the occupation of linemen—the women and men who construct and repair power lines. By examining this invisible occupation, my research explains the conditions that foster the "recognition gap"—a disparity between the recognition linemen believe they deserve and the recognition they actually receive. This recognition gap ultimately produces meaningfulness insecurity—feelings of uncertainty or doubt about the meaningfulness of their work. Moreover, this research also explains how linemen overcome this meaningfulness insecurity through intuitive feelings of pride in beautiful completed work. Through a process motivated by a desire to avoid criticism for ugly work, linemen develop "expert schemas" that allow for intuitive—rapid, nonconscious, and affectively charged—reactions to the appearance of a completed job. When positive, these intuitive judgements foster experiences of meaningfulness. By explaining these processes, this dissertation re-casts meaningfulness from an individual accomplishment to one that is deeply dependent on social cues; and from a process requiring thoughtful reflection to one driven by intuitive judgements.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

"When I say [I'm a] lineman, they go, 'You play football?' I'm like, 'No. I work in a power department. I'm a power lineman.'"

"The general public… they don't have a clue really what it entails to provide that power to make your lights work."

"People just take us for granted."

— Interviews with Linemen

Most people consider meaningfulness to be the most important outcome they could achieve through their work (King & Napa, 1998; O'Brien, 1992; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010). The pursuit of meaningfulness can require substantial sacrifices, including salary (Achor, Reece, Kellerman, & Robichaux, 2018; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009) personal relationships (Jiang & Wrzesniewski, 2021; Oelberger, 2019), and even one's psychological wellbeing (de Rond & Lok, 2016; Schabram & Maitlis, 2017). Yet, individuals continue to seek meaningful work—defined as work that is perceived to be purposeful and significant by those who do it (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Research suggests that experiencing work as meaningful is worth the costs, as meaningfulness brings higher levels of engagement (Kahn, 1990; May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004), job satisfaction (Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997), and performance (Grant, 2008; Leiter, Harvie, & Frizzell, 1998; Rodell, 2013). Given individuals' need for meaningfulness (Frankl, 1985) as well as growing recognition of the benefits for organizations when workers find their work meaningful (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010), interest in how to foster meaningfulness has been burgeoning recently (Beer, Micheli, & Besharov, 2021; Hill, Best, & Cardador, 2021; Jiang, 2021; Lepisto, 2022).

Research on how to foster meaningful work has taken a broad range of theoretical approaches (Laaser & Bolton, 2021; Lysova, Allan, Dik, Duffy, & Steger, 2019). Scholars have

emphasized individuals' orientation to their work (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), specific characteristics of jobs (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), a shared sense of purpose (Carton, 2018; Pratt & Hedden, 2023), and cultural values (Boova, Pratt, & Lepisto, 2019) as potential sources of meaningful work—just to name a few. However, despite this variety in theoretical lenses on what affects meaningfulness, evidence from across these approaches hints at a vital insight: other people's perceptions matter for one's experience of meaningful work. Indeed, research in these areas suggests that feedback or recognition from others might play an important role in affirming one's work orientation (Bloom, Colbert, & Nielsen, 2021; Jiang & Wrzesniewski, 2021), helping workers understand how their work is making a positive difference (Grant, 2008; Hackman & Oldham, 1976), and helping workers understand the purpose of their work (Carton, 2018). Although not a central focus in these fields, this work broadly suggests that other people's opinions and perceptions of one's work may play an important role in shaping one's experiences of meaningfulness.

When individuals perceive that their work is understood and valued by others, they may be more likely to experience their work as meaningful (Florian, Costas, & Kärreman, 2019; Lepisto & Pratt, 2017). Indeed, research has demonstrated that others' positive (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999) and accurate (Vough, Cardador, Bednar, Dane, & Pratt, 2013) perceptions about an individual's work are vital for a host of positive outcomes, including the individual's experience of meaningfulness at work. Receiving recognition of the worthiness of one's work from others is a deeply validating experience (Grant, 2012) that provides a sense of being respected (Mickel & Barron, 2008) and valued (Dutton, Debebe, & Wrzesniewski, 2016). Laaser and Bolton (2021) assert that such recognition involves both admiration and appreciation from others. Thus—as will later be argued in greater depth—social cues regarding others' perceptions

of one's work may play a significant role in shaping one's experience of meaningfulness (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978; Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003). Yet, for many workers, relying on cues from interactions with others to shape the meaningfulness of one's work poses a problem.

Recent events, such as the COVID pandemic, have shined new light onto the pervasive nature of "invisible work"—defined here as work that the workers perceive "go[es] unrecognized by many in society" (Chan & Anteby, 2016: 186) Such revelations have happened in at least two ways. The designation of "essential" given to previously unrecognized workers pulled back the curtain on a plethora of jobs that were previously invisible (Hennekam, Ladge, & Shymko, 2020; Kinder, 2020). Also, as individuals began working from home en masse, many jobs that were once visible became invisible. Engaging in invisible work holds several consequences—most relevant of which is a "lack of social validation" (Daniels, 1987: 405) that jeopardizes the ability to find work meaningful. Invisible work severely limits one's ability to receive cues from others about the value of one's work, as other people largely lack awareness of or interest in the work in the first place (Sharma, Ghosh, Mishra, & Anand, 2022; Star & Strauss, 1999). Thus, invisible work remains a potent threat to meaningfulness.

Although this threat has not gone completely unnoticed in the literature, existing solutions for managing the tensions associated with invisible work remain at best, incomplete and, at worst, counterproductive. For instance, theories of relational job design (Grant, 2007, 2008) assert the benefits of increasing contact with workers' clients and customers. Decreasing invisibility through such contact seems—on the surface—like a sound remedy. However, this is not possible for many types of invisible workers given that their work is conducted far away from the view of the public (Lever & Milbourne, 2017; Nardi & Engeström, 1999). Furthermore,

interactions with customers who don't value or understand invisible workers' work—as illustrated in the opening epigraphs—can sometimes have the opposite effect, leaving them feeling even more unrecognized and devalued than before (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Dutton et al., 2016).

Alternatively, research on occupations has shown that members of invisible occupations can engage in discursive strategies (i.e., trying to convince audiences of the value of their work) in order to increase their recognition from others (Fayard, Stigliani, & Bechky, 2017; Nelsen & Barley, 1997; Sherman, 2010). However, due to the deeply embedded nature of perceptions of invisibility of work in society, this is an uphill battle that rarely results in success (Mikolon, Alavi, & Reynders, 2021; Sherman, 2010). Finally, research on invisible and stigmatized work suggests that members of invisible occupations can turn to one another to provide positive affirmation and encouragement (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007). However, members of these occupations may, in fact, propagate stigma within the occupation instead of fighting against it (Toubiana & Ruebottom, 2022). Additionally, even if workers doing the same invisible work share positive affirmation with one another, if recipients of the affirmation perceive that it is inauthentic or self-serving, such affirmation is quite unlikely to increase meaningfulness (Carlson, Carlson, & Ferguson, 2011; Sanchez-Ruiz, Wood, & Long-Ruboyianes, 2021). Although these literatures will be reviewed in greater detail later, these high-level critiques demonstrate that extant solutions to the problem of invisibility have not yet explained how to overcome this significant threat to meaningfulness.

This research therefore seeks to address these tensions between invisible work and meaningfulness through a qualitative and inductive study (Charmaz, 2014; Locke, 2001). This study on the occupation of linemen—the men and women who construct and repair power

lines—revealed that one of their most significant tensions at work is the perception that their work is invisible to those outside of their occupation. In line with extant research on invisible work (Chan & Anteby, 2016; Daniels, 1987; Sherman, 2010; Star & Strauss, 1999), being unrecognized by others posed difficulties to linemen's ability to experience their work as meaningful. This context therefore seems apt for addressing the following broad research question: *how, if at all, can members of invisible occupations experience meaningful work despite a lack of external recognition?*

Before explaining the research methods by which I addressed this question, I first review relevant literature on meaningful work and invisible work. Although this research was not originally intended to explore the tensions between meaningfulness and invisibility specifically, the following literatures emerged as useful theoretical frameworks through which to make sense of my data and contribute to theory on organizational and occupational life.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I review literature on the how scholars have approached the study of meaningful work, the benefits of meaningful work, the social underpinnings of meaningfulness, and the challenges that invisible work poses to meaningfulness in light of those social underpinnings. In doing so, I argue that invisible work is a significant threat to meaningfulness and that existing theoretical solutions for remedying the problems posed by invisibility remain flawed. Given the many benefits of meaningfulness for workers and their organizations, as well as newfound realizations of the pervasiveness of invisible work, I show how this topic of study is both timely and theoretically important.

WHAT IS MEANINGFUL WORK?

Work can vary both in its meaning and level of meaningfulness. Literature on the "meaning" of work has found that work can mean different things for different people, ranging from an inescapable drudgery to a purposeful calling. "Meaningfulness" is distinguished from "meaning" in work more generally by its positive valence and accompanying sense that the work is purposeful and significant (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Although meaningful work scholars largely agree on these general characteristics of meaningfulness (cf., Michaelson, 2021), they have taken several divergent paths to studying this phenomenon. Thus, in this section, I review several prominent ways in which scholars have approached the study of meaningful work. I then synthesize insights from these various approaches that are foundational for this study.

The literature on meaningful work contains several different streams of research that have differing assumptions regarding where meaningfulness comes from. As such, these streams highlight several different pathways to meaningfulness. The most prominent of these approaches include examinations of individual work orientations (e.g., Schabram & Maitlis, 2017;

Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), the relationship between the worker and the work itself (e.g., Fried &

Ferris, 1987; Hackman & Oldham, 1976), and cultural influences (e.g., Boova et al., 2019;

Lepisto & Pratt, 2017).

Wrzesniewski and colleagues' (1997: 22) research on work orientations—defined as

"how individuals differ in their experience of the work they do"—has laid a foundation for a

prominent stream of meaningful work research. This work often uses Wrzesniewski and

colleagues (1997) questionnaire (e.g., Leana, Appelbaum, & Shevchuk, 2009; Park, 2010) or

builds on it (e.g., Willner, Lipshits-Braziler, & Gati, 2020) in order to measure individual's work

orientations. These generally include measures of three distinct orientations: (1) a "job"

orientation that involves viewing work as a means to an end, (2) a "career" orientation that

involves viewing work as an opportunity for status and achievement, and (3) a "calling"

orientation that involves viewing one's work as an end in itself due to its social or personal

significance to the one doing it (see also Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 2007).

This body of work broadly views these work orientations as predictors of meaningfulness, with

callings in particular being associated with high levels of meaningfulness (Bloom et al., 2021;

Peterson, Park, Hall, & Seligman, 2009; Rothmann & Hamukang'andu, 2013; Schabram,

Nielsen, & Thompson, 2022; Van, Deacon, & Rothmann, 2010). Thus, in short, this perspective

views meaningfulness as coming from within individuals[1].

Another stream of meaningful work research highlights features of the work itself in

studying and measuring meaningfulness. Most notably, building on the research of Hackman and

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[1] Some research on work orientations has recently started to challenge the implicit assumption that work orientations are purely individual constructs (e.g., Boova et al., 2019). This work argues that, while work orientations are individually held, they are largely influenced by culture more broadly. However, most of the literature on work orientations still—whether explicitly or implicitly—treats them as traits or as individual differences and gives little regard to their origin.

Lawler (1971), Hackman and Oldham (1976) developed the Job Characteristics Model to explain how to create jobs that motivate employees. They argued that improving the skill variety (i.e., the ability to use multiple different skills), task identity (i.e., completing an entire job and seeing the tangible outcome), and task significance (i.e., perceiving that the job has an impact on others) of employees' jobs would increase employees' experience of meaningfulness (see p. 256). This work has proven foundational in the literature on job design more generally (Fried & Ferris, 1987; Parker, Morgeson, & Johns, 2017). Broadly speaking, this perspective holds that meaningfulness is found in the relationship between individuals and their work, and that by remedying "alienation"—a lack of control over how the work is done, the work context itself, or the output of one's work—jobs can become more meaningful. Lepisto and Pratt (2017: 104) classify this body of work within the "realization perspective" of meaningfulness, as it deals with how jobs or work contexts can fulfill human needs and ultimately help them achieve "self-actualization." Other studies beyond the literature on job design seemingly fit into this same perspective, as they highlight the relationship between individuals and the actual features of their job or work context as important drivers of meaningfulness. For instance, scholars have shown how experiences at work such as workload surges (Jiang, 2021) or distressing experiences at work (de Rond & Lok, 2016) negatively affect individuals' ability to find their work meaningful. In short, this perspective views meaningfulness as coming from the relationship between individuals and their jobs.

A third approach takes a more cross-level view on meaningful work, emphasizing cultural and societal influences on meaningfulness. For instance, Boova and colleagues (2019) argue that meaningfulness is largely constituted by social and cultural "accounts" individuals use to justify why their work is worth doing (see Scott & Lyman, 1968). Without cultural

understandings of what our work means, it is difficult for individuals to assess the meaningfulness of their work. Thus, meaningfulness is achieved when individuals are able to justify their work based on values or other factors that give them a clear understanding of the worthiness of their work that are shared by society. Lepisto and Pratt (2017) classify this stream of literature more broadly as the "justification perspective" of meaningfulness, and contrast it with the realization perspective highlighted earlier. The justification perspective on meaningful work is concerned with cultural meanings regarding the value of particular types of work as well as the manner in which individuals perceive their own work in light of those cultural meanings. Whereas the realization perspective emphasizes combatting alienation from work, the justification perspective is concerned with remedying the problem of "anomie"—uncertainty about what makes work valuable (see also Durkheim, 2005 [1897]; Marks, 1974; Merton, 1938).

With the emphasis on shared meanings, this research often takes a more sociological approach and highlights the role of culture in the experience of meaningful work. Weber (1930) typifies such an approach with his arguments regarding the relationship between shared religious ideals about the value of work and the "protestant work ethic." Further, culturally oriented research on meaningful work has demonstrated the importance of currently shared values—not just what has been historically valued—in shaping what type of work will be viewed as meaningful or not. Tausky (1995) demonstrates how "working to please God" was once a common source of meaningfulness in work, but that it has lost prominence in the past few decades. More modern accounts such as "working to find your passion" are newer to the cultural scene, but seem firmly entrenched as broadly useful explanations of what makes work worth doing for workers (Boova et al., 2019).

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Despite the different approaches to the study of meaningful work, this literature seems to broadly agree on at least a few characteristics of meaningfulness that serve as foundational assumptions for this study. First, regardless of its source (e.g., an individual's work orientation, features of the work, or cultural influences), meaningful work is characterized by the worker's positive sense that their work is purposeful worthwhile (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Second, meaningfulness seems to have both cognitive elements, such as clear understandings of how one's work contributes positively to society, as well as affective elements, including positive emotions associated with doing the work (Carton, 2018; Gartenberg, Prat, & Serafeim, 2019; Lepisto, 2022; Rosso et al., 2010). Third, this literature highlights the multi-faceted nature of the antecedents of meaningfulness. It seems clear that there is no single driver of meaningfulness, as even this brief review highlights the influences of individual orientations, the work itself, and culture. That is, there seem to be multiple paths to meaningfulness. Finally, as will be argued in greater depth later, these approaches all hint—to some degree—at the social nature of meaningful work.

Research on work orientations has recently started to note the importance of receiving affirmation of one's calling from others (Bloom et al., 2021), and literature on job design highlights the importance receiving performance feedback from others (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Research on the cultural influences on meaningfulness affirms the social nature of meaningfulness most explicitly by theorizing connections between cultural accounts of work and individual experiences of meaningfulness (e.g., Boova et al., 2019). This dispersed evidence of the social underpinnings of meaningful work highlights the important opportunity for a detailed and intentional examination of this phenomenon[2]. After reviewing the benefits of meaningful

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[2] See also Lepisto and Pratt, (2017) and Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski, (2010) for calls for research that foregrounds the social processes associated with meaningful work.

work and arguing for the social underpinnings of meaningfulness in more depth, I further show why a study of the social aspects of meaningfulness is so important—because relying on social information for meaningfulness can pose a threat to workers in "invisible" occupations.

THE BENEFITS OF MEANINGFUL WORK

Although some scholars have noted that meaningful work can have its drawbacks, given the many things people will sacrifice in order to achieve it (e.g., Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Jiang & Wrzesniewski, 2021; Oelberger, 2019), this literature consistently touts the benefits of meaningful work for both individuals and for the organizations and occupations in which they work.

The Benefits of Meaningfulness for Individuals

Meaningful life. Meaningful work, defined as work that is experienced as purposeful and significant (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003), holds a host of benefits for individuals. First, scholars have highlighted how meaningful work contributes to a sense of wellbeing in life more generally, given the significant amount of time most adults spend working (Campbell, 1976). Thus, meaningful work has been linked with greater fulfillment in life (Grueso Hinestroza, Antón, & López-Santamaría, 2022; Kahn, 1990). Indeed, Wrzesniewski and colleagues (1997) find that viewing work as a calling—and therefore as meaningful—was associated with the highest levels of life satisfaction compared with other work orientations. Furthermore, when developing a scale to measure meaningful work, Steger, Dik, and Duffy (2012: 333) find that meaningful work "was related to a broad well-being indicator like life satisfaction above and beyond both meaning in life and job satisfaction." Although most research on meaningful work examines outcomes associated specifically with work, this research on meaningfulness of life, life satisfaction, and

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similar outcomes broadens the scope of research on meaningfulness to non-work outcomes as well (see Ward & King, 2017 for a review).

Job satisfaction. Regarding work more specifically, meaningfulness is closely associated with higher levels of job satisfaction. Foundational work on job design finds that a sense that a job is meaningful increases job satisfaction (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). In a meta-analysis of this job design research, Fried and Ferris (1987) find that the psychological state of meaningfulness has a stronger relationship with job satisfaction than any other job dimensions in Hackman and Oldham's (1976) original model. Research on work orientations (e.g., Wrzesniewski et al., 1997) has found a similar relationship between meaningful work and job satisfaction. For instance, Lan, Okechuku, Zhang, and Cao (2013) find that meaningful work is associated with higher levels of job satisfaction among accounting professionals. Dik and Duffy (2009) similarly argue that work will be intrinsically more satisfying when individuals view it as a calling—and therefore as more purposeful and significant. Wrzesniewski (2002) even found that when work is experienced as deeply meaningful, individuals find more satisfaction from their work than they do from their non-work undertakings such as leisure activities.

Better pay at work. In addition to these largely subjective and internally experienced benefits, meaningful work is also associated with objective benefits such as higher levels of pay and greater frequency of promotions. For instance, Hall and Chandler (2005) argue that meaningful work leads to better objective work outcomes such as salary because meaningfulness will produce higher effort that will later be rewarded. Hill, Turiano, Mroczek, and Burrow (2016: 41) examine this relationship empirically, finding that individuals who experienced their work as more meaningful (i.e., purposeful) had both higher household income and higher net worth. They also examined these relationships longitudinally. In doing so, they found that these financial

benefits increased over a ten-year span. More recently, Cho and Jiang (2021) found that meaningful work is indeed tied to objective career success (e.g., bonuses, raises). However, they uncover a surprising mechanism by which this happens. They find that, in contrast with previous literature that suggests such outcomes are apt rewards for better performance, managers actually *misperceive* individuals who view their work as a calling to be top performers. This essentially creates a "halo effect" that leads managers to view called employees more favorably and reward them accordingly.

The Benefits of Meaningfulness for Organizations and Occupations

Identification and attachment. In addition to these positive individual level outcomes, meaningful work is also associated with positive outcomes for organizations and occupations. Broadly speaking, a sense of meaningfulness can make individuals more likely to identify with or feel attached to their occupation and/or organization. Literature on callings, for example, illustrates how a sense of meaningfulness can feel deeply personal to individuals who strongly identify with a specific type of work (e.g., Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). Indeed, as Bunderson and Thompson (2009) show, when zookeepers experienced their work as a calling, they were likely to identify strongly with the occupation of zoo keeping. Experiencing work as a calling can also sometimes increase individuals' attachment to their organization, although this relationship may not be as straightforward as feeling attached to an occupation or a type of work. Notably, Cardador, Dane, and Pratt (2011: 374) find that the positive relationship between experiencing work as a calling and feeling attached to one's organization only exists when workers view the organization as "instrumental to the fulfillment of their calling." That is, when organizations help individuals fulfill their callings, those individuals are attached to their organizations. This reliance on instrumentality to link callings with organizational attachment

could conceivably spark a tension for organizations. If individuals with callings felt that their organization was impeding their ability to fulfill their calling instead of supporting it, their attachment to the organization would potentially diminish. Nevertheless, as long as organizations support or bolster members' ability to live out their callings through their work, those members are likely to feel more attached to the organizations, which provides a host of benefits to the organization itself (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986).

   Motivation. In addition to identification with and attachment to work, meaningful work also positively influences motivation. Elangovan, Pinder, and McLean (2010: 435), in a review of the literature on meaningful work and callings, find that "callings clearly instigate focused energy…and provide guidance to a person's choices for directing that energy." This follows research on meaningful work and motivation that has long showed a strong relationship between the two (e.g., Fried & Ferris, 1987; Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Indeed, foundational research on job design by Hackman and Oldham (1976) linked experienced meaningfulness of work with high internal work motivation. Thus, although I discuss Hackman and Oldham's Job Characteristics Model in greater detail in a later section on job design as a tactic for combatting the threats of invisibility, it is important to note here the robust body of job design research (see Parker, Morgeson, & Johns, 2017) that connects meaningfulness and motivation. Furthermore, because meaningfulness positively influences individuals' motivation at work, it is not surprising that meaningful work leads individuals to be more engaged (May et al., 2004) and empowered (Spreitzer, 1996).

   Organizational citizenship behaviors. The positive effects of meaningfulness for organizations has perhaps been shown most clearly in studies concerned with outcomes like organizational citizenship behavior (OCBs)—altruistic behaviors that go beyond one's role

requirements (Katz, 1964; Smith, Organ, & Near, 1983)—and performance. For instance, teachers who found their work deeply meaningful were found to be more likely to devote extra time and more of their personal resources to their work (Serow, 1994). Going "over and above the call of duty" (Elangovan et al., 2010: 437) in this way is central to the definition of OCBs. Because such behaviors are quite beneficial for organizations, scholars have been interested in finding better ways to foster them. For instance, Purvanova, Bono, and Dzieweczynski (2006: 3) study the relationship between meaningful work and OCBs through a lens of leadership. They find that "transformational leaders influence the way followers think about their work, leading them to view it as more rewarding, challenging, and *meaningful*, which affects the extent to which they engage in citizenship performance" (emphasis mine). This connection between leadership, meaningfulness, and OCBs has been made in other similar work. For instance, Piccolo and Colquitt, (2006) argue that one of the main reasons transformational leadership improves OCBs among followers is because transformational leaders shape the meaning of their employees' work. Shamir, House, and Arthur (1993: 587) seemingly agree, arguing that charismatic leadership can increase "meaningfulness associated with the tasks." They go on to argue that this style of leadership is also related to the next benefit to organizations—employee performance.

Performance. Finally, in addition to increasing positive behaviors outside of what is expected of employees (OCBs), meaningful work also contributes to better performance in their prescribed roles. Research on job design highlights this connection quite well. Early work on job design (Fried & Ferris, 1987; Hackman & Oldham, 1976) showed a strong relationship between a sense of meaningfulness and increased performance. Subsequent research continues to support this relationship. For example, Grant (2008) found that more task significance—a belief that

one's work makes a positive impact on others—increased performance in student fundraisers and lifeguards. This is but one example of the many job design studies that highlight the relationship between meaningful work and performance (Grant, Fried, & Juillerat, 2011; Oldham & Hackman, 2010). Beyond objective measures of performance, an employee's sense of meaningful work also increases subjective evaluations her/his performance from others (see Cho & Jiang, 2021). Furthermore, these positive evaluations from others seem to have ripple effects throughout the organization. For example, Leiter, Harvie, and Frizzell (1998) found that when nurses in a hospital perceived their work as more meaningful, their patients not only rated the individual nurses' performance as higher, but those patients also rated other aspects of their hospital stay higher. This underscores how employee meaningfulness can benefit their organizations or occupations more broadly. Thus, meaningful work seems closely tied to quantitatively measured performance indicators (Grant, 2008), and subjective perceptions of both individual and organizational performance by clients (Leiter et al., 1998). Given these many benefits, understanding how to increase the meaningfulness of work seems quite important for any organization or occupation. Thus, not surprisingly, organizational scholars have also been interested in exploring the antecedents of meaningful work (e.g., Jiang, 2021; Lepisto, 2022).

THE SOCIAL UNDERPINNINGS OF MEANINGFUL WORK

Meaningful work is most often studied as an individual-level construct. Indeed, a lack of social or other-oriented perspectives on meaningfulness has long been an issue in this literature (Rosso et al., 2010; Tosti-Kharas & Michaelson, 2021). However, bourgeoning evidence from various theoretical perspectives on meaningful work implicitly hints at the social and socially constructed nature of meaningfulness (e.g., Pratt, Pradies, & Lepisto, 2013). The roots of this assumption stretch back several decades to theories on the social construction of meaning more

generally (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). This perspective holds that individuals experience and make meaning of the world through social interactions. What we view as "objective" facts about life are only perceived as *objective* insofar as they have been established in conversations with others and mutually *objectified* (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; see also Burrell & Morgan, 2017; Cunliffe, 2011; Morgan & Smircich, 1980). Taken from this perspective, meaningful work cannot be experienced by individuals outside of socially constructed understandings of what is meaningful (or meaningless). This means that individuals' interactions with one another—and the understandings those interactions generate—are critical for fostering a sense of meaningfulness (see also Lepisto & Pratt, 2017). At a broad societal level, the continuous affirmation and reaffirmation of the value of certain types of work can eventually become "objectified." This partially explains why healing people who are sick or digging wells in impoverished areas might be viewed as meaningful work even when doctors or philanthropists aren't being told by others that their work is important—such work can be evaluated as meaningful "against the backdrop of a world that is silently taken for granted" (Berger & Luckmann, 1967: 152).

For some work in modern society, the socially prescribed worth is far less certain. Indeed, Baumeister and Wilson (1996: 324) argue that there is a "shortage of firm and consensually accepted standards of rightness and goodness" when it comes to work in modern society. Thus, for some jobs, there are no broader cultural standards by which to evaluate whether one's work is meaningful or not (Boova et al., 2019; Lepisto & Pratt, 2017). In these instances in particular, individuals may need to look for cues from others around them in order to make evaluations about the meaningfulness of their work (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Festinger's (1950, 1954) foundational work on social comparison processes addresses just such a situation.

He argues, "To the extent that objective, non-social means are not available, people evaluate their opinions and abilities by comparison respectively with the opinions and abilities of others" (Festinger, 1954: 118). Moreover, comparing one's own opinions with others' opinions is not a menial or infrequent activity. Rather, it is based on a nearly constant innate drive for "self evaluation concerning one's opinions and abilities" (Festinger, 1954: 135). Thus, Festinger would argue that gauging the meaningfulness of one's work is very likely to involve picking up on cues from others and comparing them with one's own experiences.

This perspective explains why "personal concierges"—individuals whose work involves tasks ranging from running errands to housework to arranging travel for others—found meaningfulness so elusive: despite their desire to engage in this work as their sole occupation, their work was rarely, if ever, recognized as purposeful or significant by others (Sherman, 2010). The importance of cues from others for meaningful work can also be illustrated by truck drivers. Ouellet, (1994: 196) shows how, for truck drivers, even subtle cues such as a "thumbs up" from other drivers is "read as approval of the truck driver they present themselves to be and therefore as recognition of themselves as notable men." Ashforth (2000: 216) comments on these truck drivers, noting that these "positive cues from external audiences" are critical sources of validation (see also Wyckoff, 1979). In short, other people provide the necessary cues for evaluating the significance of one's work. When plentiful and affirming, those cues should help the worker experience her/his work as highly meaningful. When cues are scant, or when they are largely absent, it may make meaningfulness fleeting.

Building on this perspective further, Salancik and Pfeffer (1978) contend that, "The worker is… likely to use social information in developing his or her perceptions of the *meaningfulness*, importance, and variety of the job" (p. 228, emphasis mine). This perspective

has been advanced by some meaningful work scholars as well. For instance, Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) draw on this perspective and theorize that employees use cues from others around them—such as feedback they receive from others after crafting (i.e., making changes to) their jobs—to actively shape the meaning and meaningfulness of their work. Additionally, other perspectives on meaningful work—while not always explicitly—have shown that individuals' experiences of meaningfulness can be shaped by cues from others around them, as will be illustrated in the following sections. These "others" include both insiders (i.e., those within the organization or occupation) such as coworkers, leaders, and other members of the same organization, as well as outsiders (i.e., those outside of the organization or occupation) such as clients and society as a whole. In each of the sections below, I first review examples of these social influences and then explore how each leads to a sense of meaningful work for individuals.

Insiders' Influence on Meaningful Work

Coworkers' influence on meaningful work. Although rarely a primary point of emphasis, research on work and organizations has generally shown that coworkers can play a role in shaping the meaningfulness of one's work. For instance, Roy (1959: 167) describes the informal social routines of machine operators—such as "chatter," snack breaks, and practical jokes—that helped them overcome the "long hours of relatively meaningless work."[3] While the nature of work has shifted for some in the decades since Roy's (1959) study, it seems the importance of coworkers for shaping experiences at work has not. More recently, Colbert, Bono, and Purvanova (2016) have argued that relationships with coworkers are more important than ever, given the "flattening" of traditional hierarchical structures and increased reliance on

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[3] I recognize research that has challenged the assumption that "meaninglessness" is the opposite of meaningfulness (Vough, 2008). Yet, the main emphasis of Roy's (1959) work remains relevant to research on meaningful work because he deals specifically with how workers can overcome issues associated with alienation from their work—a problem that much of the research on meaningfulness seeks to address (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017).

teamwork. They support this assertion with findings that reveal relationships with colleagues are associated with meaningful work and workplace flourishing more generally—suggesting a link between cues from coworkers and an individual's sense of meaningfulness relating to their work. In light of these general examples of coworkers influencing one's sense of meaningfulness, I now turn to the literature that explores why this is the case. This research has revealed that coworkers affect meaningfulness via several different social mechanisms.

One of the most prominent mechanisms by which coworkers influence meaningfulness is by providing sensemaking cues for individuals who then interpret those cues in order to make sense of their work (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). These cues can stem from both routine or everyday parts of a job (e.g., a coworker gives a "thumbs up" after a public presentation) or non-routine and highly memorable events (e.g., a colleague publicly recognizes one's work with an award) that prompt an individual to reflect on the meaning of their work. Coworkers can also affect meaningful work by providing relationships in which to exhibit giving behaviors, which lead to experiences of meaningful work (Colbert et al., 2016). Engaging in interaction rituals with coworkers can also produce a sense of meaningfulness by allowing workers to engage in a shared positive emotional experience (Lepisto, 2022). For instance, Bailey and Madden (2017: 9) study meaningful work among garbage collectors, stone masons, and academics, and find that "meaningfulness arose during shared rituals or ceremonies held to mark the completion of a piece of work." As these examples show, the literature consists of varying approaches to studying *why* coworkers influence meaningfulness. Yet, despite this wide range of approaches, the literature broadly suggests that coworkers can provide positive evaluations one's work, thereby boosting the sense of meaningfulness (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Colbert et al., 2016; Lepisto, 2022).

Leaders' influence on meaningful work. Leaders play an important role in shaping their employees' experiences of meaningfulness. In fact, some scholars even argue that leadership is, at its core, a meaning-making activity (Podolny, Khurana, & Hill-Popper, 2004). It is therefore not surprising that some foundational theorizing on the topic of meaningful work highlights leadership practices that help foster meaningfulness in and at work. Namely, Pratt and Ashforth (2003: 318) note that visionary leadership helps make work "special, enriching, and meaningful." Many additional studies have further bridged the topics of meaningful work and leadership, often noting how various "types" of leadership influence employees' meaningfulness. In a recent review, transformational leadership and ethical leadership were both shown to be positively associated with the meaningfulness experienced by employees (Lysova et al., 2019). Lips-Wiersma, Haar, and Wright (2020) also find that responsible leadership and leader fairness help employees experience their work as more meaningful[4]. Thus, research on leadership has consistently shown a general connection between certain leadership styles or behaviors and employees' experience of meaningful work. As I show below, this research is also starting to highlight how this occurs.

Perhaps the most prominent and important mechanism by which leaders influence meaningfulness of their followers is by communicating the purpose of the work (Allan, 2017; Carton, 2018; Pratt & Hedden, 2023). Pratt and Ashforth (2003: 323) call this activity "providing a cosmology" to followers by communicating a "comprehensive system of beliefs" that connects followers' identities, organizational membership, and the purpose of their work. Recent empirical work has further explained the importance of being able to communicate a shared

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[4] Frémeaux and Pavageau (2022) go a step further, coining the term "meaningful leadership" and arguing that such leadership involves creating coherence between what employees expect of their jobs and what they actually perceive their jobs to be about.

purpose for the work. For instance, Carton (2018) finds that John F. Kennedy's sensegiving practices while leading NASA played a critical role in helping employees find meaningfulness in their work. Instead of just communicating ultimate aspirations, Carton (2018) finds that leaders can be most successful as "architects" when they limit their rhetoric to a single high-level goal for the organization and identify a "small number of milestones" necessary for completing that goal. Thus, leaders influence the meaningfulness experienced by their employees by effectively communicating the purpose of the work, thereby providing the cues employees use to construct a sense of meaningfulness (Harris, Kacmar, & Zivnuska, 2007).

Organizational others' influence on meaningful work. Another body of literature has highlighted the role that others who do different work within one's organization play in one's experience of meaningfulness. Dutton et al. (2016) typify this approach when they advance their "social valuing perspective" on work through a study of cleaners. They find that when other members of the organization give recognition and positive feedback to cleaners, the cleaners felt as though "they were respected and deserving members of the organization" (p. 34). Research on job crafting (see Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) has also touted the importance of interactions with members of other groups within one's organization for meaningful work. This research suggests that individuals can craft their jobs in order to expand the relational boundaries of their work (Berg, Grant, & Johnson, 2010; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) and thereby make their work more meaningful. A key job crafting strategy involves "creating additional relationships" (Berg, Wrzesniewski, & Dutton, 2010: 166) so that individuals can interact with others in different roles, departments, or units within their organization. By finding additional people to interact with, individuals seemingly have more opportunities to engage in interactions that

provide cues about the purpose and significance of their work—ultimately making their work feel more meaningful (Colbert et al., 2016).

Outsiders' Influence on Meaningful Work

Research also points to the notable effects that outsiders have on individuals' experiences of meaningfulness. In fact, Lee Cunningham, Gino, Cable, and Staats (2021: 1833) find that "social worth affirmation from *outside* the team" or organization (emphasis in original) helps individuals feel like more valuable and valued workers than similar affirmation coming from member of one's own team at work. Therefore, social validation of the worth of one's work might be even more consequential when it comes from outsiders. Simpson, Slutskaya, and Hughes (2019: 225) would seemingly agree, as they find that, for garbage collectors and street cleaners, meaningfulness was largely based on "merited recognition" from others, such as the customers they served through their work. Most of the existing literature on the role of outsiders in shaping meaningful work highlights the consequential role of clients or beneficiaries of an individual's work or society as a whole.

Clients' influence on meaningful work. Customers or clients affect workers' experience of meaningfulness in at least two ways. First, workers find their work more meaningful when it is understood and appreciated by clients they serve. Second, workers find their work more meaningful when they can tangibly perceive that they are making a positive difference for their customers or clients. Regarding the former, research has found that work can feel engaging and meaningful when clients share and appreciate the workers' values (Chan & Hedden, 2023). Indeed, merely being misunderstood by one's clients can be a deeply distressing experience. Vough and colleagues (2013) find that when clients devalue professionals' work or hold misaligned expectations about how they should work, those professionals suffer emotionally.

These authors show in their findings how, when they are devalued by clients, professionals express that "it's hard to find meaning" in the work (Vough et al., 2013: 1068).

Regarding the latter, research on job design—building from Hackman and Oldham's, (1976) Job Characteristics Model—has argued that seeing firsthand how one's work benefits clients or customers makes the work more meaningful. Grant (2007) specifies that contact with beneficiaries in particular makes workers more committed to their work and ultimately contributes to greater feelings of social worth. Grant (2008: 118) empirically finds that understanding the relationship between one's work and one's beneficiaries can increase "perceptions of social impact and social worth." Even brief contact with one's customers or clients increases the perceived impact that workers have at work (Grant et al., 2007), ultimately leading them to "feel more appreciated and valued" (Grant & Parker, 2009: 329). This has been echoed throughout the meaningful work literature more broadly (e.g., Pavlish, Hunt, Sato, & Brown-Saltzman, 2019). In a recent review, Laaser and Bolton (2021: 16) argue that care work in particular is likely to be experienced as meaningful because it "has been found to offer rich sources of recognition" from customers and clients. Thus, interacting with clients increases the meaningfulness of the work by helping employees feel like they are valued and that they are making a positive difference in the lives of others.

Society's influence on meaningful work. More recent research on meaningful work has begun to demonstrate that factors at a higher level of analysis—such as society writ large—can influence meaningful work as well. For instance, Florian and colleagues (2019) find that as public discourse surrounding refugees shifted from positive to negative, refugee resettlement workers—whose tasks remained the same—experienced a significant negative shift in meaningfulness. In addition, recent events have highlighted many examples in which society has

affected workers' meaningfulness. For instance, nurses have been burning out and quitting in droves after public sentiment toward them shifted "from heroes to villains" (Chuck, 2021) during the ongoing COVID pandemic. Because this shift involved the general public's perceptions and not the actual tasks required of nurses, the social perceptions of nurses' work seems to play a central role in the negative shift in the meaningfulness they experienced. As noted, research on the "justification perspective" of meaningfulness (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017) highlights how such cultural "accounts" (Scott & Lyman, 1968) about what makes work worth doing can play a prominent role in determining whether or not individuals find their work meaningful (see also Cameron, Chan, & Anteby, 2022). This perspective therefore further illustrates the social underpinnings of meaningful work by highlighting the broader societal and cultural meanings from which individuals draw when seeking to find meaningfulness in their work.

The previous sections illustrate the often implicit hints in the literature regarding the outsized role that other people have in shaping experiences of meaningful work. Regarding outsiders specifically, this work suggests that meaningfulness increases when individuals perceive that their clients recognize and value their work and when they have opportunities to interact with their clients regularly. This work has also found that positive perceptions about one's work in society more broadly can positively influence workers' sense of meaningfulness. Thus, although these literatures rarely focus on the role of others in shaping a person's experience of meaningfulness specifically, social recognition seems to play an important role in shaping the meaningfulness of one's work. This insight shines a spotlight on an important problem: achieving meaningful work may become difficult when such interactions and perceptions from outsiders are sparse or even—in some cases—nonexistent.

INVISIBLE WORK AND ITS CHALLENGES TO MEANINGFULNESS

Modern society is rife with jobs that go unrecognized by others (Hatton, 2017; Nardi & Engeström, 1999; Venter, 2022). Classic examples include janitors (Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2019; Sharma et al., 2022), trash collectors (Bailey & Madden, 2017), or jobs like elder care (Jakobsen, 2021) or housework (Daniels, 1987). However, more recently, even some "knowledge workers" who have shifted to working remotely also experience their work as invisible (e.g., Fadilpašić, 2021). Invisible work is defined as a job or occupation that the workers perceive "go[es] unrecognized by many in society" (Chan & Anteby, 2016: 186).[5] A close examination of this literature reveals that jobs are often experienced as invisible when they are generally devalued due to perceived illegitimacy or stigma and also when they are carried out in places that go unseen by others. Regarding the former, most of the research on invisible work focuses on jobs that are overlooked by others (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011), unaccounted for (Vlasses, 1997) or not recognized as important or legitimate (Calás, Smircich, & Bourne, 2009).[6] Thus, for most of the research on invisible work, invisibility is experienced by employees who feel unrecognized, even if they are seen while doing their work. Regarding the latter, a few studies have shown how working in locations that are outside of the view of others in society can make work invisible (Otis & Zhao, 2016; Poster, Crain, & Cherry, 2016). Thus, although rarely examined empirically, some work is experienced as invisible because it is truly unseen by others (see Nardi & Engeström, 1999).

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[5] Given connotations stemming from the everyday use of the term "invisible," it seems important to note that such jobs can sometimes be seen by others (Star & Strauss, 1999). For instance, workers in organizations may see janitors in the hallway, or we may see a trash collectors empty our waste bins. Yet, even when some parts of the work can be seen by others, such work can still be experienced as invisible by those who do it.

[6] Although I recognize bodies of literature that examine *invisible tasks* done by members of all kinds of professions and occupations (Allen, 2014; Emerson & Pollner, 1975) as well as *demographic features* that make certain individuals feel invisible—even in prominent and visible jobs (Smith, Watkins, Ladge, & Carlton, 2019)—my focus here remains on invisible occupations and jobs.

Scholars who study invisible work that is seen but devalued have found that jobs such as housework can be experienced as invisible because those who do such jobs are not recognized by others as legitimate workers. For instance, Daniels' (1987) foundational research on invisible work examined the housework undertaken by women, which was almost always unpaid and underappreciated. Anteby and Chan (2018) find that TSA workers—despite being in plain view of hundreds of travelers every day—feel invisible, given that they are largely ignored by the travelers they serve. Sherman (2010: 82) similarly documented the struggles of personal concierges who sought to commodify "invisible and largely miscellaneous work necessary for household, family, and individual reproduction which are typically done by women on an unpaid basis." Despite their arduous efforts to make this work increasingly visible and recognized by others, the battle for legitimacy of their work proved nearly impossible (see also Macdonald, 1998).

As the previous example begins to hint, research on invisible work often encompasses work with low status more generally. The work of janitorial staff serves as a vivid example (Sharma et al., 2022). Dutton and colleagues (2016), for example, find that janitors often experience their work as invisible and devalued by others within their organizations. Being ignored by others at work—such as when others do not even recognize their presence—is a main driver of this perception. In addition, these workers also felt devalued when others expressed disgust regarding their work, expressed distrust in them and their colleagues, and made their job more difficult by not cleaning up after themselves. Messing (1998: 172) similarly finds that hospital cleaners feel as though they "don't exist," leading them to report that they feel like "the hospital trash." Thus, low status work more generally goes ignored or unappreciated by others,

making it feel invisible to those who do it (see also Mahalingam, Jagannathan, & Selvaraj, 2019; Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2019).

In a similar vein, occupations that bear stigma are often experienced by workers as invisible. For instance, the stigmatization of sex work often leads scholars to describe it as "invisible labor" (Kotiswaran, 2011; Toubiana & Ruebottom, 2022). More generally, jobs that bear negative stigmas are often viewed as "dirty work" (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Duffy, 2007; Simpson et al., 2019). Such workers often experience their work as invisible—not because they aren't seen, but rather because they are seen but ignored or looked down upon by other members of society.

Finally, some research recognizes that work can go unrecognized by others because it is "done in invisible places" (Nardi & Engeström, 1999: 1). As such, these jobs are simply not seen by people outside of the occupation at all. For example, Lever and Milbourne (2017) study invisible work at meat processing facilities. They note that such facilities are "detached from place in very particular ways, located 'out of sight and out of mind' in bland industrial parks on the edge of urban centres" (p. 311). This type of work that is "out of sight" of others is—seemingly by definition—unrecognized. Other examples of this type of invisible work might include logging workers (Scott et al., 2020), ghost writers (Anteby & Occhiuto, 2020), or oil rig workers (Ely & Meyerson, 2010). Although, by comparison, very little research on invisible work examines work that is done outside of the view of others, such conditions seemingly lessen workers' ability to receive external recognition.

Whether because of a lack of recognition due to perceived illegitimacy or stigma, or working where others are truly unable to see them, invisible workers' experiences of invisibility are generally negative (Chan & Anteby, 2016; Hatton, 2017). Such experiences deprive workers

of the ability to receive affirming recognition from others which, as the previous sections explained, may be quite important for their experiences of meaningfulness. Indeed, despite the broad nature of existing insights on the sources of invisibility, there seems to be consensus on its effects: a lack of recognition affects workers negatively. In synthesizing insights about these negative effects for a broad audience, Friedman (2014) explains that "Recognition… increases the perceived value of our work. We often interpret the meaning of our job from the way others treat us" (p. 160). Thus, he aptly concludes: "What happens when we fail to receive recognition for our work? Our motivation suffers, we lose interest and eventually experience burnout… Work that involves continuous sacrifice and garners little appreciation is psychologically exhausting" (p. 159). In the following section, I show how scholars of meaningful work have started to study this "psychologically exhausting" experience of invisible work and its effects on meaningfulness. Although there is very little scholarship that explicitly bridges insights from the literatures on invisible work and meaningful work, the following studies begin to lay a groundwork for examining this important tension.

Invisibility and Meaningful Work

Some recent research on meaningful work has started to examine how doing invisible work can affect individuals' experience of meaningfulness. For instance, Sharma et al. (2022) found that hospital janitors felt invisible to others—especially during the COVID pandemic. Janitors who perceived their work to be a calling experienced more negative outcomes, such as work-family conflict and burnout, when their work felt more invisible. Rabelo and Mahalingam (2019: 104) found that invisible work reduced workers' "sense of belonging and meaning at work" (p. 104). Through a study of janitors, they found that invisibility due to lack of recognition

was experienced as distressing, as the workers perceived such invisibility as devaluing and as damaging to the meaningfulness of their work.

This threat to meaningful work was further illuminated by Simpson and colleagues (2019) who studied meaningful work among refuse collectors and street cleaners. They find that these workers were deeply concerned with finding meaningfulness in their work. However, given significant "challenges in terms of how and what meanings are drawn" (p. 223) in this type of work, meaningfulness was hard to come by due to a lack of "merited recognition" from others (Simpson et al, 2019: 225). A lack of recognition similarly impaired meaningfulness for street cleaners (Bailey & Madden, 2017) and butchers (Simpson, Hughes, Slutskaya, & Balta, 2014). Thus, although not examined specifically, it seems that invisible work poses a threat to meaningfulness by inhibiting opportunities for social recognition. Given the social underpinnings of meaningful work outlined previously, this threat to meaningfulness appears to be quite formidable.

Solutions for Overcoming the Threat of Invisibility

Research on how to solve the issue of finding meaningfulness in invisible work remains scant. Indeed, in a recent review of research on meaningful work, Blustein, Lysova, and Duffy (2023: 300) even argued specifically that research on meaningfulness "remains limited" in regards to invisible workers. Yet, insights from related literatures hint at several potential solutions to this problem. At the broadest level, some research on unrecognized occupations highlights how occupation members may engage in discursive practices aimed at bolstering workers' value in society more generally (Fayard et al., 2017; Sherman, 2010). In addition, research suggests that the negative influences of invisibility may be ameliorated through affirmation from other members of one's own occupation (e.g., Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

Finally, at an even more micro level, research on job design suggests that increasing individual workers' perceptions that their work makes an important impact on others may counteract the lack of recognition (e.g., Grant, 2008, 2007; Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Parker et al., 2017).

Overcoming invisibility through discursive legitimation practices. Research on professions and occupations has demonstrated how members of unappreciated or seemingly "illegitimate" occupations can engage in discursive tactics meant to convince non-members of their occupation's value and legitimacy (e.g., DiBenigno, 2020; Evans, 2021; Fayard et al., 2017; Sherman, 2010). Insights from this literature therefore suggest that members of invisible occupations may make their work more personally meaningful by changing society's opinions of their work. For instance, Evans (2021) shows how scientists doing stem cell research—a highly controversial field—fought to gain legitimacy by seeking to establish moral authority in addition to their technical skills. They did this by displaying their "expertise in moral matters in various public and semi-public arenas such as newspaper articles, academic articles, research seminars, dedicated pages on the lab's website, university courses, public talks, and conferences" (p. 1019). Additionally, Fayard and colleagues (2017) show how service designers—members of a nascent occupation that had no recognition—sought to convince outsiders of the worth of their work by communicating distinct occupational values to potential clients. By broadly communicating their distinctive values of holism, empathy, and co-creation, they sought to garner recognition for their work as a distinct occupation with a legitimate mandate.

However, because invisible work in particular is defined by a lack of admiration and appreciation from others, these efforts are not likely to succeed often for invisible work (e.g., Sherman, 2010). Given the lack of awareness of or attention to invisible occupations, fighting to gain recognition and admiration of others is an uphill battle. Moreover, trying to manage

outsiders' opinions of one's occupation can even backfire—reinforcing the outsiders' existing negative or indifferent views. For instance, Mikolon and colleagues (2021) find that actively managing outsiders' negative perceptions of one's work, by favorably contrasting one's own work group with another that is deemed to be even less deserving of recognition, can actually reinforce outsiders' negative perceptions. Furthermore, such discursive strategies may not be feasible in many types of invisible work. Some invisible work is done completely out of the public view (Nardi & Engestrom, 1999), meaning there are no obvious audiences for occupation members to convince of their worth. In these instances, it is unclear how invisible workers can garner the social recognition that is seemingly important for experiencing their work as meaningful. In light of the difficulties associated with making an invisible occupation more visible and well-recognized, occupation members may instead turn inward to find recognition from other members of their occupation.

Overcoming invisibility through intra-occupational social recognition. Given the challenges of garnering recognition from society more broadly, some research suggests that this recognition may instead need to come from within invisible workers' occupations. That is, members of invisible occupations seemingly need to provide positive affirmation to one another in order to enhance the meaningfulness of their work. Research on similarly devalued work— dirty work—makes a particularly strong argument for this potential solution. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999: 425) argue that "dirty workers"—many of whom may also perceive that their work is invisible—are "likely to psychologically and socially withdraw to the safer confines of their occupational cohort and to look more exclusively to it for affirmation." This involves occupation members creating "social buffers" such as "forming a social network—at least for validation purposes—that looks more like a clique" (Ashforth et al., 2007: 160). Such intra-

occupational interactions seem poised to allow such workers to share positive affirmation with one another (Kreiner, Ashforth, & Sluss, 2006). This literature argues that, when facing a lack of positive recognition from outsiders, workers will seek to "reassert their positive distinctiveness" amongst themselves (Kreiner et al., 2006). This tactic is based on the assumption that, for invisible workers, "validation tends to come from members of the occupation itself, as insiders turn to one another for the affirmation they are often denied externally" (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014: 92). Thus, this research argues that members in the same occupation who engage in "extolling value of the work" (Ashforth et al., 2007: 158) will prop one another up and thus potentially provide the recognition needed to experience their work as meaningful.

Although this assumption has long been held in the literature on dirty work and invisible work more broadly (Emerson & Pollner, 1975; Mavin & Grandy, 2013; Stacey, 2005), recent research on invisible work challenges its veracity. Toubiana and Ruebottom (2022) find that sex workers—a prototypical form of invisible worker—are not just stigmatized by outsiders: they also stigmatize one another. This study highlights how "occupational members did not always buffer each other from stigma and in fact often stigmatized each other" (p. 10). Thus, invisible workers who perceive a lack of positive recognition from outsiders may tend to bolster their own perceptions of worth not by affirming other members of their occupation, but by putting them down. This challenges the assumption that members of invisible occupations will share positive, affirming, and caring feedback to one another.

Beyond this example, research on occupations more broadly is rife with examples of work cultures—particularly "masculine" blue-collar work cultures—in which such positive affirmation seems very hard to come by. Such examples, whether from fishermen (Bourassa & Ashforth, 1998; Miller & Van Maanen, 1982), ironworkers (Haas, 1972, 1977), oil workers

(Lynch, 2010), or other "masculine" work environments (Berdahl, Cooper, Glick, Livingston, & Williams, 2018; Collinson, 1992; Rawski & Workman-Stark, 2018) often show the opposite: workers lavishing one another with harsh or even demeaning comments.

Furthermore, even when invisible workers do laud one another with positive feedback, evidence seems to suggest that this is not guaranteed to be internalized or viewed favorably by the recipient. At minimum, it appears that positive affirmation from other invisible workers may need to be shared in particular ways in order to be successful. For instance, when someone shares *only* positive assessments of others, they can come to be viewed as dishonest (Ralston & Elsass, 1989). When individuals believe that someone is praising them in an unthoughtful way, they often become suspicious of the one doing the praising and lose trust in him/her (Carlson et al., 2011; Sanchez-Ruiz et al., 2021). Furthermore, repeated exposure to positive feedback can actually reduce individuals' performance (Audia, Locke, & Smith, 2000; Hoever, Zhou, & van Knippenberg, 2018; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996), making it a potentially risky long-term strategy for helping invisible workers experience their work as meaningful. Therefore, although such intra-occupational affirmation tactics seem useful coping mechanisms for reducing negative outcomes associated with invisibility, there seems to be ample evidence to challenge the assumptions that (a) such tactics will happen consistently and that (b) they will make the work more personally meaningful.

Overcoming invisibility by increasing individuals' perceived task significance. In light of the challenges associated with both changing broader societal opinions and relying on coworkers for recognition, a final potential solution involves enhancing the way invisible workers think about their work. Namely, a particularly dominant solution in the meaningful work literature involves increasing workers' perceptions that their work has a positive impact on

others (Allan, 2017; Grant, 2008; Hackman & Oldham, 1975, 1976). A robust body of research—particularly research on job design (Grant et al., 2011; Grant & Parker, 2009; Hogan & Martell, 1987)—argues that when workers perceive that their work positively impacts others, they will subsequently find it more personally meaningful. Indeed, in their foundational research on job design, Hackman and Oldham (1975) argue that "The degree to which the job has a substantial impact on the lives or work of other people—whether in the immediate organization or in the external environment" (161) is a key predictor of meaningfulness. They call this perception that one's work positively impacts others "task significance." This assertion—that perceiving that my work has a positive impact on others leads me to finding it more personally meaningful—has been supported by job design research more broadly (Allan, 2017; Allan, Duffy, & Collisson, 2018; Grant, 2008; Hackman & Oldham, 1976).

Based on these findings, the perception that one's work has a positive impact on others has been a central focus of research on job design over the subsequent decades since Hackman and Oldham's foundational (1976) work (see Grant et al. 2011; Grant & Parker 2009, for detailed reviews). For instance, in studying the temporal connection between task significance and meaningful work, Allan (2017) claims that task significance is "one of the strongest predictors of meaningful work" (p. 174). In a subsequent study, Allan, Duffy, and Collison (2018) find a "strong link between task significance and meaningful work, suggesting that *work that is perceived as improving the lives of others may be integral to feeling that work is meaningful*" (p. 178, emphasis mine). It is therefore not surprising that Grant (2008) argues that "task significance is an important aspect of job experiences that is worthy of study in its own merit" (p. 119).

Regarding how to actually increase perceptions of task significance, the literature suggests increasing workers' contact with their beneficiaries. Building on Hackman and Oldham's (1976) foundational work—in which they argue that task significance, among other factors, will increase the "psychological state" of meaningfulness of the job (see Hackman & Oldham, 1975: 256)—Grant (2007, 2008) has advanced a theory of "relational job design." In this perspective, he argues that contact with beneficiaries (e.g., customers, clients) will ultimately increase perceptions of task significance and make work more meaningful. However, for invisible workers in particular, these claims seem far less straightforward.

Indeed, while such an approach can be beneficial, contact with customers or clients does not seem to always guarantee positive results for invisible workers. For instance, Sherman (2010: 93) finds that even when personal concierges engaging in invisible work had a chance to talk with potential clients, those clients' lack of understanding about the work of personal concierges resulted in "extreme frustration." Furthermore, even when cleaners had contact with the beneficiaries of their cleaning, the way those beneficiaries acted could drastically influence whether the contact had a positive or negative impact (Dutton et al., 2016). When the beneficiaries slighted or ignored the cleaners, for example, the contact with those beneficiaries had a negative effect on the cleaners. Many "dirty workers" also find that interactions with clients involve receiving "putdowns, reduced deference and respect, and demeaning questions" (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999: 417). Thus, merely boosting opportunities for invisible workers to interact with their customers or clients seems to be a problematic solution given its potential to backfire when the interactions do not result in positive affirmation from the customer or client (see also Mikolon et al., 2021).

Even more fundamentally, invisible work—which is the focus of this dissertation—renders the core assumptions about task significance less clear. Namely, research that touts the importance of believing one's work positively impacts others often assumes that social cues trigger such beliefs in the first place (Grant, 2008; Grant & Parker, 2009). For instance, Grant (2007, 2008) argues that receiving appreciation from the beneficiaries of one's work is vital for gaining a sense of task significance. Yet, by definition, invisible work largely deprives workers of such appreciation—obfuscating existing theory's assumed *source* of task significance. Indeed, although research assumes that perceived task significance has positive effects for workers (Allan, 2017; Allan et al., 2018; Grant & Parker, 2009; Hackman & Oldham, 1975, 1976), such positive effects are largely mediated by feedback from others about the value of the work. How perceived task significance might affect outcomes—such as meaningfulness—for invisible workers in the absence of any recognition or appreciation of their work remains unknown.

In closing, despite the prevalence of invisible work and the threats that such invisibility seemingly pose to meaningfulness, existing solutions for managing these threats remain potentially problematic, and their applications for invisible work remain unclear. This is exacerbated by a lack of clarity in the invisible work literature regarding the different sources or types of meaningfulness and how they uniquely affect workers' experiences. Indeed, although invisibility is seemingly driven by a range of factors, such as social devaluation, stigma, and simply being out-of-sight of others, the literature does not address the unique characteristics of these various different types of invisibility. This seems problematic, as being devalued seems qualitatively different from simply being unseen. Particularly as work that might be socially valued moves to less visible places (e.g., home offices), it seems more important than ever to disentangle the unique sources or types of invisibility. This is important for understanding how

different types of invisibility are experienced, how different types of invisibility might relate to one another, and how these different types of invisibility might be managed. In short, broadly conceptualizing these different types of invisibility under a single theoretical umbrella likely obfuscates their unique characteristics and obscures how they might be managed or alleviated. In light of these theoretical blind spots and their significant implications for invisible workers and for research on meaningfulness more broadly, this dissertation addresses the following research question: how, if at all, can members of invisible occupations experience meaningful work despite a lack of external recognition?

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

In order to address my research question, this study takes a qualitative and inductive approach to data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2014; Locke, 2001; Pratt & Bonaccio, 2016). This research methodology is ideal given that so little is known about how individuals can find meaningfulness in their work despite a lack of recognition from others (Edmondson & Mcmanus, 2007). More specifically, this research draws from three distinct qualitative data sources in order to build new theory in this area (Pratt, 2008). In the sections that follow, I explain my research context, data collection, and approach to data analysis.

Context

Linemen construct and repair power lines across the country. They work outdoors on distribution lines (i.e., the smaller power lines that connect to homes and businesses), transmission lines (i.e., the larger power lines that carry high voltages across great distances), or sub-stations (i.e., the stations that receive the higher voltage power and distribute it out). As most of these types of worksites are far away from populated areas, much of their work is completely unseen by outsiders. Therefore, studying the work of linemen seems ideal for garnering a more robust understanding of work that is invisible because it is carried out in "invisible places" (Nardi & Engeström, 1999: 1) and not necessarily because it is stigmatized or perceived as illegitimate.

Linemen undergo extensive training in order to complete this work. Those represented by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) union must complete a minimum of a 7,000-hour apprenticeship before being granted the status of a "journeyman"—someone who can independently work on all types of jobs in their field. Linemen outside of the union generally also undergo extensive training. The training for linemen involves both "book work"—textbooks

with written assessments at regular intervals—as well as practice in specialized training facilities and on-the-job learning. This apprenticeship and training is important, as their work requires an in-depth knowledge of electrical voltages, transformers, and high-skill equipment in order to be completed both efficiently and safely.

The work of linemen is almost always conducted in groups of three to 10 linemen. Most—whether union or non-union—work as independent contractors who take jobs for specific durations ranging from a couple of months to a year. Examples of the types of jobs they could work on include constructing new transmission towers and power lines, "wrecking out" (i.e., removing) old power lines and replacing them with new ones, or building new sub-stations. In the event of disasters, they will often leave a particular job and converge at the disaster site by the hundreds in order restore power as quickly as possible. Thus, contracting linemen often travel extensively, work 12 or more hours per day, and rarely take days off. Alternatively, some linemen work as employees of particular utility companies. These "utility linemen" can do similar work, usually at a smaller scale. They also engage in more routine repairs (e.g., replacing a pole that has been hit by a vehicle). Each of these jobs ensures the ongoing functionality of the electrical grid.

Notably, this work—particularly the transmission and sub-station work—is almost always done outside of the view of the public. Sub-stations are generally built outside of the view of daily life. Likewise, transmission lines connect every corner of the country—often cutting through forests, fields, and other areas that are least likely to be disruptive to the regular functioning of society. The actual work conducted in these remote locations often involves operating heavy machinery, climbing up tall utility poles, or even working from the side of a helicopter.

In addition to often being conducted outside of the view of the general public, line work is distinguished by its critical importance to modern society. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a regular daily task that does not rely on electrical power. Large-scale examples of systems that require reliable electrical power include the internet, military operations, and healthcare facilities. On a daily basis, we rely on electrical power for smaller-scale tasks as well, such as pumping water and gasoline, refrigerating our food, and keeping our lights on. As our reliance on new technologies continues to rise (e.g., electric cars), the need for reliable sources of electrical power will need to follow suit. As such, linemen play a critical role in daily life by constructing and maintaining the transmission lines that bring power from generating plants to sub-stations and by constructing and maintaining the distribution lines that bring the power out to residences and businesses. Moreover, as extreme weather events become ever more frequent, linemen must be increasingly ready to respond to areas that have been scorched by wildfires, destroyed by hurricanes, or engulfed by flood waters in order to piece the power grid back together. Therefore, despite the fact that line work is rarely seen by individuals outside of the occupation, this work plays a vital role in many aspects of modern life.

The occupation of line work therefore provides an ideal context in which to study how individuals experience invisibility at work and how, if at all, they find meaningfulness in the face of this invisibility. Because qualitative research contexts should be able to clearly show the dynamics of interest in a given study, this occupation serves as an ideal context for examining how, if at all, individuals can find meaningful work in an "invisible" occupation.

Data Collection

This study draws on three distinct types of data. Each of these types of data—interviews, nonparticipant observations, and archival documents—provide unique and essential insights to

address my research question. Broadly speaking, interviews with linemen allowed me to understand how, if at all, linemen experience invisibility at work and how they understand their efforts at overcoming or managing this experience. Observations of linemen at work and in training sessions allowed me to examine how, if at all, linemen seek to manage or overcome the experience of invisibility at work through their actual behaviors and interactions and how, if at all, official occupational representatives talk about meaningful work in this occupation. Finally, archival documents from the linemen's occupational association provided unique insights about how the occupation writ large communicates about their work to their members.

  Interviews. First, I engaged in qualitative interviews with linemen in order to understand how, if at all, linemen experience invisibility on the job and how, if at all, they seek to make their work more meaningful despite this invisibility. Interviews are ideal methodological tools to help the researcher understand how participants perceive and understand their experiences at work (Alvesson, 2003; Weiss, 1995; Whyte, 1984). As such, interviews that addressed topics such as recognition from occupational outsiders (or the lack thereof), experiencing meaningfulness at work (or not), and their interactions with one another at work more broadly were vital for addressing my research question. Specifically, interviews were semi-structured, meaning that I asked some pre-determined questions to understand the participants' perceptions and interpretations of topics of interest. However, I remained open to discussing topics that were not originally planned in order to ensure that the issues we discussed remained important to the participants (Weiss, 1995). This was an ideal tactic for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research (Pratt, Kaplan, & Whittington, 2020), given that it amplified issues of central concern to the participants themselves (Spradley, 2016).

Participants for these interviews were recruited via emails to relevant groups, such as local International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) union halls who represent linemen, as well as social media posts on platforms such as Facebook. These posts explained the purpose of the research and listed my contact information so that interested linemen could reach out to schedule an interview. Following the tenants of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser, 1992), my sampling was purposeful—allowing me to talk to linemen who are currently working in the occupation. In all, this resulted in interviews with 114 different linemen. Of these, 96 worked as independent contractors and 18 worked for utility companies. Also, many of those who worked for utilities had described working as independent contractors in the past. Although the occupation is almost entirely male, I was able to conduct five interviews with female members of the occupation. Interviews averaged one our each, and occurred via telephone, given linemen's broad geographical dispersion, lack of a central work location (e.g., an office), and need to travel at a moment's notice for storm and other emergency work. These interviews were conducted intermittently to allow me to pause so I could engage in analysis and read relevant literature. This iterative aspect of my design also allowed for frequent research meetings with my advisor. These meetings—and some meetings with other colleagues who were not immersed in the data collection—were critical in helping me challenge any assumptions and sharpen my theorizing. This iterative process of collecting data, analyzing data, reading literature, and meeting to discuss the research with my advisor allowed me to adjust the interview protocol in a timely fashion in order to delve deeper into topics of interest (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Altering my interview protocol in this way took place in three broad phases. In the first phase, initial questions about what, if anything, linemen like least about their work revealed that

linemen perceived that no one knew that their work even existed and that this lack of recognition from those who rely on electrical power was often distressing. Thus, in the second phase, I began asking questions about the importance of how others—both the general public and other linemen—perceived their work. These questions revealed the importance of other linemen's opinions of their work given the lack of recognition from the general public. In particular, linemen emphasized that other linemen will constantly evaluate the appearance of one another's work and judge whether or not the completed work was "aesthetically pleasing." In the third phase, I began asking about how linemen expressed their evaluations of the appearance of one others' work and what effects, if any, this had on their experiences on the job. The interviews in this phase were especially vital in illuminating the social process by which linemen shared their opinions of other linemen's work, how this affected those who receive this feedback, and the novel ways in which this social feedback ultimately fostered meaningfulness. These insights have informed the final version of my full interview protocol, which can be found in Appendix A.

Observations. The second source of data I utilized was nonparticipant observation[7] data. Observing linemen allowed for a deeper understanding how linemen managed or overcame the experience of being invisible (Rosen, 1991). I gained access to various different observation sites by both (a) asking members of two Northeast branches of the IBEW union and by (b) asking interviewees about the opportunity observe their work when interviews revealed that they were working in a location that would be accessible to me. Most of my observations were conducted at distribution or transmission job sites or at one of three different training centers for apprentice

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[7]Although participant observation or other highly involved ethnographic methods (Spradley, 2016) often prove to be very useful methodological tools (Rosen, 1991), the dangerous nature of line work precluded me from being able to engage in the work itself. Thus, nonparticipant observations seemed to offer the greatest theoretical benefits given the practical constraints inherent in the research context.

linemen. My observations totaled around 40 hours. Early observations proved to be very useful in learning about the various terms, procedures, and work practices that were initially quite unfamiliar to me.

These observations also enabled me to identify the key problems confronting linemen (Wolcott, 1994) and to understand how, if at all, they address these problems. Additionally, observing linemen doing their work allowed me the opportunity to understand how they talked to each other about their work while on the job. Observing training sessions allowed me to understand how official occupational representatives talk about the work to new members of the occupation (i.e., apprentices). Thus, both work sites and training sessions were very helpful contexts for gathering data that allowed me to address my research question. Additionally, engaging in observations helped me build trust with the participants in my study (Pratt & Sala, 2021).

During these nonparticipant observations, I took detailed fieldnotes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011) on the concrete events, conversations, and interactions I was able to observe (Spradley, 2016). These observations were also vital in helping to refine ongoing interview questions, as fieldnotes from observations elicited new insights to discuss in interviews. Such iteration between observations and interviews therefore allowed me to use the interviews to interpret and understand what I observed (Whyte, 1984).

Archival Document Collection. The third source of data I collected consisted of archival documents from the occupation itself. I collected the monthly trade journals from the linemen association's regular publication—"The Electrical Worker." This archive of monthly documents spanning from 1893 until the present is available in an online database. These documents contained robust data regarding how the occupation talks about meaningful work and invisibility.

Drawing on these types of documents is in line with other studies in the professions and occupations literature that have used such trade association publications to understand how occupations talk internally about other important topics of interest (Eyal, 2013; Halpern, 1992; Kahl, King, & Liegel, 2016). These types of documents have proven useful in past theorizing because professional associations play a central role in defining what it means to be a member of the occupation (or not) and in defining the values of the occupation (Abbott, 1988). Thus, associations are vital actors for defining and expressing the proper conduct of occupation members themselves (Greenwood, Suddaby, & Hinings, 2002). Publications from occupational associations therefore served as useful sources of data to elucidate the manner in which the occupation of linemen talks about topics pertaining to external recognition (or lack thereof) and meaningfulness of the work. The specific documents I analyzed and the process by which I analyzed them will be discussed later in the following section.

Data Analysis: Interviews and Observations

The overarching data analysis strategy followed the tenets of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Locke, 2001). I based my theorizing on the most salient and important insights from each of my data sources (Charmaz, 2014; Locke, Feldman, & Golden-Biddle, 2020). Indeed, one of the strengths of the grounded theory approach to data analysis is that it allows the researcher to begin with a broader research question and iterate between data collection, data analysis, and reading of relevant theory. In this way, researchers have the benefit of narrowing their interview questions, observational foci, or other data collection tactics to specific areas of interest that emerge from the data they gather (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser, 1992). Following this tradition, I engaged in my data collection and analysis for my interviews and observations in an iterative

fashion, pausing frequently to engage in different analytical steps, altering interview questions, and returning to collection (Charmaz, 2014).

  Pre-Coding: Data Reduction. Because the large volume of data associated with qualitative research can sometimes hinder progress (Creswell, 1998), ongoing data reduction and organization strategies were critical. To this end, I sought to employ two distinct data reduction strategies: memos and contact summary sheets. Memos (Lempert, 2007) were recorded immediately after collecting new data—whether interviews, observations, or archival materials. These memos allowed me to record my immediate impressions of the data, including the most important ideas, themes, and potential theoretical insights. As interviews can produce particularly extensive data, I took an additional data reduction step after each interview. In addition to the memos which immediately follow the interview, I wrote a contact summary sheet for each interview after having it professionally transcribed (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This allowed me to draw on the full transcript of the interview when recording and describing prominent themes in the data. These contact summary sheets included excerpts of data on the most notable themes and important ideas in the interviews. Such condensed overviews of the interviews promoted a high-level understanding of important themes that informed my ongoing data analysis. Specifically, before I engaged in detailed coding of an interview, I read through the contact summary sheet in order to maintain a high-level understanding of the most important ideas in the interview. This helped guide my coding and ensured that I kept the bigger picture in mind when it came to coding themes and ideas that were important to my informants. After creating and re-reading these contact summary sheets, I began coding the data in three broad stages.

Early Stages: Initial coding. The early stages of my analysis required deep and careful reading of my interview transcripts and fieldnotes. During this process, I engaged in initial coding processes, whereby I sought to "*define* what is happening in the data and begin to grapple with what it means" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 113, emphasis in original). This involved using words or brief phrases to label segments of data from each source in a manner that described and defined the essence of the segment of data. This also included creating "in vivo" codes that consist of the actual words and phrases used by my participants themselves. In keeping with the grounded theory tradition (e.g., Charmaz, 2014, Glaser, 1992), these segments ranged from a few words to no more than a few sentences.

Examples of these initial codes that pertain to invisibility include "no one knows who linemen are," "no one looks up at the lines," and "you never see linemen" or "electricity is invisible and odorless." Examples of these initial codes that pertain to how the occupation talks about their work include "IBEW helped put a man on the moon," "linemen powered the Olympics," "electrical power is the lifeblood of society," and "modern life could not continue without electrical power." Regarding linemen's perceptions of the importance of their work for society, examples of initial codes include, "power lines are arteries of modern civilization," "our work saves lives," "no one else can do what we do," and "thank God I was there." Additionally, examples of initial codes pertaining to how they perceive their lack of external recognition include "we deserve to be recognized" and "deserving recognition without needing to brag."

Initial codes pertaining to the processes by which they actually experienced meaningfulness include, "we have to be craftsmen," "craftsmanship is most important" and also codes such as "aesthetics matter" and "I always make my shit look nice." Codes regarding how linemen talked to one another about the appearance of their work include, "telling them it looks

like shit," "getting chewed out for ugly work," "getting razzed," and "receiving ruthless criticism." Codes about how linemen did their work in light of these criticisms include "don't do anything that would get you yelled at," and "work so no one can nitpick." Additionally, codes regarding how they come to view the appearance of line work include, "Linemen can identify everything on a pole" and "I can tell when it's not perfect." Initial codes on how the appearance of their work affects them include "like cold water being poured down your back" and "disgusting" as well as codes like "just feels great" and "feeling pride in beautiful work." Finally, examples of initial codes regarding how they think other linemen will view their good work include, "other linemen will drive by and notice that it looks nice," and "sure that linemen will appreciate this in the future."

This in-depth coding strategy ensured that individual thoughts, ideas, sentiments, and expressions are adequately considered and scrutinized (Charmaz, 2014). Starting with this fine-grained coding approach for all of my data also helped ensure that data were not "forced" into preexisting theoretical categories (Glaser, 1992), thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of the research (Pratt et al., 2020).

Middle Stages: Focused Coding. After the initial coding phase(s), I turned to the second major step in grounded theory analysis—focused coding. This practice helps the researcher to "synthesize, analyze, and conceptualize larger segments of data" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 138) and thereby move toward theoretical coherence and relevance. This step in analysis involved looking over my data as a whole in order to organize my existing codes around emerging themes. This was done by "clustering" my initial codes "based on similarities and differences" (Pratt, Lepisto, & Dane, 2019: 407).

For example, codes about "never seeing linemen" and "working out in the woods" were combined into a focused code called "labor invisibility." Codes about "no one looks up at the lines" and "power lines are in the background" were combined into a focused code called "product invisibility." Regarding how representatives of the occupation spoke about their work, codes such as "IBEW helped put a man on the moon" and "linemen powered the Olympics" and others like them were combined into a focused code called "coupling invisible labor with valued outcomes" Also, codes like "electrical power is the lifeblood of society" and "modern life could not continue without electrical power" were combined into a focused code called "coupling invisible product with valued outcomes." Codes like "we deserve to be recognized" and "deserving recognition without needing to brag" were then combined in a focused code called "deserving recognition."

Codes such as "telling them it looks like shit," "getting chewed out for ugly work," "getting razzed," and "receiving ruthless criticism" were combined into a focused code called "social criticism of aesthetics." Also, initial codes such as "don't do anything that would get you yelled at," and "work so no one can nitpick" were captured in a focused code called "aesthetic signaling." Initial codes such as "like cold water being poured down your back" and "disgusting" were encapsulated in a focused code called "intuitive negative reactions" and codes like "just feels great" and "feeling pride in beautiful work" were combined in a focused code called "intuitively feeling pride in work aesthetics" Finally, codes such as "no one will tell me it looks bad" and "not getting put through the ringer" were combined in a focused code called "stayed criticism" and codes like "other linemen will notice that it looks nice," and "sure that linemen will appreciate this in the future" were combined in a focused code called "presumed praise."

Although the previous examples do not explain every code that informed my theorizing, they illustrate the process of moving from salient initial codes to focused codes. Such clustering of codes helped me get a sense of the most prominent ideas in my data. This stage of coding involved shifting away from the "in vivo" codes and toward more theoretical language. Furthermore, this stage of clustering and organizing codes based on their similarities and differences allowed me to ensure that my large number of initial codes became consolidated into a smaller number of focused codes. Such clustering and consolidation played a vital role in helping me understand the most prominent and salient themes in my data, which is vital for building theory.

Late Stages: Theoretical Coding. In the final stages of coding, I turned my attention toward understanding how my more abstract codes fit together into a coherent theoretical story. These stages of coding specifically required analysis of how my codes contribute to theory by looking at their relationships between one another and extant literature. Indeed, the goal with this type of analysis is to clearly determine "how the data fit together as well as how they fit with existing organizational theory" (Cardador, 2017, p. 602). During this stage, I paid close attention to the degree to which ideas seem important to my informants. In this way, I sought to avoid only privileging focused codes that have a lot of data (Suddaby, 2006)—instead privileging focused codes that appeared particularly vital to the linemen themselves. This helped me understand which codes fit into the emerging theoretical story and which do not. This analytical exercise also helped me determine which ideas are "figure" (i.e., of central importance and focus) and which are "ground" (i.e., important but not the central focus) (Pratt, 2009: 860; see also Pratt, 2008: 505) By frequently returning to my interview transcripts, contact summary sheets, field notes, and archival documents throughout this stage in my analysis, I sought to ensure that such

theoretical codes remained well grounded in my data (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser, 1992; Locke et al., 2020).

In this stage, by writing out my focused codes on a whiteboard and closely examining the relationships between them, I came to realize that the invisibility of their products and their labor seemed to influence occupational representatives' claims of significance of their work for society. That is, the occupation made claims that the product they provide as well as the labor required to provide it make a significant positive impact on others. This seemed to mirror codes on individual linemen's perceptions of the importance of their work. Codes on linemen's perceptions of the importance of their work also seemed closely related to codes regarding their beliefs that they deserved recognition. Logically, this belief that recognition is deserved seemed to be naturally be at odds with my codes regarding the actual amount of recognition received—little to none. I therefore labeled this disconnect "the recognition gap." This recognition gap became a core idea around which I oriented additional analysis. This allowed me to closely examine its properties and apparent consequences (Charmaz, 2014).

Also, while continuing to build theory about how linemen address the challenges associated with this "recognition gap," this stage elucidated the importance of craftsmanship and aesthetics. Early on, I oriented my analysis toward the criticism linemen doled out regarding the aesthetics of others' work. This revealed strong connections in my data between codes on social criticism of aesthetics as well as strategies to avoid such criticism. Continuing this process of interrogating the connections between my focused codes, I came to realize that codes pertaining to avoiding criticism were seemingly connected to codes on how they internalize expertise. It then became clear that the expertise linemen internalize through this process was at the heart of the strong feelings linemen experience regarding the appearance of their work. Ultimately, by

examining my codes that represented these strong feelings, I came to realize that they were connected to linemen's experiences of meaningfulness. This process of determining how my focused codes fit together ultimately produced the theoretical insights I explain in the subsequent chapters.

Because forcing focused codes into preconceived theoretical categories remains a common misstep at this stage of analysis (Charmaz, 2014: 153-4), I held these theoretical categories in abeyance until fully convinced that all ties to extant theory were robustly supported by my data. This process of connecting the key codes to one another and to extant theory continued until the new theory I developed was based on saturated codes (i.e., codes that were robustly explained by my data) and until the theoretical story represented a novel and substantial contribution to existing theory. The subsequent empirical chapters describe (1) the unique challenges that linemen face in light of both their perceived importance of their work and the invisibility of their work, as well as (2) the social and emotional processes by which they overcome these challenges and find meaningfulness in their work despite a lack of external recognition.

Data Analysis: Archival Documents

The analysis of my archival dataset proceeded in tandem with the analysis of my interviews and observation field notes. Archival data is ideal for theorizing at higher levels of analysis, such as the occupational level (Barnes, Dang, Leavitt, Guarana, & Uhlmann, 2015). Given the specific scope of my research question, I took several steps to ensure that the archival data included in my analysis would include relevant data and exclude that which was less relevant. Namely, despite having issues of the "Electrical Worker" dating back to the late 1800s, I chose to only include issues that were published during the time that at least some interviewees

in my sample were active in the occupation. I made this methodological choice because I was interested in understanding how linemen might perceive their work in light of how the occupation writ large talks about it. Thus, it seemed important to look at official occupational messaging that was being produced for members of the occupation while they were working (instead of the decades before). That being the case, I analyzed issues from 1970 until 2022.

After narrowing my dataset down to this date range, I began my analysis. Although the coding of these documents proceeded in a fashion that was similar to what has already been described, several steps were unique to this data. Namely, given the sheer volume of data, I began by reading only one issue published per year (starting in 1970), instead of all 12 issues published each year. I chose to vary the months I selected each year to maximize variation in what I might find. Starting my analysis in this way allowed me to gain a broad understanding of the types of articles that were published and the types of things they would say about the work of linemen. After gaining a broader sense of the data in this way in tandem with the analysis of my interview data, I realized that it would be particularly helpful to understand (a) what, if anything, occupational representatives said about the (in)visibility of their work and (b) what, if anything, occupational representatives said about the meaningfulness of their work.

From here, I used query tools in the NVIVO qualitative analysis software to search for specific terms and themes in the data. Regarding the (in)visibility of their work, I searched for teams such as "invisible," "visible," "appreciated," "unappreciated," "recognized," "ignored," "respected," "valued," and their synonyms—along with other similar terms. Regarding the meaningfulness of their work, early reading and initial coding revealed instances of articles talking about the importance or significance of the for society writ large to function as well as the importance of linemen in particular in achieving such successful functioning. To aid in

finding more instances of these types of sections, I searched terms such as "important,"

"society," and "vital" as well as more specific terms found in the data itself regarding such

themes, such as "backbone" and "lifeblood." These queries identified the paragraphs in which

such terms were used, allowing me to closely examine each instance and code it using the coding

strategies described above. Thus, these queries were not used to force any data into preconceived

codes or analyses. Rather, they were used to direct my ongoing coding and identify relevant

"chunks" of data amidst the over 100,000 pages of text. After identifying relevant chunks of data

in this way, my coding proceeded in a manner similar to my interview and observation data

coding, as previously described.

One of the benefits of analyzing my interview, observational, and archival data

concurrently is that I was able to compare insights from each of the sources of data throughout

my theorizing (Charmaz, 2014). For example, this approach allowed me to notice similarities

between claims that the occupation was making about the significance of their work and

linemen's own understandings of the significance of their work. Moreover, utilizing similar

techniques of initial coding and focused coding for each of the types of data afforded greater

clarity in how these codes ultimately fit together in a coherent fashion. My theorizing therefore

benefitted from analyzing each of these different data sources concurrently. This process of

analyzing and theorizing ultimately produced the theory I present in the following chapters.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE RECOGNITION GAP AND MEANINGFUNLESS INSECURITY

In this chapter, I explain how linemen's work is shrouded by two distinct types of invisibility: both the product they provide (i.e., electricity and the poles and wires used to distribute it) and the labor necessary to provide it go largely unrecognized and unappreciated. These types of invisibility recursively reinforce one another—ultimately engendering invisibility for the occupation as a whole. In light of this invisibility, the occupation writ large proffers occupational accounts of the worthiness of their work—justifications for why their work is significant and important (see Lepisto & Pratt, 2017; Scott & Lyman, 1968). They do so by coupling their invisible product and their invisible labor with valued societal outcomes. These claims are mirrored in linemen's current perceptions of their work. Specifically, linemen perceive two distinct "bases" of significance in their work, which I call "product criticality" (i.e., believing electricity is vital for societal functioning) and "skill exclusivity" (i.e., believing only linemen are able to provide electricity). However, although existing literature would predict that perceiving that their work makes a positive impact on others should bolster meaningfulness (Allan, 2017; Grant, 2008; Hackman & Oldham, 1975, 1976), such perceived significance instead fosters a sense that they deserve recognition. Given the lack of recognition in invisible work, this produces a "recognition gap" that ultimately foster meaningfulness insecurity—feelings of uncertainty or doubt about the meaningfulness of the job. Thus, I show how—for invisible workers—increasing perceptions of the importance of one's work for society can actually backfire and counteract meaningfulness instead of bolstering it. The aim of this chapter is to explain the processes that foster meaningfulness insecurity for invisible workers, as illustrated by Figure 4.1. I then explain how this problem is addressed in the following chapter.

INSERT FIGURE 4.1 ABOUT HERE

Invisible Products and Invisible Labor

Linemen perceive that the general public is largely unaware of the existence of linemen. They believe that both electricity itself and the work it takes to provide it (i.e., building and repairing the poles, wires, substations, etc…) are "taken for granted" (10161) by those who use it. One noted, "I don't think the average person puts much thought into it. I think that they just take for granted that you flip the switch and the lights come on and hey, there are some poles on the street" (1033). Whereas previous studies often treat invisibility as a unitary construct (Daniels, 1987; Nardi & Engeström, 1999; Venter, 2022), my analysis reveals that work can be veiled by several different types of invisibility that are mutually reinforcing.

Product Invisibility. The first type of invisibility linemen face is the invisibility of the product they provide—electricity and the poles and wires needed to provide it (i.e., "the grid"). In the most basic sense, electricity is not visible to human beings: "It's an invisible odorless thing that people don't really notice" (10113). However, deeper analysis revealed that the invisibility of the product linemen provide extends beyond humans' simple inability to perceive an electrical current. To provide electricity, they build poles and wires that are in plain view. Yet, despite being quite conspicuous, even the poles and wires go unnoticed: "it's invisible… like a lot of the times like, I mean, you drive by power lines all day long. And like you don't think of what's going on that power line" (10157). Another lineman similarly noted, "I think it's just part of our everyday life and people just overlook [utility poles] at this point" (1116). The invisibility of their products is thus rooted not just in the inability to perceive poles and wires, but also in the general public's ignorance about electrical power and taken-for-granted nature of electricity more generally.

Linemen perceive that the general public knows little-to-nothing about electrical power. As such, "The general public, all they know is either my lights are on or they're off, and they don't have a clue really what it entails to provide that power to make your lights work" (10133). One lineman explained, "not a lot of people know… how electricity works" (10126). Linemen were not surprised by this lack of knowledge about electrical power, noting that people generally don't have opportunities to learn about it in school: "A lot of people don't even think about how the power gets to their house. It's not something you hear about when you're in high school or anything" (10128).

From this ignorance stemmed a tendency to take electrical power for granted: "I think people take [our work] for granted because they really don't understand how they get power, how they get 120, 240 in their house" (10127). Another explained that "a lot of people take a lot of things for granted… [they think] the power is just gonna go on" (10113). The invisibility of the poles and wires thus had more to do with a lack of attention to them: "people don't know the wires. People don't pay attention to the wires" (10112). Another noted that, "Unless you're in the [occupation], most people don't even ever think about what's on the poles" (10144). Given that poles and wires are "in the background" (10144), linemen perceive that the public *sees* them constantly but never *notices* them: "the general public… are in that same situation where their eyes never go above the height of the visor in their car—not realizing that there's a whole world above them that we work in" (1037). Others noted that, "people mostly drive right by it without ever looking up… People drive right by it, and don't even think about where electricity come from or what goes into it" (101102). Indeed, with the exception of only people who "have a line worker in the family" (10137), linemen expressed that the "average person" never notices the product of their work: "you drive down the street and like, to your average person that doesn't

give a fuck—which is most people—you'll never notice. You never look up at 'em" (10141).

This forms the crux of product invisibility for linemen. The public's knowledge of electrical

power is feeble at best, and their tendency to contemplate its origins is feebler still. That being

the case, "if they [the public] don't know about power, they don't know about linemen" (10140).

   Labor Invisibility. Linemen face a second type of invisibility—one that builds upon the

first and deepens the invisibility of the occupation as a whole. Namely, in addition to the

invisibility of the finished products linemen build, the work they do to build those products is

done outside of the public eye. Indeed, as power lines—particularly transmission lines—are

intentionally built through unpopulated areas, linemen often do their work in locations where

they are never seen by the public. Lineman explained that many of their jobs are done "in the

middle of nowhere" (10138). Another noted that you can go a lifetime without seeing linemen

working: "I never heard about line work [before joining the occupation]… My whole life,

driving around, I'd never seen a guy with hooks climbing a pole. I'd never seen it" (10111).

Others agreed, saying things like "They never really see anybody working on the poles. It's not

that likely that you'll drive down the road and you'll see a bucket truck set up and somebody up

there working" (101101), and, "You don't really see them around as often as you really think you

would. Growing up, I never really ever saw a line crew out working" (10498). Indeed, given the

remote locations in which linemen often work, their labor often goes completely unseen:

>   Most of the time, people aren't home when we show up to their house. They never even
>   see us… No. Most of the time, they don't even know we're there. Or we're in the
>   backwoods cutting a tree off the line and, like I said, waist-deep in the swamp. All they
>   know is their power was out, and it came back on. (11299)

   As with product invisibility, labor invisibility goes deeper than simply not seeing linemen

while they are working. Indeed, linemen also work on distribution poles that run alongside

streets and bring power to homes and businesses. Yet, even when doing their work in view of

others, their labor largely goes unnoticed: "There's a lot of people who have never seen [us working]. You know what I mean? [They've never] seen the power lines being worked on, *or never paid attention to it*" (10169, emphasis mine). Others agreed: "they don't acknowledge us when we're out there doing our daily job" (10130). Also, even if they are working in plain view, they perceived that, "it seems like we're kind of like in the shadows" (10168) because "the general public just has no idea what we do" (10128). This lack of acknowledgement of linemen's labor is recursively related to product invisibility. That is, the invisibility and taken-for-granted nature of electricity, electrical wires, and poles makes the work necessary to build and maintain them less likely to be noticed as well. Similarly, never seeing or noticing linemen while they engage in their labor further entrenches the invisibility of the products they build. Taken together, these two types of invisibility contribute to occupational invisibility—a lack of awareness of the occupation's existence.

  Occupational Invisibility. Linemen believe that the general public is not even aware of their existence as an occupation. One explained:

> Like if I say "I'm a journeyman lineman", they [members of the general public] just look at me like "What the hell is that?" [I say] "like, if your lights go out and you call people and say 'hey, my lights are out', I'm the woman who is about to fix this up." And then they're like "Oh, wow, I didn't know that." Most people don't even know that's what [our occupation is] called. (11445)

This perception—that most of the general public is unaware of their existence—is ubiquitously shared by linemen. They explained that "Nobody really knows what a contract lineman even is" (10454). Another shared that when he tells people he's a lineman, they have "no fucking clue" what that means (10149).

Instead, linemen explained that after telling others their occupation, they are often mistaken for football players.[8] One lineman shared a recent story in which this type of confusion occurred: "the other day my wife was at work, and, you know, for some reason, she said it came up, but someone asked her, 'what does your husband do?' You know, my wife said, 'he's a lineman.' And they said, 'What team?'" (10151). Another lineman shared a similar experience:

> A buddy of mine... [was at] the bar or something like that. And he's probably about 5'7" or 5'8". And, you know, not a real big muscular guy and all that, you know, especially looking at him with his long sleeve shirt and all that on, but he was sitting up in there, minding his own business. This woman, you know, they're all talkin' and whatever. And she's like, "Well, what do you do for a living?" And he's like, "Oh, I'm a lineman." And she's like, "oh, boy, y'all look bigger whenever you have your shoulder pads and helmet on." He's like, "no I don't chase a little football around on the field. I build power lines." She's like "What does that mean?" He's like, "nevermind." (10159)

Stories like this were quite common, as many linemen explained that whenever they tell people their occupation, those people respond by saying "You seem sort of small. Like what football team do you play with?" (10138). As these examples illustrate, given the invisibility of the products they provide and the labor they engage in to provide them, they perceive that their entire occupation is invisible.

Responses to Invisibility: Occupational Accounts of the Significance of Their Work

These perceptions of invisibility were acknowledged not just by individual linemen I interviewed, but by the occupation as a whole. Analysis of the occupation's trade journal, which was targeted to members of the occupation, revealed that the occupation writ large recognized both product and labor invisibility as problematic. They therefore proffered accounts of the significance of their work (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017; Scott & Lyman, 1968) in which they coupled

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[8] Several positions on a football team are called "linemen."

both their invisible product (i.e., electricity and the grid) and their invisible labor (i.e., the work

that linemen do to build and repair power lines) with highly valued outcomes.

Although archival analysis cannot determine the motives of the occupational

representatives who wrote and disseminated their trade journals, the accounts they shared

seemed to be spurred by the invisibility of their *products* and *labor*. Regarding the invisibility of

electricity, one section noted, "Unfortunately, many other Americans who are not directly

associated with the industry fail to realize the importance of the industry as it relates to their

existence and to the well-being of our country" (1980-02).[9] Another excerpt in a different article

in this publication read:

> While traveling back and forth between home and work and places of leisure, we don't
> think twice about the electrical energy that is powering trains, subway systems, buses,
> elevators, and escalators. The list is endless. Unfortunately, we often overlook how
> essential electrical energy is to our daily life… (1980-02).

Furthermore, these publications also acknowledged the invisibility of the labor required for

maintaining the electrical grid. For instance, a later publication highlighted a poem written by the

wife of a member who focused on the invisible nature of the labor:

> You take chances no other man would take
> You're there to meet the task;
> Knowing a fall or shock may come
> And it could be your last.
> You're sent to other states to do your job,
> Till all hours of the night,
> But still you keep on working
> Because you know it's right.
> You have to take
> A lot of flack,
> You miss precious sleep
> That's not gained back.
> *Because you get such little praise*
> *For the jobs that you do*;
> These verses are for all to read

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[9] Archival data is cited herein using the date of publication (Year-Month), as this trade journal is published monthly.

To thank you for your loyal deeds. (1980-08, emphasis mine)

These examples illustrate the widespread acknowledgement of the invisible nature of electricity and the work necessary to provide it. Moreover, such acknowledgements—as they were here— were almost always accompanied by statements about the "unfortunate" nature of such invisibility. In light of this invisibility, the occupation shared accounts of the significance of their work to their members. They did so by coupling electricity and the electrical grid with valued outcomes and coupling the work linemen do to provide electricity with valued outcomes. These accounts thus directly mirrored the types of invisibility that rendered their occupation invisible as a whole.

Coupling Invisible Product with Valued Outcomes. The first way in which the occupation extolled the worthiness of their work was by coupling electricity with highly valued outcomes. That is, they discussed electricity as vital for human functioning and as playing a key role in the ability to provide medical care, advance scientific discoveries, or progress as a nation. Indeed, representatives for the occupation of linemen spoke about electricity—and the ability to distribute it to people—as the most important aspect of a society's ability to function. As one example of this claim, an article argued: "Because it is the lifeblood of a modern nation, the use of electricity is one of the most accurate measures of a country's living standards" (1972-05). Similar claims were common in these publications, as they made assertions such as "No industry has advanced the everyday comfort which is enjoyed by most people as much as the electrical industry" (1970-10). Another claimed that:

> It is virtually impossible, by way of examples, to convey a full appreciation for its [electrical power's] importance to our society. Practically every commercial or industrial firm and government or private building utilizes electrical power as a source of energy for machinery, equipment, controls, heating and air conditioning, lighting, and a host of other applications. In our private lives, we are completely at home with electrically-powered appliances, entertainment equipment, heading, air conditioning, lighting, etc.

(1980-02)

This same article went on to argue that "America became the great nation that it is because it had sufficient supply of energy needed to sustain its enormous productive capacity" (1980-02).

Claims such as these had in common a connection between electrical power and a host of other services or industries that require it. Beyond the "comforts" that electricity provides, these types of claims also highlighted the ways in which electricity is essential for life. One article argued, "The contribution of the electrical/electronics industry to medical science is of inestimable value to all of us, for we are all subject to illness without notice, the immediate diagnosis and treatment of which could be a life-saving measure" (1980-04). Notably, the connection between electricity and medicine is not discussed as a mere way to put electricity to good use. Rather, this article claims that medicine is "*dependent* on the electrical/electronics industry" (emphasis mine). It goes on to argue: "It is readily apparent that our nation and all of it [sic] inhabitants are increasingly dependent on the services and products that are provided by the electrical/electronics industry" (1980-04). Other publications concurred, noting that "Mankind's ever-growing knowledge and use of electricity have furnished the motive power for our amazing scientific progress" (1970-10). As these examples illustrate, the occupation discussed the importance of electrical power as the "backbone" and "lifeblood" of society, the primary contributor to the functioning of people and businesses, and the "motive power" behind life-saving technological advances. These accounts all highlighted how electrical power was vital for society to function.

Coupling Invisible Labor with Valued Outcomes. The occupation also linked the specific *labor* required to provide electricity with valued outcomes as well. In this way, they made a more direct connection between the invisible work of linemen and valued outcomes. This

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was most often done by highlighting the connection between their work and very important (and highly visible) events. For instance, shortly after NASA successfully completed the first lunar landing, a featured article noted the following:

> The accomplishing of this "impossible dream" [of landing men on the moon] is now history. It required the efforts of 400,000 Americans working for 20,000 separate companies. The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, through thousands of its members, helped in virtually all… phases of getting men on the moon, both directly and indirectly through the equipment they built, maintained, or operated" (1973-03).

Other articles agreed, noting that workers who provided electricity were "crucial to the success" of the moon-landing missions (1970-10). Indeed, a later issue's central focus was on the contributions to the Apollo missions, noting "IBEW is Proud that the Skills and Talents of Thousands of Our Members Throughout the Nation Helped Make Apollo 17 the Most Perfect Flight to the Moon Yet!" (1973-02). Even decades later, the trade journal dedicated space to show photos of the lunar landing and emphasize that they "played a vital role in the U.S. space program" (1991-05). As these examples highlight, the occupation explicitly recognized the importance of not just electricity, but of the "skills and talents" of linemen who worked to make critical events like the lunar landing possible.

The moon landing and space program more broadly were certainly not the only highly visible events that occupational representatives chose to focus on when touting the contributions of their invisible labor. The Olympics, for example, were singled out on multiple occasions as well. A featured article stated regarding the Olympic games in Calgary: "hundreds of members of Locals 254 and 348 have been involved in the excitement of preparing the city for the biggest event in the history of Calgary. Our members have been working for almost a year to provide electrical construction [for the Games]…" (1987-11). An excerpt from this article went on to say:

The collective involvement of IBEW members in the XV Winter Olympic Games is too extensive to cover here in detail; but Dale Ashton, business manager of Local 348, reflects the feelings of everyone involved with the Games when he says, "[The] sweat, worry, stress and dedication will be a small part of the memory of the XV Winter Olympics. [Most importantly] *we'll all be able to say with pride, 'I was part of the Olympic Games.'*" (1987-11, emphasis mine).

Similar claims were made regarding the 2002 Olympic Games in Salt Lake City, Utah: "Utah Power will be key to the Salt Lake City Games when they open on February 8. *The company— and IBEW linemen…—*will be delivering the equivalent of broadcasting 10 pro football games a day for 17 days" (2001-10, emphasis mine). Just two months later, a featured article of an issue, entitled "IBEW Powers the Winter Games," portrayed a photo of linemen on a bucket truck with the caption "The Power Behind the Games" followed by a highlighted passage, claiming "…the IBEW will play an integral behind-the-scenes part in ensuring the mega sporting event goes as planned" (2001-12).

Highlighting these past events—and the labor required to power them—spanned far beyond these examples. Additional examples include the construction of the Panama Canal (1973-03), the development of the nuclear submarine (1980-02), various Super Bowls (1992-04), and the development of X-Ray Beams (1996-08). What was common across these examples was a clear connection drawn between (a) the work linemen do to ensure the "installation of miles and miles of cables" (1996-08) that provide electrical power and (b) the success of such events that are relying on electrical power. Indeed, across different examples, these publications clearly held that such "important technological breakthroughs are possible because of… the Brothers and Sisters of the IBEW" (1989-03).

Because qualitative research cannot assess causality (Pratt & Bonaccio, 2016), the following section does not claim that the broader occupational accounts of the significance of their work had a direct effect on linemen's perceptions of the work. However, the accounts of the

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significance of their product and labor—which are distributed broadly to linemen via these intra-occupational documents—were largely mirrored by linemen whom I interviewed. Thus, it seems likely that claims about the significance of their work were—to some degree—shared with and internalized by members of the occupation as they were disseminated (see the dashed boxes and arrows in Figure 4.1). Next, I show how, in light of these occupation accounts, linemen believed their work to be deeply important for others.

Significant Work: Product Criticality and Skill Exclusivity as Bases of Significance

Mirroring the occupational accounts, linemen perceived that their work was highly significant (i.e., electricity and the labor needed to provided it were vital for others in society). More specifically, my analysis revealed two distinct reasons why linemen viewed their work as important for other people. These "bases of significance"—as I call them—were broadly shared by nearly all of the linemen in this study. The first base of significance shared by linemen was what I call a "product criticality." This involves viewing one's work as being important for others because beneficiaries (e.g., customers and society writ large) cannot live without the *product* of one's work. I call the second base of significance shared by linemen "skill exclusivity." This involves linemen viewing their work as important for others because they were the only ones who were able to do the *labor* required for providing that product.

Product Criticality as a Base of Significance for Linemen. Linemen understand electricity to be critical to the daily lives of their beneficiaries (e.g., individuals who use power) as well as to the functioning of society as a whole. This criticality of their work product undergirded a strong sense that their work makes an important impact on others. One lineman noted, "what I'm actually doing is providing a service and something that people really can't live without" (1033). He went on to explain "we… know that modern life can't go on without reliable

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electric service. We only become more reliant on it every day" (1033). Another lineman agreed,

noting the importance of electricity for vital medical services:

> I mean, you are helping the community every day you go to work because you're keeping the power grid going. You update [and] maintain it. Then when a natural disaster hits, you're putting it back together. *People die without* electricity… if it's too hot or too cold. Then you get people that need electricity for life support. I ran into that, where people have been on oxygen, then you work a little harder and faster to get their electricity back on. (10135, emphasis mine)

Other linemen shared this understanding of how critical power was for those who relied on it for

medical services:

> When the power's out in a big area like that, like I said, it affects every single person. Somebody that's on oxygen, somebody that's on a dialysis machine, somebody that is just by nature, they're nervous. You know, they have no power. Now, they're skittish and nervous that they have no power, the lights are out. You know, you really get to help and affect people. (10144)

Others concurred, saying things like, "hospitals and, you know, important buildings have their

power on to do what they need to do" (10192), and "you've got little old ladies and old men that

are on oxygen that they rely on that electricity and shit. They breathe on machine and stuff like

that in their own homes" (10196). Indeed, product criticality often involved perceptions that

electrical power was vital for keeping people alive: "the people in [the] public do have their

power so that your grandma doesn't pass away because it got too cold in her house in the middle

of the winter, or she doesn't die of heat exhaustion down in Florida because she has no air

conditioner" (11299).

In addition to viewing electrical power as critical for the functioning of individuals,

linemen also perceived their work products to be critical for society more broadly:

> There's not anything that is done in our modern world that doesn't involve electricity in some form or manner. And, you know, it's essential. So, in fact, one study from the World Health Organization, and I don't remember which one to cite it for you, but they said that the number one predictor of how well society is going to be is their access to electricity. [It is] more important than clean water; more important than food security.

Their access to cheap and reliable electricity… Because if you have cheap and reliable electricity, you have all of those other things… You can make clean water; you can make food. (10185)

This perception was also expressed by linemen, who said things like, "I… know that modern life can't go on without reliable electric service." (1033), and "these lines are the economic arteries of modern day civilization" (10187). This same lineman went on to explain the importance of these "economic arties" that they build:

If you take a look at it, some of the human development research that has been done in the past several decades, it really underscores the significance that energy has to humanity, writ large. So as human beings have developed the ability to distribute and transform energy from one form to another, they've been able to do things like filter water, to enhance educational systems, to improve health care, etc, etc. *The most significant achievement in the 20th century was the development of the electrical grid.* And moving forward in a world confronting climate change and environmental destruction, disparities in economic outcomes, one of the best things that we can have is a very efficient, effective electrical system. (10187, emphasis mine)

This lineman's view on the criticality of electrical power also hints at another commonly shared notion: the importance of their work for transitioning an aging power grid into a modern grid capable of handling new and different energy demands.

Indeed, one of the reasons linemen believed their work to be so critical for individuals and for society writ large is the deteriorating state of the U.S. electrical grid. One explained how electrical equipment stays "in the air" (i.e., in use on a utility pole) for far too long:

Because you see shit that's like— America's infrastructure is just aging like a motherfucker… a lot still stays in the air for a really long time. But you go up to it and be like "Okay, this bolt is literally like— It's supposed to be 5 inches thick and now it's 1/8 of an inch thick like it's rusted right down to nothing…" You know, you go up on big transmission lines and see like kind of the same thing where you're like "Oh man, this is barely hanging on and this is holding up like an [entire] town's [electrical power]. Good thing we replaced this." (10115)

Another lineman concurred, noting that "the [electrical] system is so neglected… the condition

of the system is so bad that they need us" (1033). He went on to note that this is problematic,

especially considering transitions to different types of power and increased demand for power:

> And even with more renewables, they still need to transmit it [power] via conductors.
> Where some jobs get phased out or careers get phased out with AI or some sort of
> modern technology, even as the new technology comes out to generate power whether
> it's solar, wind, whatever change… someone else comes up with, it still needs to be
> transmitted via a conductor, whether it's overhead, underground or whatever" (1033).

Other linemen were similarly aware of the importance of electrical power in light of current

trends toward alternative sources of energy, such as renewable energy. One noted that their work

is vital "even with solar power" (10182). As these examples illustrate, linemen viewed electrical

power as absolutely critical for individuals they served and society as a whole—especially given

the poor state of the electrical grid currently and the challenges of transforming the grid for the

future. This perception is consistent with the occupation's accounts that coupled electrical power

with a host of important outcomes, such as sustaining medical facilities and fueling modern

society.

     Skill Exclusivity as a Base of Significance for Linemen. In addition to viewing

electrical power itself as critical for society, linemen also viewed their work as important for

others because they alone were capable of providing electricity. In short, they perceived that

without exclusive skills, the electrical grid would not function. One lineman explained:

> And in order to have [a functioning electrical grid] you can't have just engineers or just
> talking heads in slacks making PowerPoint slide decks and talking about this or that.
> You've got to have a component of people who are… building and maintaining and
> troubleshooting these circuits in all kinds of different conditions [and] weather. I mean,
> there's, there's a really, there's a large degree of difficulty in doing this. And… [that]
> means that there's a subset of the workforce that are individuals who have got a unique
> skill set of doing the physical work and being able to appreciate the intellectual side in
> order to understand the physics of what's involved. So it's kind of a, *it's an exclusive*
> *group of individuals who's got a very critical skill set for modern life*. (10187, emphasis

mine)

Linemen similarly explained how one of the most important parts of their work was "being able to constructively help everybody [by]… being qualified and, you know, able to fix this stuff and maintain it" (10192). Indeed, linemen viewed their skillset is very unique:

> Not to sound like I'm bragging, but it takes a special breed of cat to do what we do. Number one, you're working in high places, which a lot of people don't like. And the other thing, you're working with electricity—a lot of electricity—and most people are terrified of that. (10123)

Another explained, "A lot of people, I can do their job, but they can't do mine. It's just the truth. It's nothing against people. It sounds, I don't know, egotistical or whatever you want to call it, but it's the truth" (10498). One similarly noted the exclusive nature of their skillset, saying, "[being a lineman is] a little more, I guess, exclusive… It's kind of harder to break into and stay in" (10163). Others agreed, noting that linemen are a "special breed" (10121) or "just a different breed" (10149) of person: "I guess you could say it takes a special man to be a lineman, or a special woman in my case" (11299).

Due to the perceived exclusive nature of their capabilities as linemen, they explained that there are many situations—particularly emergency situations—in which no progress can be made without a lineman present:

> I've worked on jobs in [U.S. State] where… you will get a phone call. It's a 911 call. Fire department's on scene, but they can't do a fucking thing until the power's out. Or, the electricity has landed on a car and there's people trapped inside that vehicle. Fire department doesn't know if those wires are dead or not. They got those people in there and the only way they can get that shit off is by having a lineman come out there and de-energize the wire. Or when there is a natural disaster that goes through, a hurricane per se, a hurricane wipes out the northeast, you don't know certain portions of the electrical grid could be up and running, but there are certain portions where the wires are down and may be energized and you can't physically see that they're energized. So, you need linemen to come out there and respond to that shit ASAP. (10112)

Other linemen noted that there were situations in which their skills and capabilities were vital for successfully responding to an emergency situation, noting times when they would say, "Well, thank God I was here" (10115) because only a lineman could have completed the necessary work. This perception was congruent with the occupation's accounts that highlighted linemen's labor in achieving valued outcomes like restoring electrical power after outages or constructing new power lines.

Taken together, linemen's belief that their work made an important impact on others (i.e., that their work was high in "task significance" [Grant, 2008]) was rooted two distinct perceptions: product criticality and skill exclusivity. Although extant research often assumes significance to be a unitary construct (e.g., Allan, 2017; Allan et al., 2018), my analysis revealed multiple bases that engender such a perception. Further, although I do not claim that these are the only potential bases of significance more broadly, they were seemingly sufficient for fostering linemen's perceptions that their work was significant. That is, they believed their work made an important impact on others because the product they provide is critical for society to function, and they are the only ones who can provide it.

The "Recognition Gap" in Invisible Work

As previously noted, literature on meaningful work has often touted perceptions of one's work as having a positive impact on others as bolstering the personal meaningfulness that individuals experience regarding their work (Allan et al., 2018; Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Indeed, this is one of the primary mechanisms assumed to produce individual experiences of meaningful work (see Allan, 2017; Grant et al., 2011; Grant & Parker, 2009). However, my analysis challenges this assumption. Indeed, the perceived criticality and exclusivity of their work contributed to linemen's perceptions that their work was deeply important for the lives of

other people. Linemen faced what I call a "recognition gap" in their work: perceptions of the criticality of electricity and their exclusive ability to provide it strengthened their sense that they deserved recognition from the public. Yet, given the invisibility of their occupation, such recognition was rarely, if ever, received. This disconnect between the recognition they believe they deserved and the recognition they received fostered sense of "affirmation deficiency" that led to meaningfulness insecurity—feelings of uncertainty or doubt about the personal meaningfulness of the job.

The Recognition Gap. Because their work was so critical for society and because they were they only ones who could do it, linemen felt that they deserved greater external appreciation for their work. One noted that, "*I feel we deserve some recognition... We just want to [be] recognized [and for the public to] at least say, 'Hey, thank you'*" (10463, emphasis mine). Another expressed that, "*I think we deserve the recognition*. I wouldn't necessarily say when I want to showboat or brag about it, but if you think you're doing something good, it's nice to get that recognition" (1031, emphasis mine). Others agreed, saying, "[It] would be great if more people knew what line work is and the work that goes into it" (1033), because "I feel like we deserve the respect" (10498).

Notably, my analysis revealed that the perception that greater recognition was "deserved" seemed to be inextricably linked to the criticality of electrical power and their exclusive ability to provide it. One lineman explained that the reason linemen think such recognition is warranted is because they "go on storms and... they left their family and their loved ones. They're out working 18 hours a day. They're in the blizzard. *They feel that they should be recognized for the things that they're doing in order to get these people back their power* and everything else" (10116,

emphasis mine). Yet, the invisibility of their occupation produced an "irritating" lack of recognition:

> I do wish people were more educated on the fact that there are, you know, people that go out there and work on the power lines… It's just like, it just blows my mind that people don't know that there is such a thing as a lineman. And there's people that work on power lines all day long every day. *That it's a pretty significant part of the whole world's life right now. Really… people can barely function without electricity for 20 minutes. Yeah. And, you know, they have no idea how it gets to them. So that… irritates me*. (10171, emphasis mine)

This irritation illustrates the recognition gap well. Indeed, at the heart of the recognition gap is the frustrating dual perception that the public is completely reliant upon electrical power and completely ignorant of the role linemen play in maintaining it.

Linemen also illustrated this recognition gap when they expressed frustration that "We're the ones that are out there risking our lives... It's just that the public doesn't perceive [us] as that" (10132). This was a common response to their perceived dearth of deserved recognition: "[If] They better understood what it took to do the work, I think there'd be… more respect [from them]." (10150). Another shared his desire for people to understand and recognize linemen for their work:

> It's a thankless job… I wish people had a better understanding of what actually needs to happen for them to have their power on. I wish they had a better understanding of where the electricity comes from, not just, 'oh, it gets made in a coal plant or a solar farmer or hydro or wind turbine or whatever the hell.' *I wish they understood that somewhere out there, there's a dude with three other dudes running on zero sleep that are probably cold and haven't seen their family [more than] a couple hours in the past week or whatever*. I wish they understood that. (101101, emphasis mine)

Others agreed, often mentioning the critical and exclusive nature of their work alongside their frustrations associated with being unrecognized as an occupation: "It is a very unique skill set to have being a lineman, and it's not very appreciated" (10150). Another seemingly agreed, explaining:

It's definitely a tough job… And, you know, I still do stuff, but it's like, you know, [at] 2 a.m. when it's thunder storming, that's like when I'm busy. And, you know, we have to work through it. And there's a lot obstacles are pretty misunderstood from, you know, John Q. Public [referencing the general public]… They don't know what it entails. (10172)

To return to a previous example, linemen found being mistaken for football players (given their shared title) to be deeply frustrating, because of how much more significant (i.e., critical and exclusive) they believed line work to be. One noted that, when he is mistaken for a football player, her responds: "No, not football. We're fucking linemen!" (10115). Other misunderstandings from members of the public were equally as frustrating or disheartening. Indeed, given the perceived positive impact that their work has on others, even being confused for other utility workers, such as cable workers, was frustrating. As one explained, "A lot of people, if you tell them, 'Oh, I'm a lineman,' they automatically think telephone or cable… How do I even explain it? To a power lineman… it's kind of like calling a police officer a mall cop" (10118). For this reason, linemen even expressed frustration with the way the public will commonly refer to utility poles as "telephone poles": "We hear that shit all the fucking time. They all think we're the same… They call them [the poles] 'telephone poles.' It's like, 'It's not a fucking telephone pole. There's nothing up there that's communication. That's your power!' Nobody knows that" (10149). These misunderstandings from the public served as cogent reminders of the lack of recognition for their important work.

Affirmation Deficiency. In light of this recognition gap, linemen felt an affirmation deficiency—a deficit of validation for their strongly held beliefs about the importance of their work. This affirmation deficiency served as a key mechanism that fostered meaningfulness insecurity (see Figure 4.1). To illustrate, one lineman noted that he wished the public had a

greater appreciation of the labor required to restore power, especially in light of how difficult

that labor is:

> [I wish they had more] appreciation for the lifestyle you have to live to do this because, again, this storm is going to hit tonight and I got to get up at three in the morning and go fixing powerlines. You know what I mean? And it happens on a regular basis. It happens in the winter during these ice storms. Well, somebody's got to fix it, right? So everyone can have peace. *I guess just having the appreciation for the type of lifestyle we have to live for other people… I wish people just have more of a recollection of that.* (10134, emphasis mine)

For this reason, linemen agreed that "I mean it's nice to get recognition. I won't lie. It is nice to

have somebody come out at least acknowledge you" (10144) after restoring their power. As one

noted, "all linemen would like to see the appreciation from people when we're out and we're

busting [our] ass in an ice storm or a snow storm or a wind storm or a rain storm or a hurricane,

because we're not there because we want to be… A lot of us are there because it's the right thing

to do" (101103). However, this appreciation or affirmation of the importance of their work

rarely, if ever, occurred:

> You do your job and you get the power back and you turn around, you look around and… there's nobody. They go back to living their life the way it was when the power was on. Their lights come back on. They're back in the house. Their windows are shut. The doors are shut. The AC is back on. That's it… Nothing. Not even a wave out the window like "hey [thanks]!'" (10144).

The melancholy nature of responses like this further underscores how disheartening it is when

their strongly held beliefs about the significance of their work are not affirmed by others.

Amplifying Meaningfulness Insecurity: Inter-Occupational Comparisons. This

affirmation deficiency that linemen felt was further amplified by inter-occupational comparisons

(see the shaded box in Figure 4.1). That is, in addition to believing that they deserved

recognition, linemen also acutely felt a deficiency of affirmation when they compared the

recognition they received with the recognition received by other occupations that they deemed

similar. This was particularly common with "first responder" occupations who were praised for their work. One lineman said:

> Every single day, I'm in harm's way. And, you know, the fire department, you know, you know, they get out there, get a cat out of the tree, and all sudden, they're on the front page of newspaper and whatnot…[But] I don't think too many people know… I mean, it's, it's nice to be like, you know, doing something for people and… being recognized for it… But…whenever I say [I'm a lineman], their mind goes to "you don't look big enough to play football." I swear to god. (10180)

Another lineman similarly illustrated this comparison between the work of linemen and work of more recognized first responders such as fire fighters.

> They talk about the first responders and believe me, I'm not taking anything away from the policemen [or] the firemen that are going out there on the height of the storm. But you know what? We're out there too. Nothing happens until the electricity goes back on, nothing. The rebuilding process is at a complete standstill until the electricity goes on. Don't ever forget that. (10123)

These comparisons were quite common. For instance, one lineman commented, "when you look at firefighters, half of their job is doing nothing. Unless something's going on. They're not going out. We're like, every day when I go to work. I'm dealing with, you know, 12,000 volts in traffic and heights. You know, my normal day is a bunch of stuff trying to kill me" (10172). Another lineman illustrated this quite vividly:

> Being a lineman is more dangerous than being a firefighter. It's a way more badass job, like way more badass. We deal with live high-voltage electricity every day, all day long. That's all we deal with with our hands… We don't spray water on a fire. But yeah, firefighters, they have like a prestigious role. They're the first responders. They get all this respect and stuff... But when a storm blows through and a line comes down on the ground, guess who they're calling? They're calling me. Firefighters are going to sit there and babysit that line for me until I get there and then direct traffic around me while I'm fixing it. (10124)

Not only did linemen make these comparisons between their occupation and others, they did so with a firm belief that those other occupations received more recognition for their work than lineman received:

I mean, if you didn't know anything about [their jobs], you would still have an idea that that EMT is there to respond to a cardiac arrest victim, or that firefighter is responding to a fire, or that police officer is coming to stop a burglary from happening. We all know that that's what these type of people do… So, I think if people had an understanding of what a lineman's job entails and the level of skill that goes behind what we deal with… it would definitely help. (10112)

Others explained that, "I mean, a firefighter can't put a fire out unless a lineman cuts the power" (10156). This disparity in recognition "bothered" them:

I don't need people bowing down to me, but there are times when the Fire Department's waiting on me to make a scene safe. The cops wait for me to make a scene safe. I'm the one going in there by myself trying to do stuff, make stuff safe… I know I work for a for-profit company, but that doesn't discount my work… [so] *it does bother me that we aren't included*. (124110, emphasis mine)

Another lineman tersely noted, "We're line workers. So why did God create line workers? So police and firefighters have heroes too" (10125). They found these occupations similar to their own, noting that their work required that they also "help people out that need help" (10351). Another noted the perceived similarity with other more visible emergency response occupations when he said, "We're not cops. We're not firemen. But yet we're basically doing the same type of work in restoring power to somebody that needs it. Where a fireman or a cop or an EMT is doing the same thing also, *just restoring life, just… saving your life*" (10130, emphasis mine).

Some also compared their work with that of the military. For instance, one noted, "You need the electricity there. It's probably no different than a soldier signing up for war" (1031). Another explained, "Really, you know, it's, I don't want to say we're like a military group that has a specialized job, but we do, and it would be no, no different than the police force. I mean, without linemen, you can't turn the lights on, and can't keep basically the modern world running" (10178). Perceiving similarities between their own invisible work and the highly visible work of other occupations further amplified their sense of affirmation deficiency—a feeling that their beliefs about the importance of their work were not shared by others.

Meaningfulness Insecurity

The affirmation deficiency linemen felt in light of the recognition gap fostered what I call meaningfulness insecurity—feelings of uncertainty about the personal meaningfulness of their work. Linemen explained how sufficient affirmation of the importance of their work *might* lead to feeling that their job is meaningful, but that such affirmation was constantly out-of-reach. One explained that he wished he would receive "positive reinforcement" from others, explaining that "If they [the public] could just stand outside the door and wave and say thanks as we drive away," that would produce "the feeling afterwards of 'Oh, I did a great job'" (11345). He continued to explain that he would "enjoy… the 'thank you' probably more than anything." However, he lamented that this feeling is difficult to come by: "[but] a lot of times once the lights come on, they kinda disappear… somebody kinda compared the customers to roaches… As soon as the lights come on, they all disappear in their house. They all go and hide." The recognition gap therefore has a stifling effect on linemen's personal experiences of the meaningfulness of their work because it clouds their *feelings* of whether the work is meaningful or not. For instance, one said that, given the lack of recognition, "You kind of hang your head at the end of the day that knowing that that pole is going to be there another hundred plus years [and that] so many people are going to drive by and see that, and probably they won't even bat an eye at it" (10150). Another explained that it is "hard to stay motivated… especially in like the conditions that we deal with sometimes. And then a lot of the times, storm restoration work will do 16- to 18-hour days, [and], *there's no praise or anything like that*. It's definitely… pretty dark" (10124, emphasis mine). Conversely, linemen shared that, in the rare instances in which their work is noticed and appreciated by a customer, the work feels quite meaningful: "it's nice

to be appreciated… that's the best part, when… people do actually kind of realize what you do" (10140).

However, as noted, such appreciation is quite rare. Linemen explained that "it's a lot more rare to find nice people" (10122) who would notice and appreciate their work. When asked if it was common to have his work noticed or appreciated by customers, another lineman responded, "No. No. It's not. Actually, it's usually the opposite" (10464). Others concurred, noting that, "More often than not, [we] don't see that side of the public" (10120), but that "Sometimes, every once in a while, somebody saying, 'good job' would [be] nice" (101102). Another lineman even noted that he could not think of a time when he received recognition for or affirmation of his work, despite his desire for it: "I can't think of one specific [instance], but to me a simple thank you, it [would really mean] a lot… a 'thank you' goes a long way, just to get a little satisfaction in life" (1031).

As these examples illustrate, the meaningfulness insecurity linemen experience is largely an *emotional* barrier to their experience of meaningfulness. They believed their work to be deeply important for society. Yet, when that belief was not affirmed by others, they did not *feel* like their work was personally meaningful. It is important to note here that, during my interviews, talking about wanting recognition or praise in order to feel "satisfaction in life" (1031) was often an uncomfortable conversation for linemen. They expressed that linemen shouldn't need "special recognition" (10149) in order to feel like their work is meaningful—an unsurprising stance given their masculine occupational culture. As an example, after describing the general lack of recognition for linemen, I asked one if he wished he got more recognition for his work. Before sharing his feelings on the matter, he paused and said, "Okay, this is one that I don't want a direct quote on." Yet, despite reticence to share their negative emotional reactions

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openly, questions about the greatest challenges or downsides in their work consistently elicited

frustration stemming from a lack of affirmation for their work. One lineman illustrated this quite

well; his clear irritation regarding the lack of public recognition exemplified his sense of

meaningfulness insecurity:

> We don't wear fucking capes, but at the same time… you'll feel disrespected. For instance, like we're on this storm right now, they [the public]… don't know the huge amount of shit that we had to go through. We're working 16 hours a day. I have been working seven days a week, 16 hours a day. I swear to you; I've been doing this since July non-stop. I haven't had a day off since July... What people don't know is that we worked our ass off all night, or all fucking day long. We go home, and we take a shower and we eat and we go to sleep, and then 5:00 in the morning, we come back and do it again. We work from 5:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. every fucking day. I mean, we don't bitch about it… but fuck man, *nobody fucking knows! It's irritating*…. [that] they don't know anything about what goes into what we do. (10149, emphasis mine)

This meaningfulness insecurity posed a significant threat to linemen's ability to experience

meaningfulness. Having explained this emotional barrier to meaningfulness for invisible

workers, the following chapter explains how they overcome meaningfulness insecurity—

ultimately cultivating moments in which they feel a deep sense of meaningfulness in their work.

CHAPTER FIVE: AESTHETICS, INTUITIVE JUDGEMENTS, AND MEANINGFULNESS

At its core, meaningfulness insecurity is an emotional problem. As such, overcoming it requires an emotional solution. In this chapter, I explain how meaningfulness insecurity is superseded in moments when linemen *intuitively* (see Dane & Pratt, 2007) feel pride—a positive emotion involving appraisals of self-worth following an achievement (Lazarus, 1991; Smith-Crowe & Warren, 2014; Tracy & Robins, 2007)—in the completion of aesthetically pleasing work. Aesthetics—the visual details that make a pole beautiful—underlie these moments for linemen because they represent the enactment of occupationally valued expertise regarding craftsmanship. Additionally, I show how—contrary to what the literature on pride at work would predict (Brown & Marshall, 2001; Watkins, Kleshinski, Longmire, & He, 2022)—such intuitively felt pride did not stem from praise for the appearance of their work. Rather, it was enabled through the development of "expert schemas" regarding work aesthetics (Dane & Pratt, 2007), formed via repeated attempts to avoid harsh social criticism from fellow linemen. Such expert schemas also sparked intense negative emotional reactions to "ugly" work—motivating linemen to criticize the appearance of *others'* work aesthetics. Thus, I show how social criticism generates a reinforcing cycle in which aesthetic standards are internalized by individual linemen. This internalization enables their intuitive judgements that, when positive, foster a sense of pride and, when negative, prompt them to criticize the aesthetics of others' work. These experiences of pride in their completed jobs serve as "transcendent moments in time" (Bailey & Madden, 2017: 15) that override meaningfulness insecurity and foster a sense of meaningful work.

Occupationally Valued Expertise: Craftsmanship and Beautiful Work Aesthetics

To start, linemen explained that their occupation valued expertise regarding craftsmanship above nearly all else. When it came to their expertise, they agreed that

"craftsmanship… is very, very important" in line work (10454) and that "one of the first words that they start [teaching] these kids… is craftsmanship" (10175). Far from just paying lip service to craftsmanship when teaching it to apprentices, almost all of the linemen in my sample strongly valued this particular type of expertise themselves: "Look, the work we do is very important… We need to be craftsmen" (10187). Another agreed that, "when it comes down to the craftsmanship, 100% I believe in that" (10166).

Linemen understood craftsmanship to be realized in the appearance of their completed work on poles. More specifically, they enacted this valued expertise when they made work that was "aesthetically pleasing" (10178). One explained, "I believe in, in setting a pole straight, or squaring the washers, so they all match. It's the little things like that... So when it comes to the simple things, craftsmanship is absolutely huge" (10166). Another noted, "there's pride in your craftsmanship. So you always want… to, you know, build it clean because… it looks good. It's more aesthetically pleasing" (10178). Building these "little things" such that they appear "clean" (10178) was at the heart of what linemen refer to as the *aesthetics* of their finished work products. Diverging from the scholarly use of the term—which connotes *any* sensory reactions to material aspects of work (see Baldessarelli, Stigliani, & Elsbach, 2022)—linemen used the term colloquially to refer specifically to the visual details that make a pole beautiful. In their terms, such details—when completed in certain ways—made for work that looked "aesthetically pleasing" (10166) to them and signified good craftsmanship. For instance, "squaring your washers" (10187) or making things look "uniform" (10141), are the "things that we do to try to make things aesthetic" (10470). Another explained what it means to have craftsmanship as follows:

> So say a pole has, I don't know let's just say something crazy like 10 arms, you know
> from the top all the way down. And if all of them have curved washers, you're going to

see 10 [or] 12 curved washers, and they're all stacked. And… *if they're craftsmen they tried to line them up straight*, they're not zigzagging, you know, like, like they didn't bore the holes at an angle. They bored them all straight, and it'll [craftsmanship] show once put all your washers that come down in a straight line. You know? (10179, emphasis mine)

The amount of a bolt that is left protruding past the pole is also seen as an important aesthetic marker of craftsmanship:

On distribution, you use five-eighths and three-quarter galvanized steel bolts. They come in multiple different sizes, but we'll just say, on your truck, you're going to keep probably a six-inch, a ten-inch, a 12-inch, 14-inch, 16-inch, 18-inch and maybe an assortment of 20 inches… A 40-foot class three [pole] is going to be thicker, more stout than a 40-foot class five. If you know you've got a 40-foot class five pole, you're probably going to be using mostly ten-inch bolts. Maybe once you get down farther from the top of the pole, you might start to use 12s. The reason for that is, if you were to take and stick 14-inch bolts to the top of the pole on a class five pole, you're going to have eight inches of bolt thread sticking out from the nut in the washer. Very little things like [making sure you] use the right bolt so you've only got an inch of thread sticking out of the bolt. Some guys go absolutely nuts over that shit. (101101)

Even techniques as seemingly minor as how the coating is trimmed off of the end of a wire allow opportunities to make the work more aesthetically pleasing: "little stuff, you know, making sure when you trim the wire or skin the coating off the copper or something, you know, rounding it off, instead of making it look all trashy and rough" (10183).

It is important to note here that the aesthetics of the completed work were not perceived to effect the functionality, effectiveness, or reliability of the power lines in any way. When asked why paying attention to such aesthetics was so important, linemen explained that it was about making the work "beautiful" (10153)—not more effective: "Electricity doesn't give a damn if [the] wire's bent another inch to the left or an inch to the right. But it's more of an aesthetic and visual [thing]" (10166). When asked if the appearance of the poles would affect how the equipment worked, another lineman responded, "it doesn't affect it at all. [Electricity] will run through it. That's for sure" (10134). As an example, another common feature of the pole that

linemen sought to make aesthetically pleasing was the spacing of the staples: "you space your staples out a hammer length all the way from the base of the pole on a 45-degree angle, all the way up, a hammer length [apart]" (101101). Yet, as another lineman described, improperly spacing them "wouldn't change a thing" about the pole's ability to function:

> Even down to the staples you put in the ground wire that go up and down the pole, they are [a] hammer length apart. The hammers we use are 18-inch[es] tall. Every lineman's hammer is pretty much 18-inch[es] long. You use that hammer to space it… I mean, that way, the spacing on the staples on the pole are the exact same all way up… *It wouldn't change a thing if there wasn't one staple in it. It's just the fact that that pole looks right.* (10196, emphasis mine)

In short, all of the linemen in this study agreed that, when it comes to the appearance of the work, whether it was aesthetically pleasing (i.e., a "clean pole" [10121]) or ugly (i.e., a "dirty pole" [10121]), "It would work the same, it's just a visual thing" (10352). As a preview of the following sections, these work aesthetics play a central role in the social process by which linemen eventually experience their work as personally meaningful. This process begins with harsh criticism of others' work that is deemed to be "ugly" or otherwise beneath their aesthetic standards. Figure 5.1 illustrates the entire process described in the sections below.

FIGURE 5.1 ABOUT HERE

Social Criticism, Aesthetic Signaling, and Intuitive Judgements of Work Aesthetics

In this section, I explain a cycle of social enforcement and individual internalization of linemen's valued expertise (see the shaded circle in Figure 5.1). This cycle begins with social criticism and ends with intuitive judgements about work aesthetics, leading either to intuitive experiences of pride (when positive) or negative emotions like disgust (when negative) that prompt them to dole out the same type of criticism to others. To start, the criticism linemen conveyed to one another stood out as a salient theme in my analysis. Across both observations and interviews, linemen displayed and described harsh disparagement of the appearance of one

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another's work. In these situations—when a lineman perceives the appearance of another crew member's work to be "ugly"—they explained, "You look at it [the other person's work] and you're like 'Oh, who fucking hacked that? That looks terrible!'" (11142). Another agreed that, "when you see something that don't look right… . You're like, 'What happened there?'… and then you find out who built it, you're gonna pick on him and say, 'what the hell were you thinking!?'" (10189).

Linemen ubiquitously experienced this social criticism of their work aesthetics—getting "called out" (10139), "razzed" (10172), or otherwise criticized by other members of their crew due to the appearance of their work: "most linemen will call you out if you do a bad job. You know, one thing about linemen is they're not gonna bite their tongue" (10139). Another noted that when you do "ugly work," you become a "laughingstock": "You'll definitely be the laughingstock. If you do a real nasty job, they'll bust your balls for it" (10122). One explained that when his work is seen to be ugly, "Like, [I] get razzed about that. The guys give me crap" (10172). Getting "razzed" often involved criticism laced with brash language, leading linemen to refer to it as receiving "an ass chewing" (10179). For instance, one lineman recounted a time when he received such feedback from another lineman as follows: "He sat me down one night in a bar after work… [and] he said 'step the fuck up and learn the job'" (10177). Another recounted similar feedback on his work, when a lineman told him, "Hey, we don't build dogshit around here. I don't know where you're from. But that's not… how we work here" (10185). Others noted that when someone's work does not look good, "we'll heckle them, and ask them if it's their first day and things like that" (10470). Indeed, examples from my interviews, as well as observations of linemen both in training and on job sites, affirm the frequency and intensity of instances in

which another lineman will "call you down out of the air if he [doesn't] like your work, and cuss you out" (10465).

Building on a previous point, linemen acknowledged that "ugly" work would not affect the functioning of the pole. However, they criticized such work regardless: "most guys will call out other guys. Like, if you look up and see somebody did like, kind of a shoddy [i.e., ugly] job, like, *is it going to work? Yeah.* But it's like, [they'll still say] 'oh, man, that looks like dogshit, like, fix it'" (10186).

An important point to note here is that criticism of one another's work aesthetics was levied not only at apprentices, but at other journeymen linemen as well. As research on blue-collar work has often portrayed harsh treatment of occupational newcomers (e.g., Bourassa & Ashforth, 1998; Haas, 1972), such feedback would not be completely unexpected for apprentices or trainees. However, linemen similarly criticize their peers. One lineman, who was acting as the general foreman for a particular job, told a story of such a recent confrontation in which he criticized the work of a crew foreman:

> I had a foreman or a leader on a truck and I really liked him a lot [but] he wasn't the neatest guy in the world. I [said]… "Hey, you're not going to leave it like that." He goes, "Well, yeah, that's all right." I was just [like], "No, it isn't. Redo it." He looked at me [and said], "You're kidding me." I said, "No, I'm not kidding. Redo it. I don't want it to look like that." I said, "You [had] all day to do it, why didn't you do it right?" (10123)

This example shows that, far from being purely a way to disparage or haze apprentices, criticisms about the aesthetics of others' work could be directed at anyone on the crew, regardless of the length of their tenure in the occupation or their status in the group.

Criticism avoidance and aesthetic signaling. In light of this social criticism of work aesthetics, I find that linemen engage in *aesthetic signaling*—producing visible markers of aesthetic quality motivated by a desire to avoid criticism. Notably, linemen engage in aesthetic

signaling not necessarily because it is their own preference—at least initially. Rather, they do so because they want to subvert the criticism of others on their crew: "You don't have to worry about somebody saying, 'Nice, a hack who can't do shit'" (10148) if they think your work is "ugly." Others expressed this same motivation when explaining why they took such care to make certain parts of their pole look aesthetically pleasing—to avoid criticism: "I take pride in my work and craftsmanship. *Because… I don't want another lineman to… look up that pole and say, [in a negative tone] 'oh, [NAME] did that.'* So we, we make sure that our stuff is done correctly" (10173, emphasis mine). One noted that for this reason, linemen should "Make everything look like you care" (101102)—tellingly not saying that other linemen need to *actually* care, but only that they should make their work appear like they do. Another noted that he tries to, "do shit right, and make it look right and look good. Because if not, people [will] call you on it" (10196). Others similarly explained that others will "go out there and think, 'oh that's shit work' *and they're gonna say something to me*… So I, I want to go out there every day and make everything look as clean and neat as possible" (10163, emphasis mine). Thus, "You just want to make it look good… *so [your crew members] don't think you're a shitbag lineman*" (101101, emphasis mine).

As these examples illustrate, efforts to make things look "as clean and neat as possible" (10163) do not always stem from a personal desire to "beautify" one's pole—at least not initially. One explained that, "you just get absolutely ridden and ridiculed about everything you do until you do it right. There's generally not positive reinforcement in the trade" (10190), and that other linemen will "ride your ass so hard [when you] mess up with something like that. They make you feel dumb in a sense, but so you [don't] do it again" (10197). Thus, the negative reinforcement they receive (see Hineline, 1984; Iwata, 1987; Michael, 1975; Rafaeli & Sutton,

1991) motivates them to engage in aesthetic signaling—doing things such as "shaping the wire up to make it look neat" (10123) and making sure "all your washes are squares …[and] just little details like that" (10179).

    "Expert aesthetics schemas" and intuitive judgements of aesthetics. Aesthetic signaling, despite being motivated by a desire to avoid criticism from others, had an effect that ultimately proved vital for cultivating experiences of meaningful work. Namely, when enacted repeatedly over time, such signaling fostered the development of "expert aesthetics schemas"—complex and domain-relevant understandings of the aesthetics of their work (see Dane & Pratt, 2007). A schema can be defined broadly as "knowledge about a… type of stimulus, including its attributes and the relations among those attributes" (Fiske & Taylor, 1991: 98). More specifically, Dane and Pratt (2007) advance the notion of "expert schemas" that involve a complex body of related knowledge and are developed via repetition in a specific work domain. Critically, such expert schemas form a foundation for intuitive judgements—"affectively charged judgments that arise through rapid, nonconscious, and holistic association" (Dane & Pratt, 2007: 40). That is, as individuals internalize expert schemas in a domain, they can process stimuli pertaining to that domain intuitively, with little "reflection" (Kahneman, 2003: 697) or "conscious deliberation" (Hogarth, 2001: 14) involved. Lizardo and colleagues (2016) aptly characterize such judgements as impulsive and automatic. Further, intuitive judgements are characterized by their affective nature: they are experienced alongside strong emotions (Shirley & Langan-Fox, 1996; Stanovich & West, 2000). Broadly speaking, scholars have referred to the cognitive processing that produces such intuitive judgements as "system 1" processing, which contrasts with "system 2" processing that is characterized by thoughtful, rational, and intentional deliberation (Kahneman, 2003; Stanovich & West, 2000).

Building on this theoretical framework, I show below how linemen's repeated aesthetic signaling over time fostered the development of expert aesthetics schemas, as evidenced by their adept ability to distinguish seemingly minuscule aesthetic markers. These expert schemas fostered intuitive judgements of work aesthetics, illustrated by their rapid, nonconscious, and emotional (e.g., system 1) reactions—either positive or negative—to the appearance of a completed job. Such intuitive reactions were at the heart of the process by which linemen ultimately experienced meaningfulness.

To start, for linemen, the ability to identify beautiful work aesthetics is something that gets "built into you" as they proffer aesthetic signals in order to avoid criticism: "A lot of guys are really really ruthless with it… [so] it kind of gets built into you after a while. You just don't do anything to get yelled at" (10191). This was further supported by my analysis which revealed that linemen were largely making their work beautiful to avoid criticism in the early stages of their apprenticeship, and later—after enacting such signaling through the course of their apprenticeship—they described doing so because of how beautiful (and ugly) work made them *feel*—a point I return to shortly. Given these differences that varied by career stage instead of by individual participant, my analysis strongly suggests that expert aesthetics schemas are developed as linemen continually enact the standards that are being forced on them by others: "it's kind of been *pushed on me*… [from] the older generation of linemen" (10470, emphasis mine). In short, repeatedly doing the work of aesthetic signaling cultivated expert schemas regarding what makes for beautiful line work.

Linemen's ability to distinguish even the smallest aesthetic details on a pole illustrates these expert schemas. One noted that linemen:

> have the ability to look and see if the job is neatly done… An experienced lineman can look at a job that's been done, and see if it's been done with a lot of real care… The wires

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are shaped just right, the poles are perfectly straight. There's a lot of little things that you can tell... They recognize that… [when] It's a perfect job. (101114)

Further supporting this point, they described—in vivid detail—their ability to evaluate the aesthetic qualities of their own work and their crew members' work, from the way they tighten certain bolts and secure washers, to the way they curve power lines and keep consistency in the "sag" of the power lines between poles. One explained:

> *Just to the untrained eye*, if you look at a pole, you're like, 'yeah, there's a bunch of wires on the pole.' *But to us, you can tell what kind of craftsmanship the person has after they're done with constructing that pole by just looking at it*. Does it look good? Is this done in a particular way? Is the top wire bent, or did they take the time to do it right? (1116, emphasis mine)

Others agreed, noting more generally that, as a lineman, "You can tell if somebody… gave a shit [about] the pole or not" (10121). Linemen's ability to evaluate the work of others who were not even on their crew further illustrates their expert aesthetics schemas:

> I mean, just driving down the road on a normal day, going to the store or something like that, you look up and you see the power lines, you're like, "Oh, wow, that guy did a bad job," or "That guy did good. That looks nice and neat. That's very professionally done." Any other linemen, *as soon as they roll up and take one look at it, they can tell you if they did a good or bad job*. (10127, emphasis mine)

Others agreed, noting they have a keen ability to evaluate line work aesthetics, such as "the way they configure their wiring, Is [there] or kinks or bends in it? Is it nice and smooth? Does it like, have a nice flow to it?... And that's where you could tell, you could tell who takes pride [in their aesthetics]" (10464). This ability to notice every slight detail extended to such equipment such as staples used to secure wire (e.g., "are they straight or are they angled or bent?" [10177]), the "sag" of the wire (e.g., making sure it "flows going down the road and it looks good" [10118]), and even the angles at which cross-arms are affixed to poles (e.g., ensuring "90 degree angles" so that "everything's gonna flow" [10177]). Ultimately, after developing expert aesthetics schemas, linemen have the ability to understand "everything" on a finished job: "You want

everything to be neat, [with a] nice swoop through the wire. No bendy shit. You know,

everything straight and uniformed" (10141, emphasis mine). Such understandings allowed them

to evaluate whether "a cross-arm is *perfectly* leveled" (10177, emphasis mine). Importantly, it

was *doing* the work of aesthetic signaling that fostered this expert understanding of the aesthetics

in the first place: "If you don't do [line work], you're not gonna really see it. [But, linemen] can

definitely tell if something is done neatly or not" (10141).

After building up complex and domain relevant expertise through aesthetic signaling,

linemen began to make intuitive judgements about the aesthetics of their completed jobs. That is,

true to definitions of intuitive judgements (see Dane & Pratt, 2007), linemen made (a)

nonconscious, (b) rapid, and (c) affectively-charged judgements about the aesthetics of a

completed job (i.e., all of the poles built by themselves and the other members of their crew on a

particular job). Regarding the nonconscious nature of these judgements, linemen often did not

even realize they were making them: "We're always, always looking at stuff that people have

done and kind of like nitpicking stuff that you see. *You don't even realize you're doing it*, it's just

a habit. You know?" (10168, emphasis mine). Regarding the rapid and affectively-charged

nature, one explained, "when you… see [ugly] work on a distribution pole [or] on a transmission

line, it jumps out at you like somebody poured cold water down your back. And your first

thought running through your mind is, 'who did that shit?'" (10132). This quote usefully

illustrates both the rapid (e.g., "the first thought running through your mind") as well as the

affective qualities (e.g., "like somebody poured cold water down your back") of these

judgements of the aesthetics of a completed job. Indeed, this idea of having cold water poured

down your back was characteristic of the jarring negative feelings that linemen experienced in

response to ugly line work.

Further, the intuitive nature of these judgements was illustrated by linemen who judged the appearance of the poles quite strongly but were unable to put the specific reasons *why* into words. That is, aligning with research on intuition (Lizardo, 2017), linemen held expert understanding of *what* made for aesthetically pleasing work, but displayed difficulty explaining *why*. When asked why aesthetics are important, one lineman said, "Like in my brain, [pause] I can't do something that looks like dog shit. [pause] I just won't do it. It's like [pause] I can't do that! you know?" (10115). The same was true of judgements of other crew members' work on a particular job. Linemen explained that the aesthetics were "painfully obvious" (10144) to them and that, when it comes to noticing and reacting to the aesthetics of the job, "to me, it's like a no brainer" (10168). Despite being a "no brainer" that, for example, staples should be spaced a certain distance apart or washers should be installed as "squares" and not "diamonds," they were unable to render reasons why this was the case. In spite of this lack of ability to justify *why* certain aesthetic markers were important, linemen made such judgements on a constant basis. As one lineman explained:

> For linemen… you'll never… not notice power line or not notice things are out of place, or, you know, arms that are crooked or risers that are ugly, like, you know, like, it's just, yeah, you'll always notice… [it's] just nonstop. Like, you see everything. And then as you get older, I think you just really know you notice stuff that just looks bad. You're not looking at every single pole just to look at it. [You're looking at], what is going on there? (10162)

This quote usefully illustrates both the constant judgements regarding the appearance of the crew's poles as well as the notion that such intuition becomes more refined "as you get older" and develop the expert schemas necessary to undergird such judgements.

Negative emotional reactions and social criticism of collective aesthetics. The emotional reactions associated with intuitive judgements of work aesthetics were critical in both (a) maintaining the "cycle" of social criticism (when negative) as well as (b) ultimately fostering

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meaningfulness (when positive). This section first addresses the former. Namely, negative intuitive reactions to others' ugly work spur linemen to criticize those who completed it. That is, because of these negative intuitive reactions to ugly work, the criticized come to act as criticizers of others' work. To illustrate these negative intuitive judgements, linemen explained that when a finished job looks "ugly," they notice and feel an instinctive negative reaction. One explained, "there's things like that *that definitely stand out* that when you look up there you go 'Yeah, he didn't care. He just slapped it together'" (10144, emphasis mine). Another highlighted the impulsive or reactionary nature of these negative judgements: "you'll never drive down the street ever again and not notice power lines or not notice things are out of place, or, you know, arms that are crooked or risers that are ugly" (10162). This inability to ignore ugly work further underscores the intuitive nature of these judgements, as do the strong related emotions. For instance, when wires look ugly (e.g., when there are kinks or the flow is uneven), "you say, 'Jesus, these… guys don't know what the fuck they're doing! Look at that. Look at this. Look at that!'" (10117). Linemen seemed to ubiquitously agree that, when it comes to the poles looking clean, "it does matter to me. If I [see] a structure that… I knew looked shitty, *it would bother me*" (10162, emphasis mine).

Intuitive reactions to ugly work in particular highlight a significant tension linemen face. Namely, even if linemen perceive that their own poles are beautiful, the presence of "ugly" poles anywhere on their job foster negative emotional reactions. Indeed, linemen explained that, even when they felt as though they were personally doing aesthetically pleasing work, having others in the crew who didn't do so "sucks the life out of" the work:

> At the same time. There are people that just don't care [about aesthetics]. [They say] "Oh, whatever. I'm getting paid. I know I get paid no matter what." Blah, blah, blah. It sucks. It sucks. Working with people like that. It takes the definitely takes the fun out of being at

work. And it just sucks. It sucks the life out of it. (10174)

Because they work in groups of 3-10 on jobs that involve many poles, aesthetics are not just evaluated individually. Instead, for a job to look aesthetically pleasing, every pole needs to be beautiful. Thus, because they viewed their work outcomes to be collective achievements (e.g., the whole completed job), each individual crew member could seemingly make or break the aesthetics of the job:

> If you got a guy up there half assing something… that reflects on him but it also reflects on the whole crew. His work reflects on everybody *because we're, as a crew, We're a unit*. So yeah… [if his work] doesn't look good… go down to Walmart and be a greeter or something. (10178, emphasis mine)

Another spoke about his negative reactions when, "you look back down, and you see how everything's perfect, and pretty, and everything looks good and looks right, *and then you see somebody's pole over here, it looks all messed up*… They [didn't] take… just a second longer to do it right" (10197, emphasis mine). Because of this more holistic and collective evaluation of their completed jobs, linemen felt negative emotional reactions—such as disgust—at the sight of *any* ugly work on their job: "You'll… look up and [say] like '*Oh, that one's disgusting*.' Some people electrify, not beautify. [So] you know, you can tell someone who put a little effort or someone who just got it done" (10113, emphasis mine). Another explained this tendency as follows:

> It's really brutally terrible… Sometimes, you see a really good looking pole and you're like, "somebody did a nice job with that," or more often than not, because we're type A assholes, we say, "Oh, they shouldn't have done that. That looks like garbage." (1016)

Others similarly noted, "You see it [others' work] and you're like 'That's wrong, that's wrong, that's wrong, that's wrong.' [Linemen] are gonna notice if you don't do things right" (11142). Given their tendency to notice and be disgusted by any ugly work on their job, other crew members' aesthetics were critical for one lineman's own judgements of the work: "if I did a good

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job and then another lineman did a good job and then some other dude didn't really give a shit, you'd definitely notice [and] you don't feel as good about it" (101101).

The importance of these negative intuitive judgements is demonstrated by the notion that linemen would prefer to see a lineman who consistently does ugly work fired than work with him/her again. One expressed that, "I want to surround myself with guys that take pride in their work" (10175). To demonstrate this point another way, linemen explained that one of the *worst* possible traits that another lineman on their crew could have was a lack of pride in the aesthetics of her/his work. One lineman described the worst type of coworkers as follows: "They don't give a fuck about [it], like they have no pride in their work… It's just whatever, somebody that doesn't have pride in their work [aesthetics]" (10124). Another explained that "if the guys I have working around me don't take pride in what they do, I don't need them there" (10175). Another tersely noted that, "if you do shitty [looking] work, you're a shit person in my eyes" (10177). Others said of linemen who produce ugly work: "You know, you just say 'hit the road, dude.' You know, it's just that easy. Because nobody wants to, you know, nobody wants [to get stuck] working with them and [their] bad attitudes. They're infectious... They're a cancer" (10180). Another agreed, saying that "[If] you just want to go out there and just slap it together, I don't want to work with you. I'm gonna go out there every day [and] I'm gonna make it look neat and clean. It's gonna look nice. [If] you just want to go out there and just do it, [then] just don't show up" (10163).

Because removing someone from a crew simply because their work was "ugly" was often not an option, linemen instead harshly criticized those who made ugly work. This establishes a cycle in which the intuitive judgements that stem from criticism avoidance in the first place ultimately motivate linemen to criticize the appearance of others' work (see the cycle on the left

side of Figure 5.1). That is, experiencing criticism of one's *own* aesthetics, and working to avoid it, fostered expert aesthetics schemas. These schemas, in turn, facilitated negative intuitive reactions to *others'* aesthetics that motivated them to criticize the appearance of other linemen's work. In short, the criticized later acted as criticizers of others work. As one lineman noted, when he experiences such reactions to ugly work, he will "pick on" the perpetrator until he or she does the work in an aesthetically pleasing way:

> I pick on the hell out of [him]. I'd ride them, I'd ride them hard until he learned it. That's how it is. You're going to beat into 'em and he's going to learn it [how to make the work look good] or he's not gonna learn it. *So you're going to beat it into him*. If he doesn't like it, he'll break. If he likes it, he takes it and he'll be a better person for it. (10189, emphasis mine)

Others noted that the recipient of the criticism may not actually become a "better person" who continues to do aesthetically pleasing work of their own volition. However, in these cases, they still sought to criticize others' work until they made their poles look clean:

> There's nowhere really in a book anywhere that says, like, you know, "take pride in your work [aesthetics]." And, and to a certain extent, you can't really teach that either. You know, like, some guys just there, *you can't make 'em give a fuck. Right?*... But you can, [say] like, "No, you're going to do it this way. And it's gonna… be of a certain quality. And you're not going to leave until it's that way." You know what I mean? (10186, emphasis mine)

This quote is especially helpful in illuminating *why* linemen conveyed this criticism to others—because the criticizer did not want to see ugly work on the job. They criticized the appearance of others' work not necessarily because they thought they could convince others to change their perspective on aesthetics, but because others' ugly work would make them feel negative emotional reactions to the completed job. Thus, feeling negative emotional reactions to others' ugly work spurs linemen to criticize other linemen's aesthetics, reinforcing the previously described processes. This behavior was motivated by negative intuitive reactions to the

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appearance of ugly work that impeded the criticizers' own ability to feel good about the collective finished job.

Beautiful Work Aesthetics: Intuitively Felt Pride and Experiences of Meaningfulness

The previous section highlights the negative intuitive reactions linemen experience toward work aesthetics and their effects. However, this is but half of the story. When linemen's intuitive reactions to the appearance of a job were positive, they instead felt a deep sense of pride in their work which bolstered the meaningfulness of their work. Because meaningfulness insecurity is an emotional barrier to meaningfulness, this positive emotional experience of pride in their crew's completed work was an apt antidote. This is because these moments of intuitively felt pride in their work served as "transcendent moments in time" (Bailey & Madden, 2017: 15) in which they felt a deep sense of meaningfulness that overrode their meaningfulness insecurity. That is, intuitively feeling pride in their work supplanted feelings of uncertainty or doubt about the meaningfulness of the job and, albeit temporarily, made the work feel meaningful.

Lazarus (1991) explains that pride is a positive emotion resulting from accomplishing a highly valued goal and attributing the accomplishment of that goal to the self. As this definition suggests, pride is "positively valenced" (Smith-Crowe & Warren, 2014) and provides "a sense of pleasure" (Jones, 2010: 859). In addition, pride is closely tied to the notion of one's self-esteem, such that feeling proud of one's accomplishments relates very closely to one's self-perceptions more generally (Brown & Marshall, 2001). It is perhaps this self-directed nature that makes pride most distinct from other positive emotions (Staw, Sutton, & Pelled, 1994; Tracy & Robins, 2004). For instance, Brown and Marshall (2001) explain that whereas plenty of stimuli can make people happy, only those stimuli that are attributed to accomplishments are likely to elicit pride (see also Tracy & Robins, 2007; Weiner, 1986). Having briefly defined the emotion of pride, I

now turn to how intuitively feeling pride in the appearance of a completed job helped foster

moments in which the work was experienced as meaningful (see the shaded arrow in Figure 5.1).

When linemen intuitively judge a completed job to be "beautiful" or "clean," they feel a

sense of pride in their work. One noted that, after they "learn" how to construct a beautiful pole

(via aesthetic repeated signaling over time), doing so "feels good": "And… after a while, when

you learn how to do it right… you take some pride in it. It's like, it just feels good" (10180). This

quote is particularly helpful in illuminating both (a) the importance of gaining expertise

necessary to make an intuitive judgement about the work aesthetics, and (b) the actual feeling of

pride that follows such a judgement. Others noted that this is why others "pound that [pride] into

your head" (10180)—because "You want it to look good, and you want to walk away from it and

look at it and [feel] proud of it" (10168).

As with negative intuitive reactions, individual feelings of pride followed not only

judgements that one's own poles looked good, but that the crew—collectively—produced a

beautiful job (i.e., every pole they built/repaired). One lineman described the experience of

reflecting on a job on which everyone's work looks pleasing: "when you pull down at the end of

the day, and you hop out of the bucket, and then you turn around and look up and what [was]

built, and… everything's nice and uniform, and it looks good. It… definitely puts a lot of pride in

you" (10168). When everyone on the crew produces aesthetically pleasing work, "there's a lot of

pride around, and there's… pretty much no tolerance for, for shoddy craftsmanship" (10171).

Although often unable to explain exactly *why* the beautiful work makes them feel pride, they felt

such pride "in the air" nonetheless: "It's a great feeling... There's pride in the air for sure"

(10166).

The pride linemen feel as a result of their intuitive assessments of beautiful jobs provides a sense that their work is meaningful. One lineman explained, "When it's finished and, you know, it's done, and it looks good… You just look at it, [pause] it's pretty… The average person [might] go, 'Oh it's a power line. Big deal.' you know, but to us, it's something different" (10181). Others similarly explained these moments in which their pride makes them *feel* like their work is meaningful—when they "take a step back and look at everything you just did and you're like, 'wow… this whole line… looks great' (10127). In these moments of intuitively felt pride, linemen experience a sense of meaningfulness or "bliss":

> Line work is my bliss. I tell people that and they roll their eyes. They can't really believe I mean it because that's kind of a very powerful statement. But it is, it's my bliss... I love what I do. I love… the reward—financial and emotional—that I get from it. (10117)

Another lineman illustrated this "emotional reward" by explaining that after he and his crew complete an aesthetically pleasing job, "It looks fucking beautiful, and you're just like, 'goddamn. That's awesome'" (10153). Such moments made line work feel incredibly meaningful, as evidenced by one lineman who noted that not even winning the lottery would deter him from continuing in this type of work: "If we won the lotto tomorrow, I wouldn't stop building power lines, 'cause… you know, I take a lot of pride in it" (10138).

The emotional challenges surfaced by a lack of affirmation of the importance of linemen's work were superseded in these moments of felt pride. One explained, "Basically, it's all about pride" (10351). Another noted, "it looks really neat. Like, it looks clean… It's done. And then you have that pride" (10464). This produces the "best feeling ever" (10351)—an idea quite indicative of work meaningfulness. Indeed, such moments made the work—although invisible and rarely recognized—worth it: "the pride… I think is what drives it all" (10171).

Imagined Recognition and Reinforcement of Pride in Work Aesthetics

Thus far, I have described how the intuitive experience of pride overrides the negative emotional experience of meaningfulness insecurity and fosters meaningfulness. Although this connection was quite salient in my analysis, it is also important to address one additional characteristic of meaningfulness insecurity—its social underpinnings. Indeed, meaningfulness insecurity was cultivated by a lack of social affirmation of linemen's strongly held beliefs of the significance of their work. Bridging both the social origins of this problem and the importance of aesthetics more broadly in alleviating it, my analysis reveals that affirmation plays an important role in reinforcing the pride linemen feel in their beautiful completed work. Indeed, even when intuitive judgements of a beautiful job foster pride, linemen still desired affirmation of their work aesthetics: "But I do need somebody to acknowledge, 'hey, you know, nice job'" (10465). Others noted that, "I really want people to recognize that when I get done [with] the job, it's going to be done right and it's going to look right" (10123) and that, "Every day, you always want people to recognize your quality work" (10150). However, such social recognition is rarely, if ever, received directly. This begs two interrelated questions. First, from whom might such recognition come? Second, how might such recognition be conveyed or received?

As a preview of the next sections, the perceived exclusivity of line work (as explained in Chapter 4) has a narrowing effect on the potential pool of individuals who can provide recognition for linemen's aesthetics. Thus, their perceived exclusivity creates a sort of dependency on a small group of people who can provide relevant recognition—only other linemen. Second, given the norms of social criticism in this largely masculine and blue-collar work culture (see Bourassa & Ashforth, 1998; Haas, 1972), linemen rarely receive positive

feedback about their work aesthetics. Instead, they perceive what I call "imagined recognition" in two distinct forms that ultimately reinforces pride in their work aesthetics.

Perceived exclusivity and narrowing sources of recognition. Continuing a thread from the previous chapter, linemen desire social recognition for their work. Whereas their general desire for recognition was discussed in-depth in the previous chapter, it is worth reiterating here that a dearth of affirmation acted as the mechanism that brought about feelings of meaningfulness insecurity in the first place. However, given both their perceived exclusivity as well as invisibility more generally, they believed that only other linemen were capable of providing the recognition they deserved for their beautiful work. One noted, "Generally as linemen we always try to impress each other… recognition from each other is definitely a big thing. That's within our community" (10161).

Indeed, when it came to the aesthetics of their work, linemen perceive that the general public does not have the ability to differentiate beautiful work from ugly work like linemen do: "The public—it's going to look good to them no matter what. They don't know" (10124). When discussing recognition for beautiful work, another said, "Well, you want to put out a good product… Like [will] a lineman see that I pressed a good dead end? …Yeah. But I don't think the general public knows anything about what goes on up there, so I mean, it doesn't really matter what [they think]…" about the aesthetics of the work (10119). Others agreed, noting that when it comes to the general public:

> I don't think most people really recognize what they're looking at. I drive by a pole and I look up and I go, "Oh wow, somebody did a nice job" or "Oh wow, somebody did a really crappy job of that. It looks like crap." But the general person doesn't drive by and go, "Oh wow, that cross-arm is straight. That denting looks nice. The sag in the wires, the cans [are] hung perfect[ly]. The taps look good." Do you know what I mean? (10118)

These examples of small aesthetic markers (e.g., denting, sag in the wires, taps, etc…) highlighted how beyond the general invisibility of work that was described in the previous chapter, linemen specifically believed that the general public lacked the ability to evaluate whether their work was beautiful or ugly: "as far as the general public… as far as knowing [whether] it's off or wrong or something's messed up [on a pole], they really ain't going to pick it up like somebody else in the trade" (10135).

Looking beyond their customers and beneficiaries, not even close friends or family members were seen as relevant sources of recognition for their beautiful work. Indeed, despite some literature suggesting that significant non-work relationships can serve as sources of work-related social affirmation (e.g., Jiang & Wrzesniewski, 2021), this was not the case for linemen. Instead, they explained that their romantic partners and families were not knowledgeable enough about the work to have valid opinions about their work aesthetics. One lineman noted that when he would talk about his work, "my wife would yell at me and she's like, 'I don't even know what I'm looking at. So you don't need to [say any more], you can stop at any time.' … She'll laugh. She just will be like, 'stop'" (10464). Another noted that his girlfriend responded similarly: "my girlfriend will be with me and I'll talk about [my work], and she will, she'll have no idea what I'm even talking about" (10168). Even when significant others (e.g., friends or romantic partners) tried to provide positive feedback about their work, linemen perceived that the lack of knowledge of the work made the positive feedback less relevant: "there's lineman appreciation day, and our family and friends will text us and be like, 'happy linemen day' or whatever [pause]. But nobody really knows" (10149). Others agreed, noting that "I know that even my friends, you know, they don't… understand what we do, the things we deal with, you know, all of it" (10346).

Given both the invisible nature of their work more broadly and the perception that their work is so exclusive that not even their significant non-work friends and family could evaluate the appearance of their work, linemen perceived that only other linemen's opinions mattered: "It's kind of thankless job now, but we have each other. We have coworkers" (10136). Indeed, linemen perceived the recognition they received from their coworkers about their work to be deeply important because *only* those coworkers knew enough about the work to provide a valid opinion of it. One noted, "it's your peers, what they think about things is what matters… It's those guys [your coworkers]… They're the only people qualified to know if you did a good job or not" (10124). Another explained, "you take pride in your craft because as linemen, we're the only ones that know what our craft looks like. The general public looks up and they see wires and poles. That's it" (101104). Contrasting with non-linemen (e.g., significant others or the general public) who "wouldn't have a second thought looking at the power lines," linemen perceived that other linemen can "recognize just about anything" (10172) of importance on a pole—including all aesthetic markers. One explained that, "We want to make it look good. But we're basically only doing that for ourselves, because like I said… Nobody on the street looks at a pole says 'Oh, man, that looks nice.' So it's just basically, basically for us who are in the trade" (10179). This is why, for linemen, it is "more important for those who are actually in the trade [to have…] a good perception of your work" (10119). In sum, given the perceived exclusivity of their trade, linemen were dependent on other linemen as the only relevant source of recognition for their beautiful work.

Imagined recognition and perceived affirmation in invisible work. Having addressed the source of recognition for beautiful work, this section explains its nature. Namely, linemen experienced "imagined recognition" in the form of stayed criticism and presumed praise. Despite

nearly constant co-presence with other linemen, this imagined recognition did not stem from actual interactions with them. However, given their invisible work, these "invisible" types of recognition nonetheless fostered perceived affirmation—reinforcing the pride linemen felt in their completed work and ultimately contributing to their sense of meaningfulness.

The first type of imagined recognition linemen perceive is what I call "stayed criticism." As the name implies, linemen perceive that the (temporary) lack of criticism from other crew members about the appearance of their work on a particular job to be a notable indicator about the appearance of their work. This stayed criticism signifies that their work is aesthetically pleasing. This was important, as linemen perceive that outright praise for aesthetically pleasing work is not likely to come. For instance, one shared that he tries to "do your best job now… [because] nobody… comes by and says, 'That's a nice job up there.' They're not going to tell you that. They're not going to say that to you" (10148). Another similarly noted, "Everybody will speak up when any little thing is wrong [but] you do not get a pat on your back for doing your job out here. Nobody says, good job just for doing your job [well]" (101102). Because such direct compliments of one's aesthetics were unlikely, and because criticism was so rampant, the lack of criticism seemed sufficient to provide affirmation that their work was aesthetically pleasing. As one noted, escaping criticism was the goal—not necessarily earning praise: "You don't want some [lineman looking at] a pole you worked on and go[ing], 'Jesus, who did that? That is just idiotic... who the hell put this together?'" (10117). Another lineman illustrated this quite clearly, when he explained "I make sure that, you know, *there's nothing that somebody can come up and nitpick*" (10168, emphasis mine). Thus, despite a dearth of compliments or praise for beautiful work, linemen perceived the absence of criticism as affirmation that their work was indeed beautiful.

The second type of imagined recognition linemen perceive is what I call "presumed praise." As with stayed criticism, this imagined recognition did not require real interactions with other linemen. Instead, linemen noted that—when they do particularly beautiful work—they feel affirmed by a belief that an unknown lineman may see the work in the future, be impressed by it, and express admiration of how the work looks. For instance, one explained that after you leave a job, "you want some other linemen to look at it and kind of either begrudgingly or openly say, 'Yeah, that looks good. That's a good job'" (10117), and that "somewhere out there, there's going to be a lineman driving on the road, looking at a pole line, looking at jumpers and whatever else, and he's going to say, 'man, that looks pretty good'" (101101). Another explained how he perceived recognition for a completed job because he believed its location on a busy road meant that other linemen would drive by in the future and think the work looks good: "and it's right over like a major intersection, to where any lineman going to any storm on the Ohio Turnpike is going to see that and… [say] 'it looks nice. It looks neat. It's not it's not just thrown together'" (10464). Others agreed, saying things like, "you basically you want the reaction… when [they're] driving down the road, somebody sees a pole you did [and] they say, 'wow, that looks good' you know?" (10168), and "every lineman that drives by a structure I dead ended and… see[s] the jumpers I built. It makes a difference. [They'll say], 'Hey, that guy knew what he was doing'" (101102).

Stayed criticism and presumed praise gave linemen a sense of perceived affirmation of their craftsmanship that reinforced the pride they felt in the appearance of their work. One lineman explained how avoiding criticism from other linemen was intimately connected to the pride that he felt about his completed work:

> But I'll tell you, for other linemen, yes, it's important. It's important for me to know that I built a quality product. Did I tell you, every lineman that you'll ever talk to will always do

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free line inspections? … they're looking at it to see if there's anything stupid up there. [They'll say] "What the hell was that guy thinking? What kind of shit is that? Who the fuck would do that?" So yeah… *to know that none of my work will ever be responded to like that from another lineman… I'll be proud of saying that I did that…* I [will] have a sense of pride in what I do. (10116, emphasis mine).

The same is true of presumed praise. That is, imagining that unknown future linemen will express their admiration of their work further bolsters the pride that linemen feel after completing a job:

> But, you know, if you if you build a pole or transfer pole or do something in an area where a lot of other linemen will drive through, you know, [you're] making sure everything's everything looks good. *That's, you know, and then all the linemen [will] talk about, you know, how good the job looks… There's a lot of pride there.* (10171, emphasis mine)

Another lineman explained this presumed praise—and how it reinforces his pride in his work—this way:

> So when you finish a job, you're going to take as much pride in… just… knowing that there are other people just like you that are going to drop by and see this next week, next year, [or] five years from now, and they're going to look at it, and they're going to—if they're worth anything in the trade—they're going to know whether what you did was correct... (10133)

Taken together, stayed criticism and presumed praise helped to overcome the appreciation deficiency that resulted from the recognition gap in their invisible work. Perceived affirmation thus reinforced linemen's sense of pride, further bolstering the meaningfulness they felt in their work.

Illustrating the Model: The Case of "Square" and "Diamond" Washers

Before concluding these findings, this final section will illustrate this model (see Figure 5.1) via a description of one particular case that elucidates the entire model well. The aim of this section is thus to show how the model plays out with the clarity afforded by focusing on only one example. The example pertains to how linemen install washers—small metal squares with round

holes in their centers that help secure bolts into place. These are used as linemen install cross

arms or other equipment on poles. They are quite basic and are used on almost all jobs. One

lineman described them as follows: "there is a really innocuous square piece of metal used as a

washer on bolts that hold hardware to wooden poles" (10187). He continued:

> I want you to pay attention to their geometric orientation on the pole because they're [just] a washer. But east to west, north to south, and for multiple generations, if you look at photographs of old historic lines, you'll see this, you'll see this to hold true. Those washers are oriented in a manner that's referred to as square. There's even industry parlance or lineman vernacular for this is called "squaring your washers." *And by keeping your washers square, [by] squaring your washers, it's meant to say, being a good craftsman,* being diligent, professional, being competent. (10187, emphasis mine)

As this lineman illustrates, squaring washers signifies "being a good craftsman" and, as such, it

"it just has a tendency to kind of become a self-fulfilling cultural value within the work group"

(10187). As before, it is important to note here that the orientation of the washers was not

important due to any effects on the functioning of the pole itself. This same lineman continued:

> There is no square washer written policy in line work anywhere. There's no square washer committee. Instead, what there is, is a remarkably strong cultural norm, that when somebody comes into the industry as a groundman or young apprentice, they're told "Look, the work we do is very important, we need to be very thorough, we need to be craftsmen... So be very proud of the work you do. And even take the time to square a washer." *Which, [it] requires additional effort to get that washer square, but it's purely aesthetic. Power lines do not fail because washers are not squared. The square washer still works, whether it's oriented in a diamond orientation or square orientation.* (10187, emphasis mine)

Other linemen agreed with this assessment, noting, "that's why… you square your washers… in

the big scheme of things is it really that big of a fucking deal? No" (10184). Yet, because they

wanted to "be proud of the work [they] do" (10187) as a crew, they placed a high value on

squaring their washers.

Not only do linemen notice these washers, they are also quick to criticize other crew

members who do not "square" them (i.e., install them parallel to the ground). The most egregious

failure in this task was when the washers were installed 45 degrees off, with the pointed corners facing upwards and downwards, in an orientation they referred to as "diamonds." As one lineman explained, "if I'm on the ground, and there's another lineman or apprentice up in the air, and they diamond off a washer, I'm going to say, 'Hey, are you going to fix that?'" (10351). Others explained how they would mock those who installed crooked washers, saying things like "We make fun of people that leave crooked washers" (11299), and that when others install crooked washers, they will "pat them on the back and say, [in a demeaning tone] 'hey, that's a little ugly. Can you clean that up?'" (10167). Another similarly explained:

> Like, if the washer wasn't squared. I know myself, I've done it to others… it really does happen out there... you'll yell down to the guy or whoever installed that bolt, washer, etc. and say "Oh, don't worry. We'll fix it. We'll make it right. You can just play that lousy mentality. We'll get it." Then you shame him... (10156)

Others similarly seek to "shame" crew members by saying things like, "Clearly [you] figured out how to how to do it wrong. Now get up there and do it right. Change that" (10177). They also say things like, "What F word are you doing? Do you not give a shit about this trade? Make it look good! Square up that washer!" (10195).

Given their desire to avoid this social criticism, linemen engaged in aesthetic signaling by "squaring up" their washers for others to see: "We always make sure the washers are square… So I mean, there's certain things that we do to try to make things aesthetic… and make things look nice" (10470). At least initially, this was done because "you want to produce quality work, *and look good [to] your buddies*" (10168, emphasis mine). One explained that the importance of squaring washers was discussed since the "first day" of his lineman training:

> The way I was trained since the first day I was, you know, I was trained on how to climb, and how to put up a crossbar… [and] I was always told to have pride in your work. That means you don't you don't put up a cross arm and have a diamond… washer, you know, [you] square [your] washers. (10351)

Quite tellingly, another noted that squaring washers is important because it makes you "look good" to others: "Things like that. They're small. But *yeah, it makes you look good*" (10179, emphasis mine).

Engaging in this aesthetic signaling repeatedly over time fostered the development of expert aesthetics schemas regarding washer orientation and placement. This, in turn, fostered intuitive judgements of the appearance of washers on their job site. Lineman explained that they quickly notice even small issues with washers: "I mean, honestly, if you just look at it… are things level, are all the washers square on the arm, you know, or are they crooked like look like diamonds instead of squares?" (10190). Another noted that he always looks to evaluate, "Is your washer square or is it a diamond?" (10177). This ability to evaluate washers was demonstrated by their reactions to imperfect washers both on and off their own job sites: "More often than not, if I'm driving, or my girlfriend's driving, you know, you [are] sitting at a red light, I'll glance up and look at the junction pole on the corner of the street and say… 'that washer, don't look too good'" (10166).

Expert aesthetics schemas fostered intuitive reactions to washers that linemen seemingly could not ignore. One explained, "The washer *has* to be square…" (10156, emphasis mine). When they judged washers to be installed imperfectly, this resulted in strong negative emotional reactions. Fieldnotes from my observations revealed this point quite clearly. For instance, while observing a transmission crew installing over a mile of new lines, without prompting, one lineman initiated the following exchange with me:

> *Lineman*: "See that washer?" [Points to crooked washer on a cross-arm approximately 50 feet off the ground][10]
> *Lineman*: "That is going to drive me crazy"
> *Researcher*: "Why is that?"

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[10] See appendix for photo of the washer this lineman pointed out in this exchange.

Lineman: "The person who did it just didn't care about it"

Thus, others leaving diamond washers was not something linemen could easily ignore. Instead, diamond washers "drove them crazy." This illustrates the nonconscious, rapid, and affectively charged judgements that follow from the expert aesthetics schemas they develop regarding washers (see Figure 5.1). Other linemen seemed to ubiquitously agree. One noted, "I can't believe that they would leave something like that" and attributed non-squared washers to the notion that those who installed them "have a poor attitude. Nobody really gives a shit" (10123). Such negative emotional reactions motivated criticism of those crew members who failed to square their washers. That is, when linemen feel this negative emotional reaction: "You come out and pretty much you know, tell them 'what are you, an effing idiot?'" (10167).

Conversely, when they judged washers to be installed in an aesthetically pleasing way, they began to actually feel pride in seeing a finished job with squared washers. One explained, "We square up all our washers. We do it so it looks good. And you take pride in [that]" (10351). Others agreed, noting that, "I'll spend an extra 30 minutes doing them [the washers] because *I like when they look pretty, it looks cool to me,* you know. And like it becomes like, just a matter [of] a little bit of pride" (10186, emphasis mine). As these examples begin to hint, such experiences of pride make the work feel more meaningful. Indeed, this pride bolstered their meaningfulness, which was a deeply satisfying experience. One lineman noted, "It gives me pride… [and] I get satisfaction out of that" (10465). Another lineman explained this feeling of pride in squaring his own washers quite vividly:

> The feeling to me is, it's awesome. You have more pride in your work. And that's what you want. You want pride. We want to feel accomplished. So I mean, sometimes you get in a bind where you just work your ass off on top of that pole and you see crooked washers, and you're like "son of a bitch," … [I] Boom over, all angry, and fix it and boom down all angry and then get out of the bucket and like *you're just happy again*. You're like, "Oh Thank God I fixed that because it made it look a lot better." (10195,

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emphasis mine)

As previously noted, such experiences of pride required not only that one's own washers were squared, but that the entire completed job consisted of square washers. One explained, "We even square up our washers so that they're flush and level… I'm big on that. I do that all the time… It makes it fun almost to make it look good. Then at the end of a job, you can look back and go, 'Oh, yeah, *we pulled that one. We nailed that one. That looks good*'" (10118, emphasis mine).[11] The use of the word "we" highlights the importance of everyone on the crew squaring washers in order for the entire job to look aesthetically pleasing.

Finally, given the affirmation deficiency in their invisible work, linemen still desired some affirmation on issues as seemingly minor as their washers. Thus, imagined recognition was important for bolstering the pride they felt in a completed job with square washers. Linemen found that when they squared their washers and made them look "pretty," others would talk about the job as a whole (e.g., all of the finished poles) in positive terms and would not criticize their washers: "and then all the linemen talk about, you know, how good the [whole] job looks" (10171). Another noted that, by squaring your washers, your work blends in with others and no one will call you out: "You want to have a pole look not noticeable, pretty much—just like just like every other pole" because this helps avoid getting "put through the ringer" (10195). Thus, stayed criticism played an important role in linemen's perceptions that their work was aesthetically pleasing.

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[11] It is important to note that evaluating washer aesthetics was not as simple as it may seem. For instance, there were different kinds of washers with different standards for what was "beautiful" or not. As but one example, "There's different kinds of square washers. There's obviously flat [ones]… But then they have some half rounds that are curved. Because the pole is curved, right? So… they snug up to the pole a little bit better… Because there's certain applications where you don't need a curved washer… [and] you just use a regular flat" (10179). Thus, the expert ability to understand the aesthetics of washers was seemingly quite unique to linemen.

The presumed praise of other linemen also played a role in bolstering the pride they felt in their work. One noted that when he makes the work look neat, he said that he "knows" other linemen will compliment the work in the future:

> So we finished up today actually, and everything looks good. We had to pull in three new phases, and like I drive I just drove away. [Now] I'm like, wow... everything looks good. I hope when [a] lineman drives through… they will drive through and say, "Wow, you guys did a great job." *When they say that—and I'm sure they will—that means a lot*. It's like "hell yeah." You feel accomplished. (10195, emphasis mine)

As a final illustration of this presumed praise, one lineman recalled the following instance at work:

> I was doing my work. And I had tightened up a bolt. And, you know, I'm sitting there looking at everything… *I had squared it up a little bit to make it look nice*… If it was off a little bit… nobody would ever notice it driving by on an interstate at, you know, 75 miles an hour… [but] *When somebody drives by that's a lineman, they'll see that and go "yeah that looks good."* (10178, emphasis mine)

Imagining other linemen admiring and praising their square washers in this way allowed linemen to perceive affirmation of their efforts and feel a bolstered sense of pride in their work aesthetics.

In conclusion, linemen faced several challenges to their ability to experience their work as personally meaningful. At the broadest scale, both the product they provided and they labor they undertook to do so were invisible. This resulted in a lack of recognition. Yet, given the perceived significance of their work (that mirrors the occupation's accounts), they believed that they deserved recognition. This "recognition gap" produced a deficiency of affirmation of their strongly held beliefs—ultimately fostering meaningfulness insecurity. This barrier to meaningfulness was overcome in moments in which linemen experienced feelings of pride in the successful enactment of strongly valued expertise pertaining to craftsmanship and aesthetics. Contrary to extant perspectives on pride, these positive emotional experiences were fostered by intuitive judgements rooted in practices meant to simply avoid criticism from others. Moreover,

such intuitive judgements, when negative, motivated the criticized to act as criticizers themselves—ultimately creating a reinforcing cycle. Finally, the pride that fostered these experiences of meaningfulness were bolstered by perceived affirmation rooted in stayed criticism and the presumed praise of unknown linemen. Both these intuitive judgements and imagined recognition cultivated moments that filled linemen with a sense of pride and meaningfulness—despite their enduring invisibility. This was summed up well by one linemen who rather woefully said, "The firemen, the police, they get they get all the accolades. They get all the news cameras. We don't get anything... We do our work. Nobody pays attention to us. [So] make it look good… we want to do it right… [so] We can drive by in 10 years and say, "that pole still looks good" (10179).

CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY MODEL AND IMPLICATIONS

This empirical study of meaningfulness in an invisible occupation provides unique theoretical insights into the processes by which work is experienced as meaningful. It does so by highlighting how meaningfulness can be fostered through intuitive (i.e., rapid, nonconscious, and affectively-charged) processes. This research also explains the social underpinnings of both the barriers to meaningfulness (i.e., affirmation deficiency and meaningfulness insecurity) as well as a path to overcoming these barriers (i.e., imagined recognition). Given the primarily individual and cognitive focus of extant perspectives (see Rosso et al., 2010), such insights seem uniquely poised to re-shape our understandings of how workers find and feel meaningfulness. Thus, having explained how linemen intuitively experience pride in their work through a cycle of enforcement of occupationally valued expertise and the internalization of expert schemas, this section will advance and elaborate a theoretical model of these dynamics. Figure 6.1 illustrates this theoretical model.

FIGURE 6.1 ABOUT HERE

Intuitive Judgements, Emotions, and Meaningfulness

To start, the dominant perspectives on meaningful work largely assume meaningfulness to be driven by conscious or deliberate evaluations of features of one's work. This may involve evaluating the degree to which one's work aligns with one's calling (Berg, Grant, et al., 2010; Bloom et al., 2021; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Schabram & Maitlis, 2017) or purpose (e.g., Carton, 2018; Jiang, 2021; Pratt & Hedden, 2023). Or, it may involve evaluating the degree to which one's work does something important like help other people (e.g., Allan, 2017; Allan et al., 2018; Grant, 2008). Contrasting with these perspectives, my research shows that pride in one's work—which fosters experiences of meaningfulness—is not always based in such

thoughtful or reflective evaluations. Instead, such pride is experienced intuitively. In short, stemming from expert schemas in relevant work domains, pride is experienced via nonconscious judgements of a job well done.

Psychologists have long been exploring the "dual systems" of individual cognition, broadly concluding that much of human decision making is driven by intuitive "system 1" judgements—which are highly emotional—instead of by deliberate and reflective "system 2" judgements (Evans, 2003; Kahneman, 2003; Stanovich & West, 2000). More recently, organizational scholars have theorized about the outcomes of such intuitive decisions for work and organizations (see Dane & Pratt, 2007). Moving beyond the extant focus on decision making, my research shows how such intuition can drive other important outcomes—namely meaningful work. That is, the positive affect (i.e., pride) associated with an intuitive judgement of a job well done cultivates a sense of meaningfulness. This insight—that meaningfulness follows nonconscious judgements of one's work—holds significant theoretical implications for the study of meaningful work (see the central shaded box in Figure 6.1).

As noted, research on meaningful work largely assumes meaningfulness to follow a conscious or deliberate evaluation of features of one's work. For instance, Schabram and Maitlis, (2017: 596) highlight how "reflective" sensemaking was critical for animal shelter workers' experiences of meaningfulness in taxing work environments. Additionally, Carton (2018) illustrates how a rich sense of how one's work contributes to their organization's purpose makes their work more meaningful. Taking a job design perspective, Allan (2017) argues that a clear understanding of how one's work impacts others (i.e., task significance) is a strong predictor of meaningfulness. Also, Fetzer, Harrison, and Rouse (2023) emphasize the meaningfulness that follows from retroactively crafting career narratives. Each of these illustrative examples

highlights deliberative (e.g., system 2) processes by which individuals thoughtfully evaluate features of their work and come to find it meaningful (or not). As my research shows, assuming meaningfulness to *require* such deliberative reflection could be problematic. At minimum, such an assumption could lead to inefficient or even counter-productive solutions aimed at making work more meaningful. Indeed, acknowledging the invisibility of their products and labor, the occupation of linemen more broadly touted the importance of their work for society. In light of this messaging, linemen could thoughtfully rationalize why their work was making an important impact on others. Yet, meaningfulness remained elusive. Even more provocatively, my analysis suggests that such a robust understanding of the significance of work can even be counterproductive. It was these thoughtful system 2 understandings of the importance of their work that fostered a sense that recognition was deserved. The lack of such recognition ultimately fostered a "recognition gap" that made linemen feel uncertainty or doubt about the meaningfulness of their work (i.e., meaningfulness insecurity).

Beyond invisible work contexts, this finding should shift scholars' perceptions of how meaningfulness is achieved by orienting them toward the nonconscious and intuitive pathway(s) to meaningfulness. This has implications for both *what* scholars of meaningfulness study and *how* they do so. Regarding the former, this work should orient future research to the emotions that underpin meaningfulness. Given the affective nature of intuitive judgements, emotions played a key role in how linemen experienced meaningfulness. Although scholars have long assumed that meaningfulness includes a positive emotional experience, emotions have largely remained in the background of research on meaningfulness (Rosso et al., 2010; cf. Lepisto, 2022). Because intuitively felt pride provided a main pathway to meaningfulness for the linemen

in my study, future work should remain sensitized to the importance of emotions in these processes.

Regarding the emotion of pride specifically, my study is, to my knowledge, the first to empirically link pride with meaningfulness. In Carton's (2018: 346) study of NASA's mission to land a man on the moon, he fleetingly suggests that the emotion of pride is "an affective indicator of meaningfulness." My work builds on this assertion by not only illustrating this link but also showing *how* intuitive feelings of pride are elicited. Although pride is most commonly studied in relation to workers' identification with their organizations or occupations (Angle & Perry, 1981; Clark, Gioia, Ketchen, & Thomas, 2010; Hall, Schneider, & Nygren, 1970; Lee, 1971; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986; Reay, Goodrick, Waldorff, & Casebeer, 2017), my research elucidates a new theoretical direction for studying pride in and at work. Thus, future research on pride and meaningfulness seems like a fruitful way to advance our understanding of the emotional side of meaningful work.

My research should also point future work to the *intuitive* nature of such emotions. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge that workers' meaningfulness may be shaped by affectively driven "impulses" (Lizardo et al., 2016) rather than thoughtful reflection. Given what we know about how cognitive schemas facilitate such impulses (Dane & Pratt, 2007), deeply ingrained and taken-for-granted ideals regarding work may play an outsized role in shaping workers' intuitive experiences of meaningfulness. This echoes insights from a small body of work in sociology which argues that researchers should pay closer attention to how intuition affects individuals' interpretation and enactment of culture (see DiMaggio, 1997; Lizardo et al., 2016; Vaisey, 2009). For instance, building on dual systems theories of cognition, Lizardo (2017) theorizes that culture can be interpreted and enacted in two distinct forms, which he calls

declarative (e.g., system 2) and nondeclarative (e.g., system 1). Whereas declarative aspects of culture are internalized through language (e.g., narratives), nondeclarative aspects are internalized through enactment. Nondeclarative, or intuitive cultural schemas are embedded as the "know how" of a certain domain, and—given that they are learned by *doing*—they are often difficult to put into words. Using this vocabulary, my research not only shows that linemen internalize nondeclarative cultural values regarding how to do their work (e.g., making it aesthetically pleasing), but also that the successful enactment of such values produces a sense of meaningfulness. Put more simply, learning a collective work-related value by repeatedly *doing* it fosters nonconscious assessments of the completed work that—when positive—foster meaningfulness. My research thus expands the theoretical insights of this small body of sociological work by empirically showing how such nondeclarative aspects of culture are internalized and by theorizing outcomes of such processes.

It is also important to note here that my analysis suggests intuitively felt pride fosters experiences of meaningfulness despite meaningfulness insecurity. That is, as I argued in the previous chapter, this pride *overrides* meaningfulness insecurity, albeit not permanently. Given my data and the prevailing literature that understands emotions to be "discrete and intense but short-lived experiences" in response to particular stimuli (Elfenbein, 2007: 317), this conceptualization of pride overcoming meaningfulness insecurity and fostering meaningfulness seemed most apt. Yet, it remains possible that a future research on emotions and meaningfulness will find slightly different configurations of these experiences. For instance, might meaningfulness insecurity and pride (or other positive emotions) coexist to different degrees, only occasionally "tipping the scales" toward positivity in certain moments? Exploring such

emotional ambivalence (see Rothman, Pratt, Rees, & Vogus, 2017; Rothman & Wiesenfeld, 2007) in relation to meaningful work seems to be fertile ground for future research.

Regarding *how* such future research on meaningfulness should proceed, this study should, at minimum, orient future work to the possibility that research participants may find meaningfulness in ways they cannot fully explain. Indeed, a prominent feature of intuitive judgements is that they do not require an ability to fully explain why they were made. Sometimes, such reasons are even difficult to identify altogether (Lizardo, 2017; Vaisey, 2009). Thus, it remains possible that data collection techniques focused on participants' detailed understandings of their organization's purpose or how their job influences others may privilege "system 2" pathways to meaningfulness—potentially ignoring important alternatives. Notably, this point is not meant to disparage existing theoretical lenses on meaningfulness, but rather to push research beyond assuming these highly "conscious" pathways are the only ones, or are the only ones worth studying.

Future research on the relationship between conscious and nonconscious paths to meaningfulness seems particularly promising. For instance, might consciously crafting and internalizing a career narrative (e.g., Fetzer et al., 2023) foster nonconscious experiences of meaningfulness when later enacting that narrative at work? Or, might repeated nonconscious experiences of meaningfulness eventually prompt a worker to consciously decide that a particular part of their work constitutes their "calling" (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Dobrow, 2013; Schabram et al., 2022)? Examining these potential connections, and others like them, seems like a fruitful way to advance our understanding of meaningful work.

Recognition, Imagination, and Invisible Work

This research also extends existing conceptualizations of social recognition and its role in meaningfulness, with particularly relevant implications for invisible work. To start, although extant research has hinted that work-related recognition from others can help bolster a sense of meaningfulness (e.g., Florian et al., 2019; Grant, 2008; Vough et al., 2013), my research illuminates two important implications regarding these process. First, it shows how beliefs about deserving recognition for one's work interact with recognition (or lack thereof) with adverse consequences. Second, it also shows that recognition in invisible work may come in starkly different forms than previously realized—as will be explained in the following section.

Regarding the former, when workers strongly believe that they deserve recognition for their work, a lack of recognition can be frustrating and discouraging. This sheds light onto *why* being invisible or even misunderstood by the beneficiaries of one's work is so distressing (e.g., Sherman, 2010; Vough et al., 2013)—because such experiences deny workers much-needed affirmation of their beliefs about how important their work is. This suggests an important theoretical implication: a lack of recognition, on its own, need not encumber meaningfulness. Rather, meaningfulness seems to be challenged when there is a disconnect between the recognition workers receive and the recognition they believe they *deserve*. This "recognition gap" could explain why personal concierges felt so distressed when others referred to them as house cleaners (Sherman, 2010)—because despite believing they deserved to be recognized for their work, such recognition never came. On the opposite side of the same coin, this also suggests that those who do not hold strong beliefs about deserving recognition for their work may not experience a lack of recognition as particularly distressing.

Imagined Recognition in Invisible Work. In addition to the recognition-related challenges, my research also enriches our understanding of the very nature of positive and affirming recognition. Namely, although research has asserted the importance of social cues for how individuals experience their work (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978), my research highlights the important role of imagined recognition (see the upper non-shaded box in figure 6.1). My analysis revealed that stayed criticism and presumed praise served as important reinforcement for the pride that linemen felt in their work. This goes beyond extant research that illustrates that workers will make general inferences about the degree to which they are valued by others based on how those others treat them, known as "reflected appraisals" (e.g., Brockner, 1988; McAllister & Bigley, 2002). It does so by showing how they make positive inferences about their work in the absence of any positive treatment by imagining others praising their work, even if they have never received such praise before. Indeed, although linemen were co-present with other linemen, this recognition was not strictly social because it was not conveyed personally. However, through imagined positive feedback from other linemen and a lack of criticism, they nonetheless perceived affirmation of their work that reinforced their sense of pride. Another implication of this work is therefore that, for invisible workers who infrequently receive recognition from others, imagined recognition may be critical for their ability to find work meaningful. Future research on invisible workers should thus be mindful of imagined recognition.

My findings also build on existing literature on imagined interactions by showing both new contextual factors that influence such imagination as well as new outcomes. A small body of research on imagined interactions largely highlights their tendency to reduce fears and increase confidence prior to an actual interaction. For instance, Schinoff and Byron (2022) theorize that

employees will be motivated to imagine interactions because doing so can help them feel more connected to others and feel more confident in their ability to influence others. Imagined interactions are also found empirically to help reduce fear and anxiety about upcoming in-person interactions (Allen & Honeycutt, 1997; Honeycutt, Choi, & DeBerry, 2009). In the organization studies literature more specifically, imagined interactions are shown to be important primarily in virtual work settings in which actual in-person interactions with coworkers are not possible (Schinoff, Ashforth, & Corley, 2020; Schinoff & Byron, 2022). My research extends this small but important body of work by showing new contextual factors that influence when imagined interactions might be important: invisible work. Indeed, when recognition is infrequent, as is the case in invisible work, imagining positive feedback may be a worker's most accessible way to experience social affirmation—however ephemeral it may be.

Notably, my research also shows that workers do not only resort to imagining interactions when they are alone. Indeed, linemen almost always work in crews with other linemen. Yet, because outright praise of one another's work was extremely rare given the norms of their occupation, they imagined what other unknown linemen would think and say about their work in the future, even when other linemen were physically co-present. This suggests scholars may need to expand our conceptualization of when imagined interactions happen and when they are important.

My work also shows novel outcomes of imagined interactions—reinforcing pride in one's work after imagining praise from other knowledgeable occupation members. Thus, my work empirically supports Schinoff and Bryon's (2022: 4) assertion that, "although these imaginings create an interpersonal world of work that exists only for them, they likely have important affective and behavioral consequences."

My research also suggests limits to imagined interactions. Linemen only spoke about imagining *other linemen* praising their aesthetics. This suggests that their presumed praise was limited by what they perceived to be probable or realistic responses to their work aesthetics. Given the exclusivity of their work, they believed the general public was not likely to even notice their aesthetics—much less be able to discern when they were particularly beautiful. In light of this belief, they did not imagine friends, significant others, or the general public praising their work, but instead, other linemen.[12] Moreover, they did not imagine *interactions* with those linemen per se, as existing research would suggest (e.g., Schinoff & Byron, 2022). Instead, given that such actual interactions rarely, if ever, resulted in praise, they imagined that other linemen would admire and praise their work, but not to their face. In short, *who* workers imagine praising their work seems important for reinforcing their sense of pride. This adds substance to Simpson, Slutskaya, and Hughes's (2019) idea that workers desire recognition that is "merited." Although they mention this idea fleetingly, my research suggests that the degree to which recognition is perceived as merited may be very consequential. For linemen, who perceived that their skills were highly exclusive, only the (imagined) opinions of other linemen were perceived to be relevant sources of affirmation of their work aesthetics. I would expect perceived skill exclusivity to similarly influence members of other occupations and professions. For instance, for a doctoral student in a specialized field, positive feedback about their work from an advisor—whether or imagined or otherwise—may be deeply affirming, whereas positive feedback from a friend or romantic partner outside of their particular field of academia may have little influence at all.

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[12] This contrasts with research suggests that close friends or significant others may act as sources of affirmation that bolster meaningfulness. For instance, Jiang and Wrzesniewski (2021) find that romantic partners can play a significant role in shaping a workers' perceptions of their work—particularly when the couple holds misaligned work orientations (see also Wilson, Baumann, Matta, Ilies, & Kossek, 2018).

Given these insights, future research on the differences between imagined recognition and non-imagined recognition seems particularly promising. For instance, is imagined recognition exclusively useful for invisible workers? Or might more visible workers also engage in and benefit from imagined recognition? If so, it would be theoretically interesting to analyze more visible workers' motivations for imagined recognition as well as how, if at all, their imagined recognition differs from their more tangible recognition. For instance, might tangible recognition for less valued tasks ever be perceived negatively and therefore need to be "supplemented" with imagined recognition for more highly valued ones? As these possibilities suggest, this area of inquiry seems like an exciting and fruitful opportunity for future research with important implications for meaningful work.

Invisible Products and Invisible Labor. Because my research suggests that imagined recognition is most relevant for invisible workers, it is important to note here that my work also clarifies existing questions within the literature on invisible work. As noted in the opening chapters, this literature has pooled experiences of invisibility under a broad conceptual umbrella. This may be problematic, as invisible workers' experiences seem to vary considerably. For instance, studies of cleaners who experience invisibility (e.g., Dutton et al., 2016) describe these workers as feeling devalued when others see them but actively ignore them or fail to get out of their way. Alternatively, Anteby and Occhiuto (2020: 1299) describe how ghostwriters—authors who receive no public recognition for their work—harbor "resentment" about being "hidden from public view." Yet, these ghostwriters did not experience a negative evaluation from others; rather, they experienced a complete lack of recognition due to their unseen work. Thus, their resentment was mostly aimed at the challenges to future employment opportunities that arose when their names were omitted from their books' acknowledgements sections. Furthermore,

whereas cleaners' experiences of invisibility were ubiquitously negative (Dutton et al., 2016), ghost writers actually embraced the need to "disappear" in order to be successful in their work (Anteby & Occhiuto, 2020). As these examples show, assuming similarities across different types of invisible work seems likely to obfuscate important dimensions of these unique work experiences.

By revealing two distinct types of invisibility—product invisibility and labor invisibility—my deep qualitative analysis provides clarity to this issue by showing how receiving no recognition for the products or outcomes of one's work is theoretically distinct from receiving no recognition due to being unseen or unnoticed while doing one's work. This distinction might explain why, for example, janitors (Dutton et al., 2016; Messing, 1998; Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2019) feel devalued when people see them but completely ignore them. Because they are seen by others, their labor is visible. However, the outcomes of their work—such as clean floors and empty trash bins—are not often recognized by others as valuable. In my terms, they experience product invisibility but not labor invisibility. Conversely, ghost writers (Anteby & Occhiuto, 2020) have a product that is quite visible—published books. Thus, they may have ample opportunities to experience affirmation of their products (e.g., good reviews of the book, rankings on bestseller lists) even though their labor of writing books remains invisible. Taking these two examples, it seems more likely that cleaners would need to rely on imagined recognition given their experiences of product invisibility—a lack of recognition for the outcomes of their work.

My work therefore contributes to this literature by delineating a critical distinction between invisible products and invisible labor. This builds on research that shows different reasons *why* work can be invisible (e.g., stigma, lack of legitimacy, etc…) and shows that

understanding the specific type of invisibility (e.g., product or labor) may be vital for explaining invisible workers' experiences. Specifically, work that is done in invisible places is likely to foster labor invisibility. Moreover, this experience is quite distinct from work that is invisible due to other factors such as stigma (e.g., Kotiswaran, 2011; Toubiana & Ruebottom, 2022) or a lack of legitimacy (e.g., Sherman, 2010; Venter, 2022), which seems more likely to foster product invisibility (i.e., lack of recognition for the work output, even if the labor itself can be seen). Future research should be sensitized to these differences and to the potential downfalls of over-generalizing invisibility of workers and their work.

Indeed, while some work—like that of linemen—certainly could face both product and labor invisibility (a topic I return to shortly), it seems possible that some occupations or types of work could experience just one or the other. Moreover, experiencing these types of invisibility in isolation could lead to significantly different experiences. Regarding these differences, my research hints that product invisibility may be more detrimental to workers' experiences. For instance, because TSA agents are seen by hundreds of travelers each day while working, their labor is quite visible. However, travelers seemingly rarely, if ever, recognize or show appreciation for the outcomes of TSA agents' work, such as safer airport terminals and planes (see Anteby & Chan, 2018; Chan & Anteby, 2016). This lack of recognition for the results of their work seems to have negative effects on their work experiences. Conversely, those experiencing only labor invisibility, such as advanced computer programmers who work from home or scientists who work in secluded laboratories, may not experience the same negative reactions. As work in many high-status occupations becomes more "invisible" as it moves from offices into people's home offices, we need theories that are sensitive to the unique effects of these different types of invisibility. My research begins to do this by showing the differences

between invisibility of one's work *outcomes* and one's actual *working* to achieve those outcomes.

It is important to note that my research also suggests that these unique experiences of invisibility may be reciprocally related to one another. Product and labor invisibility seemingly arise independently of one another based on a variety of factors (e.g., knowledge of the products, workplaces that are hidden from view, etc…). Yet, when both exist concurrently, they may be mutually reinforcing. That is, lack of recognition of an occupation's work outcomes makes it less likely those doing the work will be noticed and recognized. Relatedly, doing work that others do not see or notice may make it less likely that others will notice the outcomes (e.g., products or services) of that work. As this was not the main focus of my research, future work should continue to examine these dynamics. A multiple case study design (e.g., Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007) that compares occupations facing (a) only product invisibility, (b) only labor invisibility, and (c) both types of invisibility seems particularly promising for uncovering the unique influences of each type. This type of study would help continue to disentangle the various factors that make work invisible and the outcomes of such invisibility (see Chan & Anteby, 2016; Daniels, 1987; Mahalingam et al., 2019; Messing, 1998).

As but one of these potential consequences, my research suggests that in light of the invisibility of both their product and labor, linemen did not view strategies for gaining external recognition as a viable solution for making their work more meaningful. Indeed, they took very few, if any, steps to seek to gain recognition from those outside of the occupation. The linemen in this study viewed a lack of external recognition as unfortunate and frustrating. But they did not believe that seeking to boost public recognition would be feasible. Instead, they focused their efforts inward, on gaining approval from other linemen via aesthetic signaling. Thus, in joining

research that has highlighted the experiences of janitors (Dutton et al., 2016; Mahalingam et al., 2019; Messing, 1998), refuse collectors (Bailey & Madden, 2017), or "dirty work" jobs more generally (Ashforth et al., 2007; Mavin & Grandy, 2013; Toubiana & Ruebottom, 2022), this research contributes to a clearer picture of invisible work as a whole.

Accounts of Significance and Norms of Criticism in a Masculine Blue-Collar Occupation

The role of the occupation in shaping linemen's experiences of meaningfulness has been woven throughout this dissertation and warrants more direct consideration. As explained in chapter 4, in light of their occupational invisibility, the occupation proffered accounts of the significance of their work to their members (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017; Scott & Lyman, 1968). They did this by coupling their invisible product (e.g., electricity and the poles and wires that distribute it) and their invisible labor with valued outcomes. These accounts were seemingly meant to remind linemen just how important their work is for society. Such behavior is not entirely unexpected, as scholars have long argued that professions and occupations will seek to shape how their members view their work (Becker, 1961; Bucher & Strauss, 1961; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). This involves socializing new occupational recruits not only in matters of the occupation's techniques and tasks, but also in their related values and beliefs regarding the work more broadly (see Anteby, Chan, & DiBenigno, 2016 for a review).

In addition, not only do occupations and professions endeavor to shape their members' understandings of the work, they are often quite successful at doing so. In foundational work on this topic, Durkheim (2005 [1897]: 346) argues that because an occupation "consists of individuals, devoted to the same tasks, with solidary or even combined interests, no soil is better calculated to bear social ideas and sentiments." He goes on to argue that "occupational life is almost the whole of life" (p. 346). Simply put, because of the enveloping nature of occupational

involvement, an occupation or profession plays an outsized role in shaping their members' beliefs about their work. This seems just as true today as it was in Durkheim's time (Trice, 1993). As evidenced in my study, linemen's understandings of the significance of their work closely mirrored that of the occupation writ large. Therefore, whereas the occupation's accounts of significance being mirrored in its members' understandings may not be entirely surprising, the effects of these understandings are.

Notably, understanding the significance of their work led not to meaningfulness, but to a belief that recognition was deserved. Because they rarely—if ever—received recognition, the occupational accounts of the importance of their work seemingly failed to foster experiences of meaningfulness. Instead, in light of their invisible work, a belief that recognition was deserved stood in direct tension with the amount of recognition they received. The resulting "recognition gap" instigated a new set of problems for linemen. Their strongly held beliefs about the importance of their work—which mirrored the occupation's accounts—were never affirmed by others, fostering feelings of meaningfulness insecurity.

Although linemen were ultimately able to experience meaningfulness in their work, this came *in spite of* the occupation's efforts to communicate the importance of their work—not because of them. That is, although linemen's beliefs about the importance of their work for others largely mirrored the occupation's accounts, believing their work to be making an important impact on others did not drive their sense of meaningfulness. Yet, the solution—intuitively feeling pride in the appearance of their work aesthetics—is also supported through collective dynamics within the occupation. In this way, occupational dynamics underlie both the challenges linemen face to experiencing meaningfulness and the solutions for overcoming those challenges. Namely, the harsh criticism that was emblematic of the "masculine" nature of their

occupational norms ultimately set them on a path to feeling pride in their work aesthetics. Although norms of brash criticism may not be unusual in such "blue-collar" and masculine work contexts, the positive outcomes (i.e., pride and meaningfulness) experienced by linemen shine new theoretical light onto what such norms can cultivate.

Indeed, sociological research from as far back as the mid-1900s has acknowledged the brash negative character of interactions in masculine blue-collar occupations. Although such interactions are not exclusive to masculine blue-collar occupations, they have been found to be prominent in such work—particularly with new recruits. For instance, Haas (1972), in an ethnography of iron workers who construct tall buildings in perilous conditions, focuses his inquiry on behavior that he calls "binging." This involves "kidding and ridicule," which were a "dominant part of their interaction" (p. 28). He also describes this behavior as "verbal harassment of other workers" (p. 28). In a subsequent paper on these workers, he notes that such harassment is quite intentional or deliberate: "The style is characteristically earthy, there is little regard for amenities, and the jibes seem deliberately provocative" (Haas, 1977: 160). For a more contemporary example, Bourassa and Ashforth (1998) paint a particularly vivid picture of such harsh social conditions. Through an ethnographic account of a commercial fishing crew, they find that fishermen subjected one another—particularly the newcomers—to "taunts and harassment" (p. 182) and "constant verbal abuse" (p. 183). This critical feedback they shared with one another is referred to as "debasement" and is seemingly a central feature of these fishermen's interactions with newcomers. Although not always the primary area of focus (Hughes, 1970; Thomas, 1989), this style of interaction has been shown in other similar occupations as well, such as oil workers (Lynch, 2010), pipeliners (Graves, 1958), construction

workers (Riemer, 1979), shipwrights (Green, 1993), and truck drivers (Ouellet, 1994; Wyckoff, 1979).

Although not all of the literature that examines similar masculine blue-collar work cultures makes claims about the outcomes of such "razzing," those that do largely highlight negative ones—frustration, counterproductive behaviors, and even quitting (e.g., Bourassa & Ashforth, 1998). Johnston and McIvor (2004) argue that such "machismo" work cultures promote risk taking—in order to avoid being the target of further criticism—and are linked with damaging workers' health and well-being. Bourassa and Ashforth (1998) find that such tactics might ultimately foster identification in new recruits who can withstand the barrage of "debasement," but their findings tellingly show many examples of workers instead quitting in dramatic fashion to escape further insults.

Not only to I show that similar treatment leads instead to positive outcomes for linemen, my research also suggests *why* this is the case. Namely, the razzing was directed at the appearance of the other's work. Their *work* was the target of the razzing—not the workers themselves. Because criticism was perceived to be about the *work* and not the *worker*, linemen all seemingly had the ability to signal pride in their work and thereby avoid being razzed. Thus, by motivating linemen to signal pride in their work and ultimately fostering expert schemas regarding work aesthetics (see the cycle in Figure 6.1), razzing indirectly bolstered linemen's ability to intuitively feel pride their work. The target of the razzing seems particularly important here. I would expect similar experiences aimed at individuals themselves (e.g., debasing all new recruits regardless of their work quality or appearance) to be unlikely to foster pride. Instead, this process of social enforcement seems likely to generalize to other situations in which workers criticize others' *work* and not just other people more broadly.

This leads to an important question regarding why craftsmanship and aesthetics—instead of other domains of expertise—were so important for linemen in driving experiences of pride. Definitively answering this question would require extrapolating too far beyond my qualitative data given my research focus. However, my analysis hints at two potential reasons—one historical and one instrumental. Historically speaking, additional analysis of linemen's trade journals dating back to the late 1800s revealed that they have long viewed their work to be not just a "trade," but a "craft." Craftsmanship thus seemed fundamental to their beliefs about the nature of their work. Sennett (2008: 8) defines craftsmanship as "the skill of making things well" and argues that techniques required to be a craftsman are deeply rooted in culture. Becker (1978: 864) concurs, arguing that even when work is colloquially referred to as a craft, this implies that there are strict "standards on which judgements of particular items of work can be based." Given linemen's seeming historical conviction that their work is a craft—replete with specific standards and ideals relating to its successful completion—it is no wonder they considered the aspects of their expertise most closely related with craftsmanship to be of utmost importance.

The importance of aesthetics may also stem from a more instrumental reason: aesthetic markers were one of the few ways linemen could differentiate their work from one another's. Given the difficulty and extra time associated with making beautiful work, differences between beautiful and ugly work were stark. Conversely, many other aspects of the work were quite similar across linemen. They worked similar hours, did similar tasks, faced similar dangers, and used similar equipment. Thus, one of the only possible points of differentiation was the appearance of their work. Given individuals' penchant for comparison (Toubiana & Ruebottom, 2022), aesthetics may have emerged as convenient points of inter-individual or even inter-group differentiation. Because this question was not a central aspect of my research, future research on

why occupations come to value and enforce certain forms of expertise over others seems promising.

LIMITATIONS

All research designs, by their nature, contain inherent limitations (McGrath, 1981). What qualitative research contributes in rich and contextually grounded explanations of social phenomena, it lacks in its ability to statistically generalize or determine causation (Pratt & Bonaccio, 2016). Those general limitations aside, this section highlights the consequences of my methodological choices that bring more specific limitations to bear. First, I interviewed primarily linemen who were currently working, with a few interviews with recent retirees as well. I did not interview any former linemen who had left the occupation. Thus, it remains possible that the harsh "razzing" that ultimately fostered pride in my participants may have been too much for others—leading them to leave the occupation altogether (see Bourassa & Ashforth, 1998). If this were this case, my research would not have been able to speak to this phenomenon, as my sampling strategy did not allow me to capture those individuals' experiences.

Another limitation is that, although extant studies have shown the connection between meaningful work and more distal outcomes such as improved motivation (Elangovan et al., 2010; May et al., 2004) or performance (Grant, 2008; Leiter et al., 1998; Oldham & Hackman, 2010), my study did not measure such distal outcomes directly. However, due to the strong ties between meaningfulness and such outcomes in the extant literature, this study still suggests ways to affect those outcomes by focusing on the more proximal outcome of the feeling of pride and meaningfulness associated with it.

Additionally, although I theorize about some social processes, several contextual barriers inhibited me from closely observing group-level phenomena. First, the work of linemen is quite

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dangerous, as they work with high voltages at the top of utility poles or even on helicopters. Second, their work is done in remote locations—sometimes at a moment's notice. As such, although social phenomena—such as social criticism of one another's work aesthetics and the collective nature of their finished work products—clearly play an important role, most of my data were better suited to individual-level theorizing. Future research may benefit from studying occupations in which researchers can gain closer access to observe group-level phenomena. Other invisible jobs that are less dangerous could be fertile empirical ground for developing deeper understandings of potentially important group-level processes, such as the role of group emotions, intra-group status dynamics between linemen who consistently make beautiful (or ugly) work, and other related dynamics.

CONCLUSION

For invisible workers like linemen, the path to meaningfulness is fraught with challenges. By shining a spotlight on this invisible occupation, my dissertation not only diagnoses some of the problems invisible workers face in experiencing meaningfulness in their work, but also illuminates their solutions. In doing so, this dissertation begins to transform our understanding of the processes that foster meaningfulness. My work re-casts meaningfulness from an individual accomplishment to one that is deeply dependent on social cues; and from a process requiring thoughtful reflection to one driven by intuitive judgements. In a world that relies so heavily on invisible occupations, it is my hope that this dissertation helps more workers find and feel meaningfulness in their work.

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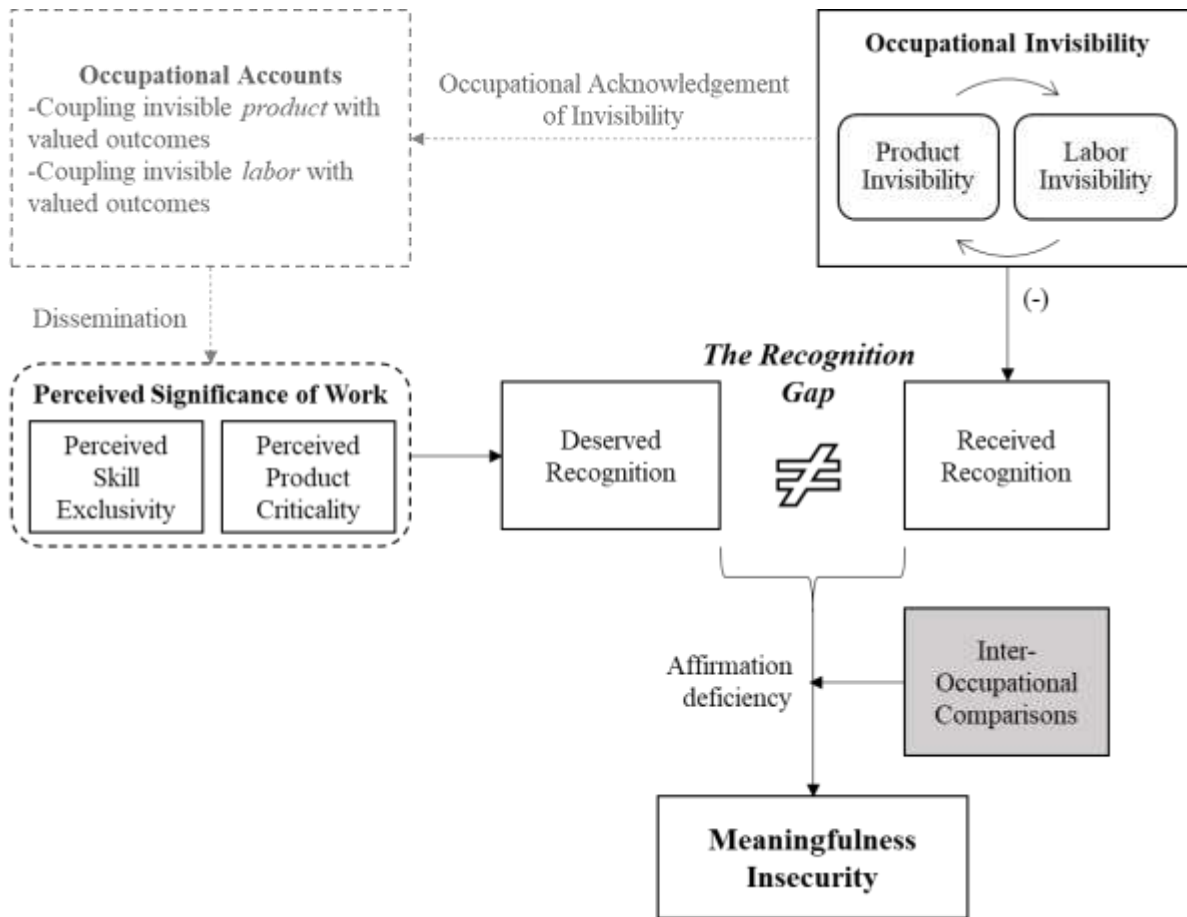**FIGURE 4.1. OCCUPATIONAL INVISIBILITY, THE RECOGNITION GAP, AND MEANINGFULNESS INSECURITY**

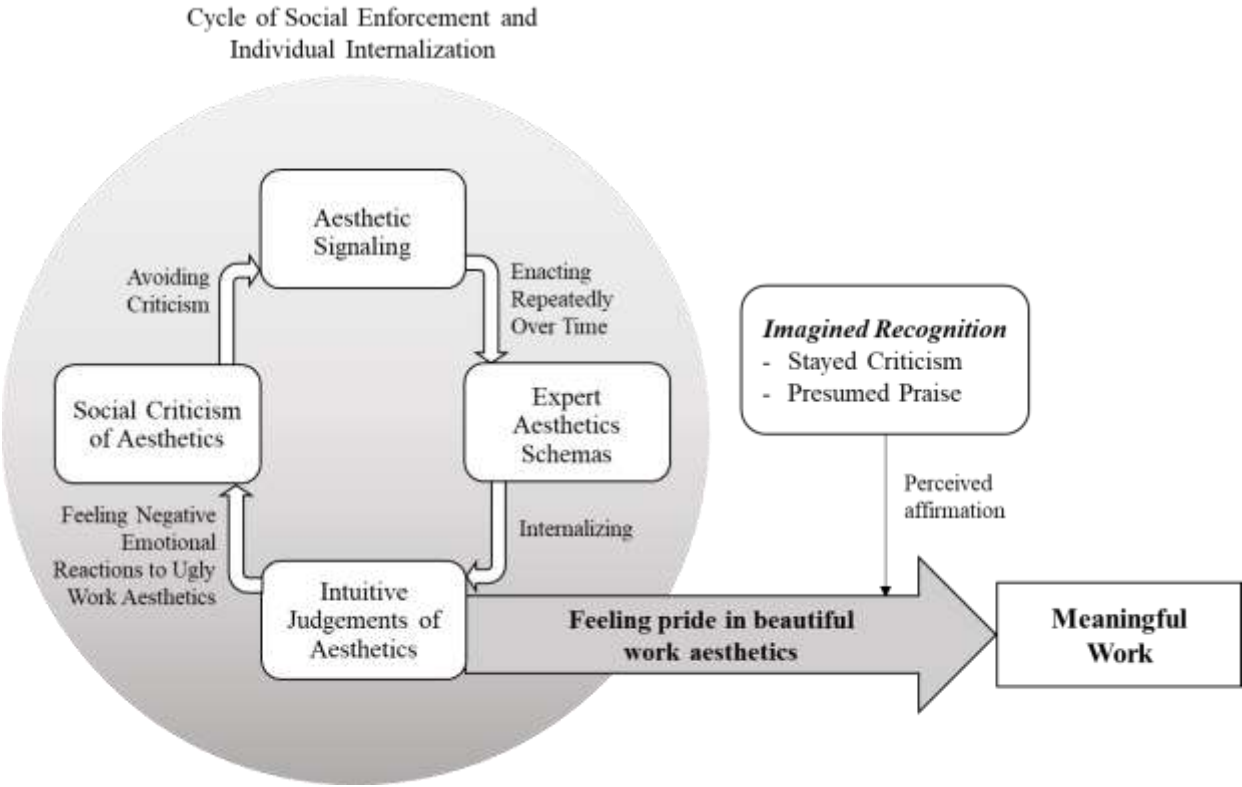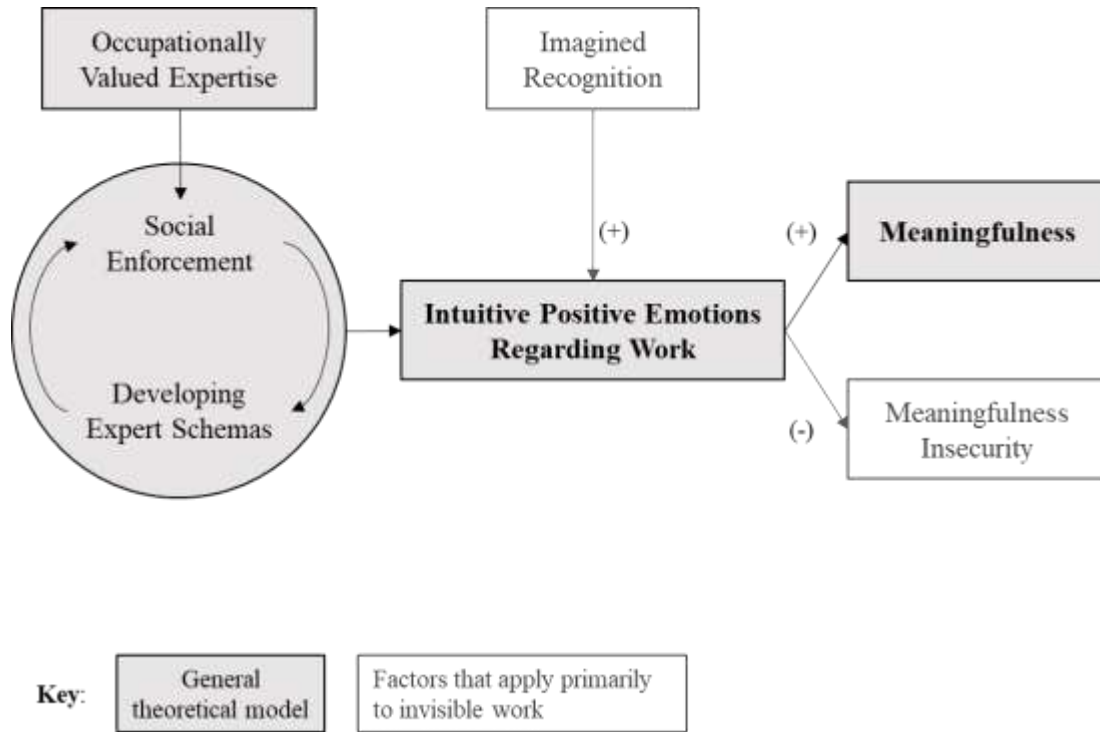**FIGURE 5.1 HOW INTUITIVELY FELT PRIDE IN WORK AESTHETICS FOSTERS MEANINGFULNESS**

FIGURE 6.1. A MODEL OF INTUITIVELY FELT PRIDE AND MEANINGFUL WORK

APPENDIX A. FINAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

General /Opening
1. What got you interested in working as a lineman? How long have you been doing this job?
2. What, if anything, do you like most about your work?
3. What, if anything, do you like least about your work?

What the Public Thinks of Linemen
1. How much, if anything, do you think the general public knows about linemen?
   a. When you tell someone you're a lineman, how do they respond?
   b. How, if at all, does the public's perception affect you?
      i. (If effect):: How, if at all, do you manage this _____?
   c. Do you wish their perception was different? Why?
   d. How, if at all, would your work be different if more people knew about the work of linemen? Why?
2. (If they bring up perceiving a lack of recognition):: Some other occupations receive ***lots of public recognition*** (e.g., firefighters, police, military).
   a. Why do you think linemen don't also receive this kind of recognition?
3. Some other occupations also seem to receive ***very little public recognition***
   a. Which other occupations, if any, seem similar to line work in this way?
   b. (If they can think of one):: What about that occupation seems similar?
4. Let's say you did awesome work on a particular job:
   a. How important, if at all, is it for the general public to recognize you for it? Why?
      i. (If because work is important for society):: How, if at all, would this be different if your work did not have such a significant impact on society?
   b. How important, if at all, is it for the people directly impacted by your work to recognize it? Why?
   c. How important, if at all, is it for other linemen to recognize you for it? Why?
      i. I haven't heard linemen give a lot of compliments to each other. Is that the norm for linemen? Why (or why not)? Can you give an example?
5. Are there times in your work when you think recognition would be particularly important? (e.g., certain types of work or certain tasks?)
6. Can you tell me about a time when you did a really good job but no one recognized you for it? (If yes)::
   a. How did that experience feel?
7. What, if anything, have linemen (e.g., the union or the occupation as a whole) done to get the word out about your work (and how important it is)?
   a. What do you think of these efforts?
   b. How, if at all, have these efforts affected the public's perception of your work?
8. Do you ever have interactions with customers? (If yes)::
   a. How do those interactions tend to go? Can you provide an example?
   b. How, if at all, do types of line work (e.g., distribution vs. transmission) differ in how much contact you have with customers?
   c. When, if ever, has interacting with a customer made you feel good (or bad) about your work? Why?

      d. If you wanted to have more interactions with customers, how, if at all, could you do that?

9. In line work, what groups, if any, tend to not become linemen? Why?
      a. (If any):: What challenges, if any, do they face?

Meaningful Work General

1. If someone asked you, "why do you work as a lineman?" how would you respond?
2. What do you think is the most important part of being a lineman? Why? Has this changed over time? Why or why not?
3. What parts of the job, if any, are most important or significant to you? (If more than one:: ask to rank)
      a. Comradery with crew?
      b. Being able to work outside?
      c. Doing dangerous work that most people can't (or won't) do?
      d. Doing particular tasks?
      e. Other things I have not mentioned?
4. I have heard linemen talking about "squaring their washers."
      a. How important, if at all, is it for linemen to square their washers? Why?
      b. What other things, if any, do linemen do that are similar to squaring their washers?

Pride and Aesthetics

1. (If pride has not come up):: I have heard linemen talk about taking pride in aesthetically pleasing work. How important, if at all, is it for linemen to have pride in their work? Why?
      a. (If Important):: How did you learn about the importance of making your work aesthetically pleasing?
      b. If you saw a lineman who wasn't making their work aesthetically pleasing, what, if anything, would you do?
      c. How can you tell if another lineman is taking pride in her/his work?
      d. Can you tell me about a time when another lineman commented on the appearance of your work? (What did they do/say? How, if at all, did it affect you?)
      e. Has the pride you've experience in your work changed over time? If so, how and why?
2. Can you tell me about a time when you felt a lot of (or not very much) pride in your work?
      a. What were you doing in that moment?
      b. Who else, if anyone, was there with you? (If someone):: How, if at all, do these other people affect your pride in your work?

Closing

1. Is there something else you think I should know to understand the work of a lineman better?
2. Do you know any other linemen who would be able to help me with this research?
3. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

APPENDIX B. PHOTO OF A "DIAMOND" WASHER