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The Mismanaged Soul: Existential Labor and the Erosion of Meaningful Work

ABSTRACT

Meaningful work has been defined as work that is personally enriching and that makes a positive contribution. There is increasing interest in how organizations can harness the meaningfulness of work to enhance productivity and performance. We explain how organizations seek to manage the meaningfulness employees experience through strategies focused on job design, leadership, HRM and culture. Employees can respond positively to employers' strategies aimed at raising their level of experienced meaningfulness when they are felt to be authentic. However, when meaningfulness is lacking, or employees perceive that the employer is seeking to manipulate their meaningfulness for performative intent, then the response of employees can be to engage in "existential labor" strategies with the potential for harmful consequences for individuals and organizations. We develop a model of existential labor, drawing out a set of propositions for future research endeavors, and outline the implications for HRM practitioners.

Keywords: existential labor; meaningful work; job design; values.

1. Introduction

Meaningful work is something that many individuals crave, and that many organizations aspire to promote (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Cascio (2003) notes that important and meaningful work is the single most valued feature of employment for the majority of workers. Studies have shown that the drive to find work meaningful is such that employees actively seek ways to construct meaningfulness, even in cases of repetitive drudgery (Isaksen, 2000). The so-called

lottery test, where individuals are asked whether they would give up work if they won a large amount of money in a lottery, invariably shows that a majority of people would choose to continue working even without the financial need (Overell, 2008), suggesting that, for many, work brings with it significant intangible benefits and returns.

One reason the topic of meaningfulness has become so popular in recent years is due to research which has shown that the experience of meaningful work is associated with a range of beneficial outcomes for individuals and employers, including high levels of engagement, performance and creativity (Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Kahn, 1990; Ulrich & Ulrich, 2012), improved wellbeing (Clausen & Borg, 2011; Routledge, Arndt, Wildschut, Sedikides, Hart, Juhl, Vingerhoets & Schlotz, 2011; Authors, 3), job satisfaction (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003) and intent to remain (Scroggins, 2008). Overell (2008: 13) cites McDonald's UK Director of People as stating that if the company could offer more meaningfulness to its staff, 55% would be more motivated, 42% would have greater loyalty and 32% would experience more pride. Petchsawang and Duchon (2009) note that meaningfulness is one dimension of workplace spirituality, and argue that where workplaces enable the expression of individuals' full selves, then this will reduce stress and conflict and improve performance.

Some have argued that organizations have a responsibility to create and sustain meaningful work for their employees. However, it has been noted that this raises important moral and ethical questions about the legitimacy of employers seeking to control the existential domain of their employees' lives (Smithey Fulmer & Barry, 2009), something that may, in fact, not even be possible (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). The aim of this article is to address these concerns and to contribute to our understanding of how organizations seek to manage employees' perception of their work as meaningful. Specifically, two key areas are addressed: first, how do

organizations seek to manage employees' perceptions of their work as meaningful, and, second, how do employees respond to such efforts? We draw on the meaningfulness literature (e.g. Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Michaelson, 2011) to outline how organizations go about constructing a holistic approach to the management of meaningfulness and emphasize the importance of authenticity for the creation of an environment that leads to employees' genuine experience of meaningfulness (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). We then consider what might happen when this goes wrong, for instance, when employees discern efforts to manage meaningfulness as manipulation, or when employees feel powerless to do otherwise than fit in with managerial prerogatives, whatever their real views. In examining potential employee responses to these scenarios, we argue that employees can be prompted through fear of negative outcomes including job loss, stigma, or career blocking, or in pursuit of positive outcomes such as high levels of personal regard, career advancement or increased rewards, to act "as if" their work were meaningful even if it is not experienced as such. We describe this as "existential labor", in contrast to "experienced meaningfulness". We propose that employees' propensity to engage in existential labor may be fostered by a range of factors at the individual and organizational levels. Existential labor may lead to negative outcomes for employees and organizations.

2. What is meaningfulness?

Studies have consistently demonstrated the central role played by work in the construction and experience of a life with meaning (England & Harpaz, 1983; Harpaz & Fu, 2002; Ruiz-Quintilla & Wilpert, 1991; Schnell, 2011). But what exactly constitutes meaningful work? It is important to consider the distinction between the "meaning *of"* work (MOW, 1987) and "meaning*ful*" work; this is rendered more complex by the fact that scholars have tended to use the two terms interchangeably (e.g. Wrzniewski & Dutton, 2001). Rosso, Dekas and

Wrzesniewski (2010: 94) suggest that "meaning" is "the output of having made sense of something" and is thus related to the process of sense-making (Weick, 1995). In other words, work may "mean" something positive to the individual such as a source of personal fulfilment or identity, or it can "mean" something negative, such as constituting a commodity or a curse (Budd, 2011). The term "meaning*ful* work", on the other hand, contains an implicit positive bias from the individual's perspective. Our focus here is on meaning*ful* work, rather than the meaning *of* work, since it is the field of meaningfulness that has been identified as most in need of further development (Rosso et al., 2010). Meaningful work has been defined in a variety of ways across disparate bodies of literature in the humanities and social sciences (Authors, 1), but definitions typically coalesce around the focal constructs of the "self", in terms of self-actualization and work that is satisfying and fulfilling to the individual, and the "other", in terms of work that is of service to a wider cause or gives rise to a sense of belonging to a broader group (Rosso et al., 2010). Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) argue that "when something is meaningful, it helps to answer the question, 'Why am I here?'", and identify four features of meaningful work: a sense of unity with others, perceiving that one's work is of service to others, expressing oneself, and developing and becoming one's self through work. In this sense, meaningful work is concerned both with undertaking work-related activities that are pleasant, enjoyable and personally enriching, as well as contributing to something beyond pure self-interest.

2.1 ***Domains of meaningful work***

An examination of the literature suggests that individuals' experience of work as meaningful can arise from four different sources. These sources represent work domains in which the individual finds meaningfulness in the work that they do.

First, this can occur in the context of the *work tasks* themselves. Jobs can be described as "a set of task elements grouped together under one job title and designed to be performed by a single individual" (Ilgen & Hollenbeck, 1992: 173). In turn, tasks have been defined as "the set of prescribed work activities a person normally performs during a typical work period" (Griffin, 1987: 94). Hackman and Oldham (1980) argued that meaningfulness is one of three critical psychological states that arise from jobs perceived by the individual to offer skill variety, task significance and task identity, and that are associated, in turn, with higher levels of motivation, performance and satisfaction. These findings have been supported by later scholars (Grant, 2008; Humphrey, Nahrgang & Morgenson, 2007). Their argument is consistent with self-efficacy theory which suggests that where individuals believe they have the agentic power to effect change, exercise control, and make a difference or impact, then they are more likely to find their work meaningful (Bandura, 1977). Grant's (2008) theory of prosocial motivation further proposes that meaningful work tasks are those that provide service to society or the community, and contribute to the sense of a "greater good" or higher purpose.

Second, meaningfulness can arise from the *roles* that people perform (May, Gilson & Harter, 2004). Roles have been referred to as "explicit and systematically enforced prescriptions for how organizational members should think and feel about themselves and their work" (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003: 1168). Thus, roles go beyond individual job tasks, and include sets of norms and expectations concerning the behavior and identity of the employee, relating to "who we are" rather than "what we do". It has been proposed that meaningfulness arises in relation to work roles through two mechanisms. First, self-verification theory (Swann, 1983) and identity affirmation theory (Elsbach, 2003) suggest that individuals experience higher levels of meaningfulness when engaging in roles that resonate with their self-perception (Kahn, 1990).

Second, social comparison theory suggests that meaningfulness arises when people feel they are performing valued or high-status roles (Barrick, Mount & Judge, 2012; Kahn, 1990; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Wrzniewski, 2003). If individuals believe that their role is an important one in the eyes of the wider world, then they are likely to experience their work as meaningful.

The third domain of meaningfulness arises through *interactions* either within the organization or with other stakeholders that give rise to a sense of belonging or connectedness with others (Rosso et al., 2010). Pratt and Ashforth (2003) draw on social identity theory to show how individuals' membership of valued in-groups can enhance experienced meaningfulness through raised levels of self-esteem (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Rosso et al. (2010) show that needs theories of motivation suggest that individuals are driven to meet their personal needs for connection and relatedness through work, and hence strive to form relationships that help create a sense of shared identity, belongingness and togetherness (May et al., 2004). Another way in which interactions can give rise to feelings of meaningfulness is when the individual perceives that their work benefits others (Petchsawang & Duchon, 2009). Prosocial motivation arises when individuals are motivated towards goals that benefit other people, and is based on other-oriented values (Batson, 1998; Grant, 2007). Grant's (2007; 2012) research shows how jobs that have an enriched relational architecture provide a range of opportunities for individuals to perceive the impact of their work on others and to generate an allocentric psychological state whereby the individual is driven to direct their attention to the thoughts, feelings, preferences and welfare of others in the interest of improving their lives.

The fourth domain of meaningfulness arises from the *organization* itself. Rosso et al. (2010: 120) note that "organizations are very strong contexts that carry unique systems of meaning which likely exert a powerful influence on how individuals interpret the meaning and

meaningfulness of their work". The extant literature identifies individual-organization value congruence and identification or person-organization fit as a principal source of meaningfulness (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman & Johnson, 2005; Pratt, 2000; Rosso et al., 2010; Thompson & Bunderson, 2003), since self-concordance theory suggests that someone working for an organization they feel has similar values to their own is likely to feel fulfilled and authentic (Besharov, 2008; Brief & Nord, 1990). Equally, it has been argued that identification with organizational values and mission can operate as a higher level motivational factor through responding to individuals' need for status (Barrick et al., 2012) and belonging (Cohen-Meitar, Carmeli & Waldman, 2009). Within the workplace spirituality literature, 'spirit-friendly' work units were found to out-perform those that were less spirit-friendly since they tap into individual's fundamental need for meaningful work (Duchon & Plowman, 2005: 809)

Several commentators propose that the greatest experience of meaningfulness arises from a sense of *consistency* across several arenas of meaningfulness rather than just one, in other words, consistency across the four domains and temporal consistency (consistency of the meaningfulness domains over time) (Authors, 2; Cartwright & Holmes, 2006; Chalofsky, 2010). Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) provide an integrated framework for meaningful work that identifies the importance to individuals of being able to construct a consistent narrative that combines a sense of contribution, self-esteem, caring relationships and moral development in working towards a cause that transcends the self. This gives rise to our first proposition:

Proposition 1: the four domains of meaningfulness, namely, task, role, interactional and organizational, can be experienced singly or in any combination; a consistent combination of all four types will be associated with the strongest experience of work as meaningful .

3. The management of meaningfulness and employee responses

Humanities scholars have suggested that meaningfulness is subjective and innate to the individual, something that everyone has a drive to find for themselves within their work (Ciulla, 2000). According to this viewpoint, meaningfulness cannot be managed or mandated by employers as it is a personal experience. Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) go so far as to argue that where meaningfulness is prescribed or controlled, it ceases to be meaningful to the individual. In contrast, other commentators from a management perspective have argued that experienced meaningfulness is a state of mind that organizations can actively create or manage at least to some degree (May et al., 2004; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). According to Michaelson (2011), meaningful work is not fully within the control of the individual; the assignment of work and the conditions under which work is assigned both influence the extent to which work can be experienced as meaningful, and thus there is a significant role for the employer in this process. Cartwright and Holmes (2006) show that organizations need to address and understand employees' deeper need for meaningful work in order to raise levels of motivation and retention, since meaningfulness can reduce cynicism and create a sense of stability. Moreover, normative writing on the topic suggests that management has every incentive to invest in managing meaningfulness; for example, Deal and Kennedy (1982) argue that firms can get an additional two hours of productive work per day from employees who identify strongly with their employer, although from the employee perspective this hints at the potential dark side to the management of meaningfulness which we address later.

In this article, we agree with the humanities scholars that meaningfulness is personal and innate to the individual, and argue that although organizations cannot tell us what we should find meaningful, they do create settings that are more or less conducive to individuals being able to

find meaningfulness in their work (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009). As social beings, individuals cannot experience meaningfulness entirely within themselves, but seek to understand their place in the wider world and their contribution to society in the context of the organizations and institutions to which they belong (Tablan, 2015). Analysis of the literature suggests a range of strategies that have been regarded as especially salient for the creation of an environment conducive to meaningfulness, which tap into the four domains of meaningfulness described above. Pratt and Ashforth (2003) term these "meaningfulness *in* work" strategies that focus on the nature of work that employees actually do, and "meaningfulness *at* work" strategies that shape the context in which work is performed. We outline these below.

Job design. The enhancement of certain aspects of job design has been linked for some while with raised levels of meaningfulness *in* work (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006; Chalofsky, 2003; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003) and employers have been advised to design jobs in order to enhance skill variety, task significance and task identity (Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Pratt, Pradies & Lepisto, 2013). Job redesign initiatives of this type are most likely to enhance task or job meaningfulness. Paying attention to the prosocial and relational aspects of work, and providing opportunities for interpersonal interaction and connection either with co-workers, clients or the public has been advocated in order to meet people's need for belonging and self-esteem (Grant, 2007; Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Pratt et al., 2013), together with encouraging high levels of person-job fit (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Scroggins, 2008; Shamir, 1991). Job design elements that emphasize the prosocial aspects of work are most likely to tap into people's experience of interactional meaningfulness.

Human resource management. Human resource management practices such as recruitment, selection and socialization focused on strong person-organization fit can also

constitute elements of organizational meaningfulness strategies aimed at enhancing all four forms of meaningfulness (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Scroggins, 2008). Cartwright and Holmes (2006) argue that enabling individuals to have a healthy work-life balance can help them achieve a sense of holistic meaningfulness, and others have noted that fair pay is essential to meaningful work (Michaelson, Pratt, Grant & Dunn, 2014). Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) highlight the role that job security, personal development and coaching, notably that which enables moral development, can play in helping individuals achieve a sense of personal enrichment and growth, contributing to their sense of meaningfulness. Scholars of workplace spirituality have explored how interventions such as supporting individuals to undertake insight meditation at work can help enhance the expression of the spiritual self and experience the meaningfulness of their work (Petchsawang & Duchon, 2012). It has also been argued by ethicists that policies aimed at enhancing employee participation can form part of a strategy to enhance meaningfulness *in* work (Tablan, 2015; Yeoman, 2014).

Leadership style. Leadership style has been shown to play a critical role in influencing meaningfulness *at* work (Duchon and Plowman, 2005; Jiang, Tsui & Li, 2015; Tummers & Knies, 2013). Brown and Trevino (2006) argue that since most people look outside themselves for ethical guidance, leaders who emphasize ethical values and behave congruently with those values can act as a role model and enhance followers' work meaningfulness through demonstrating the link between individuals' work, organizational ethical goals and standards, and higher level societal ethical outcomes. Avolio and Gardner (2005) show how spiritual leaders who focus on visioning values such as hope and faith, and emphasize work's vocational role, can inspire followers to work together for a collective purpose, affirming individuals' preferred self-perception and raising awareness of task significance. Lips-Wiersma and Morris

(2009) argue that meaninglessness conversely arises at work when individuals are explicitly encouraged by leaders to act immorally or unethically, since this discourages awareness of the impact of individuals' actions and words. In this context, leader authenticity and trustworthiness have been shown to be central (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006). Emphasising socially responsible management strategies has been shown to be an important plank within the ethical leadership approach (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006; Chalofsky, 2010), and this enables individuals to see the connection between their work and a broader ideal. Jiang et al. (2015) similarly found that servant leadership which focuses on values that reach beyond the self can help organizational newcomers experience their work as meaningful.

Culture and values. Perhaps more than any other domain, meaningfulness *at* work has been associated with "strong" value-driven organizational cultures. Pratt and Ashforth (2003) suggest that the creation of family-like dynamics at work such as through fostering care and connection between people with a mission focused around goals and values can promote solidarity and cohesion and help build an authentic "emotional ecology" that blurs the boundary between work and home to create a sense of holism. Leidner (2006) shows how many organizational leaders actively seek to emphasize mutuality and shared values in order to raise levels of motivation, meaning and loyalty. Kanter (1977) reveals how cultural management can be linked with a sense of community and belonging to a valued in-group. Initiatives and strategies that focus on culture are most closely associated with organizational or interactional meaningfulness as they can help create a sense of community in serving a wider ideal.

Thus, prior studies have identified a number of ways in which organizations and HRM professionals can seek to manage meaningfulness in and at work (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). It has been argued that this sense of meaningfulness is particularly strong in settings where employees

sense a clear "line of sight" between the work they do, leaders' actions, and organizational values (Rosso et al., 2010; Michaelson et al., 2014). Employees would therefore generally perceive organizational efforts to manage experienced meaningfulness to be authentic when they can see that there is an alignment between the 'signals' sent to employees through organizational interventions and values, leader behaviour, HRM policies and practices, and their job role. For instance, employees would be likely to perceive there to be strong alignment and authenticity in an organization with a strategic priority of customer service, a value that placed people over profit, an ethical stance of treating people fairly, training and rewards focused on excellent customer service, and where the employee was encouraged to appreciate how they were personally able to help deliver that excellent customer service and improve customers' lives. In turn, this would create an environment where employees are more likely to find their work meaningful, provided that this sense of what is held to be meaningful by the organization aligns with what they personally find to be meaningful.

Proposition 2: Organizational strategies in the areas of job design, HRM practices, leadership and culture will create an environment conducive to employees finding meaningfulness in their work, provided employees discern these to be undertaken authentically and with integrity.

Employees who find their work to be meaningful are likely to experience positive outcomes including job satisfaction, happiness, a sense of community and moral flourishing (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Michaelson et al., 2014; May et al., 2014).

Proposition 3: Employees who perceive their work to be personally meaningful will experience positive outcomes including job satisfaction, happiness, a sense of community and moral flourishing.

However, as Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009: 505) note, employees can discern "false gods", and are aware of the difference between authentic values and moral actions on the one hand, and efforts to control or manipulate on the other. They cite the example of nurses who believed that the management focus on teamwork "seemed like a thinly disguised way to get us to 'work harder'" (p. 506). Although attention has been paid to how organizations might go about raising levels of experienced meaningfulness, there has been little attention paid to the potentially *negative* aspects of efforts to manage employees' experience of meaningful work, and we now turn to examine these, alongside employees' potential responses.

3.1 The "dark side" of managing meaningfulness

The management of meaningfulness may be benign in intent and executed authentically and ethically, but it can also be viewed as having a "dark side" that can be invoked to rationalise manipulative or unethical behaviors on the part of the employer (Michaelson et al., 2014). The active management of meaningful work can be used cynically as a means of enhancing motivation, performance and commitment (May et al., 2004) and some have shown that organizations can use the rhetoric of service to a higher ideal to mislead members about the nature of their work, what the organization can offer employees, and about the societal value of the organization, in pursuit of the profit motive (Gross, 2010).

In order to manage work meaningfulness, organizations enter the realm of normative control through discourse and emotion management, since they seek to manage people by fostering their buy-in to a set of values and ideals (Kirkhaug, 2009; Willmott, 1993; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). As Gabriel (1999: 188) notes, in values-based cultures, there are implicit "right" and "wrong" attitudes and behaviors that invade the totality of the individual's

emotional and symbolic life. The organization can be regarded as "colonizing the individual's consciousness" (ibid: 188), molding their sense of self and their personal identity through seeking to enforce not only behaviors but also the feelings, aspirations and deeply-held beliefs of individual workers (Lincoln & Guillot, 2006). The suggestion that organizations might seek to enhance the meaningfulness of work for sales staff by incorporating goals for their family members, such as being able to send their children to good schools, into their workplace goal setting (Michaelson et al., 2014), in other words appealing to their sense of the wider purpose of their work, is indicative of how the construct of meaningfulness can blur the boundaries between personal life and work and be subverted for performative intent.

Related bodies of literature have shown that where organizations seek to manage employees' experienced meaningfulness through processes of socio-ideological control without giving them the power to choose whether to "opt into" these, then this will lead to negative outcomes such as inauthenticity and meaninglessness (Duchon and Plowman, 2005; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Karreman & Alvesson, 2004). Gabriel (1999: 184) refers to this phenomenon as the "symbolic manipulation of meanings". Gross's (2010) case study of Amway Corporation illustrates how core components of meaningful work such as a sense of community can become used as a cost-effective resource to motivate individuals to undertake trivial or routine tasks (Gross, 2010). Berkelaar and Buzzanell (2015) and Bunderson and Thompson (2009) show how the notion of "calling" work can be invoked as a form of normative social control to elevate the experienced meaningfulness of work and encourage the exploitation of employees through low wages, long working hours, even harming their physical and mental health. Rose (1990) refers to this as "governing the soul".

Thus, under specific circumstances, the authentic and ethical intent of meaningfulness strategies can become subverted to the needs and wishes of a powerful elite, leading employees to experience alienation and dissonance between the reality they observe in their daily working lives and the rhetoric of the corporation (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) found that employees are adept at discerning the difference between genuine and authentic efforts to manage meaningfulness, and instances where such efforts are merely a technique or an exchange, notably, when meaningfulness is substituted or controlled, when there is no time to discern the morally right course of action or to act on one's moral principles, then experienced meaningfulness is eroded. Employees are therefore not passive recipients of employer strategies to manage meaningfulness, but actively scan their environment for clues as to the authenticity of organisational efforts (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Cartwright & Holmes, 2006). Such subversion of the management of employees' experienced meaningfulness of work will also of course be detrimental to organizations themselves and lead to negative outcomes in terms of diminished trust, engagement, commitment and ultimately performance and sustainability (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006). In the following sections of the paper, we consider the potential implications of this from the employee perspective and introduce the notion of "existential labor".

*3.2 **"Existential labor"***

With the increasing focus in modern corporations on management through culture and values (Michel, 2011), and the prevalence of initiatives such as employee engagement (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009), it is inevitable that many individuals will be employed in settings where there are overt or covert efforts made to manage the meaningfulness they experience in their work (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). The meaningfulness and HRM literatures have been relatively

silent on the question of how employees may choose to respond to organizational initiatives geared towards raising their levels of experienced meaningfulness. There is evidence emerging that where employees perceive initiatives to be consistent and authentic, and there is a strong degree of alignment between their own sense of meaningfulness and that demonstrated by their employer, then their responses may well be positive and they are likely to experience their work as genuinely meaningful (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). Employees may also, of course, discern their work to be meaningful independently of any active efforts on the part of the employer to manage this experience.

However, where employees experience organizational efforts as inauthentic and/or mis-aligned with what they themselves find meaningful, then the situation is different. As Leidner (2006: 445) notes, workers often respond to such organizational efforts "with mistrust, using irony, cynicism and guile". Meaninglessness can also result when the gap between rhetoric and reality is too great and inauthenticity is discerned (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009), resulting in employees experiencing negative emotions such as anger or stress (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006). For a range of reasons, employees may not be in a situation where they feel able to express their authentically-held views and opinions concerning what is meaningful to them, or to present a false front. For example, employees may be motivated by *defensive* reasons such as the need to retain their jobs on the one hand, or by *assertive* reasons such as the wish to seek advancement opportunities on the other, and so outright rebellion against what they perceive to be organizationally mandated meaningfulness might not be an option open to all (Hewlin, 2003; Zivnuska, Macmar, Witt, Carlson & Bratton, 2004). Thus, individuals may choose to suppress their real opinions or to express fake views for personal reasons when faced with initiatives aimed at managing their levels of experienced meaningfulness, in other words, to construct and

present an identity that they believe would be looked on favourably by managers (Hughes, 1951), leading to what Goffman (1959) refers to as "front stage" and "back stage" behaviors, or the creation of a repertoire of possible selves (Alvesson, 2010). Such behaviors can be viewed as a survival strategy in the face of the perception of a threat to their job and career security, but also potentially to their image and their sense of self (Collinson, 2003). Individuals are strongly motivated to build and maintain a sense of meaningfulness and to avoid feeling alienated from the rest of the world (Heine et al., 2006), and hence there is a primary drive to eliminate or control the sense that work is lacking in meaningfulness.

Studies have suggested a variety of ways in which employees can seek to control their image at work, including their emotional responses through processes of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), their facial and bodily displays through aesthetic labor (Witz, Warhurst & Nickson, 2003), their affective expression (Parrott, 2001) or even their degree of innovative work behavior (Parker & Griffin, 2011) through impression management tactics (Bolino, 1999) in an effort to "fit in" with organizational requirements. Thus, in a variety of contexts and for a range of reasons, individuals can consciously choose to act in ways that may, or may not, be consistent with their real, authentic selves (Bolino, 1999; Kang, Gold & Kim, 2012). An example of this would be Fineman's (2006: 279) description of how workers in one organization were required to participate in "fun moments" as part of a package of measures aimed at boosting commitment, with those failing to demonstrate sufficient "fun" experiencing stigmatization.

We draw on three bodies of literature that seek to conceptualize the ways in which employees can present a "false front" at work: emotional and aesthetic labor (Hochschild, 1983; Kammeyer-Mueller, Rubenstein, Long et al., 2012; Mesmer-Magnus, DeChurch & Wax, 2012; Witz et al., 2003), impression management (Bolino, 1999; 2014; Jain, 2012), and facades of

conformity (Hewlin, 2003; 2009). Building on these, we argue that employees, under certain conditions, when faced either with efforts to manage their experienced meaningfulness that they feel are inauthentic, and that bring with them the possibility of negative repercussions arising from failure to comply, or where they can see the potential for self-advancement by presenting a particular image, can respond through meaningfulness displays, which we term "existential labor". By "existential labor", we refer to the actions, behaviors and espoused attitudes overtly adopted by individuals in response to organizational efforts to manage work-related meaningfulness. For instance, this might entail faking enthusiastic support for culture change initiatives by pretending to buy into the organization's culture change initiative, when in reality one does not believe in it, or it might entail deliberately acting in particular ways to demonstrate alignment of one's behavior with the organization's values in order to secure a positive performance rating in the annual review, even though one does not share those values. This is akin to Legge's (2005) notion of "resigned behavioural compliance" or Willmott's (1993) "instrumental compliance" (Kenny, Whittle & Willmott, 2011: 101).

The concept of existential labor builds on and extends other forms of display such as the emotional displays characteristic of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983). Mesmer-Magnus et al. (2012: 7) state that, "emotional labor requires workers to subordinate their genuine emotions in order to display emotions which are consistent with work role expectations"; this takes place through a process of "emotion regulation" which comprises both conscious and unconscious efforts to change an emotional response. In line with the emotional labor literature, we distinguish between two main forms of existential labor.

Deep existential acting is a congruent existential state whereby the individual both displays and internalizes the meaningfulness they perceive to be mandated by their employer

(adapted from Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012: 9-13). In this way, the individual attempts to alter their own experienced meaningfulness to align this with what they perceive to be required by the organization. For instance, an employee working in a call centre finds their work meaningful when they are able to help and support vulnerable or worried customers. In consequence, they feel it important to spend a long time talking with each customer to build a rapport and ensure their needs are being met. However, their employer is more concerned with call handling times and imposes strict limits on the length of calls to maximise the number of customers handled in the day. By engaging in deep existential acting, the employee deliberately sets out to change their perception of the situation and tries to find it more meaningful to meet the needs of many customers in the day rather than meeting the needs of fewer, even if that means sacrificing time with each individual. In this way, the employee changes not only their behavior but also their attitude towards and perception of what is meaningful about the situation.

Surface existential acting occurs when the individual acts in accordance with perceived organizational expectations around meaningfulness displays even if their true values and beliefs are inconsistent. In line with the emotional labor and facades of conformity literatures, two processes of personal regulation are likely to be in play here (Hewlin, 2009). The first is the suppression of contrary views and attitudes, and the second is the amplification of concordant views and attitudes. For example, an employee might hold strongly-held views against animal testing but they work for a cosmetics firm whose values centre around developing safe and hypo-allergenic products and uses animal testing in the belief that this will ensure the safety and satisfaction of their customers. In the case of existential suppression, the employee would suppress their contrasting viewpoint and not express an opinion either way. In the case of existential amplification, they may choose to express the view that they believe animal testing is

right in order to present a persona that fits with the prevailing sense of what is meaningful in the organization. In both cases, the employee does not seek to change their own experienced meaningfulness, but rather seeks to act "as if" what the organization requires is meaningful to them.

Although in the emotional labor literature, it is argued that deep acting requires less effort than surface acting since deep acting results in congruent emotions and is antecedent focused, ie individuals seek to adjust their emotions prior to their encounter with another rather than after (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013), we argue that the reverse is true for existential labor. This is because challenging one's personal and deeply-held sense of what is meaningful will likely require significant investments of personal energies, far more than would be the case in managing one's emotions.

These notions give rise to our fourth proposition:

Proposition 4: The two forms of existential labor (surface and deep existential acting) are unique and distinct from one another, and constitute different ways of responding to perceived organizational efforts to manage the meaningfulness of work. Deep existential acting will be more effortful for the individual than surface existential acting.

3.2.1 The antecedents and outcomes of existential labor

What factors might cause employees to engage in existential labor? The related literatures give some insights into the likely antecedents. These can be categorized at the individual and the organizational levels.

3.2.1.1 Individual antecedents

At the individual level, it may be the case that individual factors such as personality traits may influence whether people are prone to engage in existential labor. We can identify two personality traits that may be especially salient in surface existential acting. First, studies of emotional labor show that individuals who are high in neuroticism are more likely to report utilizing surface acting strategies than deep acting strategies (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). The same is likely to be true for existential labor. Those who experience high levels of neuroticism tend to feel nervous and insecure and are more attuned to negative situational cues (McCrae & Costa, 1987; Phipps, Prieto & Deis, 2015). Such individuals might feel that it is not safe to express what they truly believe to be meaningful at work, and would find it less challenging to engage in surface rather than deep existential acting, which would make greater demands on them in terms of their personal resources.

Studies in facades of conformity and impression management have found that individuals who are high self-monitors may be more concerned than others with fitting in (Hewlin, 2003; 2009; Fuller, Barnett, Hester et al., 2007). Building on this, it could be conjectured that such employees would be motivated to engage in surface existential acting since they are sensitive to situational interpersonal cues concerning what is regarded as acceptable behavior, and hence are more liable to act "as if" they buy into organizational rhetoric concerning what is meaningful. Low self-monitors tend to be less sensitive to social cues and adopt behaviours that are more consistent across different situations (Snyder, 1974), and consequently may be less likely to engage in either forms of existential labor.

We can also identify two personality traits that may be associated with deep existential acting. First, in the emotional labor literature, it has been argued that those high on conscientiousness report higher levels of deep acting than those who are low on conscientiousness (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). This is because individuals reporting high levels of this trait tend to be reliable, dependable, ambitious and persevering in the face of difficulty (Barrick et al., 2001; Phipps et al., 2015), and hence we can argue in the case of existential labor they are more likely to be willing to expend the effort necessary to engage in deep rather than surface existential acting in order to fit in with the perceived requirements of their employer around meaningful work.

Drawing on Hewlin (2003), we additionally argue that individuals with a collectivist orientation are more likely to embrace interests shared by the group compared with those who have individualistic values and who are more likely to be autonomous and self-contained. In consequence, such employees may be motivated to make the extra effort required to engage in deep existential acting if they perceive this to be necessary to fit in with their colleagues and adopt accepted standards of meaningful work in the organization.

Taken together, these suggest some potentially significant links between personality traits and the tendency to engage in deep or surface existential acting. This leads to our fifth proposition:

Proposition 5: Individuals who are high on neuroticism or self-monitoring are the most likely to engage in surface existential acting, and those who are high on conscientiousness and collectivism are the most likely to engage in deep existential acting.

3.2.1.2 Organizational antecedents

Prior research suggests that certain organizational conditions are likely to create settings conducive to high levels of existential labor. We link our discussion of these to the four categories of meaningfulness strategies identified earlier, namely, job design, HRM, leadership style, and culture and values.

Certain types of *job design* may be more strongly associated with existential labor than others. For instance, low levels of perceived person-job fit may well foster the adoption of deep existential acting among employees. Scroggins (2008) argues that high levels of person-job fit are associated with meaningfulness because the match between the individual's self-concept and their work tasks taps into the motivating potential of work. Where individuals are unable to achieve this congruence, then work is likely to be perceived as less meaningful. To compensate for this, employees may choose to adopt deep existential acting strategies to alter their perceptions of their work role. Other potential strategies may be possible, such as engaging in job crafting to alter the meaningfulness of work by, for example, extending the boundaries of the job into areas perceived as more meaningful (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), but this option may not be open to all employees. Altering one's perceptions of the job to create a stronger alignment between the type of work that the employee sees as meaningful and the work actually undertaken through deep existential acting is an effortful strategy, but may be appealing to employees as a means of addressing the fundamental need to experience work as meaningful.

Another situation that may give rise to existential labor in relation to job design occurs when jobs offer a depleted relational architecture (Grant, 2007) that limits the extent to which the employee comes into contact with the beneficiaries of their work. Studies have repeatedly shown

the significance of interpersonal contact and positive relationships for work to be experienced as meaningful (Michaelson et al., 2014; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). This is because a sense of belonging and contribution are core to meaningfulness (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). For example, Pavlish and Hunt (2012) show how direct contact with patients is an important component in meaningful work for nurses. However, not every job offers the opportunity for the kind of significant and frequent contact with beneficiaries outlined in Grant's (2007) study. For instance, workers in a factory responsible for packing confectionery into boxes would not have the opportunity to meet with retailers or customers, which would limit the job's potential to give rise to experienced meaningfulness. In cases such as these, the drive to experience work as meaningful may encourage employees to engage in deep existential acting to alter their perception of their work as meaningful despite the absence of such contact.

Proposition 6: Low levels of perceived person-job fit or jobs with a depleted relational architecture may foster the adoption of deep existential acting strategies among employees.

Studies have suggested that certain *HRM policies and practices* may foster an environment conducive to existential labor. Job security has been regarded as a foundational requirement for meaningful work (May et al., 2014), and so insecure jobs might encourage employees to engage in surface existential acting in order to demonstrate that they "fit in" and to increase the likelihood of continued employment and career advancement (Kang et al., 2012). Equally, reward systems that reinforce and reward behaviors consistent with organizational values and beliefs are more likely than others to encourage employees to adopt surface existential acting strategies geared towards creating the impression that they have internalized the values of the organization (Hewlin, 2003).

HR strategies that emphasize through the appraisal and reward systems the importance of engagement in corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities such as volunteering for a local charity could reinforce employees' sense of meaningfulness by providing them with the opportunity to see the wider benefits of their work (Michaelson et al., 2014). However, paradoxically, they could also foster surface existential acting when there is a discrepancy between what the employee finds personally meaningful and the chosen charitable cause. For example, if an employee feels strongly about wildlife, they might find it deeply meaningful to support a charity through their work that is devoted to helping animals. However, they might find it much less personally meaningful to support a charity that is focused on helping individuals with a particular health condition. In such a case, the employee may feel the need to act as if such a charity mattered to them in order to fit in with the rest of their team.

HR can also play a role in developing and implementing systems of control and surveillance (Barratt, 2003), such as the use of surveillance cameras to watch employees at work or the use of call monitoring software. The use of such systems has been associated with alienation and resistant responses (Barratt, 2003; Collinson, 2003; Ellis & Taylor, 2006; Gabriel, 1999), and has also been associated with the erosion of meaningful work since it signals a lack of autonomy and respect (Tablan, 2015). Such surveillance and control strategies could encourage employees to adopt surface existential acting strategies in order to manipulate managers' attitudes towards them. For example, if an employee feels that they are being closely observed at work, this is likely to enhance their self-monitoring and to encourage them to think more carefully about the interpretations managers may place on their behavior.

Finally, Brannan et al.'s (2015) research suggests that the creation of a strong employee brand may serve to mobilise a sense of meaningfulness at work through employees' buy-in to

strong brand values. Conversely, however, their research also shows how the management of the employee brand could be used in the context of career management to construct an idealized future and the promise of a prestigious career that is largely illusory in order to persuade employees to persist with what is essentially mundane work. In the process, such an approach could foster surface existential acting among staff keen to convey the impression that they share the values of the brand in order to further their career.

Proposition 7: Insecure jobs, reward systems that focus on the alignment with values, CSR initiatives that are not aligned with what is personally meaningful to employees, control and surveillance and strong employee branding may encourage surface existential acting.

Research has suggested that leadership style can have an important role to play in creating an environment conducive to meaningful work, for example, through participatory approaches that invite employees' authentic involvement in decision-making (Tablan, 2015), or through the articulation of an inspiring vision that takes employees beyond their day-to-day work (Michaelson et al., 2014). However, it may also be the case that leadership can encourage forms of existential labor. For example, low-quality leader-member exchange relationships (LMX) have been associated with meaninglessness of work among employees (Pavlish & Hunt, 2012; Drory & Zaidman, 2007; Tummers & Knies, 2013) since they deprive employees of inter-personal connections and supportive relationships that can be important for meaningfulness. Under such circumstances, employees may be more likely to resort to surface existential acting in order to appease line managers and leaders.

Proposition 8: Low quality LMX relationships may foster surface existential acting.

Finally, we consider the role of *cultural and values-based management* in existential labor. Rosso et al. (2010) argue that organizational missions and values can provide an important source of meaningfulness for employees, but that lack of authenticity can lead to negative responses. We propose that mission and values can potentially foster surface existential acting on the part of employees. The discourse around organizational values may engender a response of surface existential acting when employees perceive a discrepancy between organization's espoused values and the values they see enacted on a day-to-day basis. Employees may also respond with a strategy of surface existential acting when they perceive a discrepancy between their own personal values and those of the organization.

Proposition 9: Employees may engage in surface existential acting when there is a discrepancy between espoused and enacted organizational values or between their personal values and those of the organization.

3.2.1.3 Outcomes and moderators of existential labor

Research has highlighted the positive outcomes associated with authentically meaningful work, such as job satisfaction, engagement, spiritual growth and community (Gupta et al., 2014; Kahn, 1990). However, meaningless work has been associated with negative outcomes such as alienation and cynicism (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). Equally, studies have drawn attention to the negative outcomes associated with various forms of "acting" at work such as surface acting and facades of conformity, including reduced job satisfaction, exhaustion, strain, burnout, depersonalization and intent to quit (Harris, Gallagher & Rossi, 2013; Hewlin, 2009; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2012; Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). This has been attributed to the emotional energy required to present a false front to the world, depleting

people's ability to cope with their situation and engendering negative emotions (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). In light of this, it is likely that surface existential acting will be associated with similar negative outcomes for individuals due to the effort involved. Notably, surface existential acting is likely to take considerable energy, leading to exhaustion, and to lead to employees feeling disconnected from their true selves. In addition, it is likely that individuals will be motivated to want to leave their employer if they perceive a discrepancy between what is personally meaningful to them and the meaningfulness they feel obliged to display at work.

Proposition 10: Surface existential acting will be associated with negative outcomes for individuals, namely, exhaustion, depersonalization and intent to quit.

However, studies in the emotional labor literature have shown that deep acting, which is a concordant form of emotional labor, is positively associated with job satisfaction and negatively associated with exhaustion. This has been attributed to the fact that deep acting is an antecedent focused strategy that requires individuals to manipulate their emotions prior to experiencing them in order to internalise them successfully (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2012). As such, deep acting is more effortful, but also more personally rewarding, creating a congruent state and strong alignment between felt and displayed emotions.

In contrast to this, we anticipate that deep existential acting will give rise to either positive or negative outcomes for the individual in terms of exhaustion, depersonalisation and intent to quit, depending on the specific situation. Although deep existential acting is a congruent existential state, as we saw earlier, what is meaningful to an individual is subjective, profoundly felt, and most likely arises from multiple sources (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Schnell, 2011). Because of this, as mentioned previously, seeking to alter our sense of what is meaningful

requires very considerable effort that far exceeds the effort required to alter our emotions. It may even prove to be an impossible or undesirable challenge for some. Under conditions where the individual has time to reflect and consider what is personally meaningful to them and to think through and question the causes of any misalignment with the meaningfulness that arises from their employer, then employees may make the free choice to change the nature of the meaningfulness of their work and its expression through deep existential acting. In this case, deep existential acting may give rise to positive outcomes such as job satisfaction, harmony, and intent to remain.

However, where the employer seeks to impose their own views on the employee without taking account of their autonomy and freedom to choose (Tablan, 2015; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009), then the employee may feel constrained to adopt a strategy of deep existential acting through self-preservation or the desire for advancement. The employee may feel they have no choice other than to alter their personal meaningfulness to align with that of the employer. Under such circumstances, it is probable that negative outcomes will arise such as alienation, dissatisfaction and intent to quit.

Proposition 11: Deep existential acting may give rise to positive outcomes including job satisfaction, harmony and intent to remain when employees perceive they have the freedom to choose; however, when employees feel constrained to adopt deep existential labor strategies then negative outcomes such as exhaustion, depersonalization and intent to quit may arise.

In addition to these relationships, we also propose that a number of factors may serve to moderate the associations between the variables in the model presented in Figure 1. The first is the quality of leader-member exchange (LMX - Phipps et al., 2015). High-quality LMX may

serve as an important resource for employees when determining which existential labor strategy to use. Whereas surface existential acting requires less effort on the part of the employee and therefore may often be the easier of the two options, if employees feel that they have a supportive leader who invests him or herself in nurturing and developing them, then they may perceive that they have sufficient material and emotional resources at their disposal to engage in deep rather than surface existential acting. Therefore even employees who are low in conscientiousness or collectivism may be motivated to put in the additional effort required for deep existential acting, and so we propose:

Proposition 12: LMX will moderate the association between conscientiousness and collectivism with existential labor strategies.

Since the choice to adopt existential labor strategies is likely to be influenced by the organizational setting, we also propose that the extent to which the organization encourages the expression of divergent viewpoints and the strength of norms around existential labor (c.f. Harris et al., 2013; Hewlin, 2009) will moderate the association between the antecedent factors and the choice of existential labor strategy. The discourse around organizational values may engender a response of surface existential acting when employees perceive a discrepancy between organization's espoused values and the values they see enacted on a day-to-day basis when they believe the organization has a low tolerance for divergent viewpoints or there is a norm of high levels of existential labor. This would arise for example when there is an espoused value of fairness, and employees see staff being treated unfairly, but the culture is such that employees feel disempowered from expressing their true opinions. In such a situation, employees may be fearful of a backlash against them if they were to speak out. However, if there is either a high tolerance for divergent viewpoints, or there is no established norm of high levels of existential

labor, then employees would not be motivated to engage in existential labor but would feel able to express their true beliefs about the situation.

Employees may also respond with a strategy of surface existential acting when they perceive a discrepancy between their own personal values and those of the organization when they believe leaders and managers have a low tolerance for divergent viewpoints or there is an organizational norm of high levels of existential labor. In such circumstances, an employee may pay lip-service to the values of the organization in order to fit in, expressed through surface existential acting. However, there may also be circumstances in which an employee would engage in deep existential acting in response to a perceived discrepancy between their personal values and those of the organization where there is a high tolerance for divergent viewpoints or no organizational norm of high levels of existential labor. For instance, under such circumstances, individuals with high levels of conscientiousness or who have a collectivist orientation would be more likely to use deep existential acting strategies in response to perceiving their values diverged from those of their employer than those low on those traits, where they believed that doing so would yield benefits to them such as ongoing employment or career advancement.

Proposition 13: Perceptions of the tolerance for divergent viewpoints and organizational norms concerning existential labor will moderate the association between employees' views concerning the discrepancy between espoused and enacted organizational values and their views concerning the discrepancy between their own values and those of the organization, with the choice of existential labor strategy.

Proposition 14: The association between conscientiousness and collectivist orientation towards work with deep or surface existential acting will be moderated by tolerance for divergent viewpoints and organizational norms concerning existential labor.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

These propositions are reflected in our Model of Existential Labor (Figure 1).

4. Discussion

4.1 Directions for future research

Given the increasing focus on meaningfulness within the workplace, we are likely to witness a growing emphasis of understanding the features of meaningful work and how a sense of meaningfulness can be fostered through management actions. Despite the amount that has been written on the topic, empirical research on meaningful work is surprisingly scarce (Authors, 2) and there is therefore considerable scope for further studies exploring how, and under what circumstances, the management of meaningfulness can lead to successful outcomes for individuals and organizations. An additional avenue for future research focuses on whether meaningfulness arising from different domains ie task, role, interactions or the organization will lead to different outcomes, and further research on this would be welcome. Research could also explore the interactive effects of the four domains of meaningfulness; for instance, what happens when job designs are conducive to meaningful work but interactions with the supervisor serve to reduce them?

Conversely, little is known about what happens when meaningfulness management strategies go wrong and are perceived as inauthentic by employees. We have suggested here that

a likely response is existential labor and negative outcomes for employees. Further research that investigates the variants of existential labor, their antecedents and outcomes in different contexts would be welcome. For example, it would be possible to undertake quantitative research to explore whether factors at the individual or organizational level serve to moderate the association between meaningfulness strategies and existential labor states, as indicated in our model. In addition, it would be interesting to explore the difference in outcomes and employee experiences between strategies that specifically intended to mislead or manipulate employees on the one hand, versus simply poor communication on the other.

Our review therefore suggests that there are a number of important avenues for future research on the topic, focusing on the propositions outlined above. In addition, there is also scope for more qualitative studies that investigate individuals' lived experiences of meaningful work in a variety of settings and occupational types. For instance, are some organizational settings or sectors more conducive to the experience of work as meaningful compared with others? Do some types of organizational culture or management style tend to promote existential labor amongst their employees? It would be interesting to know more about how individuals come to regard their work as meaningful, and the relative significance of a range of work-related experiences, in helping to render work more or less meaningful. Qualitative studies would also enable an investigation of the link between individuals' experiences of meaningful work and organizational efforts to manage meaningfulness experiences. Studies on the link between HRM practices and the experience of work as meaningful have yet to be conducted, and there is considerable scope for further studies that explore this potentially important link.

Quantitative studies could usefully explore the association between personality traits and the experience of meaningful work and existential labor along the lines suggested above. There

has been virtually no prior research that specifically focuses on these issues, yet understanding more about how personality functions within models of meaningful work and the link with different forms of existential labor strategies would contribute to our understanding of these two constructs. Although earlier research has to some degree been able to shed light on the link between meaningful work and other attitudes such as engagement (Kahn, 1990; Authors, 3) there is still considerable scope for further development of this line of research, alongside studies that examine the attitudinal antecedents, correlates and outcomes of existential labor.

Future research could also explore the dynamic trajectory of experienced work meaningfulness over the life course. It is likely for many that work will have fluctuating levels of meaningfulness, and that this may be linked with experiences in other areas of life outside work or the individual's social context. It would be useful to know whether meaningfulness is momentary and similar in functioning to such experiences as flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), linked with longer term fluctuations depending on work conditions, akin to engagement (Kahn, 1990), or whether it is a relatively stable, subjective state. Obodaru (2012) shows how individuals can compare their current state with imagined alternative selves. In these comparisons, reality can be perceived as either inferior or superior to the imagined alternative, giving rise to positive or negative affective and cognitive states. Similarly, people are likely to compare the reality of their current experienced meaningfulness both with past experiences and alternative realities. Research that explores the subjective comparisons made by individuals between their current perceptions of the meaningfulness of their work and their ideal level of meaningfulness, would be welcome.

Another area worthy of further investigation is meaningful work itself and whether there are perhaps unanticipated or negative features of this. For example, future research could explore

whether it is possible to have "too much" meaningful work, leading to negative outcomes such as workaholism, burnout or the scenario of "it's lonely at the top".

Although there has been some research into the effects of meaningfulness management on overt and covert resistance, the potential significance of existential labor for both employers and employees has received less attention. However, it is probable that there are major risks for both individuals and organizations raised by the inauthenticity inherent in existential labor. For employers, lack of genuine buy-in to organizational initiatives is potentially costly and problematic. For individuals, the sense of self-alienation or meaninglessness that can arise through inauthenticity can inflict psychological harm and self-estrangement (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). Research that addresses the organizational and individual risks associated with existential labor would be welcome.

Finally, research is needed that unravels the potentially complex construct of existential labor. For example, Jain (2012) argues in the related field of emotional labor that such strategies can be focused on the self, the job or the supervisor. It may be the case that there are different forms of existential labor as well, and studies that investigate the different manifestations of this would contribute to our understanding of the construct. The enactment of existential labor may be encouraged or discouraged by different leadership styles and research that investigates this would add to the literature on leadership.

4.2 *Implications for practice*

A number of implications for managerial and HRM practice arise from this investigation. First, HR professionals should consider how their organization seeks to manage the meaningfulness experienced by employees. Our analysis of the literature suggests that a sense of

meaningfulness can arise in several different ways, but that coherence and authenticity are key. Organizations keen to foster high levels of meaningfulness amongst their workforce should consider all four domains of meaningful work and explore the degree of coherence amongst them.

Issues of authenticity and trust are significant; other studies across a wide range of domains have shown that where workers perceive a discrepancy between "rhetoric" and "reality" or view their managers as unreliable or untrustworthy, this is linked with a range of negative personal and organizational outcomes (Innocenti, Pilati & Peluso, 2011; Robinson, Kraatz & Rousseau, 1994). We argue here that these would further be linked with low levels of experienced meaningfulness and enhanced likelihood that individuals would engage in existential labor. HR managers will need to consider how they can create a strong alignment between the aspirations of individual workers, their workaday experiences, and organizational goals and ambitions, and examine how to articulate these effectively if they are to ensure that genuine meaningfulness arises.

In considering meaningfulness within the work context, it is likely that many HR managers will be challenged in helping workers to develop a sense of meaningfulness. Creating explicit links to notions of values linked with helping or serving others, for instance, is likely to be a difficult task, and one that may not be fully amenable to managerial control (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). Ultimately, meaningfulness is experienced by individuals within their work contexts, and, as we have seen, imposing notions of meaningfulness may well be counter-productive and lead instead to existential labor. HR professionals should consider the factors that are likely to give rise to forms of organizational acting, such as reward systems that emphasize "fitting in", and mechanistic structures and systems that allow little room for

individual choice, voice and discretion, and explore the extent to which these are true of their organizations.

Where HR professionals discern high levels of existential labor, it is likely that these will be associated with negative outcomes for individuals and the organization as a whole. In such cases, HR professionals may wish to consider putting in place support systems such as employee assistance programs to help with any apparent high levels of stress amongst the workforce as well as consider longer term strategies to address the underlying causes. In particular, the role of the line manager is likely to be crucial in individuals' experience of meaningful work; ensuring that line managers are appropriately trained and developed to help employees find their work genuinely meaningful should be the cornerpiece of a meaningfulness management strategy.

5. Conclusions

Based on a sense of human potentiality, scholars in the field of management studies have further sought to uncover the ways in which work itself can constitute a source of personal meaningfulness. We have proposed that the state of experienced meaningfulness through work arises through the tasks we perform, the roles we play, the relationships we build, and the organizations that employ us.

Gabriel (1999: 180) notes that postmodern forms of organizational control "reach into the very core of each employee's sense of selfhood and identity, defining his/her very being". In face of increasing awareness of the potential for the management of meaningfulness to yield beneficial organizational outcomes, it is highly likely that many employees will at some stage in their career work for an organization that makes concerted efforts to harness their motivation towards a transcendent cause (Gross, 2010). Although this may be positively perceived by the

individual in cases of authenticity and alignment between corporate rhetoric and reality, the sometimes insidious, superficial or manipulative nature of meaningfulness management means that unexpected outcomes such as existential labor can arise.

Whilst it has been suggested in related areas of study such as culture theory (Willmott, 1993) that people may respond in a variety of ways to organizational efforts to prescribe and manage individual values, and Hewlin's research on facades of conformity (2003; 2009) highlights some of the antecedent factors that can lead to employees conforming to organizational values, our analysis of represents the first effort to map out the terrain of existential labor. We contribute here to the literature on meaningfulness by outlining four domains of meaningful work, and also extend notions within the body of work on emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) by proposing that individuals who engage in inauthentic meaningfulness displays are enacting existential labor. Fundamental to the authentic experience of meaningful work is a sense of trust, coherence and consistency among organizational interventions and strategies. Whilst in work contexts where individuals perceive themselves to be manipulated through overt or covert means to act "as if" they endorse organizational goals or values that lack authenticity or personal resonance, then the outcome can be existential labor, leading to negative outcomes for both individuals and employers. This has practical implications for employers, and unveils a series of unanswered research questions.

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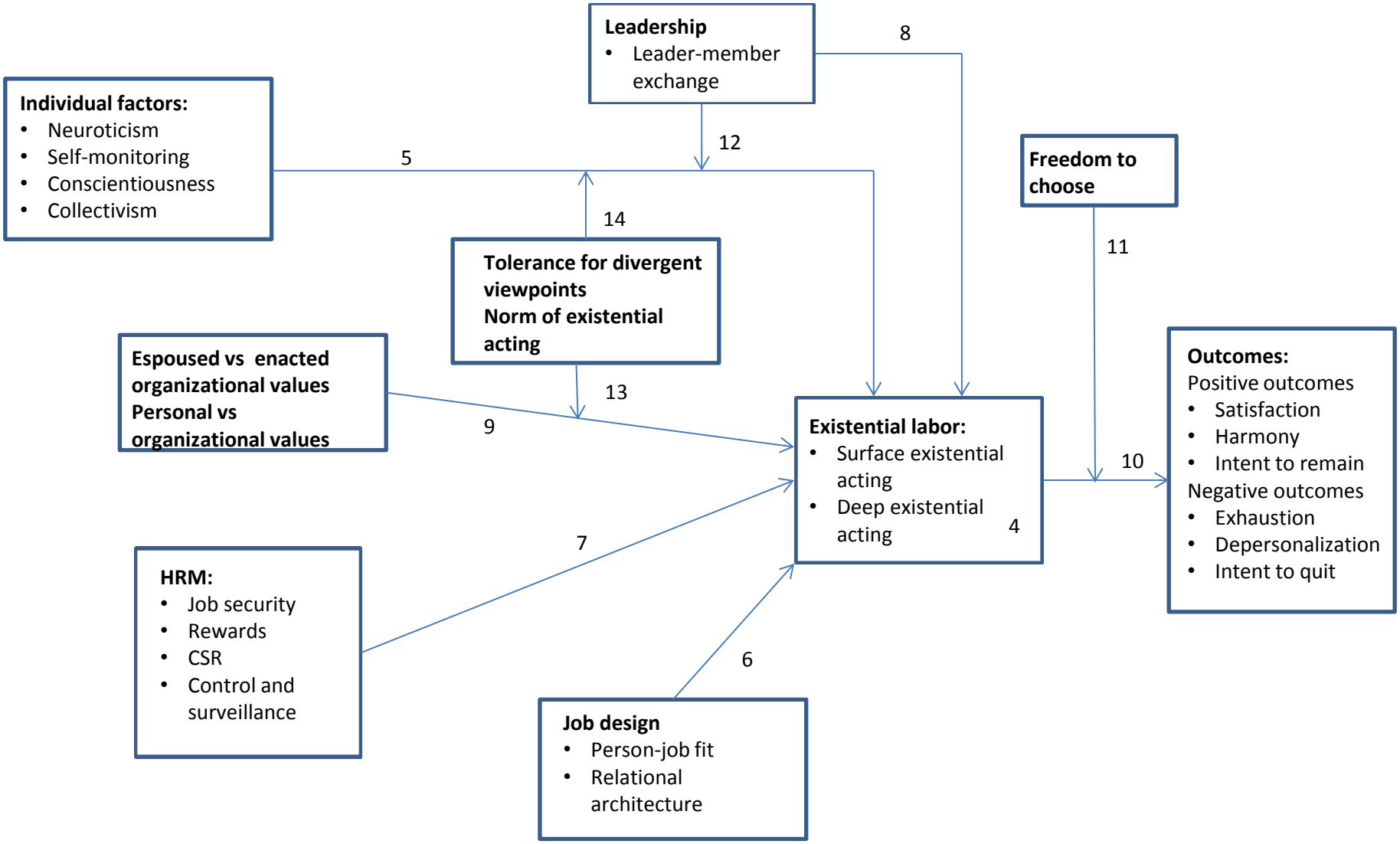

Figure 1: Model of Existential Labor