

This text is from the second chapter of a Thesis for a Pontifical Licence in Social Sciences.

2. Defining meaningful work

We will now discuss the definitions of meaningful work and approaches that researchers assume in their studies. As meaningfulness and meaning are connected, the former being the experienced strength of the latter, we will briefly sum up the wide body of research on meaningful work to make up for the scarcity of studies on the meaning of work. The temporary focus in this paper on meaningful work will enable an analysis of the broader framework of the meaning of work.

2.1 Definitions of meaningful work

Let us start by presenting the research approaches to studies in the field proposed by Bailey et al. (2019b). A review of the empirical literature on meaningful work revealed that there is no common agreed definition of meaningful work. However it has proved possible to classify the approach according to the perspective taken. In their review of most prominent literature and studies Bailey et al. (2019b) grouped the research approaches to meaningful work into 6 dominant categories, each of which represents a different focus and reference to the sources of meaning (p.88-93).

The first one sees meaningfulness as derived from the job characteristics model. It regards meaningfulness as a psychological state that mediates relationships between three job design features - skill variety, task significance, and task identity - and a number of outcomes (Hackman and Oldham 1976:257). Some of the studies in this perspective focus on diverse facets of meaningfulness: personal role engagement, and psychological empowerment. The former defines meaningfulness as “a feeling that one is receiving a return on investments in one’s self in a currency of physical, cognitive or emotional energy [...] that arises from undertaking work that is worthwhile, useful and valuable” (Kahn 1990:703-704). The latter sees meaningfulness as a result of meaning contributing to psychological empowerment composed of a set of four cognitions reflecting an individual’s orientation to their role: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact

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(Spreitzer 1995:1443). This approach may seem the most managerial, in the sense that it focuses on “managing meaning” in order to boost employees’ motivation and work engagement by playing out the leadership and organizational culture components (Lips-Wiersma and Morris 2009:492).

The second perspective examines meaningfulness within workplace spirituality. Duchon and Plowman (2005) view workplace spirituality as “a particular kind of psychological climate in which people view themselves as having an inner life that is nourished by meaningful work and takes place in the context of a community” (p.816). This approach perceives meaningfulness as a multidimensional concept arising from cognitively meaningful tasks, enjoyment, or energizing work, or when work contributes to the wider good. It also encourages learning and personal development as a way to foster a sense of meaning and purpose.

The third perspective tries to connect meaningfulness with various domains in the humanities. Thus, meaningful work is generally regarded as a social, political, ethical, and moral issue. This approach may seem similar to work spirituality, but sees meaningfulness as more intrinsic. The humanities perspective is based heavily on Victor Frankl’s premise that man’s principal striving is to find and fulfill meaning. The search for meaning is the universal human motive because, “the human being is, per definition and necessity, a being whose destiny is meaning, intentions and projects – thus, by nature, a person is involved in his or her being and in his or her becoming” (Aktouf 1992:415). Within its dynamism the search for meaning is an ongoing process, generated from within and revealed externally by action, which should be aligned with such meaning. So, it cannot come from outside as a form of a gift but needs to be actively made by a person. This humanistic paradigm acknowledges the importance of meaningful work in leading a meaningful life, which is identified by the characteristics of authenticity, morality, dignity and ultimate

concern (Lips-Wiersma and Morris 2009:492-3). Meaningful work may contain objective elements like autonomy, freedom, and social recognition, as well as the subjective experience of meaningfulness. (Yeoman 2014:245). A similar proposal claims that meaningful work consists of four sources (with respective sub-themes): developing and becoming self (moral development, personal growth, staying true to oneself), unity with others (sharing values, belonging, working together), serving others (making a difference, meeting the needs of humanity), and expressing full potential (creating, achieving, influencing) (Lips-Wiersma and Morris 2009:499-501). This approach presents a more integrated view, as it tries to seek balance between “being” and “doing”, as well as between “self” and “others” (Lips-Wiersma and Wright 2012:660). Another understanding of meaningful work defines it as “fulfilling, significant, directed, coherent with life goals, and contributing to a sense of belonging” (Schnell, Höge, and Pollet 2013:548).

A further perspective sees meaningfulness as a multifaceted eudaimonic psychological state and is closely linked with positive psychology, and the spirituality and humanity perspectives. One stream of this approach sees meaningful work as a psychological state of happiness, comprising the subjective sense of positive meaning derived from work, the link between meaningfulness in work and in broader life, and the desire to contribute to the greater good. Another stream within this approach links meaningful work with a calling. The stronger is one’s perception of work as a calling, the more meaning it has.

Reviewers have also distinguished the perspective that sees meaningfulness as an occupation-specific phenomenon, for e.g. military work or nursing, and have noted that there are some unique studies whose approach cannot be classified within the above-mentioned perspectives. Other independent definitions and approaches which do not represent any of the more widely adopted perspectives have also been identified (Bailey et al.

2019b:92).

As there are many perspectives and definitions of meaningful work, we will present a few¹. Rosso et al. (2010) define it as “work experienced as particularly significant and holding more positive meaning for individuals” (p.95). Similarly Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012) argue that meaningfulness is “the subjective experience of the existential significance or purpose of life” (p.657). Allan, Autin, and Duffy (2014) see it as “the subjective experience that one’s work has significance, facilitates personal growth, and contributes to the greater good” (p.545). Next, Yeoman (2014) defines it as “work constituted by the goods of autonomy, freedom, and dignity” (p.249), which is rather a business ethics perspective. Finally, Bailey and Madden (2015) define meaningful work as arising when an individual perceives an authentic connection between their work and a broader transcendent life purpose beyond the self (p.2).

After examining many definitions of meaningful work Martela and Pessi (2018) found that there are three elements that are most common: significance, broader purpose, and self-realization. Some researchers define meaningful work using only one of these dimensions, whereas others list two of them or all three as necessary (p.6). Reference to these constructs may not only serve to analyze meaningful work from different angles but also to integrate the separate approaches of scholarship.

Significance is seen as an “overall sense of intrinsic value and worthwhile-ness of work” (Martela and Pessi 2018:6). It indicates how valuable work is for people. The strength of value may be reflected psychologically as experience, or cognitively as someone’s conviction. The significance of work makes it possible to follow in the work environment the values that belong to a person’s value system.

Broader purpose is “connected to the idea that the work must contribute to some greater good, something beyond individual’s own benefits” (Martela and Pessi 2018:6). It means that purpose is not limited to personal goals but reflects the self-transcendent dimension of working. At the same time it makes it possible to participate positively in something bigger than individual goals and in a larger system of shared values. The authors identify broader purpose with purposefulness of work, which goes beyond just earning a salary and is rather to do with

having a positive impact on the wider environment around oneself by serving a cause or people, be it society or even one’s family.

Self-realization is in turn about “self-connectedness, authenticity, and how much we are able to realize and express ourselves through our work” (Martela and Pessi 2018:7). This dimension reflects the alignment between personal strengths and work in order to realize one’s full potential. It is also an indication of being true to oneself. Autonomy is an important factor in self-realization which ensures the freedom necessary to shape one’s work and help to counteract potential alienation.

Proposing an understanding of how these three dimensions are connected, Martela and Pessi (2018) claim a special status for significance, as it operates on a more general level, representing intrinsic value in itself. Broader purpose and self-realization would then be two dimensions representing significance. These two key types of significance refer to the internal and external impact of intrinsic value or work, the former being about the intrinsic value of work beyond the person and the latter about the intrinsic value for the person themselves. In this sense one can observe that significance is about work being important to others and to oneself (p.8).

2.2 Mechanisms of meaning

After presenting the potential sources of meaning, the classification of diverse understandings of meaningfulness, and the different definitions of meaningful work and their common elements, this paper focuses on explanations of how work may become meaningful. To this end a few models of mechanisms of meaning will be presented, beginning with the framework proposed by Rosso et al. (2010). They assume a mechanism is “the underlying engine driving a relationship between two variables, capturing the processes through which one variable influences another” (p.108) and so in the context of the meaning of work the mechanism is “the process through which a particular source influences the meaning or meaningfulness of work” (p.108). The authors recognize a set of seven categories of mainly psychological mechanisms that explain how the meaning of work or meaningful work is constructed: authenticity, self-efficacy, self-esteem, purpose, belongingness, transcendence, and cultural and interpersonal sensemak-

ing (p.108).

Authenticity is explained as “a sense of coherence or alignment between one’s behavior and perceptions of the true self” (Rosso et al. 2010:109) and so it links in a consistent way a source of meaning with the development of self. One of the forms of authenticity is self-concordance manifested by the feeling of internal consistency when one’s behavior is consistent with one’s values or beliefs. Another form of authenticity mechanism consists of identity affirmation processes i.e. verification, affirmation or activation of self-conceptions through work. The last form of authenticity mechanism is personal engagement in work. It is a feeling of being personally immersed in working.

Secondly, the scholars refer to self-efficacy as a further mechanism; this is defined as “individuals’ beliefs that they have the power and ability to produce an intended effect or to make a difference. It contributes to the feeling of capability and control or change. With regard to the mechanism of self-efficacy, the researchers explore the following three sub-areas: control or autonomy i.e. exercising free will to effectively impact one’s work or workplace; competence i.e. experience coming from learning, growing and overcoming challenges in work; and perceived impact i.e. the perception that one can positively influence others through work. (Rosso et al. 2010:109-110).

Thirdly, the mechanism of self-esteem is employed by the scholars to explain the processes through which work comes to be meaningful. It is perceived as a feeling or a state that expresses a person’s evaluation of self-worth. Self-esteem is nourished by accomplishments or affirmations stemming from the work environment and foster the belief that the individual is valuable and worthy (Baumeister and Vohs 2002:610). A strong favorable view of the self is not only recognized as an important human motivation, but also enhances the perception of one’s activity, such as work, as meaningful (Rosso et al. 2010:110).

Purpose is the fourth mechanism discussed by the scholars. It refers to the reasons for which one works or what one intends to attain. Purpose is related to maturity, a sense of directedness and intentionality in life (Ryff 1989:1071). In the work context purpose links present activity in work with future expected states or events such as happiness, love, satisfaction, fulfillment, salvation (Baumeister and Vohs 2002:610). The more a person

sees the connection between their work and its anticipated outcome, the more meaningful the work is perceived to be. Purpose is a close concept to significance. Work that serves a sense of purpose, which is often related with community, society or humanity in general is perceived as more important and significant for an individual. Also, the ability to see the spiritual significance of one's work connects it with serving a higher purpose, which strengthens the meaningfulness of work. In addition, purpose is associated with the concept of value systems². They are regarded as a set of consistent values shared by a group of people. Acting according to their values provides a person with a sense of assurance that their activity is right, shares their values, and serves their purpose. In this context, the role of an organization may consist in imbuing the work with the system of values to be promoted.

Next, belongingness is identified as the fifth mechanism of meaning. It is seen as a drive to create and keep positive, important and sustainable relationships with others. Belongingness influences the meaningfulness by membership of, identification with or a connection with social groups, which boosts the experience of sharing a common positive identity or fate with others. Two aspects within belongingness are social identification with others at work, and interpersonal connectedness. Social identification reflects the desire to form a part of a social group, because it generates a sense of shared identity with a group which is perceived as unique and desirably more valuable than other groups. On the other hand, interpersonal connectedness is the feeling of close relationships at work that generates the experience of comfort and mutual support (Rosso et al. 2010:111-112).

The sixth mechanism of constructing meaning focuses on transcendence, which may be defined as "connecting or superseding the ego to an entity greater than the self or beyond the material world" (Maslow 1971). This mechanism differs from the others in that it does not rely on the connection of self to values, goals or identities, but goes beyond them and sees meaningfulness as resulting from subordination to what transcends the self. One form of transcendence is interconnection i.e. contribution to, or coherence, or connection with something outside of or greater than the self (Lips-Wiersma 2002:512). It is experienced as participation with others in something precious that is attainable by common effort. An-

other form of transcendence is self-abnegation i.e. "deliberately subordinating oneself to something external to and/or larger than the self". This may be seen as a strategy which is the opposite of control but has the same goal, which is the reduction of practical and existential anxieties. By subordination one gains a sense of belonging to something bigger and thus not being alone.

Finally, the seventh mechanism highlights cultural and interpersonal sense-making. This mechanism focuses predominantly on sociocultural forces impacting the construction of the meaning of work and not so much meaningfulness, resulting from alignment with features of self or others, or from the fulfillment of basic human needs such as authenticity, self-efficacy, self-esteem, purpose or belongingness. Some researchers perceive meaning as an inherently social or cultural construction, which is then assumed by an individual. Others who apply the interpersonal sensemaking perspective explain that people construct meaning by interpreting cues from the others in their environment (Rosso et al. 2010:113).

2.3 Paths to meaningfulness

After explaining the mechanisms of creating meaning or the perception of meaningfulness, this paper presents a final step on the path to meaningful work. Rosso et al. (2010) have proposed a theoretical framework showing pathways to meaningful work, based on the most fundamental underlying themes from among the mechanisms. The model builds on the assumption that meaningful work is most likely to be experienced at the intersection of two fundamental dimensions: the desire for agency and the desire for communion, with respect to oneself or to others in both cases (p.113). This concept refers to two basic modalities of people, one being a drive to separate, assert, expand, master, and create (thus pursuing agency), and the other a drive to contact, attach, connect, and unite (thus pursuing communion). Depending on which tendency is followed, the experience of meaningful work is created and maintained differently (Rosso et al. 2010:114). Applying the agency-communion dimension to that of self-other results in four experiences of meaningful work: individuation (self-agency), contribution (other-agency), self-connection (self-communion), and unification (other-communion). The mechanisms of creating meaning may each be assigned to fit one category³. Individuation

"reflects the meaningfulness of actions that define and distinguish the self as valuable and worthy" (Rosso et al. 2010:115), so it means actions directed to foster the self; and comprises the mechanisms of self-efficacy (control or autonomy and competence) and of self-esteem. Contribution "reflects the meaningfulness of actions perceived as significant and/or done in service of something greater than the self" (Rosso et al. 2010:115), so it represents acting for the cause of others, and embraces the mechanisms of self-efficacy (perceived impact), of purpose (significance) and of transcendence (interconnection and self-abnegation). Self-connection "reflects the meaningfulness of actions that bring individuals closer into alignment with the way they see themselves" (Rosso et al. 2010:115), so it is focused on strengthening the alignment with oneself; and encompasses the mechanisms of authenticity (self-concordance, identity affirmation, and personal engagement). Unification "reflects the meaningfulness of actions that bring individuals into harmony with other beings or principles" (Rosso et al. 2010:115), so it is directed to unite the self with others; and encompasses the mechanisms of purpose (value systems) and of belongingness (social identification and interpersonal connectedness). These pathways are not exclusive, but may be present simultaneously and interact.

The four pathways to meaningful work which form the theoretical framework of Rosso et al. (2010) have some similarities with the above-mentioned dimensions of meaningful work from the analysis of Martela and Pessi (2018). Thus self-connection may be close to self-realization, contribution might be similar to broader purpose and individuation would align closely with significance, with which unification could align as well if the definition of meaningful work were to include the work community. The main difference between these two approaches lies in the perception of these concepts as either outside of the definition of meaningful work i.e. as pathways to it, or inside the definition as constitutional elements (Martela and Pessi 2018:9).

After the detailed analysis of a model focused on pathways to meaningful work, this paper presents another interesting model which describes meaningful work as the integrated wholeness that results from an overlap of three themes. These dimensions include the sense of self, work itself and the sense of balance.

The sense of self represents: bringing one's whole self (mind, body, emotion, spirit) to work (and the workplace); recognizing and developing one's potential; knowing one's purpose in life and how work fits into that purpose; having a positive belief system about achieving one's purpose. Secondly, work itself includes: the act of performing; challenge, creativity, learning, continuous growth; the opportunity to carry out one's purpose through work; autonomy, empowerment. Finally, the sense of balance includes: the balance of work self and personal self; the balance of spiritual self and work self; the balance of giving to oneself and giving to others. For work to be meaningful it is necessary to include all of these dimensions and none of them may stand alone (Chalofsky 2003:77-78).

Within the literature one can also find an approach focused on implementation of meaningful work. Bailey and Madden (2016) distinguish features of meaningful work. Qualities of such work include its being self-transcendent, poignant, episodic, reactive, personal. Self-trans-

scendence occurs when work is important to others and not only to the person working. Poignancy points out that meaningful work may be also experienced with mixed or even painful feelings and not only with happiness. Being episodic means that meaningfulness occurs at peak times rather than in a sustained way. Reflectiveness indicates that meaningfulness is experienced in retrospect and on reflection. Being personal means that meaningfulness arises when work is perceived in the wider context of personal life.

After presenting the diverse array of categorisations, models and definitions, the below-presented scheme gathers all major concepts described in Chapter 1 and 2. This specific graphic representation of the above-mentioned terms may serve as a map for the meaning of work.

The diverse definitions, classifications, approaches and perspectives presented in this chapter demonstrate that there is no consensus on an overarching theory that would make it possible to provide a general explanatory system of how

people construct and experience the meaning of work. Also, the studies cited tend to focus on a particular section rather than the whole problem. Since spirituality constitutes an important element in this system, and so opens it to a broader context and dimension, we find reflection from the Catholic perspective useful in contributing to a better understanding of the meaning of work. Thus, the next chapter presents Catholic Social Teaching not only as an instance of spirituality but also as a theological and anthropological outlook on work and its meaning.

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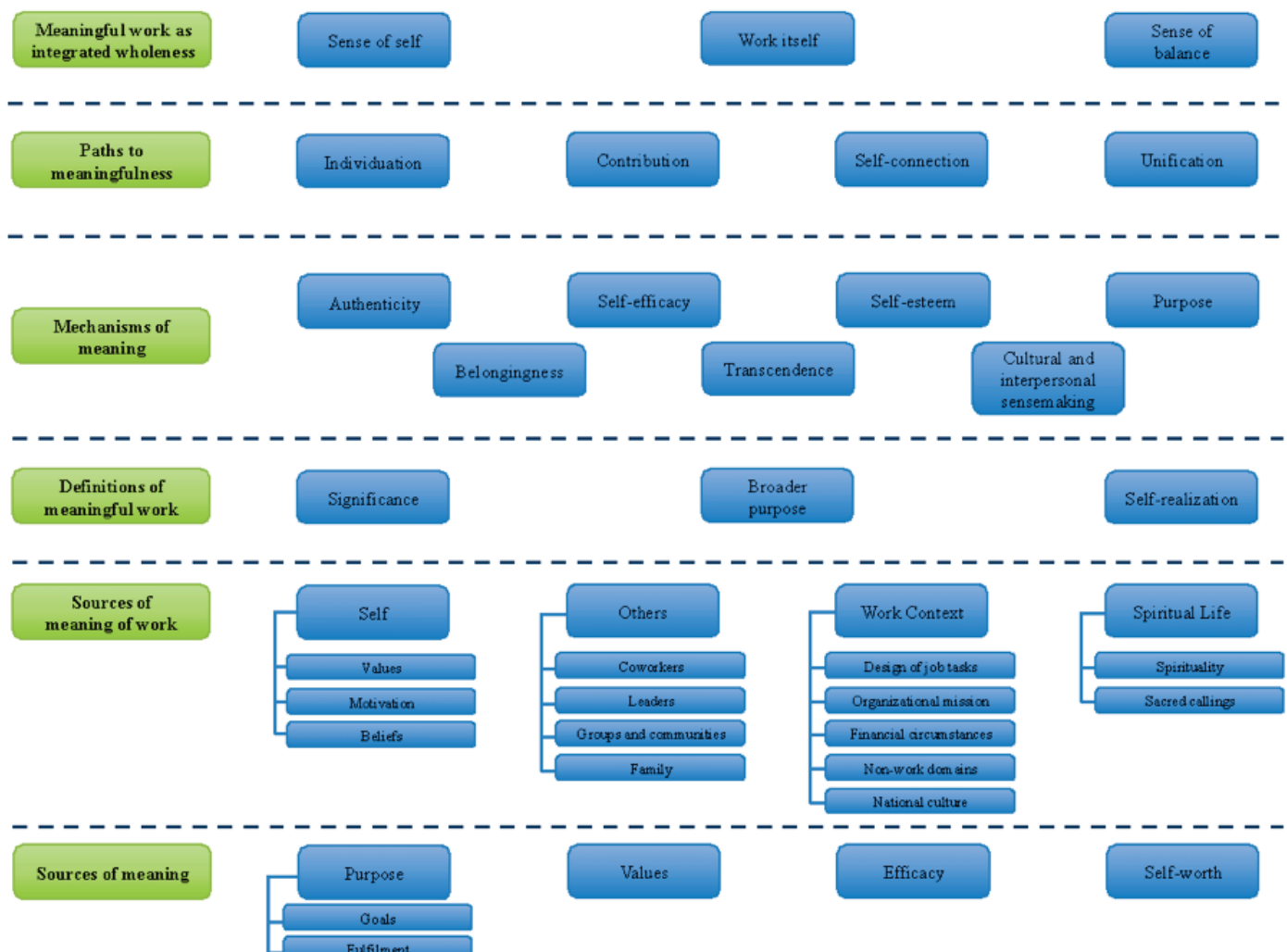


Figure 1. Map for the meaning of work (based on concepts presented in Chapter 1 and 2).

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NOTES

¹ Martela and Pessi (2018) identified and analysed 36 definitions of meaningful work (p.4-5).

² Values have been discussed earlier in the context of authenticity when one's behaviour is consistent with one's values. In terms of purpose, the meaningfulness is derived from sharing the common system of values.

³ The mechanism of cultural and interpersonal sensemaking is not included into the classification among these dimensions as it connected with creating the meaning and not meaningfulness.

