# Discriminating Between 'Meaningful Work' and the 'Management of Meaning'

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ABSTRACT. The interest in meaningful work has significantly increased over the last two decades. Much of the associated managerial research has focused on researching ways to 'provide and manage meaning' through leadership or organizational culture. This stands in sharp contrast with the literature of the humanities which suggests that meaningfulness does not need to be provided, as the distinct feature of a human being is that he or she has an intrinsic 'will to meaning'. The research that has been done based on the humanistic paradigm has been quite fragmented. This article aims to address these gaps through an action research project that actively involved participants in the process of affirming and uncovering the meaningfulness of their work. Our findings contribute to current organizational scholarship and practice as they (a) enable scholars to clearly distinguish 'meaningful work' from 'the management of meaning', (b) bring together the various sources of meaningful work in one framework and show their relationship with each other, (c) clearly show the importance of engaging with both the inspiration towards the ideal as well as the often less than perfect self and the organizational reality in which meaning gets expressed and (d) contribute to our understanding of how to engage individuals in conversations about meaningful work that are not prescriptive or exclusive, but that also show where meanings are commonly held.

KEY WORDS: action research, management of meaning, meaningful work, meaningless work

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## Introduction

The interest in meaningful work has significantly increased over the last two decades through theory development in transformational leadership, organizational culture and, more recently, employee engagement. While in this literature some lip-service has been paid to the humanistic paradigms underpinning the notion of meaningfulness, much of the associated functionalist and managerialist research has focused on researching ways to 'manage meaning'. Such research has also usually avoided studying what has caused meaninglessness in the first place. The limited research that has been done with a non-performative intent has been fragmented and has arrived at a wide variety of sources of meaningful work without addressing their relationship with each other. In both paradigms, very little research has emerged on the process of uncovering meaning.

This article aims to address these gaps through drawing attention to the literature of the humanities on meaningful work and life, which hold that an essential condition of being human is the desire to live meaningful lives. Second, we introduce the results of an ongoing action research project on uncovering meaning which attempts to answer four questions: (1) Can individuals articulate beliefs that

support the claim of the humanities that they have a 'will to meaning' and are committed to living a meaningful life? (2) What are the elements that constitute meaningful work and how do they relate to each other? and (3) What is the relationship between meaningful work and the less than perfect self and often less than perfect organizational context?

In the following sections, we review the literature on meaningful work in management studies as well as in the humanities. Next, we introduce our action research method. We show the theoretical development through our action research cycles and discuss practical implications for the process of uncovering meaningful work. We conclude with suggestions for future research.

## Meaningful work in management studies

It has long been understood that the basic dilemmas of managerial and work life revolve, in one way or another, around the meaning of work (Jackall, 1988), and a variety of disciplines in the humanities have shown that articulating and addressing existential concerns have profound implications for mental and physical well-being. [For a review, see Wong and Fry (1998).] Broadly speaking, when something is meaningful, it helps to answer the question, 'Why am I here?' (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003). More specifically, meaningfulness is defined as 'the value of a work goal or purposes, judged to the individual's own ideals or standards' (May et al., 2004). 'Meaningfulness refers to the degree to which life makes emotional sense and that the demands confronted by them are perceived as being worth of energy investment and commitment' (Korotkov, 1998). When someone experiences his or her life as meaningful, this is a subjective experience of the existential significance or purpose of life. When someone experiences his or her life as meaningless, this is a subjective experience of the purposefulness or existential significance of one's life being diminished. Meaningless work is often associated with apathy and detachment from one's work (May et al., 2004).

During 'the 1980s a renewed interest in work as a source of meaning emerged based on the belief that finding meaning within one's place of work is expected and that meaningful work is as important as pay and security – and perhaps more so' (Pratt and

Ashforth, 2003, p. 309). However, Fineman's (1983) description of the state of research into meaningful work still rings true: 'Work meaning has become tightly circumscribed by pre-determined investigator constructs and measures. We appear to have moved a long way from the idiosyncrasies of subjective meaning of work and the passions of "being" at work' (p. 144). In other words, there is substantial interest into the sources of meaningful work because 'the restoration of meaning in work is seen as a method to foster an employee's motivation and attachment to work' (May et al., 2004). Such research has been based on the assumptions that leadership and organizational culture *can* and *should* provide employees with meaning and that factors that contribute to meaningful work, such as a sense of belonging that a 'strong' organizational culture might encourage, can be studied in isolation from factors that contribute to meaningless work, such as excessive control. This approach stands in sharp contradiction to the literature in the humanities which assumes that '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 (to which alienation is an obstacle): a subject whose whole being is meaning and which has a need of meaning' (Aktouf, 1992, p. 415). Frankl (1969) similarly refers to 'the will to meaning' which he defines as the basic striving of man to *find* and *fulfil* meaning and purpose in life.

As the interest of the scholarly and business communities in 'the management of meaning' increased, some organizational theorists started to question whether healthy outcomes for individuals and society are achieved when meaning becomes a form of normative control (Ashforth and Vaidyanath, 2002; Casey, 1999; Willmott, 1993). Such critics point out that at present organizations, through leadership and organizational culture practices, are not only seeking control of the emotional domain, in prescribing that employees need to smile and be happy, but also the existential domain in prescribing that they experience their work to be meaningful (Ashforth and Vaidyanath, 2002). These authors argue that 'the management of meaning' may in fact reduce the experience of meaningful work. They focus primarily on those elements, such as the performative intent towards which meaning is

used and inherent dissimilarities in power, that cause meaninglessness. However, while both those interested in the management of meaning and those who are concerned about the 'management of meaning' implicitly assume that individuals have a need for meaning (in that the former suggest ways to enhance a sense of meaningfulness for the worker and the latter suggest ways to protect the worker from meaninglessness) neither has made a comprehensive attempt to understand meaningful work from the perspective of the contemporary worker.

In the (very limited and primarily conceptual) contemporary management literature where meaningful work has been framed in a humanistic paradigm, a wide variety of loosely connected sources of meaningful work has been described. For example, in a recent review, Michaelson (2008) finds that meaningful work is discussed in relation to subjective concerns such as self-esteem as well as objective concerns such as the social contribution of one's work, and working conditions for the powerless. Similarly, Ayers et al. (2008) relate meaningful work to objective concerns such as security and dignity as well as subjective concerns such as caring relationships. In one of the few recent examples of empirical studies on meaningful work, May et al. (2004) study meaningfulness in relation to employee engagement. They study the notion of 'psychological meaningfulness' which is a combination of job enrichment, work-role fit (in relation to the fit of values and beliefs) and co-worker relations. Their findings show that a combination of meaningfulness, psychological safety (the ability to show one's self without fear or negative consequences) and availability (the individual's belief that they have the resources to engage the self in work) are important in determining one's engagement in work, with meaningfulness having the strongest effect on engagement. While this study therefore shows that meaningfulness is an important individual and organizational concern, the precise sources of meaningfulness themselves are not studied. This is similar to management research that seeks correlations between meaningful work and discretionary effort. Through questionnaires (May et al., 2004; Spreitzer, 1995) such usually seeks to measure the extent to which the individual experiences his or her work to be meaningful by asking broad questions such as whether the work one does is important, worthwhile, significant or with purpose. However,

such questionnaires do not identify between specific sources of meaning that might contribute to such a sense of significance or purpose.

Finally, it is increasingly argued that different research methods need to be employed to understand meaningful work from the perspective of the worker: 'We need descriptions and stories of meaning-making that facilitate the process of meaning-making not as an other-defined, objectifying intervention but rather as potential inspiration for individuals engaging in a process' (Driver, 2007, p. 25).

In summary, to further our understanding of meaningful work, a helpful starting place might be to (a) frame it as a property of human beings rather than a dimension of leadership or the employing institution, (b) understand the various sources of meaningful work and their relationship with each other, (c) study meaningfulness alongside meaninglessness to discriminate between those systems of meaning which are designed to open up creative possibilities and those which delimit the choices available to individuals (Sievers, 1994), and (d) employ research methods that access the subjective experience of meaningful work.

## Meaningful work in the humanities

Within the humanities, it is usually agreed that the quest for meaning is a universal human motive, and they view loss of meaning as psychological deprivation or even disorder (Klinger, 1998). They acknowledge that meaningfulness might not always be a pre-eminent concern for everyone in every day of one's life, but also agree that the majority of people will, when they find themselves spending inordinate amounts of times on activities that they do not value or for which they see no evident purpose, raise the question: 'what for'? (Klinger, 1998).

In the following section, we examine the question of meaningful living through various domains in the humanities that treat the need to meaning as a central human concern. We focus on the themes of: 'authentic living', 'moral living', 'dignified living' and 'living ultimate concern'. We readily acknowledge that there are nuances and sometimes major differences between authors in each of these disciplines,

and that our review is by no means exhaustive. We have focused on some common themes that distinguish meaningful living from meaningless living. Our intent is to keep both inquiries in view to examine the relation each may have with the other.

### Authentic living

Within the domain of humanistic and existential psychology, the mark of true meaningfulness is that it is based on personal discovery and free choice rather than prescription and domination. The alienation of oneself is considered by existentialists as inauthentic existence. On the other hand, the individual who understands the existential structure of life, and who takes responsibility for life and identity, can be considered authentic (Cooper, 1990). At the core of authentic work is the notion of 'informed will' (Kekes, 1986). This is an ongoing process of identifying meaning that comes from within but that simultaneously requires the choice to act in alignment with such meaning. In other words, for meaning to be meaningful 'it has to be made, not received or found' (Kekes, 1986, p. 75). Every person has to uncover meaning on their own and meaning cannot be prescribed by or defined by another, because if it is prescribed, it is no longer meaningful in the existential sense (Frankl, 1959). Meaninglessness on the other hand arises when meaning is substituted or controlled, as in both these cases, it is no longer authentic. Sievers (1994) in 'Work, Death and Meaning Itself' writes: 'As meaning gets lost (and with it the ability or quality of meaning as a coordinating and integrating source for one's own actions as well as for the interactions with others) motivation has to be invented. Through motivation the lack of meaning of work becomes substituted or converted into the question 'how does one get people to act and produce under conditions in which they normally would not be 'motivated'' to work'?' (pp. 26–27). Motivation in this context is primarily seen as relating to the intrapsychic mechanics of the inner world with no further connection to the outer social world except that, through a series of motivational techniques, it can be manipulated by others (Sievers, 1994).

### Moral living

Within the domain of philosophy, ethical questions confront humanity with the meaning of life as they ask 'How are we to live?' (Singer, 1995). Such questions confront us both with the ultimate purpose of life (discussed in the section below on 'ultimate concern') and ethics for everyday life (Hsing, 1998; Nyberg, 2008). Meaningfulness on a day-to-day basis is lived by practicing virtues such as compassion, honesty, caring and loyalty that translate into 'acts of meaning' (Bruner, 1990). Enacting such virtues requires an 'in the moment awareness' of how one's speech and actions are affecting others based on some conscious or subconscious awareness of the existential significance of such actions (Gardner, 1993). Work then becomes meaningful if it supports the moral development of employees (Bowie, 1998).

Meaningless work occurs when the moral capacity of the individual is diminished. This occurs when talk about moral issues is avoided or the ability to act morally is constrained through either too much control (in the case of e.g. stringent codes of ethics) or implicit or explicit encouragement of immoral behaviour (in, for example, the case where unethical behaviour suits the political agenda of superiors or the short-term profit objectives of the organization). Bird and Waters (1989) found that managers experience a reluctance to describe their actions in moral terms, even when they are acting for moral reasons. 'They talk as if their actions were guided exclusively by organizational interests, practicality, and economic good sense even when in practice they honour morally defined standards, codified in law, professional convictions, and social mores' (p. 73). Such moral muteness can render work meaningless, as it discourages the in the moment awareness of how one's actions and words affect others. Nyberg (2008), in comparing day-to-day ethical decisions of call centre employees, found that employees often made a good decision defined by moral standards, even if it was not the 'right' decision as defined by company-standardized rules. Nyberg argues that ethical codes do not involve choice and if one does not choose to act one has not acted ethically. The extent to which one is therefore able to personally discern and act freely on one's moral principles (Martin, 2000) and the extent

to which the work environment supports moral development (Bowie, 1998) would, from a moral perspective, distinguish meaningful from meaningless work.

### Dignified living

In the domain of sociology, meaningful work is often referred to as just and dignified work (Hodson, 2001; Lamont, 2002; Muirhead, 2004). 'The debate over the moral meaning of work begins with an argument about whether work is basically degrading or enabling' (Wolfe, 1997). Dignified work refers to the right to work and the freedom to make choices. Such freedom is enhanced by just rewards (Phelps, 1997), the ability to resist and oppose (Ciulla, 1998; Lamont, 2002) and the capacity to balance paid work and other commitments, given that paid work is by no means the only or most prominent avenue to meaningful living (Rifkin, 1996). It is consistently found that dignity rests on the opportunity to exercise agency (Hodson, 2001). However, 'In order to understand workplace behaviours we need a theoretical model of the worker who is neither anaesthetized nor limited to resisting management strategies of control. Such models must include central roles for pride in work and for the struggle to create autonomous spheres of activity' (Hodson, 2001, p. 266). In other words, such models would have to address meaningful work.

Meaninglessness in this literature is experienced as the result of a number of negative consequences for worker dignity in the current economic climate such as short-term employment structures, illusory teamwork, changing and specializing work patterns, rapid redundancies of both new and old skills, collapse of company loyalty and the uncertain social world of those moving from job to job (Sennett, 1998). Sennett argues that, as a result of such patterns, workers are in danger of losing their ability to place themselves in a narrative and to see continuity in their lives. Loss of coherence, Sennett argues, leads to loss of character, breakdown in ethical behaviour, loss of community involvement and loss of a sense of personal purpose and fulfilment and hence loss of meaning.

### Living that serves an ultimate concern

In the domain of (workplace) religion and spirituality, meaningfulness is based on the distinction between meaning in the unconditional sense in which *having* any meaning is what seems to matter, and meaning that is conditional (and existential) in that it concerns itself with ultimate questions about the meaning of life and death, the ontological significance of life and deriving purpose in physical existence. Clark (2006) argues that it is unhelpful to sweep up every positive human emotion or psychological state and drive these uncritically and illogically under the umbrella of meaningful living because self-chosen beliefs could mean anything, including selfish materialism, racism or fascism. Simply put, in such definitions, meaning becomes another word for almost every human experience, which is perceived to be pleasurable or right or true to the individual (Sheldrake, 1995). From a spiritual–existential perspective, however, it is important to distinguish between meaning that is unconditional, in that it serves 'ultimate concern', versus conditional meaning which would serve 'false gods' (Tillich, 1987). While questions about ultimate concern are raised within the existential–spiritual domain, they are not exclusively relevant to those with a spiritual belief. Singer (1995) makes a similar argument in a non-theistic way. He too argues that if humanity is to find meaning, the cause for which individuals work must be a transcendent cause, in other words, a cause that extends beyond the boundaries of self. He also argues that it is not enough for such cause to be the football club or the corporation, because true meaning is found in a cause that is connected to 'making the world a better place to live in' and 'adopting the point of view of the universe'. In other words, meaning is distinguished from meaninglessness in that such a cause does not only transcend self, but also transcends the organization to a more universally beneficial legacy.

We attempted to develop our questions around meaningful work further theoretically, and as we can see in the discussions, this theory has been very helpful in explaining various processes and sources in relation to meaningful work. However, we found the multiple disciplines of the humanities to be too fragmented to explain the holistic experience of meaningful work. We therefore chose not to use it

to guide our research design, but used it to explain the data from our action research.

## Research background and context

The research reported in this paper extends an original PhD. study by the first author, hereafter referred to as the original research. The second part of the research reported in this paper is referred to as the current research.

The original research identified what constituted meaningful work for those with a spiritual belief system. The in-depth participative research was based on a small sample of individuals of a variety of occupational backgrounds, spiritual beliefs and ethnic origin. It had an appreciative focus in that it elicited those factors that contributed to meaningful work, but did not specifically focus on the factors that made work meaningless. The methods employed in this original research are described in substantial detail elsewhere (Lips–Wiersma, 2002a, b). From this original research, an initial framework depicting the various elements of meaningful work and their relationship with each other emerged (Figure 1).

In 2002, after the first author had presented the original research in various academic and applied management conferences, the framework that emerged from this original research started to jump off the page and appear on fridges and office walls. It was used as a blueprint for organising a conference on workplace spirituality and started to be used in courses on career management in university and professional settings. Those using the framework reported that it assisted them to make meaning visible, have conversations about it and make conscious choices in relation to meaningful work.

At this point, the first and second author (together with a third colleague) decided to offer some workshops on the framework. These were offered quite organically, i.e. when we would get an invitation, and took place in various settings in Western countries (US, New Zealand, Australia, UK and the Netherlands). We realised from the outset that these workshops would offer an excellent opportunity to develop our practical and theoretical understanding of meaningful work and decided to do action research.

## Action research method

Action research is a participative and democratic process that seeks to redress the balance of power in knowledge creation and increase participants' capacity to engage in inquiring lives (Reason, 2006). Action research is an emergent process (Reason and Goodwin, 1999), and hence, the research design evolves over time.

### *The development of specific research questions: an iterative design*

Action research purposes can be instrumental, theoretical and emancipatory (Reason, 2006). The workshops were designed to do three things: (a) meet the individual participants' need to uncover and discuss meaningful work, (b) provide further theoretical understanding of the concept of meaningful work and (c) further our understanding as facilitators of how to 'work' with meaningful work in ways that would empower individual participants. The very nature of action research (which draws on an extended epistemology that integrates theory and practice) means that these objectives cannot be
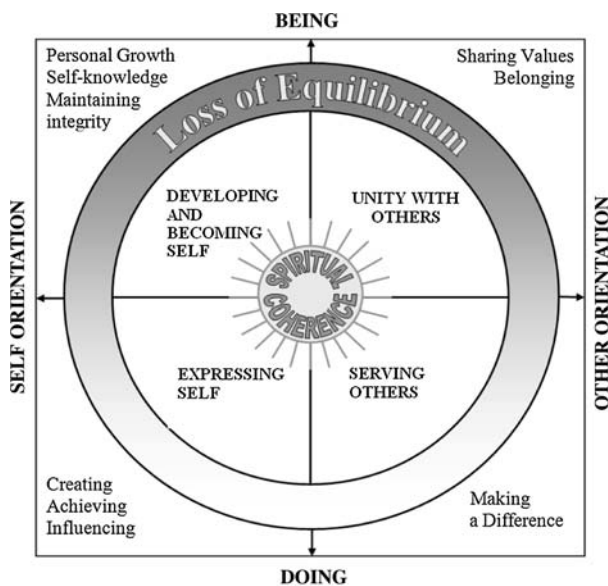


Figure 1. The original 2002 framework.

separated (Reason, 2006), and our results and discussion sections will therefore focus on both process and outcome findings.

Action research varies in the degree to which the research process and questions are pre-determined (Chisholm and Elden, 1993). In our case, we went in with an extant framework from the original research. However, the three research questions described in the introduction emerged from the workshops themselves. Although we present our findings in a sequential manner, the phases of research were iterative and cyclical. The precise questions as well as the theory building emerged throughout the process. In the first research cycle (2002–2004), we started to understand the process of uncovering meaning and how this was related to 'the will to meaning'. In the second cycle (2004–2006), we kept this initial focus *and* started to understand how the various sources of meaning related to each other and why making this relationship visible was important. In the final cycle (2006–2008), we maintained the first two foci *and* started to understand the relationship between meaningful and meaningless work and the importance of being able to articulate both alongside each other. Our theory building occurred throughout all the three cycles.

In order to achieve a combination of both readability and transparency, we (a) show a summary of how the framework developed, by showing the initial and final iteration of it and (b) discuss the development of our theoretical understanding in relation to each of the emergent research questions.

### The sample for our action research

The 214 participants of the 16 workshops had a mixture of spiritual, cultural and occupational backgrounds. Their ages ranged from 24 to 78 and approximately one-third of the participants did not have any form of religious or spiritual belief [this percentage is similar to the average of the participating countries, with the US having the highest percentage of religiosity ($>80\%$) and the Netherlands, the lowest ($<30\%$) – however, even in the Netherlands, 80% of the population believes that there is some sort of spiritual or life force (Woodhead et al., 2002)]. The workshops were attended by individuals from various occupational backgrounds,

who sought to inquire into meaningful work and life.

Congruent with the research design of action research evolving over time, an additional sample group emerged over the last year. This group consisted of those who had participated in one of the workshops and who did not only inquire into their own working lives, but who also started to teach the framework to others. At present, including us, there are about 10 individuals (academics, community workers, consultants, managers, coaches) who regularly use the framework in their own work. These individuals also became part of the inquiry process as they actively participated in discussions on the various changes that the initial framework went through and have tested these out on their respective audiences.

### The roles of the facilitators and the participants

'Although researcher engagement pervades action research, researcher roles run the gamut in terms of centrality and control' (Luscher and Lewis, 2008, p. 224) with the facilitators taking on both active and receptive roles (Marshall, 2001). From the outset, it became clear that although we, as facilitators, offered a framework for meaning, participants felt very strongly about not being passive recipients of the framework. It struck us immediately how important it was to co-construct discussions about meaningfulness. This may point to both the significance of meaning to people from all walks of life *and* their unwillingness to be told what it is or should be for them. We found that the place of meaning-making is a place of quite strong independence for people. We learnt to actively invite participation from the *very outset* of the workshops. In the first ten minutes, we would clarify that we did not claim to be specialists on living meaningful lives, that our initial framework was very much a 'work in progress', which needed questioning and developing, and that ample time would be provided to take the framework apart, add elements and rewrite it in one's own language.

Early on in the first cycle of research, we tried out not offering a framework at all, as from a research perspective, it would be interesting to see whether individuals would eventually arrive at something

similar. However, the consistent feedback was that having a framework for discussing meaningful work was incredibly helpful to inquire into meaningful work. Therefore, we facilitated the first half hour in which we explained the origin of the initial framework and described it very briefly. After that, the workshop became an increasingly collective undertaking (Wadsworth, 2001) shaped by participants 'framing the framework and asking questions about it', 'observing and surfacing discrepancies', 'developing interpretations, new theories-in-action' and 'trying it out' by writing applications for their own settings (Wadsworth, 2001).

Our roles as facilitators changed over the course of each workshop: from 'teller' (as we explained the origin and meaning of the initial framework) to 'shaper' (as we encouraged participants to become engaged in the exercises) to 'participants' (as we collectively discussed our engagement in the exercises in which we would all participate) to 'listener' (as the participants presented their different forms and uses of the framework to each other).

## The process of our action research

Over the different cycles, we increasingly drew on vastly diverse ways of knowing [as described in Reason (2006)]. In the first cycle, we primarily used presentational knowing (as described above), creative knowing (art and poetry) and action knowing (as participants found their own applications for the framework). In the second and third cycles, we added experimental knowing (through embedding the knowledge into stories of work. The quotes of the participants clearly show that meaning is embedded in their own working experience). We also added embodied knowing (we would, for instance, draw rough outlines of the framework on the floor and ask individuals to 'sit in it') and meditative knowing (prayer, meditation, reflective dialogue).

Four exercises were particularly designed to understand the distinctions between meaningful and meaningless work and to test the original framework:

(1) We would ask participants to consider each of the dimensions of the original framework and, in their own words, write a belief that

supported the importance or the meaningfulness of these. This was based on Battlista and Almond's (1973) theory on the development of a meaningful life in which they suggest that when individuals state their lives are meaningful, they have some belief that commits them to meaningful living. We were interested in understanding whether individuals had such a belief and could articulate it.

(2) We would invite participants to place any additional beliefs and dimensions of meaningful work and life that were currently not captured in the framework on a separate page. This exercise was designed to test and extend the first framework by studying whether we had missed out on categories of sources of meaningfulness.

(3) We would ask participants to consider when they had experienced meaningfulness and meaninglessness in each of the elements of the framework (and other elements they may have added) and tell us these stories. This exercise was again based on Battlista and Almond's (1973) theory on developing a meaningful life. Here, they suggest that for a life to be perceived to be meaningful, meaning needs to be enacted.

(4) We would ask participants to work together in small groups around their particular interests (or alone if they so desired) and arrive at an application of their version of the framework for their (work) context.

## Data analysis and theoretical integration

The data consisted of both oral comments (which were captured either by ourselves, a research assistant or the participants) and written material (such as those from exercise 2). We used 'template analysis' to analyse our data. This process occupies a position between content analysis, where codes are all predetermined, and grounded theory, where there is no a priori definition of codes (King, 1998). A priori codes identified were the sources of meaningful working that emerged from the original study. Codes that emerged from the current research data

were 'inspiration' towards an ideal and its relationship to 'reality'. Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing (Nud.ist) software was used to organise the data, but not to analyse the data. An analytical template was developed based on pre-defined codes and emerging codes and a final template decided upon after several readings of the texts by both the authors. Each of these cycles led to further iterations of the framework, which were then tested against theory and in practice through further workshops.

*Quality in action research*

Quality in action research rests *internally* on the ability to see the choices we are making and understand their consequences and *externally* on whether such choices have been made transparently to a wider public (Reason and Bradbury, 2001). While there is no single set of quality standards that are agreed upon for action research, Reason and Bradbury (2001, pp. 448–449) summarise a series of quality indicators. In the following table, we show how we met those criteria (Table I).

*Methodological strengths and shortcomings*

An obvious weakness of our action research (and that of qualitative research in general) is that the sample group is not representative, that we could not stratify our sample (to study whether, for example, there are differences in experience of meaningful work depending on one's position in the organizational hierarchy) and that we could not study a variety of perspectives on meaningful work within one organization (to further understand individual differences in the experience of meaningful work). These shortcomings will need to be addressed in future studies as discussed later.

However, our study also has significant strengths that are particularly relevant to the study of meaningful work. Several authors who have identified the need to better understand meaningful work from an employee perspective also argue for alternative research approaches. The spiritual turn in organizations necessitates and legitimizes a subjective and more diverse and constructivist approach (Steingard,

2005), in which research subjects are 'given maximum space to uncover and express personal meaning as it unfolds (or not) in their lived experience, that is, from situation to situation' (Driver, 2007, p. 26).

Our method was designed to engage individuals in the experience of meaning–making and provide maximum space to uncover and express personal meaning. As the rich data show, this process enabled us to access deeper work meanings that were clearly situated within the individual's work experience. The process also assisted us greatly in helping to understand the relationship between the different sources of meaningful work and the relationship between meaningful and meaningless work.

## Findings and discussions

Our original framework became more dynamic as a result of the action research and the framework based on our current research is presented below. The framework consists of several key content and process variables. We discuss the content of the four sources of meaning, as well as the experience of coherence and sense of 'common humanity' that research participants experienced in seeing these multiple sources alongside each other. Next, we describe the process of uncovering and expressing personal meaning and how this contrasts with 'the management of meaning'. Then, we describe the relationship of the different sources of work in relation to each other (doing, being, self and other) as well as 'inspiration' at the centre of the framework. Finally, we describe the existential significance of meaningfulness taking place between 'ideal' and 'reality'. In order to remain true to the cyclical nature of our research, we discuss each of these variables in relation to extant literature, rather than the traditional academic presentation in which the finding and discussion sections are clearly separated.

*The sources of meaningful work and life*

In the original research it was found that meaningful work consist of four sources: 'developing and becoming self', 'unity with others', 'serving others', and 'expressing self'. In working with the model, we found that 'expressing self' was often misunderstood

TABLE I

Quality indicators for action research

| Quality indicators | Our action research method |
| --- | --- |
| 'A mark of quality in an action research project is that people will get energized and empowered by being involved' (p. 448) | The consistent feedback on the workshops was that it was very energising to discuss the meaning of life in relation to one's experience of life (daily and over time) and that it was very empowering to discover that one had known what the meaning of life was all along, just struggled with articulating it (see findings under 'uncovering and expressing personal meaning') |
| 'A basic tenet of action research is that any new understanding must be grounded in experience/ experiment' (p. 448) | The processes of our workshop were designed for participants to constantly reflect on the relationship between the abstract and their experience (see Table II how the 'sources of meaning' are embedded daily work experience |
| 'By drawing on and integrating diverse ways of knowing, ideally people will say of action research work, 'that is true, that is right, that is interesting, engaging, thought provoking' (p. 449) | As described above, we drew on vastly different ways of knowing |
| 'Since our work together includes the co-mingled aspect of reflecting and acting, we must take time to ask questions about the value and worthwhileness of our work' (p. 449) | We consistently assessed the practical and theoretical value of contributing to understanding and enacting meaningful work |
| 'An appropriate way of power-sharing must be applied as action researchers we must ask questions that inquire into and seek to ensure quality of participation and relationship in the work' (p. 448) | We met all of Wadsworth's (2001) criteria for assessing whether this research was a collective undertaking. The findings emerged out of dialogues of workshop participants amongst themselves and with us, and we had substantial time (given that the workshop were usually 2–3 days) to recheck the accuracy and relevance of our understanding of what research participants had said |
| 'Ideally, people involved in emerging and enduring work will say 'this work continues to develop and help us' and other people will say, 'can we use this work to develop our own' (p. 449) | We submit one excerpt of a recent participant's email (received 10 October 2008). |

> The model is on my wall in front of my desk and I look at it every time I am in the office. So, today, for instance, I am in the upper right quadrant, but in the lower section of it, so that I am at unity with others and serving them. Today is an organising and arranging day, but I can now more clearly see the meaning in such days and make conscious choices on how I am to be. My wife works in the community and she is working out how to use the model in her interactions with her clients to help them to understand and develop their self-esteem. I have also considered making a magnetic model where the 'sun' of inspiration can be positioned each time to understand what I want to shine my light on. I just have not had time to do it

to refer to communication. This dimension was renamed by participants as 'expressing self' to more closely approximate a fuller meaning, which also included activism. Some of the sub-themes within these categories were adjusted based on the larger sample and the finer distinctions that emerged from dialogue; however, the basic sources of meaningful work stayed the same. Given that the data upon which these sources were built have been described in depth in previously published articles (Lips-Wiersma, 2002a, b), we will simply quote some sample comments to illustrate.

A significant finding through our current action research process, however, was that to experience meaningfulness, it was important for research participants to see these sources of meaningfulness alongside each other to (a) make visible the wholeness of meaningfulness and (b) to identify their commonalities with others in how others prioritised the sources of meaningfulness.

### Developing and becoming self

It was found that three sub-themes of '*developing and becoming self*' make work meaningful: 'moral development', 'personal growth' and 'staying true to oneself'. Moral development contributes to the experience of meaningful work through the day-to-day practicing of principles or virtues. 'On some days I have time to reflect, to ask myself: "how do I want to be today?", "what is the right thing to do here?", "why is doing the right thing important here?" These are rich days'. Meaningful work is also experienced as a result from personal growth through ongoing learning: 'with new responsibilities parts of myself emerged that I did not know I had, I was blossoming'. Finally, meaningfulness is experienced as a result of 'being true to oneself' through maintaining one's unique identity: I can be me in this organization. I can dress in feminine clothes, be serious, be light, be me'.

### Serving others

We found that two sub-themes of '*serving others*' made work meaningful: 'making a difference' and 'meeting the needs of humanity'. 'Making a differ-

ence' contributes to the experience of meaningful work through making a contribution to others within one's organization: 'I can participate and my ideas are acted upon, I feel I make a difference'. 'Meeting the needs of humanity' contributes to the experience of meaningful work when the individual can see a connection between the work he or she does and a transcendent cause, usually in addressing social, economic or environmental problems: 'I work for a company that does good work'.

### Unity with others

We found that three sub-themes of '*Unity with Others*' made work meaningful: 'sharing values', 'belonging' and 'working together'. Meaningful work is experienced as a result of identifying others who 'share similar values' and the ability to articulate such values as they underpin action: 'In my experience, our hearts connect when we talk about deeper values underpinning our actions, even if we do not agree'. Meaningful work is experienced as a result of 'belonging', where the interdependence of human beings is closely felt as well as where one can care for others and be cared for: 'I really enjoy the breaks, just chatting about our kids, the shoes we've bought, the electricity bill going up'. Working together is intrinsically meaningful because the act of doing something together creates a bond and gives an experience of common purpose: 'This sounds so soft, but we have had some deeply moving experiences where we felt the unity in working together'.

### Expressing full potential

Meaningful living is not devoid of agency or activism, and individuals find it meaningful to express their full potential through 'creating', 'achieving' and 'influencing'. Creating is meaningful through the act of combining or making new things or insights: 'To have work where I am not working towards a prescribed outcome, where I can still be surprised by what comes out of our collective hands, this is highly rewarding'. Achieving is meaningful through the act of mastering something: 'there is inherent meaning in mastering something, I am not sure why, but when something comes out of my

hands that I know to be good, it is a wonderful feeling'. Influencing is meaningful through having power to change a viewpoint or situation: 'We had a problem with the manager, he wanted us to pack straight into bags and not have trolleys, which meant a whole load of extra lifting. I went to see him and he let us have the trolleys back'.

## Discussion of the four sources of meaningful work and life

A substantial contribution of our research is that it brings together themes that have emerged in other conceptual and empirical writing on meaningful work. In other words, meaningful work is shown to be not about one life purpose or one worthwhile pursuit. It consists of a combination of work meanings articulated in previous research such as social contribution and self-esteem (Nozick, 1974), caring relationships, (Ayers et al., 2008) and the ability to show one's true self (May et al., 2004). Meaningful work also consists of a combination of the work meanings articulated in humanities literature such as work that supports moral development (Bowie, 1998) and working for a cause that transcends self-interest (Singer, 1995). Thus, similar to Michaelson (2008), we found that work meanings relate to both subjective and objective concerns.

The words 'spiritual coherence' are removed from the centre of the original framework. The research participants found it important to distinguish between 'spiritual'' which will be discussed under the heading 'inspiration' (in detail below) and 'coherence'. They consistently articulated that it was the whole of the model – the ability to see the four sources of meaning next to each other – that led to their experience of coherence. Our further examination of theory on 'meaningfulness' confirmed that a sense of coherence or wholeness is particularly important in experiencing meaningfulness (Korotkov, 1998).

The research participants commented that it was important and 'empowering to make our common humanity visible' even if, at the time, they experienced differences in how they prioritised the different sources and would language them quite differently. Our research allowed an integration of multiple sources of meaningfulness into one picture.

Meaning-making, being so fundamental to human beings, is covered in a wide variety of disciplines. While we believe there is real value in engaging with these areas of research, our action research showed that it was also important for the research participants to see multiple sources of meaning alongside each other. This has enabled people to hold multiple meanings, and by making them visible through the use of the model, allowing them to engage with this multiplicity in constructive ways. This has provided value to us, as academics in terms of how to think about multiple meanings, and to the participants, as they work with the model in their works and lives.

### Uncovering and expressing personal meaning

The findings above show that participants in our research were constantly involved in their own being and becoming (Aktouf, 1992) and the findings confirmed Battlista and Almond's (1973) theory on meaningful life which suggest that when individuals state that their lives are meaningful, they can identify the beliefs that commit them to meaningful living. Participants clearly stated that their lives were meaningful and that various aspects of work had existential significance and resonated with their own purposes in life. They could very clearly articulate such beliefs in relation to each of the sources of meaning, as shown above. Comments such as 'My moral work choices define who I am', 'the human condition is about growing', 'I need to know that I am involved in doing something worthwhile' confirm, for this sample at least, that being human is inseparable from the need for meaning and meaningful work (Aktouf, 1992). Participants were not only able to articulate such beliefs to meaningfulness in general, but also specifically in relation to each of the elements of the final framework in Figure 2; the four sources of meaningful work 'developing and becoming self', 'unity with others', 'expressing full potential' and 'serving others' as well as the meaningfulness of understanding the relationship between 'being' and 'doing'/'self and other', as well as the meaningfulness of articulating work to take place between 'the inspiration' of the ideal and the 'reality' of self and context (Table II).

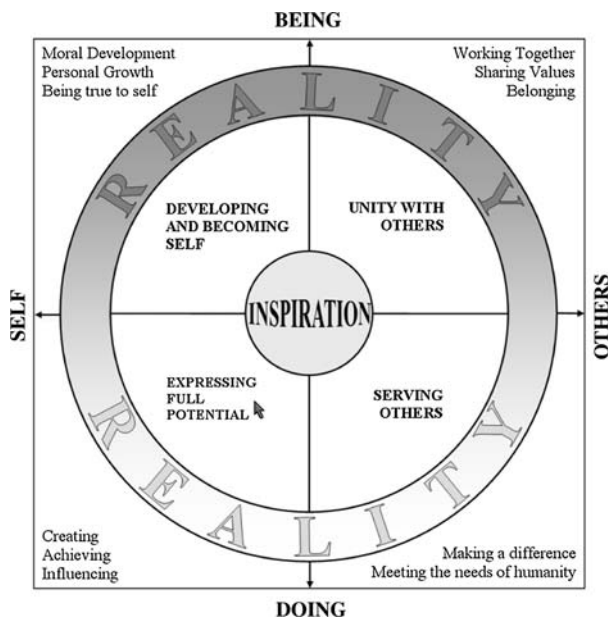In our action research workshops, we (researchers and participants) experienced that adapting a

Figure 2. The holistic development framework based on our current action research.

constructivist research approach (Steingard, 2005) and process, in which participants are given the maximum space to express personal meaning as it unfolds (Driver, 2007), is indeed a useful method to elicit meaning. At the same time, as discussed in our action research method section, we found that people find it very helpful to have a framework that makes the various components and processes of meaningful work visible. Simply responding to the general question of 'what is the meaning of your life or work' and arrive at a complete answer, seemed very hard for the majority of people we have worked with. A framework that provides a way of talking about meaning, without claiming to capture the complete experience of meaningful life, does enable people to connect with meaningfulness. We found that people experienced the framework as relevant, and the process as safe (in that it was not guided by any exclusive worldview), so that they moved quickly into deep discussion. Research participants valued the opportunity to make their own connections between the daily experience of working life and their own ways of living purposefully (Bruner, 1990), for example, to re-context a complaint into a deeper understanding about a loss of meaning.

At present, particularly in the workplace spirituality arena, a vast amount is written on the impor-

tance of distinguishing between spirituality and religion. The substantial majority makes the argument that in the arena of workplace, spirituality expressions are appropriate but religious expressions are not, as they are exclusive (Giacalone and Jurkiewicz, 2003; Mitroff, 2003). Our action research shows how important it is to let people use their own words. It is unlikely that inclusive language exists that will capture all spiritual belief. We therefore suggest that this literature pay more attention to the processes to be used to make the commonalities and differences visible.

When participants articulated what was meaningful to them, they usually found that they had 'known this all along' and experienced this reclaimed knowledge as being particularly powerful and fulfilling. This approach also encouraged mutuality (Torbert, 2004) in that the process of sharing stories of meaningful work and life with others reinforced the existential significance of one's life and work.

## Discussion of uncovering and expressing personal meaning

In contrasting some of the writing in current leadership and organizational theory that is concerned with 'the management of meaning' with humanities literature on meaningful lives and with our findings, there are some distinct differences.

Leadership and organizational culture theorists assume that meaningfulness can be supplied and that the organization itself can be the ultimate cause from which the individual derives meaning. For example, Parry and Bryman (2006, p. 447), in summarizing leadership research from the mid-eighties until the present, argue that leadership is still 'seen as a process whereby the leader identifies for subordinates a sense of what is important – defining organizational reality for others' and where 'the leader gives a sense of direction and of purpose through the articulation of a compelling worldview'. The ongoing pre-occupation with culture change has 'meant the elaboration of new programmes embodied in mission statements, visions and new value systems facilitated by a plethora of consultancy interventions, aimed at reinventing both the identity of the corporation and of the subjects within it' (Costea et al., 2008, p. 661).

TABLE II

Beliefs underpinning commitment to each of the sources of meaningfulness

| Developing and becoming self | Serving others | Unity with others | Expressing full potential |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Moral development* 'It is about acting out of my own values', 'doing what is right', 'my moral choices define who I am' | *Making a difference* 'It is important to create an environment in which people can be whole – where people can survive, create, be happy' | *Sharing values* 'I want to be able to express myself to others, and talk about the reasons why we do what we do in a more meaningful way', 'We need to acknowledge that our behaviours or opinions are based on deeper held beliefs' | *Creating* 'I enjoy creating, something that has come through my own hands', 'It is about leaving a mark', 'The human act is creative because it is an act of will', 'The inner me needs expressing and it is important to find form for that' |
| *Personal growth* 'The human condition is about growing, it is a journey', 'The world is a place to learn and discover truths', 'If I do not go forwards, I go backward', 'Learning makes my heart sing' | *Meeting the needs of humanity* 'I need to know that I am involved in doing something that I can identify as being worthwhile'. 'There are so many social and environmental problems; my work needs to somehow address these' | *Belonging* 'I want to be involved in building a community, and experiencing trust, compassion, honouring and caring', 'Being at ease with each other', 'Strong relationships form a base to stand tall' | *Achieving* 'Knowing that I've done well against the standards is important'. 'I only have one life, I want to have a good shot at it and be the best I can be' |
| *True to self* 'I want to make conscious choices', 'I don't want to be washed away by others', 'It is about resisting the pressure to conform' | | *Working together* 'There is something deeply rewarding about the simple act of working together with other people', 'Being in this together and connecting on that basis' | *Influencing* 'I think I can do good, but I cannot do it alone, thus I need to be able to bring others on board'. 'I have a voice, and if I can not influence, that voice is silenced' |

Our findings, on the other hand, would support the conclusions drawn in the humanities in that they show that it is a condition of being human to make meaning (Aktouf, 1992) and that therefore employees actively, and on an ongoing basis, evaluate the meaning of work in relation to 'the meaning that comes from within' (Kekes, 1986). They were clearly aware of when meaningful work was treated as a technique or exchange and when work meanings genuinely resonated with their inner compass of what constituted meaningful work (and life). When meaning became substituted or controlled (Sievers, 1994) and when there was no time or opportunity to discern what was the morally right thing to do (Gardner, 1993) or to act on one's moral principles (Martin, 2000), work was indeed experienced to be less meaningful. In addition, the findings show that humanity shares a set of human purposes that, if they can be expressed, help to make work meaningful. Our findings also support humanities literature in that they show that meaning is uncovered in a cause that transcends the 'cause' of the organization (Singer, 1995). Participants clearly distinguished ultimate concerns from false gods (Tillich, 1987).

We argue that far from needing to be provided with meaning, employees already have their own rich meaning. We hold that it is respectful, and that it acknowledges the dignity of the individual, to engage with existing meanings, and to work with them in organizational contexts. Working with the meaningful purposes of the individual is at the foundation of the distinction between real and bogus empowerment. While this may challenge the idea of the employee as an empty vessel, it provides rich insights for organizations that genuinely want to engage workers in meaningful work. Such an approach has the potential to create opportunities for increased meaning at work and releases (leaders specifically) from the burden of creating and carrying the 'meaning' of work and organization.

## Being, doing, self and other

Similar to our original research, we found that meaningfulness is derived from the four sources of the framework, as well as from understanding and addressing the tensions between these dimensions of meaningful work over time. Meaning was lost if the

needs of self and those of others could no longer be balanced: 'I got burned out because I was constantly meeting people's demands. A whole lot of people's demands'. Meaning would also get lost when, over a longer period of time, doing and being could not be balanced: 'My work is so goal-oriented and I want to be more process-oriented, I want to let go and explore'. 'I spent a lot of time helping others, and at times became too emotionally involved in other people's problems. I'm sure this fulfilled some need in myself, but I could not sustain this. I felt tired, my health was bad, I was weary and spiritually sick. There was a lot of accumulated stress, it was physical, but it also felt existential, my work no longer seemed to have meaning, or if it had, I could no longer see it'.

### Discussion of the tensions between 'being', 'doing' 'self' and 'other'

There is an emergent body of literature that addresses the relationship between burn out and loss of meaning (Langle, 2003), and in particular, the relationship between the ability to 'be' (in the moment, mindful, through reflective practice, conscious decision-making) and the experience of meaningfulness (Hymer, 2004; Watson, 2005). In addition, there is an increasing body of research emerging on the relationship between stress and the loss of existential meaning (Pines, 2002).

The resolving of tensions between self and other resembles Bakan's notion of the duality of human existence. Bakan (1966) suggest that themes of agency and communion need to be balanced over a lifetime to experience a sense of meaningfulness and well-being, but he also posits that there will be ongoing tensions between them. In other words, how the four different dimensions of meaningfulness are prioritised is likely to fluctuate over time, but meaningful living requires paying attention to both 'doing and being' and both 'self and other'.

## Inspiration and reality

### Inspiration

In the original research, we found that meaningfulness was experienced when the individual felt

aligned with some form of spiritual ordering or design outside the person. This could be a transcendent experience or connection with the Divine through, for example prayer; however, it could also be a purpose or vision towards which the individual was striving. In the current research, we found that participants, whether spiritual or not, experienced 'inspiration' towards an ideal, which germinates from the human desire to ever improve oneself and the conditions for others. Such inspiration was articulated in a wide variety of words that would indicate the source of such inspiration, (such as God) the experience of it (such as 'joy', 'grace', 'vision', 'insight') or a divine or more earthly purpose (such as 'drawing nearer onto God' or 'eliminating poverty'), which could be derived from a multitude of sources, including the Divine, nature, other people, suffering and even dreams. Each of these inspired participants to direct or redirect their actions towards their human purposes. While inspiration could be derived from a variety of sources, a common theme was that one needs time to either consciously tap into those sources, or not be rushed in order to let inspiration happen at unexpected moments: 'stillness is often a place where inspiration comes from but here we have constant noise and interruptions'.

### Reality

Participants had clearly articulated beliefs that coming to terms with an imperfect self in an imperfect world is of existential significance.

With regard to being present to the reality of self comments such as 'It is important to live with the patience and tolerance of being human': 'Sure it is messy and that is okay', 'It is important to articulate where life gets difficult', show that meaning is also derived from coming to terms with what is. A life in which one is always striving for some future ideal or perfect self is experienced as being less meaningful because it is experienced as not being present to the whole of one self. Rather than pretending that everything is okay (inauthenticity), work is considered to be more meaningful when one can be aware of imperfections, not knowing, or the fact that the problems facing humanity can be overwhelming: 'My expectations of myself and others became more realistic. This may sound cynical, but it was the

opposite. No one, including myself, can and should do their best work all the time. This made me a better supervisor': 'Our boss said: "I need help"; I'm not sure what to do next. There was an odd relief in that. We no longer had to pretend'.

Research participants also experienced meaningfulness through being able to discern and articulate the reality of their organizational context: 'We were between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, we wanted to be more sustainable; on the other hand, the very nature of our products and advertising stimulates consumerism. However, just articulating this and sitting with it, was meaningful'. 'There is nothing wrong with all of this, mission and vision and values stuff in itself. However, if we are not allowed to articulate where we do not or cannot live up to them, it feels like we mock something that is really quite profound'. 'We all had to pretend that we were happy and in control and that it was a privilege to work here, whereas we were often intolerant and did not always know what to do next'. Research participants often resented attempts to inspire them towards an ideal where they suspected the economic reality was the driver: 'Our clients used to come first, and this is still very much part of our vision statement. However, I wonder whether other priorities, such as our market share, have gained much more attention recently'. Research participants were acutely aware of the discrepancies between ideal and reality: 'On the one hand, we had these wonderful leadership programs in which we were encouraged to live by our principles. However, on the other hand, if there was to be a price increase, no one asked how this would affect our poorer customers': I tried to maintain some sense of contribution to our team. After all, as nurses, we do worthwhile work. However, all this 'teamwork stuff' seemed like a thinly disguised way to get us to 'work harder'. Research participants did not reject the necessity of sound economic decision-making, but they rejected pretending that it was not a management motivation and meaningfulness to them came from making both inspiration towards an ideal *and* reality visible and discussable alongside each other.

Engaging with reality also means placing importance and meaning on the material reality. A sufficient measure of security, equal access to opportunities, time to care for family or do voluntary work, as the

findings show, form a solid foundation for a meaningful life. 'I would be in the Union, or some ad hoc informal committee that would resist some change, but I have to look after number one in a time where we seem to pretty much outsource everything that is not a so-called "core" activity'. 'We were told we were the company's 'greatest assets', but now we have to reapply for our own jobs. Even if I get it, I will never feel that same sense of belonging again'. 'I am doing well, I get pats on the back, but I do not have the same access to opportunities as my male colleagues. I do good work, for a good purpose, but this inherent unfairness affects my motivation'. "We seem this team in which everyone participates, but as soon as something goes wrong, it all becomes very rank and file, very hierarchical".

### The relationship between inspiration and reality

The gap between the ideal and the reality of the situations we find ourselves in is not always experienced to be negative, as it is also experienced as a fact of life. Reality can be the source of ideals, 'at work we were discussing a program on poverty that we'd seen the night before and decided to do a collection: it was not much but it was very rewarding because we allowed the problems of the world to come into the four walls of the organization.' Similarly, ideals are unrealistic when not tested against reality. However, organizational initiatives that are seen to be only addressing values in symbolic ways, without actually addressing material reality as experienced by workers, are experienced to enhance meaninglessness.

### Discussion of 'inspiration' and 'reality'

Our findings show that meaningful work is based on an authentic engagement with the often less than perfect reality.

Leadership and organizational culture theory pays little attention to those elements of contemporary organizing that have rendered work meaningless in the first place and does not conceptualise resistance, apart from acknowledging that resistance to culture change needs to be overcome for meaning to be managed effectively. Those critical of the 'identity

management' of organizational culture (e.g. Casey, 1999; Costea et al., 2008; Willmott, 1993) draw attention to the fact that such management shapes a 'designer employee', a person who has to pretend to be happy, good and in control, whereas this is not always his or her reality.

Our findings show that meaningfulness cannot exist if reality cannot be articulated. Such an articulation of reality may lead to effective resistance or opposition (Ciulla, 1998) and translate into making a difference as in the case of the supermarket employee who asked to have the trolly back. Articulation of reality can also relate to creating an autonomous sphere of activity (Hodson, 2001), as with the research participant who finds dignity in being able to have a choice in which parts of herself to reveal at work, or the research participant who comments on the importance of discerning the moral significance of her actions. Active engagement with the ideal as well as reality is meaningful because it is authentic, whereas the participants regularly mentioned the word 'pretending' when they referred to what made work meaningless.

Leadership and organizational culture literature focus on values without usually taking material reality into account (for example, in consistently elevating the status of transformational leadership above that of transactional leadership). Aktouf (1992, p. 412) writes about 'the obstinate refusal [in managerial literature on organizational culture] to question the grounds on which work relations are actually experienced in firms. This is the sleight-of-hand attempted by the prevailing trend of symbolism and corporate culture, the objective that allows the worker to appropriate the firm symbolically without touching anything on the material level, that is, without sharing profits, power, property, or decisions'.

Our findings, on the other hand, support literature from the humanities which holds that material issues, such as work–life balance, equitable wages, and some form of security, contribute to the experience of dignified work (Hodson, 2001; Muirhead, 2004) and that this material reality is not experienced as being distinct from, or even less important than, other forms of values based management. In addition, the findings showed that the management techniques that exclusively focus on short-term performance (e.g. efficiency, flexibility, illusionary teamwork; Sennett,

1998) can also cause meaninglessness. Therefore, while our sample is limited and even though human beings are not always consciously articulating their 'will to meaning', our findings are also consistent with Klinger (1998) who argued that 'when people find themselves spending inordinate amounts of times on activities that they do not value or suggest for no immediate evident purpose, they are likely to raise the question: what for'? (p. 33).

The ongoing interaction between the inspiration towards an ideal and the articulating and understanding of reality is seen as an endless continuum, the very context in which we have to create and fulfil our purposes, and the place where life is meaningful. In order to be without inspiration *and* to be inspired without the means of bringing this into reality are seen as threatening to meaningfulness. 'On the one hand, we had these wonderful leadership programs in which we were encouraged to live by our principles. However, on the other hand, if there was to be a price increase, no one asked how this would affect our poorer customers'.

## Practical implications, limitations and future directions

The scholarship and practice of the 'management of meaning' often treats the employee as an empty vessel that somehow needs to be provided with meaning through a series of techniques in exchange for which the employee is to give more discretionary effort to the organization. Undoubtedly, such practices have, at least in part, become so popular because they responded to the basic human need for meaningful work. The promise of such practice that engagement with work goes some way to answering the question of 'why are we here'? has held the promises of meaningful work. However, for many employees, and in many situations, this promise has remained unfulfilled.

We suggest four avenues for creating more meaningful work.

First, for work to be truly meaningful, it has to be developed on the understanding that meaning-making is intrinsic to being human. In other words, subjective work meanings such as vision, values and principles can and should not be *provided* by those in positions of power, but rather should emerge from the collective being of everyone in the organization regardless of formal power positions. Such collective engagement needs to build on the understanding that for meaning to be meaningful, it needs to be made, not received or found.

Second, the findings show that when higher aspirations are called into being, individuals automatically look for discrepancies, mismatches, and inauthentic expressions. It is here that the 'great silence' in the 'management of meaning' needs to be addressed. At the moment, in academic literature as well as in practice, both leaders and followers are treated as if they are not aware of the tensions between inspiration and reality. We suggest that organizational practice is developed to assist members of the organization to engage with such tensions in meaningful ways. Dwelling on a problem, an unpleasantness, like dwelling in the problems on a half-finished painting, is often the very condition that is needed to find the answer. Therefore, organizations and the individuals in them – while wishing to be free from endless negativity – can get value from engaging openly with reality, as suppressed negativity leads to cynicism.

Third, in times of increasing diversity, it is relevant to be respectful of difference, while in times of an increasing interest in meaningful work, it is also relevant to make commonality in our human aspirations visible as the experience of our common human aspirations contributes to meaningfulness. Working with frameworks that shows commonality in human purpose and differences in cultural and spiritual belief will be increasingly relevant.

Finally, reward, security and balance of various important life roles are moral issues which shape healthy workplaces and a healthy society. Therefore, from the perspective of meaningfulness, these are important concerns and leadership and organizational culture practices need to engage with them rather than elevating the management of values above basic concerns of justice and dignity. We suggest that, for example, the relationship between transformational and transactional leadership and the relationship between values management and the economic climate in which organizations find themselves is further explored in relation to meaningful work.

While we argue that meaning should be made by the individual, we do not argue that leadership,

organizational culture, or other variables have no effect on meaningful work. It was surprising to find in our research how little spontaneous direct mention of leadership occurred in relationship to meaningful work. However, our research did not seek to compare the relative influence of different organizational influences over the experience of meaningfulness meaning. The relationship between leadership, organizational culture, and various motivational practices and meaningful work (as opposed to the management of meaning) needs further exploration.

Our exploratory research methods have several strengths and shortcomings, as discussed in the methods section. The next phase of the research would need to establish whether these findings are, as the literature in the humanities would suggest, relevant to a wider population than our self-selected research participants. To date, the individual participants have explored the notion of meaningfulness in relation to their own working lives; future research that is based within one organizational context should focus on the question of how achievable and useful it is to share deeper life and work meanings in an organizational context. Finally, our qualitative research needs to be quantitatively tested, so that we can better understand the relationship between the subjective personal experience of meaningfulness and the various elements (such as leadership, culture, and workload) of the objective organizational reality.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have addressed the sustained interest in work as a source of meaning that has emerged since the early 1980s. The majority of studies on the meanings of work has been focused on finding effective methods of 'managing meaning' rather than on understanding the subjective experience of meaningful work. We examined the question of what constitutes meaningful work (and life) through various domains in the humanities that treat the need to meaning as a central human concern. The action research design of our study assists in understanding both the sources of meaningful work and the process of uncovering meaning.

Our findings contribute to current organizational scholarship and practice as they (a) enable scholars to clearly distinguish 'meaningful work from 'the management of meaning', (b) bring together the various sources of meaningful work in one framework and show the relationship of one to the other, (c) clearly show the importance of engaging with both the inspiration towards an ideal as well as the often less-than-perfect reality of self and the organizational context in which meaning gets expressed and (d) contribute to our understanding of how to engage individuals in conversations about meaningful work that are not prescriptive or exclusive, but that also show where meanings are commonly held.

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