

The Search for Meaning at Work:
A Critical Analysis of the Dominant and Subordinate Theoretical Assumptions
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Abstract

The search for meaning is a human activity that has transcended centuries of human civilization. As applied disciplines that investigate the development of organizations and the humans who comprise them, organization development (OD) and human resource development (HRD) scholars and practitioners have engaged in a steady stream of research and theorizing related to what “meaning” or “meaningfulness” in work is, how it develops, and most prominently in the literature, how it is operationalized. This paper seeks to add to the understanding of the concept of the meaningfulness of work through engaging in a critical analysis of the historical and theoretical assumptions of the meaningfulness of work and how these assumptions developed over time. In addition, through the interpretation of the reviewed theory, this paper will discuss the implications for future research on the meaning of work.

Keywords: meaning of work, meaningfulness work, employee meaning

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The search for meaning is a human activity that has transcended centuries of human civilization. Viktor Frankl, simultaneously a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp and a psychiatrist, theorized that, “striving to find meaning in one’s life is the primary motivational force of man” (Frankl, 1985, p. 99). Frankl, through reported observations of the longevity and resilience of fellow concentration camp prisoners invoked Nietzsche, posited that “...he who has a ‘why’ to live can bear almost any ‘how’” (p. 76). As a discipline that investigates the development of organizations and the humans who comprise them, organization development (OD) scholars have engaged in a steady stream of research and theorizing related to what “meaning” or “meaningfulness” in work is, how it develops, and most prominently in the literature, how it is operationalized (Rosso, Dekas, Wrzesniewski, 2010). This is not surprising in the developed world and the modern workplace. Work, as Herzberg (1959) stated in a seminal study on work motivation, “...is one of the most absorbing things men can think and talk about. It fills the greater part of the waking day for most of us” (p. 3).

Studying the meaning and meaningfulness of work has been, and continues to be, a fruitful endeavor for OD scholars seeking to contribute to the knowledge of organization effectiveness. Over the past 75 years, research on the meaning and meaningfulness of work has consistently found that employees’ perceptions of meaning and meaningfulness in their work may be an antecedent to individual and organizational benefits such as work motivation, psychological adjustment, wellbeing, job enrichment, work behaviors, performance, and engagement (Brief & Nord, 1990; Cartwright & Holmes, 2006; Chalofsky, 2003; Herzberg, 1959; Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Morse & Weiss, 1955; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso, et al.,

2010; Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012; Wrzesniewski, 2003). The broad and influential identified individual and organizational consequences of a sense of meaning and meaningfulness of work coupled with the significance of human beings' search for meaning in non-work domains drives the need for an updated critical analysis of the concept of the meaning of work within OD. The following paper, therefore, will offer a critical analysis of the meaning of work as an OD concept.

For the purposes of this paper, critical analysis is defined as critical writing that "...breaks a subject into its constituent parts, examines these components, and offers a meaning - or alternative meanings - about each" (University of Minnesota, 2013). To accomplish this end, this paper will analyze and interpret the theoretical assumptions and claims underlying the meaning of work literature. Thus, this critical analysis is organized into four main components: (1) problem (2) purpose (3) a critical analysis of the theoretical assumptions and perspectives of the meaningfulness of work, and (4) interpretation and implications.

The Problem

The problem, that scholars have recently identified, is the fragmented nature of the available research on the meaning of work and the lack of consensus on how meaning and meaningfulness are constructed and operationalized in work (Chalofsky, 2003; Cartwright & Holmes, 2006; Rosso, et al., 2010; Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012). This fragmentation may be partly explained by the diverse array of disciplines studying, defining, and theorizing about the sources and mechanisms of meaning and meaningfulness in work that have, in turn, created insulated silos of knowledge (Rosso et al., 2010). The fields of psychology, sociology, anthropology, spirituality, and theology have all undertaken the study of meaning and meaningfulness as it relates to work. While these heterogeneous disciplines have helped inform

rich studies on the meaning and meaningfulness of work, the lack of integration of various theories, findings, and models has led to a body of research that is difficult to access. Herzberg (1959) expressed a similar concern within one of the first studies on the motivation to work and stated, “A major failing of most previous work in job attitudes has been its fragmentary nature” (p. 11). Fifty-six years later, the meaning and meaningfulness of work research remains in a similar fractured state.

The fragmentation and relative inaccessibility of research on such a powerful and pervasive human activity as the search for meaning in work should be of particular concern to OD scholars and practitioners. Organizations, after all, are human beings who organize. The definition of OD, as proposed by Cummings and Worley (2009), is the “...application and transfer of behavioral science knowledge to the planned development, improvement, and reinforcement of the strategies, structures and processes that lead to organizational effectiveness” (p. 2). The OD field is charged with transferring and applying knowledge to the practice of improving organizations. Based on this definition, OD inherits the responsibility to critique and link the fragmented research on the meaning of work to inform practitioners in organizations.

Heightening the need to link and transfer knowledge of the meaning of work concept are the forces acting on the modern organization. The emerging environment of economic uncertainty, rapid change, continued globalization, increasing competition, and the rise of the mobile millennial generation along with the significant restructures and mergers of organizations are putting pressure on the modern worker (Hickman, 2015). Cartwright and Holmes (2006) asserted that these pressures have “...had an impact on employees in terms of job losses, job uncertainty, ambiguity, and heightened anxiety” (p. 199). Commentators have suggested that these environmental factors have led to individuals becoming increasingly disenchanted at work

(Cartwright and Holmes, 2006; Hickman, 2015). As the world continues to climb out of a pervasive recession, and employers begin to look to attract and retain talented employees, a refocus and renewed understanding of the importance of the meaning and meaningfulness of work is needed. The modern organization must begin to recognize that their environments are where the human search for meaning takes place, in part simply due to the amount of time people spend at work (Schwartz, 2015). Creating an environment and work that incites and satisfies the human search for meaning may not only benefit to the worker, but also to the organization's performance and viability. As one early reviewer of this article put it, this work is quintessential to OD and human resource development (HRD).

Studies have demonstrated that peoples' desire to work comes from other sources besides financial security (Bibby, 2001; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). These studies date back to the 1950s. Morse and Weiss (1955) cited a national sample of employed men and found that for most respondents, work served as more than a function of making a living. Morse and Weiss stated, "In fact, even if they had enough money to support themselves, they would still want to work. Working gives them a feeling of being tied into the larger society, of having something to do, of having a purpose in life" (p. 191). Frankl (1985) referenced a similar study in which 7,948 students at 48 colleges were asked what they considered "very important to them." Just 16 percent of respondents indicated that "making a lot of money" was important whereas 78 percent of respondents said that "finding purpose and meaning" was important. Modern studies have demonstrated similar findings (Bibby, 2001; Heyman & Ariely, 2004; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001. Bibby (2001), for example, found by surveying 10,000 younger workers on what was critical in a good job, that more respondents felt that "interesting work," a "sense of accomplishment," and

“adding something to peoples’ lives” were more important than “pay” and “job security” (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006).

While studies and commentary have found and theorized that meaning in work and in life is centrally and innately important to human beings, research specifically related to developing an integrated construct of meaning and meaningfulness in work has been lacking. In fact, in Cummings and Worley’s (2009) broad text overviewing the OD field, the meaningfulness of work is mentioned once within a chapter on work design and embedded within Hackman and Oldham’s (1976) motivational theory of work design. Chalofsky (2003) also admonished the state of the OD profession related to the study of the meaning and meaningfulness of work, stating “our profession needs to search for and implement new workplace models that address work as a vehicle both for production and for individual and social development and satisfaction” (p. 80). Therefore, seeking to critique and uncover gaps in the complicated stream of research may assist future researchers, but more importantly may enrich peoples’ lives at work.

Purpose

Clarification of the purpose of this paper is important. This critical analysis does not intend to serve as a comprehensive, integrative literature review; this work has been thoroughly and recently undertaken by several OD scholars (e.g., Chalofsky, 2003; Rosso et al., 2010). Additionally, this analysis does not intend to provide an in-depth un-packaging of each complex psychological construct introduced. Such an expansive analysis and synthesis falls outside of the scope of a critical analysis and would warrant a more extensive and rigorous meta-analytic review.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to respond to the stated problem by critically analyzing the history, evolution, and focus of current scholarly knowledge related to the meaningfulness of work. The hope is that this analysis will spur important dialogue about HRD and ODs role in studying and further refining this quintessential construct. As a result of this critical analysis, this paper will also discuss the implications for future research and understanding of the meaningfulness of work.

Method

Due to the ill-defined borders of this construct from a disciplinary lens, the reference list for Rosso et al.'s (2010) comprehensive integrative literature review on the meaning and meaningfulness of work served as the portal to access the articles selected for this critical analysis. Articles that provided significant theorizing on either the source or mechanisms of meaning were included for review. In addition, texts that provided a needed historical and theological context for the exploration of this topic were also included to provide a sound foundation for the current stream of research and theorizing.

Definitions

For the purposes of any paper or investigation into the meaning and meaningfulness of work, defining these terms are important as they have been used interchangeably over the course of the fragmented research, and throughout the beginning of this article. Rosso et al. (2010) provided a thorough analysis of the definitions of meaning and meaningfulness to inform future research. "Meaning" they described, refers to "what the work signifies" (p. 95). "Meaningfulness," on the other hand, describes the "amount of significance attached to work" (p. 95). A further delineation of these terms is a potential area of future research. However, for the purposes of this paper, the words will be used interchangeably and by building upon Pratt and

Ashforth's (2003) definition, can best be understood to mean "the output of having made sense of something, or what it signifies, as in an individual interpreting what her work means, or the role her work plays in the context of her life" (Rosso et al., 2010, p. 94).

Theoretical Assumptions and Perspectives on the Meaning of Work

The very structure of the following reviewed components of the concept of the meaning of work is intended to serve as a critique of the concept's development up until this point. In several recent studies and commentaries on the meaning of work, authors have lamented that certain theoretical assumptions have been "perpetuated," "popular," or have "dominated" the tradition of research on the topic (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Cartwright & Holmes, 2006; Chalofsky, 2003; Humphrey, Mahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007; Rosso et al., 2010; Steger, Dik, and Duffy, 2012). However, research and commentary are lacking into the question: How and why does a theoretical assumption or ideology become "popular"?

Dominant Ideology Thesis

Scholars who retrospect on a stream of research can utilize lessons from social theory research to help answer, analyze, and deconstruct such questions. The following analysis of the research uses the *dominant ideology thesis* as a theoretical base for its organization (Abercrombie & Turner, 1978). This thesis "suggests that there is in most societies a set of beliefs which dominates all others, which through its incorporation in the consciousness of subordinate classes, tends to inhibit the development of radical political dissent" (p. 149). This same thesis may apply to the society of scholars studying the OD field, and in particular the concept of the meaning of work to help explain why there are many understudied, yet theoretically powerful, understandings of the meaning and meaningfulness of work. Through a review of recent literature reviews and commentaries, the following theorizes that there are

dominate and subordinate theoretical assumptions and perspectives that have emerged in the study and acceptance of ideas related to explaining where meaning comes from and how it is operationalized. The concepts are organized accordingly.

Dominant Theoretical Assumptions and Perspectives on the Meaning of Work

In an analysis of the patterns of research on the meaning of work, Rosso et al. (2010) found that “the meaning of work tends to build from, and perpetuate, taken-for-granted theoretical assumptions” (p. 117). They assert that such perpetuation has significantly stalled research on the meaning of work. The following reviews the dominant theoretical assumptions on the sources and mechanisms of meaning in work.

Singular Sources of Meaning: The Psychological Frame

First, Rosso et al., (2010) found that most studies examining the meaning of work have focused on single sources and mechanisms of meaning which have resulted in distinct research silos. Scholars have generally perpetuated a bias toward studying specific, or singular, ways of making meaning within domain of psychology, though the fields of sociology and spirituality are increasingly gaining more attention. The “bias” as stated by Rosso et al. (2010), toward studying meaning at work within the cognitive psychological frame specifically has left much work to be done in examining the relationships and interconnectedness of multiple sources and ways of making meaning, including relational theorizing and processes. Importantly, some modern scholars have found that when people draw upon and operationalize multiple sources of meaning in their work, they may experience enhanced meaningfulness (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). This leaves significant room in the future for important studies that may integrate many sources and mechanisms of meaning and measure their relationships across a wide variety of disciplines.

The predominant single sources of meaning that have been focused on in the literature are the self, motivation, values, others, the work context, and spiritual life. Within these researched sources of meaning, the historically dominant and perpetuated theoretical assumptions of the meaning of work have centered on the self, motivation, and values as sources of meaning with the main field undertaking these studies being cognitive psychology (Chalofsky, 2003; Rosso et al., 2010). Chalofsky (2003) uncovered this bias as well in a literature review and stated that “the classic motivational theorists and humanistic psychologists clearly supported the notion that individuals have an inherent need for a work life that they believe is meaningful” (p. 70). The focus on the “individual” and “inherent needs,” thus, has dominated the work and theories underpinning the current understanding of the meaning of work.

Self. The predominate theories about how one derives meaning from work center around the self, cognition, and intrinsic factors (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006; Chalofsky, 2003; Rosso et al., 2010). The basic assumption that underpins the self as a source of meaning presupposes that individuals act a certain way to ultimately satisfy specific needs that are common to all human beings (Herzberg, 1959; Maslow, 1971). When looking at the self as a source of meaning at work, many theorists consider the self, and cognition, as the driver of behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs. More specifically, the dominant research has paid most of its attention to “how individuals’ values, motivations, and beliefs influence their perceptions of the meaning of work” (Rosso et al., 2010, p. 95). Many researchers used Maslow’s (1971) *hierarchy of needs* as a base to their examination and understanding of the meaning of work. This focus served to evolve the research to focus on Maslow’s higher order needs such as “values, working toward a higher cause, and life purpose” (Chalofsky, 2003, p. 71). Consequentially, the study of the meaning of work morphed into the study of work motivation, of which an overwhelming number of studies

are based. Understanding this theoretical base is important in examining how certain theories on the meaning of work became popular over time.

Values. Building upon the classical assumption that the self is the primary motivator and source of meaning at work, numerous studies have examined personal and work values as a potential source of making meaning at work (Rosso et al., 2010). Chalofsky stated that the “cognitive dimension of ‘valuing’ involves the determination of whether an option is worthy, either intrinsically or extrinsically to some extrinsic outcome” (Chalofsky, 2003, p. 72). More specifically, scholars studying work values have theorized that the congruence of a specific task or work with a personal belief or set of values increases the potential perception of the meaningfulness of work (Brief and Nord, 1990). The study of “work values” has come out of this work. Work values have been defined as “the end states people desire and feel they ought to be able to realize through working” (Brief and Nord, 1990, p. 21). Research into personal and work values-congruence has suggested that values-congruence may influence satisfaction, motivation, and a sense of meaningfulness at work (Rosso et al., 2010).

Motivation and work design. The predominate theoretical assumption that all the ingredients to making meaning at work lie within the self gave way to a large and influential body of research known as “work motivation” theories (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Herzberg, 1959). Herzberg’s *motivation-hygiene theory* serves as an influential basis for much of scholarship on work motivation. Herzberg (1959) proposed that the degree to which an employee is motivated correlates to the degree to which the appropriate motivational factors are built into the work or the task itself. This line of thinking stems from the psychological theory, *activation theory*, which asserts there is an optimal level of both psychological and physiological stimulation that yields optimal performance (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Hackman and

Oldham's (1976) *job characteristics model* of work motivation builds upon these psychological theories to describe how specific job dimensions result in critical psychological states that ultimately produce positive personal and work outcomes. The model includes *the experienced meaningfulness of work* as a critical psychological state for one to become motivated at work. *Meaningful work* is defined by Hackman and Oldham (1976) as work that is significant, challenging, and complete. Thus, work design has become a predominate OD concept linked closely to the study of the meaningfulness of work and has formed much of the basis of the study of mechanisms of meaning (i.e., how meaning is created) (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006). Rosso et al. (2010) observed that the prominent work motivation approaches have perpetuated the cognitive theories that motivation is inherently intrinsic and is incited by perceptions of enjoyment, interest, and satisfaction at work. This view of motivation has informed the attention given to explanatory mechanisms of meaning.

Explanatory Mechanisms

Rosso et al. (2010) defined mechanisms as the “how’s and why’s of observed relationships” (p. 108) between variables. In the tradition of cognitive psychology, many such mechanisms of the meaning of work to this point have sought to explain and quantify the relationship between a particular source of meaning and experienced meaningfulness of work. The most prevalent mechanisms explored in the research seem to be what Rosso et al. (2010) term *authenticity*, along with self-efficacy and self-esteem.

Authenticity. Rosso et al. (2010) defined authenticity as “a sense of coherence or alignment between one’s behavior and perceptions of the ‘true’ self” (p. 108). This mechanism describes the processes of creating meaningfulness in terms of how one comes to experience congruence with their personal interests and values and their work. Baumeister and Vohs (2002)

discussed this concept as *self-connectedness* and research has found that when an individual perceives that their behaviors are consistent with their values and beliefs, increased perceptions of meaningfulness may be experienced (Sheldon & Elliot, 1998).

Self-efficacy and self-esteem. Two of the more well-studied mechanisms of meaning at work are self-efficacy and self-esteem (Rosso et al., 2010). More specifically, self-efficacy refers to the degree to which an individual feels that they have the power to produce a desired outcome or effect. This has sometimes been referred to as “volition” in the psychological literature (Meyer and Allen, 1991). Researchers have suggested that when individuals are in jobs that allow them to exercise control and autonomy, they may experience increased perceptions of meaningfulness in their work (Bandura, 1977; Baumeister & Vohs, 2002).

Self-esteem refers to the evaluation of one’s own work or abilities (Rosso et al., 2010). Theorists have proposed that a sense of self-worth and accomplishment positively affects perceptions of meaningfulness in work (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). While self-efficacy and self-esteem offer promising areas of current and future research, scholars have called for more work to determine mechanisms of creating perceptions of meaningfulness at work. Up until this point, much of the research on mechanisms has been focused on the self and cognitive responses to external elements (Rosso et al., 2010).

Workers as Passive Recipients

As demonstrated, much of the dominant research on the meaning of work has focused on individuals cognitively reacting to their environments. This dominant research paradigm has created a potential stalling impasse for the future of the meaning of work research. By viewing the individual as a passive reactor to external stimuli, the innumerable intrapersonal and interpersonal interactions that may construct perceptions of meaning are left unexamined. Rosso

et al. (2010) stated, “the assumption is that the meanings people make of their work and the amount of meaningfulness they perceive in it are constrained by whatever currently exists around them” (p. 117). This observation underscores the importance of distinguishing and then investigating the subordinate, and at times theoretically opposed assumptions and perspectives on the meaning of work.

Subordinate Theoretical Assumptions and Perspectives on the Meaning of Work

The dominant study of the meaning of work has focused on self and cognition as the major sources of experienced meaningfulness of work. However, while the current paradigm of meaning of work research may have generated valuable insights into the psychological processes that, in reaction to the design of work, may result in perceptions of meaningfulness in work, the reliance on the individualistic, cognitive frame has given way to a modern need to clarify what the dimensions of “meaningfulness” and “meaning” are from a multidimensional, holistic perspective (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2010; Wrzesniewski, 2003). The following section provides an analysis of the subordinate theoretical assumptions and perspectives on the meaning of work. Linking and integrating these components with the well-defined body of knowledge from cognitive psychology may produce a more complete picture of the meaning of work that is more accessible to both the scholar and practitioner.

Multiple Sources of Meaning

A major shortcoming of the prevalent cognitive and self-focused research on the meaning of work is the relative lack of theories and models that integrate multiple sources and mechanisms of meaning and examine their relationships to construct meaningfulness (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso et al., 2010; Steger Dik, & Duffy, 2010). Rosso et al. (2010) stated, “By overlooking the integrative nature of various sources and mechanisms of meaning, researchers

have missed valuable opportunities to develop more comprehensive understandings and models of the meaning of work” (p. 116). In addition, many theoretical assumptions have also been overlooked, leaving a multitude of opportunities for OD scholars to clarify and deepen the understanding of this important construct.

Affective, Social, and Spiritual Sources of Meaning

In particular, and because of the cognitive and self-oriented focus of the dominant research and theories, sources and mechanisms of meaning that focus on emotions (affect), others (work, societal, and culture), and spirituality have remained significantly understudied (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Cartwright & Holmes, 2006; Rosso et al., 2010). Much of the lack of research in the areas of affect, others, and spirituality as sources of meaning stems from the relative difficulty of scientifically measuring emotion, the impact of the wide variety of interpersonal interactions, and the existential nature of spirituality. The positivist view of knowledge as objective, identifiable, and controlled that has dominated the literature, therefore, must be called into question by OD scholars to better understand how human beings create and operationalize meaningfulness at work (Lincoln & Lynham, 2010).

Affective theorizing. First, there remains a great deal of work to be done around the role of emotions in shaping the meaning and meaningfulness of work. Rosso et al. (2010) found that “there remains a dearth of scholarship on the role of affect, either as a source of mechanism of meaning or meaningfulness” (p. 99). At the same time, researchers have found that emotions or a positive affective response are linked to motivation, behavior, and psychological wellbeing (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006; Slaski & Cartwright, 2003). Studying the processes by which positive feelings are elicited amongst employees may complement the large amount of research

done on cognition to create a more holistic view of the “self” as a more complex source of meaning.

Others. Additionally, while there has been some significant scholarship in the areas of how others within the workplace may serve as a source of meaning for individuals, the impact of others on an individual’s sense of meaning is relatively understudied when compared to the extent of research done on other sources of meaning such as the self. Examining the social and cultural dimensions of work and their impact on perceptions of meaningfulness is thus an area of future research. Specifically, there has been limited attention given to the role of others in a person’s life outside of the work domains (i.e., family, community) (Rosso et al., 2010). Specifically, researchers like Pratt and Ashforth (2003) and Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) have called for more work to be done in addressing how the immense and complex social interactions influence the meaning of work.

Moreover, scholars have primarily focused on the workplace as the domain in which meaning is created. However, more research on the impact of non-work domains may be helpful in understanding the worker as a holistic human being (Rosso et al., 2010). This complex work calls on the fields of sociology and anthropology as well as more constructivist frames of research in OD to better understanding of how others influence the meaning of work.

Spirituality. According to Rosso et al. (2010), there remains hesitancy for OD scholars to study how spirituality and work intertwine. A main reason for this relative reluctance is the difficulty in measuring existential questions. Ironically, however, the origin of the modern narrative that underlies the human search for meaning in work is derived from a distinct theological tradition (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). In fact, The Protestant Reformation in the 15th century gave way to some of the mechanisms that define Western societies’ modern

divisions of occupations, labor, and the higher education system (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). For example, prior to the Protestant Reformation, work was largely seen as simply a miserable means to an end. However, Martin Luther broadened the definition of a “calling” by asserting that our work on Earth should please God and that there is a divine “calling” for each human being (Weber, 1930). Elevating work from merely a repetitive task to a divine calling indirectly influenced not only the scholarship on the meaning of work and work design, but the foundations of a capitalistic society with a division of labor and occupations.

This theological foundation of work has evolved over time to a more secular view of spirituality in the work context stated as “an aspiration toward connection to the sacred, including a higher power, guiding force or energy, or belief system” (Rosso et al., 2010, p. 106). In a society in which many people look to both religion and spirituality as a way to make meaning, the aspiration toward something bigger than self presents an important future area of study for OD scholars. Moreover, further study of the characteristics of religion and spirituality, which research has shown may result in increased happiness, life satisfaction, and well-being, is necessary. For example, Myers and Diener (1995) found that it may not be the “spirituality and religiosity” itself that improves people’s lives, but the components of purpose, belongingness, hope, and community that underpin spirituality. The study of the processes of developing these components in the workplace may reveal significant, practical lessons for practitioners. This study may also help in furthering the study of mechanisms of meaning that lie outside of oneself.

Externally-Oriented Mechanisms of Meaning

In the past 15 years, many managerial texts have referred to this more existential definition of meaning and purpose in one’s life and work. Simon Sinek’s *Start with Why*, Michael Beer’s *Higher Ambition Leadership*, Aaron Hurst’s *The Purpose Economy*, for example,

all point to the transcendence of self to some higher purpose as a positive organizational and personal characteristic. Therefore, examining mechanisms of meaning that may lie outside of the self may be beneficial. Rosso et al. (2010) reviewed three powerful yet understudied externally-oriented mechanisms of meaning that may warrant further study: transcendence and purpose, sensemaking, and belongingness.

Transcendence and purpose. The ideas around the positive effects of the pursuit of a direction or a cause (purpose) outside of oneself have been powerful in many disciplines. Viktor Frankl (1985) wrote, "...success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side effect of one's dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the byproduct of one's surrender to a person other than oneself" (p. XIV). Baumeister and Vohs (2002) found that when someone can connect a current task or activity to a future outcome or event, they are more likely to view that task or work as meaningful. Additionally, it has been hypothesized that when one is able to visualize the impact of a particular task and area of work to some social good that they will perceive the work to be more meaningful (Wrzesniewski, 2003). The processes that create a sense of purpose, or intentionality, therefore, may be critical to understanding how one constructs a sense of meaning. *Transcendence*, for example, can be described as the process of connecting to something greater to oneself or beyond the material (Rosso et al., 2010; Maslow, 1971). The processes of how one pursues shared goals as a priority and subordinates one's own needs and ego for the needs or purpose of a larger organization are important and understudied areas of research on the meaning of work.

Sensemaking. Another important area of research around the meaning and meaningfulness of work focused on how meaning is interpersonally produced and constructed instead of how it is perceived. The sensemaking view may be the antithesis to the prevailing

assumption that workers are passive recipients of their environments. Scholars have posited that meaning is a social construction defined by the environment and the active participation within it (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005; Wrzesniewski, 2003). Because sensemaking is seen as contextually bound, the norms and cues of one's culture and interpersonal roles and interactions have a great impact on how meaning is derived.

Belongingness. Belongingness refers to the mechanism by which meaning is created by the involvement and identification with a particular group of people. Belongingness as a mechanism is derived from others as the relatively understudied source of meaning. In theory, when individuals feel a sense of intertwined fate with a group and interpersonal connectedness with individuals in a group, they are more likely to experience meaningfulness (Rosso et al., 2010).

In summary, studying externally-oriented mechanisms of meaning may provide for a holistic view of how the meaning of work is produced. The study of these mechanisms along with the more linear and explanatory mechanisms in the dominant research frame may provide a clearer picture of what meaning is and how it develops.

Figure 1 below depicts the dominant and subordinate sources and mechanisms of the meaningfulness of work along with the corresponding leading disciplines studying the construct. This depiction further underscores the need for HRD and OD to synthesize and make sense of the diverting perspectives to add to the understanding of how meaning and meaningfulness are elicited at work.

	Dominant	Discipline(s)	Subordinate	Discipline(s)
Sources	Singular <hr/> Self Values Motivation Work Design/environment	Psychology Psychology Psychology Psychology	Multiple/Interacting <hr/> Others Affective Social Spirit/spirituality	Sociology/Anthropology Psychology Sociology Anthropology/Theology/ Philosophy/Psychology
Mechanisms	Authenticity Self-efficacy Self-esteem Environment	Psychology Psychology Psychology Psychology/ Sociology	Transcendence Interpersonal Purpose Sensemaking	Psychology/Sociology Sociology/Communication Psychology/Theology/ Philosophy Sociology/Communication

Figure 1. Sources and mechanisms of the meaningfulness of work and corresponding disciplines.

Interpretation and Implications

A critical analysis of the research on the concept of the meaningfulness of work within OD and HRD has yielded a relatively dichotomous framework of accepted theories and assumptions as to what meaning/meaningfulness is and how it develops. This dichotomy, for the purposes of this paper, has been represented in the form of dominant and subordinate theoretical assumptions and perspectives on the meaning of work. Research to this point has been fragmented, insulated, and biased and has led to a relatively diffuse understanding of the concept of the meaningfulness of work within OD and HRD (see Figure 1). The following section addresses implications for HRD and OD.

OD and HRD Responsibility

The fragmented nature of the study of the meaningfulness of work, due to its pervasive and complex nature can be expected. However, as disciplines studying the very environments

where most people spend close to half of their waking lives, HRD and OD have the responsibility to synthesize and apply this wide body of research to the work context. Swanson (2008) defined HRD as the “...process of developing and unleashing expertise for the purpose of improving performance” (p. 1). Cummings and Worley (2009) defined OD as the “...application and transfer of behavioral science knowledge to the planned development, improvement, and reinforcement of the strategies, structures and processes that lead to organizational effectiveness” (p. 2). Therefore, OD and HRD have the responsibility to transfer the existing knowledge of the meaningfulness of work and apply it to organizations to further develop and unleash human expertise.

There are three significant implications for HRD and OD researchers that emerge from this analysis: the need for interdisciplinary research, the investigation of understudied sources and mechanisms of meaning, and the need to operationalize complex spiritual and philosophical concepts.

Interdisciplinary Research

As Figure 1 depicts, there is a critical need for interdisciplinary research teams to undertake future research on the meaning and meaningfulness of work. To form a holistic image of the construct of meaningful work, researchers from areas such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology must work together with the applied HRD and OD disciplines to move the trajectory of the research to reflect the interrelatedness of the construct.

Understudied Sources and Mechanisms of Meaning

Such research teams have ample constructs to investigate. Specifically, research that focuses on others as a source of meaningful work is needed. The relational and social sources of meaningfulness may significantly add to the understanding of how meaningfulness is constructed

and enacted by the people in the organization. Additionally, the study of sensemaking through interpersonal relationships as mechanisms of meaning have the potential to influence how organizations structure environments and processes such socialization and mentoring.

Spirituality and Philosophy as OD and HRD Disciplines

Furthermore, it is important for OD and HRD, as fields centered on human beings, to begin studying and operationalizing spiritual and philosophical concepts. A recent article in the New York Times entitled, *Do Happier People Work Harder?* reinforced this need. Kramer and Amabile (2011) found through examining nearly 12,000 electronic diaries from 238 professionals in seven different companies that workers have inner work lives, defined as "...hidden perceptions, emotions, and motivations that people experience as they react to and make sense of events in their workdays" (p. 7). Those who had inner work lives that were happily engaged in their work performed better than those who were not. The authors poignantly stated, "Working adults spend more of their waking hours at work than anywhere else. Work should ennoble, not kill, the human spirit. Promoting workers' well-being isn't just ethical, it makes economic sense" (p. 7).

This type of commentary begs OD and HRD scholars to answer hard, complex questions such as: What is "self"? What is the "human spirit"? What is "happiness"? What is "meaning"?

Emerging Models

Rosso et al. (2010) have offered one of the first promising integrated theoretical models in understanding the meaningfulness of work. They hypothesized that there are two major dimensions of meaning-making at work. These dimensions are represented as a continuum between agency and communion and self and others and depict the major sources of meaning. The pathways represent the mechanisms of meaning and include individualization, contribution,

self-connection, and unification. While this model offers a sound base and construct from which to move forward with OD research on the meaning of work, it does not address the inherent bias toward the psychological, post-positivist research frame that has dominated the field and this concept to this point. When reviewing this theory, under that lens, only two out of the four proposed pathways seem likely for further widespread and popular study: individuation and self-connection.

Rethinking Dominant Research Paradigms in OD and HRD

To propel the study and application of the meaning of work concept to examine the holistic and complex human being, a considerable mental model shift among HRD and OD scholars may be warranted. Based upon this analysis, the general bias toward a post-positivist view of knowledge may be limiting the study and subsequent popularity of many of the subordinate theoretical assumptions and perspectives on the meaning of work. One of the clearer themes in this analysis is that to examine many of the powerful, understudied elements of the meaning of work, HRD and OD scholars may need to adapt and incorporate a more constructivist and interpretive worldview and research frame. Sources of meaning such as affect, others, and spirituality have complex sociocultural processes and implications. Understudied mechanisms such as purpose, transcendence, and belongingness require the HRD and OD fields to prepare both scholars and practitioners to utilize multiple methods of collecting and analyzing data and structuring interventions. This analysis of the effects of dominant research streams on the evolution of a concept like the meaning of work can also inform graduate programs in HRD and OD to recruit and prepare students with a variety of worldviews and research methodologies (Lincoln & Lynham, 2010).

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