

DISSERTATION

THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MEANINGFUL WORK IN A STIGMATIZED
OCCUPATION: A DESCRIPTIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT

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Experiencing work as meaningful has been linked to positive personal and organizational outcomes, such as increased engagement, job satisfaction, motivation, positive work behaviors, performance, and an overall sense of well-being (e.g. Lysova, Allan, Dik, Duffy, & Steger, 2019; Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). However, while research seeking to explain the numerous factors that contribute to and result from the experience of meaningful work has proliferated, empirical studies directly investigating the lived experience of meaningful work in diverse occupational contexts are limited. Moreover, the lived experience of meaningless work and its relationship to the experience of meaningful work is not well understood. For workers in stigmatized occupations – jobs relegated by society as physically, socially, or morally undesirable due to the nature of the work – theorists have proposed numerous unique barriers to the experience of meaningfulness, thereby putting these workers at an increased risk for negative outcomes, including disengagement, lower commitment, and low satisfaction (e.g. Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Blustein, 2011). At the same time, direct inquiry into the lived experience of meaningful work in stigmatized occupations remains sparse.

Hence, the purpose of this study was to better understand this experience. This was accomplished using a qualitative approach enacted through a descriptive phenomenological method to uncover what the experience of meaningful work was like for a group of university custodians. Drawing from emerging research (e.g. Bailey & Madden, 2017; Mitra & Buzzanell,

2017), the experience of meaningful work was assumed in this study to be tensional and necessarily linked to the phenomena of meaningless work and meaning-making in work. Consequently, these phenomena were also explored and related to the experience of meaningful work.

The descriptive phenomenological analysis resulted in the identification of common elements of the experiences of meaningful work, meaningless work, and meaning-making in work among university custodians. Meaningful work was experienced by each custodian and was characterized by enacting a learned positive approach to work, having and experiencing pride in the work, maintaining meaningfulness, experiencing ongoing external validation of the self and work, enacting kinds of ongoing self-validation, helping others, and developing positive and personal relationships. However, meaningless work was also experienced by each custodian and was characterized by experiencing degradation by others, losing a sense of self at work, experiencing threats to the craft of cleaning, doing repetitive and purposeless tasks, and having kinds of negative experiences with supervisors and management. The experiences of both meaningful work and meaningless work emerged as interwoven meanings in work and were experienced as temporary, volatile, and fluid phenomena.

This study adds to the body of meaningful work research and theory by clarifying how the construct of meaningful work is lived through in a stigmatized occupational context, and by exploring the phenomena of meaningless work and meaning-making in work and their relationship to the experience of meaningful work. Moreover, the study offers practitioners an understanding and awareness of the elements that may foster the experience of meaningfulness for workers in stigmatized occupations.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This chapter introduces and provides a background on the research topic: the lived experience of meaningful work in a stigmatized occupation. The following contextualizes the research problem, reviews the study's underlying assumptions, presents the research objectives and questions, and addresses the study's significance and limitations. Finally, I discuss my own perspective as a researcher, address ethical considerations, and define key terms.

Background

Humans' search for meaning in work has intrigued scholars, philosophers, and theologians for centuries. Herzberg (1959) wrote that work "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). As work continues to manifest as one of the most central and common human experiences, it serves as a cogent context through which meaning is made of life itself (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Chalofsky, 2003; Chalofsky & Cavallaro, 2013; Rapaport, Bailyn, Kolb, & Fletcher 1998; Rosso et al., 2010). Given work's central meaning-making role in human life, it is not surprising that researchers have found that people may have an inherent need and desire for work they experience as *meaningful*: work that is perceived as positive, purposeful, and significant (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso et al., 2010) and that satisfies both psychological and social needs beyond the simple hedonic motives of survival and pleasure (e.g. Casey, 1995; Chalofsky, 2003; Chalofsky & Cavallaro, 2013; Diener & Seligman, 2002; Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012; Šverko & Super, 1995; Šverko & Vizek-Vidović, 1995).

Consequently, people's apparent desire for meaningful work and its theorized individual and organizational benefits (e.g. May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004; Hackman & Oldham, 1976, 1980;

Steger et al., 2012) have inspired a steady stream of theory-building and empirical inquiry, which has largely sought to both explain what meaningful work is and to identify its antecedents and positive consequences (e.g. Chalofsky, 2003; Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso et al., 2010; Schnell, Höge, & Pollet, 2013; Steger, Dik, & Duffy, 2012; Wrzesniewski, 2003). The following section provides a brief background on the current state of meaningful work research and theory.

Meaningful Work

Most prominently, organizational development and behavior scholars have been concerned with investigating the positive personal and organizational consequences of meaningful work and have linked its experience to increased engagement (e.g. Kahn, 1990; Saks, 2006; Wollard & Shuck, 2011) and increased perceptions of job satisfaction (e.g. O'Brien, 1992; Roberson, 1990; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). Researchers have also found that meaningful work may be a key antecedent to work motivation, job enrichment, positive work behaviors, and enhanced employee performance (e.g. Brief & Nord, 1990; Cartwright & Holmes, 2006; Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Lysova et al., 2019; Morse & Weiss, 1955; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso et al., 2010; Steger et al., 2012; Wrzesniewski, 2003). Moreover, a sense of meaningfulness in work has been theorized to be a defining feature of overall psychological and physical well-being in non-work domains of life (Baumeister, 1991; Treadgold, 1999).

In terms of the factors that contribute to the experience of meaningful work, theorized antecedents include job design (e.g. Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2013; Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Lysova et al., 2019), individual attributes and behaviors (e.g. Bandura, 1989; Gandal, Roccas, Safiv, & Wrzesniewski, 2005; Lysova et al., 2019), social identity and relationships (e.g.

Rosso et al., 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1985), and organizational practices such as recruitment, socialization, and leadership behaviors (e.g. Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Pratt, Pradies, & Lepsito, 2013).

While research explaining the factors that contribute to and result from the experience of meaningful work is maturing, both the direct investigation of a unified meaningful work construct and the understanding of how individuals come to experience meaningfulness in the context of everyday work-life remain limited (e.g. Bailey & Madden, 2017; Lips-Wiersma, Souter, & Wright, 2014; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Rosso et al., 2010; Shim, 2016).

Underscoring the need for inquiry into the lived experience of meaningful work, recent qualitative research has suggested that meaningful work is a tensional and temporal construct that emerges from a fluid and contextual meaning-making process in the workplace (e.g. Bailey & Madden, 2017; Lips-Wiersma, 2015; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Shim, 2016). Viewed from this lens, *meaningful* work may be assumed to be one kind of meaning in work among many possible kinds of *meanings*, including *meaningless* work, which are constantly being negotiated and re-negotiated by workers over time.

Exploring the interrelationships between how one experiences meaninglessness and meaning-making in work may be critical to understanding how one comes to experience meaningfulness. Therefore, further investigation into how people experience the phenomenon of meaningful work and what that experience is like in diverse work contexts is needed to build a fuller, richer understanding of the meaningful work construct and to illuminate its nuances (Rosso et al., 2010).

The following section provides a brief background on the occupational and work context selected for the present study and demonstrates the need to study the lived experience of

meaningful work in the context of stigmatized work.

Meaningful Work in Stigmatized Work

Stigmatized work, commonly referred to as “dirty work,” represents one context for which the study of the lived experience of meaningful work is especially applicable and important (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013; Blustein, 2011; Bolton & Houlihan, 2009). Stigmatized work is generally defined as work that society at large has relegated as physically, socially, or morally tainted because of the undesirable nature of the work, the skill level it requires, or the low pay it receives (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013; Blustein, 2011; Davis, 1984). Workers in stigmatized occupations, such as service and cleaning professions, represent one of the largest segments of the modern workforce, and research finds that such workers may be at an increased risk for experiencing negative outcomes at work, including disengagement, lower commitment, and lower satisfaction, than workers in other contexts, such as knowledge or “white-collar” work (Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Blustein, 2011; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016; Gallup, 2016; Lips-Wiersma, Wright, & Dik, 2016). Emerging theory has also posited that the context of stigmatized occupations presents numerous unique barriers to the experience of meaningful work; examples are loss of dignity because of others’ negative perceptions of the work (e.g. Ashforth et al., 2007), hazardous and demanding working conditions (e.g. Flum, Siqueira, DeCaro, & Redway, 2010), and perceptions of “invisibility” in organizations (e.g. Magolda, 2016).

University custodians. Colleges and universities are one of the many important contexts in which to study the experiences of meaningful work among stigmatized occupations. At colleges and universities, cleaning and maintenance occupations such as custodians represent a large portion of the workforce due to the high reliance on physical facilities to deliver

educational experiences (Magolda, 2016). For example, in 2007, U.S. colleges and universities employed more than 75,330 custodians with an average hourly wage of \$12.12, many of whom worked within hazardous and demanding work environments (Flum et al., 2010). Moreover, university custodians have been considered by some scholars as especially “invisible” due to the hierarchical and bureaucratic structures that are widely characteristic of large educational organizations (Flum et al., 2010; Magolda, 2016). In addition, since the 1940s, a series of studies measuring societal perceptions of occupations have demonstrated that custodial work consistently ranks as one of the lowest in perceived prestige (Smith & Son, 2014).

Stigmatized work research. Stigmatized work has also remained relatively understudied in the organizational development and behavior literature (Bolton & Houlihan, 2009; Grandy, Mavin, & Simpson, 2014). In a review of the research on stigmatized occupations, Grandy et al. (2014) theorized that stigmatized work has remained under-investigated for two primary reasons. The first is a tendency for academia to focus on work that is “modern, clean, and value-adding,” which is commonly tied to research funding. The second is that the relatively invisible status of these occupations makes accessing research participants difficult due to challenging work sites and the hours of employees (Simpson, Slutskaya, Hughes, & Simpson, 2012; Southgate & Shying, 2014; Sanders-McDonagh, 2014). Therefore, there exists an important opportunity for the present study to add to the understanding of meaningful work while illuminating the experiences of workers in a stigmatized occupation.

Summary

Given the theorized positive benefits of meaningful work and the unique challenges to experiencing positive outcomes of work in a stigmatized occupational context, the present study seeks to better understand the lived experience of meaningful work in a stigmatized occupation.

The stigmatized occupation studied is that of university custodians. By adopting an exploratory, qualitative methodology enacted through a phenomenological approach (Giorgi, 2009), this study also responds to the need to better understand the experience of meaningful work in everyday work-life to complement extant research and theory-building. In addition, this study aims to add valuable knowledge to practitioners seeking to foster environments that facilitate the experience of meaningful work for workers in stigmatized occupations.

The remainder of this chapter states the research problem, outlines key underlying assumptions for the present study, defines the purpose of the present study, presents the guiding research questions, discusses the study's significance and limitations, outlines the researcher's perspective, describes ethical considerations, and defines key terms.

Problem Statement

Based on the background of meaningful work research in the context of stigmatized work, the problem that necessitated this study may be summarized as follows: Workers in stigmatized occupations such as custodial work (Magolda, 2016) may be more at risk for negative individual outcomes, such as disengagement, low motivation, and low satisfaction. These outcomes have also been shown to negatively affect overall organizational performance and can result in significant financial burdens for organizations (e.g. Rastogi, Pati, Krishnan, & Krishnan, 2018). At the same time, the experience of meaningful work has been linked to many positive outcomes in the workforce, such as increased engagement, motivation, and satisfaction. Yet, the understanding of how the phenomenon of meaningful work is experienced, specifically in the context of stigmatized work, is limited.

Key Assumptions of the Phenomenon

The central phenomenon investigated in this study was university custodians' lived experience of meaningful work. Several important assumptions were made regarding this phenomenon, based in the emergent literature, which frame the research questions and underpin the selected research approach for this study. These assumptions are important to briefly discuss here to contextualize both the purpose of the study and the ensuing research questions. The assumptions are as follows:

- 1. Meaningfulness is one possible kind of meaning in work that emerges from the phenomenon of a contextual meaning-making process.** As such, the phenomenon of meaningfulness was assumed to be necessarily linked to the phenomena of meaninglessness and meaning-making. Meaninglessness was considered another possible kind of meaning made in work (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). Thus, the exploration of meaningfulness while relating it to and exploring meaninglessness and meaning-making informed the research approach.
- 2. The process of experiencing meaningfulness is tentional and temporal.** Recent research has found that because meaningfulness emerges from a fluid and contextual meaning-making process, an individual must actively negotiate organizational, professional, political, cultural, and economic forces through everyday activities to arrive at an experience of meaningfulness or meaninglessness (e.g. Bailey & Madden, 2017; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). These forces can be assumed to be *both* enabling and constraining, depending on their nature and how they are experienced. Therefore, in this study, meaningfulness was assumed to be a *tentional* phenomenon (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017).

In addition, research shows that the experience of meaningful work may be “temporally episodic and transitory rather than permanent or ongoing” (Bailey & Madden, 2017, p. 10; Shim, 2016). That is, the experience of meaningfulness is subject to phenomenological time. Therefore, it may be assumed that all individuals experience both meaningfulness and meaninglessness at various times in their work (Bailey & Madden, 2017; Shim, 2016). An individual’s present description of meaningfulness will inevitably be anchored in the past through having to reflexively look back over completed work to ascertain meaning in the moment, while at the same time referencing the future manifestation of a current work experience (Bailey & Madden, 2017; Muzzetto, 2006). Thus, meaningfulness was assumed in this study to be temporal. This explains the use of and emphasis on time (i.e. “when”) in the research questions, the descriptive phenomenological approach selected, and the methods chosen and reviewed in Chapter Three.

- 3. Meaningfulness is a subjectively, socially constructed phenomenon.** Finally, individuals’ experiences of the phenomenon of meaningfulness were assumed in this study to be constructed through the interaction between the individual and the context in which he or she is embedded (things, people, environment, and researcher) (Crotty, 1998; Wrzesniewski et al., 2013). As will be explicated later, it was assumed that my role as the researcher in the present study was to “invite” such knowledge out to better describe and understand the structure of the experience of meaningful work in a stigmatized occupation.

Purpose and Research Objectives

Given the background and problem, and building on the stated assumptions, the objectives of this study were to:

1. Better understand what the lived experience of meaningful work was like, when it was experienced, for university custodians
2. Better understand what the lived experience of meaningless work was like, when it was experienced, for university custodians
3. Explore how university custodians made and negotiated meanings in work to experience it as meaningful or meaningless
4. Better understand the facilitating and hindering contextual forces on the experience of meaningful work for the university custodians;
5. Inform practitioners responsible for designing work experiences that affect workers in stigmatized occupations
6. Advance Human Resource Development (HRD) and Organization Development (OD) scholarship in the areas of meaningful work and stigmatized work

Research Questions

To fulfill the above purpose and to respond to the research problem, the following research questions guided this inquiry:

1. What are university custodians' lived experiences when they make meaning of their work as meaningful?
2. What are university custodians' lived experiences when they make meaning of their work as meaningless?

3. What are university custodians' lived experiences of making and negotiating the meanings in their work?

Significance of the Study

First, this study contributes to and complements the extant meaningful work literature by employing a phenomenological research approach (Giorgi, 2009) seeking to describe the lived experience of meaningful work in context. The phenomenological approach addresses several research recommendations outlined by meaningful work scholars: it engages in understanding the tensional and temporal nature of meaningful work (Bailey & Madden, 2017; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Shim, 2016), adds more understanding of the human activity of meaning-making in work (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2015; Rosso et al., 2010), and provides a qualitative, inductive understanding of the phenomenon of meaningful work to help clarify the construct and complement existing quantitative research approaches and findings.

Second, this study contributes needed research (Grandy et al., 2014) on the experience of a stigmatized occupation to the fields of organizational psychology, organizational development, organizational behavior, and human resource development. By illuminating a sometimes-invisible occupational group in organizations, this study may help guide future research agendas to investigate understudied and/or stigmatized occupations. Finally, the present study provides potentially useful knowledge to practitioners engaged in designing work experiences and organizational practices that affect workers in stigmatized occupations.

Delimitations and Limitations

As an exploratory qualitative study enacted using a phenomenological approach, the present inquiry sought to describe the lived experience of meaningful work for university custodians at one large, public Western research university. Therefore, the study was bound to

the specific context of university custodians at one university but benefited from the ability to gather and analyze rich descriptions of the lived experience of meaningful work through the perspectives of an understudied population of workers (Blustein, 2011; Magolda, 2016). Moreover, a phenomenological approach (Giorgi, 2009) grounded in individuals' descriptions of their subjective, lived experiences precluded the development of grand theories, the design of generalizable factorial models, the making of definite statements of empirical magnitude, or the determination of relations among or between specific variables (Wertz, 2011).

However, the selected approach had the capability of developing local theory. In this descriptive phenomenological study, local theory was achieved through the development of a *structure of experience*. This involved identifying key, common constituents of the lived experiences of meaningful and meaningless work across participants, and proposing potential relations among these constituents (Giorgi, 2009; Wertz, 2011). By giving structure and shape to the lived experience of meaningful work in a stigmatized occupation, this experience was further clarified. Such a conceptualization, emergent from the descriptions of lived experiences, complements existing quantitative research on meaningful work.

Researcher Perspective

My interest in studying the experiences of meaningful work among university custodians arose through my former professional student development and event planning role in higher education. In that role, due to the early morning and evening hours, I had the opportunity to interact closely with members of the facilities team, including university custodians. My own work experiences have been as a “knowledge worker” (Porat, 1998), and topics such as purpose, meaningfulness, motivation, and engagement were and are familiar elements of both my training and professional development. However, through my regular interaction with and observation of

people doing the necessary manual work to keep the university functioning and clean, I began noticing differences in how these workers talked about their work. Namely, I was struck by their anecdotal descriptions of some of the hardships they faced, such as difficult working conditions, long hours, low pay, and the perceived lack of respect from others. These hardships were unlike those I had experienced or observed being experienced by my colleagues. At the same time, I was also surprised and intrigued by the custodians' accounts of how they derived significant meaning and purpose from their work. I remember a few custodians talking openly about how they felt personal ownership over the spaces they cleaned and the people they cleaned for.

As my own career in training and development at the university progressed, I became more interested in how people came to find purpose and meaningfulness in their work. In my early research on the topic, I was surprised to locate few studies directly investigating the experiences of meaningful work among people like the custodians I knew. That early exploration led me to want to conduct this study.

It is important in this phenomenological study that I acknowledge my extensive experience with the topic of meaningfulness. I have conducted research and performed consulting on purpose and meaningfulness in work. By reviewing the research, I have generally adopted a position that meaningfulness is “positive” and “needed” in work. I have also been exposed to prevailing operational definitions of meaningful work from a positive psychological perspective. I carefully bracketed and reflected upon this knowledge as I collected and analyzed the data (Giorgi, 2009).

Finally, my own identities as a middle-class white man in a “white-collar” profession are important to acknowledge and reflect upon in relation to the population I studied. The custodian profession, in general, is comprised of a more ethnically diverse, lower socioeconomic

population (Magolda, 2016). I acknowledge my differing life experiences as well as the privilege I carried as I entered this occupational context. The technique of embodied interviewing (Finlay, 2009) allowed for reflection on these identities and encouraged empathy in the data collection process.

In addition, my own perspectives and identities made enacting a descriptive phenomenological approach (Giorgi, 2009) especially applicable. The approach carefully encouraged me to adopt an attitude aimed at focusing intently on the participants' descriptions of their lived experience while bracketing and reflecting on my own experiences in the process.

Ethical Considerations

As a qualitative researcher, it was important for me to ensure that the informants' rights, values, and desires were respected (Creswell, 2009) and that the fundamental principles of beneficence and non-maleficence (Eddie 1994), or "do no harm," were upheld. To this end, the following steps were implemented (Creswell, 2009):

1. Participants were provided informed consent (informed consent form is available in Appendix A) through providing written, adequate, and comprehensible information regarding the research objectives and expectations, and had the power to consent to or decline participation.
2. Participants provided written permission through signing the consent form before I began the study.
3. Approval from Colorado State University's (CSU) Institutional Review Board (IRB) was secured prior to any participant recruitment and data collection.
4. Participants were given full access to the transcripts and any produced research report.

5. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity and were given the freedom of removing themselves, and all pertinent collected data, from the study at any time.
6. The structure and content of the reported data were constructed with the participants' interests as a priority.

In addition, due to the nature of phenomenological interviewing, I demonstrated respect and empathy toward the participants and tried to be a keen observer of their reactions to the questioning (Finlay, 2009). Specifically, as recommended by Kavanagh and Ayres (1998), if participation in the interview caused emotional distress, welfare took priority over the research. This was not an issue in this study.

Definitions of Key Terms

In accordance with the purpose of this study, the following terms are foundational for understanding this research:

Meaningful work is work that its practitioners, through a particular work context, subjectively experience and determine to be positive, purposeful, and significant (e.g. Hackman & Oldham, 1975; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003).

Meaningless work is work that its practitioners, through a particular work context, subjectively experience and determine to be negative, purposeless, and/or insignificant (e.g. May et al., 2004).

Meaning-making is refers to the ongoing, fluid processes through which people sense, interpret, negotiate, and ultimately attach significance (or insignificance) to situations, events, others, objects, or discourses through the lenses of their identities, previous

knowledge, and lived experiences (Bruner, 1990; Park, 2012; Perret-Clermont, Carugati, Oates, 2004; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003).

Stigmatized work is work that society has generally relegated as morally, physically, or socially tainted due to its undesirable nature, the low skill level it requires, or the low pay it receives (e.g. Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013; Hughes, 1958, 1962).

Stigmatized occupations are understood as occupations that, due to the sometimes unsanitary and hazardous conditions of the work, experience negative social stigma and a lack of societal validation (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013).

University custodian refers to a facilities maintenance employee, classified by the State employment system as a “Custodian,” currently engaged in cleaning work at the university selected as the site for this study.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In accordance with the purpose of investigating the lived experience of meaningful work in a stigmatized occupation, this chapter reviews the literature to contextualize and support the present study. Three bodies of informing literature form the three major sections of this review: meaningful work, meaning-making in work, and stigmatized work. The last section of this chapter presents an organizing conceptual framework that both synthesizes the review of all three bodies of literature and helps to frame the present study's research approach. Given that the phenomenon of meaningful work served as the central phenomenon under investigation in this study, the meaningful work literature is given the most attention in this review.

Section One: Meaningful Work

This section explores what is currently known and understood about meaningful work. It covers the method used to select the literature for this section, reviews the definition(s) of meaningful work, examines key meaningful work research findings, provides an overview of the informing meaningful work theories, and synthesizes and summarizes the meaningful work literature and the implications of this review. This section also briefly discusses the literature related to *meaningless work*, a previously undefined concept that, for the purposes of this study, was assumed to be related to the experience of meaningful work.

Method of Selecting Literature

The selection methods used for this section of the literature review are outlined below.

First, a limited number of highly cited (as reported by Google Scholar) influential theoretical pieces were identified using Rosso et al.'s (2010) and Lysova et al.'s (2019) comprehensive theoretical integrations and reviews of the meaningful work literature (e.g.

Chalofsky, 2003; Chalofsky & Cavallaro, 2013; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Steger, et al. 2012; Wrzesniewski, 2003). These theoretical pieces were selected because they directly sought to clarify and define the meaningful work construct using explicit theory-building or empirical methods and provided a necessary map of the constructs and components which have been studied in relation to meaningful work. The synthesis of these articles formed the guiding definition of meaningful work used in this study, the keywords used to query databases and portals, and the selection of subsequent articles for inclusion in this literature review.

To locate the relevant literature, research portals and databases such as Google Scholar, EBSCO Academic Search Premier, JSTOR, ERIC, and ProQuest – Dissertations and Theses were queried. The databases were queried using the keywords “meaningful work,” “meaning in work,” “meaning at work,” “meaning of work,” and “calling and work.”

During the initial literature search, it became increasingly clear that the current understanding of meaningful work has emerged from research which has largely investigated components related in various ways to meaningful work, and not “meaningful work” as a unified construct itself. The apparent dominance of variance models of research (Abbot, 1988, 1992; Poole, Van de Ven, Dooley, & Holmes, 2000; Van de Ven, 2007) seemed to contribute to the lack of research *directly* studying meaningful work and created several challenges in accessing and navigating the literature. To address this challenge, each of the components (i.e. job design, engagement, job satisfaction) related to meaningful work that arose in the initial search were included in additional searches of the literature by querying the databases outlined above with each of the stated keywords in combination with each of the components (e.g. “meaningful work and engagement”). Through the initial search and each sub-search, a fuller picture of the complicated research and theory-building stream emerged, as represented in this section.

The search yielded 117 results that were included in the review to build an understanding of the extant meaningful work literature, comprising journal articles, dissertations, texts, and practitioner-based research reports ranging from 1943 to 2019.

Defining Meaningful Work

To define meaningful work for the purposes of this study, the following briefly examines the prevailing definitions of “meaning” and the corresponding associations among “meaning” and “work” utilized in the literature. Finally, after synthesizing its conceptualizations, a definition of meaningful work is proposed to set the context for the present study.

Meaning and work. The associations between the terms “meaning” and “work” along with the prepositions that have linked the terms in the research literature (i.e. meaning *of* work, meaning *in* work, meaning *at* work) are complex, nuanced, and debated (Rosso et al., 2010). However, it is helpful to understand how researchers have dominantly defined meaning and its association with work to frame the present study.

Meaning. From a psychological perspective, *meaning* is generally assumed to be a subjectively constructed and individual phenomenon (Baumeister, 1991; Brief & Nord, 1990; Rosso et al., 2010). Through a sociological lens, on the other hand, meaning is thought to be reflected through the interplay of complex cultural and societal value systems often governed by larger socio-cultural contexts (Geertz, 1973). The research and theory that have investigated and described meaning and work have generally relied on the assumption that meaning is constructed *both* subjectively by the individual and through dynamic social interaction in the workplace (Rosso et al., 2010; Wrzesniewski et al., 2013).

However, the most prominent assumption of the reviewed research is that the determination of whether something (work in this case) is perceived as having meaning, and

what that meaning means, is ultimately up to the individual (Rosso et al., 2010). In this sense, Pratt and Ashforth (2003) defined *meaning* as the individual's "output of having made sense of something" (Rosso et al., 2010, p. 94), and that ultimate "sense" is a result of its co-construction among other individuals and the lifeworld of an organization (Weick, 1995).

Meaning as positive. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) admonished the difficulty in defining meaning as it related to work and suggested that it may be best defined as an individual's sense of purpose, the significance of something, and the intention one holds. Reinforcing this definition, Steger, Oishi, and Kashdan (2009) proposed that people find meaning in their lives when they view their lives as purposeful, significant, and understandable. Both Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) and Steger et al.'s (2009) inclusion of "purpose" and "significance" as qualifiers highlights the eudemonic assumptions that have informed the predominant definitions of meaningful work. In contrast to hedonism (survival and pleasure as essential to life), the elements of significance and purpose that distinguish "meaningful" work are "eudemonic" – that is, they represent well-being in life as engaging in meaningful activities and achieving goals that have intrinsic benefit (Albrecht, 2013). Much of the reviewed meaningful work research has emerged from the positive psychology movement, which relies on eudemonic assumptions (Seligman, 2002). These disciplines have been termed "positive organizational scholarship" (Cameron & Dutton, 2003) and "positive organizational behavior" (Luthans, 2002). Therefore, meaning as it relates to work has generally been regarded as a positive phenomenon.

Meaning of, in, and at work. Another key distinction that has been made in the literature is among the nuances between the prepositions linking meaning and work (Rosso et al., 2010). Namely, the literature has distinguished meaning *of* work, meaning *in* work, and meaning *at* work. *Meaning of work* has generally referred to the societal value of work or employment itself

to an individual or society, *meaning in work* to the subjective experience of meaning within a work context, and *meaning at work* has characterized the relationship between the individual and the overall organization (Chalofsky, 2003; Chalofsky & Cavallaro, 2013; Dik, Byrne, & Steger, 2013; Harpaz & Fu, 2002; MOW International Research Team, 1987; Schnell et al., 2013). In most of the extant literature, the prevailing understanding of meaningful work has emerged from the conceptualization of *meaning in work*, or the individual's subjective experience of meaningfulness within a work context. This was the case for the present study as well.

Meaningfulness. The generally positive valence attached to meaning, emerging from the positive psychology movement, has evolved into the construct of *meaningfulness*, which underpins the most widely accepted definitions of meaningful work (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Steger et al., 2012). As noted above, researchers in the positive psychology tradition have used the qualities of “purposeful” and “significant” to characterize *positive meaning* – or meaningfulness – when related to work (Albrecht, 2013; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Steger et al., 2009).

Definition of meaningful work. “Meaningful” work, then, is one “kind,” “quality,” or “amount” of meaning that an individual ascribes to work. While discord remains among scholars as to the precise definition of meaningful work, *positive meaning*, *significance*, and *purpose* are common qualities of the meaning that is made that differentiate meaningful work from other constructs.

The most widely used definitions (Rosso et al., 2010) continue to draw from Hackman and Oldham (1976), who described meaningful work as “the degree to which the employee experiences the job as one which is generally meaningful, valuable, and worthwhile” (p. 162). Pratt and Ashforth (2003) included significance and purpose in defining meaningful work as

when “the work and/or its context are perceived by its practitioners to be, at minimum, purposeful and significant” (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003, p. 311). Taking this definition further, by drawing on research on the importance of prosocial motivation to the experience of meaningful work (Grant, 2007), Dik et al. (2013) added that the work should “possess the capacity to serve some greater good” (p. 4).

In summary, the common assumptions that have underpinned the definitions of meaningful work over the last 45 years are that it is subjectively experienced within an organizational context and that it has a positive meaning. Therefore, the reviewed definitions used by researchers may be best summarized as follows: *Meaningful work* is work that its practitioners, through a particular work context, subjectively experience and determine to be positive, purposeful, and significant.

Key Meaningful Work Research Findings

This section reviews the major research findings related to meaningful work. It covers the influence of foundational humanistic and positive psychology research on the study of meaningful work, research findings on the consequences and antecedents of this phenomenon, and the research on how it is experienced.

The influence of foundational humanistic and positive psychology research. In oral historian Studs Terkel’s (1972) project *Working*, extensive analysis of meticulous interviews with more than 130 employees across diverse occupations concluded that for most, work is about a search for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying. (Schultz, 2000, p. 1892) (quoting Terkel, 1974)

In this tradition, much of the reviewed scholarship that has demonstrated the importance of

meaningful work has been informed by the disciplines of humanistic psychology and positive psychology, which seek to study the totality of individuals, their perspectives, and how they flourish and find positive meaning (Seligman, 2002; Shaffer, 1978). Positive psychology's pioneer Martin Seligman described positive psychology as a "psychology of healing" developed to repair damage done by traditional psychology as a "disease model of human functioning" (Seligman, 2002, p. 3).

The shift from viewing work as a necessary burden to a context through which positive meaning may be made of one's life was a seminal contribution of positive and humanistic psychology to the study of meaningful work. The following reviews how positive and humanistic psychology emphasized the importance of intrinsic motivation, and subsequently covers the foundational empirical research on people's motivation to work. Such research has supported the claim that people work for more than extrinsic rewards and served as the catalyst for much of the meaningful work research reviewed in this section of the chapter.

The importance of intrinsic motivation. When applied to the study of work and organizations, both humanistic and positive psychological theories and research findings have called into question the pervasive and taken-for-granted assumption that people's motivation to work and experiences of well-being at work are chiefly due to biological and economic reasons: survival, pay, security, and benefits (Diener & Seligman, 2002; Heyman & Ariely, 2004). Such a re-examination has led scholars to recognize the recurring positive attribute of meaningfulness found in most of the influential studies and theories on work motivation. In fact, through comprehensive reviews of the classic psychological work motivation theories (e.g. Alderfer, 1972; Herzberg, 1966, 2011; Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959; Maslow, 1943, 1970,

1971), Gayle (1997) and Chalofsky (2010) found that meaningful work may be an “inherent need” for individuals and their motivation to work.

Humanistic and positive psychology’s challenges to the assumption that extrinsic rewards are central to what motivates people at work also illuminated a major tension in the literature on why people work and what motivates them. Primarily, this tension lies between the influences of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivations have been found to include elements such as interesting and meaningful work, creativity, and fulfillment, whereas extrinsic motivations include factors like pay, working conditions, or job security (Herzberg et al., 1959). This tension served as a catalyst for emerging research that expanded the notions of work to be inclusive of the whole person’s state of being and that investigated the roles of intrinsic factors in work motivation. It is out of this tension that the research on meaningful work arose.

Foundational empirical research on people’s motivations to work. Situated in the post-industrialization of society and responding to the corresponding prevalence of the idea that people worked primarily for income and survival, Morse and Weiss’s (1955) landmark study of the function and meaning of work was one of the first that sought to empirically understand why people work. The researchers conducted interviews with a national sample of 401 employees across occupations and socioeconomic classes. They asked participants: “If you inherited enough money to live comfortably, would you continue to work?” Eighty percent of respondents across socioeconomic classes and occupations indicated they would continue to work even if they did not need the pay or security. The findings indicated that for most respondents, work served as more than a means to earn a living or security. Working, the researchers found, gave the participants “a feeling of being tied into the larger society, of having a purpose in life” (p. 191). Multi-national studies with large samples, such as the MOW International Research Team (1987)

project and the Work Importance Study (Šverko & Super, 1995), have empirically corroborated these findings and supported the paradigm shift to a eudemonic assumption of human psychology at work. The MOW International Research Team (1987) found that the “expressive dimensions” of work, including self-expression, personal learning and development, and spiritual and societal service, accounted for nearly half of the global sample’s chief motivations for working.

Building on the MOW International Research Team (1987) project, the Work Importance Study (Šverko & Super, 1995) aimed to measure what was most important to people *in* their work. In cross-national comparisons, the fulfillment of “personal potential” and “self-realization” were among the highest ranked values in every country (Šverko & Super, 1995, p. 351). More modern studies have continued to find that for over half of the world’s workforce, meaningful work is an important priority, and the desire for such work has been found at all levels of organizations (e.g. Gallup, 2016; Holbeche & Springett, 2004; Kelly Services, 2009, 2012).

These expansive, foundational studies were significant because they provided empirical evidence of the importance of intrinsic values theorized by humanistic psychologists like Maslow (1970). In addition, these multi-national studies highlighted the individual and contextual variability of the meanings of and in work. Such variability inevitably requires similarly variable research methodologies and approaches to studying meaningful work, a finding that resonates with the outcomes of the present review and that informed the present study.

The research outlined above sought to understand more generally and societally why people work and what they seek at work. While these studies serve as a convincing basis for the importance of meaningful work in both practice and research, the next section of this review

focuses on what researchers have found makes work meaningful and what the outcomes of meaningful work are.

Consequences and antecedents of meaningful work. The implications of the definitions of meaningful work along with the influence of positive and humanistic psychology become apparent when analyzing the major findings reported in the literature. Specifically, the assumption that meaning is an individual, static, and positive phenomenon has influenced a dominant research approach that is “outcome-driven,” with a predisposition to explain how certain independent variables or factors explain variations in desired outcomes (Aldrich, 2001; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Van de Ven, 2007). These studies have yielded useful results which aid in characterizing “what” meaningful work is and what factors are related to it. The following reviews some of the more extensively studied consequences and antecedents of meaningful work through this lens.

Consequences of meaningful work. Research investigating the consequences of meaningful work have most commonly linked the experience of meaningful work to positive outcomes, such as increased work motivation (Hackman & Oldham, 1975, 1980; Roberson, 1990), engagement (Albrecht, 2013; Fairlie, 2011; May et al., 2004; Saks, 2006; Wollard & Shuck, 2011), job satisfaction and reduced turnover intentions (Brown & Peterson, 1994; Esteves & Lopes, 2007; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997), organizational commitment (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009; Geldenhuys, Taba, & Venter, 2014; Rego, Cunha, & Souto, 2007), positive work behaviors (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), and performance (Wrzesniewski, 2003). In addition, because of its influence on the above factors, a sense of meaningfulness has also been associated as a defining feature with general psychological and physical well-being, including lower stress, lower rates of depression, and increased feelings of fulfillment in both work and non-work

domains of life (Arnold, Turner, Barling, Kelloway, & McKee, 2007; Baumeister, 1991; Elangoven, Pinder, & McLean, 2010; Oates, Hall, and Anderson, 2005; Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010; Schaufeli et al., 2009; Treadgold, 1999; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997).

However, in the human resource development, organizational behavior, and organizational development literature, there has been a distinct focus on studying how meaningful work enhances positive individual outcomes which relate to desired organizational outcomes such as work motivation, engagement, job satisfaction and reduced turnover intention, and organizational commitment and positive work behaviors (Rosso et al., 2010). The following reviews each of these researched and theorized outcomes.

Work motivation. Pinder (1998) defined work motivation as “a set of energetic forces that originate both within as well as beyond an individual’s being, to initiate work-related behavior, and to determine its form, direction, intensity, and duration” (p. 11). The “forces that originate from within” have most commonly been identified as “critical psychological states” (Hackman & Oldham, 1976, 1980). Research has found that experienced meaningfulness may serve as a critical psychological state of motivation.

Much of the research on meaningful work and work motivation stemmed from Herzberg et al.’s (1959) “two-factor theory” of job satisfaction and motivation, which proposed that the primary determinants of satisfaction at work were intrinsic (Herzberg et al., 1959; Herzberg, 1966). While the theory was questioned due to its lack of empirical measurement and conceptual clarification, it gave way to work motivation research focused on the critical psychological states of internal or intrinsic motivation at work – from which the construct of meaningful work was primarily derived (e.g. Alderfer, 1972; Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Locke, Saari, Shaw, & Latham, 1981; Vroom, 1964).

Since then, experienced meaningfulness in work has been found to be a key causal factor for numerous positive work and personal outcomes. Building on Herzberg et al.'s (1959) and other work motivation theorists' (e.g. Alderfer, 1972) research, Hackman and Oldham (1976, 1980) developed and empirically validated a key theoretical model on work motivation to identify the necessary psychological states for internal motivation at work, the characteristics of jobs that created those states, and the attributes of people that determined how well they responded to a challenging job. Hackman and Oldham found that the critical psychological state of experienced meaningfulness represented a necessary causal influence on positive personal and work outcomes (i.e. work motivation, work performance, job satisfaction, and reduced turnover).

Comprehensive meta-analyses and reviews have supported Hackman and Oldham's model (e.g. Fried & Ferris, 1987; Rosso et al., 2010). The findings from such seminal work motivation studies are critical to understanding the most current conceptualizations of meaningful work, as each of the critical states in Hackman and Oldham's model constructs its previously outlined core definition (positive, significant, and purposeful).

Engagement. In addition to motivation, the potential positive influence of meaningful work on employee engagement has gained significant attention in the research literature, especially since the Gallup employee engagement surveys have repeatedly found that just 13% of the world's workforce indicate being actively engaged in their work (Gallup, 2016). Disengagement has been linked to "burnout," characterized by the combination of exhaustion, frustration, anger, cynicism, and a sense of ineffectiveness and insignificance, which affects work performance and non-work domains of life (Rich et al., 2010; Schaufeli, Leiter & Maslach, 2009). Disengagement has also been likened to "alienation," which has been found to be a critical component when it comes to workers' commitment and motivation (Aktouf, 1992; May

et al., 2004). Further, work that is experienced as “meaningless” has been associated with apathy and detachment – two qualities of disengagement (Kahn, 1990; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990).

Kahn’s (1990) descriptive grounded theory study of an architectural firm and a summer camp has been considered integral to the current understanding and conceptualization of engagement (May et al., 2004) as it relates to meaningful work. In the 1990 study, Kahn specifically sought to identify and describe the psychological state of respondents each time they described experiences of engagement. Kahn found that one of the defining features of the phenomenon of engagement was the amount of meaning (meaningfulness) the individual attached to the task or job. Later, May et al. (2004) empirically corroborated Kahn’s findings in a field study that explored the determinants and mediating effects of certain psychological conditions on employee engagement. The researchers found that psychological meaningfulness in work was one of three critical mediators of employee engagement, along with psychological safety and availability. Meaningfulness had the strongest positive association with engagement ($\beta = .73$). Other empirically validated models of engagement have also shown that experienced meaningfulness is a critical and statistically significant antecedent and mediator of the experience of engagement at work (e.g. Albrecht, 2013; Saks, 2006; Wollard & Schuck, 2011).

Job satisfaction and reduced turnover intention. Increased job satisfaction is one of the more desirable researched consequences of meaningful work due to its demonstrated relationship with lower turnover intention and absenteeism (e.g. Brown & Peterson, 1993; Judge, Bono, Thoresen, and Patton, 2001; Mobley, 1977). Job satisfaction has been characterized as an individual’s subjective appraisal of whether the job is pleasurable and elicits positive emotions (Knoop, 1994; Locke, 1976). Research has steadily found that meaningfulness is a key contributor to job satisfaction (e.g. Brown & Peterson, 1994; Kamdron, 2005; Wrzesniewski et

al., 1997) and may even mediate the stresses of every day work-life to enhance resilience (Esteves & Lopes, 2017). These findings have extended Herzberg et al.'s (1959) theory and provided more evidence for Hackman and Oldham's (1976, 1980) findings related to the importance of meaningful work in producing positive attitudes toward work.

Organizational commitment and positive work behaviors. Like engagement, organizational commitment has also emerged as a particularly important concept for organizational scholars and practitioners due to its researched impact on positive work behaviors, lower turnover, and reduced absenteeism (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009; Mercurio, 2015). Drawing on Allen and Meyer (2000), organizational commitment is generally defined as “a psychological state that characterizes an employee’s relationship with the organization and reduces the likelihood that he/she will leave it” (Rego et al., 2007, p. 59). Research on multiple occupations has repeatedly found that when employees consider what they do to be meaningful and helpful, they report higher levels of affective, or emotional, commitment to the organization (e.g. Duchon & Plowman, 2005; Gavin & Mason, 2004; Gull & Doh, 2004; Rego et al., 2007). The finding that meaningful work contributes most significantly to affective commitment is particularly important as affective commitment has been found to have the most significant effect on positive work outcomes when compared to other types of commitment (Mercurio, 2015). These studies have also complemented findings on the importance of the emotional dimensions of work (e.g. MOW International Research Team, 1987).

Antecedents of meaningful work. When reviewing the literature on what components contribute to the experience of meaningful work, it becomes difficult to distinguish antecedents of meaningful work from its consequences. Steger et al. (2012) noted that in many empirical

studies investigating these antecedents, there has been significant “comingling” between the sources, causes, and experience of meaningful work. Steger et al. (2012) wrote,

One could conclude from a reading of the literature that [MW] consists of (at least) skill variety, opportunity to complete an entire task (task identity), task significance to other people, military pride, engagement, a sense of calling, challenge, work role identity, work centrality, work values, intrinsic work orientation, spirituality, good pay, and reputation. (Steger et al., 2012, p. 2)

The comingling of variables is one of the potential drawbacks to a research approach that investigates meaningful work by examining its relation to certain factors. A detailed review of the literature on each of these well-researched, potential antecedents of meaningful work (i.e. skill variety, pride, a sense of calling, challenge, work role identity, occupational identity, work centrality, work values, intrinsic work orientation, spirituality, good pay, reputation, etc.) is outside the scope of the present study. The sheer number of components serves as a challenge for researchers seeking to study meaningful work.

Nevertheless, there has been some general agreement in the research literature (Lysova et al., 2019) that certain factors are more related than others to the experience of meaningful work (Rosso et al., 2010). The following reviews these identified antecedents and organizes them into four categories: the job itself, the individual, others and relationships, and organizational practices.

The job itself. Much of the research on the antecedents of meaningful work focuses on the job itself or “job design” (Berg et al., 2013). Job design is defined as “the tasks and relationships assigned to one person in an organization” (Berg et al., 2013, p.81; Ilgen & Hollenbeck, 1991). Building on the Job Characteristics Model derived and validated by Hackman and Oldham

(1976, 1980), researchers have consistently found that the characteristics of a job can influence whether the individual experiences meaningfulness in work (e.g. Grant, 2007, 2008; Johns, Xie, & Fang, 1992; Kahn, 1990; May et al., 2004; Renn & Vandenberg, 1995). In particular, *task identity* and *task significance* (Hackman & Oldham, 1980) have been found to be especially connected to the experience of meaningful work (Carton, 2017).

Task identity is best defined as “the degree to which the job requires completion of a ‘whole’ and identifiable piece of work—that is, doing a job from beginning to end with a visible outcome” (Hackman & Oldham, 1975, p. 161). Research has found that when jobs are structured in a way that allows employees to see the end outcome of their work, especially along the way, those employees experience more meaningfulness in the work (e.g. May et al., 2004; Renn & Vandenberg, 1995).

In addition, the perceived impact of the job on the lives of other people has also been found to enhance meaningfulness. *Task significance* describes the degree to which the job or task has an objective or perceived “substantial impact” on the lives of other people (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Studies have found that people who perceive their work and tasks as having an impact on others both experience and perceive their work as more meaningful, and experience positive work outcomes, such as those reviewed above (e.g. Batson, 1991; Latane, 1981; Grant, 2007, 2008; Grant, Campbell, Chen, Cottone, Lapedis, and Lee, 2005; Hackman & Oldham 1976; May et al., 2004).

In addition to the design and enrichment of the job itself, researchers have also investigated how the experience of meaningful work may be impacted by the relationship between the individual and the role he or she fulfills in an organization (Kristof, 1996; Scroggins, 2008). Specifically, studies have found that “self-concept-job-fit,” the fit between the

individual's beliefs about him- or herself (i.e. attributes, values) and the job, has a predictive relationship with meaningfulness (Scroggins, 2008, 2003; Shamir, 1991; Marsh & Hattie, 1996; May et al., 2004). Much of this research has continued to uphold the assumption that the individual is one of the most critical determiners of meaningful work.

The individual. The “self” has been considered a primary determinant of the constructs (i.e. values, beliefs, attitudes) theorized to contribute to the experience of meaningful work (Bandura, 1989; Berg et al., 2013; Lysova et al., 2019; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Specifically, research has found that both an individual's disposition and values may significantly impact the degree to which he or she experiences meaningful work (Brief & Nord, 1990; Lysova et al., 2019). Furthermore, individuals may “self-select” into certain occupations based on values, thus making the work inherently more meaningful (Gandal, Roccas, Sagiv, & Wrzesniewski, 2005; Rosso et al., 2010). However, there are challenges and incongruences within the literature on values: first, the operationalization and definition of values seems boundless; and second, this body of work is laden with assumptions that employees have an ample amount of choice in their occupation or job. In his critique of organizational behavior research, Blustein (2011) noted the privileging of “high volition” careers, and the lack of studies investigating underprivileged, or low volition, workers' experience of meaningful work.

In addition to individual values and general disposition, scholars have also found that people may be able to subjectively introduce changes to their tasks, perceptions of those tasks, and relationships at work to experience more meaningfulness. The act of initiating these changes has been termed “job crafting” (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Not only has this been found to influence the meaningfulness of work, but it may also increase resilience, performance, and self-image (Berg et al., 2013). Job crafting has repositioned individuals as “active constructors” of

meaningfulness through job design, versus passive recipients of the workplace. Research has found that individuals can engage in changing tasks, relationships, and perceptions of their job to embed it in the components of meaningful work that were previously outlined (Berg et al., 2013).

Others and relationships. Relative to research investigating meaningfulness as a subjective, individually constructed phenomenon, studies on how interpersonal relationships contribute to the experience of meaningful work are not as prevalent (Lysova et al., 2019; Rosso et al., 2010). The understanding of how meaningfulness is socially constructed represents an important future direction for meaningful work scholars. However, useful literature is available on the impact of co-worker relationships and social identity on the experience of meaningfulness. Much of this research has investigated the role of co-workers on the experience of meaningful work and has centered on the role these co-workers play in reinforcing “valued identities” at work (Kahn, 2007; Rosso et al., 2010). Furthermore, scholars have indicated that individuals may look to co-workers for “cues” about the meaningfulness of the work which contribute to their individual experience of meaningfulness (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003).

In addition to the effects of interpersonal relationships with co-workers, work also serves as a context in which individuals are members of communities and groups. Research on social identity has suggested that people tend to categorize themselves based on the social groups of which they consider themselves members (Rosso et al., 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Within a larger macro-environment such as an organization, social group identification provides individuals with reduced uncertainty, and researchers have found that this psychological identification may be an important contributor to the experience of meaningful work (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Rosso et al., 2010; Weick, 1995). However, studies on the *process* of constructing

meaningfulness through these social interactions and identities remain limited, making this an important area of potential future inquiry.

Organizational practices. Because organizations – and more specifically the people who design organizational structures, processes, practices, and systems – have the ability to provide and foster some of the reviewed antecedents to meaningful work, studies on the role of organizational practices have found that when practices such as recruitment, selection, and socialization reinforce personal values, they may contribute to the experience of meaningful work (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Pratt, Pradies, & Lepisto, 2013; Rosso et al., 2010). Specifically, these studies have shown that such practices may be able to reinforce desired “work orientations,” or the subjective valuations of what makes the work worth doing. Research on work orientations has uncovered three primary work orientations that relate to meaningful work: *kinship* (doing with), *servicing* (doing good), and *craftsmanship* (doing well) (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Pratt et al., 2013). Recruitment and selection practices can serve as the context in which these work orientations are primed, and socialization serves as a process that can reinforce and socially validate such orientations, values, and practices, which may result in the experience of meaningful work (Pratt et al., 2013).

In addition to general organizational practices that reinforce antecedents to meaningful work, emerging research has also found that leaders may play an important role in contributing to the experience of such work (Lysova et al., 2019). Specifically, research has sought to identify how leadership styles contribute to instilling meaningfulness into work in organizations – most prominently transformational leadership (Bono & Judge, 2003; Piccolo & Colquitt, 2006). Studies have shown that leaders who have the capability of fostering self-transcendence to a

higher collective purpose may be more apt to create experiences of stimulating and meaningful work (Carton, 2017; Howell & Aviola, 1993; Rosso et al., 2010).

The experience of meaningful work. One of the most significant contributions of the reviewed research on the variables or factors related to meaningful work has been an increased understanding of the importance of meaningfulness for individual and organizational outcomes. Within the study of organizations, the many benefits found in this research have shaped various workplace interventions which have refocused organizations to pay attention to human beings' overall well-being (Lips-Wiersma et al., 2015; Meyers, van Woerkom, & Bakker, 2013). The literature review has so far demonstrated that the psychological science of meaningfulness is well developed. However, as both Seligman (2011) and Lips-Wiersma et al. (2015) have argued, more needs to be done to merge the psychological science of meaningful work with its lived experience as it applies in the context of workplaces.

Studies on the process or *how* the phenomenon of meaningful work is manifested in real-world contexts remains limited compared to research aiming to determine its components (i.e. antecedents and consequences) (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Rosso et al., 2010). However, existing qualitative approaches to studying meaningful work have begun to both enhance the understanding of meaningful work and raise critical questions as to the nature of the construct. The following reviews research that has sought to better understand the human processes of constructing meaningfulness in work and highlights the critical questions this research has raised. Specifically, studies on the lived experience of meaningful work as a process have uncovered that the phenomenon of meaningful work may be tensional, temporal, and can have both positive and negative meanings (e.g. Bailey & Madden, 2017; Bunderson & Thompson,

2009; Cheney, Zorn, Planalp, & Lair, 2008; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2015; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Shim, 2016).

Meaningful work as a tensional construct. In a recent study, Mitra and Buzzanell (2017) argued that a “components” view of meaningful work, where “meaningful” work is distinguished from “meaningless” work by linking and labeling certain specific positive factors (e.g. job satisfaction, engagement), leaves significant tensions unresolved – namely, the tensions and fluidity between meaningful and meaningless work. The authors lamented that the dominant ascription of positive valence to meaningfulness has inadvertently reduced the individual processes, ever-changing experiences, and fluid environmental and social forces that affect how an individual subjectively categorizes work as meaningful – or not.

In addition, many existing studies have assumed that the experience of meaningful work depends largely on the individual’s enabled “agency” to be able to name the experience as meaningful (Buzzanell & Lucas, 2013; Cheney et al., 2008). Mitra and Buzzanell (2017) argued that if that is the case, then it is critical to understand “the organizational, professional, political and economic constraints that both enable and restrain worker agency in different contexts” (p. 597). In other words, if the individual is the ultimate categorizer of “meaningfulness,” it becomes necessary to understand the complex forces acting upon that process of categorization and the context in which it occurs.

For example, in their study of how sustainability professionals made meaning in work and how the experience of meaningfulness developed, Mitra and Buzzanell (2017) found that participants derived meaningfulness through the active negotiation of circumstances and factors that “were both enabling *and* constraining” and that stemmed from various intertwining organizational structures (p. 611). Moreover, the authors reported that these negotiations were

ongoing, ever-changing, and spanned three primary activities: everyday work processes, the perceived impact of work, and career positioning.

The present study builds upon emerging process-oriented research which has suggested that the experience of meaningful work may be one result of a tension-laden ongoing meaning-making process that is layered, “messy,” and largely influenced by social, cultural, and political forces in work contexts (e.g. Berkelaar and Buzzanell, 2015; Bunderson and Thompson, 2009; Buzzanell and Lucas, 2013; Cheney, Michaelson, Grant, Pratt, & Dunn, 2014; Ritz & Kendall, 2010; Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004). In addressing future research opportunities, Mitra and Buzzanell (2017) argued for a more open, inductive approach to studying meaningful work which more broadly investigates what the “hidden” meanings of work are for people in different contexts and how they come to make that meaning.

Meaningful work as temporal. An additional outcome of Mitra and Buzzanell’s (2017) study was the reinforcement of meaning-making as an ongoing, everyday activity. In a study that directly investigated the “lived experience of meaningful work,” Lips-Wiersma et al. (2015) wrote, “meaning needs to be continuously constructed and is thus not a static phenomenon. Nor does one receive it passively” (p. 135). Lips-Wiersma et al. (2015) employed an action research methodology, using a “Map of Meaning” exercise with participants from various occupations that focused on participants’ experiences within four meaning-making categories: making meaning visible, talking about meaning with others, surfacing intuitively rather than cognitively held meanings, and balancing meaning. The authors concluded that “meaning-making is a natural, everyday human activity, done by ordinary people, and that the profound is not necessarily abstract and complex but can be grounded, simple, and positive” (p. 145).

Moreover, within this natural and temporally bound meaning-making process, Lips-Wiersma et al. (2015) found that participants' experiences and recognition of "meaninglessness" helped with what they called "role balancing," or the micro, everyday adjustments workers made to approach work to derive more meaningfulness.

The experience of meaningful work as an everyday activity was also highlighted by Bailey and Madden (2017) in their study on how workers in various occupations described their lived experiences of such work. Bailey and Madden observed that the experience of meaningful work could and did arise in each occupation, but it was "temporally episodic and transitory rather than permanent and ongoing" (p. 10). In addition, they found that participants attached meaningfulness to aspects of their work by also referencing meaninglessness, which suggested the relationship between the two phenomena. Shim (2016) reported similar findings on the temporal nature of meaningful work in her study of lower socioeconomic workers. According to Shim (2016), one implication of this is that "meaningful work is attainable for all" (p. 111).

Meaningful work as both positive and negative. A key study that called into question the overwhelmingly positive valence ascribed to meaningful work was Bunderson and Thompson's (2009) qualitative study of zookeepers. Through in-depth interviews with participants, the authors found that deeply meaningful work was a "double-edged sword" that, when infused throughout all aspects of work, could lead to acceptance of inadequate pay, physical danger, and psychological strain on personal and non-work domains of life. Bunderson and Thompson's study illuminated the nuances of meaningful work as experienced within a particular work context, and the social, political, economic, and cultural forces that influence the human experience of meaningfulness and what that experience means. In particular, their study

emphasized the importance of investigating meaningfulness within an occupational context and identity.

Another consequence of the overwhelmingly positive treatment of meaningful work in much of the literature is its appeal to organizational leaders to use for performance-based reasons. Bailey, Madden, Alfes, Shantz, and Soane (2017) found that when leaders used strategies to enhance the experience of meaningful work for self-serving and results-oriented purposes, it had a negative effect on employees' experiences of meaningfulness. In the study, when employees perceived that the strategies to enhance meaningfulness were not genuine or were applied inconsistently, they participated in what the researchers called "existential acting" – or artificially altering their perception of work to align with the desired meaningfulness communicated by the leaders in the organization – even if they did not believe it. The researchers found that when employees engaged in this "existential acting," they were more susceptible to burnout due to the emotional energy invested in *trying* to make work meaningful. Thus, both of these reviewed studies reinforced that examining the less positive "side" of meaningful work (meaningless work) is an important area of future inquiry to better understand the construct.

Meaningless work. There is much work to be done on exactly what constitutes "meaningless" work. To understand how one qualifies one's work as meaningful, it may be just as important to understand how one might qualify it as meaningless. When it does arise in the literature, the concept of meaningless work has been generally characterized by behaviors and attitudes that represent the antonyms of the experience of meaningful work, such as apathy and detachment from work (May et al., 2004). On the other hand, when viewed from a process lens, determining whether work is meaningful or meaningless seems inextricably linked to the meaning-making process (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). Therefore, the tensions between

meaningfulness and meaninglessness can be explored as they emerge from the meaning-making process. Mitra and Buzzanell (2017) stated that

deriving meaningfulness from work necessitates engaging (via communication) with the various meanings at stake, ascribing both positive and negative valences according to one's social and temporal context, and constantly shifting across these tensional poles. (p. 598)

Therefore, investigating the experience of meaningfulness as it relates to its opposite “tensional pole” of meaninglessness was an important feature of the present phenomenological study.

Informing Meaningful Work Theories

Emerging from the reviewed research, the major theories that informed the conceptualization of meaningful work for this study were Steger et al.'s (2012) *three-facet conceptualization of meaningful work*, Chalofsky's (2003) depiction of the meaningful work construct (Chalofsky & Cavallaro, 2013), and Rosso et al.'s (2010) *four major pathways to meaningful work*. These theories were selected and synthesized because they represent the convergence of meaningful work theory from the disciplines of psychology and a post-positivistic lens (Steger et al., 2012), human resource development (HRD) and a constructivist and interpretivist lens (Chalofsky, 2003; Chalofsky & Cavallaro, 2013), and the holistic synthesis of the inter-disciplinary theory-building on meaningful work (Rosso et al., 2010).

Three-facet conceptualization of meaningful work. Steger et al.'s (2012) *three-facet conceptualization of meaningful work* is significant because it is the result of the development of one of the first empirically validated scales measuring the concept of meaningful work, and it derives from the dominant discipline of positive psychology. The theory is valuable to

complementing process approaches to studying meaningful work because it defines and operationalizes the specific components or variables of meaningful work and is a summation and integration of the positive psychological meaningful work literature.

The three facets of meaningful work included in Steger et al.'s (2012) model are *psychological meaningfulness*, *making meaning through work*, and *greater good motivations*. *Psychological meaningfulness* reflects the classic work psychology construct that is characterized by the subjective, individual experience of perceiving that what one is doing has personal significance (2012). Psychological meaningfulness is demonstrated by individuals' perception of significance, understanding of how their work contributes to their life's meaning, and discovery of work that has a satisfying purpose (2012). *Making meaning through work* is demonstrated by individuals' view that work contributes to personal growth, helps them better understand themselves, and helps them make sense of the world. *Greater good motivations* are demonstrated through individuals' perception that their work makes a positive difference in the world and that their work serves a greater purpose.

One of the potential limitations of Steger et al.'s (2012) conceptualization is the influence of the overwhelmingly positive valence that Mitra and Buzzanell (2017) identified as being dominant in the meaningful work literature. Specifically, in this model, meaningful work is viewed as an operational construct that depends on certain variables or components being present. To gain a fuller picture, it is important to include theory that acknowledges the complexities and tensions of meaning-making itself.

Chalofsky's depiction of the meaningful work construct. While Steger et al.'s (2012) conceptualization aids in identifying the components of meaningful work, Chalofsky's (2003) depiction of the construct demonstrates the importance and value of viewing meaningful work as

a complex interplay among three major concepts: *a sense of self*, *the work itself*, and *a sense of balance*. Chalofsky's model also brings to light the importance of viewing meaningful work in the context of a human being's whole life (Chalofsky & Cavallaro, 2013). The sense of self-concept in Chalofsky's theory represents the bringing of the individual's whole self into the context of work (i.e. mind, body, emotion, spirit, belief system) as well the individual's need for self-realization and self-fulfillment. Sense of balance characterizes the balance and alignment between the "work self" and "personal and spiritual self," and the balance between giving to oneself and giving to others (p. 77). Together, these concepts represent a sense of "integrated wholeness" which may contribute to the experience of meaningful work. Further, Chalofsky's depiction reinforces the importance of considering the wide and complex scope of influences on the meaning-making processes which can result in the experience of meaningful work.

Chalofsky's (2003) and Steger et al.'s (2012) theoretical and conceptual models share similarities. These are characterized primarily by the acknowledgment that there are multiple sources of meaningful work (i.e. self, others, and the work itself) and that there may be aspects of the work itself which either elicit or inhibit the experience of meaningfulness.

Four pathways to experiencing meaningful work. The multiple sources of and influences on the meaning-making process which result in the experience of meaningful work were also noted in Rosso et al.'s (2010) extensive literature review on the meaning of work. The authors' conceptualization of meaningful work combines both reviewed sources and mechanisms of meaningful work. The sources of meaningful work that emerged from their review are the *self* and *others*, while the mechanisms fall into the categories of *agency* (to differentiate, separate, assert, expand, master, and create) and *communion* (drive to contact, attach, connect, and unite).

The intersections of sources and mechanisms form the *four pathways to experiencing meaningful work*: individuation, self-connection, contribution, and unification.

Usefulness of theories. When combined, these three theoretical perspectives were useful in sensitizing myself as a researcher to the potential elements of the phenomenon of meaningful work. In the context of the present descriptive phenomenological study, these theories were also useful for bracketing or taking account of my own a priori knowledge, to allow new insights to emerge on the unique lived experiences of meaningful work among university custodians.

Summary and Implications

The analysis of the reviewed meaningful work literature and informing theories have revealed two major implications for the present study: the opportunity for complementary, process-oriented qualitative research approaches, and the need to further investigate the lived experience of meaningful work in context.

The opportunity for complementary qualitative research approaches. Much of the reviewed literature has sought to understand meaningful work by explaining the relationships among ancillary variables (i.e. antecedents, mediators, and consequences) and meaningful work. These studies are helpful as they have begun to answer highly complex “what” questions to better define the construct, and they have also contributed to defining measures and components of meaningfulness.

The goal of such models has been to identify what factors constitute meaningful work and what the relationships are between the experience of meaningful work and a wide array of positive factors. However, while such research has undoubtedly legitimized the study of meaningful work and provided a picture of “what” this work might be, it has also contributed to

a body of literature that is difficult to access and that leaves many questions as to “how” meaningful work develops and is experienced in everyday work-life.

The need to further investigate the lived experiences of meaningful work in context.

The implication of studying meaningful work through a factorial lens is a relative lack of understanding of how meaningfulness is constructed *through* human beings in particular work contexts. Consequently, a gap remains in the literature: the limited understanding of the human beings themselves and the nuanced ways in which these components and constructs are *lived through* in dynamic contexts. Fineman’s (1983) commentary from 35 years ago seems prophetic when examining the current state of the meaningful work research:

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)

By seeking to understand how people more generally make meaning in work, and how and when work meanings become “meaningful” or “meaningless,” researchers and practitioners may be better able to create work environments that foster the experience of meaningfulness. In addition, such qualitative research approaches focused on elucidating workers’ lived experiences may bring to light the complex forces and tensions involved in the human processes of experiencing work as meaningful. Therefore, qualitative approaches such as phenomenological inquiry which rely on complementary philosophical assumptions may assist in further clarifying the meaningful work construct by better understanding how meaningfulness comes to be in everyday work-life.

Such approaches also provide the necessary means to investigate the lived experience of meaningfulness through diverse occupational and social contexts. For example, as previously

indicated, there is a gap in the empirical research on how meaningful work comes to be experienced in low-choice, stigmatized occupations (Blustein, 2011). As the MOW International Research Team's (1987) findings suggested, there may be contextual and occupational variability in the ways people make meaning in work. Therefore, research that aims to uncover the ways people in diverse occupations and life circumstances come to experience work as meaningful may be particularly beneficial to understanding the construct.

As Lips-Wiersma et al. (2015) reinforced, meaning-making and the ascription of meaningfulness is an everyday activity in which *all* human beings participate. Better understanding how people in diverse occupations and contexts make sense of their work as meaningful will add significant richness, grounded in real world experiences, to the emerging construct of meaningful work.

Section Two: Meaning-Making in Work

A major assumption arising from the meaningful work literature review is that the phenomenon of meaningful work is one "kind," "quality," or "amount" of meaning that is made in and of work – one that is positive and significant (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Hackman & Oldham, 1976, 1980; Steger et al., 2009). Therefore, it may be assumed that there are other kinds or qualities of meanings made in work and that such meanings emerge from a meaning-making process (e.g. Park, 2010). In addition, this study assumes that the experience of meaningfulness is tied to experiences of meaninglessness and all experience in between meaningfulness and meaninglessness (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). By engaging in the study of meanings in work more generally and of how these meanings are made, the nature of workers' meaning-making processes and their influences can be uncovered and better understood to provide a fuller description of the phenomenon of meaningful work (Zorn & Townsley, 2008).

This section of the literature review focuses on the informing theoretical perspectives of meaning-making in work to contextualize the processes from which the output phenomena of meaningful work or meaningless work may emerge. The following overviews the method used to select the literature for this section, reviews the definition(s) of *meaning-making* and *meanings made* as applied to the work context, and covers two informing meaning-making theories and their implications for and usefulness in the present study.

Method of Selecting Literature

The literature employed in this section of the review was initially identified by querying the research databases and portals Google Scholar, EBSCO Academic Search Premier, JSTOR, and ERIC with the following keywords: “meaning-making,” “meaning-making in work,” and “sensemaking.” The goal of this search was to uncover synthesizing theoretical frameworks from which to draw upon to conceptualize meaning-making for this study. Upon review of the abstracts of the initial results, it was clear that much of the extant research and theory-building seemed to focus less on the processes of meaning-making and more on the outcomes of meaning-making. This has been observed by other scholars as well (Heuvel, Demerouti, Schreurs, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2009; Park, 2010).

Therefore, I selected Park’s (2010) systemic literature review on meaning-making processes as the portal from which to access to rest of the background literature needed to understand the foundational components of meaning-making from a broader, non-contextual lens. I then utilized Wrzesniewski et al.’s (2003) theoretical piece on interpersonal sensemaking at work to access literature that contextualized the understanding of meaning-making in the work context. A total of 16 theoretical articles were selected for use in the following review.

Definitions of Meaning-Making and Meanings Made

In Park's (2010) seminal and expansive integrative literature review on meaning-making, 78 unique and conceptually distinct operational definitions of meaning-making were uncovered. Park's (2010) findings reaffirmed that the stream of research and theory-building on meaning and meaning-making is vast, multifarious, and debated (Klinger, 1998). A complete analysis of the innumerable definitions of and perspectives on meaning and meaning-making falls outside the scope of this review, but it is important to outline how the definition of meaning-making for the present study was crafted.

The following re-states the definition of meaning used in this review, overviews the constituents of the definition of meaning-making, clarifies what is meant by meanings made (the output of meaning-making), and defines meaning-making.

Meaning. First, it is important to re-ground the present section with the definition of meaning previously discussed in the first section of this review. The definition of *meaning* as it relates to work employed in this study is Pratt and Ashforth's (2003) conceptualization of meaning as an "output of having made sense of something" (Rosso et al., 2010, p. 94). That "something" in the present study is "work," and the meaning of the work that emerges is one result of a process of construction and co-construction among individuals and the lifeworld (objects, things, other individuals) of organizations (Weick, 1995). To make meaning, then, one first makes sense of something. *Sensemaking* has been described as "the capacity to perceive, judge, and discover the intelligibility of beings, actions, and things" (Morin, 1995, p. 44). Thus, sensemaking and meaning-making are assumed to occur in tandem.

Building on the above theoretical perspectives, for the purposes of this dissertation, the *meaning* that emerges from a sensemaking and meaning-making process is understood as the

subjectively determined quality of the ultimate “sense” that is made of work (Park, 2010). The kinds, qualities, or amounts of the meaning made may manifest as meaningfulness (having significant and positive meaning) or meaninglessness (having insignificant and/or negative meaning).

Meaning-making. The processes involved in negotiating and determining these kinds of meanings and their qualities can be called *meaning-making* (Bruner, 1990; Park, 2010; Perret-Clermont, Carugati, Oates, 2004; Lepore, Silver, Wortman, & Wayment, 1996). While operational aspects of meaning-making definitions vary in the psychological and sociological literature, several agreed-upon constituents, synthesized by Park (2010), form the prevailing understanding of meaning-making used in this study.

The first accepted tenet of meaning-making is that all human beings have “orienting systems” or cognitive frameworks that they employ to interpret their experiences. Such orienting systems, or lenses, have been theorized to include the negotiation of identities, previous knowledge, and lived experience (Bruner, 1990; Perret-Clermont et al., 2004). In the literature, this orienting system has been termed an individual’s *global meaning*; it is ultimately characterized by one’s beliefs about oneself independent of a certain situation and can also refer to self-esteem and beliefs about oneself (Park, 2010). The second key tenet is that individuals subjectively and actively appraise and construct the meanings of a situation (events, objects, others) in relation to their global meaning. This meaning is called *situational meaning* and refers to how individuals’ understanding of their global meaning is influenced or challenged by aspects of a situation – in this case, work (Park, 2010). Meaning-making in the work context, then, may be understood to include the individual’s sense of global meaning as it interacts with the

situational “work” meanings influenced by the characteristics and forces acting upon the individual in context (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017).

Finally, a third key tenet, proposed by Wrzesniewski et al. (2003), is that individuals in work are constantly construing and actively regulating meaning in response to other people and contextual forces, and that this is ongoing and fluid in the work context (Bandura, 1989; Bell & Staw, 1989; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). The fluid understanding of meaning-making is one reason the conceptual framework that orients this study is designed as a process model (as depicted in Figure 4 at the end of this chapter). The ongoing and social nature of meaning-making as discussed by Wrzesniewski et al. (2003) is also why *sensemaking* – the *immediate* interpretive and reflective process – and meaning-making are understood in the present study to occur together on an ongoing basis (Weick, 1995).

Meanings made. The output or products of the negotiations and processes outlined above are the *meanings made*. In the context of work, meaningful work, meaningless work, or other appraisals between these two tensional poles are the qualities of the potential products of the meaning-making process (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Park, 2010).

Definition of meaning-making. In summary, and drawing on the above tenets synthesized from the literature, *meaning-making* is defined in the present study as the ongoing, fluid processes through which people sense, interpret, negotiate, and ultimately attach significance (or insignificance) to situations, events, others, objects, or discourses through the lenses of their identities, previous knowledge, and lived experiences (Bruner, 1990; Park, 2010; Perret-Clermont et al., 2004; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). For the purposes of the present research study, the subjective determination that work is meaningful (or meaningless) is one outcome of complex, ongoing, and nuanced meaning-making processes that occur within the work context.

Informing Meaning-Making Theories and Implications for This Study

I selected two complementary theories from the above review to inform my understanding of meaning-making for this study: Park's (2010) *meaning-making model* (depicted in Figure 1) and Wrzesniewski et al.'s (2003) *interpersonal sensemaking model of work meaning* (shown in Figure 2). Park's (2010) model was chosen as it remains one of the only empirically validated theoretical models specifically examining the construct of meaning-making in life more broadly, and it includes the interaction of identity with situational meanings. Wrzesniewski et al.'s (2003) model was selected because it both emphasizes the ongoing, context-bound, and fluid nature of meaning-making in work and highlights the importance of others in the immediate sensemaking process. The following provides a brief overview of each theory.

Meaning-making model. The *meaning-making model* proposed by Park (2010) identifies two primary levels of meaning: *global meaning* and *situational meaning* (Park & Folkman, 1997). As stated above, global meaning is an individual's general orienting system which is informed by identities, previous knowledge, and lived experiences (Bruner, 1990). Orienting systems manifest as beliefs about oneself, self-agency, and self-esteem (Park, 2010) and are the lenses through which events, objects, and other people are interpreted. Situational meaning refers to the subjective "appraisals" of the situation or specific instance and its objects and other people. Park's (2010) model is discrepancy-based, meaning that the differences between individuals' global meaning and their appraised meaning of a certain situation prompt individual cognitive and emotional efforts to reduce distress caused by the perceived discrepancies. The results of these adjustments are "made meanings," which, if they help reduce the incongruence, contribute to adjusting the individual's sense of global meaning.

Implications. Park’s (2010) model has important implications for the present study. Specifically, due to the nature of the stigmatized occupational context, individuals in stigmatized work have been found to be “acutely aware” of the stigma their occupations face (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013). Much of the theorizing around meaningful work and people in stigmatized occupations has focused on the efforts of these workers to “reframe, recalibrate, and refocus” the meanings of their occupations to cast them in a more favorable light. Therefore, Park’s (2010) model helps to sensitize me as a researcher to examining the nature of potential discrepancies between global meaning and situational meaning which give rise to meaning-making activities in janitorial work, which in turn result in the experience of meaningful work.

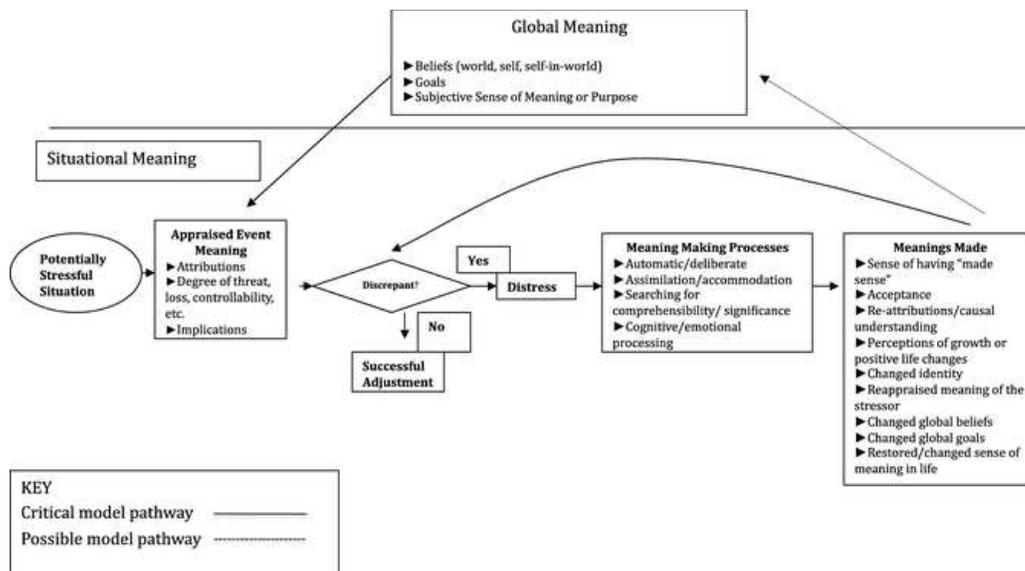


Figure 1. Park’s (2010) *Meaning-Making Model*. Reprinted from “Making Sense of the Meaning Literature: An Integrative Review of Meaning Making and Its Effects on Adjustment to Stressful Life Events” by C.L. Park, 2010, *Psychological Bulletin*, retrieved May 7, 2018 from <http://psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/2010-03383-011.html>. Copyright 2010 by American Psychological Association.

Interpersonal sensemaking model. Wrzesniewski et al.'s (2003) *interpersonal sensemaking model* (depicted in Figure 2) was derived from Weick's (1995) sensemaking framework and provides a useful model for how employees initially create meanings through their sensemaking of interpersonal encounters in the workplace. Specifically, Wrzesniewski et al. (2003) proposed that employees sense and interpret "interpersonal cues" from others to determine "how others evaluate their job, their role, and their work" (p. 103). The ongoing interpretation of these cues and meanings then gives rise to a "pattern of sensemaking" that contributes to the construction of the meaning(s) in work. The interpersonal cues that prompt sensemaking can be subtle or direct and can be interpreted as either affirming or disaffirming (2003).

Implications. Since meaning-making and sensemaking are assumed in this study to occur together, Wrzesniewski et al.'s (2003) model provides an important framework through which to describe how relationships with others may influence the initial stages of an employee's meaning-making process. Within the context of stigmatized work, this theoretical understanding was important to consider, as the model helped to orient the identification of affirming or disaffirming interpersonal cues as described by the participants. Since one purpose of the present study was to identify hindering and facilitating organizational dynamics of the experience of meaningful work, Wrzesniewski et al.'s (2003) theory helped direct attention to how participants described their interpretations of others in the workplace when they experienced meaningfulness or meaninglessness.

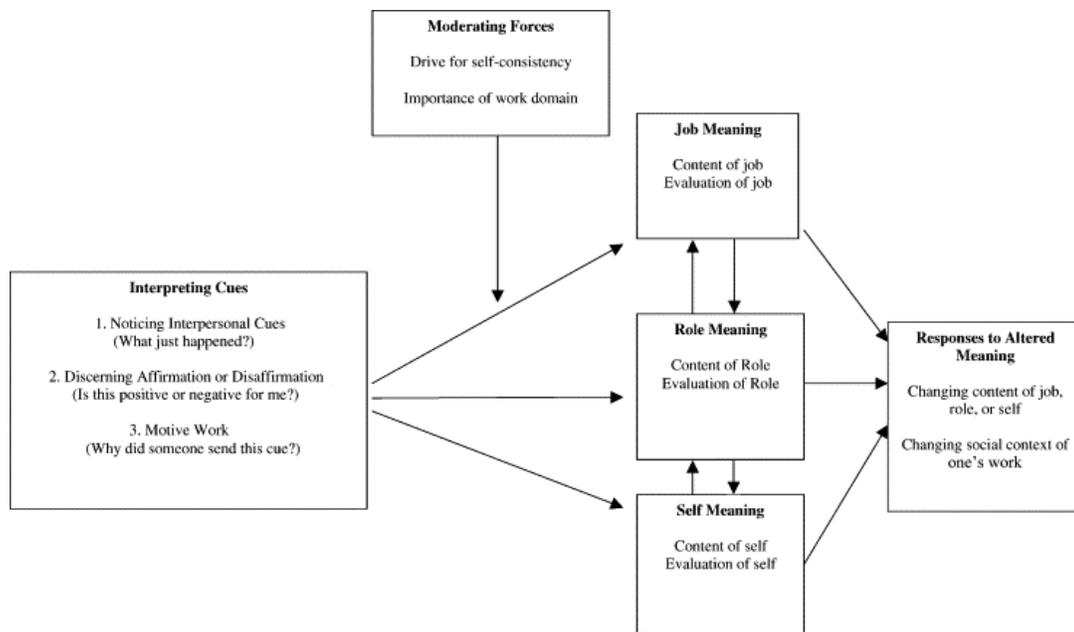


Figure 2. Interpersonal sense-making model. Reprinted from “Interpersonal Sensemaking and the Meaning of Work” by Wrzesniewski, A., Dutton, J.E., and Debebe, G., 2003, *Research in Organizational Behavior*, retrieved May 7, 2018 from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191308503250036>. Copyright 2003 by ScienceDirect.

Summary

Meaning-making may be defined as the ongoing, fluid processes through which people sense, interpret, negotiate, and ultimately attach significance (or insignificance) to situations, events, others, objects, or discourses through the lenses of their identities, previous knowledge, and lived experiences (Bruner, 1990; Park, 2012; Perret-Clermont et al., 2004; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Meaning-making has also been found to be an ongoing, everyday activity in work, and previously held identities, work experiences, and interpersonal relationships may be important influences on how meaning is made in work. Finally, through this review, it can be assumed that meaningful work is one possible product of a meaning-making process among other possible products, including meaningless work.

Section Three: Stigmatized Work

This section reviews the literature related to the context of the present study: a stigmatized occupation. Traditionally, the study of meaning-making and meaningful work has been reserved for higher-wage, knowledge, and high-volition (degree of career choice) workers (Blustein, 2011; Grandy et al., 2014; Rosso et al., 2010). Meanwhile, in the U.S. in 2014, over 58% of the workforce were categorized as hourly wage earners, of whom 26% were in the bottom third of the wage distribution (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Many of these workers have been found to reside in service occupations, including building and grounds cleaning and maintenance occupations. Service work has been traditionally socially stigmatized as “dirty work,” and such stigmatization has been found to have a significant effect on workers’ sense of dignity and their experience of positive work outcomes, such as engagement, motivation, and satisfaction (Ashforth & Kleiner, 2013; Berg & Frost, 2005; Gallup, 2016). The study of stigmatized occupations in the organizational behavior and human resource development literature remains extremely limited. Nevertheless, important, useful theoretical frameworks and research findings informed the present study.

The following overviews the methods used to select the literature for this section of the review. It then covers the definition and conceptualization of stigmatized work utilized in this study, discusses key research findings related to the experience of meaningful work among stigmatized workers, and presents an informing theory of the experience of stigmatized work and its implications for the present study.

Method of Selecting Literature

The literature on stigmatized work was accessed by consulting the reference lists of three seminal theoretical pieces on the experience of meaningful work in stigmatized occupations.

These pieces were initially located by querying the research databases and portals Google Scholar, EBSCO Academic Search Premier, JSTOR, and ERIC with the following keywords: “dirty work,” “stigmatized work,” “dirty work and meaningful work,” and “stigmatized work and meaningful work.” The most cited piece on stigmatized work, Ashforth and Kreiner’s (1999) “‘How can you do it?’ Dirty Work and the Challenge of Constructing a Positive Identity,” served as a portal to access the historical definitions and conceptualizations of stigmatized or “dirty” work. Furthermore, Ashforth and Kreiner’s (2013) article “Profane or Profound? Finding Meaning in Dirty Work” led to theoretical understandings of the experience of stigmatized workers, and Grandy et al.’s (2014) article “Doing Dirty Research Using Qualitative Methods: Lessons from Stigmatized Occupations” contextualized the research approaches used in this study to investigate meaningful work.

Conceptualization and Definition of Stigmatized Work, Occupations, and Workers

The first researcher to use the term “dirty work” was Hughes (1958), who theorized that certain tasks and occupations are more likely than others to be perceived by society at large as unclean, distasteful, and “physically, socially, or morally” tainted (Hughes, 1958, p. 122). The “taint,” or the societal label of particular work as “dirty,” is derived from a sociological phenomenon in which “dirtiness” is generally seen as “bad” and cleanliness is generally seen as “good” (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013, p. 128; Douglas, 1966; Miller, 1997; Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 2000). Therefore, researchers find that “dirty” work tends to become stigmatized, as do the occupations that do the dirty work. By extension, the workers occupying such jobs tend to be viewed as “personifying” the dirty work and have been found to be subsequently labeled as “dirty” or *stigmatized workers* (Hughes, 1962; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, 2013). To build the definition and conceptualization of stigmatized work used in this study, the following reviews

the theorized types of stigma and the nature of stigma as “imputed” on certain occupations by others.

Classifications of stigma. Hughes (1958) found three major classifications of occupational stigma related to dirty work: physical stigma, social stigma, and moral stigma. In a review of the dirty work, societal stigmatization, and occupational stereotyping literature, Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) added conceptual rigor to Hughes’ (1958) classifications by explicating the conditions under which an occupation becomes stigmatized. The following are the conditions under which societal stigma has been found to occur (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

Physical stigmatization occurs “when an occupation is either directly associated with garbage, death, effluent, and so on (e.g. butcher, janitor, chimney sweep, exterminator, funeral director, proctologist)” and/or is thought to be performed in hazardous or unclean settings (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 415). *Social stigmatization* is said to arise with occupations that have regular contact with previously stigmatized groups (i.e. prison guards, public defenders, etc.) or that are seen as having a “servile relationship to others” (i.e. maid, butler, shoe-shiner). Finally, *moral stigma* is associated with occupations in which the work involves “dubious” behavior (i.e. pawn broker, exotic dancer, casino manager) or the work defies “norms of civility” (i.e. bill collectors) (1999).

Janitors or custodians have been found to experience both pervasive physical stigma and social stigma (e.g. Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, 2013; Magolda, 2016). Therefore, for the present purposes, it is assumed that the university custodians included in this study were also part of a stigmatized occupation.

Occupational prestige. The sociological research literature related to *occupational prestige* (Dunkerly, 1975) reliably supports Ashforth and Kreiner’s (1999) and Hughes’ (1958)

classification of occupational stigmatization. Occupational prestige can be defined as the “social standing of the job and the job holder” (Fujishiro, Xu, & Gong, 2010, p. 2100). Societal perceptions of occupational prestige have been measured by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) since the early 1940s (Smith & Son, 2014) and have been repeatedly found to be reliable across respondents, location, and time (Sawinski & Domanski, 1991). The latest NORC study on occupational prestige, from 2012, asked over 1,295 respondents to rate occupations on perceived social standing from 1 (lowest social standing) to 9 (highest social standing). The mean score for janitors/custodians was a 3, meaning that the occupation ranked in the bottom third of perceived social standing. For perspective, the lowest overall mean score was a 2.6. Therefore, it can be assumed that custodial work is a stigmatized occupation.

Imputed stigma. It is also important to note that in the stigmatized work literature, researchers have come to a general consensus that “dirtiness” or “stigmatization” is a larger social construction, meaning that “it is not inherent in the work itself or the workers” but is “imputed” on occupations by other people and society based on widely understood sociological standards of “cleanliness” and “purity” (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, 2013; Ball, 1970; Douglas, 1966). Therefore, an occupation may be stigmatized without a worker necessarily identifying as being stigmatized.

However, significant debate does remain as to whether one can label a group as “stigmatized” simply by linking stigmatization to a particular occupation (Grandy et al., 2014). The challenge of conceptualizing and framing stigmatized work permeates the extant research. Some counter-theories and perspectives regarding the NORC studies, for example, have highlighted that what is “stigmatized” for one group or identity may be normalized for another, so accounting for how individual identities perceive the work may be important (Lee-Treweek,

2012). Others argue that the considerations of how the work and individuals are seen by the unique identities and perspectives of the “see-er” are integral to framing what is stigmatized and what is not (Douglas, 1966). Therefore, the delineation of what is stigmatized work or not may be a subjective determination of the researcher, or as Grandy et al. (2014) stated, it may “fully incorporat[e] the embodied experiences of the researcher.” Therefore, in Chapter Three of this dissertation, I present my own researcher perspective on stigmatized work to underpin the participant selection and sampling.

Definitions of stigmatized work, stigmatized occupations, and stigmatized workers

In summary, and building on the theoretical perspectives outlined above, *stigmatized work* is defined in this study as work that society has generally relegated as physically, socially, or morally tainted due to its undesirable nature, the low skill level it requires, or the low pay it receives (e.g. Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013; Hughes, 1958, 1962). A *stigmatized occupation* is a job role that entails performing stigmatized work. A *stigmatized worker* is a worker whose occupation’s stigma has been imputed by society onto him or her.

Meaningful Work in Stigmatized Occupations: Key Research Findings

As discussed, meaningful work in stigmatized occupations has not received much attention to the experience of meaningful work among knowledge or “white-collar” workers (e.g. Blustein, 2011; Grandy et al., 2014). In a review of the research on stigmatized work in the organizational and management literature, Grandy et al. (2014) found that stigmatized work has remained under-investigated for two primary reasons. The first is a tendency for academia to focus on work that is “modern, clean, and value-adding,” which is commonly tied to research funding. The second is the relatively invisible status of these occupations, which makes accessing research participants difficult due to challenging work sites and hours of employees

(Grandy et al., 2014; Simpson, 2012). When stigmatized occupations have been directly studied, the experience of the stigmatized worker has been emphasized over the experience of meaningfulness or other phenomena (i.e. engagement, satisfaction) within the stigmatized work context (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; 2013; Lucas & Buzzanell, 2004).

An understanding of these phenomena in the context of stigmatized work is needed. Workers in stigmatized occupations, such as service and cleaning professions and those represented in the lower third of the NORC data on occupational prestige scores, form one of the largest segments of the modern workforce. Since the Bureau of Labor Statistics does not categorize occupational prestige, it is helpful to look at wage distribution to uncover an estimate of the percentage of the workforce who might occupy stigmatized occupations. Many stigmatized occupations receive the lowest pay and are classified as “wage earners.” For perspective, in 2014, 58.6% of the US workforce aged 16 or older were categorized as hourly wage earners (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). This figure excludes those who were self-employed or engaging in contract work on behalf of a formed sole proprietorship or corporation. The definition of a “low-wage worker” is very much debated in the literature, but has in general been characterized as a worker who makes less than two-thirds of the median wage or falls in the bottom third of the national wage distribution (Boushey, Fremstad, Gragg, & Waller, 2007). Therefore, someone who makes, on average, \$11.64 per hour over the course of one year may be considered a low-wage worker (Boushey et al., 2007). As stated earlier, most low-wage jobs are found in service occupations, including building and grounds cleaning and maintenance (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). As previously stated, research has found that these types of workers are more at risk for negative outcomes at work than other worker populations.

Barriers to experiencing positive work outcomes. In 2014, just 28.2% of people surveyed who worked in service occupations self-reported being actively engaged in their work, and service occupations accounted for the lowest levels of job engagement in the U.S. (Gallup, 2016). In addition, research has found that the stigma imputed on the work in these occupations can significantly affect the sense of dignity of people working in these types of jobs (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013; Berg & Frost, 2005). When compared with data related to the experience of knowledge workers, research finds that such workers may be at an increased risk for negative outcomes at work, including disengagement, lower commitment, and lower satisfaction, than workers in other contexts (Ashforth et al., 2007; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Blustein, 2011; Gallup, 2016).

Emerging theory has also posited that the context of stigmatized occupations presents numerous unique barriers to the experience of meaningful work, including loss of dignity because of others' negative perceptions of the work (e.g. Ashforth et al., 2007), hazardous and demanding working conditions (e.g. Flum, et al., 2010), and perceptions of "invisibility" in organizations (e.g. Magolda, 2016).

University custodians. Colleges and universities represent one of the many important contexts in which to study the experiences of meaningful work among stigmatized occupations. In these settings, cleaning and maintenance staff such as custodians represent a large portion of the workforce due to the high reliance on physical facilities to deliver educational experiences (Magolda, 2016). For example, in 2007, US colleges and universities employed more than 75,330 custodians with an average hourly wage of \$12.12, many of whom worked within hazardous and demanding work environments (Flum et al., 2010). Moreover, university custodians have been considered by some scholars as especially "invisible" due to the

hierarchical and bureaucratic structures that are widely characteristic of large educational organizations (Flum et al., 2010; Magolda, 2016).

In an anthropological study on the lives of campus custodians, Magolda (2016) found that they were especially susceptible to invisibility due to the clear delineation of dominant classes (i.e. administrators, faculty, students) evident within the context of universities. After spending over a year embedded with campus custodians at two universities, Magolda (2016) observed that custodians regularly reported feeling disengaged with the larger organization, they operated from an “underdog” mentality, and they more frequently negotiated hardships because of how the job was perceived by others.

The role of others in shaping positive meaning. Magolda’s (2016) study supported other researchers’ finding that for stigmatized occupations, “others” have an amplified role in affecting the sense of positive meaning derived from the work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013). Specifically, “outsiders” and “insiders” have been found to play important and “competing” roles in mediating the experience of positive meaning in work for stigmatized workers (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). For example, “occupational outsiders” have been found to play an “adversarial” role in shaping the meaningfulness of work for stigmatized workers because they can remind workers, through explicit and implicit interpersonal cues, of their stigma (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Lucas & Buzzanell, 2004).

On the other hand, research has found that “occupational insiders” – co-workers and supervisors – then play an especially important role in facilitating positive meaning in work as they can mediate the experience of stigma (Purser, 2009; Trice, 1993). The role of insiders in facilitating positive meaning in dirty work has been well documented, which is one reason why strong subcultures tend to develop among these occupations (Brewer, 1991; Purser, 2009). These

strong subcultures, largely bound together by countering stigma, have been found to increase occupational esteem and pride (e.g. Wacquant, 1995).

Normalizing stigma. One of the mechanisms that stigmatized workers have employed to mediate stigma is what Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) termed *normalization*: tactics that help members of stigmatized occupations deal with stigma and find positive meaning in their work. Research has shown that workers tend to enact three main practices to counter stigma: reframing, recalibrating, and refocusing (e.g. Ashforth et al., 2007; Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010; Kreiner et al., 2006; Trice, 1993). *Reframing* describes how one infuses the work with a positive purpose to mediate negative stigma, *recalibrating* refers to the explicit valuing of some attributes of stigmatized work that are undervalued in society (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999), and *refocusing* occurs when workers emphasize the intrinsic qualities of the work to lessen stigma.

Manager and leader roles in recasting stigmatized work. Because stigma is a social construction, researchers have found that managers and supervisors may play a key role in “recasting” stigmatized work in the context of societal stigma (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013). One practice that has been found to mediate stigma is in the socialization process of stigmatized workers. Specifically, tactics such as realistic job previews (RJPs) that openly discuss “dirt” and stigma can help normalize the work and craft a positive ideology around it and the workers (Faller, Masternak, Grinnel-Davis, Grabarek, Sieffert, & Bernatovicz, 2009). In addition, studies have shown that leaders can reify alternate, internalized ideologies of the work that are counter to societal perceptions (e.g. Sparks & Schenk, 2001). While these practices are promising, however, literature assessing interventions related to mediating stigma was difficult to find, thus signaling an important area for future study.

Informing Theory and Implications

The theory that informs the present study is Ashforth and Kreiner's (1999) *normalization model* (depicted in Figure 3), which includes the three tactics outlined above that stigmatized workers employ to mediate or lessen the effects of stigma: reframing, recalibrating, and refocusing. Each of these activities is meant as a meaning-making activity specifically to reduce the distress caused by stigma, and relates to a sub-process in Park's (2010) *meaning-making model*. While analyzing the descriptions of participants' experiences of meaningful (and meaningless) work, it was important to attend to how they talked about the effect that others' perceptions of the work had on the described experience. The normalization model helped to sensitize me as a researcher to the activities participants described that helped counter stigma to construct positive meaning.

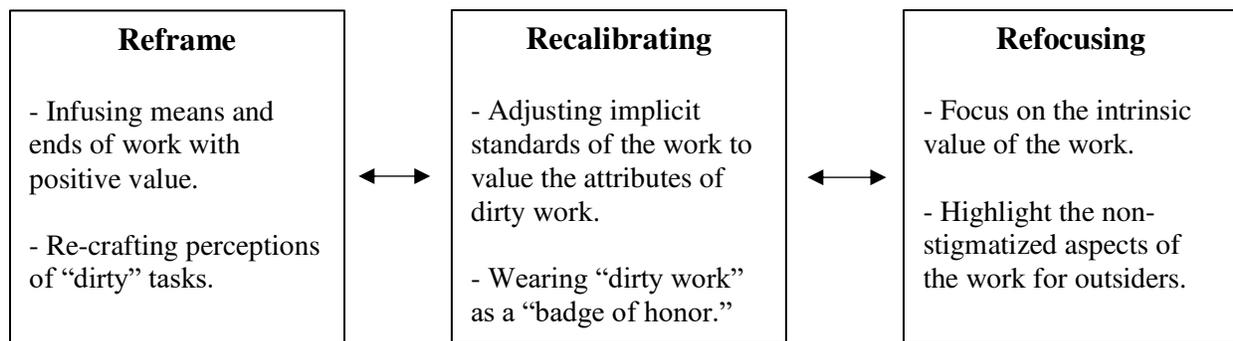


Figure 3. Ashforth & Kreiner's (1999) normalization model, which informed the conceptualization of meaning-making in a stigmatized occupation for this study. Adapted from “How Can You Do It?: Dirty Work and the Challenge of Constructing a Positive Identity” by Ashforth, B.E. & Kreiner, G.E., 1999, *The Academy of Management Review*, 23(3), p. 412. Copyright 1999 by the Academy of Management.

Summary

The stigmatized work literature is still relatively immature. However, key findings from this section of the review are that some occupations are socially and systemically stigmatized, that stigma can be physical, moral, and/or social, and that there are specific barriers that

stigmatized occupations face in shaping their work as meaningful. Further, since stigmatization is a social construction, others in and outside of the occupation have a significant role in shaping meaning-making. Finally, Ashforth and Kreiner's (1999) empirically based normalization model provides a way to describe how people in stigmatized occupations might mitigate or mediate the effects of stigma. This model helped inform this study.

Section Four: Key Findings and Conceptual Framework

This chapter reviewed the literature on three key concepts underpinning this dissertation research: meaningful work, meaning-making in work, and stigmatized work. The major findings of each section are described below.

Key Findings: Meaningful Work

The following are the key findings from the review of the meaningful work literature that had a significant influence on how the present study was conducted:

1. Meaningful work has been associated with positive individual and organizational outcomes, including engagement, satisfaction, and positive work behaviors.
2. Meaningful work research has largely been approached from a quantitative lens, with meaningful work being explained by the interrelationships among variables. There is a need for complementary, process-oriented qualitative studies to better understand the construct as it is lived through.
3. The lived experience of meaningful work may be both tensional and temporally bound, and it results from a fluid meaning-making process influenced by contextual and cultural forces.

Key Findings: Meaning-Making

The following are the key findings from the review of the meaning-making literature that had a significant influence on how the present study was conducted:

1. Meaning-making is an active process that includes both global meanings and situational meanings as well as active negotiation between the two.
2. Sensemaking and meaning-making occur simultaneously and fluidly in the work context.
3. Interpersonal cues and the co-construction of meaning are everyday activities in the workplace.
4. Meaningful work is one possible product of a meaning-making process among other possible meanings made, which include meaningless work.

Key Findings: Stigmatized Work

The following are the key findings from the review of the stigmatized work literature that had a significant influence on how the present study was conducted:

1. Some occupations are socially and systemically stigmatized. That stigma can be physical, moral, and/or social.
2. Stigmatized occupations face barriers to experiencing positive work outcomes, such as engagement, motivation, and satisfaction.
3. Stigma is a socially constructed phenomenon and *imputed* on certain occupations by others, whether or not a worker directly experiences stigma.
4. Stigma may be one unique force acting upon meaning-making processes for university custodians.

5. Stigmatized workers may normalize stigma by reframing, recalibrating, and refocusing the work.

Conceptual Framework: Process Model

Based on the literature review, the present study utilized an exploratory, qualitative methodology enacted through a descriptive phenomenological approach. This approach sought to engage in and explore the tensional, nuanced, and on-going meaning-making processes within the stigmatized work context which resulted in the subjective determination that work was meaningful or meaningless. Specifically, the aim of the study was to uncover, through rich description, the lived experiences of stigmatized workers when they experienced their work as meaningful or meaningless.

After analyzing the findings from the literature review, three key constructs were abstracted for the purposes of guiding the research through a process model: *influences on meaning-making in work* (input construct), *meaning-making in work* (process construct), and *meanings in work* (output construct). A process model (depicted in Figure 4) best serves the aim of this research by illustrating the generative, event-driven nature of the phenomena of meaning-making in work and meaningful work uncovered in the literature review (Van de Ven, 2007).

The input construct, *influences on meaning-making in work*, is the group of concepts related to contributors to the meaning-making process of stigmatized workers. Based on the literature, these contributors may include *social and cultural forces*, *job characteristics*, *organizational context and practices*, and *individual characteristics*. *Social and cultural forces* include the broader societal and identity-based forces and stigmas outside of the organizational context which may be significant for university custodians. *Job characteristics* refer to the design elements of the job itself, such as the nature of tasks, task identity, and task significance

(Hackman & Oldham, 1976, 1980). *Organizational context and practices* more broadly include organizational characteristics like culture, climate, goals, purposes, other people, relationships, processes, practices, structure, and time (e.g. Hackman & Wageman, 2005; Mowday & Sutton, Pawar & Eastman, 1997; Shamir & Howell, 1999; Tosi, 1991). *Individual characteristics* comprise disposition, values, and identities (Lysova et al., 2019).

The process construct, termed *meaning-making in work*, includes the general meaning-making process and theories outlined in Section Two of this review. This process may be informed by the input constructs outlined above. Finally, the output construct, *meanings in work*, depicts the kind, quality, or amount of meaning that is made. The *meanings in work* construct also includes the tensional poles of meaningful work, meaningless work, and all meanings in between. Time is indicated because of the theorized temporal nature of the construction of meaningful work, and reflexivity is included due to the assumption that a worker is in constant reflexivity when constructing and co-constructing meaningfulness and/or meaninglessness (Bailey & Madden, 2017; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017).

The conceptual framework as a process model is depicted below in Figure 4. It is important to note that in this descriptive phenomenological study, the conceptual framework was meant to illuminate how I was sensitized to the phenomena, so that I could bracket such knowledge to maintain a commitment to understanding the phenomena through direct lived experience (Giorgi, 2009). The conceptual framework is employed again in Chapter Five to make sense of the study's findings and implications.

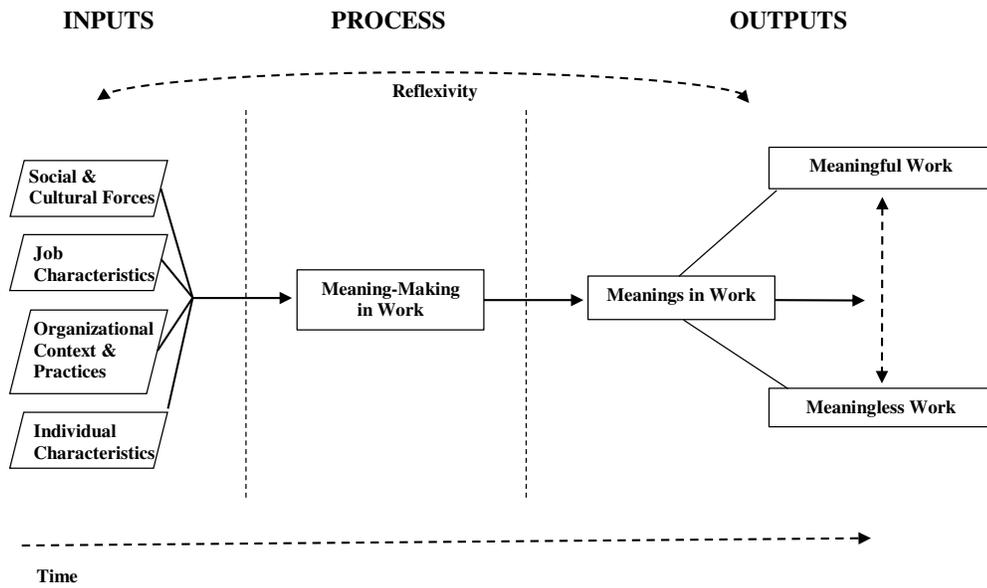


Figure 4. The conceptual framework of this study.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

The purpose of this chapter is to present a justification and overview of the selected phenomenological research methodology and methods that responded to the research problem and questions. To this end, the following restates the problem, identifies the core assumptions of the phenomenon of interest that emerged from the literature review, and restates the research questions. Next, the chapter justifies and overviews the guiding philosophy of inquiry and methodology (phenomenology). The methods are then presented, including participant and site selection, data gathering procedures, data analysis procedures, and means of reporting findings. Finally, the chapter covers the methods used to uphold the quality of this research in terms of validity and rigor.

Restating the Research Problem

Researchers have consistently found that the experience of meaningful work is associated with many positive benefits in both work and non-work domains of life (e.g. May et al., 2004; Rosso et al., 2010; Steger et al., 2012). Certain theorists have gone so far as to posit that the experience of meaningfulness may be a fundamental human need (Bailey & Madden, 2017; Frankl, 1962). As demonstrated in the review of the literature, research on both the antecedents and consequences of meaningful work is maturing, but the understanding of how individuals experience meaningfulness in the context of everyday work-life remains limited (Bailey & Madden, 2017; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2015; Rosso et al., 2010).

In particular, the lived experience of meaningful work in the context of stigmatized work or “dirty work” has been understudied (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013; Blustein, 2011; Bolton & Houlihan, 2009; Grandy et al., 2014). Stigmatized work is defined in this study as work that

society at large has relegated as physically or socially tainted because of its undesirable nature, the skill level it requires, or the low pay it receives (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013; Blustein, 2011; Davis, 1984). In addition to representing one of the largest segments of the modern workforce, research finds that those who do such work may be at an increased risk for negative outcomes at work, including disengagement, lower commitment, and lower satisfaction, than workers in other contexts, such as knowledge or “white-collar” workers (Ashforth et al., 2007; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Blustein, 2011; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016; Gallup, 2016). In addition, such negative individual outcomes can have a detrimental effect on organizational performance outcomes (Rastogi et al., 2018).

Given the researched positive benefits of experiencing work as meaningful, such as increased engagement, motivation, and satisfaction, studying the lived experience of meaningfulness among workers in a stigmatized occupation advances the understanding of the lived experience of this type of work while also illuminating how such work comes to be experienced as meaningful by its practitioners.

Thus, the problem that necessitated this study may be summarized as follows: Workers in stigmatized occupations such as custodial work (Magolda, 2016) may be more at risk for negative outcomes at work, such as disengagement and low satisfaction, which can also negatively affect organizational outcomes. At the same time, the experience of meaningful work has been linked to many positive outcomes in work, including engagement, motivation, and satisfaction. Yet, the understanding of how the phenomenon of meaningful work is experienced, specifically in the context of stigmatized work, remains limited.

Core Assumptions of the Phenomenon of Meaningful Work

The central phenomenon investigated in this study was the lived experience of meaningfulness in work (meaningful work) for workers in a stigmatized occupation (university custodians). Several important assumptions regarding the phenomenon of meaningful work emerged from the literature review and framed the research questions and the choice of philosophical approach and methodology:

- 1. Meaningfulness is one possible meaning of work which emerges from the phenomenon of a contextual meaning-making process.** As such, the phenomenon of meaningfulness was assumed to be necessarily linked to the phenomena of meaning-making and meaninglessness, which is another possible quality of the meaning made in work (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Perret-Clermont, et al., 2004). Thus, exploring meaningfulness while relating it to and exploring meaninglessness informed the research approach.
- 2. The process of experiencing meaningfulness is tensional and temporal.** Recent research has suggested that because meaningfulness may emerge from a fluid and contextual meaning-making process, an individual must actively negotiate organizational, professional, political, cultural, and economic forces through everyday activities to arrive at an experience of meaningfulness and meaninglessness (e.g. Bailey & Madden, 2017; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). These forces can be assumed to be *both* enabling and constraining, depending on their nature and how they are experienced. Therefore, in this study, meaningfulness was assumed to be a tensional phenomenon (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017).

In addition, research has found that the experience of meaningful work may be “temporally episodic and transitory rather than permanent or ongoing” (Bailey & Madden, 2017, p. 10). That is, the experience of meaningfulness is subject to phenomenological time, and it may therefore be assumed that all individuals experience both meaningfulness and meaninglessness at various times in their work (Bailey & Madden, 2017; Shim, 2016). An individual’s present description (as it appears to his or her consciousness in the data collection moment) of meaningfulness will inevitably be anchored in the past through that individual having to reflexively look back over completed work to ascertain meaning in the moment, while at the same time perhaps referencing the future manifestation of a current work experience (Bailey & Madden, 2017; Muzzetto, 2006). Thus, meaningfulness was assumed in this study to be temporal. This explains the use of and emphasis on time (i.e. “when”) in the research questions, the phenomenological approach selected, and the interviewing technique employed.

- 3. Meaningfulness is a subjectively constructed phenomenon.** Individuals’ experiences of the phenomenon of meaningfulness were assumed in this study to be constructed through the interaction between the individuals and the context (objects) in which they were embedded (things, people, environment, researcher) (Crotty, 1998; Wrzesniewski et al., 2013). My role as a researcher was to “invite” such knowledge out to better describe and understand the structure of the experience of university custodians’ experiences of meaningful work.

Restating the Research Questions

With the previously outlined assumptions in mind, and in response to the problem, the following research questions guided this inquiry and informed the methodology:

1. What are university custodians' lived experiences when they make meaning of their work as meaningful?
2. What are university custodians' lived experiences when they make meaning of their work as meaningless?
3. What are university custodians' lived experiences of making and negotiating the meanings in their work?

The following section makes explicit and describes the philosophy of inquiry adopted to answer the above research questions.

Philosophy of Inquiry

This study sought to investigate how the phenomena of meaningfulness, meaninglessness, and meaning-making in work manifested through the lived experiences of university custodians within a complex and real work setting. To this end, an inductive, qualitative approach enacted through phenomenological inquiry was adopted to respond to the research problem and questions (Crotty, 1998; Giorgi, 2009; Vagle, 2016; Wertz, Charmaz, McMullen, Josselson, & Anderson, 2011). Such an approach emerged from a constructivist paradigm of inquiry which rested on an ontological position of relativism and an epistemological position of subjectivity and inter-subjectivity (Crotty, 1998; Guba, 1990; Lincoln et al., 2011). These philosophical positions also characterized my own philosophical approach as the researcher, and are as such important to briefly explicate below.

Constructivist Philosophical Assumptions

Approaching inquiry into human phenomena from the constructivist paradigm meant that, as a researcher, I adopted the foundational ontological assumption that “reality” exists in the minds of individual human beings (Guba, 1990; Lincoln et al., 2011). It is important to acknowledge here that other types of realities do exist outside the human mind, like objects of the physical world, but the phenomena investigated in this study (meaningfulness, meaninglessness, and meaning-making) were assumed to be held within the participants’ minds. From this perspective, such a reality was inherently subject to *relativism*, or the belief that there were multiple possible realities of the phenomena held by the individual participants (Crotty, 1998; Guba, 1990). When considered in this way, reality was not seen as an objectively observable phenomenon detached from human consciousness (Guba, 1990). Rather, the constructivist views reality as meanings of the world that are constructed and co-constructed by living in the world.

According to Crotty (1998), the verb “to construct” importantly implies that we have “something to work with” to “build” such realities and meanings (p. 43). That “something,” as posited by philosophers such as Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, is “the world and the objects in the world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 44). For the constructivist, subjective individual meanings of the world are constructed *in* and *through* the interactions – or as phenomenologists call them, the *intentions* – among the subject (individual) and objects of the world (or the *lifeworld*, consisting of people, objects, and experiences) (Dahlberg, 2006; Vagle, 2016).

From an epistemological standpoint, then, knowledge is *subjectively* and *inter-subjectively* constructed through interactions among an individual’s consciousness and the objects of the lifeworld (Lincoln et al., 2011). A subjectivist epistemological position had

significant implications for how this study was conducted. Specifically, if reality and subsequent meanings and knowledge of that reality were held in the minds of the individuals, then such knowledge needed to be “uncovered” or “invited out” (Crotty, 1998; Guba, 1990; Lincoln et al., 2011). The role I assumed as an inquirer in this study was to illuminate such hidden knowledge and meanings through the development of rich, precise descriptions of the phenomena in question (Giorgi, 2009).

Rationale for the Philosophy of Inquiry

In addition to the congruent aims of a qualitative approach in most effectively addressing the research questions and problem, adopting such an approach from a constructivist paradigm of inquiry also added an important complementary way to study meaningful work. Thus far, meaningful work research has been dominated by a post-positivistic approach rooted in psychology which has sought to explain the factors that constitute meaningful work, antecede it, and result from its experience (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Rosso et al., 2010). In the present study, by applying a constructivist approach enacted through phenomenology, the phenomenon of meaningful work previously explained through post-positivistic approaches was explored as it was lived through in situ. This understanding, derived from the lived experience itself, adds to current knowledge on the construct of meaningful work and informs future research using a more diverse philosophical approach.

The methodology that most aligns with *directly* investigating the lived experience of a phenomenon is *phenomenology*, which is why it was selected to address the research problem (Giorgi, 2009; Heidegger, 1962; Husserl, 1931; Vagle, 2016). The following presents the employed phenomenological research methodology by briefly discussing its background and the

differences between descriptive and interpretive phenomenology, and providing an overview of and rationale for use of the descriptive phenomenological method (Giorgi, 2009) in this study.

Methodology: Phenomenology

Most simply, phenomenology is the study of phenomena as they present themselves to human consciousness (Crotty, 1998) – or, as the “father of phenomenology” Edmund Husserl more directly declared, phenomenology is a philosophy of inquiry which returns to studying “the things themselves” only as they appear to human beings living in and among the world (Husserl, 1931; Spiegelberg, 1960; Vagle, 2016). The return to “the things themselves” represents phenomenologists’ teleology to seek, see, and represent phenomena as human beings live through and experience them – nothing more and nothing less (Marton, 1986; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Spiegelberg, 1960).

While other qualitative research methodologies use the term *phenomena*, it is important in this study to understand the specific meaning of phenomena in phenomenology (Vagle, 2016): namely, as

all forms appearing, showing, manifesting, making evident or ‘evidencing,’ bearing witness, truth-claiming, checking and verifying, including all forms of seeming, dissembling, occluding, obscuring, denying, and falsifying. (Moran & Mooney, 2002, p. 5)

The complexity and lengthiness of the above definition are instructive. The verbs appearing, showing, and manifesting demonstrate the essence of a phenomenon in phenomenology as something that is brought into being only through the many acts of “living in the world” (Heidegger, 1962; Vagle, 2016, p. 20). The purpose of phenomenology as a research

methodology, then, “is to study what it is like as we find-ourselves-being-in-relation-with others and other things” (Vagle, 2016, p. 20).

For example, in this study, the relation between the university custodians and work that is experienced as meaningful or meaningless was of primary interest. The goal from a phenomenological approach was to answer the questions: How did the university custodians find themselves when they experienced meaningful/less work? How was it for them to experience meaningful/less work? Vagle (2016) characterized the verb “to find” in phenomenology as the “careful, reflexive, and contemplative” (p. 21) examination of how it is to *be* in the world (i.e. experiencing meaningful work). Creating the space for participant reflexivity and facilitating careful examination of the recollected lived experience is the role of the phenomenologist and was my role in this inquiry.

Applying a phenomenological research methodology to the study of meaningful work was especially appropriate given the emphasis on measuring and explaining the phenomenon in much of the extant literature (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Rosso et al., 2010). Phenomenology offered the opportunity to study meaningful work as it was lived (Husserl, 1931), not as it was “measured, transformed, represented, or correlated” (Vagle, 2016, p. 22).

Because phenomenology focuses on concepts such as being-ness and the relationship between individuals (subjects) and the world (objects, environment, ideas, people), it is important to briefly explain a key philosophical mechanism of phenomenology that has contributed to a divergence of phenomenological research approaches: *intentionality* (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Moran & Mooney, 2002; Sokolowski, 2000; Vagle, 2016). In phenomenology, *intentionality* refers to the connectedness between people and objects (ideas, things, other people) (Vagle, 2016). This idea was made clearer by Merleau-Ponty (1962) when he proposed

that intentionality represented the “invisible threads” connecting people to the things in the world. When made visible through inquiry, the nature of such invisible threads, or *meaning links*, are the constituents that allow for a better understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Sokolowski, 2000; Vagle, 2016). In phenomenology, meaning links form the units of analysis in the inquiry and comprise the structure of the phenomenon, which is the output and goal of phenomenological inquiry (Giorgi, 2009).

Descriptive Phenomenology and Interpretive Phenomenology

Different interpretations of intentionality have contributed to the emergence of two major branches of phenomenology which differ primarily in how the units of analysis (the meaning links) are analyzed: *descriptive phenomenology* (e.g. Colaizzi, 1978; Husserl, 1931; Giorgi, 2009; Wertz, 2011) and *interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenology* (e.g. Gadamer, 2008; Heidegger, 1962; van Manen, 2001).

Briefly, descriptive phenomenology emerged from Husserl’s (1931) philosophy of “returning to the things themselves” and assumes that to understand a phenomenon, researchers must make every effort to adhere as faithfully as possible to participants’ direct descriptions of their experience of that phenomenon (e.g. Colaizzi, 1978; Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Researchers following a descriptive phenomenological approach therefore seek to stay as close as possible to “what is given to them in all its richness and complexity” (Finlay, 2009, p. 10). The commitment to the description of lived experience urges researchers using a descriptive approach to limit themselves to only making assertions that are underpinned by “relevant intuitive validations” directly tied to the raw data (Fry, 2016; Giorgi, 1985). Therefore, the goal of descriptive phenomenology stays most closely aligned to the original aim of a phenomenological philosophy of inquiry: to better understand and clarify what makes a “thing”

what it is to human consciousness (Husserl, 1931; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). The effort to remain true to the participant's voice is represented by the adherence to techniques like bracketing inquirer interpretation or bias in an effort to perceive the phenomenon as it is lived by the participant as clearly as possible (Vagle, 2016).

On the other hand, interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenology draws from Heidegger's (1962) departure from Husserlian thought; it views interpretation, or "adding" to the presented lived experience, as inevitable. The interpretive approach encourages the application of inquirer speculations to the participant's lived experience (Vagle, 2016; van Manen, 2001). The encouragement of interpretation is evidenced through the focus on hermeneutics and the call for researchers to write and re-write interpretations to arrive at plausible interpretations of the phenomenon (van Manen, 2001). Therefore, instead of the primary goal of seeking to better understand and clarify what a phenomenon *is like*, interpretive phenomenologists also seek to resolve ambiguities and interpret what a phenomenon *means* to the participant (e.g. Finlay, 2009; van Manen, 2001).

Many researchers have argued that phenomenological research can lie on a continuum between description and interpretation and that one need not make an explicit declaration one way or the other (e.g. Finlay, 2009; Langdrige, 2008; van Manen, 2001). However, such a position has also been critiqued as contributing to a lack of researcher explanation and rationale regarding the specific methodological choices made in phenomenological research, leading to difficulty in selecting and applying research findings and judging them for quality (King & Horrocks, 2010; Wertz, 2011).

The Rationale for a Descriptive Phenomenological Approach in the Present Study

While each approach could have had useful applications in this study, phenomenological researchers such as Reiners (2012) and Idczak (2007) have urged novice researchers to return to the phenomenon, research problem, and research questions to pragmatically determine their direction. Namely, Reiner's (2012) instruction for choosing a descriptive or interpretive approach was helpful:

Interpretive phenomenology is used when the research question asks for the *meaning* of the phenomenon and the researcher does not bracket their biases and prior engagement with the question under study. Descriptive phenomenology is used when the researcher wants to *describe* the phenomenon under study and brackets their biases. (p. 119)

Moreover, a descriptive approach has been recommended for phenomena that lack clarity and are difficult to rationalize – such as meaningful work (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Fry, 2016; Rosso et al., 2010). The descriptive phenomenological approach also emphasizes the discovery of a *generalized structure* or *essential structures* of phenomena. These structures reveal the interrelated constituents of a phenomenon as it is lived through and how its constituents functionally interrelate (Giorgi, 2009). Therefore, a descriptive approach was particularly valuable in linking the constituents of meaningfulness with the constituents of the phenomenon of meaninglessness in the present study, thereby responding to the need to study meaningful work as a tensional and fluid phenomenon.

Thus, in response to the research problem and questions concerning an understudied and tensional phenomenon, this study drew heavily from a descriptive phenomenological approach (Giorgi, 2009). Such an approach was in line with the goal of this study to better understand and clarify what the phenomenon of meaningfulness *was like* in stigmatized work. A descriptive

approach was used over an interpretive or hermeneutic approach because of the need that emerged from the literature review to further investigate what the experience of meaningful work “was” as it was lived through, as opposed to relying on interpreting what meaningful work “meant” to those who lived through it.

Of course, the selection of a descriptive phenomenological approach did not mean that my interpretation was not an important part of transforming the accounts of lived experiences into a represented structure of the phenomena. In fact, in addressing other qualitative researcher critiques of the emphasis on description, Giorgi (2009) stated that the complete elimination of interpretation based on past experiences should not be the goal of a descriptive approach. Instead, following a descriptive approach compels the researcher to consistently work to adopt a “shift in attitude” so that he or she can be as attentively present to the phenomenon as possible. According to Giorgi (2009), “A certain heightening of the present is being called for, not an obliteration of the past” (p. 93). In other words, instead of eliminating interpretation, the descriptive phenomenological approach more closely guided how such interpretation was dealt with and accounted for throughout my research process.

The following provides an overview of the delineating philosophical assumptions of descriptive phenomenology and reviews the general steps of the selected descriptive phenomenological method, which will be more thoroughly described and applied in the data gathering and analysis overview (Giorgi, 2009).

Overview of the Delineating Assumptions of Descriptive Phenomenology

A key assumption of descriptive phenomenology is that intentionality – or the meaning links – that constitute a phenomenon have essential structures which can then be explicated to define and describe that phenomenon (Vagle, 2016; Wertz, 2011). Specifically, intentionality for

the descriptive phenomenologist means that individuals are conscious *of* something. The “ways” – this “of-ness” – are the units of analysis in the present study’s approach and include the “embodied, practical, emotional, spatial, social, linguistic, and temporal aspects of human life” (Wertz et al., 2011, p. 126). These “ways” are then assumed to have certain structures and qualities which describe the phenomenon in question, thereby clarifying the *essences*, or consistent meanings, of the phenomenon as they appear in the context of the study (Giorgi, 2009; Vagle, 2016).

Most phenomenologists, including those who subscribe to a more open and interpretive philosophy, such as van Manen (2001), agree that the description of the lived experience of a phenomenon in the form of building and representing a structure of experience is the primary goal of all phenomenological inquiry (e.g. Giorgi, 2009; Finlay, 2009; Husserl, 1931; Heidegger, 1962, Merleau-Ponty, 1962; van Manen, 2001; Vagle, 2016). In fact, Finlay (2009) goes so far as to state that all phenomenological research must include “concrete descriptions” of the lived experience and should be descriptive in the sense that it should aim to “describe rather than explain” (Finlay, 2009, p. 10; Fry, 2016). Finlay advocates that any research that does not have as its central feature a description focused on the lived experience cannot be considered phenomenology. Therefore, it is important to explain the underpinnings of what *description* means in phenomenological research and in this study, as opposed to other uses of description in the social sciences.

Description. To phenomenologists, *description* is the “use of language to articulate the intentional objects of experience” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 89). The strict adherence to descriptions given by the participants themselves (their lived experience) is what makes a description phenomenological. Van Manen (2001) stated that “phenomenological descriptions aim at

elucidating lived experience...The point is, of course, that the meaning of lived experience is usually hidden or veiled” (p. 26). Thus, descriptions in phenomenology seek to “exhibit” what is experienced by participants (Giorgi, 2009).

Some may argue that description is inherently reductive of experience and is not commensurable with a constructivist, interactionist paradigm of inquiry. However, it is important to note that much of this critique stems from the application Husserl’s original notion of “universal essences,” or the idea that a description of a phenomenon could transcend context and is developed through reducing the phenomenon to invariant components. However, as explained by Giorgi (2009), Husserl’s approach was always philosophical, not methodological. The descriptive approach has since been modified (e.g. Colaizzi, 1978; Giorgi, 2009), and the idea of translatability across numerous contexts is not a central tenet in widely used and accepted descriptive phenomenological methods.

The function of description in this study, drawing from Giorgi (2009), was to accomplish “the heightening of an experiencer’s presence to the activity of consciousness.” In other words, the commitment to description heightened my awareness of the participants’ voices and experiences to produce what Creswell (2000) labeled a critical outcome and test of validity for qualitative research: thick, rich descriptions of experience.

The descriptive phenomenological approach to studying the debated and tension-laded phenomenon of meaningful work in the present study aimed to identify and clarify defining features (structures and meanings) through vivid and precise descriptions of the lived experiences derived from participants’ descriptions (Giorgi, 2009).

General Steps of the Descriptive Phenomenological Method

Giorgi's (2009) descriptive phenomenological method offered a useful approach for clarifying the features of the phenomenon of meaningful work, and was drawn from to structure the methods used in the present study. The specific steps as they were applied are more thoroughly addressed in the data collection and analysis sections. Giorgi's procedures are largely congruent with the agreed-upon steps of descriptive phenomenological research, but go deeper in offering specific practices for the transformation of meaning units (emergent from the lived experience) into the identification of the structures of a phenomenon (Wertz, 2011; Vagle, 2016). As previously stated, Giorgi's methods were also selected because they compelled me as a researcher to maintain a focus on the "voice" of the participants themselves "without abstracting their viewpoint out through analysis" (Broomé, 2011, p. 7). The method was oriented toward discovery in the sense that, for this study, the first-person meanings of experience were of primary interest versus the interpretation of behaviors to abstract meanings (Broomé, 2011; Giorgi, 2009). The general steps of the descriptive phenomenological method are as follows:

1. **Assume the phenomenological attitude.** The *natural attitude* can be said to be the attitude of everyday life, where most things are taken for granted. On the other hand, the *phenomenological attitude* illuminates what is taken for granted by adopting a perspective that is rooted in understanding how one becomes conscious of the things in one's world (Giorgi, 2009). This attitude is characterized by the researcher "dwelling in" and illuminating the "moment of experience," an effort to suspend a priori beliefs about another's lived experience, and "turning from the objects to their personal and relational significance" (Wertz, 2011, p. 132).

2. **Investigate the experiences of a phenomenon.** Descriptions of the phenomena in question are then gathered by collecting data from ordinary individuals who have experienced the phenomenon from within the natural attitude – in everyday work-life. In this study, the descriptions were gathered via semi-structured interviews with university custodians with the aim of elucidating their experiences of the studied phenomena (Giorgi, 2009).
3. **Analysis and transformation of descriptions.** After each description is transcribed verbatim, the researcher turns to the descriptions and reads them to obtain a sense of the whole. Then, he or she completes a line-by-line reading, paying attention to identifying shifts in meaning within the participants' descriptions to signify *meaning units*. Once the meaning units have been identified, the researcher linguistically transforms each unit in two phases. The first transformation is accomplished through *phenomenological reduction*, which is foundational to phenomenological research, by taking the raw verbatim description and extracting key meanings or possible aspects of the phenomena. The second is through *eidetic generalization*, or describing the general constituents and “shape” of the experience described through the respective meaning unit.
4. **Synthesize a general structure of the experience based on the constituents of the experience.** For each transcription, a “structure of the experience” for each phenomenon in question (e.g. meaningfulness and meaninglessness) is then constructed using the constituents or key aspects of the experience which arose from the eidetic generalizations of the meaning units. The key constituents for each transcript are then cross-referenced and negotiated to develop one or more overall structures of the

experience of the phenomena of meaningful and meaningless work for workers in a stigmatized occupation.

The following explains how these methods were applied in this study through a detailed review of the employed participant selection, data gathering procedures, and data analysis procedures.

Participants and Site Selection

Since this study was primarily concerned with understanding the phenomena of meaningfulness, meaninglessness, and meaning-making as they were experienced by workers in a stigmatized occupation, the participants were *purposively sampled* (Krathwohl, 2009). Specifically, custodians at a large, Western, public university were selected. The site of a large university was chosen because of its convenience to me as a researcher, because of the access to employees, and because custodians represent a large segment of the university workforce (Flum et al., 2010). In the literature, custodial work has been widely considered a stigmatized occupation, or “dirty work,” due to the nature of the job, the skill level required, and the sometimes hazardous and demanding working conditions (e.g. Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013; Berg & Frost, 2005; Flum et al., 2010; Magolda, 2016).

It is important to reiterate, for the purposes of this study, that the phenomenon of meaningful work was assumed to be one possible quality of meaning emerging from a contextual meaning-making process that was tensional and temporally bound. Therefore, meaningfulness was not seen as one “static” phenomenon that only certain people could experience and access; rather, it was viewed as something all individuals do and can experience at different points in their work (Bailey & Madden, 2017). For example, Shim (2016) found “that meaningfulness in

work may not necessarily be a constant perception, but may be a judgment of a moment which may vary from job-to-job, day-to-day, and even task-to-task in the same job” (p. 101).

Hence, the participants for this study were sampled with the assumption that they made meaning in their work and at times experienced work both as meaningful and as meaningless. This assumption justified the adoption of a more general purposive sampling technique focusing on stigmatized work, instead of an *operational construct sampling technique* (Patton, 1990) which would have placed emphasis on discerning whether or not the individual had experienced “meaningful work” as a psychological construct before selection.

Within this discussion of participant selection, it is also important to acknowledge that there is significant debate as to whether a researcher can label a group as “stigmatized” simply by linking stigmatization to a particular occupation (Grandy et al., 2014). The challenge of conceptualizing and framing stigmatized work permeates the extant research on such work, including in my own negotiation of the selection of participants for this study. Some, for example, have highlighted that what is “stigmatized” for one group or identity may be normalized for another, so controlling for how individual identities perceive the work may be important (Lee-Treweek, 2012). Others argue that the considerations of how the work and individuals are seen by the unique identities and perspectives of the “see-er” are integral to framing what is stigmatized and what is not (Douglas, 1966). Thus, the delineation of what is stigmatized work or not is clearly a subjective determination of the researcher, or as Grandy et al. (2014) state, it “fully incorporates the embodied experiences of the researcher.” The following briefly explains how I as a researcher viewed and conceptualized stigmatized work to justify the selection of university custodians as a population.

Researcher Perspective on Stigmatized Work/ers

For this study, I defined *stigmatized work* as work that is generally stigmatized *by society* due to the nature and functions of the work (i.e. cleaning) (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013; Hughes, 1962). Thus, I did not assume that all participants would self-describe themselves as “stigmatized” simply because they did custodial work, but rather that the unique environmental conditions of custodial work and others’ views of the work manifested stigmatization. Research supported this assumption. According to the NORC findings on perceived occupational prestige, since the early 1940s custodial positions have received some of the lowest perceived social standing scores (mean of 3 out of a possible 9) of all occupations (Smith & Son, 2014).

My own interest in working with university custodians came from a previous university event planning work role. Due to my often early and late hours in buildings, I interacted with custodians regularly. Many of the anecdotes I collected from them through these encounters referenced the challenges of the job as being related to the treatment from others and the difficulty and nature of the tasks. In a pilot study I conducted, in which I observed a team of custodians and interviewed three of them, each of the participants indicated that others’ perceptions of their work as “lower,” “dirty,” or “easy” played a significant role in how they felt about their job. In addition, Magolda’s (2016) extensive ethnographic study of university custodians revealed systemic, oppressive perceptions of custodians themselves which resulted from the nature of the work and how one came to do the work. Therefore, it was assumed for the present study that the selected university custodians worked in a socially stigmatized occupation.

Participant Recruitment and Sample

There are not firm recommendations as to the sample size needed in a phenomenological study, with depth of descriptions of the phenomenon itself taking precedence over participant

numbers and diversity (Colaizzi, 1978; Giorgi, 2009; Vagle, 2014). However, for complex phenomena such as those proposed in this dissertation, Giorgi (2009) recommended enough participants (at least three) to be able to identify a range of variations in experience useful in building a structure of the experience. Others have suggested more generally that qualitative studies should have samples between 7 and 25, with no explicit rationale other than achieving “saturation” (Creswell, 1998; Morse, 1994). Since in a descriptive phenomenological study, all gathered data is analyzed, it is recommended to seek a smaller sample (Giorgi, 2009). Therefore, as it investigated a complex phenomenon, the original goal for this study was to select between 6 and 12 university custodians.

Custodians were recruited from two different areas of custodial work on the university campus: Facilities Management (general classroom and building cleaning and maintenance) and Housing and Dining Services (residence hall and dining facility cleaning and maintenance). The directors of each unit were e-mailed to secure support, and lists of employees with a State employee classification of “Custodial” were gathered. A sample of the consent form is available in Appendix A.

I sent a recruitment e-mail to all listed university custodians in each area. Nine custodians responded and agreed to take part in the study. While scheduling their interviews, I deployed an optional online survey to collect demographic and occupational data, such as location/department, gender identity, race/ethnicity, tenure, and role (custodial classification) to ensure appropriate variations in the experience of the phenomenon could be captured, as recommended by Wertz (2011). At this stage, one of the prospective participants decided not to participate for unknown reasons.

Sample. The eight remaining custodians who responded to the inquiry were ultimately selected for the study due to the achieved distribution and diversity of custodial classification, tenure, location, gender, and race/ethnicity. Represented in the sample were six women and two men, as well as each level of Custodial classification (Custodian I, II, and III). One custodian identified as Hispanic/Latina, while two declined to self-identity race/ethnicity. Tenure ranged from 3 to 19 years, with an average of 10.1 years. Three participants worked in the Housing and Dining department and five in the Facilities department. Each custodian was given a pseudonym to protect his or her identity. The demographic details of the sample and their pseudonyms are displayed in Table 1.

For purposive sampling, “relevance” was valued over randomness (Schneerson & Gale, 2015), so I was particularly attuned to the events, incidents, and experiences described by the custodians that illuminated the studied phenomena. After the fifth interview, I started noticing similar events and incidents being described for the experiences of both meaningfulness and meaninglessness. Therefore, after the eighth interview, I chose not to seek more participants.

Table 1

Demographic Details of the Sample

Pseudonym	Classification	Tenure	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Location
Susan	Custodian I	19	Woman	White	Housing
Erin	Custodian II	18	Woman	Hispanic/Latina	Housing
Lisa	Custodian III	3	Woman	White	Housing
Tim	Custodian III	5	Man	White	Facilities
Sarah	Custodian III	11	Woman	N/A	Facilities
Bobby	Custodian II	3	Man	White	Facilities
Jane	Custodian I	18	Woman	White	Facilities
Ashley	Custodian I	4	Woman	N/A	Facilities

Data Gathering

According to Giorgi (2009), “what one seeks from a research interview in phenomenological research is as complete a description as possible of the experience a participant has lived through” (p. 122). To achieve detailed descriptions of the phenomena of meaningful/less work, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant in a mutually agreed-upon, private location. The exact length of the interviews varied by participant, ranging from 30 minutes to over 90 minutes.

The goal of the semi-structured interviews in this study was to “get concrete and detailed descriptions of experiences in which the researcher is interested” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 122). Namely, the aim was to directly elucidate the experiences of meaningful work and meaningless work while paying specific attention to the features of meaning-making embedded in those descriptions.

Unfortunately, at the time of this study there was little methodological scholarship offering guidance on how to conduct a phenomenological interview (Giorgi, 2009; King & Horrocks, 2010; Vagle, 2016). Because of this missing guidance, phenomenologists often draw from various qualitative interviewing methods to craft an interviewing approach. Primarily, phenomenological interviews are designed to “invite lifeworld descriptions from others” (Todres & Holloway, 2004, p. 85). Thus, the semi-structured interviews in this study focused on gathering precise and rich descriptions of how the participants found themselves living *in* and *through* the experiences of meaningful and meaningless work (Vagle, 2016). This required that I, as an interviewer, adopt a phenomenological attitude characterized by “standing back” and asking direct phenomenological questions about the phenomena of interest (Fry, 2016; Todres & Holloway, 2004).

As previously discussed, the phenomenological attitude is characterized by an effort on behalf of the interviewer to suspend the natural attitude, or the “everyday ways” of perceiving life (Husserl, 1931). The goal was therefore to as fully as possible immerse myself in the phenomenological descriptions of the custodians by making the effort to suspend pre-conceived personal and professional perceptions of the phenomenon (Fry, 2016). Such an effort is termed “bracketing” and was enacted and documented in research memos both before and after each interview was conducted (Giorgi, 2009). An excerpt from a research memo below demonstrates how I did this after my interview with Susan:

Overall, I found myself moved by how powerful and affirming feelings of meaningfulness were and how hurtful feelings of meaninglessness were. I was also struck by how work helped P1 make sense of key events in her life, it was almost like an anchoring and reference point to helping her place certain events and describe her life.

BRACKETING

It is important that I bracket a few initial feelings here:

- [The emotional positive or negative qualities I perceive and associate with meaningfulness and meaninglessness.]
- [The perspective of what might have “caused” meaningfulness or meaninglessness from an environmental perspective based on existing research.]
- [The value I may ascribe to meaningfulness as “good” and meaninglessness as “bad.”]

Once I adopted the phenomenological attitude, the semi-structured interviews employed direct questions to encourage the participants to recreate the embodied experience of the phenomena (Giorgi, 2009). An interview protocol was developed which documented the

participant and setting, and included main questions as well as probing and “directing” questions (Knox & Burkard, 2009). A sample of the protocol used is available in Appendix B.

One of the noted pitfalls of phenomenological interviewing is the propensity for respondents to abstract their experiences and move away from the phenomenon of interest (Clarke, 2006; Giorgi, 2009). Therefore, per Giorgi’s (2009), Englander’s (2012), and Finlay’s (2009) guidance, I built follow-up questions into the interview protocol that served to direct participants back into the description of the specific experience. Giorgi (2009) called such a technique asking “directing” questions instead of leading questions. The act of directing by a phenomenological interviewer is important to prompt the interviewee back into his or her detailed lifeworld experience of the phenomenon. For example, follow-up questions employed both formally and informally on the protocol were:

- Can you possibly describe that experience in more detail?
- Do you have any other experiences like that?
- What was that experience like for you more specifically?

Additional mechanisms and interview methods that informed this study’s interview design and techniques drew from Englander’s (2012) guidance on structuring descriptive phenomenological interviews and Finlay’s (2011) *embodied interviewing technique*. First, Englander’s (2012) structure ensured that the interviews were directed as much as possible toward participants’ direct descriptions of the phenomenon. I posed direct questions which elicited a detailed description from the participants. Probing and directing questions were employed to gather as many direct descriptions of the phenomenon as possible from each participant and to direct them back to the specifics of their described experience of the phenomenon (Englander, 2012). Englander (2012) also recommended directing and reminding

the participants to think of moments in their everyday work to encourage them not to provide vague, idealized descriptions. Following Englander's (2012) guidance, my interview protocol's two main questions were:

1. Please describe a situation when you thought of your work as meaningful, whatever that means to you. Be sure to choose a situation that you can remember clearly and one that occurred.
2. Please describe a situation when you thought of your work as meaningless, whatever that means to you. Be sure to choose a situation that you can remember clearly and one that occurred.

Second, Finlay's (2011) *embodied interviewing technique* helped me structure both my attitude and my follow-up questions. The goal of my follow-up questioning was to help the participants and myself as a researcher "get into the moment" of the described experience if this was not achieved in the initial description (Finlay, 2011). This was accomplished by including informal, directing questions regarding the *emotional* (i.e. What did it feel like?), *cognitive* (i.e. What were you thinking?), and *bodily experiences* (i.e. What did you notice about yourself?) of living through the phenomenon.

In addition, Finlay recommended an interviewer approach characterized by *openness*, *empathy*, and *attentive listening* (Finlay, 2011). As a researcher, I pursued *openness* by bracketing preconceived ideas and biases about what the experience of meaningful/less work might be like for university custodians, as evidenced in my research memos. I tried to embody *empathy* by taking careful account of my own emotions as an interviewer through researcher memos while I listened to the participants' account and prepared for subsequent interviews. Finally, I worked to demonstrate attentive listening by trying to be both open and empathetic. In

addition, I made sure to “stay with the phenomenon” through the previously outlined technique of utilizing directing questions, as well as reflecting on my attentiveness to the phenomenon after and before each interview (Englander, 2012; Fry, 2016).

Practical Considerations

Each interview was recorded in full using a digital recording device and transcribed using verbatim transcription (Poland, 1995). The transcriptions included any emotional or nonverbal expressions to offer a deepened description of the experience of the phenomenon, although the focus of the analysis was not to explain or interpret such emotions, staying in alignment with the philosophical tenets of descriptive phenomenology (Dahlberg et al., 2008). The transcriptions were saved as Microsoft Word documents and were password-protected.

Data Analysis

After completion of the eight interviews, there were 162 single-spaced pages of transcribed descriptions of the experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness. These transcriptions were then analyzed in four major phases, guided by Giorgi’s (2009) descriptive phenomenological method. While this method served as the procedural and philosophical basis for the analysis, these four steps are widely considered the fundamental commitments that must be made to conduct sound phenomenological data analysis (Vagle, 2016; Wertz, 2011). As previously discussed, the four steps were:

1. Reading for a sense of the whole;
2. Line-by-line reading to determine meaning units;
3. Transformation of the participant’s description (meaning units) into phenomenologically sensitive expressions and identifying emerging constituents; and
4. Building a structure of the experience.

In addition to assuming the phenomenological attitude and bracketing prior knowledge and experience through research memos, each of the above steps required that I adopt an attitude of *phenomenological reduction*. Phenomenological reduction is characterized by a narrow focus on intentionality, or the “ways” individuals relate to and experience the phenomenon in the world, without judging the objective existence of the phenomenon itself. It is important at this stage to acknowledge that disagreement remains as to the nature and use of phenomenological reduction among qualitative researchers. As in the critique of the use of description, some argue that psychological phenomenological reduction is limiting, reductionist, and post-positivistic in nature (e.g. Dahlberg, 2006; Heidegger, 1962; Vagle, 2016). However, as a qualitative research attitude, phenomenological reduction was always meant to be expanding and not narrowing (Giorgi, 2009):

By studying the ‘ways’ through phenomenological reduction, the field of investigation is not narrowed but rather is opened up and expanded to encompass all the complexities and intricacies of psychological life (Wertz et al., 2011, p. 125).

I agree with Wertz (2011) and Giorgi (2009) and see phenomenological reduction as expanding and clarifying the phenomenon at issue. Specifically, in this study of the fragmented and sometimes misunderstood phenomenon of meaningful work, phenomenological reduction served an important purpose to further clarify and adequately describe what meaningful and meaningless work were like in the lives of the custodians.

The following section reviews how each of the above steps were taken in the present study. Steps one through four were applied to each individual transcription. In addition, the fourth step was also applied to all the transcriptions together. Each transcription underwent the full analysis procedure one at a time, as the interviews were conducted over the course of three

months. The only phase in which all data from all participants was analyzed together was in the last step.

Step One: Reading for a Sense of the Whole

Each transcription was first read in its entirety to obtain a “sense of the whole.” The goal was to answer the overarching question: What is this participant’s description of his or her lived experience generally about? At this stage, clarification in the form of coding or notations was not conducted. While most qualitative research methods include a *whole-part-whole analysis* structure (Wertz, 2011), this first reading in phenomenology is guided by the phenomenological attitude and is focused on “sensitively discriminating the intentional objects of the lifeworld description provided by the participant” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 129). Therefore, I paid particular attention to the various “ways” in which the phenomena of meaningful/less work were encountered and lived through by the participants. General reflections of these “ways” were included in research memos after the initial reading for each participant.

At this stage, I also noted on the transcripts where the descriptions of each phenomenon (meaningfulness and meaninglessness) started and ended to ensure these were grouped and intact for the next phase of data analysis.

Step Two: Line-by-Line Reading and Determination of Meaning Units

Giorgi (2009) indicated that “everything that is gathered must be analyzed.” Therefore, after each transcription was carefully read through as a whole, I conducted a line-by-line reading to determine meaning units contained within the participant’s description. *Meaning units* were the parts of the description that pointed to the “ways” in which meaningful/less work were experienced. They were not simply codes, themes, or similar sentences; they could comprise many sentences or a few words (Giorgi, 2009). The criterion here was that each meaning unit

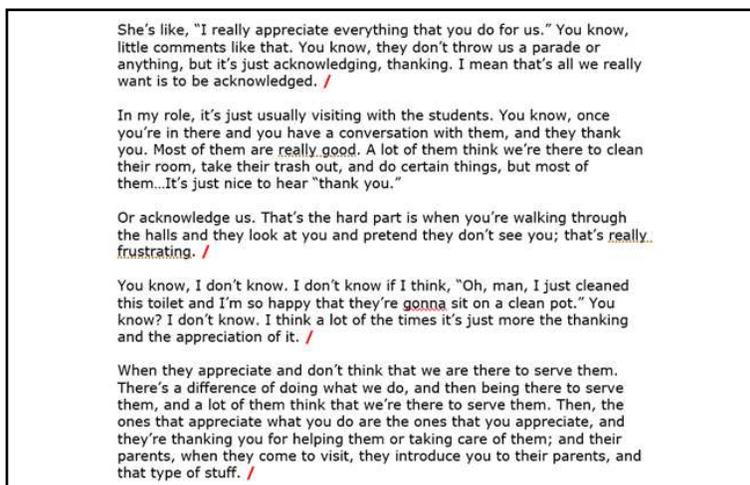
represented a distinct and delineated shift in meaning in the participant's description of the ways he or she experienced the phenomena.

At that point, I first condensed the transcription by omitting certain statements that were not directed toward the phenomena of meaningful work and/or meaningless work (i.e. side conversation, researcher nonverbal feedback, etc.). I also ensured that I was reading with an attitude of phenomenological reduction (Giorgi, 2009; Wertz, 2011). Therefore, casual sentences and statements that did not reflect a response regarding the phenomena of interest were not included for analysis and were greyed in the transcript. This allowed for the creation of whole descriptions of only the experiences of meaningful and meaningless work, and for the development of a phenomenologically directed review to delineate the meaning units.

To identify the meaning units during the line-by-line reading, I made a “/” notation in Microsoft Word on the transcript every time there was a shift in meaning in the participant's description (Giorgi, 2009). An example of an analyzed paragraph of Erin's transcript is provided below in Figure 5. Wertz (2011) characterized this process as identifying critical moments in the “temporal unfolding” of a participant's experience. This was a spontaneous activity and I had to bracket and keep reminding myself that the meaning units themselves did not yet carry theoretical weight (Giorgi, 2009, p. 130). In addition, during this phase, I bracketed any interpretations or preconceptions to maintain as clear a focus on the participant's description as possible when determining such shifts (Giorgi, 2009; Wertz, 2011).

I also had in mind what a “critical other” (Giorgi, 2009) might discover when reading the same transcript and kept asking myself, “Would another researcher conceivably delineate this same shift in meaning?” This constant reflective process helped me stay attuned to the phenomenon and bracket my own interpretation of the phenomenon. For each transcript, I

completed a process of refining the meaning unit delineations through many additional re-readings of the transcripts.



She's like, "I really appreciate everything that you do for us." You know, little comments like that. You know, they don't throw us a parade or anything, but it's just acknowledging, thanking. I mean that's all we really want is to be acknowledged. /

In my role, it's just usually visiting with the students. You know, once you're in there and you have a conversation with them, and they thank you. Most of them are really good. A lot of them think we're there to clean their room, take their trash out, and do certain things, but most of them...It's just nice to hear "thank you."

Or acknowledge us. That's the hard part is when you're walking through the halls and they look at you and pretend they don't see you; that's really frustrating. /

You know, I don't know. I don't know if I think, "Oh, man, I just cleaned this toilet and I'm so happy that they're gonna sit on a clean pot." You know? I don't know. I think a lot of the times it's just more the thanking and the appreciation of it. /

When they appreciate and don't think that we are there to serve them. There's a difference of doing what we do, and then being there to serve them, and a lot of them think that we're there to serve them. Then, the ones that appreciate what you do are the ones that you appreciate, and they're thanking you for helping them or taking care of them; and their parents, when they come to visit, they introduce you to their parents, and that type of stuff. /

Figure 5. Excerpt of participant "Erin's" transcript with denoted and delineated meaning units.

Once I was satisfied with the delineations of the meaning units in the Microsoft Word document, I transferred them to a Microsoft Excel sheet and placed them in the first column in separate rows. Each meaning unit was then given a label and numbered (i.e. MU1, MU2, etc.). Next, I created a memo on the Excel sheet (in the second to last column) that indicated the rationale for why each meaning unit was identified (part of the Excel sheet for Erin's data with displayed and transformed meaning units is provided in Figure 7; a full example of Erin's Excel sheet is provided in Appendix C). There was no labeling or coding of the meaning units at this stage (Wertz, 2011), as they were not intended to have conceptual meaning and were primarily enacted to better organize the data for the next stage of analysis (Giorgi, 2009).

During this phase, I also kept research memos and attended to how the custodians were generally making sense of their experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness within their descriptions. I relied on these memos to synthesize the general features of meaning-making after

each transcription's analysis. These general features are described as part of the report of the findings in Chapter Four.

A total of 266 meaning units were delineated across the eight interview transcripts. After this phase, the data was ready for the next step of the data analysis, which was to transform the raw meaning units into more generalized, objective expressions of the phenomena as experienced.

Step Three: Transformation of Meaning Units into Phenomenological Expressions

The next stage called for the interrogation of each meaning unit in the transcript so that it could be expressed in a more general and transferable way. This involved transforming the meaning unit one or more times. Each *transformation* was a description that tried to represent “precisely the features of the experienced phenomenon as they presented themselves” to me as the researcher (Giorgi, 2009; p. 131). It is important to note that this implied that I introduced minimal speculative or non-given factors. I aimed for this goal through the bracketing process and continual personal reflexivity evidenced in the research memos, but the goal was also manifested because of the overall aims of phenomenological inquiry and this study: to describe the phenomena and not generate theories or hypotheses (Giorgi, 2009; Wertz, 2011). The aim was to ensure that the second- and third-level transformations of the meaning units, because they were derived from the participants' direct descriptions, had “the strength of facts, even though they are not pure facts” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 133).

In this third stage, I interrogated each meaning unit to express its implications on understanding the experience of meaningful or meaningless work. This transformation process was one of “detecting, drawing out, and elaborating” on potentialities in the raw data that might be further developed (Giorgi, 2009, p. 131). The goal was to reveal more generalized

“phenomenal characteristics” from within the complex description of the lived experience of meaningful or meaningless work. Such a generalization was done to the degree that the meaning units could be utilized as an emerging constituent and fit into the structure of the phenomena that emerged in the final stage of analysis from the converged constituents from all transformed meaning units (Giorgi, 2009).

Most meaning units underwent three primary transformations or reductions: a linguistic representation of the raw data with the first-person replaced by the third-person; a phenomenological reduction that objectively described the key features of the description as presented in the meaning unit; and, finally, an *eidetic generalization* which linguistically identified the phenomenal constituent(s) of the meaning unit derived from the reduction (Giorgi, 2009; Husserl, 1931) (Figure 6). Some of the meaning units lacked phenomenological depth and complexity and underwent only one transformation. Each transformation was represented in a separate column in each transcript’s Excel sheet (example in Figure 7 below) to the right of each meaning unit. The columns were labeled “Transformation One,” “Transformation Two,” and “Emerging Constituents.” The transformations were written and re-written through several iterations, with attention paid to ensuring the direct link to and adequate depiction of the raw description. A memo was added to the last column of the Excel spreadsheet to provide context and rationale for each transformation, and research memos were also noted there to document decisions made for each set of transformations.

Once all the meaning units were transformed and emerging constituents were identified, the data was ready for the last phase of analysis: building a general structure of the experience by identifying and relating the main constituents of the experience of meaningful work and meaningless work.

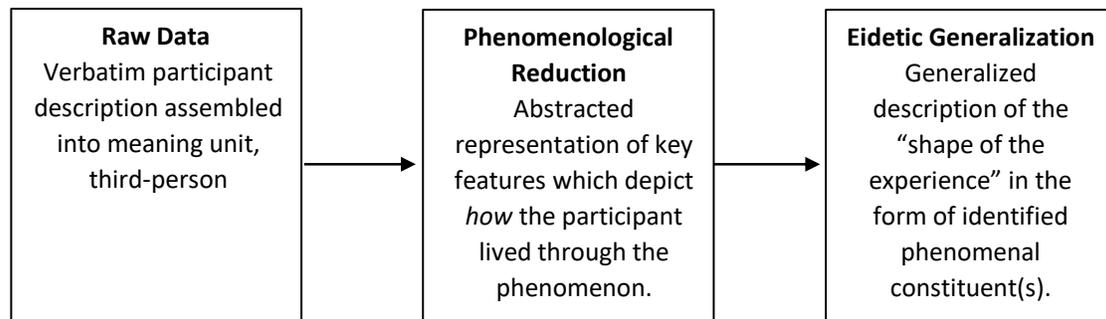


Figure 6. The meaning unit transformations in the descriptive phenomenological method used in this study’s data analysis.

Step Four: Building a Structure of the Experience

There were two major phases of this stage of data analysis: building a general structure of the experience of meaningful work and meaningless work for each participant, and building a general structure of experiences of meaningful work and meaningless work across all eight participants.

Building a general structure of the experience of meaningful work and meaningless work for each participant. After transformations of each meaning unit were carried out, I utilized the eidetic generalizations (the “Emerging Constituents” column) of each meaning unit to form a general structure of the experience for each participant. A general structure is best characterized as “expressions of patterns or wholes that coherently make sense of the examples on which they are based” (Todres, 2005, p. 111). General structures can be narratively or figuratively expressed (Giorgi, 2009). For each individual participant, I narratively described how the emerging constituents fit together to linguistically depict the experience of both meaningful and meaningless work as precisely as possible. This was expressed as a written composite description which was summative of the participant’s described experiences of

Meaning Units	Transformation 1	Transformation 2	Emerging Constituents
MU1: I really enjoy it. I enjoy the students. I enjoy most of the students, I should say. I mean I don't know. I think it just keeps me young; I'm not sure. I enjoy it. I like to come to work every day. I like all my co-workers, my staff, the front desk staff. I wake up happy to come to work. Nine times out of 10.	P2 describes that she enjoys the students the most in her job. She says it keeps her young. P2 also says she likes coming to work each day because of her co-workers and fellow staff and that she wakes up happy to come to work most of the time.		The students (building occupants) bring the most enjoyment to the job. The importance of others
MU2: There's a lot. I think just the students are pretty grateful for what we do. I did have a girl one time go on vacation for Christmas, and she came back and she was like, "I missed you so much," and I said, "Oh, that's nice," and she said, "I had to clean my own bathroom when I went home." She said, "I'm not used to that." She's like, "I really appreciate everything that you do for us." You know, little comments like that. You know, they don't throw us a parade or anything, but it's just acknowledging, thanking. I mean that's all we really want is to be acknowledged.	P2 indicates that there are a lot of moments of meaningfulness. She describes that students are grateful for what they do. P2 then describes that a student in a residence hall came back after a break and told her that she missed her because she had to clean her own bathroom. P2 describes that the student told her she appreciated everything that P2 did for them. P2 describes that comments like that are meaningful. P2 describes that all custodians want is to be acknowledged.	P2 indicates that there have been a lot of moments that have brought her meaningfulness. She indicates that when the building occupants show appreciation and are grateful it results in feelings of meaningfulness. P2 indicates that custodians want to be acknowledged.	Difficult to pick our one moment of meaningfulness Receiving verbal appreciation and gratitude by building occupants is meaningful Being acknowledged by others is meaningful
MU3: In my role, it's just usually visiting with the students. You know, once you're in there and you have a conversation with them, and they thank you. Most of them are really good. A lot of them think we're there to clean their room, take their trash out, and do certain things, but most of them...It's just nice to hear "thank you." Or acknowledge us. That's the hard part is when you're walking through the halls and they look at you and pretend they don't see you; that's really frustrating.	P2 describes that meaningfulness comes from having conversations and visiting with students and having them say thank you. P2 describes that she thinks that the building occupants/students think that they're just there to clean the rooms, but that it's nice to hear them say thank you. P2 then juxtaposes that experience with when the students/occupants look at her and her fellow custodians and pretend not to see them, P2 says that feels really frustrating.	P2 describes that getting to know students/occupants and hearing gratitude is meaningful. P2 then reflects that it is hard and frustrating when her and her fellow custodians don't get acknowledged.	Getting to know building occupants is meaningful Reflecting on meaningfulness by reflecting on times of frustration or meaninglessness Not being acknowledged produces feelings of frustration
MU4: You know, I don't know. I don't know if I think, "Oh, man, I just cleaned this toilet and I'm so happy that they're gonna sit on a clean pot." You know? I don't know. I think a lot of the times it's just more the thanking and the appreciation of it.	P2 says that she doesn't think of the specific task as meaningful all of the time, but that it is the thanking and appreciation of doing the task that is meaningful.	P2 describes that others' appreciation of the task gives it meaningfulness.	Tasks are not as inherently meaningful when the impact on others is unclear Others' appreciation of the task makes it meaningful
MU5: When they appreciate and don't think that we are there to serve them. There's a difference of doing what we do, and then being there to serve them, and a lot of them think that we're there to serve them. Then, the ones that appreciate what you do are the ones that you appreciate, and they're thanking you for helping them or taking care of them; and their parents, when they come to visit, they introduce you to their parents, and that type of stuff.	P2 describes that when the students/occupants appreciate them instead of thinking of them as there to serve them, it's meaningful. P2 describes that she thinks a lot of the students see her and her custodians as there to serve them, but some appreciate their work and thank them for helping them and taking care of them. P2 then describes getting to meet some of the students' parents.	P2 describes that the perceptions others' have on the work has an impact on her experience of meaningfulness.	The perceptions others have on custodial work (servant vs. caretaker) can have an impact on meaningfulness

Figure 7. Example of Erin's transformed meaning units from the data analysis Excel sheet. The "Emerging Constituent(s)" columns for each meaning unit served as the major parts that would be included in the structure of the experience.

meaningful and meaningless work. An example of Erin's composite description is available in Appendix D.

Building general structures for the experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness across all eight participants. The experiences of each participant were then compared with one another to search for variants and congruencies and to assemble general structures of the experiences of meaningfulness, meaninglessness, and the unified phenomena. This phase was key to realizing the philosophical assumptions of phenomenology in this study that phenomena have essential structures or essences (Giorgi, 2009; Husserl, 1931; Wertz et al., 2011). It is also important here to reiterate that the units of analysis in this study were the ways the phenomena of meaningful and meaningless work were experienced, and not necessarily the experiences themselves. To accomplish the creation of the general structures, I compared individual participant findings with one another to search for invariant and essential constituents of the described experiences. This was the first time in the data analysis process that the participant data was compared or cross-referenced (Giorgi, 2009).

First, the last column of the meaning unit transformations – the emerging constituents represented by the psychological expression of the meaning unit – was reviewed for each of the eight participants and for each phenomenon's description. The emerging constituents of both the custodians' experiences of meaningful work and meaningless work that were invariant across all eight custodians' experiences were identified and initially labeled using the language from the third transformation of the respective meaning unit. These served as the initial essential constituents of the experiences of meaningful work and meaningless work. The goal in labeling and writing the title of the essential constituent was to capture the essence of the constituent as it tended to occur when the phenomena were respectively experienced across all participants. The

constituents thus represented general tendencies in how the experiences manifested for all the custodians. My goal was to craft wording in such a way that the constituent was both representative of the direct participant description and general enough to be applied to multiple cases of the experience.

It was assumed that divergent constituents of the experience would be identified at this stage. To determine what was “essential,” I enacted what Husserl (1931) called “free imaginative variation” and sought to answer the question: Would the structure of the experience be radically altered if I included this constituent? If the answer was yes, it was included in the general structure and was considered essential (Giorgi, 2009). The aim at that point was to identify and depict “what was typical” of the phenomena of meaningful work and meaningless work among all the custodians (Fry, 2016, p. 107). Specifically, I considered if the constituent was context- and participant-dependent or phenomenon-dependent, and employed the perspective of the “critical other” by posing the questions: Would an objective observer of the data identify a similar constituent across the experiences? and Does this seem typical of the experience of meaningful work among these or other imagined custodians? In addition, each constituent was questioned and reflected on by asking: What if this was not necessary for meaningful/less work to be experienced by custodians?

In some instances, some final constituents did not appear in direct, explicit descriptions in every case. However, if the constituent seemed necessary for the respective experience to occur, it was retained. For example, three participants directly expressed in the raw data that while knowing the work was inherently important was meaningful, this only lasted so long before the external validation from an “other” was needed to maintain that experience of meaningfulness. The constituent *maintaining meaningfulness*, detailed in Chapter Four, reflected these

participants' direct descriptions. However, it also made sense of other participants' descriptions by characterizing their more implicitly described function of kinds of external validation for maintaining their motivation or sense of meaningfulness. This was an example of how free imaginative variation was enacted.

After this process, seven essential constituents were identified as being typical for the experience of meaningful work to occur among all the custodians, while five were found to be typical of the experience of meaningless work. A composite narrative description was then written of the general experience for both meaningfulness and meaninglessness, relating the essential constituents together as they appeared in the participants' descriptions. The constituents' relationships to one another for each experience were also assembled as a figurative representation (Figure 10 in Chapter Four). Then, the two experiences were synthesized together to build a general structure of both phenomena that considered the general features of meaning-making illuminated within the participants' descriptions.

Finally, the overall structure was tested by revisiting the participants' descriptions and cross-referencing them to the constituents represented in the whole. To ensure credibility and demonstrate that all of the structure's constituents were empirically based, each constituent was identified in the raw data by creating a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet that included key meaning units from each participant and an explanation of how they contributed to form each constituent (Knorring-Giorgi, 1998; Giorgi, 2009). The empirical basis of each constituent for each participant is displayed in Tables 3 and 4 in Chapter Four.

Methods to Maintain Validity and Quality

Various terms have been used in qualitative research to conceptualize validity, such as credibility, relevance, and confirmability (Vagle, 2016). One of the main mechanisms of

maintaining validity, specifically in this descriptive phenomenological study, was the effort made to stay as true to the participant descriptions as possible (Giorgi, 2009; Wertz, 2011). Techniques such as bracketing my interpretation and biases and providing documentation of key decisions in transforming meaning units and arriving at the general structure of experience served as important ways to ensure the validity of the findings (Wertz et al., 2011). In addition, maintaining documentation in which the constituents of the general structure of experience were specifically linked to raw data was adherent to standards of rigor for descriptive phenomenological research (Knorring-Giorgi, 1998).

Member Checking

In addition to the above methods of ensuring validity and quality, Creswell and Miller (2009) indicated that *member checking* is an important way to maintain validity in a qualitative study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described member checks as “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). Therefore, all participants in this study were given the opportunity to provide input on the findings that emerged from their interviews. Before the general structure of the phenomena was assembled, each participant was e-mailed the composite description I wrote of his or her lived experience of meaningful and meaningless work, and was asked to read it for accuracy. Six out of the eight custodians responded and affirmed that the composite descriptions of their experiences and the essential constituents informing them were reflective of their lived experience.

Assessing Quality

Finally, in terms of quality, Wertz (2011) provided the following questions to judge the quality of phenomenological research; as such, they served as the standards for the present study.

These questions were reflected on after the composition of this dissertation was complete, and were used to assess overall quality prior to submission.

- 1. Does the research address a significant problem and research problem that require qualitative knowledge of lived experience?** The problem necessitating this study was both practical and conceptual. First, workers in stigmatized occupations may be more at risk of experiencing negative outcomes at work. Second, research on the lived experience of meaningful work, specifically in the context of a stigmatized occupation, is limited.
- 2. Did the data collection provide genuine and adequate access to sufficiently varied examples of the phenomena under investigation?** The sample included varying locations, tenures, genders, races/ethnicities, and custodial classifications. All participants had experienced both meaningful and meaningless work.
- 3. Were all relevant data reflected upon with conceptual fidelity to participants' own experiential processes and meanings?** The empirical basis for each emergent constituent was detailed to ensure the findings expressed the participants' raw descriptions.
- 4. Do the findings conceptually clarify the essence(s) of the research phenomena, including all constituents in their holistic structural relationships with each other?** Constituents were clarified and assembled figuratively to depict the experiences of all eight custodians and to show the general essence of the experiences of meaningful and meaningless work.
- 5. Are all knowledge claims supported by and illustrated with concrete evidence?** The study incorporated a thorough literature and theoretical review, and all findings were rooted in participants' lifeworld descriptions.

6. **Are the levels and kinds of generality achieved, the contextual limitations of the study, and the remaining open issues and questions transparently articulated?** The limitations of this study are articulated clearly in Chapter Five.
7. **Do the eidetic descriptions intelligibly illuminate and ring true of all examples of the research phenomena in both the study's data and in the literature, in the lifeworld, and in the reader's experience?** The emergent constituents were directly rooted in each custodian's lifeworld description, as indicated in Tables 2 and 3 in Chapter Four.
8. **Are the contributions of the phenomenological findings to the theory and practice literature made explicit?** Chapter Five provides several implications for research, theory, and practice.

Reporting Findings

Each research question was answered by this study. The findings were presented by providing a detailed description of each of the constituents of the experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness and how those constituents emerged from the raw data. For both meaningful work and meaningless work, a structure of the experience was expressed narratively as a composite description and depicted figuratively. In addition, the general features of the custodians' meaning-making processes were described. Finally, an overall structure of experience was depicted which incorporated the interrelated constituents of meaningfulness and meaninglessness (Giorgi, 2009).

Summary

This chapter described the philosophy of inquiry, methodology, and methods used to respond to the research questions. Namely, to best understand the lived experience of the phenomenon of meaningful work among university custodians, I adopted a constructivist

philosophy of inquiry enacted through a qualitative, phenomenological methodology. The aim was to clarify what the experiences of meaningful work, meaningless work, and meaning-making were “like” for university custodians. Therefore, a descriptive phenomenological method of data gathering and analysis was employed and detailed. Specific details such as participant and site selection were also outlined. Finally, the chapter covered the validity and quality methods used and described how the findings were reported.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings of the descriptive phenomenological analysis of the phenomenon under investigation: university custodians' lived experience of meaningful work. The overarching goals in expressing the findings for a descriptive phenomenological analysis are to identify and describe the constituents that are considered essential for the phenomenon to manifest, to describe how these constituents presented themselves through the experiencers' lifeworld descriptions, and to depict and better understand how the essential constituents relate to one another to form a general structure of the experience (Giorgi, 2009; Sokolowski, 1974; Wertz, 2011). Because a key assumption of this study was that the phenomenon of meaningful work was interrelated and dependent on the phenomenon of meaningless work, essential constituents for the experience of meaningless work as described by the participants were also identified and incorporated into the development of the general structure of the experience. In addition, my interpretation of the custodians' ways of meaning-making was described to contextualize how the experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness came to be.

The findings address the previously stated research questions:

1. What are university custodians' lived experiences when they make meaning of their work as meaningful?
2. What are university custodians' lived experiences when they make meaning of their work as meaningless?
3. What are university custodians' experiences of making and negotiating the meanings in their work?

For this chapter, *constituents* are defined as invariant and related parts of the experiences of meaningful and meaningless work, emergent from participants' direct descriptions, that formed a general structure of the unified experience of the phenomena (Giorgi, 2009; Gurwitsch, 1964; Wertz, 2011). The goal was not to abstract commonalities among participants' descriptions, which are sometimes referred to as themes, but to bring forth key parts of the experiences which *tended* to be present with other parts when the phenomena manifested. Giorgi (2009) likened constituents in phenomenological research to central tendencies in statistics: they express what *typically* occurs when the phenomenon is experienced in a specific context (Giorgi, 2009, p. 202). Therefore, in this study, the general structure of the experience is defined as the *essence* of university custodians' lived experience of meaningful and meaningless work – what tended to occur together when these custodians experienced meaningful work and/or meaningless work.

To answer the above research questions and to accomplish the goals of a descriptive phenomenological analysis, this chapter identifies and describes the eidetically invariant constituents of the phenomena and how they manifested in the custodians' lifeworld descriptions. Furthermore, it presents composite descriptions and general structures of the lived experiences of meaningful and meaningless work, describes my interpretations of how the custodians made meaning in their work, and depicts the general structure of the custodians' unified experience of meaningful and meaningless work while describing and visually depicting the interrelations among the constituents.

Identifying and Describing the Constituents

The goal for identifying, naming, and describing the constituents was to depict with “descriptive adequacy” what meaningful work and meaningless work “generally were” for the

university custodians (Ashforth, 2000; Giorgi, 2009; Wertz, 2011). As discussed in Chapter Three, all gathered data was analyzed line-by-line. After multiple reviews of the transformed meaning units for each participant, eidetic intuition and free imaginative variation were employed to determine the constituents that presented as invariant across participants' experiences for each phenomenon.

The constituents were named through a back-and-forth process of re-reading custodians' original descriptions and writing and re-writing the constituent descriptions to capture the essential parts of the experience of meaningful work and meaningless work in more general descriptive terms. It was difficult to know when to stop the process of naming and refining the constituents. However, when I could re-read the direct transcripts and sensed that the constituents represented the experience as described in the verbatim words of each participant, I began to move forward and assemble the constituents to form the general structure of the experience. The empirical basis for each constituent for each phenomenon, as it appeared in the custodians' raw descriptions, is displayed in Tables 3 and 4 at the end of this chapter for reference.

In response to the first research question, seven eidetically invariant major constituents were identified as being typical when meaningful work was experienced: 1. Enacting a learned, positive approach to the work, 2. Having and experiencing pride in cleaning work, 3. Maintaining meaningfulness, 4. Experiencing ongoing external validation of the self and work, 5. Kinds of ongoing self-validation of the self and work, 6. Helping others, and 7. Developing positive and personal relationships.

Regarding the second research question, five eidetically invariant constituents were identified as being typical for the experience of meaningless work: 1. Experiencing degradation

from others, 2. Losing a sense of self at work, 3. Experiencing threats to the craft of cleaning, 4. Doing repetitive, purposeless tasks, and 5. Kinds of negative experiences with supervisors and management.

Finally, addressing the third research question, my interpretation uncovered five general qualities of the ways the university custodians made and negotiated meanings in work: 1. Meaning was made in work through life and in life through work, 2. The meaning *of* work could be different than meaning *in* work, 3. Meaninglessness helped make meaning of work as meaningful and vice versa, 4. Meanings shifted quickly and were volatile, and 5. Meaningfulness and meaninglessness were interwoven experiences.

Some constituents for both the experiences of meaningful work and meaningless work comprised sub-constituents, which were further specifications of the manifested constituent denoted as such throughout the descriptions. Table 2 presents an orienting overview of the constituents and sub-constituents of the university custodians' experiences of both meaningful and meaningless work in the order they are described in the following section.

The Experience of Meaningful Work

The employed definition of meaningful work was previously elaborated in the literature review and was developed through a synthesis of the extant research and theoretical literature as work that its practitioners subjectively experience and determine to be positive, purposeful, and significant. It is important to acknowledge that when gathering descriptions of the experiences of meaningful work and meaningless work from the university custodians, "work" was not defined for them. While this was not a specified research question, the

Table 2

The Constituents and Sub-Constituents of the Experiences of Meaningful and Meaningless Work

Phenomenon	Constituents and Sub-constituents of the Lived Experience
Meaningful Work	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Enacting a learned, positive approach to work</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1a. Reflecting on upbringing and personal life to inform a positive approach to work 1b. Making sense of personal hardships through work 1c. Enacting personal values through work 2. <i>Having and experiencing pride in cleaning work</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2a. Experiencing the satisfaction of completable work 2b. Doing the job the right way 3. <i>Maintaining meaningfulness</i> 4. <i>Experiencing ongoing external validation of the self and work</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4a. Receiving direct gratitude and formal recognition from others 4b. Feeling acknowledged by others 5. <i>Kinds of ongoing self-validation of the self and work</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5a. Reminding oneself that cleaning is inherently meaningful 5b. Thinking about tasks' impact on others 5c. Perceiving and reframing cleaning as a skilled craft 6. <i>Helping others</i> 7. <i>Developing positive and personal relationships</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7a. Relationships with building users or occupants 7b. Relationships with peers 7c. Relationships with supervisors
Meaningless Work	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Experiencing degradation from others</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1a. Experiencing disregard, condescension, disrespect, and stigma 1b. Seeing cleaning work disrespected 2. <i>Losing a sense of self at work</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2a. Feeling misunderstood and disaffirmed 2b. Sensing misaligned personal and organizational values 3. <i>Experiencing threats to the craft of cleaning</i> 4. <i>Doing repetitive, purposeless tasks</i> 5. <i>Kinds of negative experiences with supervisors and management</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5a. Sensing disconnection and feeling unsupported 5b. Experiencing a lack of meaningful, ongoing formal acknowledgment

custodians' descriptions seemed to reveal how work itself was conceptualized in the context of being a university custodian. Across all custodians' described experiences, the conceptualization of "work" was multi-faceted and holistic.

For example, when analyzing custodians' descriptions of meaningful work, work itself was conceptualized by each as a simultaneously occurring combination of the cleaning tasks, a part of their personal identities, the overall context and relationships with others, and their own feelings and thoughts about the tasks, their identities, and the context and relationships. In short, an initial unanticipated finding was that for the participants, work seemed to be much more than something to do, and more of a holistic way of being. The seven constituents of the experience of meaningful work identified and defined below reflect this holistic conceptualization of what work meant for university custodians in this study.

The following identifies and describes the seven constituents that were typical when the university custodians described experiences of meaningful work.

1. Enacting a learned, positive approach to work. The first constituent illustrated custodians' descriptions of adopting a generally positive approach to work as a part of experiencing meaningfulness. The phrase *learned, positive approach to work* was crafted to characterize the custodians' prevailing subjective perception, constructed by reflecting on and enacting learned values and moral principles, that the job and the work it entailed were mostly good. Most of the custodians qualified a critical part of their described experiences of meaningful work as being "up to the individual." For example, while describing how her own individual positive approach to work maintained a sense of meaningfulness despite negative experiences, Erin described,

I think it's what you make of it. So, if you're going to be miserable here, you're going to be miserable and nothing is going to be right; and if you come to work with a positive

attitude, “The day is going to be good,” it just makes it go better. You know? I think it’s the individual...

Jane shared a similar perspective when she depicted her experience of meaningfulness and juxtaposed it with her own perceptions of peers who did not experience their work as meaningful. She stated, “some of it is...I think if they don’t have the appropriate attitude to begin with...they are stuck.”

The subjective, positive approach that most of the participants described enacting when they experienced meaningful work was characterized as learned and negotiated by them through three major sub-constituents:

- 1a. Reflecting on upbringing and personal life to inform a positive approach to work
- 1b. Making sense of personal hardships through work
- 1c. Enacting personal values in work

1a. Reflecting on upbringing and personal life to inform a positive approach to work.

Each custodian described various ways the interactions among parts of their personal and work lives contributed to developing a positive approach to work which manifested when they experienced meaningfulness. More specifically, they described processes of what I have termed *making meaning in work through life and making meaning in life through work* as being important for learning a positive approach to work. For this sub-constituent, *making meaning* or *meaning-making* refers to how the custodians made sense of, interpreted, and negotiated the interrelation between positive and negative personal life events and work to approach work in a way that manifested experiences of meaningfulness (e.g. Bruner, 1990; Park, 2010; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003).

In most instances of custodians' descriptions of experienced meaningfulness, they referenced moments in their upbringing (both positive and negative), current personal lives, and other past life events to make sense of their positive approach to work. When Susan described her experience of meaningfulness, rooted in her generally positive view of her job, she conceptualized and tied part of her described identity as a "cleaner" to an early childhood experience that pointed to her talent for cleaning:

When I was little — this is where it all started for me — when I was little, my family, and I would go out to a restaurant, and I'd say, "Mom, I've got to go use the restroom." "Okay." Ten minutes later, my mom would come find me. I was cleaning the bathroom. I would pick up all the paper towels, the toilet paper, throw 'em in the trash, wipe down the sinks. It's — you know, however tall I was, that I could reach, and that's why.

In this example, Susan explained her approach to her job, "where it all started," by recalling how the cleaning work itself had been part of her identity for as long as she could remember. To frame the rest of her description of experiencing meaningful work, Susan continued to describe how her talent for cleaning, uncovered by reflecting on her childhood, was validated when she took a job placement assessment to determine her fit for applicable positions for the State. Susan stated, "but I took a test...for positions — like, what would be a good job — and it came out as a custodian." The validation that she was where "she was supposed to be" helped to frame the way she viewed herself in the job, as she returned to this validation often in her description. Susan framed her job as one tied to who she was as a person, a pathway to expressing her innate talents, which reinforced that the job itself was meaningful to her. Simultaneously, her description of experienced meaningfulness in her current job gave meaning and significance to her recalled story from her upbringing. Susan's example demonstrates the bi-directional reflexive nature of *learning* a positive approach to work – that life may help make meaning in work and work may help make meaning in life.

Erin also described her job as meaningful because cleaning had become part of her identity that transcended the work domain to the personal domain. Reflecting on her own positive approach to work, she went back and forth between describing the personal domain and the work domain. Erin shared,

Doing this job, when I go places, that's one of the first things I do. I'm like, "Hmm," I'm running my hands over things, and I'm like, "Wow. They don't do a very good job. Somebody needs to talk to them," but I just find myself doing that a lot now...

Most of the custodians also relied on reflecting on their upbringing to describe how they came to approach their work as generally positive. For Erin, her personal value of "helping others at work," which she indicated as important to experiencing meaningfulness, was largely derived from her upbringing and observing her father. When making sense of how she learned her view of work as a way to help others, Erin commented:

I think a lot of it is the way I was raised. You always help out. You just do. If somebody needs help, you offer your help. My dad was really good. I mean my dad is one of those people: he used to bring people home that he didn't know. Like he'd find hitchhikers, and he'd pick them up and bring them home, and we'd feed them, and then he'd give them money and take them back out to the highway so they could finish their hitchhiking journey. So, that's just the kind of stuff my dad did... That's just how he was. It's just how I was raised, you know?

Erin's example illuminates that reflecting on upbringing and identity formation contributed to how custodians approached their work and formed personal values.

In addition to making sense of their positive approach to work by reflecting on their upbringing, many of the custodians described such an approach as something that was automatic and non-negotiable – as a moral imperative. For example, in the above quote, Erin stated, "You always help out. You just do." When Susan discussed her value of "being kind" at work as part of how she experienced meaningfulness, she reflected on how she taught her own daughter to treat others:

My daughter, if somebody says “hi” to her, sometimes she won’t say “hi” back, and I said, “You!” — “Mom, if I don’t want to talk to ‘em, I’m not going to.” I said, “But that’s being very, very rude. If somebody says ‘hi,’ you at least need to make an acknowledgment.”

Here, Susan depicted her approach to work as something that could be taught – as a principle that transcends the work-life boundary.

Similarly, when she described experiences of meaningfulness, Ashley expressed that “doing the work right” was a moral principle that could also be taught. In her description of experiencing meaningfulness, she noted the role of her own individual approach, stating, “It’s like, you know, as I taught my kids, ‘If you’re gonna do it, you might as well do it right.’”

Ashley’s description also pointed to how pride in doing the work well seemed linked to past and present personal experiences and her learned positive approach to work.

Another example of how a formed positive approach to work manifested meaningfulness was when Jane described how she came to approach her work as “important” regardless of how others perceived it:

Probably, I don’t know exactly, but partially I would think my mother, my mother’s influence. To me, I’m anal enough that I don’t want...I don’t want somebody pointing out bad work. I try not to do bad work because it reflects poorly on me.

In addition to a general, positive approach being manifested in the ways the custodians did their work, this approach also presented itself in their descriptions of how they thought about the job itself. For example, the general appreciation for having a good job considering challenging personal circumstances informed Bobby’s positive approach to work. In his description of meaningfulness, he reflected on his approach as being cultivated by the benefits of having a good job for his personal life. While Bobby described that “making money” was a part of how he experienced meaningfulness, the significance and meaning of making money for him

was derived by reflecting on his difficult childhood and juxtaposing it with his current lived experience. Bobby shared,

I get paid money. That's pretty motivating. I won't lie. I had a horrible, oppressive upbringing. Having the freedom to do things because I want to is an intoxicating rush that I might never get over in my adult life.

In Bobby's description, making money was not a constituent of the experience of meaningful work, but meaningfulness manifested when he thought about what making money *meant* to him because of the negotiation of his past personal life experiences.

1b. Making sense of personal hardships through work. The custodians also described in various ways how their positive approach to work was partially informed by how work was a key mechanism for making sense of their own personal hardships. All custodians in this study described that a personal struggle had been a chief reason for becoming employed in their current positions. Because of the nature of these very personal experiences, I decided not to include or associate their more specific details and used more generalized excerpts instead. However, taking a composite view, experiences such as unplanned family changes, loss of family members, felony convictions, substance abuse recovery, and homelessness were all described as the life contexts through which the custodians acquired and/or experienced their jobs and the work. Every custodian's descriptions included some reference to a hardship that contextualized his or her experience of meaningfulness.

More specifically, some of the participants described the work itself as inherently meaningful because of how it helped them navigate such hardships. In Erin's description, she characterized work as a place to escape negotiating the challenges of life, which included being a caretaker for a very sick family member as well as handling other familial responsibilities. Erin

described that her general enjoyment on the job was related to its ability to offer escape. She stated,

But I really just enjoy being here. I know it sounds corny, but I just do. I enjoy it. I don't really have too many bad days. I think being here takes me away from issues, other issues. So, I'm concentrating when I'm here. So, the world outside doesn't exist. So, I think that just helps me.

In addition to offering a place to escape personal hardships, work was also depicted as meaningful when it added meaning to one's life during a hardship. Susan described how being at work was a key component to helping her grieve numerous losses of family members in a short period of time. She shared, "So, I really was still grieving. Hadn't been able to grieve... Yeah, but it's what has saved me, and has meaning in my life."

Other custodians more generally framed the job opportunity itself as meaningful to them because it was a way out of previously experienced personal struggles. For example, Sarah described working through a personal issue that made it difficult to be hired elsewhere: "it was actually very hard to get hired at places. They wouldn't even consider you, but they were willing to give me a second chance and, you know—which was very nice."

The custodians' descriptions of meaningfulness, then, were informed by personal life experiences outside of work, which reinforced that work was a more holistic endeavor for the custodians. Being able to make sense of their personal lives through work to craft a positive personal approach was an important way the participants framed their described experiences of meaningful work.

1c. Enacting personal values through work. The custodians' positive approaches to work typically manifested in work through the enactment of values. *Values* are defined for this study "as a person's principles or standards of behavior" (Oxford Dictionary, 2019). This sub-constituent illustrated that several custodians described how being able to enact their values

contributed to the experience of meaningfulness. In particular, the value of “work ethic,” or a personal commitment to doing the work well for its own sake, manifested when they shared their experiences of meaningful work. For example, Ashley began her description by indicating that all her work was inherently meaningful because of her held value of “doing work well”:

Yeah. It’s like every day I come here. Because I don’t do a half-ass job. I take pride in my work. So, when I’m gonna come and I’m gonna do my job, I’m gonna do it to the best of my ability.

Jane also described her personal value of “work ethic” when she described how she derived meaning from her work: “It’s really hard for me to do a poor job. Sometimes you have to, but it’s really hard for me to do a poor job. I think you have to have it, kind of, to some degree to begin with.” Jane continued by sharing how she experienced meaningfulness when she was able to instill that value of work ethic in others with whom she worked. While describing how she trained someone to be a lead custodian, Jane recalled,

Well, one person I trained is a lead now. He’s been a lead for a couple of years, and I guess it’s because he had a work ethic to begin with. I guess I try to instill work ethic by my example.

In Jane’s case, being able to enact and model her personal value of work ethic was a key part of her experience of meaningfulness.

Another example of a held value being enacted to manifest meaningfulness was Sarah’s description of how she experienced meaningfulness when she went above and beyond her job responsibilities in her work to help others. She described providing a great service by answering e-mail on time and making the extra effort to promptly respond to building users’ requests as an opportunity to enact her personally held value of treating people the way she wanted to be treated. Sarah shared,

and again, I just try to treat people the way I want to be treated. You know, it’s simple. I make sure I go a little extra. You know, I mean, we have a level of service that we

provide.

Erin also described how her efforts to create community among her team came from a previously formed and held value of “being a good person”:

I always try to make it enjoyable and form some kind of bond with the people, the people I’m working with, whether it’s for the day, or if it’s like my staff for the whole year, the people that come in and help me, the maintenance. I just try to be a good person to everybody, and hopefully karma will come back.

When personal values were enacted, the custodians tended to experience meaningfulness, and a values-based approach guided how they generally navigated work. Some, like Bobby, described values as a moral duty. Bobby likened his own value of helping others in his role to a “moral imperative.” He stated, “I would feel bad not doing it. It feels, like, a—a moral imperative, you know, to help people.”

Summary. When the custodians experienced meaningful work, they tended to be *enacting a learned, positive approach to the work*. The custodians described this positive approach as their individual perceptions of the work and their ways of being at work. Their learned, positive approaches to work were derived from making meaning of their upbringing and making sense of personal hardships through work, and were generally manifested through the enactment of personal values in work. When the participants were able to enact these values, they tended to experience their work as meaningful.

2. Having and experiencing personal pride in work. All custodians expressed the constituent *having and experiencing personal pride in work* in their descriptions of experienced meaningfulness. The word *pride* was included in the name of this constituent because nearly all participants used that precise term when they described the satisfaction of cleaning work itself and the positive feelings that satisfaction brought them. Pride is defined in this study as a “feeling of deep pleasure or satisfaction derived from one’s own achievements” (Oxford

Dictionary, 2019), and this definition adequately characterizes the custodians' descriptions of the phenomenon. For the custodians, both *seeing* the difference their work made in the cleanliness of physical spaces and *thinking* about the importance of their work mediated their negative experiences in an often difficult, repetitive, and "not respected" job.

Jane described experiencing meaningfulness most when she learned to feel pride in her work because her first supervisor defined the word *custodian* for her. She depicted pride as sustaining her over her 18 years in the job. Jane recalled,

he would give us trainings, and he defined the word "custodian" and the meaning of custodian, and the custodian is somebody who takes custody of their building or their area, and has pride in their work, and they don't...they want to have their building or buildings, or whatever, the best that they can be, and that inspired me to...that fit in with my belief patterns. I think I kind of overdid it.

Jane described pride as her belief patterns and shared that when she learned that custodians have responsibility and ownership over a physical space, and therefore should have pride, it was inspirational for her.

In addition to pride being inspirational, Erin illustrated personal pride's role in helping her handle the difficulties of the job: "Me, I take pride in my job, and if I'm gonna do it...it's a crappy job some days, but it needs to be done; and if you're gonna do it, do it right." Ashley also highlighted her personal pride's role in building self-respect for the job to mediate others' disrespect, stating, "They are comin' in every day to a clean room that they don't respect, a lot of them don't, but we respect it, and we respect the job that we do in here."

The main constituent *having and experiencing personal pride in work* manifested through two major sub-constituents:

- 2a. Experiencing the satisfaction of completable work
- 2b. Doing the job the right way

2a. Experiencing the satisfaction of completable work. This sub-constituent illuminated the custodians' descriptions of how noticing the physical difference their cleaning tasks made contributed to having and experiencing personal pride in their work. Most of the custodians described how being able to reflect on the before and after conditions of the spaces they cleaned helped them experience pride while validating that their work was important. The nature of cleaning work itself, described by Sarah as "project work," contributed to how the participants generally thought about and derived pride from their work. The nature of the work as completable and immediate was exemplified when Sarah commented:

One thing I like about cleaning is that—like project work, where I can take a floor or something that looks terrible and make it look, you know, and you can see difference in night and day. And, you know, that's—that's what I like.

Erin also described how seeing the before and after impact of her work helped her build a sense of pride. She explained,

Pride means something that I can go back and say, "You know, I did a damn good job cleaning that window." You know, "That window looks nice," and I mean I say stuff like that to my employees, "Hey, this looks good. That looks good now," until somebody comes and touches it, but that's just...I just want to see something I would expect when I walk into somewhere.

Erin recounted that pride came from the ability to directly observe that what she physically did produced a positive result, thereby identifying her tasks with a completed outcome. Erin's description also pointed toward the transcendence of cleaning work to principles of cleanliness in her personal life (i.e. "I just want to see something I would expect...") as informing her pride.

Experiencing the tangible difference that the cleaning work made also produced and reaffirmed feelings of being important for the custodians. When Lisa described her experience of meaningfulness, she reflected on being able to see how her work made a difference in the

physical condition of the space as “really important” to her; doing work that made a visible difference contributed to a feeling of self-worth in the role. Lisa shared,

we found a room that hasn't been used in probably three, four, five years, and there was old equipment in there, and it was dusty, and the floor was gross. So, I went in there and we sanitized the whole room and got all the dust out, we did the floor; and by the time we looked in there, it looked like a brand-new room again. So, being able to also see the difference between what it was and what I was able to make it, seeing the transition, is really important to me as well.

Similarly, while Tim described that entering cleaning work was mostly about having a job and security, he simultaneously described the satisfaction of seeing the difference his work made as being meaningful: “There’s a satisfaction in cleaning, at least for me. That’s why – I mean that’s not a reason I’m doing it – because it’s a before and after picture in 10 minutes in what we do.” Bobby also reflected on the nature of the job as “upkeep” as an inherent source of personal pride because of the knowledge that the cleaning work had to be done. Bobby said, “I would do it if you didn’t say anything. The job is about upkeep. There’s not really a leniency for error. You gotta do all the things all the time.” Like other participants, Bobby reflected on the inherent meaningfulness of cleaning work because of the very reason the job exists: to upkeep physical spaces. Bobby also described how the satisfaction derived from doing upkeep work was a personal way to maintain meaningfulness and was detached from the validation that others may or may not give to the work.

The contexts from which Bobby’s and Tim’s descriptions arose highlight another important part of experienced meaningfulness: while they both initially conceptualized their work as being about making money and having a job, *how* they experienced meaningfulness when they were *in* the job and doing the work was partly about having and experiencing pride in it. Their distinction illustrates the difference between the meaning *of* work (i.e. a way to make

money) and meaning *in* work (i.e. having and experiencing pride as important), which is described later in this chapter.

2b. *Doing the job the right way.* Pride also manifested in nearly every custodian's description of meaningfulness as doing the cleaning work the "right way." From their descriptions, the "right way" entailed the adherence to and enactment of a set of unspoken standards of excellence that ultimately guided and judged the cleaning work's quality. For example, Susan's pride was a result of being able to deliver her perfected "way" of cleaning – a common description among the other participants as well. Susan's example also tied the inherent meaningfulness of "upkeep" work with her own learned way of how cleaning work should be performed. She described,

I think just doing my job. Period. It's...meaningful to me. I am cleaning their bathroom so they don't get sick, you know? And it's going to be cleaned. I am a perfectionist in that bathroom. And it's going to be cleaned. I want to make sure, you know, I'm scrubbin' and-and co-workers are like, "Susan, that doesn't need..." You know, that's one of my evaluation things, that, "Susan, the way you do your cleaning, not everyone has to do it your way..." That's what I was told on my evaluation this year, "It's okay, as long as the bathroom is cleaned." But that's how I was taught. Taught by a supervisor, when I first started cleaning bathrooms.

Susan shared how she had learned her way of cleaning over time and that being able to do cleaning work the right way was an important part of having and experiencing pride in the work.

Similarly, as a situation in which she experienced meaningfulness, Sarah recounted a time when she noticed dirty overhead lights in a space her team was cleaning. Although policy dictated that they should not clean the lights, Sarah enacted a personal view of the "right way" to clean:

We cleaned it above their expectations. You know, I walk in, and I'm like, you know, "This isn't our job." We're not supposed to do lights, okay, because we're not supposed to be on ladders, okay, and that's changed since I started here, but we cleaned everything in that room but the lights, and the lights would have bugs in them, and it just, you

know—to me, it's like—I looked at the room, and all I could see was the bugs, okay, like a lot of people.

Here, Sarah evoked a type of cleaning ethic in which if a custodian noticed something unclean, the right thing to do was to clean it. The right way of cleaning as an ethical imperative was also expressed by Jane when she described her way of cleaning as a set of principles that bound her to the personal duty of doing the cleaning work well. She shared,

I think it goes down to principles, and my ego. I don't want...It reflects badly on me if I don't give a rat's, and somebody has to fill-in for me and they go, "You know, this really looks really bad. What has she been doing? Has she been doing anything?" So, yeah, I have pride in my work.

Summary. *Having and experiencing personal pride in cleaning work* was an important part of the custodians' experience of meaningful work and tended to manifest when they could both cognitively reflect on and physically observe the difference that their upkeep labor had on the physical space. In addition, when the participants enacted their learned or perfected "way" or ethic of cleaning, they experienced pride. This pride helped them handle both the undesirable parts of the work and the lack of respect for the work they observed from others.

3. Maintaining meaningfulness. This main constituent manifested in some way through each custodian's described experiences of meaningfulness. *Maintaining meaningfulness* characterized the participants' descriptions that meaningfulness was not static or enduring once experienced; their perception and feeling that work was meaningful through self-controlled constituents like *enacting a positive approach to work* or *having personal pride in work* had to be regularly sustained with the ongoing interventions of kinds of external validation of the self and work, and self-validation of the self and work. *External validation* referred to how others in the custodians' work context legitimized their own and their work's significance and worthiness, which often led to kinds of self-validation. *Self-validation* comprised the ways in which the

participants re-confirmed or re-established their own and their work's significance and worthiness. Often, the kinds of self-validation were informed through experiencing and referencing kinds of external validation. The various kinds of external and self-validation are detailed later in this chapter as respective constituents. However, the following examines how maintaining meaningfulness more generally appeared through the custodians' descriptions.

Several custodians described that the experience of meaningfulness was short-lived without the experience of external validation. Moreover, external validation of the work provided evidence of the work's significance to others, which largely informed the custodians' own kinds of self-validation that they and their work were significant and worthy. An example of a kind of self-validation was the ongoing self-reminder that cleaning work was inherently meaningful, which manifested in several of the custodians' descriptions. For example, Jane's description featured an example of self-validation in the form of reminding herself of the importance of the cleaning work by thinking about its absence. Jane said, "Well, I mean, it's always pretty much meaningful because without us that place would fall apart in a month or less." These kinds of self-validation re-cemented the custodians' "knowing" that the work was significant.

However, a key feature of the *maintaining meaningfulness* constituent was the custodians' descriptions of how one could "know" the work was meaningful yet subjectively experience it as less meaningful or meaningless depending on how and whether it was positively validated by others. Lisa offered a helpful distinction between *knowing* the work was meaningful and *experiencing* the work as meaningful through ongoing external validation:

I guess I get a sense of pride from just the fact that I know that I'm providing a service to people; but without the appreciation part of it, or the completion part of it, I don't find a lot of just day-to-day, 'Oh, I did such a great job.'" It's just, this needed to be done. I realize that what I'm doing is upkeep. I realize that if I wasn't here, that floor would be dirty in three days, but it doesn't feel the same, it's not as uplifting;

and for me when I receive that praise, or when I receive the thank you it's like, "Oh, okay." I'm re-energized. It reasserts my efforts, "Okay. I actually did do something good. People want to see this. I can keep doing this."

Here, Lisa indicated how "knowing" and "realizing" the work was significant on its own was not enough to sustain her perception and experience of meaningfulness in the absence of external validation from others. She also described the effect of the external validation from others, described here as "praise," as helping her self-validate (much like Jane) through reminding herself that the work was good and did make a difference (e.g. "Okay. I actually did do something good. People want to see this. I can keep doing this").

Erin also explained that the tasks themselves did not have meaning on their own unless their meaningfulness was affirmed by someone else, even when she reminded herself of their impact. She commented,

I don't know if I think, "Oh, man, I just cleaned this toilet and I'm so happy that they're gonna sit on a clean pot." I think a lot of the times it's just more the thanking and the appreciation of it.

In Erin's example, the tasks themselves were not meaningful unless others valued and showed gratitude for their outcome. Similarly, Tim said,

It doesn't feel particularly meaningful without somebody, like, reminding us of it. It's meaningful to me when I know I did a good job, but day-to-day, if nobody's around, I mean, I like to do well, but it doesn't... I mean, overall, to me it is still just cleaning, so as far as, like, on a level of importance day-to-day, I could not clean for, like, two or three days and, you know, someone will complain eventually.

Tim's description that cleaning could be "just cleaning" without the validation or "reminder" that it meant more to someone else further exemplified how external validation from others was an important input to his meaning-making process of determining that the cleaning tasks were meaningful.

Similarly, Bobby also articulated that others ultimately determined whether his work was meaningful or not when he described meaningfulness as a subjective determination made by “the other.” He described, “My job is observed by other people. So, what’s meaningful about it is how other people look at it.”

Summary. Different ways of *maintaining meaningfulness* tended to be occurring when custodians described how they experienced their work as meaningful. As they explained, meaningfulness could be a short-lived experience without kinds of ongoing external validation from others to reaffirm the significance of the work. *Maintaining meaningfulness* illuminated the necessary processes of regularly sustaining meaningfulness through the ongoing interventions of *external validation of the self and work* and *self-validation of the self and work*. These respective constituents are described next.

4. Experiencing ongoing external validation of the self and work. A key part of maintaining meaningfulness for the custodians was the experience of *ongoing external validation of the self and work*. In their reflections on experienced meaningfulness, all eight participants described moments when they received direct gratitude, formal recognition, or informal acknowledgment from others. In addition, several custodians described sensing building occupants’ respect for their cleaning work as being key parts of experiencing meaningfulness. The experience of direct gratitude, formal recognition, and acknowledgment from others reaffirmed that both the custodians and their work were worthwhile and significant.

For the purposes of characterizing this constituent, the reaffirmation of the worth and importance of the custodians and their work was called *validation*, as the term has been defined as “recognizing or affirming” someone’s or some thing’s “worth” (Oxford Dictionary, 2019). For seven of the eight participants, the initial experience of meaningfulness they recalled and

described involved one or more types of external validation, and they frequently referenced kinds of external validation throughout their descriptions of meaningfulness. In addition, the custodians indicated that external validation that frequently occurred, or was ongoing, was important to *maintaining meaningfulness* because it sustained both motivation and positive feelings about their work.

Lisa's and Tim's descriptions demonstrated the motivational function of external validation for them. Lisa commented,

I feel a lot better about coming to my job when I have the appreciation and the recognition; without it, it becomes very draining to be providing a service over and over and over again. It doesn't feel impactful because it's not being recognized.

Tim described external validation as a key motivating factor: "it's, like, a motivating factor.

Because you know somebody's actually paying attention to what you do and appreciating what you do."

In her description, Lisa alluded to the nature of cleaning work as both draining and repetitive, as did others. Embedded within their descriptions of meaningful work, custodians also depicted their work as "crappy at times" and "looked down on" (Erin), "mostly busy work" (Tim), and "menial" (Jane). Considering the described difficult nature and perceived negative views of the work by others, experiencing external validation helped the participants maintain a positive sense of self-worth and reaffirmed their and their work's importance, which contributed to the experience of meaningfulness. On receiving validation from others, Tim shared, "it doesn't make you feel like you're wasting time somewhere at a job. For sure it's easier to get up and come in." Erin described how receiving gratitude helped her feel significant: "It also kind of builds you up...It's like, 'Oh, I am somebody. I really am.'"

The constituent *experiencing external validation of the self and the work* manifested through the following sub-constituents:

- 4a. Receiving direct gratitude and formal recognition from others
- 4b. Feeling acknowledged by others

4a. Receiving direct gratitude and formal recognition from others. This sub-constituent was common among each custodian and was characterized as receiving verbal gratitude, often in the form of hearing words of “thank you.” Verbal gratitude tended to result in the custodians’ sense that they were “appreciated.” Most prominently, the participants experienced meaningfulness when they received this direct gratitude from building users or occupants during their normal, routine work. However, receiving gratitude in the form of more formal *recognition* from leaders and others in the organization was also part of some custodians’ experiences of meaningfulness and is thus included in this sub-constituent as well. These two parts of the sub-constituent are detailed below.

Receiving direct gratitude from building users and occupants. Receiving gratitude during periods of routine cleaning work emerged as a critical part of the custodians’ experiences of meaningfulness, and re-energized and re-motivated the custodians. Most often, meaningfulness manifested when they received a simple “thank you” from a building user or occupant. Lisa described her most memorable experience of meaningfulness as a time when she was working in a bathroom and had to clean up vomit while a crowd of people waited. She recounted:

one time there was a woman who just vomited all over the outside of the bathroom door, and it was right where the line of people would go in to go use the bathroom, and so I was able to run over there and get everything I needed. I was a lead at the time, but we didn’t have any supervisors on that side of the stadium because the stadium was so big it had the two sides. So, I was just able to clean up the puke mess really quick.

Lisa's description highlighted how a difficult situation involving a particularly dirty part of her job manifested in a positive feeling of meaningfulness because of the gratitude she received. Her depiction showed the role that receiving a "thank you" played in how custodians reframed their work. She continued,

and I was thanked again by 10-20 people walking past me, "Thank you for that. Thank you for that." So, it's just really nice knowing that people appreciate the job that I'm doing; and it's the appreciation I get, from the people who are directly impacted from my work, that make me feel good about it.

Lisa then described the effect gratitude had on her work as reaffirming and validating that she did something "good" or worthwhile:

I'm re-energized. It reasserts my efforts, "Okay. I actually did do something good. People want to see this. I can keep doing this. If I keep going above and beyond, I'll continue getting the recognition or the feedback of completed jobs," and it's like, "Ohh, I completed one. So, I better go start on another!" and it's that, "Okay, I'm ready to go again," feeling. Whereas, though, day-to-day is just very mundane. It's definitely a motivation.

Tim also indicated that receiving direct gratitude in his everyday routine work was important to him. While trying to recall an instance of experienced meaningfulness, he noted that any time he received gratitude was meaningful. Tim commented,

most of the time, if I'm working in a building or I was doing some work and someone comes up and just thanks me outta nowhere. I've had a few times where I'm just doing my normal job and someone comes over and said, "Oh, thanks- Thanks for what you're doing," 'cause they actually appreciate it.

Tim's use of the phrase "*actually* appreciate it" represented how gratitude was especially important given the custodians' perceptions of how others might think of the work. This demonstrated the constituent of "validation" as legitimizing the worth of the work, as Lisa also described.

The role of gratitude in reaffirming the custodians' sense of self-worth was also highlighted by Erin when she remembered a student who had come back to the residence hall she cleaned after a break and thanked her for her work. Erin recounted,

I think just the students are pretty grateful for what we do. I did have a girl one time go on vacation for Christmas, and she came back and she was like, "I missed you so much," and I said, "Oh, that's nice," and she said, "I had to clean my own bathroom when I went home." She said, "I'm not used to that." She's like, "I really appreciate everything that you do for us." You know, little comments like that...I mean that's all we really want is to be acknowledged.

Erin's description of gratitude as a way to satisfy the need to be "acknowledged" represented the validating role of gratitude in custodial work.

Receiving gratitude also manifested in experiences of positive emotions in work, including joy. Jane recounted an experience where she felt her work was particularly joyful because she was assigned to a building with a group of generally "appreciative" occupants:

But the attitude of the faculty, the staff, the students in that building: when I was in there – it's been a few years ago now – but when I was in there, that was the most appreciative group of people that I've ever worked around. They would always thank me. They would always...Rarely would there be nasty messes. They always picked up after themselves. I mean it was a joy to work there.

Receiving gratitude also manifested in the form of "feeling remembered," and two of the custodians specifically referenced being thanked and remembered during holidays as especially meaningful. Sarah described, "And most people, you know, because of the relationship that you build with them and stuff, it, you know—they really do appreciate it, you know? They remember us at Christmas, you know..." Being "remembered" also impacted the effort Sarah put forward. When she described how being remembered and thanked made her feel, she said, "I make sure I go a little extra."

Similarly, Tim recounted experiencing meaningfulness and a feeling of being remembered when he received a thank you gift from one of the building occupants. He shared,

she'd always thank me every time I was there and she started, like... She was like, "Oh, what are you, you know, what do you like for, like, snacks and stuff?" And I just thought she was talking about, like, the holidays coming up. It was, like, Halloween or Thanksgiving. So I'm into, like, pumpkin, like, everything, and we had a conversation about it. And then right before Thanksgiving or Halloween, I don't remember which one, she bought me, like, this huge box of, like, pumpkin cookies. And she said, "Thank you for everything you do," and "You're doing a great job..."

The act of gratitude reminded Tim that people "noticed" his work, and he came to rely on that relationship and her ongoing validation. Tim described the disappointment of knowing he was going to be moved to a different building when he reflected on her influence on his feelings about his work: "So, when people take notice and she was cool, and I transferred out of her area after that and it was I was, like, 'Aw, man.' 'Cause she was nice. Someone to talk to every day.'"

Receiving direct gratitude manifested as external validation of the custodians and their work's worth and importance. Gratitude that contributed to meaningfulness was generally described as words of "thank you" within the everyday, normal routine of the participants' work and came from building users or occupants. Furthermore, some of the custodians indicated that gratitude in the form of being remembered and acknowledged through gifts and on holidays also contributed to meaningfulness. Gratitude served to motivate them, produced feelings of joy, and helped them develop a positive self-concept.

Receiving formal recognition from others. While not as prominent a part of the experience of meaningfulness as receiving direct gratitude from building users and occupants, three of the custodians described that being recognized for their work by leaders or others in the organization was important to experiencing meaningfulness. For Lisa, Ashley, and Tim, recognition took the form of formal awards or organized recognition events. One of Lisa's moments of meaningfulness occurred when she was able to see the larger impact of her work because of a formal recognition event. She explained,

It was a basketball game where there was a bunch of students who attended and everything, all the facilities management got free tickets, entry into the game, and then at half-time we were allowed to go out onto the court to be recognized. And that is one of the few times I've ever heard of or seen, on campus, where there was actually recognition by the students and outer faculty to us as an organization, that felt bigger than just our higher-ups saying, "Good job!" because it felt more impactful that there was larger recognition there...but I think that was one of the times that it was just like, "Wow, this actually is impacting all of these people."

In Lisa's description, the large-scale, community-wide recognition was juxtaposed with the relative lack of recognition received on a regular basis. Her use of the word "actually" seemed to indicate that she learned through that moment of recognition that her work mattered. This reaffirmed belief was expressed through her reflection, "Wow, this is actually impacting all these people."

Similarly, Ashley and Tim described how formal awards for going above and beyond were important reaffirmations of their and their peers' efforts. Ashley described two instances of receiving formal awards as validating. The first occurred earlier in her career when she worked for a private contractor, but it was memorable for her and was the first instance she recalled in response to a prompt to remember an experience of meaningful work. Ashley described,

the [city] every year gives out awards to the top five vendors who work for the city...so, for two years in a row, we were in the top five vendors for the [city] because of us taking care of the buildings. We got a plaque. We got a luncheon...and I was running it.

Ashley also described how receiving an award for helping an injured co-worker reaffirmed her value to help others in work. She explained the function of the awards as follows:

So, that's kinda why they started with that Spark Award: to help morale, and to keep people maybe doin' a little extra, or other people being able to notice that your co-worker went a little bit above and beyond. You know what I mean? That's why it works.

Tim also saw formal awards as important mechanisms for offering ongoing reaffirmation in a meaningful way. He described the Spark Award by saying, "So people are doing their job, but

they're getting, like, on-the-spot, you know, 'good job. Like you deserve this.'" As a supervisor, he recounted the impact that the award had on one of the custodians who worked for him:

I said, "I recognize that you did all this extra work for this place. Like thank you. You know, you didn't have to do any of that. It benefits you. It benefits me, because I don't have to then force somebody to go work those games when they need help, 'cause I've got someone volunteering." So and he was, like, super thankful. He's like, "Yeah. That was great. I'm just, you know. Someone recognized me. Awesome."

In this description, Tim reflected on the reaction of a peer to make meaning of how the award program impacted custodians. He also described how having a formal award program served as a mechanism for recognition and was an important way to validate custodians and their work.

4b. *Feeling acknowledged by others.* This sub-constituent illustrated the custodians' fulfilled need to be seen and considered by others. As a constituent, *feeling acknowledged by others* was one outcome of experiencing and receiving direct gratitude and formal recognition and was largely described by custodians through reflecting on what it was like *not* to be acknowledged. This highlighted the custodians' negotiations between experiences of meaninglessness and meaningfulness to make meaning in work. The lack of acknowledgment seemed to be a consequence of *experiencing degradation from others*, which is presented as a constituent of the experience of meaninglessness later in this chapter. However, I decided to include *feeling acknowledged by others* as a constituent of meaningful work because its experience was referenced by several custodians within their descriptions of meaningfulness.

Erin highlighted the desire and need to be acknowledged in her experience of receiving gratitude as important to meaningfulness: "that's all we really want, is to be acknowledged." Erin indicated that gratitude fulfilled that "want" to be acknowledged, and continued, "but most of them...It's just nice to hear 'thank you.' Or acknowledge us. That's the hard part is when you're walking through the halls and they look at you and pretend they don't see you; that's really

frustrating.” This description also illustrated the negotiation between positive and negative work experiences to make meaning of work as meaningful or meaningless. External validation also served as a way for custodians to “feel seen.” Lisa described not being acknowledged as feeling “in the way”:

Like I sweep-down fire towers or mop front entrances, and things like that, and it’s most of the time students saying, “Excuse me,” and trying to push past you. It’s not that same thank you or it’s not the same recognition. It’s very much, “Why are you in my way?”

The sense of being “in the way” or invisible was described by other custodians as well. Often, as Lisa did in the above quote, they employed these negative experiences to highlight the importance of receiving validation and informal acknowledgment from others, especially building users. In other words, the nature of the custodians’ work and perceptions of it may make external validation more important than in other occupations.

Similarly, Jane described that her work only seemed visible when it was not happening, and that she did not experience “acknowledgment” on a regular basis. Jane shared, “they care because they hear complaints, if it doesn’t happen, but um, you know, other people don’t think about, you know, who cleans the floors, who’s—who’s keeping all the carpets vacuumed or whatever.”

When the described gap in experiencing acknowledgment in everyday work was filled by experiencing external validation such as gratitude or recognition, the custodians described their experience of work as more meaningful.

Summary. Experiencing ongoing external validation of the self and work was a part of the experience of meaningful work for each of the custodians. This constituent comprised participants’ descriptions of receiving regular reaffirmation and recognition of their own and their work’s worth and significance as part of their experience of meaningful work. External

validation was experienced in the forms of receiving direct gratitude, formal recognition, and feeling acknowledged. This validation re-motivated and re-energized the custodians while contributing to a more positive overall feeling about their work.

5. Kinds of ongoing self-validation of the self and work. This main constituent illustrated the custodians' enactment of kinds of self-affirmation of their and their work's importance and impact. Self-validation was conceptualized as a way the participants maintained a positive sense of self-worth (Crocker & Knight, 2005) through self-affirming thoughts that were verbalized in their descriptions. Primarily, kinds of self-validation manifested when they reflected on and reminded themselves (and me as the researcher) of the inherent meaningfulness of cleaning work by philosophizing as to what its absence would mean. Bobby offered an example that is summative of this type of self-validation when he started describing an experience of meaningfulness. He stated,

if you wanna look at it from the perspective of have I—when and how long have I felt it was meaningful to perform, it's from the beginning of always because, you know, you can immediately see if you're not doing it.

The custodians also frequently reframed their work as a highly skilled craft with unique expertise to self-validate.

Thus, *kinds of ongoing self-validation of the self and work* appeared through the following sub-constituents:

- 5a. Reminding oneself that cleaning is inherently meaningful
- 5b. Thinking about the tasks' impact on others
- 5c. Perceiving and reframing cleaning as a skilled craft

5a. Reminding oneself that cleaning is inherently meaningful. In their descriptions of experiencing meaningfulness, seven of the eight custodians specifically noted the belief that

cleaning work itself was meaningful because of their own reflections about what would happen without it. The custodians' "knowing" of the inherent meaningfulness of the cleaning work was reflected in their descriptions as a kind of regular self-reminder of the work's impact, and it was described through philosophizing about and contemplating what their work meant aloud, regardless of whether they received external validation for it or not.

At the beginning of their descriptions, most of the custodians made a point of describing the inherent meaningfulness of cleaning work. For example, Ashley explained, "Yeah. It's like every day I come here... I don't understand what you mean like, 'This work matters,' because it all matters... Because heaven forbid you forget something." Here, Ashley indicated that her work had inherent meaningfulness for her every day because it was a cleaning job, and the absence of cleaning would be clear. This conceptualization of the work as necessary was common among the custodians when they started thinking about the experience of meaningfulness. Bobby reflected,

I clean a lot of floors. You'll notice immediately if that doesn't happen. So, of course, it's meaningful, which, I guess, that extends to most—everything about it. Anyone's gonna be able to tell, you know, when custodians go on strike or something... I think it's always been important. It's—it's a constant upkeep job...it's meaningful because an absence of it is impactful...

Bobby's imagining of what might happen "if the custodians go on strike" is an example of a kind of self-validation through a self- and work-affirming reminder.

Tim offered a similar example when he described thinking about what the absence of his work might mean:

...as far as, like, on a level of importance day-to-day, I could not clean for, like, two or three days and, you know, someone will complain eventually. After, like, a week. And then you know you didn't do something right.

This highlighted a common characteristic of the custodians' descriptions: when they received any acknowledgment, it was usually because a building user or occupant noticed that the work was not done. Jane also stated, "Well, I mean, it's always pretty much meaningful because without us that place would fall apart in a month or less." Furthermore, Erin said of her perception of the work's importance, "Somebody's got to do this job, and you know... We try; we really do."

Bobby also philosophized about what cleaning meant to others as he was describing the inherent meaningfulness of the work. He commented, "other people don't think about, you know, who cleans the floors, who's—who's keeping all the carpets vacuumed or whatever. That's—that's the thing that people shouldn't have to think about, normally. So, it's not normally valued." Here, Bobby expressed his perception that cleaning work was "not normally valued" because cleanliness is a general societal expectation. This description contextualized his need to individually maintain the belief that the work was meaningful by thinking about its importance, which was a kind of self-validation.

Bobby further illuminated how he arrived at his individual belief that the work was inherently meaningful by reflecting on cleaning work's relative invisibility to others outside of the cleaning profession. He explained,

So, every day, when I walk in, there's just muddy footprints everywhere — I mean everywhere — and, you know, you—you probably didn't notice it too much when you were—as a person before you worked this kind of job, um, because it's, like, you walk into Walgreens or whatever, and you see, like, a couple of footprints by the door from the snow or whatever, and you just think, "Oh, it's cuz it's dirty outside. Dirt gets in." You don't think about when it magically gets cleaned at some point when you're not looking, and then it looks spotless, and you don't look at the corners where it's cleaner and all that stuff.

From the above descriptions, “knowing” that cleaning work was meaningful seemed important to how the custodians framed their experience of meaningful work. Many began their descriptions of meaningful work by reasserting cleaning work’s inherent meaningfulness.

5b. Thinking about the tasks’ impact on others. Another way the custodians validated themselves and their work was through regular reminders and thoughts of the tasks’ impact on the building users or occupants. While describing their experiences of meaningful work, four of the eight participants indicated that they thought about the impact of the tasks on the end user, especially when they were not receiving any overt external validation for it. Susan illustrated this sub-constituent in the first sentence of her description of meaningfulness when she said, “I am cleaning their bathroom so they don’t get sick, you know?” The language “so that” signified the connection between the task itself and the impact that it would eventually have on someone else.

Susan also described experiencing meaningfulness when she cleaned a residence hall room for a blind student and imagined the impact that the work would have on the student. She recounted,

we had this student who was blind who lived on the third floor, on the south side, and when we cleaned her room, we had to make sure we put everything back when we vacuumed, make sure the trash can was in the spot, and that nothing was moved, so that when she would come back into her room, you know, she would not trip over anything.

Again, Susan used “so that” to connect the task to its importance for the blind student specifically. This type of imagining or thinking about the future impact of the work also went beyond the immediate end user of a task.

As she described an experience of meaningfulness, Erin philosophized about the kind of impact she wanted to make on the students who lived in the buildings she cleaned. She imagined a student reflecting on her and her work many years in the future:

I just think I'm here to help them, and I'm hoping that we make a difference, and later on when you're older and be like, "Oh, you know what? I really did appreciate the help that I had when I was in college. I really did like the lady that helped clean my room because she talked to me, she cared about me and asked questions."

When Erin thought about the lasting impact she might have on others, it served to reaffirm that her work was important. In the above description, Erin talked about both the tasks – "clean my room" – and herself as a person – "she cared about me." This highlighted the importance for the custodians of validating both themselves and their work.

Other participants described thinking about their work as being counted on by others. Sarah noted the overarching drive to keep her building users happy as a key part of experiencing meaningfulness, stating, "You know, they can count on me. That's where I feel, you know— what were you asking? What makes me feel worthwhile or meaningful? I keep them happy, you know." Bobby reiterated the idea that the work was meaningful because of how it impacted other people: "What [meaningfulness] is to me is how it reflects the other person. My job is observed by other people. So, what's meaningful about it is how other people look at it."

As evidenced above, a kind of self-validation for the custodians manifested through thinking about how they and their jobs would ultimately impact other people. For each of the participants for whom this sub-constituent was present, descriptions of this type of self-validation occurred in the absence of external validation, which demonstrated the individual's role in maintaining meaningfulness.

5c. *Perceiving and reframing cleaning as a skilled craft.* This sub-constituent illustrated how, in their descriptions, custodians reaffirmed the skill and expertise required to do cleaning work. This sub-constituent was only explicitly present in two of the eight custodian's descriptions, but it was also seen through other constituents, such as *having and experiencing pride in the work*, when the custodians indicated experiencing meaningfulness by doing the work

“the right way.” The custodians who described cleaning as skilled and requiring expertise exemplified both their own perception of the work as well as the active reframing of the work to me as an interviewer.

For instance, as Jane reflected on her experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness, she paused to consider the nature of her work: “It has always been considered unskilled, that anybody can be a custodian; actually, that’s not true. It’s very skilled. It may not be educated, per se, but it’s very skilled.” Jane pointed to her own view of the external perception of custodial work, and in the moment of the description reframed that perception for me as a researcher.

Sarah also demonstrated this act of reframing the negative external views of the work when she discussed how she perceived that some supervisors thought the work was less skilled.

Sarah stated,

I mean, you know, there’s a lot of repetitive tasks and stuff like that, but, um, when it comes to project work and, you know—there’s a lot of expertise, you know, and, you know, generally, in the industry, it’s all the same. It’s just different chemicals, different, you know, floor finishes or whatever.

Sarah indicated that while the work was “repetitive,” that did not mean it was unskilled. Thus, she recast a perception that because of the routine nature of the work, it was unskilled, reasserting that “there’s a lot of expertise.”

Summary. When custodians experienced meaningful work, there tended to be one or more *kinds of ongoing self-validation of the self and work* occurring. Specifically, the participants self-affirmed their own and their work’s worth and significance by reminding themselves that cleaning work was inherently meaningful, thinking about the tasks’ impact on others, and perceiving and reframing cleaning as a skilled craft in response to perceived negative

external perceptions. These kinds of self-validation tended to take place in the absence of external validation.

6. Helping others. This constituent expressed the custodians' descriptions of the acts of helping others as part of experiencing meaningfulness. Seven of the eight custodians explicitly described a time where they were assisting another person as a moment of meaningfulness. These acts of helpfulness and service were both part of the job's duties and beyond them. In addition, the people the participants helped were building occupants and users as well as fellow team members. There was some contextual variability in this constituent: the custodians who worked in a student residence hall seemed more likely to describe an experience of helping a student beyond the cleaning tasks themselves, whereas those who worked in more general use buildings described instances within their job or work tasks.

For example, two custodians who worked in the residence halls began their descriptions of meaningful work by stating that the students (building occupants) made the work meaningful. Susan started, "that's hard. I mean, it's...it's all meaningful because I care so much about my students." Similar, Erin shared, "I really enjoy it. I enjoy the students. I enjoy most of the students, I should say." Susan's and Erin's immediate reference to the building occupants as the source of the work's meaningfulness framed the other-centered nature of the phenomenon of meaningfulness as conceptualized by the custodians.

As another example, Susan recounted numerous instances of helping students beyond the cleaning tasks as being important to experiencing meaningfulness. In one description, Susan demonstrated how serving as a resource and source of support for the students in the residence hall she cleaned was particularly meaningful. She stated,

One girl was having a really rough time with classes, and her parents didn't want her to have a car up here, and she was from Denver, and she just was having — and she was

living with her best friend, and then they ended up breaking up because of what the roommate did, but you know, I would just visit with her, and just tell her, “You know, you’re doing the best you can.” She-she was really appreciative that I gave my two cents. You know, and she did the best, and I don’t know how she ended up. I think she’s graduated.

In addition to helping students, Susan also described instances of being able to see and watch them grow and progress through their education as meaningful to her:

it’s so cool, just to see each...I don’t know. That’s just meaningful to me, because they’re fresh, and they look like deer in the headlights when they come, and then by the time they leave, it’s like, “Oh, wow, there’s a calm...more of a calmness under...over them.”

Similarly, Tim described a moment of helping someone beyond his job duties as meaningful. He also indicated that a major reason he enjoyed the night shift was because there were many people to help. Tim explained,

When people say, “can you help me, I need to get in my office” or “I need to get this moved out.” Something that’s not even part of the job and they thank us because we’re just around. I’ve had a few instances of that. That was, like, it’s just good to be around, because at night there’s not many people here, so we get a lot of people needing help or, like, assistance with things.

In Tim’s description, having the opportunity to help by “being around” when people needed him was meaningful to him.

In a similar vein, Bobby described acts of helping others beyond his job duties as something that was personal to him and important to how he experienced meaningfulness. He said,

I do make it a personal part of my business. It’s not required for my job, but I—I do try and have a running communication with department heads or whatever in the area so that they know that we’re listening and are willing to make adjustments for them and keep on top of things.

This reflection occurred as Bobby was thinking about the gap in communication with building users and custodians. He expressed that his enacted value of helping others was important to him and his work.

Helping others also took the form of serving team members. Erin was a supervisor and described a moment of meaningfulness as going beyond to help her own team when they were short-staffed, canceling a meeting with a supervisor to help her frontline custodians clean the bathrooms. Erin stated,

So, I had a meeting with a director and I'm like, "Do I cancel or do I leave my staff doing all these bathrooms? What do I do?" So, finally, my meeting was at eight-thirty, so I finally called her about ten after eight and I'm like, "I'm sorry. I'm gonna have to cancel our meeting today because I'm short-staffed, and I'm not gonna leave them doing all these bathrooms."

Summary. Acts of *helping others* were consistently part of the experience of meaningfulness for each custodian. As illustrated in the previous descriptions, this manifested largely as serving building users or team members beyond the assigned duties and tasks of the job itself.

7. Developing positive and personal relationships. This final constituent expressed the relationships that the custodians indicated forming when they experienced meaningfulness in work. All the participants described one or more relationships they made with building occupants or users, peers, and/or supervisors as being parts of their experience of meaningfulness. The custodians characterized these relationships as both positive and personal. *Positive* meant that the relationship was depicted as adding to and regenerating the experience of meaningfulness for the custodian, while *personal* meant that the person or people learned about the custodian and his or her life beyond the work. Developing positive and personal relationships was reflected in three sub-constituents:

- 7a. Relationships with building users or occupants
- 7b. Relationships with peers
- 7c. Relationships with supervisors

7a. Relationships with building users or occupants. Seven of the eight participants indicated that a positive relationship, characterized by knowing and being known, with one or more building occupants or users was part of their experience of meaningfulness. For two of the three custodians who worked in the residence halls, becoming acquainted with the students was highlighted and emphasized as a key part of experienced meaningfulness. There was contextual variability for the participants who did not work in the residence halls, as their descriptions of relationships tended to be vaguer and less impactful. Among those in the residence halls, some of the first experiences they recollected concerned forming close relationships with students.

In one example, Susan described developing a sense of concern and care for a resident of the building:

One day the guy is, like, not in his room, and he hadn't been in for quite a while, and I said, "Where is he?" and they didn't know, and so when he came back I said, "Where have you been? Are you okay?" He goes, "I was in the hospital with pneumonia." I said, "Well, why didn't you tell somebody? You know, I was concerned about you." And the father looked at me when I said that, like, "Wow," that there was somebody that was concerned about his son.

Susan recounted this experience in the context of her connection to the students and coming to know them personally. She indicated that making it a priority to serve as a caretaker for them was a particularly meaningful part of her job. Susan also described experiencing meaningfulness by seeing the students grow up and graduate. She shared, "it's just meaningful to see how they change, and they grow up, from being a freshman..."

Likewise, Erin stated that "visiting with the students" was what primarily made her job meaningful. She explained,

it's just usually visiting with the students. You know, once you're in there and you have a conversation with them. I had a student one year who we visited every time I was in her room; she ended up working with us that summer because she needed a job. So, I think...I like to talk, so I try to make a connection with the students.

Similarly, Ashley, who was not assigned to a student residence hall, expressed that being able to talk with the building users helped satisfy a need for connection due to the job's sometimes isolated nature. Ashley described,

And it's like, "Please talk to me," because after eight hours at night I'll talk to anybody. No, we give the [students] you know, just give them shit here and there. Or ask them a question, "Yes, ma'am. Yes, ma'am." They were always, for the most part, very courteous to me. You know, I'm old enough to be their grandma, or almost.

Ashley's description of working around students and relating to them as a grandmother or mother figure mirrored a statement by Susan: "but I just love the students. They remind me of my kids. The age."

Other custodians also described relationships with building occupants or users as being important to them – most prominently, with one or two specific building occupants with whom the custodians became acquainted by being assigned to the building. For instance, Tim discussed a relationship with an administrative assistant as significant because she was "someone to talk to," and Bobby remembered a specific sports team coach who went out of his way to thank him for doing his regular cleaning work.

Jane expressed her "love" for a building she cleaned that housed the music department. She described meaningfulness by sharing her perception of and relationship to the faculty who worked there: "Yes. The energy in that building – and they have phenomenal faculty." Jane's connection to the building and its people also manifested in her spending her free time there. She added, "In fact, I'm going to a concert on Thursday."

7b. Relationships with peers. The custodians also indicated that forming positive and personal relationships with their peers – fellow custodians – was meaningful to them. This sub-constituent was more prominent and directly described by Erin, Sarah, Tim, and Jane, who had specific roles as "leads" or supervisors. The only major variations in custodial supervisors'

experiences of meaningful work were related to this sub-constituent. Both the bond formed with their teams and having a shared experience to create community around were functions of developing relationships with peers for the custodians. Erin's and Tim's descriptions highlighted these functions.

For example, Erin explained, "You know, I always try to make it enjoyable and form some kind of bond with the people, the people I'm working with, whether it's for the day, or if it's like my staff for the whole year..." Working alongside her team was a way for her to develop this personal bond. She described how meaningful relationships were formed by doing the cleaning work with one another, rather than in more formal settings such as scheduled meetings. Erin also emphasized the importance of being with her peers to create personal relationships:

we had a meeting about this a couple days ago, about having one-on-one conversations with our employees; so when I do that, it's kind of like this. Nobody wants to say anything. When I'm helping them in a bathroom and I'm visiting with them, everything comes out, "Oh, my nephew fell last week and had to get stitches." You know, that type of stuff. "My mom's sick," and that type of stuff; but when you sit in a formal environment it's like, "Everything's fine. Everything's okay. My work is good." I'm being out there and being seen.

A result of doing the work together was that the custodians with whom Erin worked developed a support system that extended to their personal lives. Erin stated, "I enjoy working with my staff. I think we are a great team. We all get along. On the weekends, we check up on each other, see how people are doing."

Similarly, Tim indicated that forming relationships with peers served to make sense of some of the inherent struggles in custodial work. He described the value of a nightly team discussion to make meaning of some of the daily struggles while also building a support network among the team:

There's usually, like, a daily, like at the end of the night, we're about to clock out, there's, like, the daily bitching session. Right? I have to keep it together, like you know,

we – we can't, like- If we make it totally negative... but if it gets everyone to laugh and all that... Then, like, it's fine, because it's like that shared experience.

7c. Relationships with supervisors. This sub-constituent illustrated the impact that positive supervisor-supervisee relationships had on experiencing meaningfulness. Three of the eight custodians specifically described the impact that supervisors had on their experiences of meaningfulness. More commonly, however, the participants described these relationships as contributing more to the experience of *meaninglessness*, which is described later in this chapter.

Specifically, experiences with supervisors who reaffirmed the value and importance of custodial work, who were involved in the daily frontline work, and who took an interest in the custodians' personal lives were meaningful to several participants. Jane, who had been a custodian for close to two decades and who had been around numerous supervisors, described the impact of having supervisors who reframed and reaffirmed custodial work on her conceptualization of herself and her job. Jane reflected,

When I first started, the guy that was the head of...it was called Labor Trades and Crafts at that time, I think he had a lot of caring about his staff, and he tried to make it...He tried to make the job less onerous, and more enjoyable...

This supervisor gave Jane a sense of pride in her work through his personal investment in making custodial work feel important.

Furthermore, Lisa explained how supervisors who were present and involved in the frontline work made her feel like her work was meaningful. She said,

There are supervisors I know who are out in the field and they have certain duties that they do every day. They take a study room, or they take their front area, and they're out vacuuming first thing in the morning, even 7 a.m. you're seeing a supervisor out there with a vacuum. It creates a camaraderie between them and their employees because it creates a better environment to be like, "Oh, well, you're not just yelling at me telling me to do these things. You're actually willing to come and do these things with me.

Mention of the positive impact of supervisors who did the frontline work with their custodians was also present in Erin's and Sarah's descriptions of meaningful work and "good" supervisors. In their depictions, they juxtaposed the "involved" approach to the more hands-off approach of supervisors, characterized as spending more time in the office and less time on the floors with the team.

Finally, Ashley expressed that supervisors who took an interest in learning and knowing about her personal life and who showed empathy created an environment through which she could experience work positively. She described that having a supervisor who was empathetic positively impacted her own experience while cultivating a positive experience on her team.

Ashley stated,

you know, sometimes you get, like, as you already know, you get a good team and you get a good supervisor, they get you motivated because they're nice, they're considerate to their people. You know? They care. Because they take interest somewhat. You know what I mean? If you have to have like...Like I had to have some dental work done and stuff, so it's like, "I'm gonna be out," and you can just tell. It wasn't like, "Oh, whatever," but "Sure. Don't worry about it. Just get well. Get back." Stuff like that. Just normal being courteous.

Summary. The constituent *developing positive and personal relationships* was seen in the custodians' descriptions of being known by and knowing building occupants or users, forming a bond and shared community with their peers, and having relationships with supervisors who valued their work and were empathetic. Developing relationships with peers was more prominent for those in supervisor positions, but all participants described in some way how one or many relationships played a part in their experience of meaningfulness.

Composite Description of the General Structure of the Experience of Meaningful Work

The goal of the composite description of the general structure of the custodians' experience of meaningful work was to narratively depict the "unified dynamics taking place

across the varying experiences” (Giorgi, 2009, p. 200). The description of the structure brought the previously elaborated essential constituents, derived from the eight participants’ descriptions, together to synthesize how their experience of meaningful work more *generally* appeared. This structure also depicted the relationships among the described constituents. It is important to note here that the following paragraphs depict the essence of the experience and not the nuanced and contextual *ways of experiencing* for the custodians (Giorgi, 2009; Todres, 2007; Wertz, 2011). The description below is visually displayed in Figure 8. The word “Custodian” in this description is used to refer to the *ideal Custodian*, or the embodiment of the essence of the general experience of meaningful work.

The composite description of the experience of meaningful work. Meaningful work was experienced when the Custodian enacted a learned, positive approach to work, informed by making meaning of both positive and negative personal life experiences through work. The Custodian’s generally positive approach was typically constituted when he or she enacted held values like the moral imperative of having a strong work ethic or helping others. The Custodian’s held values contributed to directing and framing a sense of satisfaction and pleasure – pride – in the cleaning work itself. Pride manifested when the Custodian immediately saw and observed the direct impact of properly performing the cleaning tasks on both the physical and social environment he or she cleaned.

The Custodian’s positive approach to work and pride in the work did not sustain the experience of meaningfulness, and both ongoing external validation and self-validation of the self and work served to maintain this experience. When the Custodian received direct gratitude and acknowledgment from building users or formal recognition from supervisors or the larger organization, validation was experienced, which led to increased motivation and feelings of joy

in the work. When external validation was not experienced, meaningfulness tended to be sustained through ongoing self-validation. Self-validation was enacted when the Custodian thought about the cleaning work’s inherent importance and its impact on other people, and when the he or she actively reframed the work as a skilled craft. Beyond the direct cleaning work itself, the Custodian experienced meaningfulness when actively helping others outside of his or her job duties.

The Custodian perceived an environment that supported the positive experience of work when he or she formed positive and personal relationships with building users and peers, and when he or she had a supervisor who reaffirmed the value of custodial work, who was present and involved, and who demonstrated empathy.

Figure 8 below visualizes this composite description of the general structure of the experience of meaningful work emergent from the custodians’ descriptions.

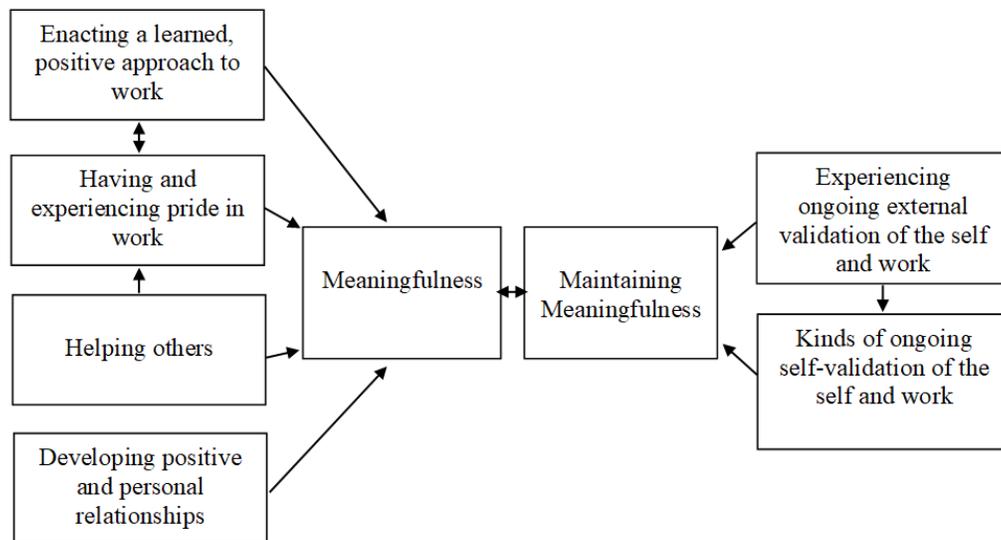


Figure 8. A visual depiction of the general structure of custodians’ lived experience of meaningful work. This figure illustrates the emergent constituents of the experience of meaningfulness in work.

The Experience of Meaningless Work

As uncovered in the literature review, the phenomenon of meaningful work has largely been presented and studied on its own, independent of the experience of *meaningless work*. The custodians' descriptions of meaningfulness in this study reaffirmed the emerging literature indicating that the lived experience of meaningfulness is fluid and interwoven with the experience of meaninglessness (e.g. Bailey & Madden, 2017; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Muzzetto, 2006; Shim, 2016).

Regardless of which phenomenon (meaningfulness or meaninglessness) I asked the custodians to describe, they all described *both* meaningfulness and meaninglessness, often reflecting on meaninglessness to describe moments of meaningfulness and vice versa. Therefore, what follows is a description of what tended to be happening when the custodians described experiences of meaninglessness. It is important to note that the participants did not reaffirm the absolute value of meaninglessness as having “no meaning.” In other words, it may be more accurate for this study to determine meaninglessness as occurring when they experienced *less meaningfulness* than they did in their directed descriptions of meaningfulness.

Meaningless work was defined in the literature review as work that its practitioners, through a particular work context, subjectively experience and determine to be negative, purposeless, and/or insignificant (e.g. May et al., 2004).

The following identifies and describes the five constituents that were typical when the university custodians described experiences of meaningless work: 1. Experiencing degradation from others, 2. Losing a sense of self at work, 3. Experiencing threats to the craft of cleaning, 4. Doing repetitive, purposeless tasks, and 5. Kinds of negative experiences with supervisors and

management. Like in the overview of meaningful work, some constituents of meaningless work also had sub-constituents, as denoted in Table 2 at the beginning of this chapter.

1. Experiencing degradation from others. The most common experience of meaningless described by all eight custodians was the perception or direct experience of being degraded by others, including building users and leaders within the organization. It is important to note that I did not direct or lead the custodians into a conversation about stigma at any point in any of the interviews. The main prompt was, “please describe an experience in which you experienced your work as meaningless.” The custodians attached degradation to meaninglessness throughout their descriptions.

Degraded means “treated or regarded with contempt or disrespect...inferior” (Oxford Dictionary, 2019). Degradation, then, was chosen to characterize this constituent as the custodians depicted either *perceiving* or *directly experiencing* others’ disrespect through two major sub-constituents:

- 1a. Experiencing disregard, condescension, disrespect, and stigma
- 1b. Seeing the cleaning work disrespected

1a. Experiencing disregard, condescension, disrespect, and stigma. The first sub-constituent illustrated the four major kinds of degradation the custodians sensed. *Disregard* was experienced through feeling ignored, “in the way,” or largely invisible due to the behavior or perceived attitude of others. *Condescension* was characterized as sensing an attitude of superiority from others, most commonly described as “sticking their nose up at us” by numerous custodians. *Disrespect* entailed the direct and overt acts of “rudeness” by others, and *stigma* referred to when the above ways of degradation of the work extended to the custodians as people.

Disregard and condescension. The participants experienced disregard as being visibly ignored and overlooked by building users. Tim explained, “You’re kind of like the faceless entity and who cares... This is totally pointless, because nobody – nobody cares. Or it seems like no one cares.” Tim’s feeling like a “faceless” entity was one consequence of the observed behaviors described by custodians that contributed to them feeling disregarded and like the work was meaningless.

For example, Lisa shared,

it’s most of the time students saying, “Excuse me,” and trying to push past you... It’s very much, “Why are you in my way?” All the “excuse me” and the walking past you quickly in the hall or pretending they don’t see you.

Here, Lisa described feeling worthless because of being overtly ignored and unacknowledged by building users. Building users’ behaviors of pushing past her, directly asking her why she was in the way, or pretending that she was not there were parts of her experience of being disregarded.

Similarly, Erin described the phenomenon of building users “pretending” she was not there:

“That’s the hard part, is when you’re walking through the halls and they look at you and pretend they don’t see you; that’s really frustrating.”

Beyond these moments experienced “in passing” as a general perception of building users, Erin also indicated being disregarded through more direct interactions with building occupants:

It’s frustrating. You go, you knock on a door, announce yourself, walk in, and there’s somebody sitting there looking at you. It’s like I just really want to say, “Come on, dude. Just say, ‘Come in,’” or you know, “Just acknowledge that you’re here because you startle me when I’m knocking, and you don’t say anything and I walk in,” and...that’s another hard thing. Like I said, not being acknowledged in any way.

The lack of acknowledgment “in any way” produced frustration for Erin and for the other custodians who described similar experiences.

While disregard was generally experienced as being ignored or unacknowledged, condescension was described as a feeling the custodians sensed when they experienced the building users “sticking their nose up” at them or looking down on them. For example, Susan recalled a year-long experience with a student who was condescending to her when she tried saying “hi” to him:

He was very rude. Very rude. I would see him, and I would say, “Hi,” and he’d stick his nose up in the air. Every day I saw him, and I’d say “Hi.” He was in the lobby, and he was studying, which I saw, but I said, “Hi,” and he looked at me and he said, “I’m busy. I’m studying.” I said, “You’re right; I can see that, but you’re being very rude, because when I say hi, you need to say hi back.” He never, ever said “Hi,” the whole year.

This experience had a lasting impact on Susan, partially due to her own held value of “saying hi” and treating people well. Erin described her perception of condescension in similar terms when she said, “they stick their nose up as you’re in their room cleaning.”

For the custodians, both being disregarded and sensing condescension manifested as a general feeling. Jane described condescension as follows: “It’s attitude. Just the things that they say. I don’t know if I could put it into words. It’s just a feeling...”

Experiencing disrespect and stigma. In addition to disregard or condescension, some of the respondents also described being recipients of direct and open displays of disrespect and stigma. Lisa recounted times when building users were openly rude to her by yelling at her or shutting doors in her face. She shared,

I’ve had experiences where they’re just flat out rude, they’re mean to you, they’ll shut the door in your face. I’ve had students yell at me, that it’s too early, and they didn’t want their bathroom cleaned...

The effect of these displays of disrespect on Lisa was a general feeling of worthlessness and that she was not wanted there. She said,

when somebody’s flat out rude to you, or calls you a maid, or things like that, it really does rake on you. It makes me feel like my job is worthless like, “If you don’t want me

here, why am I bothering?”

Lisa indicated that it was particularly damaging to her when a building user called her a “maid,” describing it as “raking” – a word that means to “scratch or scrape away” (Oxford Dictionary, 2019).

When the custodians perceived the disrespect as being more of a judgment on them as people, it manifested more as *stigma*, or the view that they were “less than” as people because of their job. Erin depicted stigma by explaining that she and her peers were often accused of stealing things in the buildings she cleaned:

So, we are always the first to be accused of anything missing – anything missing – and there’s been so many times we have been accused... That’s the hard part about my job, and that’s what really bothers me is that people think that we want to go in their rooms and take their stuff.

Erin described being accused of stealing as evidence of building users’ generally negative perception of her and her peers because of their job. This perception “bothered” her. She went on to describe the phenomenon of sensing stigma in a more specific moment with a building resident:

I have another example. I was helping my staff – this was last year, maybe two years ago – and I was cleaning the sink and this girl had some hooks on her wall, and she had some really pretty necklaces hanging, and I said, “Oh, that’s a really pretty necklace,” and that was it, didn’t think anything of it. Well, the next week for some reason I had to help again, and she took all her necklaces away, like hid them, and I thought, “Really? You think I really want to lose my job over your damn necklace?” I can afford to buy my own jewelry, you know? I don’t need yours. That’s what makes me so mad is that they think we want to take their stuff; that’s my big issue here, and that makes my life, or my job feel, not so much meaningless, but degrading maybe, and it’s happened on more than one occasion.

In this example, Erin described the frustrating toll (like Lisa’s depiction of “raking”) that stigma took when she expressed her response to the woman by reflectively reiterating, “Really?” She also described feeling angry about the perceptions she sensed and how this stigma made both her

life and her job feel degraded. Her response after she described this moment was one that reasserted her humanity in the face of the stigma she experienced. She said,

We have families. We have TVs. We have Gameboys. We have Xboxes. Why do we need yours? Just because we do what we do doesn't mean that we don't have a life, and our own outside things to do, and homes and kids to take care of. I don't think they see that.

Her description that “just because we do what we do doesn't mean we don't have a life” expressed the phenomenon of stigma as being first applied by others to the job and then to the person in the job. Erin continued, “I would like that to change. I really would like that perception of us to change.”

Similarly, Jane described sensing stigma as perceiving that building users and occupants saw custodians as “scum.” She indicated that the context of where she cleaned made a difference in what she noticed in terms of others' treatment. In the buildings with more professional staff, she perceived much more stigma:

they are much less appreciative and much more, “You are scum and we deserve.” Not all of them. But I discovered the ones that are more of a staff building are not nearly as appreciative as the ones that have students in them. Being demanding and assuming that we don't have that much to do, that we're mostly lazy.

In addition to experiencing disrespect and stigma from building users, Sarah described an experience that was insulting to her as when a manager characterized custodial work in demeaning terms. Sarah recounted, “well, I've heard—my old manager says, ‘We can train a monkey to do the work,’ which was very insulting... and it's not true.” Sarah, along with other custodians, described experiencing custodial work being labeled as unskilled or uneducated as being demoralizing and insulting.

Ashley explained the results of this type of disrespect and stigma on her own sense of self. When asked to describe an experience of meaninglessness, she indicated that she reflected

on her own worth and that of her work daily. She also philosophized about whether she could have “done something more” with her life. She described her daily self-reflective process:

“Really? I’m comin’ there?” You know, “Why couldn’t I have done something better with my life?” but this is what I chose. So, I have to live with that. So, I try to not really go there. You know like, “Maybe I could have done something more important in my life.”

Ashley indicated that her own sense of self-confidence due to her age helped her deal with the effects of sometimes disrespectful and stigmatizing treatment. She said,

And since I’ve been experiencing it pretty much all my life, it’s kind of better up here now, being the older worker than the younger one, because you have more confidence in who you are as a person.

In other words, Ashley had become used to being stigmatized.

1b. Seeing the cleaning work disrespected. Another way that four of the eight custodians directly experienced degradation from others was seeing their cleaning work disrespected through building users’ treatment of the space. Tim described a moment of meaninglessness as seeing someone drop trash on a floor he just cleaned:

It’s when the customers do something in particular. Like we had just taken an hour and clean up the floor really nice and someone walks by and five minutes later, there’s, like, trash on the floor again, ‘cause people just drop it. At least from feedback on the team, too, they’re like, “I just cleaned this floor.” Like this person just came by and dumped coffee on the floor and didn’t pick it up.

Similarly, Bobby recalled a time when he was cleaning up a space used for athletics and seeing how the building users treated the space was frustrating.

they will just throw things on the ground — just anything — bags of food, little gauze wraps, their clothing everywhere. So, for a time, we were just, you know, like, going through and, like — I had to put on gloves cuz we’re not touching that stuff with our bare hands — throwing it in random cubbies, vacuuming everything, and then they’d come back in and then throw it on the floor again, and we’d have to do it multiple times.

Both Tim and Bobby indicated that having to do the already difficult work multiple times because of the building users’ treatment and disrespect was disheartening. Tim described the

effects of sensing this disrespect as contributing to a fellow team member feeling that the work was “totally meaningless.” He stated,

They see you vacuuming, and then someone gets up and just drops something on their way out and he goes – This is totally meaningless. This is pointless. Like this doesn’t make me feel like I’m doing anything, because this just keeps happening.

These experiences affected how Bobby perceived how people valued the work. He stated, “Well, I don’t know that it’s ever valued by other people, outside of the department.”

In addition to seeing how others treated the space disrespectfully, Lisa experienced meaninglessness whenever she had to clean a bathroom in a residence hall and the students would not move their personal items to give her and her team adequate space to work. Lisa shared,

we make sure that the entire bathroom gets cleaned – the sink, the floor, the shower, the toilets – and we have students who really don’t want us there. We have students who don’t want to have to clear their sink every week. They don’t want to pull all their stuff off their sink to give us room to work.

Summary. One of the most prominent parts of the experience of meaningless work was the experience of being degraded by others because of the nature of custodial work. Degradation manifested through custodians’ descriptions of being disregarded, sensing condescension from others, experiencing direct disrespect, and personally experiencing negative stigma because of their work. Degradation produced feelings and perceptions of worthlessness and pointlessness in the job and in the custodians’ lives.

2. Losing a sense of self at work. This constituent reflected custodians’ descriptions of experiences where their sense of self, including their personality, strengths, or values, was not affirmed at work. Such disaffirmation primarily occurred from supervisors or peers. The custodians expressed this as frustrating, deflating, and in one case, hurtful. In addition, some of

the respondents described experiencing meaninglessness when they observed or perceived misalignment between their personal and organizational values.

The constituent *losing a sense of self at work* manifested through the following sub-constituents:

- 2a. Feeling misunderstood and disaffirmed
- 2b. Sensing misaligned personal and organizational values

2a. *Feeling misunderstood and disaffirmed.* This sub-constituent appeared directly when three out of the eight custodians described feelings that their personality or values were not affirmed by others or were actively questioned or critiqued. Susan recalled losing her sense of self when she received a critical evaluation from her supervisor that indicated she should not share as much about her personal life as she did and that she might want to talk less. Susan commented, “I never, ever wanted to make anybody uncomfortable, and so that’s on my evaluation, to work on not sharing as much about [my personal life.]” Susan continued by describing how that feedback disappointed her and made her feel like she could not be her whole self at work:

So, I interrupt too much...so, on my evaluation there’s, like, so much, and I feel like, “Okay, what do I do?” I feel deflated. That just is very disappointing, that my — how I’ve been all my life...and I know I’ve interrupted. I know I tell stories. I mean, my parents, if they were alive this day, they would tell you, “Susan would go next door and tell ‘em that we were fighting.” So, they say, “Susan talks a lot.” And then it’s like, I feel meaningless. What is my purpose, then, in life?

Losing a sense of self at work, as manifested through the feedback from a supervisor, contributed to Susan feeling purposeless and meaningless both as a custodian and as a person.

While Susan described a personality trait being disaffirmed, Sarah shared how one of her strengths as a curious learner was misunderstood by supervisors. She recounted a prolonged

experience with supervisors and others where her strength was misunderstood as inappropriately questioning authority. Sarah explained,

If you've ever done this strengths test...I'm a learner is one of my top ones... And yeah, I need to understand "the why," okay? And well, it's because I wanna know in case I've got to make that decision someday, or I understand the why in case somebody's asking me and I'm trying to get them to—to join in and, you know, make this decision, you know, happen and implement it successfully and stuff. My questions have been viewed that way, that I'm challenging them, that I'm questioning their authority, rather than I'm trying to learn, ever since I've started here.

Because her strength was misunderstood, Sarah described feeling unsupported and alone in her work, as well as stereotyped based on how she expressed herself.

Similarly, Bobby expressed experiencing meaninglessness when others on his team called him "bossy" because of his strength of asking about and wanting to know the bigger picture of the workplace and the team's operations. He described being misunderstood as others "layering disrespect on him." Bobby commented,

People will call me bossy whenever I ask about things in the abstract. I'll be like, "Hey, do you know who's cleaning the vacuum this week?" and it—I get told by my supervisor that I've been being bossy or whatever the word is and that kind of stuff and it just kind of occurs to me, you know, you can't—if you do try to be better at your job, it's—it looks bad on the record for some reason.

Bobby indicated feeling punished for seeking to provide feedback to make things better. The result of this experience was a retreat into isolation and thinking more myopically about how he could focus on and better his own role and job. Bobby described this impact:

So, I mostly just stick to things that enhance my position that are not actually better for the job positions above me. I've had team members that don't respect me. So, it's really hard to give them respect when, in doing so, they s—they layer on the disrespect towards you.

2b. Sensing misaligned personal and organizational values. In addition to feeling misunderstood and disaffirmed in work, the custodians also experienced meaninglessness when they sensed misaligned personal and organizational values. This was described directly by four

out of the eight participants and was primarily depicted as observing peers or supervisors not enacting certain held values, such as work ethic or pride in the work. Ashley, who also described her held value of work ethic and not complaining, shared:

I guess, when I see people there, “Well, I’m bitched-out. It’s a horrible job, and blah-blah-blah,” because I don’t bitch, because I don’t think it is. But I don’t wanna hear it, you know? It’s like, “Go find another job” and you have that in any kind of job.

Ashley felt frustrated when she observed her peers complaining in the role, and she referenced her own value of hard work when making sense of the complaining:

You get, you know, a little frustrated; and some people just do work half-assed, and that’s kinda like my pet peeve. It’s like, you know, as I taught my kids, “If you’re gonna do it, you might as well do it right.”

Similarly, Jane highlighted an overall change she had noticed in organizational values over her long tenure. Her value of having principles and pride in the work seemed in contradiction with what she observed in the organization, which contributed to her experience of meaninglessness. Jane described the lack of training and emphasis on doing a good job as being signals of this misalignment. She reflected,

There’s no training anymore. There’s no emphasis on doing a good job, having pride in your work; there’s no emphasis on that at all anymore. I have pride in my work. We used to have principles and procedures, and we don’t have them anymore. It’s basically a free-for-all.

Bobby and Lisa also indicated that when their own values of being proactive and innovative were not reflected in organizational or supervisor practices, they experienced meaninglessness. Bobby said,

It’s just weird that being proactive in the job almost seems detrimental, especially because none of the supervisors have any direct issue with it. I’ll bring their attention to it. They’ll say, “Oh, well, I’ll mention something.” And nothing ever happens with it.

In a similar way, Lisa described how hearing the words “that’s how it’s always been done” in response to her feedback contributed to her feeling that her work was meaningless:

“That’s how it’s always done” is a phrase I hear a lot in my job of, “Oh, well, this is the way we’ve always done it. Oh, this is the way we do it.” It’s not very innovative, and there isn’t much room for improvement or new ideas.

Summary. *Losing a sense of self at work* was a part of experienced meaningfulness. This appeared through the custodians’ descriptions of experiencing their personality attributes or strengths being misunderstood or disaffirmed. Another way that losing a sense of self manifested was through their observations of enacted values in the organization and by supervisors that were misaligned with their own previously held values.

3. Experiencing threats to the craft of cleaning. When custodians described an impediment to doing the cleaning work the “right way,” they also tended to experience meaningfulness. This sub-constituent characterized these obstacles as *experienced threats to the craft of cleaning* and doing the custodial work the right way. For the five custodians who directly depicted this experience, not having the resources or being asked to do the work in a way that was not up to their standards of work produced feelings of meaningfulness.

For example, Susan explained that a developing change over the years in the volume of space the custodians had to clean impacted the ways in which she was able to clean. As she had described earlier, she liked to clean in a detailed, methodical way and considered herself a “perfectionist.” Susan indicated that not being able to clean as deeply and thoroughly “hurt” her. She stated,

What they’ve changed hurts. I don’t know if “hurts” is the right word. It just doesn’t feel right. The change is, we have bigger buildings. We’re doing 15 suites a day. Certain floors get 15 suites. The first floor is eight, and the bigger the buildings are — they’re upgrading them — we don’t get to do...when I started, I only had six suites a day, and so that’s a big change in...and change is hard for me. Very hard...I just don’t feel like it’s...it’s meaningful, still, but I just don’t feel like we’re doing as good a job as what we

were in the past. The bigger you are, the less time...they give you so much to do in a short time, and not enough people.

Susan described the impact of experiencing this threat to her way of cleaning as a moral issue, explaining, "It just doesn't feel right."

Similarly, when she recalled experiencing meaningfulness, Sarah, a supervising custodian, described that being short-staffed precluded the ability to do important, high-impact project work like refinishing floors because her team was asked to cover multiple areas to account for being understaffed. Sarah shared,

We'd have to go over there and do their buildings. That's the busiest time because we're all trying to scramble and get in and get out of places that must be done prior to people coming in, that we just need to be outta there, you know? 5:00 by 8:00 is your three-hour period that, you know—we are swamped, and that's when we were going over and helping somebody else... There's a lot of floor refinishing here. You can't do it when people are in the lab.

Ashley also described the frustrating impact of being short-staffed when she discussed the small team of people available to fix essential machines needed for her cleaning work. Not having access to the resources she needed to do her job well was a memorable experience of meaninglessness for her. Ashley explained the implications when just one of the machine repairers was out with a personal illness:

But it's like, "Really? Can you get some backup here? You know, we need to get this done." Then, he was out for six weeks...Because they don't have somebody else doin' it, and it's like, "No. Come on. Hire somebody else..." Otherwise, then it looks bad for the teams that aren't getting stuff done because we don't have the equipment.

In addition to threats to doing the cleaning work well such as time, staffing, and equipment, Bobby described a perceived lack of followed protocol that compromised the upkeep of the equipment and facilities. He also indicated that observing peers not taking care of the tools was frustrating for him. He recounted a moment of meaninglessness as when he started as a

custodian and noticed that his co-workers would overlook a procedure of ensuring that the sinks in buildings stayed working properly. Bobby stated,

So, when I came in, I would notice there was some, a lack of—of protocol, some issues with handling material or things like that. Frequently, people will leave the sinks on. There's, like, a little stopper thing. So, there's, like, a spray nozzle you can use. If you do that, it builds up water pressure in the back, which can cause issues with the piping. You're supposed to turn that off and disconnect the—the whole tube system and then drain it so that the water doesn't build sediment inside the tube, which can cause build up — all that kind of stuff. That was never observed. People do not care about their tools when they use them...

Jane also described a lack of followed procedures and protocol as threatening the craft of cleaning:

the people who are here now don't have a clue of how to do things, and it's like, "Didn't you guys know how to do this? We are facilities here. We are supposed to be maintaining facilities." Yeah. It's like, "Okay. Well, if nobody's complaining, I guess. I don't know." But, you know, I know this isn't right.

Jane's expression of knowing a "right" way to do the work demonstrated how this constituent of *experiencing threats to the craft of cleaning* affected feelings of meaningfulness.

Summary. Five of the eight custodians directly described impediments to doing the work the "right" way as contributors to the experience of meaninglessness. The "right way" was termed the *craft of cleaning* for this constituent. Being short-staffed, not having enough time or the resources to do the work, and not following protocols for ensuring high quality were all experienced as threats to the craft of cleaning.

4. Doing repetitive, purposeless tasks. This constituent was directly present in three out of the eight participants' experiences and characterized how having to complete tasks that seemed purposeless and trivial to them contributed to experiences of meaninglessness.

Purposeless was defined through the custodians' descriptions as tasks that seemed pointless due to the lack of observed impact, or because there were elements that were in the control of others,

making the tasks unnecessary. Lisa provided an example of a repetitive, purposeless task when she described the daily cleaning of exterior windows. Every day, after she cleaned the windows, the sprinklers would come on. Because the sprinklers were aimed in such a way that the water splashed up on the windows, there would also be watermarks every day. Lisa described this cycle of repetitive purposelessness as follows:

One of the things here that I have to do...is the outside windows; I am expected to clean them, and make sure that they're clean every single day, but every single day the sprinklers turn on in that specific area that splashes up and leaves watermarks on the windows. So, I don't understand why it's my job every day to wipe off these watermarks that are going back on the window every single day. So, it's little things like that that you could ask management about, but they just go, "Oh, well that's how it's always done. That's why you need to do it."

Lisa also remembered an incident when supervisors had asked her to clean a carpet only to tear it up the next day. She recounted:

there was this room that the higher-ups told me, "Hey, will you get this shampooed and the carpet ready to have an office move in here?" So, I went in and I shampooed all the carpets; I washed all the walls and everything. Then, the day after I finished this project that they had asked me to do, they tell me, "Oh, we're gonna rip up the carpet in that room and we're gonna use it for something else," and I felt really like, "Why did I just spend three hours shampooing this carpet that you're gonna rip up and throw away? Why would you make me do this?"

Lisa's questioning "Why would you make me do this?" in her description expressed the frustration and anger that this instance of experienced meaninglessness brought her.

Tim also described doing a purposeless task for a building occupant as an experience of meaninglessness. In this example, Tim was asked by a building occupant to empty her personal trash daily, even though the custodial policy was to do so weekly. He described similar anger and frustration as Lisa, stating, "This is frickin' pointless." Tim shared,

then I would empty some trash and then she would take her trash from her office and put it in the trash I just emptied even though we only do that once a week. So, she'd go, "Hey, that trash can's full again," and I go, "This is- this is frickin' pointless," because I just did it. Like nobody has the respect. Her door was 20 feet away from a dumpster. If

she really needed it, she could have gone out. But instead she chose to give me more work because, you know, who cares. So that – That made me feel like this is completely pointless.

Other custodians also depicted doing tasks that did not need to be done by them as purposeless. Bobby remembered a very specific experience of meaninglessness when he had to lock a door that could have been locked by the people walking through it at the end of the night. He recounted,

there's this one door. We locked it. Obviously, it could be locked by the people when they leave their office, but they ask us to come over and personally lock it for them. And it's like—it shouldn't be a thing we go out of our way to do for you, but okay.

Summary. When the custodians had to repeatedly complete tasks that they perceived as purposeless, they tended to experience meaninglessness. They described purposeless tasks as those tasks that either did not need to be done by them (because they could easily be done by someone else) or did not have any observable impact on the cleanliness of a space due to controllable factors. Doing these tasks because it was “the way they’ve been done” or because “someone else told them to” produced feelings of frustration, resentment, and an overall sense that their work was “pointless.”

5. Kinds of negative experiences with supervisors and management. All of the custodians described, in some way, how their experiences with certain supervisors contributed to experiences of meaninglessness. In addition, some of the participants depicted perceptions or experiences with “management,” which connoted upper management. *Negative experiences* were those that the custodians described as having a detrimental impact on their feelings of meaningfulness in their work. These experiences were described through two major sub-constituents:

- 5a. Sensing disconnection and feeling unsupported

- 5b. Experiencing a lack of meaningful, ongoing formal acknowledgment

5a. Sensing disconnection and feeling unsupported. This sub-constituent illustrated the custodians' described experiences of sensing a lack of connection with leaders. Sensing disconnection from leaders manifested in two primary ways: experiencing a lack of involvement of supervisors in the frontline work, and perceiving a gap in lived experience and expertise between "management" and frontline custodians. Feeling unsupported was a described consequence of the perceived disconnect of leaders.

First, when the participants had or were around supervisors who did not do the everyday cleaning work with the custodians, it contributed to experiences of meaninglessness. The impact of such supervisors was long-lasting with some of the participants, who recounted negative experiences with disconnected supervisors from many years prior. Lisa's description below exemplified the effect of a disconnected supervisor:

You're supposed to be doing things that we see, so we can interact with you and feel like you're on the same page as us; because when you're separated by a desk, it doesn't feel as...the word that I'm looking for: genuine. It feels like you're just bossing us around and telling us what to do, but we don't see you doing anything.

Lisa indicated that the distance created by not being with a supervisor in the everyday work had an impact on the feeling of having a genuine relationship.

Erin also described this "distance" in an experience with a supervisor who was not responsive to her and who generally sat behind her desk and was not available. Erin's description showed that availability could be experienced in both a physical sense and a social sense. She shared,

With my old supervisor, if you came in ten minutes early, she'd come here at five-thirty and be sitting at her desk, and if you asked her a question, "I'm not on the clock. It's seven o'clock." Okay, then why are you here? I mean that's how she treated people; that's how she still treats people.

In addition to the physical and social distance described by the custodians, the gap in knowledge of what was happening in the frontline work also produced feelings of meaninglessness in work. Specifically, Sarah depicted a gap in “cleaning” expertise and “management” expertise as impacting her experience. She stated,

I always wondered how they could hire people — supervisors and managers — that had absolutely no cleaning experience, you know, and be successful because they got a lot to learn, know? ...it's real easy to sit there and say, “This is what it should take, and we have a computer program that says so,” you know? You know, and it's like—Well, you really need to get out there and experience it, you know, because there's so many different things that come into play...I think that they don't appreciate the work, sometimes. Uh, they don't know what's involved. Um, there have been times—they don't appreciate us.

In this instance, Sarah indicated that when managers did not take the time to come onto the frontline and learn from what was happening, she felt her work was unappreciated. She also described that a lack of understanding of the context in which she was cleaning affected her perception of support from leaders. She described an instance where she was short-staffed and, because her supervisors did not have the chance to see the impact of being short-staffed up close, she felt unsupported. Sarah explained,

You know, when you're not appreciated for those kinds of things, but yet you're supposed to keep your team motivated and keep morale up, and, and it's really hard when, you know, your support system, you know—they're supposed to be my support system, and I just—I have not had that.

Similarly, Jane described that not noticing managers and leaders physically around and asking for input contributed to her feeling unsupported and her perception that the custodians “don't matter.” Jane said, “We don't matter at all. Nobody cares, comes to us, anymore.”

5b. Experiencing a lack of meaningful, ongoing formal acknowledgment. This sub-constituent represented the lack of meaningful acknowledgment from leaders as contributing to experiences of meaninglessness. The participants described *meaningful acknowledgment* in

various ways as recognition that felt genuine and offered a tangible benefit to them because of their work. Several custodians expressed that receiving acknowledgment that seemed insincere or appeared to be just a formality had the opposite effect to what was intended, and often negatively affected meaningfulness and morale.

Tim expressed that a lack of meaningful acknowledgment existed because of a stereotype of workers in the state classified system as being in the job only for the benefits. Tim made a distinction in his description between why custodians work (to earn a paycheck and receive benefits) and why people *want to come* to work (for enjoyment). He explained:

With the state system, it feels like there's an attitude of, "you're getting benefits, we don't need to give you anything else." That kind of thing. So that's great. That's why people are working here, but it's not the reason why people want to come to work. Right? Like we want to work here because all these benefits, you know, but it's like, "oh, that's what you get, so be happy with that." That's great, but that doesn't last for years and years at a time. Like, it's about the enjoyment you get.

Tim indicated that the "enjoyment" could be maintained through more ongoing, genuine acknowledgment of workers instead of formal events that were scheduled and took place regularly and sparingly. Tim described the detrimental effect of the pre-planned, formal recognition events as follows:

You feel worse. We've had Christmas parties that were basically telling us, like, there's gonna be no raises this year and then some cookies. Like, outside the room, everyone got so mad that year. All the custodians were in that and they got angry.

Instead, Tim suggested that meaningful acknowledgment would be ongoing and not in the form of events that seemed to offer insufficient, formalized gratitude. Tim stated,

You know, just to- just to know that, like, OK, great, we recognize we did a good job versus plugging along for months and no one's saying a word and then it's like in your review, "oh, you did a good job this year." Thanks.

Similarly, Bobby indicated that some of the formal awards were not meaningful to him and that when he saw he was not going to be promoted (which he described as a more meaningful acknowledgment), it had a negative effect on him:

I think they're called Spark Awards, they just introduced two or three years ago. They're when you do special things, you get acknowledgments or whatever. That doesn't matter. You're not gonna get any acknowledgments. If you want to move up in the position, you have to work there for five years, minimum, and then probably have experience in a different job where you're a manager and then apply for a manager position. You can't just do it.

Other custodians also noted that the *way* in which leaders gave acknowledgment affected what meaning it had for them. For example, Sarah recalled a time when a supervisor who routinely and generally told the team “thanks for your hard work” had a negative effect. She described meaningful acknowledgment as a “thank you” that was more specific, personal, and ongoing. She recounted an experience with a past supervisor who offered acknowledgment that was not meaningful:

I don't want to tell you that every day, to where it doesn't have any meaning. You know, we used to make fun of the lead that—that did that. “Thanks, everybody, for your hard work. Have a good evening,” and he'd say it every day. And we were like—we'd start mimicking him, and—You know, it kinda got to where it didn't have that meaning, you know, and I've had employees comment on it.

In Sarah's description, she reflected on how that experience had shaped the way in which she acknowledged and appreciated her own workers.

Summary. Various kinds of negative experiences with supervisors and management tended to be present in the custodians' descriptions of experiencing meaninglessness. More broadly, when they sensed a disconnect with supervisors and a lack of meaningful acknowledgment of their work, they tended to experience meaninglessness. Disconnection manifested as physical and social distance with supervisors which resulted in a feeling of being unsupported. A lack of meaningful acknowledgment was depicted as formalized, insincere

recognition events, the lack of ongoing recognition, and gratitude that seemed routine and impersonal.

Composite Description of the General Structure of the Experience of Meaningless Work

The following composite description of the general structure of the experience of meaningless work is the narrative description of the unified constituents that emerged from the eight interviews. As with the general structure of the experience of meaningful work, the word “Custodian” is used to embody the *ideal Custodian* or the representative of the essence of the general experience of meaningless work (Giorgi, 2009). The composite structure of meaningless work is visually displayed in Figure 9.

Composite description of the experience of meaningless work. Meaningless work was experienced when the Custodian experienced degradation from others because of his or her role as a cleaning worker. When building users or supervisors showed disregard to, visibly condescended to, or verbally disrespected the Custodian, feelings of unworthiness and frustration ensued. When others’ disrespect for the cleaning work was perceived as directed to the Custodian as a person, he or she felt stigmatized and less human, affecting his or her positive sense of self.

When the Custodian’s sense of self, including personality attributes, strengths, and values, was disaffirmed by others in the work context, he or she felt misunderstood and hurt. Meaninglessness was also experienced when the Custodian observed enacted values from peers, supervisors, and management that were misaligned with personal values.

Furthermore, the Custodian tended to experience meaninglessness when facing impediments to doing the cleaning work the right way. These threats to being able to practice the craft of cleaning well stemmed from a lack of resources such a time, staffing, and equipment. In

addition, when the Custodian was asked to complete repetitive tasks with no clear purpose because of the lack of observed impact of the task or its unnecessaryness, the Custodian perceived his or her work as pointless.

Finally, the Custodian experienced meaninglessness when he or she sensed a disconnection from leaders and management characterized by a lack of supervisors’ presence in the everyday, frontline work. The perception of this disconnect affected the Custodian’s sense of receiving adequate support in his or her daily work. In addition, the Custodian felt unsupported and unacknowledged when receiving recognition from supervisors and management that was formalized, pre-planned, and sparse instead of personal, tangible, and ongoing.

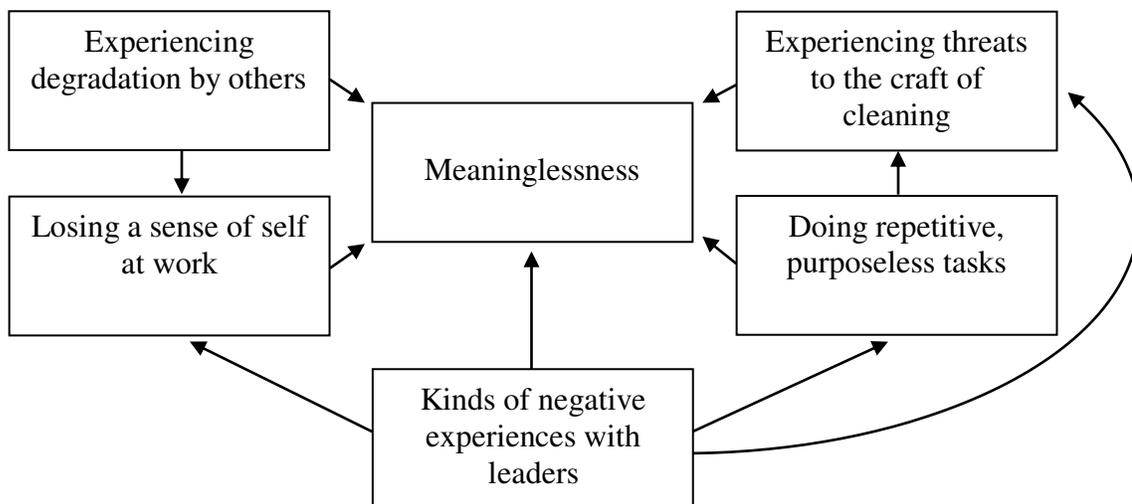


Figure 9. A visual depiction of the general structure of custodians’ experience of meaningless work. This figure illustrates the emergent constituents of the experience of meaninglessness in work.

The Experience of Meaning-Making

For this study, *meaning-making* is defined as the ongoing, fluid processes through which people sense, interpret, negotiate, and ultimately attach significance (or insignificance) to situations, events, others, objects, or discourses through the lenses of their identities, previous

knowledge, and lived experiences (Bruner, 1990; Park, 2012; Perret-Clermont et al., 2004; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Participants in this study were not phenomenologically directed to describe their experience of meaning-making. Therefore, to present the following findings, I relied on my own interpretation of the qualities of the previously described constituents that emerged from the custodians' descriptions of meaningfulness and meaninglessness. Specifically, I attended to what was generally happening *within* these descriptions. This was primarily accomplished by synthesizing interpretive research memos that analyzed *how* the custodians described meaningfulness and meaninglessness.

Five characteristics of the meaning-making process were uncovered: 1. Meaning was made in work through life and in life through work, 2. The meaning of work could be different than meaning in work, 3. Meaninglessness helped make meaning of work as meaningful and vice versa, 4. Meanings shifted quickly and were volatile, 5. Meaningfulness and meaninglessness were interwoven experiences.

Meaning was made in work through life and in life through work. As illuminated primarily through the description of the *enacting a learned, positive approach to work* constituent, when the custodians described their experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness, they tended to reference events or people in their personal lives to make meaning of events in their work. They also seemed to use work events to make meaning of events in their personal lives. Most often, the participants used personal life events to describe how they came to perceive or assess work events. However, they also reflected on how different aspects of work helped them interpret events in their personal lives or how work gave their lives a sense of overall meaning.

For example, Susan described how work gave her life an overall sense of meaning, especially when considering her personal struggles. She said, “that’s what has saved me, and has meaning in my life, is working.” Erin more specifically described how work gave her the ability to cope with hardships and stressors outside of work by offering an escape. She explained, “So, I’m concentrating when I’m here. So, the world outside doesn’t exist. So, I think that just helps me.” Bobby was able to make sense of his overall appreciation for the job when he juxtaposed his current quality of life, which he attributed to his job, to his oppressive and difficult upbringing. Sarah’s overall approach to and gratitude for her job were driven in part by her perception of the university “giving her a chance” considering her past struggles. On the other hand, Ashley reflected on her whole life when she described experiencing meaninglessness in work, asking, “Why couldn’t I have done something better with my life?”

In addition, Susan, Erin, Bobby, and Jane specifically described how they thought about their work as being directly related to the influence of family members, such as their children or parents. Primarily, reflecting on family helped to solidify work values for the custodians, as evidenced by Erin’s description of how her late father had instilled in her a value of “helping others,” how Sarah’s and Jane’s mothers taught them a strong “work ethic,” and how Susan reaffirmed her work values by reflecting on what she taught her child.

The meaning of work could be different than meaning *in* work. Through their descriptions, the custodians also illuminated the difference between the meaning *of* work and meaning *in* work. All eight participants, when asked why they worked as a custodian, indicated that earning a paycheck to provide for themselves or others was their initial motivation. Therefore, the meaning *of* work for the custodians in this study seemed to be partly to provide and experience security. However, all participants experienced their work as meaningful when

they were *in* their jobs, and none described receiving monetary compensation as part of experienced meaningfulness, even though that was their initial reason for working. All eight custodians explained that additional motivation and meaningfulness in work came from the previously described constituents of experienced meaningfulness.

Tim directly described how the meaning of work could be different than the need for meaning in work (meaningful work) when he said, “That’s why people are working here [pay and benefits], but it’s not the reason why people want to come to work.”

Meaninglessness helped make meaning of work as meaningful and vice versa.

Another common feature within all the custodians’ descriptions was that they frequently discussed experiences of meaninglessness to make meaning of meaningfulness and vice versa. This manifested in their interviews as the nearly continuous reflection on meaninglessness to delineate meaningfulness and vice versa. For example, Susan frequently interrupted her own description of meaningfulness to make sense of an experience of meaninglessness. In her depiction of a moment of meaninglessness – a student being rude to her – she vacillated between the rudeness and her value of treating others well, and finally told a story of a building resident treating her well.

Erin also demonstrated this in her example of experienced meaningfulness by juxtaposing building users who made her feel like her work was meaningful with those who did not.

Regarding experiencing meaningfulness, she shared,

When they appreciate and don’t think that we are there to serve them. There’s a difference of doing what we do, and then being there to serve them, and a lot of them think that we’re there to serve them. Then, the ones that appreciate what you do are the ones that you appreciate, and they’re thanking you for helping them or taking care of them.

This co-mingling of moments of meaningfulness and meaninglessness was evident in every custodian's description, regardless of which phenomenon he or she was asked to describe.

In addition, the custodians seemed to remember meaninglessness, but relied on meaningfulness for motivation. This was evidenced in their descriptions by the presence of relatively few but specifically recounted moments of meaningfulness and the higher number of vaguer experiences of meaninglessness. The participants also talked about the moments of meaninglessness at greater length. As Tim stated in his initial response to the prompt to describe a time of meaningfulness, "so it's interesting. Most of times we weigh on the negatives. You know? A lot of us feel like we weigh on negatives more than positives so it's hard to come up with something specific." Tim went on to describe more specific and deep experiences of meaningfulness.

Meanings shifted quickly and were volatile. As primarily expressed through the previously described *maintaining meaningfulness* constituent, meaningful and meaningless work seemed to be non-permanent experiences. The analysis of the respondents' descriptions revealed that the experience of meaningfulness was particularly volatile and seemed dependent on the ongoing preservation of positive characteristics of a custodian's internal and external environment through *experiencing ongoing external validation of the self and work* and *kinds of self-validation of the self and work* to stabilize it. This is evidenced in Table 3 and Table 4 at the end of this chapter, which depict how each constituent manifested in each custodian's raw descriptions.

For example, a custodian could experience a constituent of meaningfulness in one moment, and in the next a constituent of meaninglessness. Or he or she could experience meaningfulness in one domain of work and meaninglessness in another. This was also evident in

the participants' direct descriptions. For example, Susan derived meaningfulness from perfecting her craft of cleaning, yet pressure to do that perfected craft more quickly from a supervisor could contribute to meaninglessness. That threat to her perfected craft could occur at any time, thereby making the experience of meaningfulness tenuous and volatile.

Meaningfulness and meaninglessness were interwoven experiences. Finally, as evidenced through the constituents displayed in Figure 10 below, meaningfulness and meaningless could be experienced concurrently depending on the domain of work on which the custodian was focusing at that moment. For example, per the custodians' descriptions, in a single day they could conceivably experience gratitude from a building user while at the same time working with a disconnected supervisor and experiencing stigma. Given the participants' descriptions, the overall experience of meaningfulness or meaninglessness seemed to manifest when a greater frequency and concurrency of constituents of meaningfulness or meaninglessness were being experienced. Therefore, a custodian could have experienced the full spectrum of meaningfulness and meaninglessness in a single day or perhaps a single hour.

Ashley provided an example of this phenomenon in how she began both her descriptions of experienced meaningfulness and those of experienced meaninglessness. In her description of experienced meaningfulness, she started, "Yeah. It's like every day I come here," while she began her description of experienced meaninglessness with, "Oh, kinda like every day it's like, 'Really? I'm comin' there?'" The custodians who had a more generally positive experience and assessment of their work as meaningful seemed to perceive more constituents of meaningfulness than meaninglessness at that given time.

Summary. Five common features of the experience of meaning-making were derived from interpreting the qualities of the custodians' descriptions themselves. First, meaning in work

was made by reflecting on aspects of personal life. Second, the meaning of work in a more global sense (i.e. for security) could be different than the meaning in work (i.e. for meaningfulness, motivation). Third, experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness were employed to make sense of each other in the custodians' descriptions. Fourth, meanings seemed to quickly shift for the custodians. Finally, meaningfulness and meaninglessness seemed to be interwoven and experienced concurrently.

The General Structure of the Experience of Meaningful and Meaningless Work

Following the descriptive phenomenological method (Giorgi, 2009) and drawing from the composite descriptions of the general structures of both the experiences of meaningful work and meaningless work, the following focuses on formulating a general structure of the unified phenomenon of meaning-making characterized by how the custodians came to experience meaningfulness and meaninglessness. This structure was also contextualized using the general features of custodians' meaning-making processes which were previously described. The essence of this unified experience is expressed verbally below and is figuratively displayed in Figure 10 through the synthesis of the structures of the experience of meaningfulness and of meaninglessness. The following elaborates on Figure 10 by providing an essential summary (Giorgi, 2009) of the general structure of the unified experience, including the proposed relationships between the experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness.

The Essential Summary of the General Structure

In the context of meaningfulness and meaninglessness being volatile and fluid, the structure in Figure 10 shows the synthesis and depiction of the whole unified experience of meaningful work and meaningless work. Shown above the dashed line in Figure 10, meaningful work tended to be experienced when some combination of the following constituents was lived

through: enacting a learned positive approach to work, having personal pride in the work, maintaining meaningfulness, experiencing ongoing external validation of self and work, engaging in kinds of ongoing self-validation of self and work, helping others, and developing positive and personal relationships. Illustrated below the dashed line, meaningless work tended to be experienced when some combination of the following constituents was being lived through: being degraded by others, losing a sense of self at work, facing threats to the craft of cleaning, doing repetitive, purposeless tasks, and having kinds of negative experiences with supervisors and management. The bi-directional arrow with the addition and subtraction symbols represents that any one of the experiences of meaningless work seemed to have a negative impact on the maintenance of meaningfulness (and therefore the constituents that helped to maintain meaningfulness) for the custodians. The same seemed to be true for how the experience of meaningfulness positively related to experiences of meaninglessness.

The dashed line in the middle of the figure along with the alternating vertical arrows represents that over any period of time, the custodians could move above and below the line and into and through experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness, depending on both the focus of the custodian and the environment and context within which the custodian was working.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings of the study by identifying and describing the constituents that were considered essential for the experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness to occur. Each constituent was depicted in terms of how it was portrayed in the experiencers' lifeworld descriptions. Finally, I presented my interpretations of how the custodians made meaning of their work to experience meaningfulness or meaninglessness, and I proposed a general structure of the unified experience of meaningful and meaningless work

(Figure 10) in accordance with the descriptive phenomenological method's standards of rigor and reliability (Giorgi, 2009; Sokolowski, 1974; Wertz, 2011).

The next chapter elaborates on and considers these findings in the context of how they inform and extend extant research, theory, and practice.

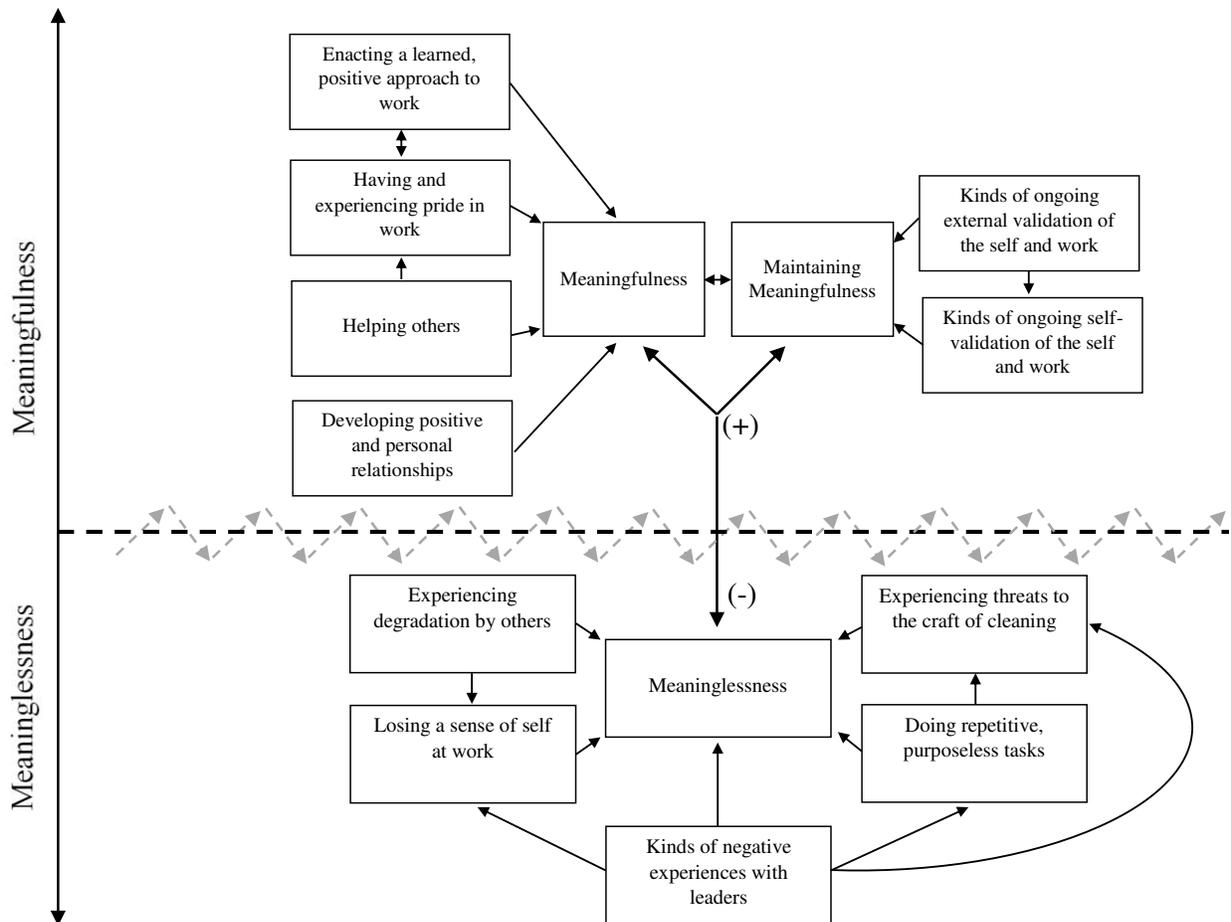


Figure 10. The general structure of custodians' experiences of meaningful and meaningless work.

Table 3

The Constituents of the Structure of the Experience of Meaningful Work and Their Empirical Basis for Each Subject

Constituent	Participant							
	Susan	Erin	Lisa	Tim	Sarah	Bobby	Jane	Ashley
ENACTING A LEARNED, POSITIVE APPROACH TO WORK	Tied identity as a “cleaner” to upbringing, value of treating other well. (MU1, MU21)	Described importance of individual attitude, learned value of helping others from father. (MU7, MU15, MU22, MU30)	Focused on “providing a service to people” as her approach. (MU7)	Described “liking to do well” as general approach. (MU8)	Identified Personal value of “treating people the way I want to be treated” as central to approach. (MU3)	Described personal perspective that it is all meaningful as the approach, reflected on difficult upbringing. (MU 3, MU24)	Described a strong work ethic as framing her approach. (MU29)	Perspective that “it all matters” because of her approach and strong work ethic. (MU1, MU3, MU12)
HAVING AND EXPERIENCING PRIDE IN WORK	Described being able to do the cleaning work the “right way,” being a perfectionist. (MU14)	Described taking pride in her work to mediate difficulties, seeing before and after impact. (MU15)	Pride in serving people, seeing before and after results. (MU6, MU7)	Pride in doing a good job even when no one is around, satisfaction in cleaning work. (MU6, MU8, MU11)	Pride in being part of a big project, doing work the right way. (MU4, MU5)	Doing a good job even in the absence of external validation. (MU16)	Pride in custodial work in general, having pride comes naturally. (MU3, MU8)	Pride in doing a good job, felt pride when she helped a co-worker. (MU1, MU10)
MAINTAINING MEANINGFULNESS	Receiving appreciation and helping kept her going. (MU4, MU 5, MU 6)	External appreciation gave her tasks meaning. (MU4)	Ongoing appreciation made the work less draining (MU10, MU11)	Work was not meaningful without the ongoing reminder from others. (MU7)	Appreciation maintained meaning and motivated her. (MU12)	What is meaningful about the job to him is determined by others. (MU2)	Personal pride maintained meaning when the environment did not. (MU10)	A positive. individual perspective maintained meaning. (MU4)

EXPERIENCING ONGOING EXTERNAL VALIDATION OF THE SELF AND WORK	Told multiple stories of building users saying thank you and showing appreciation. (e.g. MU4, MU5, MU18).	Being acknowledged and appreciate for her impact by a building occupant. (MU2, MU3, MU8, MU10).	Received gratitude from building users. (MU3, MU4)	Received thank you gift from building occupant. (MU4)	Being remembered by building occupants during the holidays. (MU8)	Received regular gratitude from specific building user. (MU10)	Worked around appreciative building occupants. (MU4, MU5, MU6)	Received formal award and recognition. (MU2, MU10)
KINDS OF ONGOING SELF-VALIDATION OF THE SELF AND WORK	Reminded herself of the impact of the tasks on others before she completed them. (MU6, MU11)	Thought about and philosophized as to what she wanted her impact to be. (MU8)	Reminded herself that what she did was important and “good.” (MU11)	Thought about the absence of custodial work to derive meaning. (MU8)	Thought about being counted on by others. (MU6)	Philosophized about what would happen without the work. (MU3)	Reframed custodial work as a skilled craft, reaffirmed expertise needed. (MU2)	Thought about the impact of the task on the space and building users. (MU4).
HELPING OTHERS	Gave advice to a student outside of job duties, helped a student get a ride home. (MU3, MU7)	Regularly helped supervisees with frontline tasks. (MU22)	Reflected on providing a service to people as important. (MU7)	Reflected on helping people after hours. (MU3)	Described making building users happy, helping her employees. (MU15, MU20)	Communicated with building occupants beyond job requirements. (MU11)	Helped set-up new building, felt ownership over building. (MU4)	Helped and stayed with seriously injured co-worker. (MU8)
DEVELOPING POSITIVE AND PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS	Developed personal relationships with building occupants. (MU4)	Described visiting with building occupants, being with her team. (MU1, MU2, MU3, MU16).	Positively impacted by involved supervisors. (MU24)	Described getting to know a building user. (MU5)	Developed relationship with building users, served alongside her team. (MU8, MU21)	Came to know a building occupant. (MU10)	Expressed her love for a building and faculty, remembered positive supervisor. (MU2, MU3, MU4)	Described interacting with building users and empathetic supervisor. (MU21, MU23)

Note: MU = “Meaning Unit” as identified in data analysis procedures

Table 4

The Constituents of the Structure of the Experience of Meaningless Work and Their Empirical Basis for Each Subject

Constituent	Participant							
	Susan	Erin	Lisa	Tim	Sarah	Bobby	Jane	Ashley
EXPERIENCING DEGRADATION FROM OTHERS	Experienced rudeness, user “sticking nose up” at her. (MU20)	Was accused of stealing multiple times, felt stigma, saw un-acknowledgment. (MU25, 26, 27, 28)	Was ignored, looked past in hallways, experience rudeness. (MU9, MU19, MU21)	Felt seen as a “servant,” seeing the work disrespected. (MU11, MU19)	Heard former supervisor say, “a monkey could do this job.” (MU24)	Saw space disrespected by building users. (MU21)	Described that job is perceived as unskilled, feeling unappreciated. (MU2, MU14)	Experienced worthlessness, seeing work disrespected. (MU4, MU13)
LOSING A SENSE OF SELF AT WORK	Experienced negative, hurtful evaluations of her personality. (MU18)	Described feeling less than human. (MU 28)	Experienced that she was not “wanted here.” (MU21)	Had thoughts of “Why do I bother” due to experiences with others. (MU12, MU14)	Felt that her strengths were misunderstood by supervisors. (MU36)	Described feeling misunderstood by team members. (MU29, MU30)	Sensed others who did not enact her value of “work ethic.” (MU28, MU29)	“Maybe I could have done something more important in my life.” (MU13)
EXPERIENCING THREATS TO THE CRAFT OF CLEANING	Increased workload and space to clean undermined cleaning “the right way.” (MU15, MU16)	Experienced being short-staffed. (MU16)	Experienced a culture not open to innovation. (MU18)	Seeing the same mess every day and having to spend extra time cleaning it up due to building users’ behaviors. (MU15, MU16)	Being short-staffed impacted her ability to clean her building. (MU29)	Described lack of protocol for taking care of tools and space. (MU 40, 41)	Described a lack of training and overall support for doing job well. (MU27, MU28)	Described lack of staff, especially related to upkeep of machines needed for work. (MU16, MU17, MU18)

DOING REPETITIVE, PURPOSELESS TASKS	Being asked to clean bathrooms without adequate time. (MU15)	Tasks seem purposeless in absence of appreciation. (MU4)	Asked to do daily tasks that weren't necessary. (MU15, MU16)	Seeing a trash can filled right after emptying it, feeling task is pointless. (MU12)	Being short-staffed impacts ability to do the right tasks, which makes more work. (MU27)	Describing being asked to lock a door that is walked past by building users every day. (MU18)	Noticed lack of standards. (MU28)	Cleaning a space that will be dirtied by building users soon after. (MU4)
KINDS OF NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES WITH SUPERVISORS AND MANAGEMENT	Receiving critical evaluations, having her way of cleaning not honored by supervisors. (MU15, MU16, MU17)	Previous supervisor did not spend time on the frontline with employees. (MU18)	Seeing supervisors who don't do the work with the frontline employees. (MU23)	Getting formal recognition that was "hollow" or ingenuine. (MU22, MU23)	Experienced gap between "management" expertise and frontline expertise, not seeing managers on the frontline. (MU25, MU26, MU27, MU28)	Experienced supervisors not doing anything with offered feedback. (MU42)	Noticed lack of involvement from managers. (MU25, MU24)	Experienced supervisors who were not empathetic. (MU22)

Note: MU = Meaning Unit

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter is to elaborate on the findings of the descriptive phenomenological analysis of university custodians' lived experiences of meaningful work to inform future research, theory, and practice. To this end, the following discusses the main findings for each research question, proposes implications and recommendations for future research, theory, and practice, reviews the significance and contributions of the study, and accounts for its limitations.

Discussion of the Main Findings for Each Research Question

While Chapter Four revealed the major constituents and emergent structures of university custodians' lived experiences of meaningful and meaningless work, the findings were meant to be descriptive and not elaborative of the phenomena (Giorgi, 2009). The purpose of this section is to elaborate on these descriptive findings to situate them within the extant meaningful work research and theory, in order to set the context for proposing implications and recommendations for future research, theory, and practice.

Before discussing the major findings for each research question, it is important to restate the purpose and corresponding objectives of the present study which were addressed by the research questions. The purpose of this study was to address the lack of understanding of how workers in stigmatized occupations (in this case, university custodians) experience meaningfulness and what the experience of meaningfulness is like (e.g. Bailey & Madden, 2017; Lips-Wiersma et al., 2014; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Rosso et al., 2010; Shim, 2016). Further understanding could help address workers in stigmatized occupations' increased risk for negative

outcomes at work, such as disengagement, low motivation, and low satisfaction, which affect both individuals' well-being and organizational outcomes. The objectives of this study were to:

1. Better understand what the lived experience of meaningful work was like, when it was experienced, for people in a stigmatized occupation;
2. Better understand what the lived experience of meaningless work was like, when it was experienced, for people in a stigmatized occupation;
3. Explore how university custodians made and negotiated meanings in work to experience work as meaningful or meaningless;
4. Better understand the facilitating and hindering internal and external forces on the experience of meaningful work for workers in a stigmatized occupation; and
5. Inform practitioners responsible for designing work experiences that affect workers in a stigmatized occupation.

Because the aim was to understand what the experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness were like and what was happening when these phenomena occurred, a qualitative methodology enacted through a descriptive phenomenological method guided the development of the research questions. The three research questions posed to fulfill the purpose of the study were:

1. What are university custodians' lived experiences when they make meaning of their work as meaningful?
2. What are university custodians' lived experiences when they make meaning of their work as meaningless?
3. What are university custodians' experiences of making and negotiating the meanings in their work?

The following section discusses the main findings for each research question and situates those findings in existing research and theory.

Research Question 1: What are university custodians' lived experiences when they make meaning of their work as meaningful?

This research question was designed to uncover what tended to occur for university custodians when they experienced work as meaningful. The following discusses the major findings concerning this research question.

All custodians episodically experienced meaningful work. Overall, all custodians experienced their work as meaningful at one or more times. Experiencing work as meaningful was not an inclusion criterion for this study. That meaningful work was experienced by all the participants corroborated Shim's (2016) finding that meaningful work can be and is experienced within challenging conditions such as low socioeconomic status, or in this case, a stigmatized occupation. The finding that all the custodians readily recalled experiences of meaningfulness also contrasts Brief and Nord's (1990) and Rosso et al.'s (2010) assertions that it is *more* difficult to experience meaningful work in certain jobs, like blue-collar work. Furthermore, this finding reaffirms Bailey and Madden's (2017) proposition that meaningful work is not a phenomenon that only certain people can experience and access, but is something all people do and can experience at different points in their work.

When the custodians described their experiences of meaningfulness, they tended to remember and construct their recollection by piecing together multiple, separate episodes of meaningfulness that had occurred at different times in the past. The descriptive phenomenological analysis illuminated what tended to be occurring for all the custodians in the study, both internally and externally, when these "moments of meaning" or "episodes" were

described (Bailey & Madden, 2017; Shim, 2016). These “tendencies” were named as constituents in Chapter Four (listed in Tables 3 and 4 and depicted in Figure 10 in Chapter Four). The major constituents of the experience of meaningful work were: 1. Enacting a learned, positive approach to the work, 2. Having and experiencing pride in cleaning work, 3. Maintaining meaningfulness, 4. Experiencing ongoing external validation of the self and work, 5. Kinds of ongoing self-validation of the self and work, 6. Helping others, and 7. Developing positive and personal relationships.

The discussion of the rest of the major findings below is based on the synthesis of the above constituents described in detail in Chapter Four.

A positive individual approach and enacting personal values contributed to experienced meaningfulness. The “self” as a critical source of experienced meaningfulness as theorized by Rosso et al. (2010) was reaffirmed by the custodians’ descriptions of meaningfulness in work. When the participants had a generally positive approach to work and were able to enact personally held values such as “work ethic” or “helping others,” they tended to experience their work as meaningful. In general, they described developing their positive approach to work through reflecting on their upbringing, making sense of hardship and struggle through work, and having a generally appreciative attitude for having a “good” job considering those hardships.

The custodians’ positive approaches also manifested in the form of what several of the them (e.g. Bobby and Jane) described as “moral imperatives” to do the work well. These approaches were realized in moments of meaningfulness when the custodians could activate those moral imperatives in the work context. For the purposes of this study, these moral imperatives were defined as *values*, understood as “a person's principles or standards of

behavior” (Oxford Dictionary, 2019). The importance of custodians being able to enact their personal values in work to experience meaningfulness is in line with previous findings of the enactment and alignment of values being an important pathway to experiencing meaningful work (e.g. Bandura, 1989; Berg et al., 2013; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

Moreover, the custodians’ accounts of enacting an overall positive individual approach to the work corroborate the idea that an individual’s “dispositional signature,” such as a generally positive affective disposition, is an important factor in the experience of meaningful work (Lysova, Allan, Dik, Duffy, & Steger, 2019). A distinct contribution of the present study, however, is the finding that the custodians seemed to learn this positive approach or disposition over time through ongoing reflexivity, and that it appeared to be contingent upon the unique nature of custodial work and their own life story.

Personal pride, derived from the craft of “upkeep” work, made work meaningful and was a way to cope with difficult, stigmatized work. Another self-controlled source of meaningfulness for the custodians was having pride in their work. All participants used the term “pride” to describe the overall feeling of satisfaction they experienced when they did their jobs well. They often experienced this in instances where they were doing their work autonomously, either physically alone or in the absence of external validation such as gratitude or recognition. In addition, having personal pride seemed to insulate the custodians from the described difficult nature of custodial work. As indicated by several of the custodians, a sense of pride in the work was especially important in response to stigma due to the relative lack of external appreciation and value for the work that the custodians described experiencing.

For the participants, pride primarily manifested because of the nature of cleaning work as “upkeep” or “project” work, through which there was a clear and immediately visible impact of

the tasks they were doing. The custodians also described the moments in which they looked back on a space they had cleaned as meaningful. This satisfaction of reflecting back on completable work reaffirms Bailey and Madden's (2017) finding that, specifically for those who worked in a manual craft, meaningfulness occurred when an outcome was visible and actively reflected upon. The ability to see how a task fit into a completable whole brought to life the importance of task identity, a key predictor of psychological meaningfulness uncovered through the validation of Hackman and Oldham's (1976) job characteristics model.

In addition to experiencing satisfaction from reflecting on completed work, the custodians also derived pride from viewing the cleaning work as a "craft" with expertise and understood standards for excellence that could be learned, honed, and evaluated. When they were able to take ownership of a "right way" of doing the work, they experienced meaningfulness, thus supporting previous findings regarding the importance of pride tied to occupational identity in blue-collar work (Lips-Wiersma, Wright, & Dik, 2016; Lucas & Buzzanell, 2004).

From this study's findings, the experience of pride seemed contingent on the nature of the work or the occupation. For the custodians, cleaning elicited pride and was therefore inherently meaningful because they could see the before and after impact of the cleaning tasks. This may not be the case in other occupations in which work does not have a linear progression and one cannot clearly see and reflect on "completion." Furthermore, since pride seemed to be a common part of experienced meaningfulness, a future direction for research should be to understand how pride is derived from different characteristics of different occupations. This also emphasizes a pressing need to further examine whether the phenomenon of meaningful work itself is comparable across occupations.

Helping others made work meaningful. Corroborating previous research (e.g. Dik et al., 2013; Grant, 2007), this study also uncovered that service to others was a key component to the experience of meaningful work. All the custodians indicated that moments in which they could help others made work meaningful. For most of them, serving others outside and beyond their specific job descriptions and roles was especially meaningful and memorable, thus reasserting the potential important contribution of *organizational citizenship behavior* to the experience of meaningful work (Smith, Organ, & Near, 1983).

Being known and supported through positive, personal relationships made work meaningful. The participants also described how developing positive and personal relationships with building users, peers, and supervisors contributed to their experiences of meaningfulness. Relationships with peers served as a function of community-building and created a forum to process difficult aspects of the custodial work.

Relationships with supervisors contributed to the experience of meaningfulness largely because of supervisors' role in reaffirming and framing the value and importance of custodial work and the custodians themselves. Jane described having her prevailing outlook on work shaped over a decade ago when a supervisor defined the word "custodian" for her; this evidences the ability of a supervisor to "recast" stigmatized work, as theorized by Ashforth and Kreiner (2013). Jane said, "he defined the word 'custodian' and the meaning of custodian, and the custodian is somebody who takes custody of their building or their area, and has pride in their work..." The opportunity for leaders to reframe stigmatized work as important and valued, especially stigmatized work, has been speculated in prior research (e.g. Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Pratt, Pradies, & Lepisto, 2013; Podolny et al., 2005; Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Supervisors who authentically and regularly recognized and affirmed the custodians also seemed to fill a gap

in recognition from the custodians' larger community and their work, and contributed to a feeling of meaningfulness.

Finally, supervisors who were physically present and worked alongside custodians on the frontline contributed to the participants' experiences of meaningful work. While research has examined the effects of servant leadership, characterized by being with and serving employees, on work engagement (e.g. Bouckennooghe, Raja, & Matsyborska, 2014), this finding points to the need to further understand how different supervision or leadership behaviors in different occupations might influence the experience of meaningfulness (Lysova et al., 2019).

Thus far, much of the limited existing literature on the role of relationships and meaningful work has focused on the role of proximal, interpersonal relationships with co-workers or leaders in experiencing meaningfulness (e.g. Kahn, 2007; Lysova et al., 2019; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Primarily, researchers have proposed that the reason relationships contribute to perceived meaningfulness in work is that they provide the necessary social cues from others that reinforce (or disaffirm) meaningfulness in work, and that relationships with co-workers serve as a function for service to others (Colbert, Bono, & Purvanova, 2016).

However, the custodians in this study primarily referred to relationships with those *outside* of their team or occupation, such as building users or the public, as being critical to their experience of meaningfulness. Some of the participants indicated that it was "nice to have someone to talk to" (Tim & Ashley) or that being seen and acknowledged by others helped them to feel more "known," "human," or "included" (Erin). For the custodians in this study, these relationships with the people in the larger community seemed to serve as a validation of their worth and significance in the context of the stigma they described experiencing because of the nature of their occupation. As Erin explained when she reflected on her experience of

meaningfulness, “sometimes all we want is to be acknowledged.” Therefore, for workers in stigmatized occupations, having more distant yet meaningful relationships, such as with community members, may serve as an important way to mitigate the experiences of stigma and contribute to meaningfulness.

Meaningfulness was temporary, volatile, and needed to be maintained. As recent research has suggested (e.g. Bailey & Madden, 2017; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2018; Shim, 2016), the custodians in this study experienced meaningfulness as temporary. This impermanence was evidenced through the custodians’ descriptions of how their continuing experience of meaningfulness was dependent on ongoing internal and external inputs to sustain it. For example, several of the custodians overtly and verbally expressed how meaningfulness was a temporary feeling. Tim stated, “It doesn’t feel particularly meaningful without somebody reminding us of it...” Similarly, Lisa said,

I realize that what I’m doing is upkeep. I realize that if I wasn’t here, that floor would be dirty in three days, but it doesn’t feel the same, it’s not as uplifting...and for me when I receive that praise, or when I receive the thank you it’s like, “Oh, okay.” I’m re-energized.

In addition to being temporary, the experience of meaningfulness was volatile. One experience that contributed to meaninglessness could alter a custodian’s perception of his or her work seemingly instantaneously. This volatility of meaningfulness was evidenced *within* the custodians’ descriptions of meaningfulness, where they often shifted back and forth between describing meaningfulness and meaninglessness. Reviewing the empirical data in Tables 3 and 4, it is conceivable that constituents of both meaningfulness and meaninglessness could be experienced concurrently, and that the custodians could experience their work as meaningful and meaningless at the same time, depending on the constituent to which they attended in that moment. For example, the custodians could engage in a positive relationship with a building user

and feel like their work was meaningful, and then in another instant in the same hour experience a building user being rude to them, creating a perception of meaninglessness.

Furthermore, all the custodians used experiences of meaninglessness to describe meaningfulness. Erin's description below demonstrates this constant shift:

In my role, it's just usually visiting with the students. You know, once you're in there and you have a conversation with them, and they thank you. Most of them are really good. A lot of them think we're there to clean their room, take their trash out, and do certain things, but most of them...It's just nice to hear "thank you." Or acknowledge us. That's the hard part is when you're walking through the halls and they look at you and pretend they don't see you; that's really frustrating.

In this same paragraph, Erin described experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness.

Other custodians did the same. This finding is in line with Mitra and Buzzanell's (2017) proposition that how one makes meaning in work constantly shifts between the "tensional poles" of meaningfulness and meaninglessness. It also explains the depiction of the general structure of making meaning of meaningfulness and meaninglessness in work as fluid and tensional (Figure 10 in Chapter Four).

However, the participants seemed to experience a more sustained experience of meaningful work when there was a combination of ongoing elements that served to maintain meaningfulness. The custodians described externally controlled and self-controlled inputs that appeared to stabilize the experience of meaningfulness; I have termed this stabilizing function the *maintenance of meaningfulness*. The two primary inputs or ways of maintaining meaningfulness uncovered in this study were *the experience of ongoing external validation of the self and the work* and *kinds of self-validation of the self and the work*. As previously defined in Chapter Four, external validation refers to how others in their work context legitimized the custodians' own and their work's significance and worthiness, which often led to kinds of self-

validation. Self-validation referred to the ways in which custodians re-confirmed or re-established their own and their work's significance and worthiness (Crocker & Knight, 2005).

Acknowledging that meaningfulness is not a static construct and understanding what tends to be occurring when meaningfulness does manifest as more of a stable and constant experience in occupations could yield important insights into how to design work environments for *sustained meaningfulness*. The following further elaborates on external validation and self-validation as ways in which meaningfulness was maintained and sustained for the custodians in this study.

External validation from others ultimately maintained meaningfulness. While they could experience meaningful work through self-controlled means, such as a positive approach, having personal pride in the work, or the behaviors of helping others, all the custodians described that others in their environment had the most powerful impact on their ultimate perception of whether their work was meaningful or not. Bobby summarized the importance of others in defining the custodians' work as meaningful when he said, "My job is observed by other people. So, what's meaningful about it is how other people look at it." More specifically, the role others played in externally validating the worth and significance of cleaning work and the custodians themselves was a central feature of experienced meaningfulness. Specifically, receiving ongoing, formal words of gratitude and being informally acknowledged by building users and occupants were most important for the participants' experiences of meaningfulness, and served to humanize them ("It also kind of builds you up...It's like, 'Oh, I am somebody. I really am.'" (Erin)). Of secondary importance was supervisors' ongoing recognition through meaningful, formal means, such as awards and gifts, or other informal gestures, such as ongoing words of appreciation.

Overwhelmingly, studies on the experience of meaningful work have focused on the “self” as the primary determiner of the experience of meaningfulness (Rosso et al., 2010), and research on the social context has generally examined proximal interpersonal relationships with co-workers or leaders (Lysova et al., 2019). However, the present study suggests that the transient and distant relationships and interactions with others in the larger organization and public are important for maintaining meaningfulness in a stigmatized, service-based occupation, such as custodial work, that is embedded in a larger ecosystem.

Kinds of self-validation maintained meaningfulness. Another way the custodians maintained meaningfulness was through different kinds of self-validation of both themselves and their work. This supports Lips-Wiersma et al.’s (2015) finding that people participate in “role balancing” or micro, everyday adjustments to approach work to derive more meaningfulness for themselves.

The custodians validated themselves in three primary ways: regularly reminding themselves that their cleaning work was inherently meaningful, often thinking about the tasks’ impact on others, and perceiving their cleaning work as a skilled craft. These ways of self-validation are in line with the research on job crafting which has indicated that people can shift their perspectives of their tasks by focusing on their impact (Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2013; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Furthermore, these self-validation methods reflect Grant’s (2007) finding that people could change their mindsets to focus on the greater good of a task to find more motivation and meaningfulness.

While these ways of self-validation seemed important to maintaining a sense of meaningfulness, the custodians generally described them as short-lived without the validation of their and their work’s worth and significance from others. This further reaffirmed the

significance of interpersonal cues from others as validating and contributing to the experience of meaningfulness (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003).

Knowing work was meaningful was different than experiencing work as meaningful.

As previously stated, whether the participants perceived their work as meaningful or not was ultimately validated by others' perceptions and cues. This finding highlighted the difference between "knowing" the work was meaningful and "experiencing" the work as meaningful. For example, all the custodians indicated that they "knew" the cleaning work was inherently meaningful and important because of its function in the organization and society. This knowledge was also expressed through having pride, and it partially informed the custodians' generally positive approach to the work as well as the ways in which they validated themselves and their work. A dominant stream of meaningful work research focuses on ways of knowing work is meaningful through job crafting and the ability to learn and shift mindsets to experience work as more meaningful (Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2013; Grant, 2007; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

However, the custodians in this study directly indicated that knowing the work was meaningful was not enough to sustain meaningfulness, and that the experience of meaningful work was maintained only through ongoing external validation of themselves and the work by others. This may be a function of the experience of working in a stigmatized occupation, in which validation from others is more significant and needed. This finding leads to more questions regarding how others' (peers, supervisors, community, etc.) actions influence sustained meaningfulness.

In summary, all custodians had experienced work as meaningful at least once. In these cases, they tended to enact a positive approach to the work, have pride in the cleaning work, and

maintain meaningfulness through ongoing external and self-validation of the self and work. In addition, the custodians tended to experience meaningfulness when they helped others and developed positive and personal relationships. However, the experience of meaningfulness was temporary and volatile.

Research Question 2: What are university custodians' lived experiences when they make meaning of their work as meaningless?

This question was designed in response to recent calls for more inquiry into meaningful work as a tensional construct experienced in relation to, and intertwined with, the experience of meaningless work (e.g. Buzzanell & Lucas, 2013; Bailey & Madden, 2017; Cheney et al., 2008; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). The aim of this question was to understand what tended to be occurring for the custodians when they described their work as meaningless. The following discusses the major findings for this research question, which were synthesized from the five major constituents of the custodians' experience of meaningless work outlined in Chapter Four: 1. Experiencing degradation from others, 2. Losing a sense of self at work, 3. Experiencing threats to the craft of cleaning, 4. Doing repetitive, purposeless tasks, and 5. Kinds of negative experiences with supervisors and management.

Meaningless work did not mean the absence of meaning. When directed to describe a time when they had experienced meaninglessness, several of the custodians qualified their responses by indicating that they would not necessarily describe the experience as lacking meaning, but that they experienced meaningless work as “less meaningful” than meaningful work. Susan provided an example of this when she said, “I just don't feel like it's...it's meaningful, still, but I just don't feel like we're doing as good a job as what we were in the past.” Erin also illuminated this phenomenon when she described an experience of stigma: “and

that makes my life, or my job, feel, not so much meaningless, but degrading maybe...” This finding reaffirms that meaningfulness and meaninglessness may be experienced on a spectrum and not in absolute terms. Accounting for and better understanding the lived experiences within this spectrum would be a possible future path for research.

Hence, for the remainder of this discussion of the findings, *meaningless work* should be understood as work that the custodians experienced and described as being *less meaningful* than the meaningful work they depicted. The following are some of the key contributors to the experience of meaningless work.

Others were perceived as the primary source of meaninglessness. While the self was a significant part of the experience of meaningful work for the custodians, the prevailing sources of meaningless work they described were either direct interactions with other people, observations of other people, or other variables, such as tasks that they attributed to being controlled or influenced by other people. It seemed that while meaningfulness could be at least partially derived from themselves, at times independent of external validation, they predominately perceived meaninglessness as inflicted on them by others.

The most significant and universal experience of meaningless work among the custodians was being degraded by others due to the nature of their work as cleaners.

Degradation of the person and the job by others made work meaningless. Theorists have posited that the context of stigmatized occupations presents numerous unique barriers to the experience of meaningful work, including the loss of dignity because of others’ negative views of the work (e.g. Ashforth et al., 2007) and perceptions of “invisibility” in organizations (e.g. Magolda, 2016). The present study supports those findings and extends them by developing an

initial understanding of *how* those phenomena are experienced and tied to their impact on perceptions of meaninglessness.

In each of the custodians' descriptions of meaningless work, there was a reference to a time when they were either directly degraded by another person or they observed their cleaning work being disrespected by others. These "others" tended to be what Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) termed "occupational outsiders." Occupational outsiders are the broader public, or in this case building users, and have been found to play a particularly adversarial role in shaping meaningfulness in work because they can remind workers of their stigma (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2004). In this study, the custodians were reminded of their stigma through degradation manifested in experiencing implicit disregard and condescension, explicit disrespect and stigma, and seeing people disrespect the cleanliness of the buildings. These phenomena contributed to perceptions of meaninglessness.

The custodians described feeling disregarded as sensing that they were invisible or "in the way" because of informal, more covert actions from building users and occupants, such as pushing past them while they were cleaning or flippantly and loudly exclaiming "excuse me" as they walked through areas where the custodians were working. The participants described the impact of being disregarded as feeling faceless and worthless, and like the job was pointless. As Tim described, "You're kind of like the faceless entity and who cares... This is totally pointless, because nobody – nobody cares. Or it seems like no one cares."

In addition to a sense of being disregarded, the participants described condescension as when building users or occupants "stuck their nose up" at them while they were doing their work. They depicted condescension as a general feeling they sensed by how others in the space

acted when they were around. Jane said, “It’s attitude... I don’t know if I could put it into words. It’s just a feeling... ‘You are scum.’”

In addition to some of the more implicit ways of being degraded, such as being disregarded and condescended, the custodians also recounted times of explicit disrespect and stigma because of their work. Being directly called a “maid,” having doors slammed in their face, or being routinely accused of stealing building users’ objects led to feelings of personal worthlessness and dehumanization. Lisa described the effect of stigma as a constant “raking” that slowly wore her down. Other custodians expressed feeling de-humanized by disrespect and stigma. Erin said, “Just because we do what we do doesn’t mean that we don’t have a life...” This statement reflects the concept that workers occupying cleaning jobs can tend to be viewed as “personifying” the cleaning work and are therefore susceptible to being labeled as “dirty” or “less than” by others (Hughes, 1962; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, 2013). The routine stigma also seemed to have a negative impact on the participants’ self-worth and even contributed to a kind of self-stigma. As Ashley reflected on her life, she questioned its overall value: “‘Really? I’m comin’ there?’ You know, ‘Why couldn’t I have done something better with my life?’” Sarah also indicated that stigma sometimes came from what Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) called “occupational insiders,” like supervisors. In one instance, a supervisor described cleaning work by saying “we can train a monkey to do it.” This statement had a lasting impact on Sarah and her work.

Another way the custodians described themselves and their work as being degraded was through their observations of building users disrespecting the space they cleaned. They expressed feeling a sense of pointlessness and frustration when they saw building users doing things like

throwing a coffee cup on a floor that had just been waxed or dropping trash in an area where a custodian was visibly vacuuming.

Since stigma was imputed on the custodians by occupational outsiders, further sociological inquiry into the pathology of stigma of certain workers and potential interventions to mitigate stigma for workers in frontline, service-based occupations such as custodial work may be needed to allow for a sustained experience of meaningfulness in these types of occupations.

Losing a sense of self made work meaningless. The custodians also indicated that when their personality, strengths, or values were not affirmed or aligned at work and in their job, they experienced their work as meaningless. This corresponds to similar findings indicating that the fit between individuals' beliefs about their attributes or values and the work experience is positively related to meaningfulness (Scroggins, 2008, 2003; Shamir, 1991; Marsh & Hattie, 1996; May et al., 2004).

More specifically, the respondents described feeling misunderstood or being disaffirmed directly or indirectly by supervisors and peers as contributing to a loss of their sense of self at work. For Susan, that disaffirmation came when she received critical feedback on her evaluation from a supervisor that was pointed at what she believed to be core personality traits. Not being able to enact those traits in work led her to feel purposeless in life. For others, like Sarah and Bobby, losing a sense of self manifested by having what they perceived as their strengths misinterpreted negatively by supervisors or their peers.

In addition, when the custodians sensed that their values were not being enacted by others in the organization, they tended to feel like their work was meaningless. For example, when Ashley saw others complaining, she felt that her values of "pride" and a strong "work ethic"

were threatened. Similarly, Bobby described the impact of seeing others not follow protocol, a value of his, as being frustrating.

When the custodians felt that their values, strengths, and personality were not aligned at work, they indicated feeling hurt, deflated, and frustrated, pointing to what the experience of meaningless work feels like.

Experiencing threats to the craft of cleaning made work meaningless. While the participants generally indicated that having a “right way” of cleaning, or doing their work as a perfected craft, contributed to meaningfulness, they also described experiencing meaningfulness when others threatened their ability to do their work well. In their study of the experience of meaningful work among stone masons, Bailey and Madden (2017) found that having control over the delivery of their craft in terms of speed, time, and technique was important for experiencing meaningfulness. The researchers’ conclusions are in line with this study’s finding that when the custodians were not able to control the manner and quality of their craft of cleaning, they tended to experience meaningfulness.

The custodians experienced threats to the craft of cleaning when they were asked by supervisors to do the work in a way that was not up to their standards or when they did not have the resources (i.e. machines, materials) to do their work. For example, Susan explained that being asked to cover more space in less time threatened her learned way of cleaning bathrooms, which contributed to feelings of meaningfulness. Similarly, Sarah indicated that the lack of time to do adequate project work contributed to such feelings. Furthermore, Ashley and Bobby both recounted how not having tools and machines in proper working order gave rise to meaningfulness characterized by frustration, and Jane noted that the lack of ongoing training threatened her craft and thus led to feelings of meaningfulness.

These findings seem to reaffirm previous research indicating that competence in work is important to experiencing meaningful work (Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004; Rosso et al., 2010). The custodians in the present study described what experiencing a lack of competence was like and how it negatively affected their feelings of meaningfulness.

Repetitive and purposeless tasks made work meaningless. The present study also found that the custodians experienced meaninglessness when they could not see the use or usefulness of the specific tasks they were undertaking. Purposelessness of tasks was further compounded when these tasks were given and expected by supervisors to be completed regularly, or when they were tasks that others (such as building users) could do but chose not to. Research has suggested that the design of a job can have a significant effect on experienced meaningfulness (e.g. Lysova et al. 2019; Rosso et al., 2010) and that task significance or the clear line of sight to how a task has a positive impact can promote meaningful work (e.g. Grant et al., 2007; Hackman & Oldham, 1976).

From the custodians' descriptions, it seemed that a repetitive cycle of purposelessness was particularly demoralizing. This was highlighted when Lisa described her frustrating daily experience of cleaning exterior windows that would be dirtied almost immediately because the exterior lawn sprinklers were aimed toward them and splashed them. She had to continue doing the task even after providing this feedback to supervisors. Lisa also described spending hours clearing out and cleaning a room only to be told the next day that this was not necessary. For Bobby and Tim, building users made tasks feel purposeless. Bobby recalled a building user who would walk by an office door on her way out every day only to leave him to have to lock it. Tim described experiencing meaninglessness because of being asked by a building user almost daily to empty her trash can even though the larger garbage bin was mere steps away. All in all,

meaninglessness because of repetitive, purposeless tasks manifested in resentment and frustration for the custodians.

Negative experiences with supervisors and management made work meaningless.

While the influence of supervisors and management was not a prominent constituent in the experience of meaningfulness, negative experiences with them were important contributors to experienced meaninglessness. This was also the case in Bailey and Madden's (2017) study, in which bosses tended to contribute more to the experience of meaninglessness than to that of meaningfulness. In the present study, supervisors were described as direct managers, and management was described as upper management or leadership.

The kinds of negative experiences with supervisors and management that contributed to meaninglessness were sensing disconnection and feeling unsupported, and experiencing a lack of meaningful, ongoing acknowledgment from leaders. The custodians sensed disconnection and felt unsupported when supervisors were not physically present on the frontline or when a social distance was kept between them and the frontline workers. For example, for Sarah, the lack of presence in the day-to-day cleaning work created a gap in expertise that resulted in inadequate support. Jane also described that the disconnect contributed to feelings of not mattering, stating that upper management did not "come to them" anymore. "We don't matter at all," she said.

In addition, several of the custodians indicated that a lack of ongoing, genuine recognition and appreciation from supervisors and managers contributed to meaninglessness. Specifically, it appeared that more formal and scheduled recognition events or reviews gave rise to meaninglessness because they felt insincere in the context of the lack of ongoing, authentic gestures of appreciation. For example, Tim explained, "we're plugging along for months and no

one's saying a word and then it's like in your review, 'oh, you did a good job this year.'
Thanks."

In summary, meaningless work was work experienced as "less meaningful" by the custodians. It tended to be experienced when they felt degraded by others, perceived that their sense of self was disaffirmed, experienced threats to doing the cleaning work the right way, had to complete tasks with no clear purpose, and had negative experiences with supervisors and management.

Research Question 3: What are university custodians' experiences of making and negotiating the meanings in their work?

This research question was designed to uncover what was happening within the custodians' described experiences of meaningful and meaningless work. The aim was to illuminate how the custodians generally made meaning in their work to arrive at the subjective determination of meaningfulness or meaninglessness. Meaning-making was defined in this study as the ongoing, fluid processes through which the custodians seemed to sense, interpret, negotiate, and ultimately attach significance (or insignificance) to situations, events, others, objects, or discourses through the lenses of their identities, previous knowledge, and lived experiences (Bruner, 1990; Park, 2012; Perret-Clermont, Carugati, Oates, 2004; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). The following discusses the major findings for this research question.

Meaning was made in work through life and in life through work. One way the custodians made meaning in their work was by using their personal lives to make sense of how they interpreted and approached events in their work lives. Most commonly, they relied on reflections on their upbringing, influential family members, or hardships to describe their general approach to work, through which they made meaning of that work as meaningful or meaningless.

Researchers have termed such approaches “orienting systems” or “lenses,” and this study reaffirms the prior meaning-making theory that the construction of such lenses includes the negotiation of identities, previous knowledge, and lived experience (Bruner, 1990; Perret-Clermont et al., 2004).

As previously discussed, the participants in this study also relied on the alignment and enactment of personal values in work to make meaning of their work as meaningful. Park (2010) called these personal values “global meaning.” The findings in this study suggest that the custodians subjectively and actively made meaning in their work by negotiating this sense of global meaning (their own values and sense of self) with their situation (the work and its context). It seemed that part of the experience of meaningfulness or meaninglessness was tied to whether the situation reaffirmed or disaffirmed their previously held values, or global meanings.

However, the study did not phenomenologically direct inquiry toward the phenomenon of meaning-making specifically. Therefore, a deeper understanding of the nuances of this process in relation to current meaning-making theory is needed.

The meaning of work could be different than meaning in work. In their descriptions, the participants also highlighted a difference between the meaning in work and the meaning of work. The *meaning of work* generally refers to the society or individual’s value of work or employment itself, and *meaning in work* to the subjective experience of meaning within a work context (Chalofsky, 2003 2009; Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009; Dik, Byrne, & Steger, 2013; Harpaz & Fu, 2002; MOW International Research Team, 1987; Schnell et al., 2013). All the custodians indicated that they initially worked primarily to earn a paycheck and to have security. Thus, the *meaning of work* more globally seemed to be security. However, all the participants described their work as meaningful (meaning in work) for reasons other than security and pay. In fact, none

of them indicated that meaning in work was derived through additional monetary reward or benefits – the reason they indicated they were in the job. It seemed that while they may have worked for security, it was not why they *wanted* to come to work, which seemed to be derived from meaningfulness.

Tim summarized this directly: “that’s why people are working here [pay and benefits], but it’s not the reason why people want to come to work.” Further investigation into how meanings of work and meanings in work for employees differ may be important to more fully understand the meaningful work construct.

Meaningfulness and meaninglessness were intertwined and could be experienced together. Another significant finding in this study was that experiences of meaninglessness were employed to delineate experiences of meaningfulness and vice versa. As previously stated, all participants included references to both phenomena within single descriptions. This finding reaffirms Mitra and Buzzanell’s (2017) proposition that the experience of meaningfulness and meaninglessness are tensional and seem to exist and co-exist on a spectrum. The intertwined nature of meaningfulness and meaninglessness uncovered through the custodians’ descriptions also corroborates Bailey and Madden’s (2017) finding that a job could be both meaningful and meaningless, depending on which part of their experience the custodian was attending to.

The participants’ descriptions in this study and the constituents of the experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness illuminated how this simultaneous experience could occur. For example, a custodian could experience meaningfulness through personal pride in his or her work, and at the same time experience meaninglessness because of a degrading comment from a building user or an ongoing negative experience with a supervisor. How the custodians attached meaningfulness or meaninglessness to their work in the moment seemed to correspond to the

experience to which they were cognitively attending, or be due to their overall experience consisting of more constituents of meaningfulness or vice versa.

Of significance was this study's depiction of the typical events relating to meaningfulness and meaninglessness. Further research on when and how these events overlap or change would add important context to better understand when meaningfulness and meaninglessness are more likely to occur (Bailey et al., 2019).

Meaning could shift quickly and was volatile and fluid. Finally, and as previously discussed, meaning was a volatile and fluid phenomenon for the custodians in this study. Given the constituents of the experience of meaningful work and meaningless work, a custodian could experience a moment that produced a feeling of meaningfulness, while the very next moment could contribute to meaninglessness. This manifested in the structure of the custodians' descriptions. For example, in many instances, described experiences of meaningfulness were interrupted by described experiences of meaninglessness.

In other words, the experience of meaningfulness was tenuous and unstable without internal or external inputs to maintain or stabilize it. The finding that meaningfulness and meaninglessness were ever-changing for the custodians supports emerging research suggesting that the experience of meaning-making and of meaningful work may be tensional and negotiated through everyday work processes, rather than something that is guaranteed to be statically and stably experienced for the long term (Buzzanell & Lucas, 2013; Cheney, Zorn, Planalp, & Lair, 2008; Mitra and Buzzanell, 2017). This finding has significant implications for practice in terms of how and when the experience of meaningfulness in work is assessed and how environments are designed to elicit the experience of meaningfulness.

Implications and Recommendations for Research, Theory, and Practice

By exploring the process of how meaningfulness manifested for people in a stigmatized and understudied occupation (Blustein, 2011; Magolda, 2016), this study further revealed the complex, multi-level, nuanced, and tension-laden nature of the meaningful work construct (Bailey, Yeoman, Madden, Thompson, & Kerridge, 2019). As the interest in meaningful work research, theory-building, and practical workplace interventions continues to grow (Bailey et al., 2019; Lysova et al., 2019), and diversified fields such psychology, sociology, philosophy, and human resource development (HRD) continue to undertake inquiry into meaningful work, several key implications from this qualitative, phenomenological study can help guide future research, theory, and practice.

The conceptual framework in Chapter Two depicted how a process approach to studying the experience of meaningful work could complement the existing dominant research which has investigated this construct from a factorial approach. The framework posited that social and cultural forces, occupational context, individual characteristics, job characteristics, and organizational practices may contribute to a meaning-making process that results in the subjective attachment of meaningfulness or meaninglessness to meanings made in work. The following implications and the corresponding recommendations for research, theory, and practice are informed by reflecting on the conceptual framework considering this completed study.

Implications for Research

Recent literature reviews have shown that there is limited qualitative research investigating individuals' processes of experiencing meaningful work (e.g. Bailey et al., 2019; Rosso et al., 2010). While the present study added to the understanding of how the phenomena of meaningfulness, meaninglessness, and meaning-making manifest in a stigmatized occupation, it

also illuminated the need for more research into the lived experience of these phenomena in various occupational contexts while accounting for individual and social identities. Reflecting on the conceptual framework, this study highlighted several important individual-specific (i.e. identity, hardship, upbringing) and occupation-specific (i.e. stigma, manual work) inputs to the experiences of meaningfulness, meaninglessness, and meaning-making. However, given its aims and method, this study was primarily concerned with understanding the phenomena and not the experiencer.

Therefore, an important pathway for future research is to attend to and account for the unique occupational and individual characteristics that may contribute to the experiences of meaningfulness, meaninglessness, and meaning-making. This study and others have indicated that individual characteristics such as values and disposition may have an association with experiencing meaningful work (Lysova et al., 2019; Rosso et al., 2010). It would be valuable to understand how these values and dispositions come to be constructed and shaped through the occupational context while considering personal and social identities. In addition, since this study uncovered unique barriers to the experience of meaningful work for people in a stigmatized occupation (i.e. degradation by others), more research into the experience of meaningful work in other understudied or potentially socially stigmatized occupations is needed.

Second, given the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the construct of meaningful work in the context of the literature's fragmentation (Lysova et al., 2019), more research, both qualitative and quantitative, is needed to explore the lived experience of meaninglessness and to explain the factors that contribute to its experience. Most of the meaningful work research to date has focused on one side of the phenomenon of meaning-making in work: meaningfulness. However, as uncovered in the present study and others (Bailey

& Madden, 2017; Lips-Wiersma & Wright, 2012; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017), making meaning of work as meaningful seems to rely on making meaning of work as meaningless and other states in between. To uncover a fuller picture of the construct of meaningful work, it will be important to continue to explore how certain qualities of individual, job, organizational, and societal forces relate to the experience of meaningless work.

Achieving a fuller picture of the experienced spectrum of the phenomena of meaningfulness and meaninglessness will also require more constructivist and interpretivist research using meaning-making and sensemaking approaches (Lysova et al, 2019; Schnell et al., 2013). The present study directly attended to meaningfulness and meaninglessness and considered meaning-making by interpreting those phenomena. The findings of this study revealed numerous qualities of meaning-making itself (i.e. contextuality, its shifting nature) which impacted how and when the experience of meaningful or meaningless work manifested. However, more focused inquiry is needed into the specific phenomenon of meaning-making in work and how particular inputs affect its process and outcomes. In particular, one of the major findings of this study was that meaningfulness was volatile, temporary, and fluid. Understanding meaning-making in work more deeply could further our understanding of how the tensions among the various researched forces and factors are negotiated and could illuminate tendencies in how and when certain factors manifest to construct the experience of meaningfulness or meaninglessness.

In addition, since one of the findings of the present study was that meaningfulness was short-lived without internal and external inputs maintaining its experience, further examination of what most contributes to *sustained* meaningfulness is warranted. There are opportunities in the

meaningful work literature for longitudinal qualitative and quantitative research to uncover the relationships between certain factors of meaningfulness and its longevity.

Third, there are important opportunities to better understand how *each* input in the conceptual framework specifically contributes to meaning-making processes and to the experience of meaningfulness or meaninglessness. Like in this study's conceptual framework, through a multi-level review of the literature, Lysova et al. (2019) categorized these inputs of experienced meaningfulness as individual-level, job-level, organization-level, and societal-level factors. In the present study, individual-level, job-level, and societal-level inputs had a greater impact on the participants' experiences of meaningfulness, while the organization-level and societal-level primarily impacted their experiences of meaninglessness. Therefore, to inform practice, it will be important for more research to examine how different qualities of relationships and behaviors and styles of leaders/supervisors (organization-level) contribute to both meaningfulness and meaninglessness.

In addition, much of the research on relationships' impact on the experience of meaningful work has centered on relationships with proximal co-workers and leaders inside the occupation (e.g. Colbert, Bono, & Purvanova, 2016; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). However, the present study found that for workers in a stigmatized occupation, more transient and distant relationships and interactions with the public had a pronounced impact on experienced meaningfulness. Therefore, expanding research is needed to better understand the impact of these more societal and macro-organizational relationships on meaningfulness, especially in stigmatized occupations.

Finally, in this study, stigma was found to contribute to the experience of meaninglessness and was a significant input in the custodians meaning-making process.

Specifically, stigma was most often imputed on the custodians by the public. While individuals deployed various coping mechanisms (i.e. relying on a positive, personal approach), further understanding of how organizational-level and societal-level inputs can mitigate the experience of societal stigma is needed. One important area of inquiry in the context of stigmatized occupations should be how specific leader and supervisor behaviors affect the lived experience of stigma. Furthermore, more research should examine how organizational practices such as socialization can affect how individuals cope with stigma. Finally, studies are also needed to determine how interventions can address experienced stigma for workers such as custodians at the societal/public level.

Implications for Theory

The major informing theories used in this study sensitized my inquiry into the inputs, meaning-making processes, and conceptualizations of meaningful and meaningless work. Ashforth and Kreiner's (1999) *normalization model* shaped the occupational lens (stigmatized work) through which the process of making meaning in work as meaningful was situated. Park's (2010) *meaning-making model* helped to frame my delineation of how the participants' personal approach to work (global meaning) interacted with the work context (situational meaning) to influence the experience of meaningfulness, while Wrzesniewski et al.'s (2003) *interpersonal sensemaking model of work meaning* sensitized me attend to the relational parts of the phenomena of meaningful and meaningless work. To inform my understanding of what the phenomenon of meaningful work "was," I relied on Steger et al.'s (2009) *three-facet conceptualization of meaningful work*, Rosso et al.'s (2010) *four pathways to meaningful work*, and Chalofsky's (2003) conceptual model of the construct of meaningful work.

While constructing and framing this implications section, I also relied on Lysova et al.'s (2019) integrative multi-level framework of factors fostering meaningful work (i.e. individual-level, job-level, organization-level, societal-level) to contextualize and situate the constituents of meaningful work uncovered in this study. Upon reflecting on the findings of this study in relation to the theoretical framework, several general modifications to the employed theories emerged, along with implications for future theory.

First, as stated in the implications for research, this study identified many contextual nuances that seemed to contribute to the experience of meaningful work. The participants described meaningfulness in the context of their everyday work practice. Many existing theories, including those used to inform this study, are largely conceptually driven (Bailey et al., 2019; Korte & Mercurio, 2018). Therefore, there is room for more empirical, inductive, and local theory-building on how the factors and outcomes of meaningful work interrelate with the various and sometimes specific individual and occupational nuances *in practice*. Such practice-driven theory might be beneficial for informing interventions that can foster meaningful work and develop a closer connection between the academic research and practitioners in organizations (Korte & Mercurio, 2018).

Second, much of the extant literature favors the notion that meaning-making and the experience of meaningfulness is primarily a subjective, individual phenomenon, and has thus emphasized the individual perspective of meaningful work (Bailey et al., 2019; Rosso et al., 2010). Given this study's findings regarding the impact of others and the larger organization and society on the experience of meaninglessness and meaningfulness, more theory is needed which includes other-based, societal, and community influences on the experience of meaningful and meaningless work. Echoing Bailey and Madden's (2017) findings, more sociologically oriented

theory may help fill this void in understanding the social nature of meaning-making and meaningful work.

Moreover, in line with Rosso et al.'s (2010) findings, this study uncovered multiple personal, organizational, and societal tensional forces simultaneously at play in the participants' experiences of meaningful work. Drawing on Lysova et al.'s (2019) identification and categorization of the many factors contributing to the experience of meaningful work, more integrative theory that focuses on the interplay among these various factors would add to a more holistic understanding of meaningful work, as others have called for (e.g. Chalofsky, 2003, 2009).

When conducting this study, I found a lack of meta-analytic model-building to aid me in understanding the nature and strength of relationships among varying factors theorized to contribute to the experience of meaningful work. Such quantitative meta-analytic model-building could be useful to provide a direction for future research.

Finally, this study reaffirmed Bailey and Madden's (2017) proposition that meaningfulness is linked with temporality. More integrative theory-building which accounts for and conceptualizes the nature and relationship of time with meaning-making, meaningfulness, and meaninglessness would be valuable in better understanding and directing future inquiry into how time affects the phenomena.

Implications for Practice

Several suggestions and recommendations for practice emerged from this study. First, both the literature review and the findings of this study reaffirmed that the experience of meaningfulness has the potential to influence positive perceptions of the self and work, while increasing a sense of motivation and joy. Though all participants indicated that they worked

primarily for security, all of them also expressed that they experienced their work as meaningful at various times. This has implications for leaders' own conceptualizations of employees, especially in lower-wage, frontline, and stigmatized occupations. Namely, while people in these jobs may initially work because they need a paycheck, the present study indicated that this may not be *why* the workers want to come to their jobs and how they want to *feel* once they are there. This study supports the suggestion that all people seem to search for meaning in work, and that all people in all jobs may be able to access it (Rosso et al., 2010).

In addition, for workers in a stigmatized occupation, the experience of meaningfulness seems to be an important contributor to mediating the difficult and sometimes degrading nature of their work. On the other hand, the experiences that contribute to meaninglessness seem to enhance stigma's negative influence. Therefore, for leaders in organizations, understanding what makes work meaningful or less meaningful for people may be an important starting point to create positive working conditions that foster the experience of meaningfulness to mitigate the experience of stigma.

Relatedly, in this study, the experience of meaningfulness was partly maintained through the intervention of externally controlled forces: ongoing gratitude, genuine acknowledgment, positive and personal relationships, and experiences with leaders who reaffirmed pride in the work and redefined stigmatized work. In other words, a feeling of meaningfulness depended on more than singular, disparate interventions and was not largely "up to the individual." Therefore, to create the conditions for the experience of sustained meaningfulness, it may be important to ensure that practices that reaffirm the worth and significance of both the worker and the work is embedded and enacted within supervisory and leadership roles as well as within team and organizational cultures and climates.

Third, the experience of meaninglessness was tied to external forces, such as how workers were negatively treated and degraded by others outside of the occupational context. This has implications for leaders or supervisors in stigmatized occupations. Namely, improving our understanding of how employees may be better equipped and socialized to respond to stigma is an important area for leaders and supervisors in stigmatized occupations to explore. Moreover, opportunities for education and normalization of the work for the broader community interacting with the workers may be a significant subject for future practitioners.

Finally, several job design elements (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) were identified as contributing to the experience of meaninglessness in this study. Specifically, when the custodians had to do repeated tasks which they perceived as purposeless because they could not see the positive impact or usefulness of the task, they experienced meaninglessness. They also experienced this when they were asked to do their work in a way that was incompatible with their quality standards. Therefore, ensuring that jobs and tasks are designed with a clear line of sight to their purpose and that tasks are regularly reviewed with input from workers to determine their value would likely result in increased perceptions of meaningfulness.

Significance and Contributions of this Study

Principally, this study has added to the limited body of qualitative research investigating the lived experience of meaningful work (Bailey et al., 2019; Rosso et al., 2019; Shim, 2016). In addition, by seeking to understand the experience of meaningless work and meaning-making as they relate to the experience of meaningfulness, this inquiry provided insights into the tensional spectrum of the meanings made in work and the numerous contributors to the experiences of meaningfulness, meaninglessness, and meaning-making. The descriptive phenomenological method used to uncover and elicit the described experiences from the participants also

illuminated and clarified more general tendencies in what was occurring both internally and externally when the phenomena were experienced (Giorgi, 2009).

Given the fragmentation of the current understanding of the meaningful work construct (Rosso et al., 2010; Lysova et al., 2019), one of the main strengths of implementing a descriptive phenomenological method was that the phenomena, as they appeared, were identified, defined, and clarified (Giorgi, 2009; Wertz, 2011). The study provides an additional example for future researchers of how a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon such as meaningful work can be qualitatively studied.

Furthermore, this study investigated the lived experience of an understudied, stigmatized occupational type (Bolton & Houlihan, 2009; Grandy et al., 2014) and will hopefully spur further interest in such marginalized occupational types in HRD and organizational development research. According to Grandy et al. (2014), stigmatized workers have remained under-investigated due to the focus of academic research on “modern, clean, and value-adding” professions which are commonly tied to research funding, and because the status of stigmatized occupations makes accessing research participants difficult due to challenging work sites and the hours of employees (Simpson, Slutskaia, Hughes, & Simpson, 2012; Southgate & Shying, 2014; Sanders-McDonagh, 2014). However, with over 58% of the American workforce residing in lower-wage service work (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014), it seems imperative to continue studying the experiences of these occupations.

The most significant findings in response to the first research question reaffirm that meaningfulness is accessible and experienced regularly in stigmatized occupations, and that it is a temporary phenomenon that is constructed and maintained through both internal and external inputs. Regarding the second research question, the most significant findings illuminate how the

experience of meaninglessness manifests, and suggest that meaninglessness may be tied to the experience of meaningfulness, that stigma and the larger social context of the organization may contribute to the experience of meaninglessness, and that the absence of previously uncovered characteristics of job design also plays a role in this experience. Finally, the findings addressing the third research question most significantly demonstrate that meaning is made in work through life and in life through work, that meaning is a tenuous and volatile phenomenon in work, and that meaningfulness and meaninglessness are sometimes contested, simultaneously experienced phenomena.

Finally, the meaningful work literature, specifically in HRD, has been largely conceptually driven and therefore benefits from this empirical research.

Limitations of this Study

One of the limitations of this study was that the phenomena were investigated within a small cohort of university custodians at one university. Therefore, applying generalizations to all stigmatized workers or all university custodians was not possible, nor was it the goal of this exploratory phenomenological study. In addition, while it was assumed that all participating custodians had experienced meaningfulness at least once (e.g. Bailey & Madden, 2017; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2018), more understanding and exploration of what meaningfulness or meaninglessness *meant* to these individuals would have been enriching and would have helped to better contextualize their descriptions. Moreover, the descriptive phenomenological method is designed to focus and attend deeply to phenomena – a strength of the method – and not necessarily to “the experiencer” (Giorgi, 2009; Wertz, 2011). Therefore, future inquiry that focuses on the nuances of meaning-making for individuals considering their personal and social identities would be valuable.

Furthermore, the participants had different roles (i.e. some were “leads” or supervisors) and varying tenures. The chosen method precluded accounting for the role of these other factors in the custodians’ experiences in favor of a more general understanding of how the phenomena occurred. While free imaginative variation prompted me to consider whether constituents of the phenomena could be reasonably transferable to the other custodians, thereby leading me to remove those that I thought were related to specific individual attributes, it is both conceivable and likely that in such a small cohort, some unique individual characteristics and lived experiences influenced the described and analyzed experiences. Therefore, complementary research on these varying factors is encouraged and welcomed.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the major findings for each research question guiding this descriptive phenomenological inquiry into the lived experience of meaningful work in a stigmatized occupation. It then explored implications and recommendations for research, theory, and practice, examined the significance and contributions of the study, and reflected on its limitations.

Building upon Bailey and Madden’s (2017) and Shim’s (2016) findings, this study showed that the experience of meaningful work was readily accessible in a stigmatized, blue-collar occupation. In addition, while the participants indicated that they worked primarily for security, none included this extrinsic reward in their description of how they experienced meaningfulness in their work. This suggests that the meaning *of* work for someone may be different from the meaning he or she derives *in* work (meaningfulness). Having a positive approach to work, being able to enact personal values, having pride, helping others, and developing positive and personal relationships tended to make work meaningful. However, the

experience of meaningful work was not sustained without ongoing external and self-validation of the work's worth and significance.

Further, experiencing degradation from others, losing a sense of self, facing threats to the craft of cleaning, doing purposeless tasks, and having negative encounters with supervisors and management could make work less meaningful or meaningless for the custodians. Perhaps most prominently, negative and stigmatizing interactions with more transient and distant occupational outsiders made work especially meaningless for the participants, showing the power of the larger ecosystem on stigmatized workers' experiences of meaningfulness.

In addition, this study supported Mitra and Buzzanell's (2017) proposition that meaningful work is a tensional and fluid phenomenon. Experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness were often intertwined and could be experienced together depending on what parts or experiences of the job the custodians attended to. Thus, this study further demonstrated the tensional and fluid nature of the experience of meaningful work.

As stated in Chapter One, the problem that necessitated this study was that workers in stigmatized occupations, such as custodial work, may be more at risk for negative outcomes, such as disengagement, low motivation, and low satisfaction, thereby negatively affecting organizational results. The emerging research on the experience of meaningful work demonstrated many positive effects of this phenomenon, such as increased engagement, motivation, and satisfaction, but the understanding of how meaningful work is experienced, specifically in the context of stigmatized work, was limited.

I responded to this problem by examining how university custodians experienced meaningful work with the goal of adding needed empirical, qualitative research to the body of meaningful work literature. In addition, this study has contributed knowledge on the lived

experience of an often invisible and understudied population of workers to the existing literature base.

This inquiry found that the experience of meaningful work was both accessible to a population of workers in a stigmatized occupation and important for experiencing motivation and overall positive emotions at work and in life. In addition, the employed descriptive phenomenological approach allowed for the identification and depiction of the key parts of the experience of meaningful work for the university custodians, thus clarifying how meaningful work may be experienced. The study also explored and clarified what meaningless work was and illuminated the volatile and tensional nature of meaning-making in work.

Perhaps most importantly, this study sought to inform those with the power to design university custodians' work environments about what contributes to the experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness in work. Ultimately, the goal was to help practitioners create the conditions for fulfillment and improve these workers' lives. In this context, it is important to highlight that this study found that university custodians experienced meaninglessness in work largely because of the stigma attached to them by others, mainly the public, due to the nature of their work. In their descriptions, the custodians indicated that this experience of meaninglessness "hurt," felt "degrading," and was "deflating." As a researcher, some of the described experiences of meaninglessness were difficult to gather and analyze. Yet, I am reflective of the power of research and appreciative of this study's participants for providing data that may help to shift the narrative and inform the practices of those who lead, interact with, or are served by workers, like custodians, who often do the unseen work of maintaining the function of society and our institutions. I am also hopeful that my fellow researchers will continue to study these important occupations.

Finally, for the participants in this study, their work served to make sense of personal hardships, make meaning of their personal lives, and enact their values. It was also a way for them to help and contribute to others through a learned and prideful craft. This study thus showed that work continues to serve as a critical context through which meaning is made of life itself. Work is perhaps our commonest experience as human beings. Therefore, continued research into how that experience can be rendered meaningful in all occupations is needed.

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APPENDIX A: CONSENT TO PARTICIPANT IN RESEARCH STUDY

TITLE OF STUDY: *The Lived Experience of Meaningful Work in a Stigmatized Occupation: A Descriptive Phenomenological Inquiry*

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: *Thomas Chermack, PhD, School of Education, Thomas.Chermack@ColoState.edu*

CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: *Zachary Mercurio, M.S., PhD Candidate, School of Education, Zachary.Mercurio@ColoState.edu*

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH? *You are being selected to participate in this research study because you are employed as a “Custodian” at Colorado State University.*

WHO IS DOING THE STUDY? *Zachary Mercurio, PhD Candidate, School of Education*

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY? *The study is designed to better understand the work experiences of custodians at Colorado State University. Specifically, the study seeks to understand what parts of the job custodians perceive as meaningful.*

WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST? *Your interview will last about an hour at a location agreed upon by you and the investigator. You will have the option to review and provide feedback on the findings but this is not required.*

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO? *You will be asked to participate in an interview with the researcher where you will be asked questions about your work experiences – both positive and negative.*

ARE THERE REASONS WHY I SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY? *If you are not employed as a “Custodian” at Colorado State University, you should not take part in this study. If an interview time cannot be scheduled that does not interfere with your ability to fulfill your employment responsibilities, you should not participate.*

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?

It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researcher(s) have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY? *The study may benefit you by helping you identify which parts of your job are meaningful as well as providing valuable information that may improve the work environments for others in similar positions as Custodians.*

APPENDIX A: CONSENT TO PARTICIPANT IN RESEARCH STUDY, CONTINUED

DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY? *Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.*

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT I GIVE? *We will keep private all research records that identify you, to the extent allowed by law.*

For this study, we will assign a code name (a name that is not your own) to your data so that the only place your name will appear in our records is on the consent form and in our records. Only the investigator will have access to the records and will not disclose this to anyone else. Your supervisors, fellow employees, or any other persons outside of the research team will not have access to your data or information about your participation.

The only exceptions to this are if we are asked to share the research files for audit purposes with the CSU Institutional Review Board ethics committee, if necessary.

When we write about the study to share with other researchers, we will write about the combined information we have gathered. You will not be identified in these written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private.

WILL I RECEIVE ANY COMPENSATION FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

There is no compensation for participation in this study.

WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the investigator, Zachary Mercurio at Zachary.Mercurio@ColoState.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at: RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu; 970-491-1553. We will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.

WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW? *To facilitate data collection, your interview will be audio-recorded. Only the investigator will have access to the recordings, which will be held in a password-protected file. All recordings will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed by a professional transcriber who will have no access to any identifying information.*

After participation, you will be contacted by the investigator(s) to review the general findings of the research and provide feedback. If you are interested in reviewing the findings, please check the below:

APPENDIX A: CONSENT TO PARTICIPANT IN RESEARCH STUDY, CONTINUED

- I would like to be contacted to have the opportunity to review and provide feedback on the findings.*

By signing, you acknowledge that you have read the information stated and willingly sign this consent form. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing 2 pages.

Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study

Date

Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

Name of person providing information to participant

Date

Signature of Research Staff

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Study: THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF MEANINGFUL WORK IN A STIGMATIZED OCCUPATION: A DESCRIPTIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY

Interview Protocol

Interviewee (Name and Title):

Interviewer:

Date: _____ **Time:** _____ **Location:** _____

Planned/Actual Length: 60 minutes / _____

Introductory Protocol

Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. I selected you to speak with me because you serve as a custodian here at _____. This research project is seeking to better understand the experience of being a custodian.

This study does not aim to evaluate your specific experience, your employment status, or your performance. Rather, I am trying to learn more about your experiences as you describe them. There will be no identifying information in the published results that will identify you and your responses are anonymous and confidential.

Also, please know that you may opt out of this study at any time, for any reason, either during this interview or after the interview and any data collected from you will be destroyed.

You will also be free to review the results and make changes to your provided data at any time.

Thank you again for participating.

Audio Recording

To facilitate our note-taking, I would like to audio record our conversation today. For your information, only I will be privy to the recordings which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. I also want you to know that all information will be held confidential, your participation is voluntary, and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and the study does not intend to inflict any harm. We have planned this interview to last no longer than 90 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that we would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL, CONTINUED

Section A. Interviewee Background

To get started, I'd like to ask a few questions about your background.

1. How long have you been in your present position? At this institution?
2. How did you come to be employed as a custodian here?

PROBE: What are some of the specific reasons you pursued this position versus others?

3. What has led you to stay in your job?

Section B. The Description of Meaningfulness

1. Please describe a situation when you thought of your work as meaningful, whatever that means to you. Be sure to choose a situation that you can remember clearly and one that occurred in your everyday work. Try to describe the situation with as much detail as possible.

PROBE: Can you tell me a bit more about the situation? When exactly was it? What exactly were you doing? Exactly what happened? Who was around? What were the others doing?

2. How did it feel when you thought of your work as meaningful?

PROBE: What specific emotions do you remember feeling?

3. What were the kinds of thoughts you had when you were thinking of your work as meaningful?

PROBE: What, specifically, do you remember thinking?

4. Now that we've discussed that situation, can you think of other specific times in your everyday work when you felt and thought the same way – that your work was meaningful?

PROBE: Can you tell me a bit more about those situations? Who was there? What were others doing? When was it? Exactly what happened? What were you doing?

PROBE TWO: What parts of those situations do you think had the most effect on you thinking your work was meaningful?

5. How did these situations affect your work as a custodian? What impact did they have on your own life?

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL, CONTINUED

Section C. The Description of Meaninglessness

Thank you for your responses. Now, we're going to shift to talking about some times where maybe your work wasn't so meaningful, yet the structure of the questions will remain the same. Again, make sure to try to be as detailed as possible in your description.

1. Please describe a situation when you thought of your work as meaningless, whatever that means to you. Again, be sure to choose a situation that you can remember clearly and one that occurred in your everyday work. Try to describe the situation with as much detail as possible.

PROBE: Can you tell me a bit more about the situation? When exactly was it? Exactly what happened? Who was around? What exactly were you doing?

2. How did it feel when you thought of your work as meaningless?

PROBE: What specific emotions do you remember feeling?

3. What were the kinds of thoughts you had when you were thinking of your work as meaningless?

PROBE: What, specifically, do you remember thinking?

4. Now that we've discussed that situation, can you think of other specific times in your everyday work when you felt and thought the same way – that your work was meaningless?

PROBE: Can you tell me a bit more about those situations? Who was there? What were others doing? When was it? Exactly what happened? What were you doing?

PROBE TWO: What parts of those situations do you think had the most effect on you thinking your work was meaningless?

5. How did these situations affect your work as a custodian? What impact did they have on your own life?

**APPENDIX C: EXCERPT OF DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS FOR MEANING UNIT
TRANSFORMATIONS IN ONE TRANSCRIPT**

Meaning Units	Transformation 1	Transformation 2	Emerging Constituents
MU1: I really enjoy it. I enjoy the students. I enjoy most of the students, I should say. I mean I don't know. I think it just keeps me young; I'm not sure. I enjoy it. I like to come to work every day. I like all my co-workers, my staff, the front desk staff. I wake up happy to come to work. Nine times out of 10.	P2 describes that she enjoys the students the most in her job. She says it keeps her young. P2 also says she likes coming to work each day because of her co-workers and fellow staff and that she wakes up happy to come to work most of the time.		The students (building occupants) bring the most enjoyment to the job. The importance of others
MU2: There's a lot. I think just the students are pretty grateful for what we do. I did have a girl one time go on vacation for Christmas, and she came back and she was like, "I missed you so much," and I said, "Oh, that's nice," and she said, "I had to clean my own bathroom when I went home." She said, "I'm not used to that." She's like, "I really appreciate everything that you do for us." You know, little comments like that. You know, they don't throw us a parade or anything, but it's just acknowledging, thanking. I mean that's all we really want is to be acknowledged.	P2 indicates that there are a lot of moments of meaningfulness. She describes that students are grateful for what they do. P2 then describes that a student in a residence hall came back after a break and told her that she missed her because she had to clean her own bathroom. P2 describes that the student told her she appreciated everything that P2 did for them. P2 describes that comments like that are meaningful. P2 describes that all custodians want is to be acknowledged.	P2 indicates that there have been a lot of moments that have brought her meaningfulness. She indicates that when the building occupants show appreciation and are grateful it results in feelings of meaningfulness. P2 indicates that custodians want to be acknowledged.	Difficult to pick out one moment of meaningfulness Receiving verbal appreciation and gratitude by building occupants is meaningful Being acknowledged by others is meaningful
MU3: In my role, it's just usually visiting with the students. You know, once you're in there and you have a conversation with them, and they thank you. Most of them are really good. A lot of them think we're there to clean their room, take their trash out, and do certain things, but most of them...It's just nice to hear "thank you." Or acknowledge us. That's the hard part is when you're walking through the halls and they look at you and pretend they don't see you; that's really frustrating.	P2 describes that meaningfulness comes from having conversations and visiting with students and having them say thank you. P2 describes that she thinks that the building occupants/students think that they're just there to clean the rooms, but that it's nice to hear them say thank you. P2 then juxtaposes that experience with when the students/occupants look at her and her fellow custodians and pretend not to see them, P2 says that feels really frustrating.	P2 describes that getting to know students/occupants and hearing gratitude is meaningful. P2 then reflects that it is hard and frustrating when her and her fellow custodians don't get acknowledged.	Getting to know building occupants is meaningful Reflecting on meaningfulness by reflecting on times of frustration or meaninglessness Not being acknowledged produces feelings of frustration
MU4: You know, I don't know. I don't know if I think, "Oh, man, I just cleaned this toilet and I'm so happy that they're gonna sit on a clean pot." You know? I don't know. I think a lot of the times it's just more the thanking and the appreciation of it.	P2 says that she doesn't think of the specific task as meaningful all of the time, but that it is the thanking and appreciation of doing the task that is meaningful.	P2 describes that others' appreciation of the task gives it meaningfulness.	Tasks are not as inherently meaningful when the impact on others is unclear Others' appreciation of the task makes it meaningful
MU5: When they appreciate and don't think that we are there to serve them. There's a difference of doing what we do, and then being there to serve them, and a lot of them think that we're there to serve them. Then, the ones that appreciate what you do are the ones that you appreciate, and they're thanking you for helping them or taking care of them; and their parents, when they come to visit, they introduce you to their parents, and that type of stuff.	P2 describes that when the students/occupants appreciate them instead of thinking of them as there to serve them, it's meaningful. P2 describes that she thinks a lot of the students see her and her custodians as there to serve them, but some appreciate their work and thank them for helping them and taking care of them. P2 then describes getting to meet some of the students' parents.	P2 describes that the perceptions others' have on the work has an impact on her experience of meaningfulness.	The perceptions others have on custodial work (servant vs. caretaker) can have an impact on meaningfulness

**APPENDIX C: EXCERPT OF DATA ANALYSIS PROCESS FOR MEANING UNIT
TRANSFORMATIONS IN ONE TRANSCRIPT, CONTINUED**

<p>MU6: I don't get that much anymore because I'm not on the floor with them all the time; but like I said, today I'm short of staff, so I was in bathrooms with my staff this morning, and I enjoy it.</p>	<p>P2 describes that since moving into a supervisor position she doesn't get as much direct appreciation because she is not on the floors of the building. She then describes that at the time of the interview she was short-staffed and got to be cleaning bathrooms and she enjoyed it.</p>		<p>As a supervisor, going back to the front line and doing the hands on tasks maintain meaningfulness</p>
<p>MU7: But I really just enjoy being here. I know it sounds corny, but I just do. I enjoy it. I don't really have too many bad days. I think being here takes me away from issues, other issues. So, I'm concentrating when I'm here. So, the world outside doesn't exist. So, I think that just helps me. I don't know, I just really like...</p>	<p>P2 says that she enjoys being in the job and that she doesn't have many bad days. She explains that the job helps take her away from personal issues because she can concentrate and that helps her.</p>	<p>P2 describes that the work is meaningful because it helps to take her mind off of personal issues outside of work.</p>	<p>Work is meaningful because it offers escape from personal issues Work is meaningful when it helps make meaning of personal life Work helps with personal struggles</p>
<p>MU8: I don't always like my job. I don't always like the people that I work with and that are around. Like the students, there's always something. To make you, you know...for your day not to go that great, but I just think I'm here to help them, and I'm hoping that we make a difference, and later on when you're older and be like, "Oh, you know what? I really did appreciate the help that I had when I was in college. I really did like the lady that helped clean my room because she talked to me, she cared about me and asked questions," and my staff does. We try to make a connection with the students as much as we can. It's harder now.</p>	<p>P2 says that she does not always like her job and that she doesn't always like the people around her. P2 says that to counteract that she thinks about being there to make a difference. She then reflects on and imagines a student in the future looking back with appreciation on what she did and that she cared about them. P2 describes that making connections with the students as much as they can is important, but that it's gotten harder.</p>	<p>P2 doesn't always like her job because of other people around her. She thinks about and imagines her impact on the students as ways to cope.</p>	<p>Thinking about how the work makes a difference helps mediate difficult days Others, including co-workers, can make work seem meaningless</p>
<p>MU9: A lot of the students...I mean I've been here 18 years. So, every four or five years you kind of get a different batch of students. You know, I've been here where you had people that, like I said, they stick their nose up as you're in their room cleaning.</p>	<p>P2 describes that new students come into the residence hall regularly and that she has seen them stick their nose up at her when she is cleaning.</p>	<p>P2 describes how the building occupants/students can determine meaningfulness and describes times of being looked down on.</p>	<p>Being looked down on by building occupants produces feelings of meaninglessness Others have influence over perceptions of meaningfulness</p>
<p>MU10: I've had years where I've had...I call them stoner kids, and they were the best. You know, they cleaned, they were friendly, they didn't care, they had conversations. I had one girl, their roommate, I went to clean their bathroom and they said, "No, not today. You need to watch us," and they did this Riverdance for me. They said, "Come in our room and watch this," and I said, "No, I'm not comfortable going into your room," there's a line where I don't cross. I said, "But I will stand here and watch you," and they said, "Okay. Just don't clean our room," and I said, "Okay." So, they did the whole Riverdance for me; and that's, what, 20 minutes? I can't even remember. I had a student one year who we visited every time I was in her room; she ended up working with us that summer because she needed a job. So, I think...I like to talk, so I try to make a connection with the students.</p>	<p>P2 describes having years when building occupants were friendly and had conversations. She describes a time when a group of students did a performance for her. P2 also describes a student she got to know coming to work for her as an example of a connection she made with a student.</p>		<p>The building occupants/recipients of the work can make work meaningful/meaningless Students including and valuing custodians is meaningful Making connections with students/occupants is meaningful</p>

APPENDIX D: EXAMPLE OF ONE PARTICIPANT'S EMERGENT COMPOSITE DESCRIPTION OF THE EXPERIENCE OF MEANINGFUL AND MEANINGLESS WORK

The initial structures of the experiences were constructed by taking and relating the constituents derived from the transformations of the raw descriptions. Writing, reading aloud, and re-writing was key.

P2 experiences meaningful work when she and the tasks she completes are acknowledged by the students who reside in the buildings she cleans. Specifically, when P2 receives verbal gratitude in the form of “thank you” or other words and non-verbal cues of acknowledgment, she experiences meaningfulness. Moreover, P2 experiences her work as meaningful when she is able to connect with students and be included and involved by those students in their lives. When she does feel like work is meaningful, she feels more confident.

While the tasks such as cleaning toilets themselves may not be inherently meaningful for P2, the impact those tasks have on the building occupants make the tasks meaningful, especially when occupants give direct affirmation and appreciation for doing the regular, everyday work. In other words, tasks can seem meaningless without the knowledge or evidence of their meaning to others. To cope with experiences of meaninglessness or frustration, P2 relies on the thought that the work is important to the building occupants to stay positive and motivated.

For P2, work is also meaningful because it offers her an escape from her own personal life and issues; and it helps her to make sense of her personal life. Especially in times of personal struggle, work is a way to achieve stability. P2 also experiences work as meaningful when she can fulfill her personal value of helping others, developed by her upbringing, in her daily work.

As a supervisor, P2 experiences meaningfulness when she can be on the frontline doing the cleaning work with her team. Doing the hands-on work is a way that P2 maintains a sense of meaningfulness in her sometimes-detached role as a supervisor. She experiences meaningfulness when she is building personal relationships with her team and can see and encourage their potential and betterment. The community that is developed while doing the cleaning work transcends the workplace and creates a supportive network outside of work which is meaningful to P2.

In addition, work is meaningful to P2 because cleaning is a way of life for her and the work complements her own interest in cleaning which was cultivated outside of work and is part of her identity. P2 derives meaningfulness from taking pride in her work, which means doing the job well and being able to see the outcome of a job done well, a standard she carries with her in her personal life. P2 attributes her experience of meaningfulness in her work as a choice she makes which includes knowing that the work itself has to be done and is important and choosing to have a positive attitude.

APPENDIX D: EXAMPLE OF ONE PARTICIPANT'S EMERGENT COMPOSITE
DESCRIPTION OF THE EXPERIENCE OF MEANINGFUL AND MEANINGLESS WORK,
CONTINUED

Alternatively, P2 experiences meaninglessness when she and the work are not acknowledged by building occupants. The perception and feeling that building occupants look down on her because of the work she does, evidenced by occupants not greeting her or avoiding her makes her feel degraded. One manifestation of feeling degraded or meaningless comes when building occupants treat her as a “servant” versus a “caretaker.”

Additionally, when P2 and her peers are regularly accused of stealing from building occupants, it is frustrating and angering because it is stereotyping. P2 feels like her work is meaningless when she and her peers are not viewed as human beings because of the type of the work that they do. To cope with these experiences, P2 processes them in community with other custodians or avoids and ignores building occupant's stereotyping actions.

Compounding the experience of meaninglessness because of others' perceptions of the work is the lack of preparation provided by the organization for reacting to the stigma, which P2 describes as intimidating, especially for new custodians.