

Working for a Wage - What's the Point?

To Whom it May Concern

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ANDRÉ ALVINZI

Working for a Wage - What's the Point?
Lived Experiences of Meaningfulness and Meaninglessness in
Professional and Manual Occupations

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Abstract

André Alvinzi 2022: Working for a Wage - What's the Point? Lived Experiences of Meaningfulness and Meaninglessness in Professional and Manual Occupations.

This thesis explores experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness in wage labor, and how these work experiences relate to social and organizational factors in work situations (situational meaning). It also explores the centrality and value of wage labor in life in a broader sense (existential meaning). In the research field 'meaning of work', previous research is primarily leadership-oriented, psychological and quantitative. Sociological studies have remained scarce, and the concept of meaning tends to be used in confused ways. An explicit philosophically informed sociological perspective of lived experience, action and meaning is lacking. The thesis argues that this can be initiated through theorizing and interviews with a social phenomenological focus. Theoretically and empirically, the thesis contributes with a sociological perspective that integrates social phenomenological and structure-oriented perspectives. Based on 20 interviews with presently employed and recently retired individuals from professional and more manually oriented occupations, the findings suggest that (a) the wage is fundamental for employees' initial conceptions and experiences of the purposive meanings of working. (b) People are not really themselves at work. Such inauthenticity has consequences for work experiences of meaning. (c) Employees perceive that managers do not understand their work situations and what is realistic to achieve in them. This can become a source of meaninglessness at work. (d) Some experience working life as a whole meaningful for its broader life structuring temporal and practical functions in terms of socializing, routines and habits in everyday life. (e) Working life biographies matter. Previous work experiences from past and current occupations are central for understanding employees' expectations of- and ways of framing their experiences of meaning in the current job. (f) At work, non-work activities may be experienced as more meaningful than work tasks. (g) Habits and routines from work may generate an embodied form of work centrality. They may become internalized and embodied and spill over to life outside of work; (h) Employees across occupations value disconnecting from work, either at or in life outside work. This may be difficult to achieve because of (g).

Keywords: meaning of work, meaning of working, meaningfulness, meaninglessness, meaning of wage labor, meaningful work, meaningless work, Sweden

André Alvinzi, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Örebro University, SE-701 82 Örebro, Sweden, andre.alvinzi@oru.se

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This is also the part of a thesis where the author has the opportunity to say something about what it's been like and meant for her/him to do a PhD. In other words, the lived experience of doing a PhD. Some have likened it to a four year long pregnancy. A colleague of mine described her PhD-experience as "an interesting nightmare". Others have described it as the start of an exhilarating intellectual journey that has been part of a life-long dream of becoming a researcher. Another common metaphor is to liken the PhD-experience to sports: "the finish line is several years away";

“the bar is set high”; “don’t trip just before the finish line!”; “keep fighting!”. For me, it’s been some of the above, but mostly a job. At the end of the day, as I see it, all the thinking and questioning associated with this thesis has been a necessary part of the academic labor process of doing a PhD, with the purpose of learning the craft of being a researcher in sociology. In various ways, this job has involved many privileges. Getting paid for listening, asking, talking, reading, and writing. Generous job benefits. Being able to work remotely, especially during the pandemic. A decent salary. Nice colleagues. However, to delve into questions about experiences of meaning in wage labor and life itself has been far from a walk in the park. To be honest, it has been a daunting and challenging task. Early on, I discovered that within this topic, one needs to be prepared for that new questions and meta-questions will arise constantly. Questions that may be impossible to answer. Questions that lead to – with the risk of sounding pretentious - thoughts that border on what is possible to express with language. Questions about time, space and meaning that I would probably never have asked had I not needed a job. Many times, I doubted that I was the right person for this job. However, it is entirely plausible that this doubt was just a case of what some refer to as academic imposter syndrome.

With this said, I hope that what is communicated on the pages that follow is more than merely an educational and occupational step in a potential academic’s career. In other words, that it can have some meaning to others.

André Alvinzi, Örebro, October 2022

Situating the Study

The topic and methodology of this thesis is reflected in a video clip, widely spread on the internet in Sweden, of a six-year-old girl's existential and sociological ponderings about why people have to do certain things in life that other people and institutions "tell" them to. In the video, the girl is seated on the back of her mother's bicycle and on her way to her first day of school in life. When stopping at a red light and before hitting the record button, the mother gets the idea that it could be fun to film her daughter while asking her what it feels like going to school for the very first time in life. While waiting for the light to turn green, the mother begins to film. She asks her daughter how she feels about this big change in life. The girl looks down at her feet and contemplates the question in silence for a brief moment. She then looks into the camera and asks, "Why do we go to preschool and school, and school, and university, and high school, and then work all of our lives?" She becomes quiet again and looks down, as if she were reflecting on the point of spending so much time and effort on things that adults may take for granted but not necessarily want to do voluntarily. She then raises her head slowly, looks into the camera, this time with a very concerned expression in her eyes and face, and says, "You're never ever left alone".

The girl's hermeneutic, somewhat critical, and curiosity-driven questioning of seemingly taken for granted aspects of social life and its regulations have inspired the topic of the present study and my approach toward exploring it. This thesis contributes to the research field of the "meaning of work". I explore an old and familiar problem by drawing on sociological and social phenomenological considerations: people's lived experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness in wage labor and constraining/facilitating social influences thereon. The study takes place in Sweden. Since the ways in which the activities of wage labor are socially, economically, materially (e.g., equipment) and nonmaterially (e.g., ideology) organized determine how, when, where and why they are performed, I distinguish analytically between the organization and activity of wage labor (Karlsson, 2013).

Since the advent of industrialization, the work form of wage labor began to be and still is a key social and economic foundation of societies and human civilization. It is the central form of social and economic organization and activity that drives the production, distribution, and consumption

of socially and economically significant resources (Alfonson, 2020; Hoffman & Paulsen, 2020; Karlsson, 2013; Marx, 2013 [1867]; Kovacs, 1986; Arendt, 1998 [1958]). In today's Western-oriented wage labor-centered advanced industrialized societies of intensified busyness and industriousness, most full-time employed adults spend approximately one-third or more of their waking hours working (Jönsson, 2016; (Ciulla, 2000; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin & Schwartz, 1997)¹. When people meet for the first time, the most common initial question one asks the other is "So, what do you do?" This question usually refers to what the person does for a living in terms of gainful employment (Unruh, 2004). Thus, as suggested by business ethics scholar Ferdinand Tablan but with the reservation that the extent to which wage labor actually *determines* people's lives may be unclear,

While we shape and control our work, our work shapes us too. It determines our social roles, our stable sense of self-esteem, the place where we live, our economic status, the quality of our lives, as well as our physical ailments, and psychological disorders. (Tablan, 2013: 293)

The topic of wage labor and what it means to employees in terms of its value-based significance in work situations and life in a broader sense is highlighted across a wide variety of everyday realities, sometimes in quite critical terms. In the media and internet blogs, one can find work related rubrics such as "Email is Making us Miserable" (Newport, 2021); "How to Overcome the Sunday Blues" (Janelli, 2021); and "How to Avoid Getting Life Drained at Work" (Erba, 2018). Other commentators suggest, "if you're an employee with a high level of education, then you might just suffer from Sunday neurosis" (McGregor, 2014). Meaning theorist Viktor Frankl, whose work I discuss and to some extent draw on in this study, defines Sunday neurosis as "that kind of depression which afflicts people who become aware of the lack of content of their lives when the rush of the busy week is over and the void within themselves becomes manifest" (Frankl, 1959: 107; see also Cassar & Meier, 2018). In the lyrics to the

¹ Mean work hours per week may differ significantly between cultures and countries. For instance, in 2013, 23% of Japanese employees worked 50 hours or more per week. In Japan, there are strong cultural norms that endorse a strong work ethic and long working hours. They are assumed to be a contributing factor in high numbers of burnout and the phenomenon of *karoshi* (death by overwork). In the same year in Hong Kong and China, the rate was 34%, and in South Korea, 35% (Eguchi, Wada & Smith, 2016).

song “Busy Doin’ Nothing”, an explicit contempt and resentment toward wage labor is expressed. With a raspy shouting voice and punkish attitude reminiscent of socialist critic Paul La Fargue’s (2017 [1848]) praise of idleness and comprehensive critique of capitalist modes of organization and production, the singer Ace Wilder emphasizes: “I am not made for working overtime, and you know, do not even like the nine-to-five, I wish all those lazy days were every day, and you know, would not want it any other way” (see also Russel, 2004).

The examples above highlight that a first and fundamental structural component of wage labor in society, workplaces, and life in a broader sense is that it is rooted in economic necessity and compulsion. Regardless of people’s background and social position, they may experience wage labor activities as something that they would rather not do were they not financially compensated for it. For the majority of employees, the income generated through wage labor is indispensable for realizing a basic livelihood and beyond. As noted by scholars from various disciplines, in the organization and activity of wage labor, autonomy and self-determination are limited from start. As suggested by Findlay and Thompson (2017: 131), “the meanings of work are experienced at the individual level, but determined largely by structural changes at corporate, labor market and labor process levels” (see also Laaser & Bolton, 2021; Blauner, 1964). For those who have to work for a wage to make a living, these economically rooted initial and ongoing structural conditions of wage labor have to be conformed to in the workplace and life itself (Alfonson, 2020, 2017; Furåker, 2014; Yeoman, 2014a; Mei, 2009; Braverman, 1999; Kovacs, 1986; Jahoda, 1981). As suggested by Jonas Axelsson (2021), these inter-related conditions of power and agency highlight the relation and tension between economic necessity and freedom in the workplace as well as in life in a broader sense. An implication of this relation, some theorize, is that “meaningfulness is fought for and struggled over in different ways in the formal and informal spaces of a wider range of workplace settings” (Laaser & Karlsson, 2021: 15; see also Laaser & Bolton, 2021). These fundamental conditions of wage labor and the normative assessments surrounding them raise questions about what meanings employees themselves experience in their occupations. Such questions include what social and organizational factors constrain and promote work experiences of both meaningfulness and meaninglessness.

The Janus Face of Wage Labor

I have thus far introduced wage labor and its purposes, values and functions to the individual and society as a multifaceted topic that is surrounded by strong normative assessments. Such normative assessments and tensions between their positive and negative poles are salient in both public and academic debates around the meaning of work. Ruth Yeoman (2014a: 236) highlights these general tensions when suggesting that in “advanced industrialized societies, work occupies a peculiarly ambivalent position—simultaneously valued for providing the means for self-realization and disvalued for being burdensome and compulsory”. And, as noted by Beate Roessler (2012: 71), “what should and what should not count as meaningful work will always be disputed in a liberal democracy”. Referring to wage labor in Sweden, sociologist Gunnar Aronsson (2015) suggests that in contemporary discourse, wage labor has a Janus face. As a social and institutionalized form of organization and activity, wage labor tends to be viewed as both a curse and central source of meaning and identity in life (see also Furåker, 2014; Karlsson, 2013; Paulsen, 2010; Shershow, 2005; Ciulla, 2000; Ruiz-Quintanilla & England, 1996; Harpaz, 1990; Jahoda, 1981). The tensions in valuation that surround the meaning of work considerations bring to the fore that wage labor, its meanings and purposes to the individual and society in a wider sense, is a sociopolitically polarized and charged topic (Jaeggi, 2017; Roessler, 2012; Kamp, 2011) and a moral and economic issue (Tablan, 2014; Yeoman, 2014).

The tensions described above in terms of positive and negative valuations come to the fore when commentators on the meaning of work (wage labor) put forth overarching claims about people’s actual or potential work experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness. In the meaning of work debates on general media platforms, starkly contrasting ideas and ideals about meaning and its sources in workplaces are put forth. In such cases, abstract overarching assumptions are prevalent and often used as a yardstick for framing and describing what meanings wage labor brings or ought to bring to people and society at large. Such assumptions typically include hypothetical scenarios about the meanings that wage labor bring to individuals and society in a wider sense. In a debate article in which he emphasizes the disciplining, necessary, and essential social functions of wage labor and their concrete value to the individual and community, economist Thomas Sowell is critical of what he seems to view as utopian ideals about wage labor and asks for more realism:

What is ‘meaningful work’? The underlying notion seems to be that it is work whose performance is satisfying or enjoyable in itself. But if that is the only kind of work that people should have to do, how is garbage to be collected, bed pans emptied in hospitals or jobs with life-threatening dangers to be performed? (...) In the real world, many things are done simply because they have to be done, not because doing them brings immediate pleasure to those who do them. Some people take justifiable pride in working to take care of their families, whether or not the work itself is great. (...) Telling young people that some jobs are “menial” is a huge disservice to them and to the whole society. Subsidizing them in idleness while they wait for “meaningful work” is just asking for trouble, both for them and for all those around them. (Sowell, 2012; for a similar public debate argument, see Cox, 2020)

Some studies suggest that experiences of meaningfulness at work can be beneficial for both employees and organizations. This includes factors such as improvements in organizational performance (Neck & Milliman, 1994), retention of key employees, efficiency in organizational change, and greater organizational commitment (Bailey et al., 2019; Albrecht, 2013; May, Gilson & Harter, 2004; Holbeche & Springett, 2004; Milliman et al., 2003). Additional highlighted beneficial factors are increased employee motivation, work engagement, performance, productivity (Bailey et al., 2019; Gallup, 2022, 2017; Chadi, Jeworrek & Mertins, 2016; Holbeche & Springett, 2004; Milliman et al., 2003), well-being and life satisfaction (Bailey et al., 2019; Baumeister et al., 2013; Frankl, 1959). In contrast, experiences of meaninglessness at work and otherwise in life may have negative consequences for the individual (Frankl, 2014 [1988], 1959).

Commentators on the conflict-oriented side of the Janus face argue that in a large proportion of present forms of organizing and performing wage labor, people’s fundamental need for meaning, dignity, authenticity, freedom, and autonomy in life is systematically and structurally hindered (Yeoman, 2014a, 2014b). Critical meaning of work commentators usually focus their analytic attention on experiences of work-related meaninglessness indirectly and primarily in capitalist organizations, often by focusing on structural and organizational aspects that are related to the economy, working conditions and labor processes. They are prevalent among scholars such as Hoffman and Paulsen (2020), Alfonson (2020), Graeber (2018), Alvesson, Gabriel and Paulsen, (2017), Renault, (2017), Alvesson and Spicer, (2016); Yeoman, 2014a; Standing (2013), Paulsen (2010),

Adorno (2001 [1944]), Gorz (2010, 2001), Braverman (1999), Marx (1977 [1844]), Fromm (1965 [1941]), and Mills (1956).

Although empirical studies of employees' work experiences of meaninglessness are even scarcer than empirical studies of work experiences of meaningfulness, broad claims about them are prevalent among conflict-oriented work theorists. A recurring argument is that work experiences that are intrinsically meaningful beyond the wage or other extrinsic rewards are difficult or impossible to achieve for the employee. In "Bullshit Jobs", anthropologist David Graeber suggests that although automation has reduced and keeps reducing the need for human work, there has been an increase in jobs and work tasks. Drawing on both theoretical and anecdotally supported empirical arguments, Graeber suggests that a large proportion of wage labor performed in both public and private organizations is socially useless or even counterproductive and therefore meaningless, both to the individual and society in a wider sense:

The main political reaction to our awareness that half the time we are engaged in utterly meaningless or even counterproductive activities—usually under the orders of a person we dislike—is to rankle with resentment over the fact there might be others out there who are not in the same trap. As a result, hatred, resentment, and suspicion have become the glue that holds society together. This is a disastrous state of affairs. I wish it to end. (Graeber, 2018: 22)

For similar reasons but referring specifically to wage labor in Sweden, Roland Paulsen suggests in a newspaper interview and oral conference presentation that "Most people probably realize that their jobs are meaningless" (Paulsen, in Barr, 2015). "In general, work does not give meaning to life. In general, it takes meaning from life" (Paulsen, 2016; and for similar universalistic claims about "meaningless" work experiences, see Srnicek & Williams, 2015: 117; Yeoman, 2014: 11; Dupré & Gagnier, 1996: 558; Fromm, 1969 [1941]: 302; Mills, 1956: 228).

Theories and empirical findings suggest that experiences of meaninglessness are associated with negative effects on life satisfaction and well-being (e.g., experiencing a general lack of direction in life, which may lead to despair, anxiety, and depression). This includes the suggestion that the general experience of meaninglessness in life may have negative effects on overall motivation (Fredricksson et al., 2013; Morgan & Farsides, 2009; Frankl, 1968, 1992 [1959]; Compton, 2000; Baumeister et al., 2013). Although studies of work experiences of meaninglessness are scarce, some

findings indicate that meaningless work experiences are associated with negative outcomes for both the individual and the organization. This includes aspects such as cynicism toward the organization, a general lack of engagement in work and the experience of meaninglessness and alienation in life in a wider sense (Mercurio, 2019; Bailey et al., 2019, 2017; Holbeche & Springett, 2004; Andersson, 1996; Blauner, 1964).

In a critique of overarching claims about work experiences of meaninglessness, Findlay and Thompson (2017: 132) argue against “postwork theorists”, such as Graeber’s and Paulsen’s universalistic claims about widespread work experiences of meaninglessness and suggest that there is “a complex mixture of positive attachments to work and work identity”. For these reasons and while acknowledging the problem of meaninglessness in wage labor, Findlay and Thompson (ibid.: 132) suggest that it “simply isn’t true” that “the vast majority” of employees experience their jobs as meaningless (ibid.; see also Doherty, 2009).

In this study, I view the general prevalence of starkly differing and broad knowledge claims and normative assessments of wage labor and its meanings to employees and the tensions between them as a key source of inspiration and relevant reason for studying employees’ own work experiences of meaning, empirically and sociologically.

Meaning of Work Debates in Sweden

In societies with highly individualistic norms and ideals, such as Sweden, there are strong politically and culturally rooted ideals of self-realization and self-reliance. In such societies, the experience of meaningfulness and the need for realizing it through satisfaction of preferences, needs, and desires become more central life concerns. It is suggested by some commentators that this relationship is associated with people having access to more time and resources for thinking about meaning and aiming consciously and practically toward filling their lives with it (Ahlin Marceta, 2021; Gillberg, 2018; Webb, 2013). Large-scale value surveys indicate that Sweden is one of the most individualistic cultures in the world, where self-expression, personal autonomy, and self-reliance are widely shared values (Haerpfer et al., 2020). However, in Sweden, there is simultaneously a potential paradoxical relationship between individualism and collectivism, which further highlights the Janus face of wage labor. Swedish politics, norms and institutions emphasize and promote collective values and collective solutions to social problems in general. This collectivistic characteristic is expressed, for instance, in historically strong norms

and laws about labor market regulations and negotiations between employee and employer union organizations about extrinsic factors such as working conditions and wages (Berggren & Trägårdh, 2009; Daun, 1991; Junestav, 2007). However, such regulations and negotiations do not include employees' work experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness and sources thereof in the workplace (Eklind Kloo, 2020).

During the last decade, debates over the personal and public meaning of work in Sweden have been initiated and kept alive by sociology of work scholars and meaning of work commentators such as work sociologist Roland Paulsen (see, e.g., 2010), more recently alienation scholar Johan Alfnsson (2020, 2017), and social democratic think tank representative David Eklind-Kloo (2020). However, although such contributing commentaries and research are closely related to the meaning of work research, none of these commentators have studied employees' work experiences of meaning in a direct or scientific manner.

In Swedish politics, the topics of people's work-related experiences of meaning in the workplace and life in a broader sense are reflected in ideological and moral ideals about the values, purposes and functions of wage labor for the individual and society. Such broad abstract conceptions and starting points highlight that from an interconnected social, material, and economic perspective, wage labor is both an existential problem and a resource for societies and their citizens. Morally laden ideas and ideological conceptions about the values, purposes and functions of wage labor for the individual and society are expressed across the political spectrum in the "work line" doctrine. In more concrete terms, such political and philosophical ideas about the meanings of wage labor to individuals and society are generated and reproduced in labor market policies and other forms of political discourse (e.g., speeches and debates, see, e.g., Löfven, 2017; Reinfeldt, 2005). From this labor market policy perspective, wage labor as an institution, social contract between citizens and the state, and individual activity is framed as a central source of meaning, moral virtue, solidarity, and social integration (Paulsen, 2010; Junestav, 2001). The organization and activity of wage labor are framed implicitly or explicitly as a good in and of itself for the individual and society in a mutually constitutive way. These political discourses about wage labor are centered on the activation, rights, duties, and responsibilities of both abled and disabled citizens. This focus is sharpened, especially when wage labor becomes a problem for policymakers, such as when people are unemployed and/or

health compromised in ways that affect their work abilities (Lindqvist & Marklund, 1995).

The Swedish political discourse about wage labor and its functions, values and purposes to society and the individual is, thus, double-edged and surrounded by tensions between ideals and reality, between the individual and society and between the individual and the state. From a moral and work ethics perspective, Swedish labor market policies focus on people's rights and duties as citizens toward the state. Partly echoing the ideology of possessive individualism—the theory that peoples' freedom to trade their labor power with an employer for pay is an expression and source of their self-determination and autonomy in life (see, e.g., Karlsson, 2013), but with a collectivistic twist, wage labor is framed as both intrinsically and instrumentally meaningful to the individual citizen. In Sweden, the right to employment has been endorsed and emphasized by political representatives across the political spectrum. Right-wing parties typically emphasize the individual and social values that are generated from gainful employment and the importance of adhering to and facilitating a strong work ethic. Left-wing parties may be more attuned to collective solutions and promoting union activity. This involves addressing structurally rooted aspects of the organization of wage labor, such as the lack of democracy in the workplace, wages, and work hours. Left wing representatives may occasionally promote more “radical” reformist solutions, such as the shortening of working hours and basic income. Among these political actors, however, there is still an interest in not disrupting the status quo of the work-line doctrine and full-time employment too much (Karlsson, 2013; Paulsen, 2010; Junestav, 2007).

In Sweden, employee participation in decision-making, planning and execution of work, and negotiation between employer and employee representatives about working conditions is mandated by labor laws and regulations (Sveriges Riksdag, 2022). However, despite such partly democratic features of the organization and activity of wage labor, employees typically have substantially limited say and power in deciding how, where, when, and why work is planned, organized, and performed. There are limited possibilities for employees to influence how working conditions influence their work experiences. Despite the ideals in labor market discourses about what wage labor means or ought to mean to the individual, there tends to be a strange silence around what meaning employees may actually experience in their jobs (Eklind Kloo, 2020; Paulsen, 2014). The cultural debate, and policy-related aspects outlined above contribute to

making Sweden a particularly relevant and interesting case for sociological research on the empirical meaning of work.

Conceptual Confusion

A further reason why more empirical and sociological research is needed is conceptual confusion. At the conceptual level, a salient trend in the existing meaning of work and adjacent literature is fragmentation and diversity. As noted by Dekas et al., the field is divided into “relatively independent domains of study that exist in silos organized around various sources of meaning and meaningfulness” (ibid.: 91). Depending on the discipline (e.g., sociology, psychology, human relations, career development studies, organization studies, management studies), scholars employ a wide array of different theories and methods (primarily quantitative) to operationalize concepts and capture work experiences of meaning. This siloed knowledge situation contributes to conceptual confusion (Bailey et al., 2019; Dekas et al., 2010); it obscures what meaning is, where it comes from, what is social about it, and why it matters in human existence both in a general sense and related to wage labor (see also Marteli & Pessi, 2018; Daher et al., 2017; Paulsen, 2014; Puplampuu, 2009; Fineman, 1983; Sievers, 1986). For example, in a review of empirical research on lived experiences of meaningful work, of which the majority were quantitative, Bailey and colleagues (2019: 88) found that among the quantitative studies, “a total of 28 different scales had been used to measure meaningful work” (for similar findings, see the reviews by Scott, 2019; Mercurio, 2019; Michaelson, 2005). Similarly, in a conceptual review of 61 articles in the meaning of work research literature, Marteli and Pessi (2018) found 36 separate definitions of meaningful work.

Furthermore, there is a salient tendency to adopt mixed terminologies and conflate the concept of meaning with other constructs (Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020; Martela & Pessi, 2018; Lee, 2015). Scholars within the field meaning of work tend to use concepts such as “motivation”, “work values”, “calling”, “attitudes toward work”, “work ethics”, “work/job involvement”, and “work goals” interchangeably with “meaning” (see, e.g., Meaning of Work International Research Team, 1986; and for critiques of this trend, see Cnossen & Nikolova, 2020; Paulsen 2014; Puplampu, 2009; Sievers, 1994). There are also tendencies to conflate theoretical and empirical arguments, which may contribute to obscuring actual employees’ work experiences of meaning (Bailey et al., 2019).

Moreover, there is a tendency in the existing meaning of work research to use “meaning” in an everyday sense or as a synonym for “meaningfulness” (Martela & Pessi, 2018; Dekas et al., 2010). The concept of *meaningfulness* is usually privileged over meaninglessness or other variations of meaning. The everyday use of “meaning” or conflating it with “meaningfulness” can be misleading. The latter has positive connotations and, therefore, risks obscuring negative aspects of meaning, such as a lack of meaning or a sense of complete meaninglessness. For “meaning” and how it is typically used in sociology in general and the meaning of work literature, this type of meaning is related to communication and denotes descriptions of the output of having made sense of something, or the function of something in relation to an actual or perceived whole (e.g., “I understand the meaning of this sentence”; “the meaning of work is to generate economic and use value for society”). This use of “meaning” tends to overlook that claims about the “meaningfulness” and “meaninglessness” of actions and outcomes thereof are based on perceptions, value judgments, and value hierarchies (e.g., “these work tasks are more meaningful than other work tasks because in the bigger picture, they contribute to the common good and therefore make society a better place”) (Martela & Pessi, 2018; Paulsen, 2014). This latter type of meaning is related phenomenologically to peoples’ experiences and perceptions of the purpose and value of their own and others’ actions, ideas, and outcomes thereof. It can be referred to as *purposive meaning* (Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen, 2017; Paulsen, 2014; see also Nozick, 1984). It is the type of meaning people refer to in everyday life experiences, actions, and purposes when they ask themselves, try to understand and answer questions such as “what’s the point?” or “to what end?” (Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen, 2017; Frankl, 2014 [1988], 2010, 1959; Ruiz Quintanilla, 1991). Unless stated otherwise, it is this type of meaning and positive or negative expressions thereof (meaningfulness and meaninglessness) that I refer to in this thesis by the term “meaning” and that is developed further in my theory chapters².

² When referring to “meaningfulness” or “meaninglessness”, unless stated otherwise I refer to people’s lived experiences (including actions) in past, present, and future everyday situations and their valuations thereof in terms of their perceived positive or negative significance to self and/or others. An experience of a voluntary or compelled action project undertaken by Self or other can be perceived by people as filled with (meaningfulness) or lacking (meaninglessness) significance and value. The level of meaning attributed to something is relative to the experiencing sub-

The Lack of Sociology in Meaning of Work Research

A general tendency in sociology of work literature and meaning of work research is that there is a lack of studies that focus directly on first-hand accounts of peoples' perceptions and lived work experiences of meaning in the workplace (Laaser & Karlsson, 2021; Mercurio, 2019; Bailey & Madden, 2017; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Shim, 2016; Lips-Wiersma, 2015; Paulsen, 2014). This absence is especially notable in regard to interpretive phenomenological studies of socioeconomically disadvantaged employees' experiences of meaning in manually oriented occupations (Mercurio 2019; Shim, 2016). Despite the fact that different forms of work in general and wage labor and its meanings in particular are old and recurring themes in sociology, surprisingly few sociological empirical meaning of work studies have been conducted. This may be related to the supposedly subjective character of people's perceptions and experiences of meaning. In Sweden, the topic of wage labor and its meanings to individuals, organizations, and society as a (perceived) totality has not been studied empirically in any direct sense (for an extensive theoretical study, see Grenholm, 1988). Empirical studies have typically touched upon the topic indirectly when exploring related phenomena such as empty labor, work ideologies, and meanings of retirement (see, e.g., Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2016, 2021; Paulsen, 2014, 2010; Karlsson, 2013).

In the general literature on meaning of work-related sociology, a central and recurring theme is alienation and its origin in the ways according to which the economy and labor processes are organized. This section of the literature typically includes a normative and action-oriented line of argumentation. In such cases, authors take into abstract dialectic consideration both what society is in its theorized negative totality (economically rooted instrumental rationality and pervading alienation) and positive potentiality (emancipation from the material and ideological hegemony of instrumental rationality and mitigation/elimination of alienation). A general trend in the sociology of work literature is that work experiences of meaning tend to be reflected upon theoretically in a spontaneous or secondary manner. Typically in relation to some other primary phenomenon/concept, such as recognition, working conditions, empty labor, bureaucracy, union activity, empty labor, functional stupidity, work attitudes, or alienation (see, e.g., Laaser & Karlsson, 2021; Alfonsson, 2020; Hoffman & Paulsen, 2020;

ject's apprehension and valuation of it. I will return to this definition of meaning later.

Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Marx, 2013 [1867], 1977 [1844]; Braverman, 1999; Mills, 1956; Blauner, 1964; Fromm, 1969 [1941]; Goldthorpe, 1971; Lukács, 1971; Beynon, 1973; Weber, 1978b [1905]; Sievers, 1994; Durkheim, 1997 [1893]; Paulsen, 2010, 2014).

Regarding empirical studies, as far as I have noted, no sociological interpretation of the previous empirical meaning of work literature has been conducted. The majority of the meaning of work literature in the social sciences is leadership oriented. This typically involves explorations of management representatives' joint economic and humanitarian incentives for managing sources and employees' experiences of meaning at work. They are reflected in the literature in assertions such as "leadership development aimed at helping leaders and managers enhance their spiritual and transformational approaches will likely foster high levels of meaningfulness among their followers" (Bailey et al., 2019b: 105; see also Lips-Wiersma & Mills, 2014; Burger, Crous & Roodt, 2012). Michael Steger (2017) highlights humanitarian and economic incentives and managerial motivations to integrate them: "meaningful work holds the promise of being the 'next big thing' among organizations seeking a lever for improving organizational performance", where

a better understanding might enable meaningful work to be cultivated and harnessed to maximize performance, build strong brands, nurture innovation, and benefit both employees and their host communities while they are at it. (Steger, 2017: 60)

Furthermore, from a leadership-oriented perspective in the meaning of work literature, authors typically only touch upon or overlook the problem of employees' work experiences of meaninglessness (Mei, 2019; Mercurio, 2019; Rodrigues, Barrichello, Bendasolli & Oltramari, 2018; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009). A common underlying assumption in the leadership-oriented literature is that if only employees are externally and/or internally motivated and engaged enough in their work tasks and work roles and work conditions facilitate such motivation, virtually any type of wage labor and its outcomes have the potential to be meaningful beyond the wage (see, e.g., Gallup, 2022, 2021; Steger, 2017; Bailey et al., 2019a; Tourish, 2019; Chadi, Jeworrek, Mertins, 2016; Geldenhuys, Łaba & Venter, 2014; Steger et al., 2012; Dekas et al., 2010; Fock, Yim & Rodrigues, 2009; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Burger, Crous & Roodt, 2012). Moreover, in this literature, there is a tendency to frame "work" (referring to wage labor) as a unitary catego-

ry. Distinctions and differences in working conditions and work experiences between occupations and employees' working life biographies tend to be overlooked or obscured.

Leadership-oriented meaning of work research shares with conflict-oriented perspectives that they have a primarily theoretical approach. Additionally, in the leadership-oriented literature, philosophical and theoretical starting-points are usually dualistic and individual-centered. This is reflected in that the majority of studies rely largely on psychological theories and psychometric measures of factors such as work motivation and work engagement (Laaser & Karlsson, 2021; Mercurio, 2019; Dekas et al., 2010; Sievers, 1986; Fineman, 1983). This dualistic and largely theoretical perspective on the influence of external organizational factors on the interiority of the employee involves ideas about top-down managerial strategies for rendering meaningfulness beneficial to the organization and its members. It includes strategies for combining reinforcement of organization-based identifications and orientations with making the work experience more motivating, engaging, worthwhile and meaningful to the employee (see, e.g., Gallup, 2021; Steger, 2019; Bailey et al., 2019; Tourish, 2019; Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Chadi, Jeworrek, Mertins, 2016; Geldenhuys, Łaba & Venter, 2014; Steger et al., 2012; Rosso et al., 2010; Fock, Yim & Rodrigues, 2009; Burger, Crous & Roodt, 2012; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Kärreman & Rylander, 2008).

In the leadership-oriented literature, there is seldom a direct or explicit focus on how social factors at the micro-, meso- and/or macro-levels in the workplace and society may be related and influence employees' work experiences of meaning and how they may be intertwined (Dekas et al., 2010). This limitation is strengthened by the notion that in the organization and activity of wage labor, economic and social factors at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels can be viewed as intertwined in a structural sense, which is manifested practically (e.g., rationalization) and ideologically (e.g., work ethics) in work situations and society (see, e.g., Karlsson, 2013; Gorz, 2010; Sievers, 1986). In leadership-oriented literature, such power-related aspects are at risk of becoming obscured, naturalized/taken for granted, and/or overlooked (Lips-Wiersma & Mills, 2014; Kamp, 2011; Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Sievers, 1986; Bramel & Friend, 1981).

Empirical findings suggest that managerial efforts at fostering sources of meaningfulness and employees' apprehension and lived experiences of them in work situations can have positive effects by facilitating overall

work satisfaction (Bailey et al., 2017)³. Employees may also experience meaningfulness in their work by identifying with an organization's culture and mission, especially when concrete work situations and tasks are experienced as frustrating, boring, and/or mundane (Brannan, Parsons & Priola, 2015). On this note, it is relevant to highlight that power may be exercised unconsciously and with good intentions. As suggested by Flora Gill in her article "The meaning of work: Lessons from sociology, psychology, and political theory" (1999: 733), when referring to organizational leaders' power over subordinate employees, "people who exert power on others are often entirely unaware of the spell they cast on their subordinates, even when this undermines their workers' productive capacity. These are neither psychopaths nor gloating dictators".

However, the overrepresentation of leadership-oriented research in the field is a further reason why empirical sociological perspectives are needed and why previous research needs to be interpreted through and complemented with power-sensitive perspectives. Managerial efforts at constructing and manipulating sources and subordinates' perceptions of meaning in the workplace raise questions about power and hierarchy in organizations and their relation to subordinates' work experiences of meaning. As noted above, such efforts are typically directed at influencing employees' attitudes toward work (e.g., work tasks and their end results, or the company) and increasing their work motivation. From this dualistic perspective, employee subjectivity at work becomes a central object of external influence. Although it may result in a win-win situation for employers and employees, this external influence is ultimately carried out to optimize the fit between the employee and the organization. It may, for instance, be practiced by discursively and practically performing transformational

³ By work situation I mean any situation in which employees find themselves in work-related settings during work hours. In other words, what Fineman (1983) refers to as being at work. Being at work may involve situations from for instance performing work tasks to socializing informally with co-workers and others. For the employee, work situations may also involve being physically situated in a work setting and/or on the move between work-related settings. Work situations may thus involve both concrete work activities and non-work-related activities. I view work situations as exclusive to the organization and activity of wage labor. The individual would not find her/himself in them to begin with for economically necessary reasons if she/he did not need to sell her/his labor and time on the formal labor market in order to attain a wage that is necessary for making a basic living and beyond.

leadership to influence employees' understandings of work and its purposes in a way that facilitates organizational commitment (Bailey et al., 2017; Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Lips-Wiersma & Mills, 2014; Sievers, 1986).

Meaningful or Meaningless according to Whom or What?

I have thus far situated this thesis by outlining what I view as key reasons why employees' experiences of meaning in wage labor are an existentially and sociologically relevant topic that is worth pursuing empirically. They can be summarized as follows. (a) Participation in wage labor is economically compulsory for necessary and unavoidable reasons that are related to generating a basic livelihood and beyond. (b) The institution and organization of wage labor in society and the workplace is not fully democratic. Combined, (a) and (b) raise questions about power, control, and autonomy and their relation to employees' work experiences of meaning in terms of what social and organizational factors may constrain or facilitate them in work situations and life itself. (c) Meaning of work debates are typically normatively and epistemologically polarized and tend to remain at a quite abstract level that lacks empirical content. Arguments and assumptions are often characterized by top-down and broad claims about employees' general experiences of meaning in their jobs. Such a decontextualized perspective risks neglecting employees' voices and may obscure what work-related meanings actual employees themselves experience in concrete work situations and life in a wider sense. It also evokes questions regarding what differences in work experiences of meaning there may be between occupational groups. (d) In the existing meaning of work literature, the concept of meaning is employed in ways that are too reductive and psychology-centered for capturing social phenomenological aspects and potential structural constraining/facilitating influences on employees' work experiences of meaning. The top-down trends in the meaning of work research, adjacent literature, and political discourse have common dualistic starting points that overlook employee subjectivity and its embeddedness in intertwined social and economic factors in the workplace and life itself. This observation echoes Fineman's (1983: 144) phenomenology-oriented suggestion put forth many years ago: "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".

Current debates on the meaning of work on both sides of the Janus Face of wage labor have in common that they give rise to fundamental questions about power and its relation to preconceptions and conceptions of what forms of wage labor are meaningful and not. Such questions are, in turn, related to both the subjective nature of meaning and its socially constructed character in terms of people's apprehensions and valuations of what is meaningful or meaningless at work and in working life as a whole. What determines what is meaningful and not, and why? And who? Politicians? Theorists? Managers? Employees? Everyone collectively? Are work experiences of meaning primarily social, preferential? Or both? Such power- and subjectivity-related questions brings to the fore the existentialist suggestion and general critique of objectification of people's apprehensions, experiences and actions: "it is a condition of being human to make meaning" rather than something that can be defined, created, prescribed, and "supplied" by some external authority (Lips-Wiersma & Morris 2009: 503-504; see also, Bailey et al., 2019; Yeoman, 2014; Frankl, 2010, 1959).

An overarching argument in this thesis is that there is a tendency in both leadership-oriented and conflict-oriented/critical meaning of work literature to frame employees' work experiences of meaning primarily from a theoretical perspective. It is typically a perspective that focuses more on actual or potential conditions of work rather than its present meanings to actual employees⁴. As will be argued in this thesis partly from a social phenomenological perspective, the conditions in which people find themselves are not separate from their experiences of meaning but rather part of the nature of meaning itself, which is inseparable from human experience the actions it involves. It, therefore, makes sense to turn analytic attention to employees' work experiences of meaning to understand the conditions that facilitate or constrain them. In the present study, this includes describing and interpreting how general and particular social and

⁴ For examples of such trends in management-oriented literature, see e.g. Gallup (2021); Steger (2017); Bailey et. al, (2019); Tourish (2019); Chadi, Jeworrek, Mertins (2016); Geldenhuys, Łaba & Venter (2014); Steger et al. (2012); Dekas et al. (2010); Fock, Yim & Rodrigues (2009); Lips-Wiersma & Morris (2009); Kärreman & Rylander (2008); Burger, Crous & Roodt (2012). For examples of such trends in critical and conflict oriented literature, see e.g. Graeber (2018); Alvesson, Gabriel and Paulsen (2017); Renault (2017); Standing (2013); Gorz (2001); Adorno (2001 [1944]); Paulsen (2010); Braverman (1999); Fromm (1965); Mills (1956); Marx (1977 [1844]).

organizational factors may constrain or facilitate work experiences of meaning in different occupations. Such a focus also and necessarily means departing from general theories of meaning in human existence and theories that highlight how contextual conditions such as organizational and economic factors may constrain and/or facilitate work experiences of meaning. I argue that such a sociological focus on meaning is lacking in the current meaning of work research and that a social phenomenological perspective can contribute to it. In sum, I view the largely theory-oriented, conceptually confused, dualistic, and top-down tendencies in the current meaning of work debates as an invitation to return to and depart from key philosophical/theoretical conceptions of what meaning is, why it matters in human existence and human experience, and what is social about it.

Aim and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to clarify and deepen sociological understandings of employees' work experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness in wage labor. By clarify, I mean making more explicit otherwise implicit sociologically relevant themes and assumptions about work experiences of meaning. By deepen, I mean taking into theoretical and empirical consideration existential perspectives on meaning and wage labor. In this study, I define wage labor as a form of paid work that is organized and performed through intertwined social and economic relations in the sphere of necessity (Karlsson, 2013; England & Harpaz, 1990). My intention is not to introduce entirely new definitions of wage labor or to conduct a systematic historical interrogation of the concept (for an example see Karlsson, 2013). In the meaning of work literature, the term "work" is typically used to denote wage labor. When referring to any type of productive activity in the form of "work" or "labor", unless stated otherwise, I mean wage labor that is organized by public or private employers and performed by employees in the formal economy⁵.

I do not intend to re-examine or create causal explanations for experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness in a single workplace. My objective is exploratory and limited to contributing with initiating a sociological mapping of general and particular sources of work-related experi-

⁵ In contrast to self-employment, which is also a form of paid work, wage labor denotes that employees work for and therefore are subordinated to management and an employer who pays them a salary (Karlsson, 2013).

ences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness that the meaning of work scholars have tended to overlook or focused on indirectly. My study can be categorized as existential sociological. Existential sociological explorations draw on phenomenology and sociologically relevant themes from existentialist thought (see, e.g., Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2021, 2016; King, 2010; Kotarba, 2002; Tiryakian, 1962). Existential sociological considerations can be found in studies of existential meanings of retirement (Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2017; Lips-Wiersma & Mills, 2014) and in political sociology (Taylor, 2010). An existential sociological perspective includes exploring how and why people experience meaningfulness and meaninglessness in life, and what kinds of constraining and enabling general and particular sociological factors, both general and particular, may influence these experiences (Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2016; King, 2010; Kotarba, 2002; Tiryakian, 1962).

I explore whether, when, how, why, and to what extent social and/or organizational aspects influence work experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness in the workplace and in life in a broader sense. I draw on key philosophical and theoretical insights about what meaning and wage labor are in human existence, what is social about them, and how they are experienced by actual people in their first-hand encounters with work situations.

Last, this study aims to contribute with a form of perspective shifting in the present meaning of work debates. Regarding the latter, my purpose is to study work experiences of meaning not only from the perspective of what happens in work situations. I also explore them from an “in between” perspective, where I take into account how temporality and the social ordering of time may influence people’s experiences and interpretations of meaning. This involves focusing on employees’ past, present, and future transitions between work and non-work domains (e.g., between work and retirement and between life during work time and leisure time). Empirically, this temporal perspective includes exploring what employees think about and how they feel about their work and its meanings when they look back at or forward to it in time.

I set out to answer to the following questions. When explored from a sociological perspective,

- How do employees describe their work experiences of meaningfulness/meaninglessness when framing them, and why do they describe

them in this or that way? Do their descriptions include agential responses to constraints and meaninglessness at work?

- Do manual and professional employees describe and frame their work experiences of meaningfulness/meaninglessness in different or similar ways?
- Under what conditions are employees' work experiences of meaningfulness facilitated or hindered? Are there differences between manual and professional occupations?
- Are particular conditions in the workplace related to employees' work experiences of meaninglessness? Are there differences between manual and professional occupations?
- Are there general conditions across occupations that influence employees' work experiences of meaning?
- How can social phenomenological insights contribute to or challenge previous research on the meaning of work?

I generated my empirical materials through interviews with currently presently employed and recently retired individuals. They work/worked in either professional or more manually oriented high routine jobs that supposedly require more manual than mental dexterity in relation to work tasks.

Disposition

The remainder of the thesis is structured as follows. The next chapter is a semi-systematic review of sociologically relevant empirical meaning of work research literature. In the subsequent two chapters I discuss and develop my theoretical framework and the theories it builds on. I draw on and integrate phenomenological and sociological philosophies and theories of meaning, lived experience, and wage labor. After this theoretical exercise comes my method chapter. Here I describe and motivate why a hermeneutic phenomenological approach and face-to-face interviews suit my empirical objective. Then follows my result chapters. They are divided into two main themes: existential meanings and situations meanings. These

main themes are based on my ideal typical preunderstanding of experiences and work experiences of meaning that I developed in the theory chapters. Each main theme is followed by subthemes, and each sub theme is followed by conclusions. In the last chapter I summarize, conclude, and discuss my findings in relation to the thesis as a whole.

Literature Review

The following literature review is a sociological interpretation of the peer-reviewed meaning of work research in which I focus on empirical studies. My restriction to empirical studies is motivated by my own and Bailey's and colleagues' observation in their review of the empirical literature on meaningful work that there are no reviews that focus exclusively on empirical studies (Bailey et al., 2019). On this note, I have not found any sociological review of studies that focus on both meaningfulness and meaninglessness. By sociological interpretation, I mean that I have analyzed the literature by looking for indications of how, why, where and when social and/or organizational factors influence employees' work experiences of meaning. In the literature included in the present review, work experiences of either meaningfulness and/or meaninglessness are explored either indirectly or directly. These studies highlight how and why participation in wage labor is experienced to bring meaningfulness or meaninglessness to employees' lives while at work and/or outside of work. I focus on answering the following questions: What sociologically relevant themes can be found in the empirical meaning of work research? What has been overlooked, and what can a sociological perspective contribute to? I conduct my review partly by drawing on procedures for performing systematic research reviews as recommended by Petticrew and Roberts (2006) and Hart (2009). Detailed information about my procedure, which is semi-systematic, can be found in appendix 1. My review is structured accordingly: (a) key origins and turns in the field, (b) MOW studies, (c) too much meaningfulness? (d) temporality (e) community involvement (f) gender aspects (g) creating meaningfulness in work (h) callings (i) life structure (j) subordinates' and leaders' relationships with each other (k) alienation and boredom and (l) the power of leadership and peer influence.

Meaning of Work Research - Key Origins and Trends in the Field

Before the 1950s, empirical social science meaning of work studies that had a direct focus on work experiences meaning were even more rare than they are today. An emerging but still indirect focus on employees' work experiences of meaning in the workplace can be traced to early studies of the human relations school, such as the Hawthorne studies in the 1920s. Later derivations and variations of this sociotechnical and partly industrial psychological and/or organizational psychological perspective have focused on worker productivity and its connection to working conditions and managerial modifications thereof. This focus was largely rooted in humanitarian and economic concerns and the aspiration to integrate these concerns into the workplace in social and technical ways through managerial intervention (Karlsson, 2013). Historically, the managerial explicit or implicit interest in meaning in the workplace is partly rooted in and inspired by leadership ideas about the humanization of work and the sociology of work research of the human relations school, as practiced by Elton Mayo (1933) and followers thereof in industrial sociology and management studies (Laaser & Bolton, 2021; Ciulla, 2000; Honneth, 1995). Many of these studies were initially and are still partly inspired by Abraham Maslow's (1968) theory of intrinsic basic psychological needs and other psychological theories of self-actualization and motivation (Bailey et al., 2019; Kamp, 2011; Sievers, 1986).

Later, employee subjectivity became and is still a central interest in the human relations school and related disciplines. This interest was initially expressed in studies of employees' work motivation, recognition, work satisfaction, work engagement, attitudes toward work, and the connection of these factors to working conditions. As noted by Bailey and colleagues (2019) in their review of the empirical literature on meaningful work in human resources development, ethics, and organizational behavior studies, human-relations oriented forms of managing meaning include presupposing and exploring how employee-related internal (e.g., work engagement) and external factors (e.g., job design) can be influenced through managerial intervention. Job design factors may include job enrichment, work-role fit, job content, and task characteristics. Such intervention is motivated by both boosting employee morale and maximizing output through manipulating material and nonmaterial working conditions (see, e.g., Bailey et al., 2019; Hackman & Oldman, 1975).

Empirical sociological meaning of work studies are even scarcer than human relations studies. I have found only one empirical sociological study (Morse & Weiss, 1955). This study was a “fixed question-free answer” interview exploration of a random sample of 401 men employed in professional middle-class and manual semiskilled and “unskilled” working-class occupations in North America. A general conclusion made by the authors about the meanings of working differences between occupational groups was as follows:

To the typical man [sic!] in a middle-class occupation, working means having a purpose, gaining a sense of accomplishment, expressing himself. He feels that not working would leave him aimless and without opportunities to contribute. To the typical man in a working class occupation working means having something to do. He feels that not working would leave him no adequate outlet for physical activity; he would just be sitting or lying around. To the typical farmer, just as to the typical individual in a working class occupation, working means keeping busy, keeping occupied. But work has a much more pervasive importance for the farmer. The boundaries between work and home life are not as sharp for him, and life without work is apt to be difficult to consider. (Morse & Weiss, 1955: 198)

The quote above highlight what I interpret as existential aspects of wage labor: working life affects life in a wider sense by structuring time, thought, action, and emotion and influencing overall wellbeing (see Bailey et al., 2019; Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2016). In the study quoted above, such aspects were largely based on interpretation of responses to the question “If by some chance you inherited enough money to live comfortably without working, do you think that you would work anyway or not?” (ibid.: 191). This counter-factual way of probing existentially oriented meanings of working by asking people if they would continue to work if it were not financially necessary has been and is still used in more current meaning of work research (predominantly in quantitative studies). Such studies are typically referred to as “lottery question” studies (Snir, 2011; Harpaz, 1989). The question is typically phrased as follows: “Imagine that you won a lottery or inherited a large sum of money and could live comfortably for the rest of your life without working. What would you do about work?” (1) I would stop working, (2) I would continue to work at the same job, (3) I would continue to work, but under different conditions” (Snir & Harpaz, 2002). Participant responses may vary significantly depending on factors such as culture and age (Paulsen, 2008). In a more recent lottery question study of employees in seven countries (n = 8763),

between 68.8 percent (in Great Britain) and 93.4 percent (in Japan) of the workers indicated a desire to continue working (Harpaz, 1989). In even more recent studies based on the lottery inquiry, Highhouse, Zickar & Yankelevich (2010) found that across occupations and genders, peoples' motivation to continue to work despite not being economically compelled to have declined over the past quarter century. The reasons for this may be manifold. A richer life during leisure time, women's increased participation in the workforce, education level and political orientation may play an important role in explaining differences and changes in work ethic and beliefs about the purpose and meanings of working for a wage (ibid).

There is a key methodological concern with the use of the lottery question when exploring the meanings of working indirectly by measuring nonfinancial employment commitment. The respondents may very well yearn for a life situation of total economic independence, but in reality, it is likely that she or he will never find her/himself in such a situation (Harpaz, 1989). Lottery question studies also typically do not take into consideration the number of hours people would prefer to work. Or additionally, whether people's preferences to continue working despite financial independence refers to their current job or whether such preferences may vary between occupational groups and socioeconomic status (Snir, 2011; Paulsen, 2008). Using the lottery question to probe these more existentially oriented meanings of working may therefore introduce problems of construct validity that are related to temporal bias. As noted by Paulsen (2008: 17) in a systematic critical assessment of the lottery question, "The lottery question primarily measures vaguely formulated longings beyond taken-for-granted notions of necessity".

According to my assessment, a deeper problem with quantitative lottery question studies is that they do not encourage respondents to reflect on what meanings or lack thereof may be experienced in performing their present actual work tasks and reaching actual work goals. This includes why and how such situational aspects in the workplace may be related to the experience of meaning in life in a broader sense. The lottery question generates survey responses that indicate that people have a strong work centrality since they would choose to continue working, which in turn suggests a non-instrumental relationship to wage labor. However, readers are typically left wanting in terms of interpretations of why respondents would want to do so. It therefore becomes difficult to make any deeper interpretations and conclusions about the experienced situated or existential meanings of actual and present work experiences.

In the sociology of work domain, a more explicit but indirect focus on meaning became more common in the 1960s and 1970s, both from theoretical and empirical perspectives. This change in focus was also connected historically to sociology of work scholars' striving to empirically understand the place and agency of the individual in an increasingly industrialized and complex world. Modes of production and fundamental structural aspects of economy and society changed rapidly (Karlsson & Månson, 2017; Ciulla, 2000; Polanyi 1985 [1944]). With such changes, many of the conditions, functions, and meanings of human activities and wage labor as an organization and activity also changed. Technology and science gained general influence and were applied increasingly in scope and intensity to the organization and activity of wage labor and other spheres of life. Previous sources of meaningfulness, morality, and value, such as shared religious and secular traditions and practices, were uprooted. Social reality itself, particularly wage labor, became more fragmented and diverse to its form and content. Work and leisure became even more distinctly separated. Liberal forms of individualization and individualism gained traction (Ciulla, 2000). In other words, as pointed out by Chase (2002), traditional social conditions for generating and maintaining larger shared stable sources to which experiences of meaningfulness in life were connected, changed or disappeared.

The changing nature of general social and economic conditions, work and its meanings in earlier and later modernity also put the problem of the union struggle as it relates to both employees and employers at the forefront of research agendas, especially in sociology of work scholarship and ethnographic labor process studies (see, e.g., Beynon, 1973; Blauner, 1964). During this period, some conflict-oriented sociology of work scholars reinvigorated and echoed Marx's initial diagnosis and critique of political economy and capitalist modes of organizing and performing work. Braverman highlighted the crisis of work when suggesting that intensified and increased rationalization led to an increasing loss of dignity and meaningfulness in work for employees. At an epistemological level, following Marx, Braverman was especially critical of the subjectivist focus among industrial sociologists in their studies of work, such as the human relations school. He suggested that industrial sociologists' focus on subjectivity at work was something that diverted attention from the economically rooted structural conditions and exploitative features of work (Braverman, 1999; see also Alfonsson, 2020).

MOW-Studies

The largest empirical social science study hitherto was an interdisciplinary mixed-methods (primarily quantitative) effort by organization and psychology scholars George England and colleagues (The Meaning of Working International Research Team, 1987). This study has had a defining methodological impact on the field. It was cross-national and cross-sectional. The authors' use of the term "working" illustrates their view on wage labor as primarily representing a form of activity. They focused on people's attribution of meaning to the general activity of working for a wage in relation to life in general and society. From here on, I will refer to this original study and studies that draw on its measures and findings as MOW (meaning of working).

In the original comparative and primarily quantitative MOW study, the authors explored how work meanings differed and varied across different countries. It included representative samples of adults from all age groups across all occupations and eight Western-oriented national labor forces. The questionnaire was administered to 14644 individuals in Belgium, the Netherlands, Britain, Germany, Israel, Japan, the U.S.A. and Yugoslavia. It contained 68 items and included between 116 and 140 questions and eight open-ended questions. On average, the survey took approximately 60 minutes to complete. Based on a heuristic model of the concepts of meaning and working, which the researchers developed from their interpretations of selected sources of existing theoretical and empirical literature on meaning and its relation to working, the researchers explored sources of meaning such as expressive needs (e.g., social status), basic needs (e.g., security), and instrumental needs (e.g., wages). Questionnaire items focused on five primary domains: work centrality; desired working conditions; work outcomes; work role identifications; and social norms about working. Work centrality involved both an absolute (how much work means to me) and a relative (how much work means to me in relation to other life domains) dimension. Interpreted through the lens of their heuristic model of meaning, five common patterns that influence what meaning individuals attribute to working were identified: (a) individual definitions of work, (b) social norms about work, (d) work goals, (e) motivation, and (f) work centrality (MOW, 1987).

A key finding across countries was that respondents associated working with both expressive (satisfying intrinsic needs) and instrumental (e.g., wage and benefits) sources of meaningfulness. Regarding the former, the authors' findings indicated that interesting work and good pay were the

most important goals that people seek from working (see also Harpaz, 1990). However, the overall findings suggested that for a majority of the participants in each country, a primary motive for working was instrumental, as in enabling consumption, leisure activity and basic livelihood. These findings were consistent across different organizational levels, between the genders and among different age categories. Findings generated from responses to the lottery question suggested that the wish to continue to work if one were to become economically independent ranged from 69 and 70 percent in Britain and Germany, respectively, to over 93 percent in Japan (Harpaz, 1989). A large proportion (86 percent) of the total sample of participants reported/hypothesized that they would continue working were they to become financially independent. Findings from the original MOW study also suggest that generational differences matter. Perceptions of working as a central life role and general life concern were particularly salient among older workers, for whom working was a more important part of life. On the measure of work centrality, participants from Japan scored the highest, followed by those from Yugoslavia, Israel, the U.S.A., Belgium, the Netherlands, and Britain (MOW International Research Team, 1987). However, as others (Patrickson, 1988: 649) have also pointed out, the high levels of work centrality reported by the participants in this study are “not surprising”. Because of its economically compulsory and, from a livelihood perspective, existentially necessary character, working life inevitably occupies a central part of one’s waking lifetime until retirement. Lack of work means lack of economic means for basic livelihood and consumption, which, depending on the level of access to income provided by welfare arrangements, will and may have significant negative effects on unemployed individuals’ lives as a whole. It is therefore not surprising if people attribute high centrality to working during one’s life in a wider sense.

The MOW study conducted by England and colleagues in the 1980s was a landmark study of the social science meaning of work research. It inspired researchers to conduct further studies that drew on their heuristic model for understanding, exploring, and explaining the meanings of working for a wage. In follow-up studies, when compared to other important things in life (leisure, community life, religion, family), societal norms about working, and valued work goals, the degree of work centrality has been found to vary between national and occupational groups (see, e.g., England & Harpaz, 1990; Lundberg & Peterson, 1994).

More recently, occupational therapy scholars Baker, Jacobs and Tickle-Degnen (2003) explored work experiences of meaning among 170 telecom workers (predominantly female) in North America. Compared to other roles and nonwork activities during nonwork hours, the findings indicated that a majority of the participants did not perceive work as a central life role. They perceived working primarily as a constraint or reciprocal arrangement rather than as a means by which to contribute to society. Instrumental aspects in the form of conditions and the functions of working in life, such as the wage and its consumption enabling function in life, good benefits, and a secure job, were valued by a majority of participants as key initial and fundamental reasons for working (for similar findings among blue collar workers, see Goldthorpe et al., 1971).

Alexandre Ardichvili (2005) explored the meaning of working and professional development needs in a context that was undergoing a transition from centrally planned to market-oriented economies (Russia). This was one of the first studies of its kind during its time with regard to focusing on potential differences between collectivistic and individualistic cultures in the meanings people attribute to working. Ardichvili suggests that “the collapse of the communist regime with its Marxist conceptualization of productive activity and ideological valorization of collective work, a profound shift in the meaning attributed to work” was “to be expected” (ibid.: 107). Based on a survey of 260 engineers from four large industrial enterprises in Russia, by using questions from the Meaning of Working (MOW) instrument, Ardichvili found that spending time with one’s family was the most important factor among life roles and activities, followed by work and then by leisure (ibid.).

Similar to MOW findings from Western countries, 85 percent of participants reported that they were willing to continue working even without any economic or significant material need for work income. Interesting and satisfying work and contacts with interesting people were rated substantially higher by participants than income and time absorption and higher than prestige and status or service to society. The findings also indicated that there were differences between the beliefs of respondents about work from Moscow and a provincial city (Vladimir). A significant ‘capital city’ effect was found on six valued work outcome dimensions (e.g., expressive or instrumental), in which status, prestige, and societal contributions (“my work gives me an opportunity to serve the society”) were the most significant among these factors. A general finding in regard to this dimension was that respondents in Moscow were suggested to be

“happier with their lives and work and believed that their work allowed them to ‘self-actualize’” (ibid.: 114).

Additionally, in Moscow, “there was a much stronger belief in the potential for being better paid in the near future, having opportunities to travel, buy new cars, and so on. In Vladimir, there was much more emphasis on self-fulfillment than on growth in income” (ibid: 115). In other words, highlighting how social contests may influence people’s attribution of meanings to present and future work, depending on a city’s geographic location industrial and demographic constitution, people may have a different set of perceptions of what makes working worthwhile beyond the earned wage.

The opposite of the instrumental work orientation indicated across different countries in studies that draw on the heuristic model taken from the original MOW study was highlighted in a four-part study of many different jobs that focused on the relationship between salary level and meaningfulness in work (Hu & Hirsch, 2017). In addition to conducting their own empirical survey studies, the authors also interpreted available data from the International Social Survey Program’s Work Orientation Module. This data included 43,441 participants from 31 different countries and their answers to a variety of questions about their working life experiences. Across a wide variety of job categories, countries, and income levels, the authors examined whether and to what extent people were willing to accept lower salaries to obtain more meaningful work opportunities (e.g., interesting and personally developing work and perceptions of making a positive social impact). A general finding was that participants who reported having more intrinsically meaningful work were less willing to leave their current jobs and organizations for higher paying opportunities in the same or another organization. This phenomenon was observed across a wide variety of jobs and income levels (ibid.).

As noted by Findlay and Thompson, 2017: 124), studies that draw on the original MOW study “are an indispensable source of information on key issues and trends, identifying patterns over time, even if these need further interpretation and explanation”. In the original MOW study and subsequent research in which authors use its measures, there is one central aspect that can be interpreted as a key shortcoming. This has to do with the quantitative attempts made to capture work experiences of meaning. What is missing are employees’ descriptions of what meanings or lack thereof they experience from carrying out concrete work tasks in actual work situations and why they experience these meanings or lack thereof.

Studies drawing on the MOW model therefore focus primarily on the functions, properties, characteristics and conditions of work rather than on its purposive meanings to those who work. Because of its quantitative nature, the study design and its generation of findings do not allow for interpretations of first-hand narratives of deeper aspects of meaning construction/destruction. Such interpretations could be made from the perspective of phenomenological understandings of purposive meaning and its relation to lived experience and action (for a similar argument see Akin & Loehr, 1988: 649-650).

As noted by Margaret Patrickson (1988), this lack highlights the general difficulty of “measuring” meaning quantitatively since it is rooted and intertwined phenomenologically with lived experiences. This involves the starting-point assumption that the meanings of an experience are generated and understood by the actor when reflected upon retrospectively (see also Bailey & Madden, 2017; Schütz, 1967). Referring to the original MOW study and its model for exploring what it means for employed people to work for a wage, Patrickson suggests that its findings

beg for further interpretation, since they don’t directly show how working acquires meaning. The book includes no stories or examples of real work done by real people. How can we understand the meaning of working without actual examples of what working is like for those to whom it has meaning? (Patrickson (1988: 650)

I now proceed to highlight sociological trends that reflect the additional meaning of work research that may or may not draw on the heuristic device and measurement instruments from the original MOW study.

Too Meaningful?

Some studies have suggested that high levels of meaning in work may become an issue and cause wide-reaching problems for employees in their overall lives. Kuchinke, Cornachione, Youg Oh and Kang (2010) used the MOW study’s meaning of work dimensions to quantitatively explore the relationship between work centrality and work stress among mid-level managers in the United States, Brazil, and South Korea. A key finding that cut across countries was that higher levels of work meaning (experiencing working as a central life concern) were associated with higher levels of work stress. This finding was true among both those who valued working primarily for economic reasons (extrinsic outcomes) and those who found

working meaningful for intrinsic reasons (e.g., because of learning opportunities and meaningful interaction with others).

Regarding the relationship between work stress and meaning, the authors found that “seeking greater intrinsic satisfaction from work appears to also increase role ambiguity” in life (ibid.: 406). The authors also found that valuing extrinsic outcomes of work as a primary source of meaningfulness is associated with “increased levels of conflict and overload” (ibid.). Kuchinke and colleagues focused on whether stress was related to different reasons for experiencing working as meaningful and to what extent working was a central life concern. A general conclusion was that “individuals with higher levels of work meaning incur a cost in terms of added work stress” (ibid.). Challenging the predominantly positive connotations of “meaningful work”, the authors suggest that

while the task of finding meaning in one’s work has been described often in salutary terms, there are costs and trade-offs when increasing work salience. (...) Individuals opting for fast-paced careers need to be cognizant of the costs incurred and, perhaps more importantly, the importance to balance work and non-work domains of life.

(Kuchinke et al.: 406)

The link between meaningfulness and work centrality highlighted above is also highlighted by economists Lea Cassar and Stephan Meier (2018) in their empirical cost–benefit analysis of the meanings of working:

if my job is meaningless, no matter how much effort I will put in, it will not generate much meaning. If my job is meaningful, by working more I can also produce more meaning in this work. As an example, if my job has a strong “competence” dimension, in the sense that it allows me to apply my skills to solve challenges, then by working hard I can derive very high meaning from work. On the contrary, if my job has a weak “competence” dimension, such that I do a repetitive and unskilled task with little acknowledgment, then no matter how much effort I exert, I will not derive much meaning. (Cassar & Meier, 2018: 225)

Potentially problematic aspects of experiencing high levels of meaning in work have been highlighted in other studies. These studies have also suggested that high degrees of meaningfulness in work are not necessarily associated with pleasure, wellbeing, happiness, or absence of suffering (see, e.g., Wof, Metzing & Lucas, 2022; Bailey et al., 2019; Scott, 2019; Lysova, 2019). Furthermore, meaningful work may not always be expected because people may be more inclined to look for meaningfulness in

other parts of their life (Thory, 2016). Such studies yet again challenge overly positive perspectives on the outcomes of meaningful work in life in a wider sense and the assumption that all people care about experiencing intrinsic meaningfulness in their work.

On the general topic of work meaningfulness as something that is potentially problematic, Lysova (2019) suggests the following: experiencing working as meaningful at a deeper level in life terms of providing a broader life purpose, personal development, and general worthwhileness may lead to obsessive passion, status stress, workaholism, burnout, and an intensified imbalance between work and life outside of work. For some of those who experience their work as deeply meaningful and central to their identity, this form of meaningfulness may have broader life implications. Such wider and therefore more existentially oriented implications may express themselves in resource depletion and role conflicts between working life commitments and life outside of work. In such instances, personal relationships outside of work may suffer because one's time, attention, and effort are primarily devoted to pursuing meaningful work (Lysova, 2019; for a similar argument about the tension and spill-over effects between family life and the meaning of work in North America, see Hochschild, 2001).

Temporality

A small number of studies have either directly or indirectly highlighted how temporality may influence work experiences of meaning. By indirectly, I mean that some studies can be interpreted as focusing on temporal aspects since they focus on how employees' perceptions of past, present, and future aspects of their work experiences influence their present work experiences of meaning.

An example of a study with an indirect temporal focus is Victor and Barnard's (2016) hermeneutic phenomenological study of the well-being of slaughterhouse employees in a South African commercial abattoir setting. The study participants represented the lower socioeconomic spheres of South African society. The work environment was cold, damp, monotonous, violent, dangerous, and stressful, and it was challenging for many employees to find their work meaningful beyond attaining a wage.

Despite the materially and psychologically demanding conditions and their negative influence on general wellbeing, some employees managed to construct a sense of meaningfulness and purpose from their work. This was typically done by relying on their religious beliefs and activities as a

way of coping, as well as viewing working meaningfully in instrumental terms; i.e., it enabled them to provide for their families. In this sense, social aspects that transcended the workplace here and now in thought and impact represented a source of meaning. Some managed to experience their work as being worthwhile by connecting it to the bigger picture, namely, by viewing it as having an important role in addressing various basic human needs and an important function that helped sustain the community (Victor & Barnard, 2016; see also Doherty, 2009). A general observation of employees' attitudes toward work made by Victor and Barnard was that some participants with a more "positive outlook" were more likely "to be able to comprehend their work situation and find meaning and purpose in it", where the experience of meaningfulness seemed to facilitate constructive coping strategies (Victor & Barnard, 2016: 9).

Catherine Bailey and Adrian Madden (2017) studied temporal aspects of work experiences of meaning in a direct sense from the perspective of employees' lived experiences of concrete work situations, work tasks and their actual and perceived outcomes. It was a face-to-face interview study in which refuse collectors, stakeholders, and academics participated. They were asked questions about what purposive meaning and thus what sense of worthwhileness and value they experienced in their jobs.

Bailey and Madden found that transcending the immediate work situation temporally through mental effort could act as a source of meaningfulness in work activities. Regarding differences in experiences of meaning across different occupational groups, the authors concluded that experiences of meaningfulness or lack of meaning in work are "not merely confined to professionals or craftspeople but can extend to workers in stigmatized occupations" (ibid.: 4). In all of these occupations, the transcendence of the here-and-now was found to be a central component in the work experience of meaning. In such cases, participants projected their present work actions and potential outcomes thereof into the future by perceiving the potential usefulness of one's work in a future social context. Referring to and echoing Schütz's (1967) theory of retrospective and prospective sensemaking and evaluation, a central finding in Bailey's and Madden's study was that meaningfulness is rarely "experienced merely in the moment, but rather it emerges from an appreciative or reflective act in which the significance of the moment is perceived within a wider timescape", for instance, in terms of "the perceived significance of events not yet come" (ibid.: 15). This forward-looking view is a crucial factor for the work ex-

perience of meaningfulness, specifically in relation to the participants' perceptions and evaluations of the end result, usefulness, and social impact of their work efforts. This finding puts into question and nuances previous assumptions about certain jobs and occupational sectors being more meaningful than others (ibid.).

In the abovementioned study, work experiences of a lack of meaningfulness or complete sense of meaninglessness were associated with employees' perceived lack of control over time management, i.e., "having a temporal pace imposed on their work with which they disagreed eroded a sense of work being meaningful" (ibid.: 14). Additionally, meaninglessness emerged when employees experienced difficulty in connecting their work efforts to a broader context and tangible purpose that transcended the immediate work situation. In other words, meaninglessness emerged when they had difficulties imagining or comprehending the larger relevance of their work efforts (ibid.).

The relation between temporality and work experiences of meaning has been highlighted in other studies. Lisa Perrone, Margaret Vickers and Debra Jackson (2015) conducted an exploratory interview study of 21 individuals in Australia. They focused on the experienced general meanings of working from the perspective of financial independence. The participants were financially independent or aspired to become financially independent so that they could stop working. A large proportion of those who were actively aspiring to reach or had already reached financial independence experienced working as something that colonized their lifetime, limited, and eroded opportunities for doing more purposeful, intrinsically fulfilling, and therefore meaningful things in life. Highlighting existentially significant aspects, these participants wanted "more from life"; they "saw financial independence as a way to achieve this"; where "all of the respondents reported wanting the freedom to choose how they spent their time and felt trapped in paid work not of their choosing, wishing instead to pursue more meaningful life experiences" (ibid.: 204).

Time use and more agency to do what one wanted whenever were thus key factors for constructing and experiencing meaningfulness. The participants also highlighted time in relation to the finitude of life when they reported that they wanted to enjoy life and spend time with significant others rather than spend large proportions of their lifetime at work. This phenomenon was captured saliently by a 30-year-old property investor, who highlighted forward-looking temporal aspects when asserting that "people get excited about the weekend – it's two days out of seven. Why

would you get excited approximately 2 days out of seven, not 7 days out of seven?” (ibid. 205). For those participants who continued to work despite having achieved financial independence, their work was experienced as a calling and/or an activity that was seen as intrinsically meaningful and worth doing because it produced beneficial outcomes for others. I will return to the concept of callings later.

Community Involvement

Several studies have suggested that community involvement (e.g., perceptions of and/or work experiences related to making a difference by contributing to the wider common good, groups or individual others) is a central source of meaningfulness in work situations and working life as a whole. One example is an interview study that focused on the experience of meaning in government service work in North America (Pattakos, 2004). Some researchers have found that when indicating work experiences of meaningfulness, employees across a wide range of occupations talk “about the impact or relevance their work had for other individuals, groups, or the wider environment” (Bailey et al., 2016: 54; see also Doherty, 2009). The centrality of the experienced and/or perceived social impact and social usefulness of work as a source of meaningfulness is highlighted across a wide array of countries and occupations across the entire labor market in Bailey’s and colleagues’ (2019) and Rosso’s and colleagues’ (2011) extensive reviews of the empirical literature on meaningful work.

In a study of work experiences that focused on the US hospitality sector, the community involvement-related aspects that constituted sources of work experiences of meaningfulness were value-based culture, caring about employees, and caring about the organizational mission (Dimitrov, 2012). Additionally, in a quantitative survey study of the meaning of work that focused on 146 North American older adults (age 50+) seeking employment, Mor-Barak (1995) found that jobs that provide opportunities for the transfer of knowledge and experience to younger generations may be of particular value for older adults. Additional identified sociologically relevant sources of meaningfulness in work were attaining respect from others, status, prestige, socializing, income, and benefits associated with work (ibid.).

Gender Aspects

Existing research has focused primarily on white-collar and male-dominated occupations. Regarding the latter, studies that have explored blue-collar employees' work experiences of meaning indirectly or directly tend to be male focused (for an indirect exception see Pollert, 1981). The technology focused and manual occupational sectors are male dominated, whereas women are concentrated in service, health and social care, and clerical occupations (Tellhed, Bäckström & Björklund, 2017; Konjunkturinstitutet, 2017; Gabriel & Schmitz, 2007; Wootton, 1997). Gender perspectives remain scarce (Iatridis, Gond & Kesidou, 2021).

Some but few studies have highlighted potential differences in work experiences of meaning between men and women. In an interview study of CSR consultants, Iatridis, Gond and Kesidou (2021) explored how meaningfulness interacts with professional identity and formation thereof. A key finding was that "gender influences the professional self-identification and professional socialization mechanisms, with female CSR consultants being more likely to engage in meaningful work than male CSR consultants" (ibid.: 1418). In a face-to-face interview study (n=35) of low-skilled older and younger unemployed men conducted in the United Kingdom, Darren Nixon (2006) explored the experienced meanings of working indirectly and through a gender lens. Nixon's objective was to understand why there is a tendency among low-skilled unemployed men with low levels of formal education to not want to work in service-oriented jobs and other less manually oriented occupations. This study also highlights generational differences in attitudes and perceptions about work and its meanings and how such aspects may influence what meanings people experience in their jobs. By noting the influence of biography on the experience of meaning in work, the study also highlights temporal aspects of meaning indirectly.

Despite the decline and lack of jobs in the manual-industrial sector because of aspects such as deindustrialization, technological changes, and changing skill demands, Nixon found that among the participants, especially older individuals, many of them still valued manual work and preferred to "work with their hands" (ibid.: 201). However, among the younger men in particular, there was a tendency to not expect work to contain sources of intrinsic meaningfulness in the first place (see also Iatridis, Gond & Kesidou, 2021). Among the older men, it was more common to find working intrinsically meaningful both at work and in life. Older men also had a stronger work commitment compared to the young-

er ones. For the older group, working meant solving concrete problems that required skills and allowed for a sense and exertion of craftsmanship that had been developed over many years in an occupation. For similar findings about generational differences in work commitment in the United States and Japan, see Loscocco and Kalleberg (1988). For empirically supported interpretations of the craftsmanship thesis (occupations with craft characteristics are more likely to be experienced as intrinsically meaningful), see Blauner (1964) and Thorlindsson, Halldorsson and Sigfusdottir (2018).

According to Nixon (2006), gendered work preferences may partly be a result of past socialization factors, such as learning to identify with traditional and familiar forms of male-dominated, low-skill manual employment and therefore seeing manually oriented jobs (e.g., warehouse clerk) as good and worthwhile while seeing nonmanual work as bad and less worthwhile. In this sense, Nixon's suggestion sheds retrospective light on Goldthorpe's (1971) classic study of working-class men's attitudes and orientation toward work, which were indicated to be largely instrumental. Resonating with Nixon's findings, Goldthorpe's findings suggest that the biographically and socially acquired expectations, values, and beliefs about work people bring with them into the workplace influence what meanings and purpose they may expect to find in and experience from working in the first place (see also Mercurio, 2019; Isaksen, 2000).

Furthermore, by drawing on the MOW study's central constructs and Hofstede's (1980) masculinity–femininity continuum, Lundberg & Peterson (1994) suggested that gender differences and gender norms about work may contribute to men and women drawing on different sources for meaning construction both in and from work. From this perspective, other findings have suggested that 'masculine' cultures may "give more importance to work performance, status and material gains achieved through work, than to good relationships with coworkers, or opportunities to enjoy a good work environment" (Ardichvili, 2005: 109).

Moshe Sharabi (2016) used the original MOW dimensions referred to above. He found that when employees in the Israeli workforce advance in the organizational hierarchy, gender differences in the MOW dimensions decrease. Among both men and women, a higher position was associated with increased work centrality and increased work hours. Sharabi suggests the following:

It seems that women in mid-level management, who are older and have more children than junior managers and workers, use a special strategy to cope with the work-family conflict. Since mothers in management roles face higher tension between job demands and family needs than managers who are fathers do, they balance this pressure by reducing working hours although they have high work centrality” (Sharabi, 2016: 654-655).

In the study, instrumental orientation toward work decreased with higher positions in the organizational hierarchy, except for female middle managers. They had an economic orientation similar to that of male middle managers. Regarding working life in general, Sharabi’s (2016) findings indicate that women who advance in an organizational hierarchy may demand and expect from themselves and the organization the same levels and sources of meaning as those given to male managers.

Amelia Manuti, Antonietta Curci, and Beatrice van der Heijden (2018) further highlighted how socialization factors and past work experiences may influence how people of different generations frame their current work experiences of meaning. They explored the meanings of working among young people (Millennials) in Italy and used the MOW items of work centrality, work goals, and valued working outcomes. A key suggestion from their study is that “work centrality is strictly linked to subjective values attached to work and to societal norms about work, that is to the whole of cognitive and normative representations about work people develop in their life course” (Manuti, Curci & van der Heijden, 2018: 283; for a similar argument see Isaksen, 2000). Because of their temporal and biographical nature in terms of how socialization influences people’s core work perceptions and preferences, such findings have a socially rooted existential character. They indicate that the learned and internalized preferences, values and attitudes toward work that people bring with them into the workplace may play a significant role in what meaning such people may expect to find and how they frame their work experience and understand meaning to begin with.

Creating Meaningfulness in Work

Some studies highlight that people may find ways to locate sources and construct work experiences of meaningfulness through agential responses to work situations and other workplace conditions. This theme highlights concepts such as autonomy, job crafting, job design, self-determination, creativity, and action. Research suggests that even in so-called low-skilled jobs and when the work situation is characterized by significantly con-

straining conditions, employees may find ways to render the work experience more meaningful. These ways may involve collective and/or individual practices, such as union activity or having a positive attitude that one has developed over time (Laaser & Bolton, 2021; Mercurio, 2019; Lysgaard, 1985).

In their extensive review of human resource development and adjacent literature on meaningful work, Bailey et al. (2019) noted that job design, both in terms of leaders' organizing of it and employees' influence thereon, is generally considered to have a central influence on the experience of meaningfulness in work. Moreover, Bailey and Madden (2019) conducted a qualitative interview study of work experiences of meaningfulness and employees' responses to them in work situations. Their findings indicate that responses are "shaped and constrained by interpersonal and occupational contexts as well as individual dispositions and metaperceptions" (ibid.: 8). Responses could involve, for example, resisting (e.g., quitting the job or devaluing those who did not appreciate one's work) and responsibility-taking, which may represent strategies for reinstating the work experience with meaningfulness. Acceptance, distancing, minimizing and resistance were identified as key general strategies for coping with meaningfulness.

A general finding in the same study was that a large proportion of participants used "switching" as a way to frame and counteract their experiences of meaningfulness. Switching refers to employees' positive or negative cognitive moves of relating their work to a broader context of significance and relevance. According to Bailey and Madden, this form of thought-based perspective shifting in work situations and in relation to one's job in a wider sense in life may render individuals able to "challenge or subvert the perceived categorization by others or themselves that their work lacks meaning and to craft a sense of meaningfulness", which can be interpreted as a strategy for "reinstating" the experience of meaningfulness" (ibid.: 9; see also Mercurio, 2019). The findings showed that resources that facilitated responses to work experiences of meaningfulness were not equally available to all employees. Such findings indicate that depending on employees' socioeconomic position and access to cognitive and material resources, there may be a stratified experience of work meaningfulness (Bailey & madden, 2019).

Furthermore, an indirect example of how employees may create work experiences of meaningfulness is highlighted in sociologist Michael Burawoy's (1979) study of workplace consent and the organization and ex-

perience of manufacturing work. Burawoy found that employees individually and collectively can make their work more meaningful by viewing their otherwise fragmented, highly specialized, boring and monotonous work on the industrial shop floor as a private and joint game. In this game, employees set a goal to work toward based on maintaining a certain speed and efficiency to reach a certain quota within a certain amount of time. In this sense, employees can render the work situation more worthwhile and tolerable/acceptable. However, Burawoy suggests from a meso- and macro-Marxian perspective that such ways of reinstating work experiences with meaning at the micro level distracts subordinates' attention from, benefits and upholds the capitalist production system (ibid.).

Matos, O'Neill and Lei (2014) conducted a quantitative study of a wide array of different occupations that are characterized by toxic leadership and masculinist contest culture. Counterintuitively to their expectation, they found that for a large proportion of participants (who were predominantly male), the competitive culture rendered the work experience more meaningful and acted as a corrective to the dissonance experienced as a result of toxic leadership. Toxic leadership was associated with lower work engagement and job meaning and higher intention to job search (ibid.).

In an ethnographic and focus group interview study of employees working in the elderly care sector in Norway, Pernille Tufte (2011) found that people's active efforts to render work meaningful is an essential element for understanding how and why meaningfulness is created and experienced in work situations. This phenomenon was explained by the authors through the concept of job crafting (see also, e.g., Wrzesniewski & Dutton 2001). The study was conducted in a job setting where work may involve a dissonance between the intrinsic needs of employees, care receivers, and the rationalization of work driven by economic incentives such as cost cutting, increased efficiency and productivity. Tufte (2011) suggested that a key aspect that rendered the care work (which she defines as involving intellectual, emotional, and manual work) meaningful to the participants was that they had to be creative in work situations by solving problems using their own judgment and values of the best solution. This included viewing and experiencing work as an important and dignified societal service and function for their community. Thus, the findings suggest a centrality of self-determination and job autonomy for experiencing meaningfulness in work situations.

Helping others and being responsible for the wellbeing of others is a key source of meaningfulness in work. This sense of meaningfulness is, however, always at risk of becoming eroded if the rationalization pressures from higher up in the organization became too extensive and tangible in a concrete sense. Examples of this in the abovementioned study were time pressures and the stress and lack of dignity that such pressures may have introduced into work situations both with and for care receivers. The authors also found that the individual responsibility for crafting the work situation and the meaningfulness it may generate may also have negative effects in that it may become difficult for the employee to determine what is good enough (*ibid.*). For similar findings pulled from a study of the experience of meaning and the construction of meaningfulness in repetitive and highly agency constraining work situations, see Isaksen (2000) and Doherty (2009).

Further highlighting social factors, some studies have indicated that organizational cultural aspects may act as sources of meaningfulness in work situations. In an ethnography of front-line service work in an IT consultancy call center in Britain, management scholars Matthew Brannan, Elizabeth Parsons and Vincenza Priola (2015) explored the brand as an internal organizational resource that sustains processes of employee meaning-making activities at work. They found that employees are encouraged by leaders to internalize particular brand meanings (e.g., prestige, success, and quality). According to the authors' interpretations, employees often willingly buy "into these intended brand meanings as a palliative to 'cope' with mundane work", where "brand meanings" became "central to producing a self-disciplining form of employee subjectivity" (*ibid.*: 29). In this sense, organizations' brands and the ideological function thereof in the workplace that is highlighted when leaders may intend to foster a specific organizational culture, for instance, by emphasizing the organization's wider mission, may represent a source of meaningfulness for subordinates.

Brannan, Parsons and Priola found that identification with brands may create a sense of belonging and act as an important platform for identity formation/reformation and identity regulation at work. Additionally, highlighting temporal aspects of meaning indirectly, the authors suggested that the "brand promise" may become a source of meaningfulness in the present because of its narrative function; it reshapes "alienation in the present and gives employees a goal to strive for in the future" (*ibid.*: 44). This temporally oriented embracing of the brand as a source of meaning in work and life itself by employees in turn may be beneficial for the employ-

er. It may help to enhance employee commitment and smooth out nonorganizational idiosyncrasies and therefore help to regulate and optimize the fit between the employee's needs and wants and organizational objectives. The following quote from a study participant highlights how employees' connection to a brand may act as a symbolic and remote source of meaningfulness in work that is otherwise experienced to lack meaning in the concrete work situation:

Trish: I was really sucked in by the glossy brochures and the smooth talk of the recruiters; I really felt that I was going to be working for an important company, a company that does important work, and I wanted to be a part of that. When I'm on the phones and it's awful, or I get wound up, or bored, I remember what the company is all about and it makes me feel proud, like I know there is more to the company than answering phones, just not for me, not yet! (Brannan, Parsons & Priola, 2015: 43)

Moreover, on the topic of creating meaningfulness, findings across occupations and countries indicate that in work situations, that which may facilitate the experience of meaningfulness in and/or tolerance of work situations may not have anything to do with formal aspects of the work itself. Empirical findings suggest that nonwork-related and informal aspects, such as socializing and experiencing solidarity and friendship with colleagues, listening to music, playing games, writing a thesis, surfing the web, reading a book, and so on, may act as sources of meaningfulness and/or increased tolerance in and of work situations (Paulsen, 2014; Rosso et al., 2010; Doherty, 2009; Isaksen, 2000; Lysgaard, 1985). On this topic in an ethnographic study of the experience of working in a blinds factory, Korczynski (2007) found that social listening in factories plays a key role in shaping the way in which music is used to create meaningfulness and a sense of defiance, resistance, and identity in otherwise highly agency constraining and rationalized work situations. Similar indications about the centrality of music for workers on the factory floor as a source of meaningfulness and something to look forward jointly to during the workday in otherwise highly repetitive and monotonous work situations can be found in Pollert's (1981) ethnographic study of female employees' experiences of assembly line production work in England.

Callings

Some but few studies have explored existential factors related to work experiences of meaning in a direct manner. Such factors may be expressed in religious or secular forms. In a qualitative interview study, sociologist Tracy Scott (2002) explored the meanings of working among conservative protestant women in the US. Drawing partially on Weber's theory of the Protestant ethic and the notion of calling, Scott found that religion, "while privatized, continues for some to shape the construction of the meaning of work and to influence decisions about work and family" (ibid.: 1). A central finding was that even when family life and domestic work are religiously motivated, experienced as callings and the main sources of meaning in life, participation in a working life and performing work roles and work tasks still remains a key source of identity, esteem, and social contribution (Scott, 2002). Similarly, in an interview study of the meaning of retirement for people living in Sweden and who were employed in a wide variety of occupations, Bengtsson and Flisbäck (2016) found that working may be experienced as an intrinsic and larger-than-life activity in the form of a calling (see also Bailey et al., 2019; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009). In such instances, a working life and the work tasks and goals such a life involves may represent an ongoing intrinsically valuable and dignified end in itself and therefore a central source of meaningfulness in life (see also (Hirschi, 2012).

Bengtsson and Flisbäck's (2016) findings indicated that when some leave a working life and their source of calling disappears, they may experience identity confusion, lack of meaningfulness, and therefore an existential crisis. As a calling, the ongoing activities that are undertaken and goals aimed at in a working life become a life-defining task and a source of identity and existential meaningfulness. In this context, the roles and activities in a working life may become associated with self-transcendence, identity, and self-realization. In experiencing one's work as a religious or secular calling, working is likely to be associated with sources of meaningfulness that stem from nonmonetary aspects and motivations that become part of a central life role. In a broader existentially significant sense, working becomes associated with the attainment of social recognition and the upholding of personal dignity. Working is therefore given deep and sometimes religious significance in relation to other life domains, and it is considered by those who feel "called" by an occupation to produce durable important and valuable contributions to the self, others and society at large.

As a calling, working may therefore not necessarily be experienced primarily as a self-realizing and identity-constructing project but also and simultaneously as a self-transcending project of sacrificing the self for a perceived religious or secular higher good (e.g., by caring for and being useful to others, or in the name of God). Consequently, as also suggested in other empirical studies, work situations that promote positive notions of self-transcendence and selflessness may represent an intrinsic source of existential meaning in life (Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2016; Rosso et al., 2010; see also Weber, 1978; Perrone, Vickers & Jackson, 2015). Callings and their association with self-transcendence highlight other meanings of work scholars' observation about community involvement that "one path to meaningful work appears to be to transcend the demands and dynamics of the moment and of one's career ambitions to incorporate ways in which work can also be fashioned to help others" (Steger, 2016: 75).

In a mixed methods study, Kimberly Scott (2019) examined 119 individuals' work narratives and their relationships with survey measures of perceived meaningfulness, job characteristics, job involvement, and well-being. Empirical materials were generated through a 7-year longitudinal study in North America that used life story interviews and surveys to examine adult personality development. Participants were employed mainly in the following sectors: education/training/library (13.4%), sales (9.2%), office/administrative support (7.6%), management (6.7%), and health care practitioner/technical (5.9%). Meaningfulness was measured with the survey question "How often do you feel that your work is meaningful or important?" (ibid.: 6).

Sources of meaningfulness in work that were highlighted by the participants in their narratives were job-identity fit, working conditions that allowed for satisfying or interesting work, learning, helping others, variety, job abilities match, autonomy, discretion, and focus on interpersonal relations (interesting contacts, types of people one works with, good interpersonal relationships). The self, others, prosocial outcomes, competence, and agency were thus central components in meaning making in work. Many study participants "made sense of their work lives by constructing themes centered around their competence, achievements, or enjoyment of using their knowledge, skills and abilities at work", which reflected "a sense of meaning from work authenticity and competence rather than upward mobility" (ibid. 14; see also Rosso et al., 2011). Education level and income were positively related to the experience of the presence of sources of meaningfulness at work. A finding from this study that high-

lights existentially oriented meanings of working and temporal aspects thereof was that when participants experienced that their work was often meaningful and important, “they experienced more purpose in life overall and a sense of continued development and realization of their potential” (ibid.: 16). Indications of struggles to find meaningfulness in work were highlighted by participants when they spoke of instances in which they had experienced failure and loss of control in having success in their careers (Scott, 2019).

Other studies have highlighted the notion of callings indirectly, such as when suggesting nonmonetary factors act as a primary source of meaningfulness. Hu and Hirsch (2017) found that across a wide variety of jobs and income levels, people who experience what they do at work as being intrinsically meaningful are more likely than those who do not have such an experience to turn down higher-paying jobs elsewhere. Again, such findings suggest that people may choose less salaried work that they find intrinsically meaningful because of its socially contributory aspects before well-paid and less intrinsically meaningful work (Warming, 2011). Cassar & Meier (2018) suggest that examples of occupations in which nonmonetary factors such as prosocial impact may be valued by employees more than the pay can be found in the health care sector, professionals, therapists, teachers, lecturers, and social workers.

Life Structure

Further studies have highlighted existentially oriented aspects of lived work experiences of meaning. Tanaka and Davidson (2015) conducted a qualitative analysis of what it means for people with psychiatric disabilities to participate in a clubhouse rehabilitation program in which the work-ordered day (WOD) was implemented. They drew on interview data generated from interviews with staff and participants. A key finding was that the temporally and practically life structuring- and socially integrating effects of the WOD program acted as a source of meaningfulness in life for the participants. Participants also appreciated that working enabled them to forget about their illnesses and problems by focusing on their work or health. Staff and participants reported that they saw intrinsic values of a working life. Such a life gave them discipline, routine, something to do, and worthwhile reasons for doing it. For the participants, the WOD functioned as a platform for creating purpose, autonomy, and positive personal and collaborative relationships with other people: “It helps them, as its best, reconstruct a life, develop their occupational self and skill sets, and

experientially learn and live what parallels a good life in the general community” (ibid.: 269). Furthermore, in a study of the meaning of work for people living with HIV disease and AIDS, McReynolds (2001: 104) identified four central existentially oriented sources of meaningfulness in work, namely, “providing access to affordable insurance and health care, (b) providing distraction from the disease, (c) allowing one to be a contributing member of society, and (d) serving as a measure of health” (see also MacLennan, Cox, Murdoch, & Eatough, 2022). For a similar argument about the existential significance and value of working life structure but in relation to employed people in general, see Jahoda (1981).

Subordinates’ and Leaders’ Relationships with Each Other

A central theme highlighted in the organization- and management-oriented meaning of work studies is organizational leaders’ influence on subordinates’ experiences of meaning in work tasks and general work situations. In a survey, Gloria and Steinhardt (2017) studied 200 postdoc fellows’ experiences of engagement and meaning in work. This occupational group is significantly burdened by high workloads, stress, and mental health issues. Key factors that promoted experiences of meaningfulness and engagement among participants were assistance, encouragement, and respect from their supervisors. Work meaningfulness was the strongest determinant of work engagement. The authors suggested that “To optimize work meaningfulness, it is important for supervisors to know their employees and be mindful of their strengths and interests. Supervisors can then capitalize on that information, and—to the extent possible—assign work based on individual strengths and interests.” (ibid.: 2224). For similar findings but in regard to public administration work, see Summers & Knies (2013); working with a PhD thesis (Stubbs, Pyhältö & Lonka, 2012); and cleaning work, (Mercurio, 2019).

Fock, Yim and Rodriguez (2009) conducted a comparative quantitative study between individualistic and collectivistic cultures of the experience of meaning in work among sales employees in Canada and China and the influence of leadership thereon. They found that in China, a key source of meaningfulness in work was also having a good and personal relationship with one’s sales supervisor. These findings indicate that for some employees, regardless of the nature of the job, the relationship with one’s supervisor may represent a source of meaningfulness itself. The authors suggested in general terms that “by developing of a quality working relationship, a sales supervisor can enrich the meaning of their sales team’s work by nur-

turing perceptions of customer orientation in the selling organization and enhancing self-determination” (ibid.: 1069; see also Sarros et al., 2002).

Alienation and Boredom

An example of an early empirical study in which the experienced meanings of the activity of wage labor were explored partly and indirectly is Blauner’s (1964) comparative qualitative study of alienation in different industries: automobile production, printing, and textile production. In this study, which partly echoes Braverman’s (1999) Marxian critique of Tayloristic fragmentation of work, Blauner suggested that meaninglessness is a core component of alienation (see also Tummers & Den Dulk, 2013). In this context, meaninglessness refers to “a split between the part and the whole”, when “individual acts seem to have no relation to a broader life program”, and when there is a lack of “organic connection with the whole structure of roles”, which in turn may have the consequence that “the employee may lack understanding of the coordinated activity and a sense of purpose in his work” (Blauner, 1964: 22). A core feature of Blauner’s empirically inspired hypothesis is that experiences of meaninglessness in work occur “when individual roles are not seen as fitting into the total system of goals of the whole” (ibid.: 32).

Another empirical sociological study that highlights experiences of meaninglessness in work situations is Hugh Beynon’s (1973) ethnographic industrial workplace study of what it was like to work on the shopfloor of a Ford Motor Company car factory during the period 1967-1971. Beynon explored the ways in which shop stewards navigated their contradictory roles within the organizational structure and the processes through which they and shop floor workers built an organization that increasingly challenged management. Beynon found that the work experience among employees in the Ford factory was characterized by an instrumental attitude toward work and working conditions that generated monotony, dullness, and immense repetitiveness. The general experience of working was thus embedded in and significantly affected by agency-constraining social and material structures (e.g., management’s authoritarian exertion of power and control, fast-paced assembly line work composed of strictly specialized operations, low levels of task discretion, and highly constrained physical and mental relative work autonomy).

Referring to the oppressive nature of the labor process and the constraining working conditions associated with it, one steward described the factory “as a place of desperation” (ibid.: 61). From a temporal perspec-

tive, one of Beynon's central observations was that "car assemblers hate their work and long to forget about it on weekends" (ibid.: 202). Thus, there was a certain temporal orientation among many of the Ford assembly line workers since many of them found themselves in a constant mode waiting for the weekend when work could be temporarily left behind and more meaningful activities pursued. The job was typically experienced as strictly separated from the rest of their life, where nonwork hours were attributed a significant and primary value in life. As one employee asserted in response to a question about participation in union activities, "Your leisure time is difficult to give up when you work in a place like this" (ibid.: 205). Meaninglessness, inauthenticity, and alienation related assertions such as the following were common among both employees and stewards:

It's the most boring job in the world. It's the same thing over and over again. There's no change in it, it wears you out. It makes you awful tired. It slows your thinking right down. There's no need to think. It's just a formality. You just carry on. You just endure it for the money. That's what we're paid for — to endure the boredom of it. If I had the chance to move I'd leave right away. It's the conditions here. Ford classes you more as machines than men. They're on top of you all the time. They expect you to work every minute of the day. The atmosphere you get in here is so completely false. Everyone is downcast and fed up. You can't even talk about football. You end up doing stupid things. Childish things — playing tricks on each other. (ibid.)

According to Beynon, assertions such as this were indicative of the general work experiences, opinions and feelings of the majority of employees and stewards on the shop floor. The experience of meaninglessness generated from working on the assembly line was even recognized at the managerial level. As one manager put it, "We've got a young work force, better educated than ever before, working on boring, frustrating jobs. You don't get much sense of purpose working on the track" (ibid.: 253-255). There were thus few to no sources of meaningfulness to be found or expected to be found on a personal level in the activity of working on the shop floor or in relation to the products. Regarding the latter, a common orientation among employees was experiencing a lack of personal connection to what they produced. According to Beynon, many of the shop floor employees even resented and were deeply cynical toward the organization and the cars they produced. They consciously wanted to distance themselves from

them. Referring to the cars, one employee asserted: “I wouldn’t touch the bloody things, not with what I see going on in that plant” (ibid.: 110).

In a more contemporary context, the experience of meaninglessness in work situations is highlighted in Paulsen’s (2014) interview study of empty labor. Paulsen found that across a wide variety of occupations, the experience of meaninglessness in work situations may emerge jointly with boredom and feelings of uselessness. This was related to a lack of having anything work-related to do at work during downtime. Paulsen notes that such forms of alienated and degrading work experiences may also involve having to pretend to work to look occupied or being forced to remain at the workplace despite there being nothing work-related to do and few or no options for doing something else (ibid.).

Additional research suggests that the experience of meaninglessness may be associated with the perceived social usefulness of work. Robert Dur and Max van Lent (2018) studied perceptions of the social impact and thus community involvement of different occupations. Based on an analysis of a representative dataset of 100,000 workers from 47 countries collected at four points in time, the authors found that 8 percent of the employees considered their job to be socially useless. An additional 17 percent were doubtful about the issue. Most of these employees who felt alienated from the social impact of their work in this way were employed in private-sector jobs that involve “simple” and routine tasks and jobs in finance, sales, marketing, and public relations. The authors note that if such employee perceptions about the social uselessness of work are true, it implies “a huge waste of resources” and thus evokes not only existentially relevant but also financially pressing questions that may be connected to a lack of purposive meanings in work (ibid.: 1).

Leadership Power and Peer Influence

In the literature that I have had access to in my review, other studies have further highlighted the influence of others on work experiences of meaning. Such influence includes other people in general in terms of employees’ experiences and perceptions of their recognition of their work and leadership and management representatives’ exertion of top-down power on subordinates’ experiences of meaninglessness in the workplace.

In an interview study of employees across a wide array of occupations, Bailey et al. (2016) found that although the vast majority of their interviewees “found their work meaningful, whether they were musicians, sales assistants, lawyers, or garbage collectors” (ibid.: 58), the experience of

“poor management was the top destroyer of meaningfulness” (ibid.: 54; see also Sarros et al., 2002). The following quote captures this leadership-related influence on the destruction of experiences of meaningfulness and the emergence of experiences of meaninglessness:

Whereas our interviewees tended to find meaningfulness for themselves rather than it being mandated by their managers, we discovered that if employers want to destroy that sense of meaningfulness, that was far more easily achieved. The feeling of “Why am I bothering to do this?” strikes people the instant a meaningless moment arises, and it strikes people hard. If meaningfulness is a delicate flower that requires careful nurturing, think of someone trampling over that flower in a pair of steel-toed boots. Avoiding the destruction of meaning while nurturing an ecosystem generative of feelings of meaningfulness emerged as the key leadership challenge. (Bailey et al., 2016: 54)

In the same study, other and related factors that contributed to work experiences of meaninglessness were experiencing a disconnect between their own values and those of their employer or work group; not being listened to; feeling that one’s opinions and experience did not count; experiencing that one completely lacked a voice; and performing work tasks that were perceived as unnecessary and not connected to the core purpose of the organization and job (e.g., administrative tasks). Further sources of meaninglessness were experiencing that one had to perform work in ways that went against one’s better judgment (e.g., because of time constraints); feeling unrecognized and underappreciated by leaders; feelings of loneliness, isolation or marginalization in the workplace; unnecessary exposure to risk; and perceptions and experiences of unfairness (ibid.). Other findings suggested that submission to organizational requirements and being embedded in an organizational culture that is experienced as imposed and in conflict with one’s own value structures may generate work experiences of meaninglessness and emotional labor both at work and in one’s life outside of work. On this theme and by drawing partly on Hochschild’s theory of emotional labor, Bailey and colleagues found that for employees who find themselves in such work situations, existential labor may affect their lives as a whole. The dissonance between the culture and values fostered by leaders in the organization and one’s own value structures may create an ongoing and existentially toilsome experience of having to cope with feelings of meaninglessness, powerlessness, alienation, and indignity at work. This work-related experience of existential labor may spill over

into one's life outside of work (Bailey et al., 2017; see also Mercurio, 2019; Sarros et al., 2002).

In a descriptive phenomenological study of the experience of meaning in a stigmatized occupation (cleaners, n=8), Mercurio (2019) found that key sources of meaninglessness were (a) experiencing lack of recognition and degradations from others, (b) losing a sense of self at work, (c) experiencing threats to the craft of cleaning, (d) doing repetitive purposeless tasks, and (f) negative experiences with leaders and others (e.g., being controlled, disrespected or observed).

Bailey and Madden (2019) used a relational sociology framework and conducted a face-to-face interview study of the experience of meaninglessness in work and employees' responses to such experiences. Participants (n=45) were refuse-collectors (e.g., street refuse collections and street sweeping), creative artists (e.g., acting, music, writing and the visual/sonic arts), academics (e.g., assistant professor) and clergy (Church of England, Catholicism and Judaism). A key conclusion was that "one's sense of meaningless work arises in a relational and broader ontological context. (...) Work is generative of a sense of meaningfulness or meaninglessness when refracted through the perspective of others" (ibid.: 8). Findings across the occupations indicated that experiences of meaninglessness arose through four relational processes: powerlessness, disconnection, devaluation, and self-doubt. This involved situations that were characterized by aspects such as bureaucratic routines, devaluation of effort by others, lack of appreciation and recognition from others, and lack of authentic connection with others.

Furthermore, regarding recognition or lack thereof from peers, Cassar and Meier (2018: 225) suggested the following from the perspective of an employee: "If my job has a weak 'competence' dimension, such that I do a repetitive and unskilled task with little acknowledgment, then no matter how much effort I exert, I will not derive much meaning". Additional findings suggested that "others are key contributors to the process through which work meaning is created or destroyed" (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, and Gebebe, 2003: 95). This is further highlighted in the suggestion that "the creation, alteration, and destruction of meaning at work occur in concert with others on a daily basis" (e.g., through shared and joint recognition and valuation) (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, and Gebebe, 2003: 127; see also Mercurio, 2019; Lysgaard, 1984; Blauner, 1964).

Literature Review Conclusions

The empirical research field that focuses on the “meaning of work” is young and diverse and has flourished during the last two decades. A large proportion of the existing studies are leadership oriented. A dualistic focus on organizational and psychological factors dominates the field, while studies that focus directly on work experiences of meaning are scarce. The concept of meaning tends to be conflated with other concepts. It is used in different ways by different scholars. The ways in which it is defined tend to be nonphenomenological and vary significantly. The majority of studies have a quantitative design and focus on general factors. The concept of work is typically treated in a monolithic, where nuances and differences in and between different occupations are overlooked. Studies of work experiences of meaninglessness are even scarcer than studies of experiences of meaningfulness or both meaningfulness and meaninglessness. Self-employment is an overlooked topic, and gender perspectives are scarce⁶.

My interpretations of the literature paint a complex and diverse picture. In general terms, work experiences of meaning cannot be reduced to totalizing suggestions of complete meaningfulness or complete meaninglessness. Scholars from a broad array of social science and adjacent disciplines have made sociologically relevant observations related to work experiences of meaning at work and life outside of work. Scholars in organization studies and adjacent disciplines may focus on both social and psychological aspects and their intertwinement. Furthermore, existing research suggests that cultural, societal, organizational, group, and individual factors influence employees’ work experiences of meaning in the workplace and in their lives outside of it. All of these factors may interact in complex ways that need to be disentangled and explored further in sociological ways. Social factors may include both workplace-related, societal, and more existentially oriented work factors that facilitate or constrain experiences of meaning in the workplace or life as a whole. Interpersonal factors that influence employees’ work experiences of meaning are good or bad leadership and the presence or absence of leaders’ or peers’ recognition of employees’ work efforts and selfhood at work. Leadership practices and leaders’ recognition of subordinates’ needs, talents, skills, and capacities influ-

⁶ One exception that I know of is Ute Stephan’s and her colleagues’ (2020: 1) empirical study, in which they suggest that “self-employment, relative to wage-employment, is a more self-determined and volitional career choice, which enhances the experience of meaningfulness at work and perceptions of work autonomy”.

ences subordinates' work experiences of both meaningfulness and meaninglessness.

Existential themes are present mostly in implicit ways. These themes remain to be studied explicitly and systematically. At this existential level, some studies have suggested that for health-compromised individuals, being at work and general participation in a working life are valued sources of everyday routines and purposes in one's life. Additionally, some people may also perceive their work as a secular or religious calling to do good to others ('I was meant to do this'). In such cases, employees may value the perceived and/or experienced ongoing social usefulness of their work before monetary motives for working life participation in general and performing work tasks in work settings.

Furthermore, the MOW study and subsequent research that draws on its measures provide many important insights into the meanings of working. However, these meanings are framed more from a denotative perspective, as in they refer to different functions and definitions of paid work in individuals' lives and society and how these definitions are internalized and communicated. This focus thus tends to be directed at what working signifies rather than what employees' value/do not value in their work in terms of its perceived and experienced purpose and significance (see also Paulsen, 2014). The original and subsequent MOW research typically does not provide any knowledge about differences in work experiences of meaning depending on different working conditions (e.g., in and between white-collar jobs and blue-collar jobs). Additionally, because of its primarily quantitative character, MOW research has typically generated knowledge of a general and descriptive-confirmatory nature that reflects the authors' a priori heuristic model.

At a more general level, studies have suggested that some social and organizational factors may influence work experiences of meaning across occupations. These factors are community involvement, relationships with others at work, leaders, recognition, gender factors, and employees' perception of the relevance of their work to others over time and space. Regarding agential responses, some studies have suggested that employees across occupations may find ways of creating a sense of meaningfulness in work situations (job crafting). Sometimes, they make agential responses to experiences of meaninglessness at work. Alienation, monotony, repetitiveness, lack of recognition, and boredom are associated with work experiences of meaninglessness. The findings further suggest that an additional key factor that may contribute to work experiences of meaninglessness is

perceiving that work tasks and work goals reached in the workplace are socially useless/lacking social usefulness.

Finally, I have noted that there is limited focus and discussion in the literature of the economically compulsory nature of wage labor in people's lives and its economically motivated organization. This includes whether the initial and inescapable economically instrumental motive for working may influence how employees frame their work experiences of meaning. On this point and regarding its relation to the conceptual level, the majority of authors use the term "work" or "working" when referring to wage labor in the workplace or peoples' lives as a whole. Additionally, authors typically do not use a specific concept for denoting experiences of meaning in *wage labor*, which is a specific social context that is constituted by specific social relations between employer and employee, and leaders and subordinates. These relations are mediated by economic structures that are exclusive for the organization and performance of wage labor (see e.g. Karlsson, 2013).

Theory Part I – Theoretical Foundations

The purpose of my theory chapter is to articulate a philosophically informed theoretical sociological preunderstanding of work experiences of purposive meaning in work situations and in life. My approach to theory and theorizing is hermeneutic and ideal-typical. It is relevant to note that the theoretical perspectives I draw on may be viewed as philosophically and normatively incommensurable, such as existentialist thought/phenomenology and Marxism (Smyth & Westerman, 2021; Waldenfels, 1984)⁷. Theoretically rooted normative tensions, such as between individualistic (existentialism) and collectivistic (Marxism) values, are present throughout the entirety of this thesis. On this point and in relation to knowledge, I agree with Alvesson's and Sköldberg's (2009), Swedberg's (2014), and Mills' (1959) arguments for viewpoint diversity and perspectivism and against dogmatism in social research methodology and theory use. Any social theory is reductive and value laden, and seemingly opposing theoretical perspectives may partly converge, inform, nuance, and/or

⁷ As noted by Andreas Goettlich (2011) in a discussion of structure-oriented and actor-oriented perspectives, these "two types of approaches focus on the different starting points of the two paradigms, not on their results, which may be quite similar. Therefore they do not stand in a contradiction to each other" (ibid.: 493).

complement one another⁸ analytically. I draw on experience-oriented phenomenological, social phenomenological, and structure-oriented philosophies and theories. Here the distinction between theory and philosophy is often blurred.

Before moving on it should be noted initially that the relevance of existential/phenomenological perspectives for sociological reasoning about people and their relation to social reality is highlighted in that theorists such as Bourdieu, Foucault, Derrida, and Giddens have been significantly inspired by Heidegger's philosophy, which is ultimately phenomenological (Aspers & Kohl, 2013; Dreyfus, 1991; Bourdieu, 1990). My reason for choosing an approach that draws on phenomenology-oriented perspectives is that it is typically overlooked in existing research and asked for by other meaning of work scholars. I focus on the following largely overlooked themes in the existing meaning of work literature: care, will, temporality, action, authenticity/inauthenticity, alienation, instrumental rationality, and existential imperatives.

My focus in the first part of the theory chapters is more philosophical and actor oriented than in the latter. The purpose of this more micro-focused perspective on human experience is to generate a social philosophical basis for understanding meaning, its relation to the subject's lived experiences and agency, and general social influences thereon from an ideal-typical perspective. In the second half, I integrate this philosophical basis into structure-oriented sociological perspectives on macro- and meso-aspects of the organization of wage labor and how it influences agency. These features are related to material and nonmaterial manifestations of instrumental rationality in work situations. A red thread in my theoretical chapter as a whole is the tension between the individual's lived experiences and apprehension of situations and the meanings thereof and the influence of agency constraining/enabling micro-, meso- and macrosocial factors thereon.

⁸ My combination of structure-oriented and actor-oriented perspectives within a single study, reflects the pluralistic state of knowledge in the sociology of work field in general. For better or worse, just as in sociology in general (for assessments see e.g. Cole, 2001; Davis, 1994), the sociology of work field is characterized by an absence of a methodological and theoretical core and eclecticism (Furåker, 2018).

Condemned to Meaning?

Why should anyone assume that meaning is important in human life in the first place? And for whom? What is meaning and where does it come from? And what is social about it? Meaning theorists and meaning of work scholars have provided different answers to these questions. However, a pattern of consensus in philosophies/theories of meaning is the assumption that in human experience, meaning is a fundamental need and desire until death (see, e.g., Flisbäck, 2014; Yeoman, 2014a; Wong, 2008; Kotarba & Johnson, 2002; Frankl, 1959). When referring to experience, I mean the phenomenological concept of people's first-hand experiences of their lives and the social worlds in which they apprehend, perceive, and act during waking hours until death (Campbell, 2019; Merleau-Ponty, 2002). My focus in this study is to interpret, describe, understand, and explain sociological aspects of people's lived work experiences of meaning.

From a phenomenological standpoint, the human desire and need for meaning is ontologically grounded in our orientation toward interpreting, judging, and apprehending our own and others' experiences and actions. As suggested by Heidegger (2013) in his phenomenological account of essential characteristics of what it means to be a human being, from its very beginning, the human being (Dasein) is always already socially situated, for whom existence (Being) and its forms and contents are a question and concern. In waking everyday experience until death, this involves being oriented toward constructing and finding individual and collective reasons and purposes for our involvement in and with the world and our life worlds within it (see also Schütz, 1967; Frankl, 1959). In this vein, a key assumption about meaning among sociologically relevant meaning of work theorists is that "meaning can be constructed individually – from a person's own perceptions, socially – from norms or shared perceptions, or both" (Dekas et al., 2010: 94).

From a phenomenological perspective on humans' lived experience of reality and its intermeshed relation with meaning, it is suggested that since we are self-conscious, acting, and constantly interpreting and judging beings, whether we like it or not, we give the world and its contents significance by consciously and unconsciously projecting our intentions and valuations onto it. In this vein, Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1962]: xxii) suggests that regardless of our social origins, roles, and positions, we are *condemned* to meaning. Merleau-Ponty's reference to humanity as collectively condemned to meaning is a paraphrase of Sartre's (1969) pre-Marxist and radically individualistic period in which he suggested that humans are

condemned to being free in terms of having ultimate responsibility for their actions and choices.

Why condemned to meaning? Condemned by whom or what? According to phenomenology-inspired theorists such as Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1962]), metaphorically speaking we are condemned by our existential condition of being “thrown” into, finding ourselves in, and being part of a historically transmitted and thus inherited complex social world and the structures and situations that constitute it. Regardless of context or group affiliation, this socially structured world and its situations are fundamentally not of its present participants’ own design. A key suggestion from this phenomenological perspective on being human, is thus that we have limited control over the fundamental structures of our existence and environments, and as passively and actively apprehending and interpreting beings, we cannot help but unconsciously or consciously evaluate, typify, categorize, order, and try to make sense and purpose of what exists and occurs in them (see also Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Weick, 1995; Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Schütz, 1943).

With regard to the alleged intrinsic human orientation toward meaning, a central (social) phenomenological assumption is that *intentionality* is a precondition for interpretation and apprehension. This means that our (human) consciousness is always directed *at* something and that we have the capacity to be self-aware of it. During waking hours, until death and if we have sufficient cognitive and bodily resources, we are always already individually or collectively and unconsciously or consciously paying *attention* to something through our minds and/or bodies in the past, present, or future. Therefore, in phenomenology, people’s individual or shared active and passive attention to and perception of phenomena are central topics of inquiry. In their existential disposition, people’s individual and socially shared field of perception and attention is always limited. From this perspective, typically, we consciously or unconsciously want things to be coherent, graspable, have value, worth, and thus to be meaningful rather than unintelligible, incoherent, purposeless, and meaningless. However, just as attention is limited, any sense of coherence, grasping or value is always already limited. In this sense, we are oriented toward and desire meaning and intelligibility but are always constrained by our limited apprehension of phenomena that represent sources of meaning (see, e.g., Frankl, 2014 [1988; Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Heiskala, 2011; de Beauvoir, 2010; Merleau-Ponty (2002 [1962]; Weick, 1995; Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Cox, 1978; Husserl, 1973; Schütz, 1967, 1945, 1943; Berger

& Pullberg, 1965). Regarding how phenomenologists study meaning, as noted by the organization and meaning of work scholars Alvesson, Gabriel and Paulsen (2017: 15), by focusing on what people pay/do not pay attention to and what they value/do not value when their attention is directed at something in the world, phenomenology scholars can study the experience of meaning in a “detached” and systematic way.

For purposes of clarification, it is useful to concretize on the assumption that people are always consciously or unconsciously oriented toward meaning. To end these initial parts of my theory sections, I will do this by referring to two particular social phenomena. These are beliefs and the role they have in peoples’ biographies and the narratives and stories they construct from them. It is suggested by some meaning theorists that narratives and the “stories” they make up “are probably the most primordial way for generating meaning” (Gärdenfors, 2009: 114). On this point, organization scholar Kimberly Scott (2019) suggests that a central process through which individuals make sense of, construct an identity, and find meaning in their work lives is by constructing work narratives. Work narratives integrate people’s particular work experiences into coherent general stories about their past and present working lives (ibid.).

Narratives are contextualized by culture, class, gender, and other social factors (Nilsson, 2013). Stories and their narrative components represent existentially necessary reductive frameworks for orienting and connecting experiences to some perceived whole (e.g., “society” or an institution”) that is experienced to make larger sense in situations and in a prolonged way over time and space (Gärdenfors, 2009: 114; see also Nilsson, 2013; Wong, 2008; Honneth & Wright, 1995). The information, knowledge and narratives people consciously and/or unconsciously draw on in their beliefs and to connect their experiences to a perceived coherent totality may not necessarily need to be based on empirical facts (Gärdenfors, 2009: 114-118, see also Heins, 2016; Mannheim, 2009 [1949]; Žižek, 2006).

Meaning and Social Ontology-Epistemology

I have thus far introduced the assumption that human experience and construction of meaning are intertwined with considerations about what reality is and how we apprehend, know, grasp, and understand it. On this point, social phenomenological assumptions about meaning are related to ontological-epistemological assumptions about social reality. A defining ontological consideration in social phenomenology is that everything in human experience has intersubjective roots in a direct or indirect sense.

Social phenomenology is thus relational and non-dualistic in its epistemological-ontological outlook: human consciousness is co-constitutive with social reality and what it knows about it. On this note, according to Schütz (1962: 341), “it is the meaning of our experiences and not the ontological structure of the objects, which constitutes reality”. People’s lived experiences and their inseparable relations with meaning are thus always already situated in and part of the reality in which it occurs. Social reality and people are composed of and immersed in historically transmitted material and nonmaterial social networks of significance. These networks are manifested in and the outcomes of people’s actions and ideas. They are both temporarily stable and in a state of change. Based on the assumptions above, human experience in itself becomes a legitimate object of social inquiry for exploring what society is and what it is like to be a human being.

The aforementioned ontological assumptions can be illustrated more concretely with a work-related example from Heidegger (2013 [1927]). Like Marx, Heidegger had an action-oriented view on human existence and valued the craftsmanship ideal. A hammer is used in work efforts to achieve a specific goal (manufacturing a chair). For the hammering person, the hammer and the hammering activity have practical significance and value since they represent useful means to reach a desired end. The hammer becomes meaningful to the hammering person because it is useful. From an intersubjective perspective, the hammer also has past significance and value: it is an intended socially useful outcome of other peoples’ actions of constructing hammers. The finished chair has present and potential future significance and value for other people in reference to its nature as furniture to be used for everyday practical purposes of sitting. The chair and the act of sitting have positive or negative significance to those who will use the chair to sit. It may be well or ill constructed. It may fill its purpose or break. In this sense, the origins and practices of the chair are embedded in intertwined practical and temporal networks of social significance and value (Heidegger, 2013 [1927]).

A main topic of inquiry in social phenomenology is to grasp why and how social networks of significance (social structures) are represented and interconnected in people’s lived experience, action, and ultimately their own and others’ awareness and apprehension thereof. From this perspective, a key purpose in sociologically oriented phenomenology is to systematically describe and analyze the ways in which the prescientific, everyday subject experiences, knows, interprets, and acts in her or his social envi-

ronment (see, e.g., Frankl, 2014 [1988]; Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; de Beauvoir, 2010; Merleau-Ponty, 2002 [1962]; Dreyfus, 1991; Schütz, 1967, 1945).

Expressed in a condensed way, social phenomenological perspectives on meaning and experience, as highlighted in the aforementioned literature, share the following ontological-epistemological assumptions. They are my ontological-epistemological starting-points.

- *Empathy and Skepticism toward metaphysical theoretical reasoning.* The rationalistic forms of intellectualism and idealism expressed in positivism and empiricism may become instrumental and have a distancing and reifying effect on inquiry and social phenomena and their meanings to actual people. A central objective in social phenomenological analysis is to bracket such abstract theoretical accounts that are divorced from references to direct human experience. This involves an aspiration to “get back to the things in themselves” and arrive at an ever-evolving understanding of their structures as they appear in lived experiences to consciousness in a pre-theoretical way. A key tool for facilitating understandings of what it means to exist and experience social reality as a human being is to approach these topics with an unprejudiced attitude that is careful to impose preconstructed categories empty of empirically relevant content onto people’s lived experiences. This hermeneutic phenomenological way of thinking and communicating involves systematic and emphatic interpretations and descriptions of what it is like for people to have experiences of phenomena in everyday life situations.
- *Language* is part of the reality in which it is used. Language has both a revealing and obscuring effect on people’s apprehension, understandings, and grasping of their own and others’ experiences and the reality in which they take place and are part of.
- *Preunderstandings* —schemes of interpretation—are an existentially necessary prerequisite for all forms of interpretation, understanding, and valuation. When interpreting, valuing, and anticipating present and future situations and experiences, people make inferences and generalize by associating them with their past experiences. In this sense, people’s everyday accumulated and consciously/unconsciously sedimented stock knowledge represent a key pre-

condition for preunderstanding, everyday sensemaking, understanding, and experience of meaning.

- *Stock Knowledge.* Through proximate and remote relations, people's stock knowledge is inevitably learned from others and via interaction with material and nonmaterial outcomes of others' actions and ideas. For socially, existentially, and cognitively necessary reasons of reduction and limitation, people's (pre)understandings and the stock knowledge they are rooted in are always incomplete.
- People's stock knowledge includes and influences what interests, values, and preferences they develop, have, maintain, and reproduce.
- People's interests, values, attitudes, and preferences influence what they are individually and collectively conscious of, direct their attention toward, and what they find relevant and meaningful (and vice versa) in life.
- People individually and groupwise differ in that which they find interesting, pay attention to passively and actively, find relevant/irrelevant, and thus meaningful/meaningless.
- Different groups of people share and differ in their stock knowledge.
- *Multiple Realities.* People are situated in and influenced by different social factors that may be unique for particular contexts. Therefore, groups of people expect, know, and believe different things⁹. Thus, metaphorically speaking, different groups of people operate practically and cognitively in different social realities that may be vastly unfamiliar and ungraspable to others. Therefore, relationism is key.
- *Taking things for granted.* Over time, for existentially inescapable and cognitively necessary reasons of reduction and simplification,

⁹ A neighbouring concept to stock knowledge and horizon of understanding are worldviews. According to theorists in this domain, a worldview represents a totalizing image in consciousness of what the world and its forms and contents are like. Worldviews and their belief-based constituents provide existentially necessary reductive frames of reference for moral, political, and practical orientation in the world. Ideology scholars suggest that among groups, the internal logic of the ideas and interests that inform ideologies and worldviews may become a socially shared taken-for-granted and unquestioned reference point for interpretation and understanding (Mannheim 2009 [1949]; Nilsson, 2013). In terms of their influence on the experience of meaning, Nilsson (2013: 9) suggests that worldviews and the beliefs they are rooted in "form the most central sources of meaning".

individuals and groups thereof learn to take for granted what they do, expect, know and believe, as well as and the reasons for it. People's stock knowledge and the world of familiarity it is about, become a taken for granted and habitual reference point for everyday action, valuation, judgement, sensemaking, and thus experience of meaning. In phenomenological terminology, this "natural attitude", which is existentially necessary for operating in the world, and the taken for granted perceptions and convictions it is built upon, does not involve questions or doubts at first about the social world and its structures, norms, and conventions. For practical and necessarily cognitively limiting reasons then, and although people may think that they understand the bigger picture, much remains unknown and ungraspable.

- *Habits and embodiment.* During a large proportion of everyday involvements in their life worlds, people do not orient themselves or do things through conscious deliberation¹⁰. People do not have to/cannot always be aware of or pay attention to what they are doing (e.g., using a computer, driving a car, using tools), what it means, and how it may be related to processes and relations. Habits and skills become embodied. Abstract assessments and understandings of the "hows" and "whys" of things, actions, and goals are often irrelevant for getting on with everyday involvements of attaining practical aims.

¹⁰ Habit scholars suggest that people's development and performance of habits are central for managing everyday actions. Habits involve making routine decisions without conscious deliberation. They are suggested to facilitate the capacity for thinking about something else than the actual task at hand (e.g. hammering a nail or driving a car). On this point, for good and for worse, tacit knowledge matters for getting on with everyday life. In order to be functional and avoid cognitive overload, people have to take certain things and meanings for granted and do things in an unreflective way (Wood, 2021; Camic, 1986; James, 1890). As pointed out by habit scholars, in the daily cycle of everyday doings, unreflective habits and the naïve slumber of routines they involve, can thus be viewed as existentially necessary for operating in the world (Wood, 2021; Heidegger, 2013 [1927]). As noted by Charles Camic (1986: 1046) in an historical analysis of the use of the concept of habit in sociology and its status in the discipline, "habit creates a stable inner core that affords immunity from external sensations and impetuous appetites".

For analytic purposes and with the reservation that no social theory can capture social reality (or anything else in it) in its entirety, I proceed with the assumption that the ontological-epistemological premises about social reality and people described above are likely to be true and therefore also apply to myself and my own disposition and situation.

Who Cares About Meaning?

The philosophical/theoretical assumptions discussed above imply that we (humans) consciously or unconsciously and typically care about meaning. For this reason, a central concept in some social phenomenological assumptions about meaning and where it comes from, is *care*. In meaning of work and adjacent literature, the concept of care is largely overlooked (for an exception see Graeber, 2018). Heidegger (2013) and other sociologically relevant philosophers (see e.g. Merleau-Ponty, 2002 [1962]) indicate that meaning is connected to what people individually and collectively care about in life, historically, presently, and in relation to perceptions of the future¹¹. From this perspective, the existential disposition that people individually and jointly care (Sorge), are concerned, and worry about anything at all in life to begin with and throughout life until death, is viewed as a prerequisite for understanding and valuing the purpose, significance, and worthwhileness of things in the worlds they inhabit (Heidegger, 2013 [1927]: 218-225). This supposedly a priori existential care structure in human existence indicates that regardless of the moral behind the things people may care about, meaning is a basic existential feature and concern of- and in human experience and existence. People care and are concerned about their own existence, their doings, surroundings, and their form and content until death to begin with from a perspective that transcends satisfaction of basic needs (Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Dreyfus, 1991; Frankl, 1959; Jaspers, 1919).

In his theory of bullshit jobs and their relation to people's work experiences of meaning in wage labor, anthropologist David Graeber (2018) connects intersubjectivity with everyday care. Drawing partly on anecdotal evidence from a wide array of occupations, Graeber suggests that employ-

¹¹ In similar ways, some more contemporary existential psychologists suggest that if meaning did not matter and was not a responsibility in human life in the first place, there would be no reason for individuals to do or care for anything at all besides from satisfying basic and immediate needs, such as finding food, eating, and minimizing and mitigating threats and risks to survival (Webb, 2013).

ees' care is interlinked with their perception of the social usefulness of what they do at work and its relation to their work experiences of meaning:

(...) all labor can be seen as caring labor, since (...) even if one builds a bridge, it's ultimately because one cares about people who might wish to cross the river. As the examples I cited at the time make clear, people do really think in these terms when they reflect on the "social value" of their jobs. (Graeber, 2018: 305; for a similar argument see Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen, 2017)

I suggest that the concept of care is useful for addressing work meaning-related questions such as the following: do people care about what they do at work? Does it matter to them beyond the wage? Are they positively/negatively concerned with what they do and where their doings lead? Why? Such questions are largely overlooked in the existing literature or explored implicitly. I contend that such care related questions are worth making more explicit and thus exploring directly and empirically.

Meaning Indifference

A final note on care and other universalistic claims about the centrality of meaning in human existence. The pattern of consensus among meaning theorists/philosophers should not be exaggerated. Some meaning theorists challenge the universalistic assumption that all people have a fundamental need for meaning and that they would actively or passively care about being concerned with it. This is highlighted in the concept/phenomenon of nihilism (devaluation of all values), which includes the suggestion that human life may lack ultimate sources of meaning and that some people may be indifferent toward experiencing it (Nietzsche, 2001; ter Borg, 1988). Regarding the latter, it is suggested that people may lack or have a low need for meaning. On this note, some commentators argue that such indifference in terms of not caring about whether something is meaningful or not, may become manifested when people do not care whether things (e.g. actions and experiences) have a purpose that they value and therefore meaning in life. According to the theory of meaning indifference (MIL), which indirectly highlights nihilism (devaluation of all values), "some people may accept low levels of MIL without feeling upset or uncomfortable" (Zhang et al., 2018: 207; see also Wolf, Metzinger & Lucas, 2022; Schnell, 2010). In this vein, and while suggesting that men are more prone to meaning indifference, Wolf, Metzinger and Lucas (2022: 711) suggest

that “Not all persons wish to experience a meaningful job. They still report no meaning at all, even if working is pleasurable for them”. I discuss social constructions of nihilism and their relation to sources and experiences of meaning in wage labor in the second part of my theory chapters. My next step is to discuss the concept of *the will to meaning*.

The Will to Meaning

I have thus far discussed general philosophical/theoretical assumptions about meaning and its inseparable relation to human existence. This existence includes people’s lived experiences and consciousness of social reality in terms of what they pay attention to and care about in passive or active ways in life. People’s conscious/unconscious need for and orientation toward meaning in situations and life in a wider sense are central components in meaning scholar, neurologist, and existential psychiatrist Viktor Frankl’s (1959, 2010) theory of the will to meaning. In terms of preunderstandings and their influence on theorizing, an important detail is that Frankl partly developed his theory of the will to meaning from his own lived experiences, actions, survival, and observations of everyday life and forced labor in four different Nazi concentration and labor camps. In this context, Frankl (1959: 15) asserts that prisoners were stripped bare of all their possessions and identities, where all that was left was their “naked existence”. In my view, this theory can be viewed as a succinct amalgamation of existentialist assumptions about meaning in human existence. It is seldom referred to in sociology (for an exception, see Antonovsky, 1987). At first glance, this theory seems primarily psychologically oriented and individual-centered. However, Frankl’s theory is rooted in a phenomenological and action-oriented perspective that has sociological relevance and is useful for framing and exploring work experiences of meaning.

The motivational aspects of Frankl’s theory of meaning are often referred to briefly and used as an analytic starting point in the meaning of work research literature. One of the theory’s core components is the assumption that past, present, and future ideals and goals in life and people’s orientation toward them through decisive commitment to a task give meaningfulness to situations and life itself. These motivational aspects of Frankl’s theory are referred to especially in leadership-oriented studies. As noted initially, such studies typically focus on management representatives’ possibilities for and practices of motivating and engaging employees to facilitate organizational commitment and meaningfulness (see, e.g., Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2021; Bailey & Madden, 2019; Bailey et al., 2019;

Bailey & Madden, 2016; Lee, 2015; Burger, Crous & Roodt, 2012; Lips-Wiersma & Morris; 2009; Kamp & Munck-Madsen, 2008; Wrzesniewski, Dutton & Debebe, 2003; Isaksen, 2000).

Frankl's theory of the will to meaning is partly inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy of morality, meaning, and power. Referring to the experience of meaning and purpose and their intimate connection with authentic commitment to actions and goals in situations and life in a broader sense, Nietzsche (1997 [1889]: 6) suggests, "if you have your why for life, you can get by with almost any how". I will return to the concept of authenticity and its relevance for meaning of work scholarship later. Viewed from Frankl's perspective, Nietzsche's "why" refers to short- and long-term ideals, actions, and goals in situations and life in a wider sense that are experienced as actually or potentially purposeful, valuable and worthwhile to perform and aim at. In this sense, Frankl emphasizes spatial and temporal self-transcendence through action and planning thereof:

Human beings are transcending themselves toward meanings which are something other than themselves, which are more than mere expressions of their selves, more than mere projections of these selves. Meanings are discovered but not invented. (Frankl, 2014 [1988]: 52)

Frankl's assumption about the will to meaning is rooted in the belief that an essential condition of being human is the intrinsic individual and collective desire and motivation to live a meaningful life. In Frankl's view, meaningfulness comes from aiming to fulfill and fulfilling responsibilities toward projects and objects that are evaluated and recognized as worthy, ideally by both self and others. Frankl suggests that those who were the most likely to survive the concentration camps were those who cared about others, held on to ideals and principles, saw purpose in overcoming obstacles, and thought and acted in ways in accordance with the ways described above. Inspired by this perspective on meaning and its relation to purpose, ideals, and goals, Frankl emphasizes potentiality, prosocial action, and the connection between Self and Other. People can find doings and experiences meaningful in life by acting and aspiring toward acting in ways and toward goals that are qualitatively beneficial to themselves and others (Frankl, 2010; 2002, 1959).

Frankl (2010, 2002, 1959) thus departs from the affirmative assumption that meaningfulness is something that is always already a *potential* in all situations. This affirmative and perhaps idealistic view of meaning is grounded in the following humanistic trope that is characteristic of some

strains of existentialist thought. Even under conditions of extreme levels of external oppression, suffering, absence of happiness, and powerlessness, all people have the capacity to be resourceful and knowledgeable in terms of being able to cognitively and practically find and construct sources and experiences of meaningfulness (ibid.; see also Bloom, 2021; Bailey and Madden, 2016; Lee, 2015; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Baumeister et al., 2013; Baumeister, 1991; Freud, 1969 [1930]).

A key component of Frankl's theory is the assumption that experiences of meaningfulness and actions that facilitate them may be generated in the process of and outcomes from responding to interpersonal and/or practical life situations. Frankl emphasizes confronting and overcoming obstacles¹². Thus, in Frankl's view, action and its potentialities are central to the experience of meaning. Such action responses may be realized by committing to a self-identified cause that is perceived as purposeful and worthy, and this commitment to a worthwhile project is directed outwardly through acts of self-transcendence (e.g., toward others or some project that is valued). This type of responsiveness, which has a social character since it occurs in and is hindered/facilitated by a socially and economically structured world, is what Frankl (1959) refers to when suggesting that *responsibility* for action and thought is a source of meaningfulness in life. Such responsibility involves individuals exercising their judgment and being able to use their capacities as knowledgeable beings in response to some situation. By emphasizing agential responses to situations, Frankl thus uses the

¹² This assumption about the possibility of finding meaning in the face of- and aiming toward overcoming obstacles, is reflected in Marx's workmanship ideal. Marx suggests that freely chosen and creative non-alienated work may very well involve processes and experiences of overcoming obstacles that are characterized by the "most damned seriousness" and "the most intense exertion" (Marx, 1973 [1939]: 534; see also Blauner, 1964).

concept of responsibility in an unorthodox and existentialist way¹³. From this viewpoint, the experience of meaningfulness supposedly emerges in people's responses to the circumstances they find themselves in and are confronted with in situations, regardless of their level of constraint and powerlessness (Frankl, 2010; 1959).

Frankl suggests that larger and smaller sources of meaningfulness can be discovered by individuals when they orient/learn to orient themselves in life according to the question of what life "wants" from them. Frankl, who is inspired by a phenomenological perspective on action and meaning, emphasizes that "existence falters unless it is lived in terms of transcendence toward something beyond itself" (Frankl, 2010: 116). In this sense, by emphasizing intentionality, attention and people's directedness toward purposes in life, Frankl gives transcendence of the here and now through thought (interpretation, understanding, and valuation) and action a central role in meaning construction.

Apart from sporadic mentions or by framing productive activity and goal direction in general as a key source of meaningfulness in life, Frankl does not discuss the will to and experience of meaning in the context of wage labor. However, it is worth noting that Frankl was critical of cultural norms and beliefs through which people value the activity of wage labor as something that ought to be a central source of meaning in life for the majority:

It is in this spirit that I pose the question to the disheartened youth, whether they really believe that the fact that makes life worth living is that one works through eight hours daily for some old boss, to toil for a businessman or that sort of thing. The answer is 'no', and I explain to the young people what their answer positively means: Professional work does not represent the only chance to give life meaning! The erroneous identification of

¹³ In my view, it is possible that Frankl's unorthodox use of the term "responsibility" by referring to people's ever-present potential for responsiveness may be misinterpreted and exploited for ideological or other purposes related to vested interests. From this perspective, I think that it is important to highlight that the existentialist conception of responsibility should not be confused with so-called neoliberal or other political conceptions (or caricatures thereof) of individual responsibility, freedom, and responsabilization. As pointed out by Pendenza and Lamattina (2019), neoliberal characterizations of freedom are typically rooted in ideological assumptions about individuals' primarily Self-centered responsibility for their own happiness and lot in life. This includes an assumption about people as autonomous self-governing and self-responsible market players who seize in a rational manner on available social opportunities for Self-advancement (ibid.).

vocation and calling forms the spiritual basis for the outlined apathetic state. (Frankl, 2010: 18)

Given the central influence and recurring references in leadership-oriented meaning of work research literature primarily to the motivational and psychological parts of Frankl's theory, it is interesting to note that Frankl had this critical perspective on cultural assumptions about wage labor as a central source of meaningfulness in life.

A potential problem with Frankl's theory of meaning and leadership-oriented usages thereof is the following. Individual-centered existential psychological theories of meaning typically emphasize inner motivation and attitude as sources of meaningfulness even under conditions of externally imposed hardship. As noted by Karlsson (2013), such psychological aspects may become part of a management ideology and appropriated by organizational leaders. As noted by Bailey et al. (2017: 420), "The active management of meaningful work can be used cynically as a means of enhancing motivation, performance and commitment". Based on such ideologically related aspects, it is possible that management representatives may use one-size-fits-all ideas about individual stoicism and positive thinking as a universal solution for mitigating experiences of meaninglessness and facilitating meaningfulness. In such instances, the human capacity for conformism, adaptation, acceptance, and positive thinking even under conditions of extreme constraints, hardship, and suffering may be used as an argument for assigning sole responsibility for the situation and experience of meaning in it to the individual. A second problem is that Frankl tends to associate the will to meaning primarily with moral virtues. As argued by other meaning theorists, people may experience morally reprehensible actions and outcomes thereof as meaningful (Wong, 2008)¹⁴. Regardless of potential and actual problems with Frankl's theory, I think that it is important to recognize that theoretical assumptions about the possibility of meaningfulness even under conditions of hardship and suffering, such as those highlighted above, indicate that work experiences of meaning in the workplace and life more broadly may involve counterintui-

¹⁴ On this point, Wong (2008) emphasizes the difference between identity and action as sources of meaning. He gives the following example: "In the case of Hitler, it was presumably not by virtue of his identity as the monster who was responsible for the death of millions of Jews, but by virtue of his identity as a powerful political leader, that his life was meaningful" (ibid.: 142).

tive nuances and subtleties. As noted in the literature review chapter, such nuances and subtleties have been indicated in some empirical studies.

I proceed with assuming that it is likely that people individually and collectively care about and want things and their experiences to be meaningful. I also assume that it is likely that groups of people may share similar wills to meaning in terms of what they perceive as making sense and is relevant, purposeful, and valuable in life. If there was not a conscious or unconscious will to meaning, people would lack the capacity and need for evaluation and interpretation, accept doing things that lack purpose, and uncritically subordinate to and not oppose any constraint of agency. In such a situation, there would be little point to begin with to be concerned about the experience of meaningfulness and meaninglessness in wage labor and life in a broader sense.

Temporality

In the previous sections, when highlighting Frankl's emphasis of the human capacity of going beyond what is actually given through temporal and spatial transcendence in thought and action, I highlighted a central theme in (social) phenomenological considerations of human existence and its orientation toward meaning. In sociology in general and the meaning of work research in particular, temporality and its relation to the organization of society and the experience of meaning are largely empirically and theoretically overlooked (Bergmann, 1992; Bailey & Madden, 2017). According to my interpretation of the literature, this may be one reason why there are few meaning of work studies that explore existential meanings in a direct and explicit sense.

According to Schütz, "the problem of meaning" is "a time problem" (Schütz, 1967: 12, 1940; see also Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Mannheim, 2009 [1949]; Camus, 2005; Weick, 1995). In this vein, Lee (2015: 2259) suggests that "'Meaning in work' is not merely personal values and beliefs but includes self-initiated and future-oriented meaning that gives reasons for one's existence at work". The suggestion that meaning is a time problem refers to the assumption that the experience of meaning is related to how and where people direct their attention in time (e.g., by thinking about the past or future) and how this influences their present, expected, or anticipated actions and valuations thereof. In this context, anticipate means to expect something and to take action in expectation ('the manager saw smoke coming from the machine and anticipated it to break down. She therefore ordered her employees to shut it down'). Expect refers to

regarding something as likely to happen and does not require any action ('Sofia expected to get a higher wage this month because she had worked a lot of overtime').

In this thesis, I focus on temporality from sociological as well as existential perspectives. To recapitulate, I view these perspectives as intertwined (see also Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Tiryakian, 1962). A red thread in phenomenological theories of meaning is that the experience of meaning and its relation to temporality are intimately interlinked with social aspects. Such social influences are expressed at macro-, meso- and micro-levels in how and why time is ordered for economically rooted instrumental reasons, and how this is experienced by people. For full-time employed people, until retirement, the organization and activity of wage labor structures and influences everyday time, thought, emotion, action, and goals for a large proportion of waking hours. In other words, time and what is done with and during it both while in and between situations are to a large extent structured according to externally predetermined schedules and action scripts of working life.

In social phenomenological terms, temporality refers to people's shared time consciousness. It involves people's knowledge of, attitudes toward, and lived experience of actual and imagined actions and events in the past, present, and future. Temporality is grounded in our lived experience, perception, apprehension and awareness (consciousness) of reality and is therefore implicitly and explicitly reflected in all aspects of life. From a Western perspective on time in industrialized societies, this temporal horizon is universally shared in the organization and activity of everyday life (e.g., clock time, schedules, dates). From a social phenomenological perspective, temporality is a basic starting point for organizations, people's shared sense of history and future, and their experience of the passing and presence of time (Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; 2009 [1948]; Muzzetto, 2006; Arendt, 1998 [1958]; Urry, 1996; Weick, 1995; Schütz, 1967).

The social ordering of time is expressed at the meso-, macro- and micro-levels in wage labor and social life more broadly. This ordering is expressed in the production and reproduction of predictable and relatively rigid schedules and timetables that are rationally calculated according to Western conceptions of linear clock time. From this socio-structural perspective on time, "a modern industrialized and modernized society can function only if its members follow a highly patterned and dependable daily round" (Lewis & Weigart, 1981: 439). On this note, de Grazia suggests that

Time is a moving belt on which all activities run off as on a sheet of teletype. It moves with perfect regularity, its pace is the same the world over and it never stops to back up and repeat itself. There's no turning back the clock. So much a part of us is this concept we find it difficult to believe that any other kind of time can be true or possible. (de Grazia, 1962: 64)

This socially constructed and supposedly taken for granted and naturalized shared temporal horizon of abstract and rationalized time in society creates opportunities and constraints for action and the experience of meaning. Temporality and work theorists suggest that the social ordering of temporal horizons according to abstracted linear clock time becomes especially highlighted and intensified in the context of wage labor. In the organization and activity of wage labor, people's temporal horizon of past, present, and future and what they do within it becomes tightly ordered. Institutions, organizations, and individuals fragment and order time in systematic ways by dividing it into units and schedules for intentional and rational purposes (e.g., clock time, months, days, amount of time used for work tasks, and so forth) (Paulsen, 2020; Hoffman & Paulsen, 2020; Adams, 1995; de Grazia, 1962).

Key features of the social ordering of time in the context of wage labor are expressed in the rationalization and fragmentation of present and future actions and goals. In this rationalized and abstractly calculated mode of time use, appropriation of the future in the present to limit uncertainty is crucial. This is expressed practically and cognitively in planning and calculating the execution of present activities to predict and reach future goals and to mitigate actual and potential risks (Paulsen, 2020; Braverman, 1999; Thrift, 1990; Weber, 1978b; Lukács, 1971). Weber suggests that the control and rationalization of time and what is done during time highlights the intimate relation between time and money in industrialized societies. This relation was (in)famously highlighted by Benjamin Franklin when he suggested that "time is money" (Franklin, cited in Weber, 2005 [1930]: 14; see also Hoffman & Paulsen, 2020; Adam, 1995; Lukács, 1971). I will continue to discuss instrumental rationality and its potential influence on general and work experiences of meaning in later parts of my theory sections.

From an existential perspective, humans' existential condition as finite beings who are capable of being self-aware, historically aware, and who are aware of and feel anxiety toward their own and others death, renders time itself and what is done during its passing a matter of scarcity and

finiteness (Honneth, 1995; Heidegger, 2013 [1927])¹⁵. Sievers highlights this relation between temporality, finitude and their existential relevance for understanding the experience of meaning in wage labor when suggesting that what people do and the time they spend doing it is ultimately a proportion of their lifetime:

Work can only have meaning in its fundamental sense when it is regarded not just as a dimension of the employing institution but also as part of an individual life and of our collective lives. As meaning can only be understood from beyond the frame of life, the meaning of work has to be qualified by the fact of human mortality. (Sievers, 1986: 346-347; see also Hägglund, 2019; Schütz, 1945)

The interconnectedness of temporality, action, experience, and meaning highlights a key hermeneutic component of the general experience of meaning that highlights the relation between parts and wholes in human experience. People understand things in the present and base their valuations of them through relating them to, making inferences and generalizing from prior events and experiences. In futuristic terms, through intentional and habitual expectation, anticipation, forecasting, and speculation, people project what may happen in the future if they act in certain ways in the present and according to what they have apprehended and learned in and from past experiences. In this sense, both the past and the future become constitutive parts of an ever-ongoing present that is perceived and experienced as an intelligible whole (Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Schütz, 1967, 1945).

In the Mood for Meaning

Two central and interrelated concepts in phenomenological theories of temporality and their relation to the experience of meaning are *attunement* and *mood*. As far as I have noted, these concepts are typically not referred to in the meaning of work literature in the social sciences or sociology (for

¹⁵ Hägglund (2019) argues partly from a Heideggerian perspective that finitude is the ultimate source of freedom, value, and meaning in life. Since every lived experience and relationship with others are finite in terms of occurring within a time span that is heading toward a definite end in the form of the final moment of death, all moments are precious. Hägglund suggests that every human experience is finite when conceived in relation to death, everything that happens and is experienced in the present is unique, important, and matters. It is therefore of utmost importance to pay attention to and care about what is done and happens in the present (ibid).

an exception regarding the latter, see Bude, 2018; and for the former, see Ringmar, 2018). I argue, however, that they have sociological relevance for framing and exploring lived work experiences of meaning. In Heideggerian (2013) terms, temporality and its relation to the experience of meaning in life is connected to moods and people's attunement toward their environments and what happens and is performed in them (e.g., events, threats, actions, and goals). According to Heidegger (2013), attunement refers to different things in social reality and life itself that individuals and groups direct their individual or joint attention to and care about. This involves past, present, and future things in life that they are interested in and intuitively find matter in a positive or negative sense.

The way individuals and groups of people are attuned to situations and other aspects of the social world and what they mean to them in terms of their value-based significance may be reflected in the different moods people simply find themselves in—what people feel about situations, the world, society, and their perceived states (Ringmar, 2018; Bude, 2018; Bengtsson et al., 2017; Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Areni & Burger, 2008). Moods may be shared at a group level and therefore influence what people pay attention to collectively and how they interpret situations or “the world” as a perceived whole. Such collective attention and its influence on people's moods may become manifested in the mood of a situation, historical period, or a certain zeitgeist. The state of “society”, “the world”, “the economy” and situations within them may be experienced collectively as, for example, gloomy (e.g. war) or bright (e.g. perceiving the future in optimistic terms). Such moods may reveal how people pay attention to the same things and understand their environments and what meanings/lack thereof they experience (Bude, 2018). In my view, the change in many employees' overall mood when the weekend is present, approaching or ending can be interpreted as an example of when moods may be shared at a group level in working life (for similar suggestions, see, e.g., Ryan, Bernstein & Brown, 2010; Pollert, 1981).

To concretize moods and their relation to meaning, temporality, and what people pay attention to, it can be useful to use our sociological imagination for the purpose of constructing an ideal-typical everyday example. The following example is related to the experience of meaning in work settings. In Swedish workplace culture, there is a shared care structure around the practice of “fika”. In a collective sense, many people care about and are attuned to drinking coffee and eating pastries with work colleagues, typically at rigidly scheduled times during the workday

(Paulsen, 2014). This may create a certain atmosphere and shared mood in the workplace. Perhaps especially in temporal term, as in when the fika situation is approaching. There is care and concern about the coffee break—people attach significance to it and it matters to them. The fika situation is often something that employees are individually and collectively interested in. In a temporal sense, they may look forward to the fika during the workday, which may affect their mood collectively. The fika situation becomes an institutionalized feature in the workplace toward which attention, anticipation, moods, and action may be directed in a regular fashion. It highlights the different forms of action and scheduling thereof in the workplace in the sense of illustrating a division between time for work tasks and time for informal socialization during coffee breaks.

Time for Action

In the previous sections, I discussed theories in which temporality is viewed as crucial for people's orientation toward meaning in life. This included the suggestion that the human temporal horizon is socially ordered through clock time, which is ultimately abstracted from the lived experience of time. I highlighted temporality especially in its relation to specific activities, practices and the *actions* they involve in everyday life (see, e.g., Frankl, 2014 [1988], 1959). In phenomenological theories, action is a core component in the social construction and individual experience of meaning. As suggested by Mannheim (2009 [1949]: xxii), "it is the participation in an activity that generates interest, purpose, point of view, value, meaning, and intelligibility, as well as bias". In terms of action and its relation to time, people's perceptions of why things have mattered in the past and why they will matter in the future influence what people do in the present, and why, where, how, and when they do it. I have not found any explicit action perspectives in the meaning of work literature (see e.g. Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Schütz, 1967).

In his integrations of Husserl's phenomenology and Weber's theory of action and meaning, Schütz (1967, 1945) suggests that the actions people perform in the present and the goals they aim at through action and planning thereof are dependent on both past and present action schemes and plans of how to act. Such unconscious, habitual or deliberative schemes and plans for action involve anticipations of what outcomes said actions should ideally lead to according to the actor (Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Weick, 1995; Schütz, 1967, 1945, 1943). This temporal focus on things in

the past and present highlight a counterintuitive aspect of the experience of meaning that is discussed by both sociologists and philosophers. Potentiality in the form of things that are not yet realized (e.g., an action or a desired outcome) has a key role in the construction and experience of meaning. In this sense, not only things that exist in the present but also nothingness and absences are constitutive elements for the experience of meaning (Scott, 2018; Heidegger & Lovitt, 2013; Käufer, 2005; Sartre, 1969).

Phenomenology-oriented commentators suggest that humans are, figuratively speaking, always already ahead of themselves for intentional, voluntary, involuntary, or unconscious reasons (Paulsen, 2020; Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Weick, 1995; Schütz, 1967, 1943). From this perspective, the present has meaning only insofar as it opens toward a possible future. According to my sociological interpretation, an everyday illustration of being ahead of oneself and its relevance for the experience and social construction of meaning is highlighted when people individually and jointly say that they are “looking forward” to something (e.g. *fika*). It may become expressed when people care/are concerned about something that they anticipate may or ought to happen the future, or when they say that they need to plan ahead for something in order for things to turn out as they have initially intended. One may therefore ask the following questions: In addition to the fact that they have to go there because they need a wage, do people look forward to going to work? Why/why not? Do they look forward to going back to work after being off from it for a while? Do they look forward to leaving work? Do people care about and value the short- and/or long-term social impact of what they do at work?

Ideal-typically, from a voluntaristic and rationalistic perspective on action and its relation to time, people set and aim for future goals that are to be reached through some action. In this everyday action context and its underpinning rationales, people may intentionally or unconsciously plan for the future by imagining how their past actions lead up to their present situation. They may also anticipate how their actions in the present situation may create a particular outcome and influence a potential future situation (Paulsen, 2020; Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Mannheim, 2009 [1949]; Schütz, 1967, 1945, 1943). By having this temporal orientation toward actions and goals, Schütz (1967, 1943) suggests, people experience purposive meaningfulness in their present actions: the imagined future outcome of action and ways of reaching it are of significance; that is, they are valued and sought.

This future-oriented characteristic of the experience of meaning can be highlighted further by connecting it to Schütz's (1967) ideal-typical action theory of meaning (see also Heidegger, 2013 [1927]). In this theory, which has a rationalistic bent, the concept of *in-order-to motives* is a key component for understanding the meaning of actions to those who perform them. Intentionally or habitually, people do things (e.g., use tools and other forms of equipment) in the present to reach some future goal. There is always some conscious or unconscious rationale behind an action, which may be based on affective, instrumental, value-oriented or other motives (ibid.: see also Weber, 1978a). Temporally, this in-order-to motive is established prior to action ("For reason Z, Anna will perform action X in order to reach goal Y"), while because-of motives are constructed retrospectively ("Anna performed action X because of the initial reason Y or some other reason that was constructed retrospectively or during the course of action").

From a non-voluntaristic or less voluntaristic perspective on action, based on her or his accumulated understandings, experiences, and expectations of the activity of wage labor, a person who goes to work in the morning knows that at work, she or he will perform certain predetermined actions. Life is divided into free time and labor time, and at work, there are limited opportunities for temporal and practical spontaneity in action and planning (Bailey & Madden, 2017; Marx, 2013 [1867]). At work, the action scheme and in-order-to motives are largely the same. The action scheme follows a standardized routine-based recipe (Schütz, 1943). In wage labor, what subordinates do, and why, when, where, and how they do it is ultimately determined by the employer. Present work tasks and equipment are thus planned and structured according to certain externally predetermined action schemes (expressed in, e.g., a formal job description). If the predetermined action scheme holds and nothing interrupts it (too much), the employee knows beforehand and expects that her or his present work tasks will produce certain anticipated and predictable ongoing and future outcomes in the form of a product or service (Ahrne, 1994; Lukács, 1971; Schütz, 1943).

From a wider existential perspective on action and its relation to temporality and meaning, the first and ongoing economic in-order-to motive for being ahead of oneself in wage labor is highlighted in retirement. A key existentially significant function of wage labor in life is to generate a pension to live off in the future during retirement until death. The heading toward, transitioning to, and life during retirement and the role wage la-

bor has in life in terms of its pension generating function illustrates the position the organization of wage labor has in the social ordering of time, doings, goals, and therefore life itself (more on this topic later). Existential sociologists Bengtsson and Flisbäck highlight this when noting that

people in Sweden annually receive an orange-colored envelope by regular mail from the Swedish Pensions Agency. This envelope contains forecast information on a person's financial situation as retired based on their accumulated taxed income to date. From a phenomenological perspective, the sight of this envelope refers to a whole context of meaning, such as concerns and beliefs about economic (in)security and managing financial risks, the approach of old age, the individual's responsibility for making plans for their future, etc. (Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2021: 201)

Retirement from working life, thus, can be viewed as a socially constructed road sign on the economically ordered temporal path toward definite finitude (death) (Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2016). In Sweden, the earliest possible age of age-based retirement from labor market participation is presently set to 62, while the latest is 68 (Pensionsmyndigheten, 2020). I will return to retirement later when discussing existential imperatives and sample selection.

To sum up, the reasons why people carry out actions are based on their past, present, and future-oriented conscious or unconscious apprehensions, deliberations and habits. They influence the experience of meaning; they are key for understanding the whys behind action. To participate in wage labor means to have a large proportion of waking time and everyday action rationally structured, ordered, and subordinated according to the needs, rules, and demands of the temporal and practical regulations of organizations. Theoretically, this social ordering of time has consequences for present and future reasons for carrying out actions and the experience of meaning in them. Consequently, at work (where actions and goals are structured according to professional time) and in life outside of work (where actions and goals are structured according to personal time), may not only be vastly different from one another in terms of its practical content and form but also regarding temporal rhythms in general during waking hours.

Authenticity and Inauthenticity

The concepts of authenticity and inauthenticity and their relation to the self at work and employees' work experiences of meaning are an underlying and recurring theme in both the theoretical and empirical meaning of the work and the sociology of work literature. This theme is reflected in the theoretical considerations above: the experience of meaning is always relative to people's value hierarchies. The experience of meaningfulness or meaninglessness is relative to valuing one thing over another (e.g. a particular actual past or present or imagined future outcome of an action). People may value one outcome of action over another because it is apprehended by self and/or others as more real, sincere, worthwhile, and thus authentic. In this sense, the time used for action can be apprehended and experienced as well or ill spent – it can be used authentically or inauthentically. The authenticity/inauthenticity construct and its relation to meaning remains largely undertheorized and empirically overlooked in meaning of work literature. I therefore suggest that they are worth framing and exploring further both in theoretical and empirical terms.

Assumptions about authenticity and inauthenticity in the individual's confrontation with social pressures bring to the fore central questions about the self, subjectivity, their relation to the experience of meaning and the influence of social aspects on it (see, e.g., McLane, 1977). Theories and everyday references to authenticity/inauthenticity draw on assumptions about sincerity, insincerity, realness, and falsehood in relation to the self, others, actions, and outcomes thereof. Things, people and their roles can be perceived, recognized, and experienced by self and others as either more or less authentic or inauthentic. In theories of authenticity, a common key assumption is that which is subjectively and/or intersubjectively experienced or perceived as authentic is typically valuable, more meaningful, and therefore more desired than that which supposedly lacks authenticity. Sociologists have noted that theories of authenticity/inauthenticity typically focus on the Self from the perspective of the extent to which people are supposedly true to their intrinsic interests, wants, and desire. This involves a focus on the extent to which such subjective aspects are constrained or facilitated by social factors (Vannini, & Franzese, 2008). In what follows, I discuss existential, sociological, and meaning of work-related conceptions of the Self and its relation to the authenticity/inauthenticity construct.

A theme of authenticity/inauthenticity that is highlighted by existential sociologists and some sociology of work scholars is that in life in general and in organizational life, people's nonconformity to cultural and collective pressures may result in stigmatization, exclusion, ostracism, or other forms of interpersonal alienation (see, e.g., Axelsson, Karlsson & Skorstad, 2020; Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999; Lysgaard, 1985; Tiryakian, 1962). In theories associated with existentialist thought, a red thread is the assumption that the social pressure to conform to and the risk of becoming unconsciously absorbed by the supposedly unreflective social conventions of social groups makes it difficult for people to find and truly be themselves. This includes being truthful and sincere to both self and others in thought, emotion, communication, and action (see, e.g., Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; de Beauvoir, 2010; Kierkegaard, 1985; Sartre, 1969; Tiryakian, 1962).

Heidegger (2013) is often regarded as the philosopher of authenticity par excellence. As noted by Tiryakian (1962), Heidegger gives a sociologically relevant account of authenticity/inauthenticity. For Heidegger (2013 [1927]), authentic selfhood is when people identify, step out of, and can be their true selves in the otherwise institutionalized and supposedly internalized shallowness of mass conformity and standardized expressions of unreflective sameness in everyday life and people's everyday self-expressions (see also e.g. de Beauvoir, 2010). At the same time, Heidegger suggests that since the individual self/human being (*Dasein*) is dependent on and can "exist" only in relation to others, this kind of authenticity is always already influenced and mediated by intersubjective arrangements. To be authentic, Heidegger suggests, the individual needs to be consistent in her/his self-expression across social contexts (e.g. not say or do things that she/he does not believe in), but also recognize and understand her or his everyday self as always already proximately and remotely embedded in, reproducing, and influenced and mediated by intersubjective arrangements (*ibid*).

A potential problem with existentialist suggestions and subjectivistic ideals of authenticity is that since it is ultimately up to the subject to identify what is authentic to her or him, even morally reprehensible ways of acting in the world can be viewed and legitimized by the individual as "authentic" (Wrathall, 2015). A second potential problem is the following. Universalistic assumptions about mass cultural phenomena and their constraining influence on more authentic thinking, acting, and feeling is that they may be used to justify arbitrary forms of elitism and authoritari-

an reasoning. From this perspective, only a select few individuals or a specific social group become regarded as enlightened enough to be authentic. In this view, the masses are viewed as deceived by and trapped in socially induced conformism and shallowness and, therefore, lack ultimate insight into what is authentic and desirable in life (Adorno, 2002; Hohen-dahl, 1993; Bronner, 1977).

Authentic and Inauthentic Selves in Meaning of Work Literature

In the meaning of work literature, the inauthenticity/authenticity construct is sometimes used for understanding and explaining employee cynicism, alienation and other tensions between employee subjectivity and organizational demands in work situations (Costas & Fleming, 2009). Additionally, authenticity is sometimes framed as a central component in managerial constructions of meaning and employees' general experience of meaningfulness at work (Scott, 2019; Bailey & Madden, 2017; Bailey et al., 2017; Steger, 2017; Dekas, et al. 2010). Construction refers to leaders' initiatives to promote subordinates' work experiences of meaningfulness by facilitating authentic relations with their work. An underlying assumption in the existing meaning of work perspectives on the authentic self at work, is the existence of a stable core to the Self as a whole, that this core can be imported into, cultivated, and facilitated in the workplace, and that employees view this as desirable.

A sociologically relevant observation about the self at work is made by Dekas et al. (2010) in the most extensive review of the meaning of work literature. There is a tendency to refer to the "self" in a taken-for-granted individualistic and socially isolated manner. As noted above, phenomenological and existential theorists understand the Self as an entity that is always already part of, situated in, and influenced by social factors. The existential disposition of this social self is in a constant state of becoming¹⁶. The former more atomized understanding of the Self is characterized by a conception of the self that is rooted in dualism. From this dualistic

¹⁶ Similar notions of the authenticity/inauthenticity dichotomy and its relation to intersubjectivity are highlighted in the works of Herbert Mead. In "Mind, Self, and Society", Mead (1934) argues from a social behavioristic viewpoint - which in my view is too deterministic - that people's self-conceptions are socially constructed. In this view, people's Self-conceptions are primarily based on what they imagine that others may think of them. In Mead's view, this imaginative evaluation and constitution of self and others, represents a starting point for how people view themselves and how this view affects how they present themselves to others (ibid.)

perspective, an underlying assumption is that the interiority of the self is primarily an inward core and individual psychological concern of the subject; it is isolated, private, and separated from others. Such atomistic conceptions of the Self tend to overlook discursive and other social influences on peoples' Self and identity (O'Doherty & Willmott, 2011; Dekas, et al., 2010; Costas & Fleming, 2009).

Regarding authenticity in the workplace, a common theoretical assumption in the meaning of work literature is that if employees are given opportunities to bring their whole self or at least central parts of it to work, they will be more likely to experience working as meaningful beyond the pay and job benefits. From this perspective, authenticity includes expressing and acting out self-identified personal needs, aptitudes, strivings, values, and desires at and through work. This form of authenticity at work also includes a fit or similarities between the employee's and the organization's value structure (e.g., its core mission and why this mission is socially important). In other words, there is a person-role fit and person-organization fit. Conversely, too much incongruency between the self at work and the organization is suggested to represent a key source of alienation and lack of meaningfulness in work and life in a wider sense (Martela & Pessi, 2018; Bailey et al., 2017; Dekas et al., 2010).

The Alienated Inauthentic Self

A stark contrast to the authenticity/inauthenticity construct, as it is typically theorized and idealized in leadership-oriented meaning of work literature, can be found in Marx's historically materialist conception and immanent critique of capitalist modes of organizing and performing wage labor (see, e.g., Marx, 2013 [1867], 1977 [1844]; Marx, & Nicolaus, 1973 [1939-41]). As highlighted in my first chapter, the historical and contemporary influence of Marx's thought on the sociology of work is significant.

Marxist thought and existentialist thought share the underlying theme of alienation and the unconscious as a defining characteristic of human existence. However, Marx viewed alienation as determined by the value logic of the market economy and its intimate relation with the means of production and of bourgeois ideologies of capitalist societies. In some existentialist/phenomenological writings (e.g., Sartre, 1969), alienation between the consciousness of self and other is viewed as a universal human condition, regardless of people's social position or context (Tiryakian, 1962). Marx was neither a phenomenologist nor an existentialist

and did not intend to be either. Analytically, he approached individuals as personifications of economic categories and embodiments of particular class relations and class interests. He did not theorize explicitly about the subject's relation to meaning and authenticity. On this note, as highlighted by Paulsen (2020: 143) in reference to classic sociology of work theorists, "what none of them, not even Marx, were interested in, was to visit the factory shop floor and ask the workers themselves how they experienced their jobs". Nevertheless, a recurring theme in Marx's early and later theories is what purposive meanings productive activities in general and wage labor in particular bring to human life/society as a whole and as individuals. This theme includes assumptions about under what structural conditions people's experiences of meaning in life are hindered or promoted. On this note, as suggested by Marcuse (1995) in his phenomenological interpretation of Marxism, a key assumption and theme in Marx's revolutionary critique of bourgeois society is the loss of authentic selfhood and of meaningfulness in work and human life in general under capitalism (see also Mertel, 2017).

Classic Marxian interpretations of the authentic/inauthentic self needs to be understood against the backdrop of Marx's original philosophical conception and ideal of the anthropological essence of humans as always already social and autonomous, planning, productive and creative beings who realize themselves through self-determined productive activities. For Marx, labor as productive and objectivating activity is a defining characteristic of that which makes humans human; people realize themselves by producing things in which they can recognize their efforts and themselves. In societies structured according to capitalist modes of production and consumption, the authentic self is lost and systematically hindered from emerging. Although they may not understand it themselves, both employers and employees are objectively alienated from their own humanity. In an antagonistic sense, because of their different externally imposed and materially rooted socioeconomic positions and interests, the employer is socially, economically, and existentially separated from the employee, and vice versa (Alfonsson, 2020; Marx, 1977 [1844]; Marx & Nicolaus, 1973 [1939-41]).

According to my interpretation, a crucial difference between phenomenological theories of human experience and meaning in life and Marx's is that the Marxian perspective is future oriented (see also (Mannheim, 2009 [1949])). In this materialistic and temporally oriented ideal of the possibility of total emancipation, freedom, and resource distribution, authentic

freedom for the individual to be her nonalienated self necessitates the freedom of all people. Overcoming alienation and realizing authentic freedom can only and necessarily happen when the subject and object become and are dialectically reconciled into a supposedly organic whole at the point of production and in life in a wider sense. For Marx, this form of authentic selfhood can only and necessarily happen in a future society. In the breaking point of this anticipated situation, the immiseration of the proletariat has become unbearable, and the crises of the capitalist system reached unattainable levels and where property is subsequently abolished through inevitable and necessary revolutionary means. In this imagined future society where the state eventually ceases to exist, production and consumption are organized and performed according to noncapitalist rational principles (socialism/communism) (Marx & Engels, 2001 [1848]; Marx, 1977 [1844]; Marx & Nicolaus, 1973 [1939-41]).

From the original Marxian perspective on alienation in capitalist societies, both the existence of the bourgeoisie and proletarian Self are under siege by economically rooted rationality and its material manifestation in the organization and performance of wage labor. On this existentially significant note, Marx suggests that the capitalist modes of production, consumption, and its accompanied value logic “extends the labourer’s time of production during a given period by shortening his actual lifetime” (Marx, 2013 [1867]: 179). As long as the capitalist organization and activity of wage labor exists, the presence and realization of Marxian ideals of freedom and an authentic self in labor and life are, in a wider sense, rooted in a structurally rooted impossibility and bourgeois utopia. In the original Marxian conception and more recent modifications thereof, the wage laborer’s externally imposed role of employee at the point of production and the economy at large is fundamentally alienating in a concrete (lived experience) and abstract (systemic) sense (Alfonson, 2020; Marx, 1977 [1844]). Classic and neo-Marxian commentators suggest that by virtue of being employed by someone else to produce alienated objects to generate surplus value, the economically subordinated individual becomes mentally, physically, socially, and, therefore, existentially disconnected from the products of her or his labor, her/himself, others, and her or his fundamental humanity (see, e.g., Harding, 2019; Renault, 2014; Althusser, 1971; Lukács, 1971; Fromm, 1965; Mills, 1956; Braverman, 1999).

Specifically, for the alienated employee in capitalist wage labor, her or his existence is characterized by a fundamental mode of suffering that is

rooted in loss of control and loss of autonomy in life. There is no authentic self-identification with the work activities that take up a substantive proportion of lifetime, their outcomes, and other workers. Therefore, according to Marx's earlier view, in the capitalist workplace, people do not and cannot feel at home (Marx, 1977 [1844]). Their artificially constructed productive function as employees in need of money so as to live is to reach economically motivated ends that were determined by someone else and impersonal social/economic structures and alien technology; they (and employers) are reduced to functional components in a vast economically motivated instrumentally rational productive apparatus (Marcuse, 2005; Marx, 1977 [1844]; Marx & Nicolaus, 1973 [1939-41]). According to this original and more humanistic and utopian view than is reflected in Marx's later economic and more "positivistic" writings, at the point of production and in life in a wider sense, employees cannot see their true Self expressed in the work they do (the material manifestation of her or his talents, abilities, and potentials as a human being). Authentic selfhood and subjectivity are separated from objects and become objectified in themselves (Marcuse, 2005). In wage labor, since she or he does choose neither the reasons nor ends for her actions (work tasks), the employee becomes robbed of the responsibility for her own actions. In Marx's universalistic view on alienation as a general intertwined social and economic syndrome of capitalism, the greater the employee works and produces for the employer, the more estranged, dehumanized and, therefore, unfree she or he becomes. However, since the employee is born and socialized into and embedded in this alienated and unequal mode of being and working in the world, she or he mistakes it as a natural feature of life (Marx, 1977 [1844]; Marx & Nicolaus, 1973 [1939-41]).

Marx's implicit assumptions about authenticity in selfhood and action involved a future vision of complete collective and individual self-determination under conditions of total emancipation from economic ends (Marcuse, 1995). This included structurally unhindered opportunities for pluralistic self-realization in the absence of market-economically motivated externally imposed social positions, roles, and instrumentally rational activities:

For as soon as the division of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; whereas in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive

sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic. (Marx & Engels, (1998 [1845]: 53).

When interpreted from a phenomenological perspective, there is a key problem with the original Marxian conception of alienation, authenticity/inauthenticity and their relation to present experiences of meaning in work and life in general. This problem is related to temporality; that is, how people think about the past and/or future and how this way of thinking may become a defining worldview characteristic. In such cases, some suggest that romanticizing the past ('the good old days were better') and future-oriented yearnings for betterment or perfectionism in social organization may limit and potentially bias interpretations of phenomena in the present (Kilminster, 2013; Roessler, 2012; Mannheim, 2009 [1949]; Camus, 2005; Berger & Pullberg, 1965). In the original Marxian interpretation, authentic selfhood and intrinsic meaningfulness in productive activities are viewed as possible only under imagined optimal conditions of total emancipation and realization of human potential through nonalienated (non-capitalist) labor. Although Marx (1973 [1939-41]: 177) himself rejected utopianism, Karlsson (2013: 90) refers to such an imagined and idealized future as "the utopia of work". Tiryakian (1962: 78) highlights this form of futurism when noting that measuring present circumstances and experiences against future-oriented ideals, as in, for example, an "eschatological notion of a communist utopia", may be a needed and existentially necessary source of hope and motor for change (see also Mannheim, 2009; Geoghegan, 2008). However, in epistemological terms, it may also have a temporally distracting effect on judgement, attention and valuation in the present (see also Frankl, 2010; Mannheim, 2009 [1949]). Since the posited normative ideal of how things ought to be may remain a forever unattainable goal that recurrently fails to be realized in practice, the experiencing everyday subject may develop overly idealistic yearnings and become nihilistic in her or his interpretations of the present. Some commentators on meaning and epistemology suggest that such a temporal and general existential disposition may fuel and intensify experiences of disappointment and meaninglessness in the present (for similar arguments, see Webb, 2013; Kilminster, 2013; Roessler, 2012; Mannheim, 2009 [1949]; Honneth & Wright, 1995; Durkheim (1970 [1897])).

Thus, in the Marxian tradition, there are tendencies of framing human experience in general against the backdrop of romantic and idealistic comprehensive conceptions of an imagined more human, dignified and authentically interconnected social world that may or may not come. Nevertheless, in my view, Marxian and neo-Marxian interpretations of work experiences under capitalism are indispensable for systematic critiques of social pathologies in organizing and performing wage labor. They provide analytic tools for identifying, denaturalizing, and critiquing economically rooted structural sources of constraint and suffering in the historical and current situational and existential context of wage labor (see also Alfonsson, 2020; Arendt, 1998 [1958]). Regardless of their normative content, this is how I use Marxian and related conflict-oriented perspectives in the present study.

The Fluid Self

A more fluid kind of self, as partly reflected in Marx's projected ideal of a future nonalienated Self that is in a constant state of pluralistic and individualistic becoming and creative (re)invention, is also reflected in more contemporary social and meaning of work theories of the Self in general and at work. From this vantagepoint, the self and its relation to authenticity/inauthenticity are discussed in implicit terms. The self and its construction is conceived in a more open way that is relative to the multitude of social contexts, including their constraints and opportunities for agency. This self is open for constant socially influenced change and revision, while still having lost, is separated from, or lacks a stable core to begin with. In terms of the self and its relation to work experiences of meaning, Konstantinos, Jean-Pascal and Effie (2022: 1401) highlight this form of fluid self when suggesting that "meaningfulness interacts with the formation and enactment of professional identity" in work situations. In other words, when people adapt their selves to what they perceive that the work situation and work roles demand from them. In general terms, such more fragmented and supposedly less essentialist interpretations of the self, are more akin to existentialist conceptions of the self as contextually relative and an ever-unfinished project of becoming, while still socially rooted and dependent on the existence of others (see, e.g., Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Muzzetto, 2006; Tiryakian, 1962).

In sociological and sociology of work theories, this conception of the self as a non-fixed entity is expressed in various but related terms. In such cases, self-(re)presentations may be described as dramaturgically con-

structured according to front stage or back stage performances (Goffman, 1990[1959]) or generally fragmented (Muzzetto, 2006). The self and its character may also be theorized as fluid (Bauman, 2000). From a conflict perspective, this unstable Self may be theorized as corroded by economic pressures of having to constantly be flexible in one's occupational trajectory, work roles, and overall identity in life (Sennett, 1998). It may also be theorized as hyper alienated, where the employee not only sells her or his physical labor power but also her or his emotions and expressions thereof as part of prescriptions of how to perform work roles (Paulsen, 2010). Others theorize the self at work as contextually contingent and performative, changing in its inauthentic/authentic expression depending on organizational factors such as managerial surveillance and coworking with others one feels that one can trust and be transparent with (Harding, 2019). However, as pointed out by Costas and Fleming (2009, p. 362), a problem with conceptions of the self as ever fluid in time and space and lacking a stable core while simultaneously being alienated from itself is that "if there is no human essence from which we can derive authenticity, then how can we ever be self-alienated?"

More open-ended theories of the self at work, are further reflected in the recent sociology of work literature. Here subjectivity at work and its relation to authenticity/inauthenticity is an explicit or implicit theme. Such accounts paint a less romantic picture of the self than the ones indicated in the conceptions and ideals of authenticity in Marxian (total universal emancipation from alienation) and existentialist conceptions (the subject's identification and stepping out of mass conformity). An example can be found in Paulsen's (2014) theory of subjectivity at work, where expressions of subjectivity are suggested to be an expression of the will to become an actor in life (for a similar argument, see O'Doherty & Willmott, 2009).

Paulsen (2014) draws on Alain Touraine's (2005) more open-ended and existentialist-influenced theory of subjectivity. Paulsen theorizes that expressions of subjectivity at work may become manifested when individuals and/or groups thereof in intentional or unintentional ways challenge or resist the instrumentally rational dictates of the organizational system. In Paulsen's (2014) view, this indication of a more creative and resistant self that partly penetrates the otherwise rigid impersonal structures of instrumental rationality can be interpreted as an indication of the employee wanting to become an actor in her or his own life and experience meaningfulness in work. By intentionally or unintentionally diverting from the

instrumental rationality of the organization, employees may find room and ways to be more of themselves in thought and/or action at work. Paulsen suggests that the will to become an actor at work may also become specifically awakened and put to practice in certain work situations (e.g., when work is very boring or when there is nothing work-related to do while at work) (ibid.). These more open-ended accounts of subjectivity highlighted by others and by Paulsen when referring to the will to become an actor at work add further nuances and complexities to the self at work and its relation to authenticity/inauthenticity.

To sum up, in the meaning of work literature, there is a tendency to theorize authentic selfhood at work as much as possible and as desirable in most forms of occupations. An underlying assumption in this perspective is that it is realistic that people can bring their whole Self or parts of it into the workplace and cultivate it there. In such cases, this theory goes, authenticity facilitates the experience of meaningfulness. Classic Marxian commentators and others (e.g., critical theorists) view authentic selfhood in the form of organic reconciliation of subject and object as desirable, anthropologically and humanly essential, and existentially necessary for a meaningful life. However, in this view, under capitalist and therefore inherently alienating modes of production, authenticity is viewed as structurally counteracted and therefore subjectively impossible. More postmodern and existentially oriented commentators of the self at work view it as fluid, adaptable, and ongoingly influenced and structured by contexts and situations in conscious and unconscious ways. Those in between these two perspectives view authentic selfhood at work as perhaps possible, but only to some still very limited extent. It depends on the resources of the individual, the level of constraints in the work situation, and opportunities to alleviate or escape such constraints. Altogether, these differing conceptions of the self and its relation to authenticity/inauthenticity at work suggest that the question of how subjectivity in the workplace is related to work experiences of meaning remains open for interpretation and worth exploring further in both empirical and theoretical terms. I do this in my empirical and concluding sections.

Meaning – an Ideal Type

The next step in my theory section is to distinguish ideal-typically between existential meaning and situational meaning. These distinctions are based on the theoretical groundwork performed above. They should be understood as broad analytical categories. In the meaning of work research and theories of meaning, distinctions between situational meaning and existential meaning are usually referred to indirectly or implicitly. I argue that there is a need to clarify them.

The philosophical/theoretical considerations above share the core assumption that in their life worlds and everyday involvements, people are unconsciously or consciously oriented toward caring about both larger existential meanings and smaller situational meanings. For the experiencing subject, a core component of both situational and existential meaning is to see a worthwhile and pursuable purpose and point of direction to that which is undertaken in action and experienced in situations and over space and time in life more broadly (Frankl, 2014 [1988], 2010, 2003, 1959).

My sketch of existential and situational meaning is not entirely but partly my own invention. It is ideal-typical for the necessarily reductive and heuristic reasons described by Weber (1978a) and Schütz (1967, 1943). Existential meaning and situational meaning are two different expressions of my core concept purposive meaning, which I introduced in the first chapter (see also, e.g., Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen, 2017; Paulsen, 2014). I view existential and situational forms of “meaninglessness” or “meaningfulness” as negative respectively positive expressions of purposive meaning. As noted by Martela and Pessi (2018), depending on people’s positive or negative valuations and interpretations of their experiences (e.g., of situations or actions), meaning can vary in its amount. Things can be experienced as more or less existentially or situationally meaningful/meaningless. Depending on the value people assign to them, things (e.g., actions and outcomes thereof) can be experienced as filled with meaning or lacking meaning. This value may be qualitative (e.g., practical social usefulness) and quantitative (e.g., economic value). Valuation is thus a prerequisite for people’s experiences and assessment of purposive meaning. There is therefore always a normative element involved in the construction and experience of purposive meaning (Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen, 2017). Whether it is perceived as valuable or noteworthy,

something can be experienced as either lacking or having certain levels of meaning (e.g., “since I will have no practical use of that which is written in this book, there is little purpose and therefore meaning in reading it”).

Regarding neighboring concepts, I have highlighted that experiences of meaning are closely related to attention, interpretation, and understanding. I have also highlighted that experiences of meaning are related to experiences of the absence or presence of significance, authenticity, care, moods, mattering, worthwhileness, responsibility, and/or coherence. Regarding interpretation and understanding, how and the extent to which people interpret, understand and value a purpose (e.g., of work tasks) in the present and in relation to the past and future, are constitutive elements for the experience of meaning. This highlights that in the experience of purposive meaning, understanding and valuation are interlinked. As theorized by Scott (2019: 3), “Work meaning encompasses employees’ understanding of what they do and how significant it is”. A precondition for the experience of purposive meaning is thus both the interpretation and evaluation of the value-based significance of actions and their outcomes (see also Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003).

Understood from a sociological perspective, the experience of meaning is linked to social arrangements in processual and relational ways. To recapitulate, a key premise underlying this phenomenological claim is that by studying the links between people and objects within social networks of significance, it is possible to understand the processes behind how and why people individually and jointly experience meaning. These links are constructed when people individually and jointly make and agree upon interpretations and evaluations of situations, experiences, object, and so forth (Mercurio, 2019; Wong, 2008; Merleau-Ponty, 2002 [1962]; Schütz, 1967, 1959, 1945, 1943). From a sociological perspective, the organizational context and its rootedness in structures and practices influence the experience of meaning in work situations, work tasks, and outcomes thereof. As suggested by Mercurio (2019: 67), examples of such organizational factors are “culture, climate, goals, purposes, other people, relationships, processes, practices, structure, and time” (for similar arguments, see Laaser & Bolton, 2021; Laaser & Karlsson, 2021; Weick, 1995; Ahrne, 1991).

Before I describe my twofold ideal-typical sketch of meaning, to avoid misunderstandings it is relevant to clarify my use of the term “existential” in a sociological study some more.

A general observation in my assessment of sociological theories of meaning or sociological texts in general is that the concept “existential” and its connection to meaning are rarely approached in a direct manner. It may, therefore, be assumed that explicit inquiry into existential matters is primarily associated with fields such as existentially oriented philosophy (see, e.g., Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; de Beauvoir, 2010; Sartre, 1969) and existential psychology (see, e.g., Frankl, 1959). An exception can be found in Ulrich Beck (2009), who sometimes uses the concept “existential” when referring to larger socially/humanly constructed risks, such as global warming and nuclear threats. Another exception is Bengtsson’s and Flisbäck’s (2021) reference to existential meaning in their empirical and theoretical work on the experience of meaning in life before and after retirement.

In the otherwise diverse and eclectic field of “existential sociology” (see, e.g., Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2021; King, 2013; Kotarba & Johnson, 2002), the term “existential” is generally derived from phenomenology-inspired theories/philosophies (see, e.g., Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Arendt, 1970; Husserl, 1973; Schütz, 1967; Sartre, 1969; Jaspers, 1919; Nietzsche, 2001; de Beauvoir, 2010). These theoretical and philosophical perspectives, which I draw on in the present study, do in no manner represent unitary bodies of thought. However, they share a number of common themes: construction/destruction/lack of larger and smaller forms of meaningfulness in the relational and processual tension between the individual and society (Tiryakian, 1962).

When referring to the concept “existential”, it does not denote the same thing as the general term “existentialist”, as in referring to existentialist philosophy and all of its themes (e.g., awareness of death, moral ambiguity, becoming, absurdity, suffering, alienation, authenticity). Such themes and their relation to meaning are central in existentialist considerations, and some of them are important for the present study. However, when using “existential” in relation to meaning, I refer to work experiences of meaning that influence broader networks of significance in people’s lives and their apprehension and valuation thereof.

Existential Meaning

Existential meaning refers to the value-based significance something (e.g., a goal and the action undertaken to reach it) is experienced as having or lacking in relation to an individual’s wider life and identity in an ongoing, durable and sustained sense over an extended time period (Baumeister

et al., 2013; Svendsen, 2003; Reker, 2000; Reker & Chamberlain, 1999; Frankl, 1959; and for a similar argument about such larger meanings and their connection to the activity of wage labor, see Bailey et al., 2019; Lee, 2015; Blauner, 1964). Existential meaning, thus, refers to spatiotemporally broader and deeper experiences of meaning. Certain things in life can be perceived and felt to matter and produce a sense of durable coherence in an overarching holistic sense¹⁷. This may give rise to an overall feeling and experience-based apprehension and assessment of that things matter, have a broader purpose and, therefore, are existentially meaningful (Svendsen, 2003; Reker, 2000; Reker & Chamberlain, 1999).

Meaning theorists suggest that action projects that are valued in an ongoing sense over time and space represent important sources of existential meaning in life (Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2021, 2016; Costin & Vignoles, 2020; Baumeister et al., 2013; Wong, 2008). At the individual level, the experience of existential meaning can be viewed as connected to whether a project in life is interpreted by the subject as a worthy and central life concern. This includes whether this larger life concern is experienced as worthwhile to direct ongoing attention to, pursue, relevant and matter in relation to a broader purpose that is connected to broader sources of significance in life (e.g., belief in divinity, experiencing a sense of calling, or ideological convictions). Social psychologists Baumeister and colleagues emphasize temporality, identity, and cognition as preconditions for the experience of meaning and that meaningfulness is not necessarily related to happiness or absence of hardship. They theorize existential meaning in the following way:

Meaningful thought allows people to think about past, future, and spatially distant realities (and indeed even possibilities). Related to that, meaning can integrate events across time. Purpose, one important component of meaningfulness, entails that present events draw meaning from future ones. The examples listed above of meaningful but unhappy lives (e.g. oppressed political activist) all involve working toward some future goal or outcome, such that the future outcome is highly desirable even though the present ac-

¹⁷ My conception of existential meanings of wage labor echoes Arendt's (1998 [1958]) concept of *work*. According to Arendt, in contrast to *labor*, which refers to never-ending existentially necessary productive activities aimed at satisfying and inescapable needs through immediate consumption (e.g. producing and eating food), *work* refers to activities that introduce durable objects into the world that have symbolical and/or practical significance to contemporaries and predecessors in the present and future (ibid.).

tivities may be unpleasant. Meaningfulness may therefore often involve understanding one's life beyond the here and now, integrating future and past. (Baumeister et al., 2013: 506; see also Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2021; Bailey et al., 2019)

An ideal-typical example that highlights work experiences of existential meaning can be illustrated with the following hypothetical and morally laden working life experience: “a main purpose in my life is to help others, and it is primarily through work that I do this, both in the present and as a long-term project. Besides from attaining a wage that has existential significance for rendering my basic livelihood and additional consumption, working is worthwhile to me. Despite its struggles and constraints, it means fighting for something worthwhile and represents a source of doing good. My working life has existential significance in that it matters in relation to my life in a wider sense, who I am, and what I consider important and worth aiming at in life in general”.

As noted above, a key feature of existential meaning is, thus, that it may be connected to both self-realization and self-transcendence that manifest themselves both in the present, over time and space, and through direction toward some future goal in an ongoing and sustainable way. In this context, “transcendence” means that human experience has the capacity to go beyond what is actually given (Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2021; Reker, 2000; Frankl, 1959, 2010)¹⁸.

Situational Meaning

Situational meaning refers to experiences of meaningfulness or meaninglessness in work situations. Although it is recurring and may be located in similar situations in an ongoing sense, work experiences of situational meaning are more context specific, short-term, and fleeting than existen-

¹⁸ In a similar phenomenological and hermeneutic vein, Erich Fromm (1965) uses the parts-versus-whole dialectic to theorize about actions and conditions that may help rendering life worthwhile and supposedly more authentic. In Fromm's view, which is partly inspired by a classical Marxian teleological understanding of history and alienation, “human nature”, society, and the individual, it is by having the freedom to act spontaneously that people may render their lives meaningful. According to Fromm's socialist critique of modernity, which echoes Marx's teleological view of the historical realization of human potential and freedom, life becomes meaningful through self-determined spontaneous action that provides people the opportunity to both realize their potentials and become part of something that is larger than the Self (ibid.).

tial meaning (Mercurio, 2019). As noted above, throughout life, people always already find themselves in some situation or other of which they do not and cannot have total control. By consciously or unconsciously looking for reasons, people actively or habitually interpret and value situations and their contents in the sense of judging whether they are worthwhile, good, bad, meaningful, purposeful, and so forth (Frankl, 2014 [1988]).

To conceptualize situational meaning in general life and in work situations in particular, it is useful to draw on the meaning and action theories of Weber, Schütz, and Blauner. Weber theorizes meaning primarily from the perspective of understanding and intelligibility and their relation to the actions of the Self and others. As discussed earlier, the action perspective overlooked in the meaning of work literature is important for understanding general and work experiences of meaning.

According to Weber's (1978a) perspective on meaning and action, it is when people can comprehend symbols, their own and others' actions and communications that they can make sense of them individually and collectively. Comprehension between individuals, thus, facilitates navigation in the social world and the sharing of denotative meanings with others. However, Weber also theorized about meaning and its relation to various forms of action from the perspective of intention, purpose, and motive. This social perspective on action and meaning involves both the one who performs the action and the observers thereof.

Weber (1978a) highlights both the hermeneutic and relational nature of meaning: the situational meaning of an action is dependent on both the actor's and observer's interpretation of the action and the definition of the situation. Why do some actions (e.g., work tasks) and their goals matter and are experienced as worthwhile to some people but not to others? How are these actions and meanings connected to personal motives and social factors that lead up to and are present in the situation?

According to Weber (*ibid.*), understanding the subjective dimensions of situational meanings of action is a prerequisite for grasping social meanings. Schütz (1967) elaborates the relational and social aspects of meaning by drawing on Husserl's phenomenology of consciousness and Weber's theory of meaning and action. Schütz suggests that people's subjective experiences of meaning in situations must be understood in relation to intersubjective contexts. This includes social processes, social relations, and how they influence the personal experience of meaning at the individual level (*ibid.*).

An ideal-typical example of the experience of meaning in the context of a work situation is the following. My example is inspired by an assertion made by working life science scholar Jan Karlsson in his book “Organizational Misbehaviour in the Workplace”¹⁹. Referring to his own experiences of work situations at a university, Karlsson reports that

At my faculty at the university, all teachers and researchers are summoned to attend an administrative meeting. If I am unable to attend, I have to notify a manager because the meeting is obligatory, but I cannot be bothered. I do not have time for administrative meetings. I am doing my real work – I am writing a book of narratives about resistance. (Karlsson, 2012: 149)

This example of work experiences can be interpreted/translated in phenomenological ways by using the concept of situational meaning(lessness) and the neighboring meaning concepts of purpose, relevance, mood, attention, care, action, temporality, significance, and value: “At work, I often have to participate in meetings that I feel are disconnected from the main purpose of my concrete work and its main tasks. Such work situations are not worth caring about or paying attention to. Many meetings are irrelevant for the performance of my actual job. Meetings invade and absorb my work time and do not contribute anything that is of positive significance, useful for, or improves my concrete work tasks. They disturb my core work process, affect my mood negatively, lack concrete value for my work activities and are a waste of time. Therefore, meetings tend to be an irrational element and lack meaning in relation to my actual job performance”.

The processual and relational components in the social construction and individual experience of purposive meaning, as highlighted by Weber (1978a) when he emphasizes the relation between individual motives and the social context in which they are formed and socially influenced, are prevalent in labor process scholar and sociologist Robert Blauner’s theory of alienation in the workplace. Using Marx’s original conception of alienation as a point of departure, Blauner (1964) explored empirically and theorized different degrees of alienation and its connection to freedom and meaning in different industrial work settings (for a similar conception of alienation, see Seeman, 1959). In Blauner’s view, meaninglessness in work

¹⁹ My example was initially inspired by Paulsen’s (2014) use of the same quote when theorizing and describing lived experiences of empty labor.

situations is a key phenomenological component of alienation²⁰. Conversely, others theorize that meaningfulness is the opposite of alienation (Tummers & Knies, 2013). Blauner (1964) highlights both existential meaning and situational meaning in an implicit sense. He associates meaning construction/destruction in the situational context of wage labor with understanding and the purpose of action and its outcomes:

Meaninglessness alienation reflects a split between the part and the whole. A person experiences alienation of this type when his individual acts seem to have no relation to a broader life-program. Meaninglessness also occurs when individual roles are not seen as fitting into the total system of goals of the organization but have become severed from any organic connection with the whole. The non-alienated state is understanding of a life-plan or of an organization's total functioning and activity which is purposeful rather than meaningless. (Blauner, 1964: 32; see also Bauman, 1991)

Thus, similar to other meaning theorists'/philosophers' suggestions, Blauner emphasizes action, purpose, understanding, and the general hermeneutic and relational parts-versus-whole dialectic in meaning construction (see also Breen, 2019; Sievers 1986). From this perspective, people's perception of a purposeful sense of spatiotemporal direction in their actions in situations and life more broadly is central for the experience of meaningfulness. The opposite relationship is likely to generate experiences of meaninglessness, both in wage labor and life in general (Mercurio, 2019; Frankl, 1959, 2010).

According to Blauner, in work situations at the point of production, the scope of the product worked on and the level of standardization of the product determine the level of meaning an employee experiences. Blauner echoes Frankl's (see, e.g., 1959) suggestion that responsibility in the form of self-determined responsiveness to external demands and exercise of judgment in situations and action projects are central components for the experience of meaningfulness. Blauner (1964) suggests that the larger the scope and, thus, wholeness of the product an employee is involved in and responsible for when immersed in production, the more likely it is that he or she will experience the activity and outcomes of the work as meaningful. This includes (a) mental and practical involvement in the labor process and product. (b) the responsibility this creates for the employee over the

²⁰ Tummers and Knies (2013) define meaningfulness as the opposite of alienation. However, as noted by Bailey et al. (2019: 99), "insufficient research has been conducted to evaluate whether this is the case".

labor process the employee is involved in and the quality of the end product, and (c) the opportunity these conditions create for self-determination in work and utilizing one's potential in terms of decision-making, personal skills, and knowledge, which are intertwined aspects that are central to employees' experiencing meaningfulness in work (Blauner, 1964).

Similar to Braverman's (1999) assessment of the link between meaning and exercise of spontaneity and skill, and the destruction thereof in capitalist labor processes, Blauner further associates meaningful work with craftsmanship (*ibid.*: 173). In Blauner's view, the labor performed by printers working in the printing industry qualified as craftsman-like work. Blauner (1964) suggests that work that includes craft characteristics introduces potential for experiences of meaningfulness for the following reasons: (a) the lack of standardization of the product; (b) the product is constantly changing and thus unique; (c) the job requires high and diverse cognitive and manual skill and expertise; (d) the employee can try out her or his own ideas (for the work done); and (e) she or he has responsibility and control over the immediate labor process (*ibid.*: 42-47).

Although interlinked with existential meanings, as reflected in the quote from Blauner above, situational meanings can be viewed as having smaller and more fleeting significance and as being constructed/destroyed/found lacking in everyday life. Situational meanings (experiences of meaningfulness or meaninglessness) are more limited to actions in certain situations in a temporal and practical sense—actions aimed at reaching short-term and typically recurring goals in immediate contexts (Frankl, 2010; 1959).

Overlapping Meanings

My ideal-typical model of meaning thus far can be nuanced. In reality, sources of people's and situational meanings may intersect and, therefore, influence the general experience of meaning in life in a broader sense. As suggested by organization and meaning scholars, the life domains of wage labor and leisure are not neatly separated into distinct spheres that never touch temporally, emotionally, spatially, mentally, or practically (Gallup, 2022; Yeoman, 2014; Frost et al., 2000; de Grazia, 1962; Frankl, 1959). As in Habermas' (1987) critical theoretical terms, the instrumental rationality of the system influences and may even colonize the lifeworld. From a general existential perspective, the period between birth and death and its events and experiences can be viewed as composed of a myriad of situations that may be very different in form and content but still overlap in terms of time, thought, emotion, and action (Frankl, 1959). Although

working life and the rest of life may be distinctly separated in many fundamental ways, the organization and activity of wage labor structures and influences time, thought, action, and emotion in life both inside and outside of work situations (Jahoda, 1981; de Grazia, 1962). As suggested by Jahoda (1981), employment may have a larger impact on people's lives in a broader sense that goes beyond economic aspects. As suggested by Bailey et al. (2019: 485), "Since we spend so much time at work, meaningfulness in this domain is likely to have a disproportionate effect on attitudes towards life as a whole". Such suggestions further highlight the existentially significant character of wage labor.

Furthermore, scholars who draw on (neo)Marxian and/or critical theory perspectives point out intersecting existential and situational aspects of working life. Because of how it is organized economically and socially, the activity of wage labor has an inescapable centrality in life in terms of its externally imposed economically compulsory nature and its structuring of time, thought, emotion, and action for a large proportion of waking lifetimes (Alfonson, 2020; Paulsen, 2014; Fromm, 1965; de Grazia, 1962). Some meaning of work commentators similarly theorize that it is likely that situational factors in the workplace may have a spillover effect and influence the experience of meaning in life outside work in significant ways (Lysova, 2019; Bailey et al., 2017; Yeoman, 2014a; Kuchinke, Cornachione, Youg Oh & Kang, 2010). Such overlapping relations evoke questions regarding how people may feel and think about their working lives and their meanings in existential terms.

What people do and experience in certain situations and contexts (e.g., at work) may influence the existential meanings they attribute to their lives in a broader sense (e.g., "As I understand it, my main purpose in life is to serve others, and it is mainly at work that I perform actions that serve others; therefore working is existentially meaningful to me"). I have chosen to differentiate between situational and existential meanings for analytic purposes. I argue that separating and exploring them analytically and empirically may facilitate understanding how they may shape and depend on each other.

My ideal-typical suggestions about the experience of purposive meaning sketched above are illustrated below in figure 1.

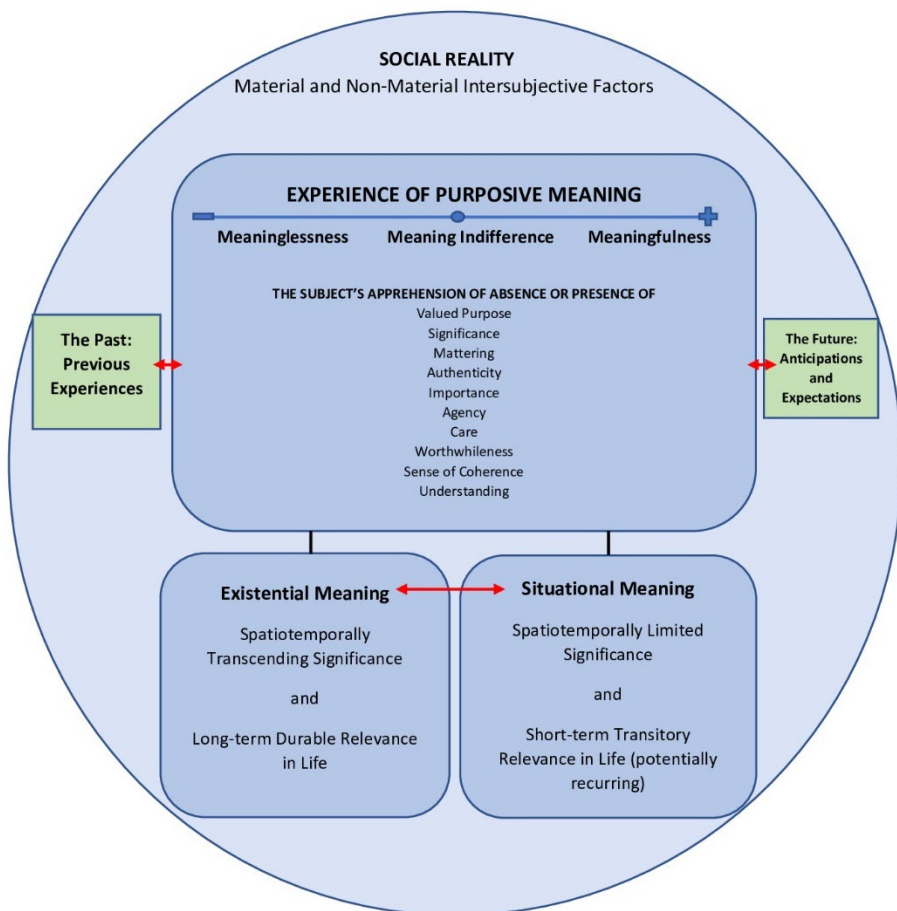


Figure 1. Ideal-typical model of the general lived experience of purposive meaning.

To sum up, based on my assessment of the literature discussed above I conclude that people's experiences of meaning always already take place in, are part of, and influenced by intersubjective and temporal arrangements. Moreover, whether something is experienced as situationally or existentially meaningful or not can be viewed as connected to relationally dependent processes of interpretation, understanding (which is the output of having made sense of something through interpretation) and valuation. My analysis and integration of theories of meaning suggest that interpretation, understanding and valuation are interlinked aspects in the experience of meaning. Valuation and understanding can be viewed as intertwined because interpretation is involved in the construction of both (when people understand something (e.g., the purpose of a work task), they are more likely to be able to perceive and value it as meaningful or meaningless). This intertwined relationship is largely overlooked in the existing theoretical and empirical meaning of work research. However, as a final comment, it is important to emphasize that things may not necessarily be experienced as meaningful because they make sense. As theorized by Alvesson, Gabriel and Paulsen (2017), many bureaucratic routines of calculation and measurement make sense. Although they have a functional cause-and-effect type of purpose and relevance and have significant rhetorical value in organizations, they may not necessarily be understood or experienced as meaningful by employees in their everyday practical involvement in concrete work situations (see also Alvesson, 2019; Bailey et al., 2017; Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Bauman, 1991).

Theory Part II – Structural Conditions

A red socio-ontological thread in the predominantly actor-oriented considerations above is that lived experiences of situational and existential meaning are personal and subjective but also always already part of, situated in, and influenced by material/nonmaterial intersubjective arrangements (see, e.g., Frankl, 2014 [1988]; Heidegger, 2013 [1927]). As noted by Dekas and colleagues (2010: 118) in their review of empirical and theoretical meaning of work literature (the most extensive hitherto), a salient trend among meaning of work scholars is that they “promote investigation of microlevel and intrapersonal mechanisms while downplaying social or contextual sources of meaning and, therefore, inhibit more comprehensive understandings of the meaning of work”. How can we (sociologists) expand our understanding of social aspects of work experiences of meaning

in a sociological way? The purpose of the next theory section is to discuss theories in which structural aspects may influence work experience of meaning. I begin with some key concepts from Schütz and then connect these concepts to Lysgaard's theory of the human system and the technological/economic system and its relation to ideological and material manifestations of instrumental rationality.

The Technological/Economic System and the Human System

By referring to the ideal-typical constructs of *finite provinces of meaning* and *imposed relevance systems* in everyday life, Schütz (1967, 1945) highlights that individuals and groups thereof cannot always act according to their will. From a power- and control perspective, people have to adapt and conform and cannot always decide what is relevant or irrelevant to do, pay attention to, and how to act in life's different social spheres. They may also lack the power and resources for making it more relevant and, thus, meaningful in a more personal sense. And in phenomenological terms, that toward which consciousness is directed in terms of what people pay attention to and consider relevant and worth caring about may be socially constrained and altered. Regardless of social position, people inevitably have to participate in, adapt, conform, and, thus, subordinate themselves and their attention to historically transmitted impersonal social circumstances that are not of their own design (Campo, 2015; Benta, 2014; Goettlich, 2011; Schütz, 2011, 1967). For sociostructural reasons, the sources, opportunities, and constraints for action and experiencing meaning are always already limited and finite (Goettlich, 2011; Schütz, 2011, 1967, 1945).

Schütz theorizes that a finite province of meaning is built upon relevance systems. A relevance system represents an intersubjective network of significance. This network may be composed of referentially related material and nonmaterial aspects, such as ideas, equipment, and other people. These material and nonmaterial aspects both constrain and facilitate agency. Examples of finite provinces of meaning are the world of work and the world of family life (Schütz, 1967, 1945). Things that are relevant, experienced as worth paying attention to and meaningful in work situations may not be present, relevant or meaningful in family life at home and during nonwork hours. In this respect and metaphorically, work and nonwork situations represent two different finite provinces of meaning and two different social realities in human existence. For the individual, being in and moving between different realities involve and require using, perform-

ing, and moving between different relevance systems, cognitive styles, and actions (Schütz, 1967, 1945).

I have not found any social phenomenological theory of work experiences of meaning. Schütz and other socially oriented phenomenologists mainly theorize about the general everyday experience of meaning and performance of action in everyday lifeworlds from the perspective of general social structures. However, a theory that comes close is Sverre Lysgaard's (1985) theory of the technological/economic system and the human system. Since it has not been translated into other languages until very recently, Lysgaard's theory has been limited to Scandinavian audiences (Skorstad, Axelsson & Karlsson, 2019). Lysgaard's theory is ideal-typical and systems-oriented. It is based on an ethnographic study of a pulp and paper factory during the second half of the 1950s. This theory highlights key structural components of wage labor in the workplace and to some extent life in a broader sense and their influence on people's agency. Lysgaard emphasizes key structural aspects of instrumental rationality and constraining/facilitating influences of these structural aspects on people's individual and collective agency, needs, and desires in the workplace and life outside of it.

Lysgaard suggests that there are significant structural differences between wage labor and its organization and other forms of organizations and activities (e.g., self-determined domestic or artistic work). Expressed in Schützian terms, they can be said to represent different provinces of meaning. In Lysggardian terms, the human system refers metaphorically to peoples' individual and joint many-sided personal needs and desires for self-expression, meaning, dignity, satisfaction of social and psychological needs (e.g., solidarity and safety), and development of potential. To this I would like to add Frankl's (1959) concept of the will to meaning. Thus, by referring to the human system, Lysgaard emphasizes the self at work and its embeddedness in socially constructed ideological and material relations. Lysgaard theorizes that in the workplace and life outside of it, the human system is not completely determined but to a substantial extent is subordinated to the largely one-sided inexorable and insatiable impersonal production logics and laws of a technological-economic system and what is needed to keep it running at a basic and optimal level (*ibid.*; for similar arguments see Skorstad, Axelsson & Karlsson, 2019; Eldred, 2015; Heidegger & Lovitt, 2013; Habermas, 1987; Marx, 1977 [1844]). The historically transmitted and current institutional logics and laws of this technological/economic "system" are not of its present participants' origi-

nal design. Both employers and their representatives and employees are subordinate to the rules and laws of the technological/economic system. However, management representatives are more direct representatives of the technological/economic system in terms of catering to its needs. Nevertheless, regardless of their heritage and social positions, people are born inside and socialized into the different but intertwined social realities of the human system and the technological/economic system. Whether they like it or not, in institutional terms, the instrumental logic, rules, and laws of the technological/economic system have an externally imposed and unavoidable relevance and significance in people's lives. They inevitably and continuously have to subordinate, conform, modify, and adapt their non-instrumental needs and desires to it (Lysgaard, 1985).

In my view, what Lysgaard calls "the human system" can be viewed from a social phenomenological perspective as partly echoing Habermas' (1987) Marxian-phenomenological conception of "the life-world" and its relation to micro phenomena: people's everyday needs and desires for authentic and solidaric relationships, economically non-instrumental sources of and experiences meaning, and self-realization. "The technological/economic system" can be viewed as representing the key economically regulatory macro- and meso-structural aspects of the organization of wage labor. These regulatory aspects are rooted in instrumentally rational reasons for organizing and performing wage labor in economically efficient and productive ways (e.g., by using specific forms of technology and management). In this sense, instrumental rationality, which is rooted in economic necessity, is a defining structural component in terms of how, where when, and why wage labor is organized and performed.

From Lysgaard's systems perspective, echoing Marxian interpretations, the instrumental rationality of capital and its representatives are in structural conflict with labor. By producing more or less socially beneficial services/products, the employer needs to constantly make profit through surplus value and/or stick to a budget and innovate. The employee needs to be paid a wage level that does not hinder this economically rooted process. In this context, depending on their level of skill and the employers demand thereof, employees are expendable and replaceable. In the organizational context of wage labor, the "human system" of people's lived experiences and intrinsic needs for authentic relationships and nonmonetary self-realization is inevitably subordinated to the general laws and logics of economically rooted instrumental rationality. This instrumental rationality and its relevance for people takes its material/nonmaterial manifestation in

the work setting in the form of aspects such as division of labor, planning, technology, and bureaucracy (Lysgaard, 1985; for a similar argument see Gorz, 2010; Marx, 2013 [1867]; Bauman, 1991).

Trapped in an Iron Cage?

In the previous sections, I used Schütz's theory of relevance systems and related it to instrumental rationality and to Lysgaard's conflict-oriented ideal type of human system and technological/economic system. The purpose of the following theoretical exercise is to relate the concept of the will to meaning further to instrumental rationality and its structural relation to the organization and activity of wage labor. This is motivated by my observation that there are no general sociological theories of work experiences of meaning and social influences thereon in work settings and life outside of them. Drawing on Lysgaard (1985), I view structures related to instrumental rationality as part of the technical/economic system. By structures, I mean socially constructed patterned material or nonmaterial regularities of the organization and performance of wage labor.

In theories of meaning and/or wage labor, economically motivated instrumental rationality and its manifestation in material and nonmaterial aspects in the workplace and life outside of it is viewed as a central structural component of how, when, where and why wage labor is organized and performed. As noted above, this economic necessity can be viewed as a defining structural feature of the organization and performance of wage labor. From this perspective, a central theoretical assumption is that technical/economic macro-, meso- and micro-structural aspects influence (constrain and facilitate) the will to and the experience of meaning.

Sociology of work and organization theorists emphasize that a key component of work rationalization is standardization. Material and non-material ways of organizing and performing wage labor are standardized according to the logic of scientifically informed cause-and-effect reasoning and cost-benefit analysis. Standardization is, thus, an economically motivated instrumentally rational means for reaching instrumentally rational ends according to the needs of a technological/economic system (Gorz, 2010; Lysgaard, 1985). The level of standardization varies according to the types of technology employed, such as unit production, mass production, and process production (Paulsen, 2020; Braverman, 1999; Ahrne, 1994; Blauner, 1964).

A recurring sociologically relevant topic in Frankl's theory of meaning is the assumption that in advanced industrialized societies, the will to

meaning has become all the more socially constrained and difficult to identify and realize in authentic ways. This was partly introduced above in my description and assessment of the social ordering of time. Frankl developed his theory during and after World War II. He emphasizes technology and science as both agency constraining and agency enabling micro-, macro- and meso-aspects of social reality. Frankl (2010; 1959) suggests that a key reason why social constraints of the will to meaning have increased in scope and intensity is that instrumental reason, rationalization, and reification have become pervading features of and in human existence. According to this mechanistic, dualistic, and secular modern worldview, at a mass level in advanced industrial societies, the human being is always at risk of being reduced to material for manipulation. In such cases, individuals become dehumanized and reduced to a means to an end in an increasingly ungraspable, non-instrumentally purposeless, fragmented, and meaningless world (see also Smyth & Westerman, 2022; Heidegger, & Lovitt, 2013; Casey, 2002; Lysgaard, 1985; Weber, 1978b [1905]; Tiryakian, 1962).

At the micro level in organizations, the consequences of the process of instrumentally rational mechanization and objectification can be exemplified with what Emmanuel Renault (2017) refers to as *social suffering*²¹. Critical sociology of work scholars view capitalist wage labor as the chief social domain of power asymmetry, obedience, and an externally imposed general source of human suffering (see, e.g., Kanov, 2021; Paulsen, 2018; Renault, 2017; Marx (1977 [1844])). From this critical perspective, being economically compelled to work and having to subordinate oneself to instrumentally rational managerial dictates and impersonal structures whose design is determined by someone else are associated with social suffering. At the micro-level, Renault (2017: 141) suggests that social suffering may include lived experiences of negative stress, resource depletion, indignity, feelings of “shame for being made robotic”, objectification,

²¹ Some organization- and management scholars suggest that “suffering is a pervasive, inescapable, and costly organizational reality”, and that suffering is a disruptive feature in working life that may erode people’s general sense of meaningfulness in work situations (Kanov, 2021: 85; see also Leitch, 1996). And from an employer- and business perspective, Kanov (2021: 97) suggests that “suffering is estimated to cost organizations hundreds of billions of dollars annually due to diminished productivity, turnover, insurance costs, and other expenses”.

depersonalization, and systematic disqualification of individual potentials²².

Weber and other scholars who explore links between the experience of meaning and rationalization associate excessive rationalization in organizations and society at large with loss of meaningfulness and nihilism (devaluation of all values). In the organization and activity of wage labor, economically motivated rationalization and thus standardization practices are implemented in nonmaterial (e.g., planning through thinking) and material (e.g., technology, practical execution, and equipment) ways. Weber suggested in a way reminiscent of Nietzsche's (1968 [1901]) diagnosis and forecasting of the mechanization of human life and the advent of nihilism that the socially manufactured bars of the "iron cage" of disenchanting rationality were becoming increasingly pervading, tighter and rigid in the present social world. Through increasing and intensified rationalization in virtually all spheres of human civilization, the world increasingly lost its magic, and the subject risked being consumed by the machine it had created. Weber speculated and forecasted that the rigid bars of the iron cage would become even more difficult to bend in the future (Weber, 1978b [1905]: 181). A key suggestion in general loss-of-meaning theories is that this excessively rationalized human condition stifles authentic human autonomy and subjectivity in general and, thus, the intrinsic will, potential, and creativity of the individual (see, e.g., Paulsen, 2020; Chase, 2002; Fromm, 1965; Mills, 1959).

A key negative feature highlighted in general theories of rationalization and its relation to the experience of meaning is that excessive rationalization driven by instrumental motives risks reducing individuals to functional components in an objectifying, alienating and highly technologized and economic apparatus that is rooted in calculation. In this world, the externally imposed structures of economically motivated instrumental calculation and bureaucratic coordination of actions and goals reign supreme, hindering the experience of intrinsic meaningfulness (for additional exam-

²² Marx (1991 [1894]: 959) argued that because of humans' inescapable need to be productive in order to attain and generate basic life necessities and other things, regardless of social forms of organizing and performing work (e.g. capitalist or communist) there will always be "a realm of necessity". Emphasizing temporality, Marx speculated that even in work organized according to communist principles, "the true realm of freedom, the development of human powers as an end in itself, begins beyond it, though it can only flourish with this realm of necessity as its basis. The reduction of the working day is the basic prerequisite" (ibid.).

ples that highlight this general loss-of-meaningfulness thesis, see, e.g., Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen, 2017; Učník, 2016; Heidegger, & Lovitt, 2013; Frankl; 2010, 2002, 2010; Heidegger, 1999; Arendt, 1998 [1958]; Bauman, 1991; Sievers, 1986; Husserl, 1978 [1970]; Weber, 1978b [1905]; Becker, 1971; Lukács, 1971; Nietzsche, 1968 [1901]; Tiryakian, 1962). In other words, to borrow from Lysgaard (1985) and Frankl (1959), the will to meaning is always already situated in and subordinated to a technological/economic system.

A Taylorized Destruction of Meaning?

Historically, modern capitalist forms of work rationalization are typically theorized as originating from scientific management and variations thereof (Karlsson, 2013; Ahrne, 1994; Furåker, 1991). Since their invention in the first half of the 18th century, these Tayloristic principles of the division of labor have been implemented in their most extreme forms under what is typically referred to as Fordism, which is associated with assembly line production and highly regulated working conditions (Beynon, 1973). A hallmark of Tayloristic organization of work and the scientifically calculated detailed division of labor that underpins it is standardization and fragmentation of organization, activity, and goals into predictable and highly specialized pieces (Taylor, 1920; and for analyses of Taylorism in contemporary organizations, see Breen, 2019; Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen, 2017; Ahrne, 1994). This involves repetition in actions, goals, and planning thereof. Regarding the implementation of standardization regimes in workplaces, Taylor (original emphasis) highlights the central importance of top-down enforcement: “It is only through *enforced* standardization of methods, enforced adoption of the best implements and working conditions, and *enforced* cooperation that this faster work can be assured” (Taylor, 1919: 83).

Classical Marxian and neo-Marxian commentators suggest that the type of rationalization of work rooted in scientific management represents a key structural source of constraint and fragmentation of subjectivity, agency, and destruction of sources of meaningfulness in wage labor (Gorz, 2010; Braverman, 1999; Lukács, 1971; Mills, 1956). In this vein, Lukács suggests in his Weber- and Marx-influenced theory of alienation and reification in capitalist societies that the economically motivated

fragmentation of the object of production necessarily entails the fragmentation of its subject. In consequence of the rationalization of the work process, the human qualities and idiosyncrasies of the worker appear increas-

ingly as mere sources of error when contrasted with these abstract special laws functioning according to rational predictions. (Lukács, 1971: 89)

From a more contemporary perspective, Sievers (1986) departs from the same dialectical assumption that unity between the Self and action and its goals, and unity between Self and others, is central and desirable for facilitating people's experiences of meaningfulness (see also Gorz, 2010). Sievers' holistic theory of loss of meaningfulness in wage labor and life in an existential sense echoes Marx's (1977 [1844] dialectic perspective on economically rooted alienation in capitalist societies. This includes the alienation of the subject from the object at the point of production and from social life as a whole. It also resonates partly with Durkheim's (1997) theory of the socially and morally disintegrating effects (anomie/normlessness) that the division of labor in society and the workplace may have on individuals when it becomes extreme:

(...) the loss of meaning in work is immediately connected with the increasing amount of fragmentation and splitting, with the way work has been, and still is organized in the majority of our Western enterprises. (---) This fragmentation is based on the dichotomy of the individual and institutions through which both man himself and his institutions are destroyed, and dispersed, into tiny little bits which are no longer connected and related (Sievers, 1986: 338-339; for similar arguments see Gorz, 2010; Simmel, 2004; Fromm, 1969).

In literature on the sociology of work, Tayloristic rationalization and variants thereof are typically associated with the organization and activity of wage labor in capitalist societies. However, it is relevant to note, as highlighted specifically by Marxian scholars, that although capitalism is typically and legitimately the usual suspect (see, e.g., Gorz, 2010; Braverman, 1999; Marx, 1977 [1844]; Beynon, 1973; Lukács, 1971; Fromm, 1969; Mills, 1956), the influence of Taylorism has not been restricted historically to capitalist societies. This is especially relevant to consider in relation to Frankl's following suggestion. Experiences of meaninglessness that are rooted in instrumentally motivated reification and objectification of the human being are social phenomena that get "through the borders between capitalist and communist countries without a visa" (Frankl, 2002: 55). Regarding the latter, because of its facilitative effects on cost reduction and efficiency in large-scale mass production, rationalization of work according to Tayloristic principles was viewed by state officials as a

necessary means for building socialism in the Soviet Union (Klein, 2008; Del Mar & Collons, 1976).

Taylorism-inspired forms of work rationalization (e.g., lean production and New Public Management) are suggested by various organizational scholars to have become pervasive in contemporary professional and bureaucratic settings. In professional and bureaucratic settings, the organization and activity of wage labor typically become highly technologized and administrative and may generally take on an increasingly abstract form and content (Crowley, Tope, Chamberlain & Hodson, 2010; Smith & Willmott, 1996), such as in, for instance, administrative work (Edwards, 1979) education (Au, 2011; Lorenz, 2012; Atalay, 2018) and technical and managerial occupations where mental labor may also become highly mechanized and standardized (Perrolle, 1986).

Since the 1970s, Tayloristic forms of work rationalization have also been implemented for ideological and practical reasons in an intensified manner and wider scope in public organizations. With the introduction and application of neoliberal forms of “new public management”, public organizations such as governmental organizations, regional and local government, higher education institutions, health services, the criminal justice system, police forces, the legal profession, and professional service organizations have tended to become more business-like (Diefenbach, 2009). This business feature of work organization involves the implementation of standardization aspects of goals and outcomes of work, such as “quality management, customer satisfaction measurement, decentralization of authority, creation of quasi-market mechanisms, a results-based culture, and cost control” (Lips-Wiersma & Mills, 2014: 150). Taylorism-inspired principles of rationalization are also suggested by some to be a common feature in the organization and performance of work in the fast-food industry and general service sector and in the media and television industry (Kamp, 2011; O'Doherty & Willmott, 2009; Mayhew & Quinlan, 2002).

In terms of micro perspectives on rationalization, Hochschild's theory of emotional labor highlights work rationalization and its expression in standardization at the level of the Self at work. Hochschild and others, drawing on her theory, suggest that many types of occupations are characterized by employees having to conform to and obeying formally prescribed standardized ways of thinking and feeling. This includes outward emotional expression and representation of the Self. Dressing, acting and feeling in organizationally prescribed standardized ways in the work environment may be part of the formal job description and encouraged

through a workplace culture that is rooted in managerial interests (Bailey et al., 2017; Paulsen, 2010; Hochschild, 2003; Ahrne, 1994).

Cracks in the Iron Cage?

A potential problem with general theories of economically motivated instrumental rationality and its manifestation in wage labor, its destruction of meaning, and its reifying and objectifying influences on people is that they risk becoming overly reductionist, deterministic, and perhaps even nihilistic. Critics suggest that there are countertendencies and situation-dependent nuances and changes in the regimes of instrumental rationality of organizations and their effects on work organization and employee subjectivity (e.g., sectorial growth rates, employees' sense of pride in workmanship despite low-skilled tasks). This includes, for instance, the phenomenon that "capitalist profit seeking produces both tendencies toward the fragmentation and deskilling of labor and tendencies in the opposite direction" (Attewell, 1987: 328; see also Doherty, 2009).

Although crucial for identifying, understanding, and critiquing economically motivated instrumental rationality in the organization of wage labor and its potentially pathological influences on work experiences of meaning, it risks painting the picture of the subject as an appendix that is fully integrated into the machine. Especially in labor process scholarship, the problem of totalizing general structural features of the organization and activity of wage labor is highlighted in the tendency toward reducing the subject, consciousness, and agency to represent a function of structure and/or discourse (Laaser & Karlsson, 2021; Paulsen, 2014; King, 2010; O'Doherty & Willmott, 2009; Leitch, 1996; Elger, 1979).

In their extensive review of the literature on meaningful work, Rosso, Dekas and Wrzesniewski (2011) nuance the destruction of work-related existential and situational sources meaningfulness (e.g. craftmanship) highlighted in both Weberian and Marxian rationalization narratives:

Such a narrative has taken on a folkloric quality in the meaning of work scholarship. However, although this narrative has conceptual appeal as a straightforward way of understanding and explaining vast cultural shifts in the meaning of work, scholars rarely question the assumptions upon which it has been perpetuated, and too frequently rely on secondary sources to support these claims. (Dekas et al., 2011: 117; see also Ciulla, 2000)

As initially identified, described and criticized by social theorists such as Smith, Marx, Weber, Durkheim and others, the problem of excessively rationalized, exploitative, alienating and otherwise constraining and dehumanizing mental and physical working conditions still exist (for a recent and largely Marxian study of alienation in gig-work in Sweden, see Alfonsson, 2020). However, in the West/Global North, such conditions are not as widespread as in non-Western and economically/industrially disadvantaged countries (Fineman, 2012; Ciulla, 2000). While it is difficult to identify overarching trends, for good or for worse, many of the conditions of the organizations and activities of wage labor are different from the time of industrialization during which the classic theorists of work operated (Findlay & Thompson, 2017; Fineman, 2012; Baldry, 2007).

Key examples of more recent and ongoing significant changes in the organization and activity of wage labor in Western-oriented societies include automation, individualization, expanded and intensified bureaucracy (especially in public authorities), women's increased participation in the work force, short-term employment contracts, gig work, globalization, and less hazardous working conditions. Examples of additional developments are increased precariousness, performance pressures, shortening of the workday, less overt authoritarian leadership, increased workers' rights through union activity, and flexibility (Alfonsson, 2020; Gillberg, 2018; Findlay & Thompson, 2017; Standing, 2013; Fineman, 2012; de Beauvoir, 2010; Paulsen, 2010; Bengtsson, 2008; Sennett, 1998; Edwards, 1979). Such structural changes in the organization and activity of wage labor indicate that the socio-structural stage on which working conditions are generated and maintained, where employees' lived work experiences of meaning take place, are complex and nuanced (Findlay & Thompson, 2017; Kamp, 2011).

Regarding complexity and nuance, some commentators highlight that regardless of its form and content, the instrumental rationality that underpins present forms of organizing and performing wage labor is not necessarily hegemonic and impenetrable for the employee. Organizations and the work structured and performed in them may also contain more or less hidden features and action scripts. Although they may take on structural characteristics, these features may be less structured, less formal and centralized, and less standardized. They may allow for more room for limited forms of creativity, relative autonomy and self-determination, and spontaneity (Laaser & Karlsson, 2021; Paulsen, 2014; Karlsson, 2012; Ahrne, 1994; Mintzberg, 1979). As suggested by Harding (2019: 135), "individu-

als may move into and out of several or numerous identities as they go through their working days, in some of which they may conform with managerial initiatives, but in others of which they may act with autonomy”.

Other commentators theorize that work experience may involve power shifts from leaders to subordinates. Employees’ expression of subjectivity and their knowledge advantage in work situations in terms of understanding the labor process may become both a source of meaningfulness and resistance against the otherwise rigid organizational structure (Axelsson, Karlsson & Skorstad, 2020; Paulsen, 2014; O’Doherty & Willmott, 2009). Furthermore, as pointed out by Ahrne (1994: 22), if they do not feel like complying or if they, for instance, are “lazy, tired, or angry”, employees may deviate in an informal way from managerially prescribed scripts for instrumentally rational doing, thinking, and feeling. In some organizations and work situations, the labor process may be opaque and partly or completely out of sight of the managerial gaze and superordinate control (Paulsen, 2014). For the employee, this may introduce more room for slacking off, soldiering, spontaneity, initiative, and relative autonomy in deciding how and when to work in a certain manner (Laaser & Bolton, 2021; Paulsen, 2014; Blauner, 1964).

In practice, less “rational” features of organizations and their labor processes are theorized by organization scholars to become revealed when spontaneous ruptures and uncertainties occur in the workplace and labor process. This may include strikes, machine stoppages, and equipment breakdowns (Ahrne, 1994; Beynon, 1973). Other examples include employees modifying the labor process and their attitudes toward it by viewing it as a game of making out to render the work experience more tolerable or more meaningful than it otherwise is (Baumeister, 1991; Burawoy, 1979).

Sometimes, such recurring “irrationalities” in the organization in which employee subjectivity may appear through the cracks of the iron cage may even involve an absence of work-related things to do while at work or willful attempts by the employee at appropriating work time for private purposes. Depending on the level of imagination of the employee and available resources to put it into practice, such “irrationalities” in the workplace may enable people across a wide range of occupations to engage individually or collectively in nonwork-related activities while at work. It may also make individuals invent and/or simulate working because they have a high sense of work ethic, even when there are no official

work tasks available to carry out (Paulsen, 2014). The aforementioned organizationally “irrational” accounts of action and subjectivity in work situations give rise to theoretical and empirical questions about subjectivity and agency at work, as it may become expressed in resistance and responses to structural constraints and therefore also the experience of meaning in work situations (Laaser & Bolton, 2021; Laaser & Karlsson, 2021; Paulsen, 2014; King, 2010; O'Doherty & Willmott, 2009).

To sum up, in work organizations, the technological/economic and human systems are characterized by different needs, incentives and differences in employers' and employees' access to power and control over the work situation and its organization. Management representatives need to cater to the technological/economic system's one-sided and insatiable instrumentally rational need for efficiency, productivity, profit, and economic householding. Subordinate employees' many-sided needs represent the “human system” in the organization. These needs, which are subordinate to and often in structural conflict with the technological/economic system's needs, include belonging, meaning, dignity, freedom, autonomy and solidarity.

However, systems-metaphors or the dichotomy between instrumental rationality and irrationality should not be reified (Lysgaard, 1985; Piven & Cloward, 1977; Berger & Pullman, 1965). In reality, the technical/economic and human systems influence each other not only through wholly deterministic relations between rigid units of given systems but also through fluid and indeterminate processes (Lysgaard, 1985). As noted above and as highlighted in the empirical chapters, in organizational processes, subjectivity and rationality in the workplace may have unintended outcomes and consequences for the organization and its members. In terms of interests, incentives, and needs, which may be irrational from the perspective of the organizational system, and its needs and their representatives, may be rational for the employee, and vice versa. While not altering the structurally inherent antagonisms between capital and labor and their material and nonmaterial manifestations at macro- and meso-levels, in the concrete everyday reality of organizational life and its contingencies, there may still be different forms of hybrids, resistance, conflicts, and tensions between and within the different “systems”. In metaphorical terms, the “human system” may sometimes infiltrate and call into question the rationality of the organization and its technological and economic systemic features (Axelsson, Karlsson & Skorstad, 2020; Lysgaard, 1985; for similar arguments about intended or unintended deviations from instrumental

rationality in organizations, see Laaser & Karlsson, 2021; Paulsen, 2014; O'Doherty & Willmott, 2009; Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999; Weick, 1995). The main characteristics of the influence of organizational structural and subjective factors on work experiences are illustrated in figure 2 below.

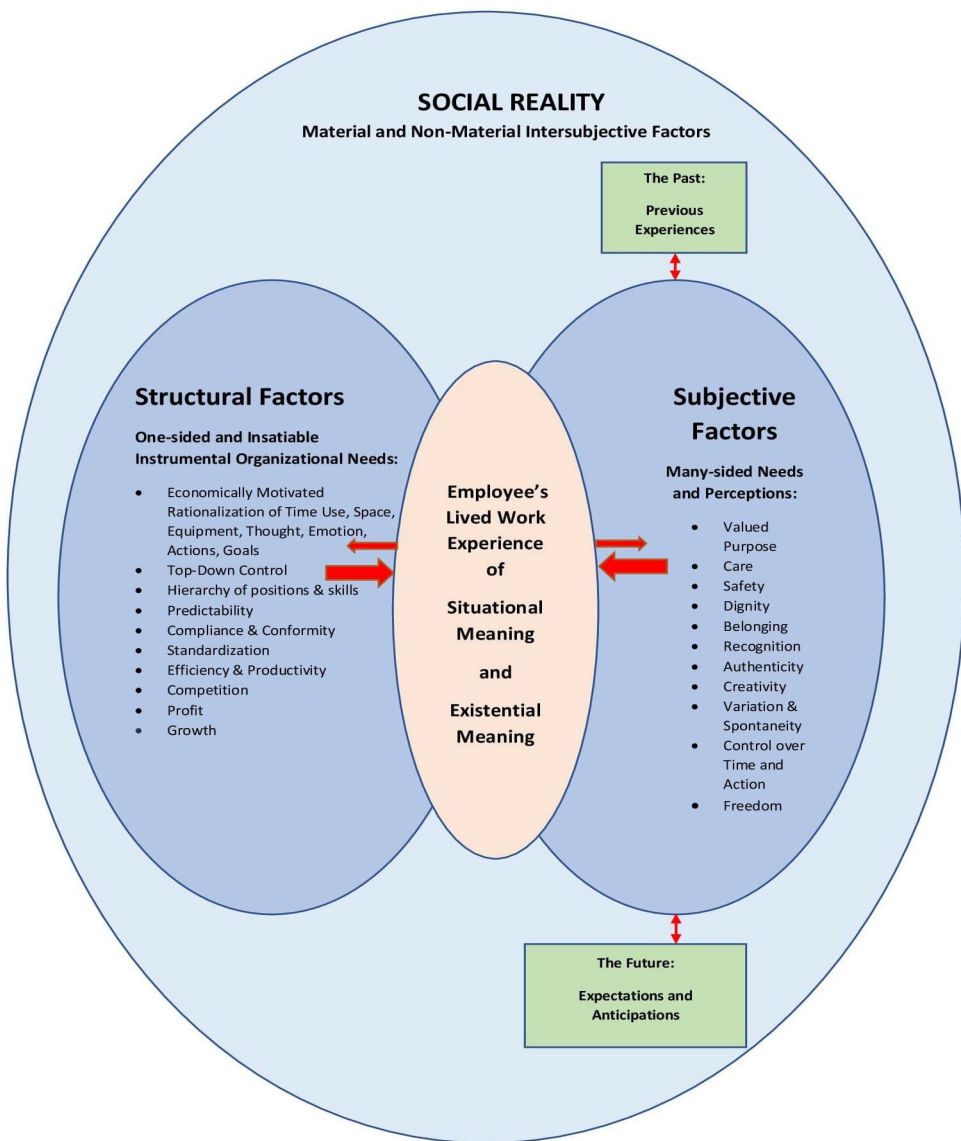


Figure 2. Ideal-typical model of constraining and facilitating structural and subjective influences on employees' general lived work experiences of meaning. In reality, organizational needs and subjective needs are not mutually exclusive. Organizational needs may coincide with subjective needs and vice versa. The red arrows between the employee's lived work experience of meaning and structural and subjective factors illustrate that although employees' resources for influencing whether, how, and to what extent such factors facilitate or constrain her/his work experiences of meaning are limited, she/he is not necessarily a passive recipient of forces that she/he unconsciously internalizes and conforms to.

Existential Imperatives

In the previous sections, I discussed theories that describe primarily how economically motivated work rationalization is insatiable, one-sided and impersonal and constrains personal needs for meaning in work situations. However, a general tendency in the theory chapters above and in the meaning of work research in general is to limit the focus on meaning to what exists, occurs and is experienced by employees in the workplace (see also Fineman, 1983). In other words, analytic attention is usually and primarily given to what I have chosen to refer to as situational meanings. This limited attention may overlook the fact that the organization and activity of wage labor structures time, thought, emotion, and action for a large proportion of waking hours and, therefore, in existentially significant ways. In relation to this, as ideal-typical representations, the concepts of existential meaning, situational meaning, and their relation to material and nonmaterial forms of economically motivated instrumental rationality may not be sufficient for exploring and understanding work experiences and constraining/facilitating social influences thereon. Some theories indicate that there may be a third way to frame and explore employees' work experiences of meaning. This is related to my previous ideal-typical description of overlapping meanings and situations in working life. It is also related to what I have described above as ruptures and cracks in structures of wage labor and employee's work experiences thereof in terms of meaning and agency.

For those who work for a wage, ruptures and transitions between work and nonwork life and their accompanying habits and routines are influenced by how the organization and activity of wage labor are organized temporally and practically. Such transitions and ruptures can be referred to as *existential imperatives* (Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2021, 2016; Flisbäck, 2014; Jackson, 2005). The concept of existential imperatives refers to people's definite or episodic transitions between life domains and situations. The habit- and routine-rupturing logic of definite and episodic life transitions specifically highlight that when common sense understandings and taken-for-granted structures of everyday life temporarily or permanently disintegrate and/or are removed, their meanings may become conscious and thus revealed to the individual (Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Wong, 2008; Schütz, 1967, 1945).

When living through what I have chosen to call a definite existential imperative (e.g., the event of retirement from working life), people may experience a heightened awareness of their own mortality. Such forms of

heightened awareness of the finitude of life may in turn catalyze/throw people into a mode of perspective shifting. In such cases, people may gain some distance from their experiences and actions and begin to reflect on their meaning. According to the theory of existential imperatives, this facilitates the process of looking back at and making sense of what relations their prior life experiences and actions have had to their experiences of meaning (Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2016; Jackson, 2005; Jackson, 2013; for a similar argument see Heidegger, 2013 [1927]).

The habit-rupturing and distance-generating effects of existential imperatives highlight the relational and retrospective character of the experience of meaning. Schütz theorizes that

Meaning does not lie in the experience. Rather, those experiences are meaningful which are grasped reflectively. The meaning is the way in which the Ego regards its experience. The meaning lies in the attitude of the Ego toward that part of its stream of consciousness which has already flowed by, toward its 'elapsed duration'. (Schütz, 1932: 69–70; see also Bailey & Madden, 2017; Fineman, 1983; Garfinkel, 1964)

From a temporal perspective on work experiences and their beginnings and ends, participation in working life is characterized by movement between work and nonwork domains in life. During nonwork time in life, people can and may look back at and forward to work situations and compare their nonwork experiences and actions with work experiences and actions. During work hours, people can and may look back at and compare/contrast experienced meanings of work experiences/actions with meanings of leisure experiences/actions (Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2021, 2016).

Definite Existential Imperatives

For those who work for a wage, while they are employed, retirement represents a fixed future reference point in the social ordering of the human life course (Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2021; Bengtsson, Flisbäck & Lund, 2017; Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2016). The point of definite retirement typically marks a final exit from working life. The individuals' life takes on a temporal rhythm and practical structure that is not influenced and determined by the rational and institutionalized demands, routines, habits, and general structures of wage labor (Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2021; Lewis & Weigart, 1981). In this sense, retirement represents a socially constructed life period until death that may be positioned in stark contrast to work-

ing life in terms of how time, thought, emotion, and action are existentially and socially structured and influenced in interconnected ways in everyday life.

The transition from work to retirement introduces a disruption and fundamental change in taken-for-granted and habitual everyday doings, experiences, and thus meaning structures. During such transitions, to use phenomenological terms (see, e.g., Schütz, 1967; 1943), provinces of meaning and relevance systems may become radically changed or lost. They become a feature of the past. The individual can and may reflect upon her or his past experiences and the context in which they occurred from a definite spatiotemporal distance.

For the individual, the rupturing logic of existential imperatives also has the potential to introduce an openness toward the future and its possibilities and constraints for agency (see, e.g., Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2021, 2016; Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Jackson, 2005; Jackson, 2013; Kotarba & Johnson, 2002). Definite existential imperatives may introduce novel sources of meaningfulness²³. The openness introduced by definite existential imperatives presents the individual with both risks and possibilities for a new beginning. It may become possible and/or necessary to act and start over and, thus, to discover and/or generate new sources of meaning and identity formation (see, e.g., Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2021; see also Arendt, 2017 [1951]; Arendt, 1998 [1958]).

In the context of retirement from working life, the individual is in some sense both compelled and invited to begin something new. The questions of when and why to retire are determined by externally imposed rules and laws that are determined at a governmental level (Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2021). On this point, Bengtsson and Flisbäck (2021: 204) suggest that “in the existential imperative’s experience of the possibility to leave the disciplinary nature of wage labor, retirement may become an opportunity in life when the driving force is even stronger to mark the right to one’s own life”.

Consequently, the heightened awareness of the value-based significance/non-significance of past experiences and the openness toward the

²³ For example, Baumeister, (1991: 394) suggests that becoming a parent involves novel sources of constraints in life, and it may not necessarily be linked to increased “happiness”. However, since parenthood produces a fixed and lasting point of responsibility, care and concern in life, it represents an existentially reorienting event that is likely to “increase the amount of meaning in a person’s life” (ibid.: 313).

future introduced by existential imperatives may introduce a shift in perspective in the stories individuals construct about who they are and what is their role in relation to others and society as a whole²⁴. The following statement from an unemployed 45-year-old construction worker in historian and journalist Studs Terkel's (1972) book "Working" can be used to illustrate this phenomenon.

Right now I can't really describe myself because... I'm unemployed.... So, you see, I can't say who I am right now.... I guess a man's something else besides his work, isn't he? But what? I just don't know' (construction worker, cited in Terkel, 1972).

In the wake of a definite existential imperative, in a worst-case scenario, people may experience what some meaning theorists refer to as a "meaning vacuum" (see also above)²⁵. Frankl (1959) theorizes that the meaning vacuum is characterized by a sense of rootlessness and lack of direction in life. This may happen when sources of meaning and purpose in life disappear or are experienced as lacking in the first place. As pointed out by Baumeister (1991: 312), it is characterized by a situation or period in which individuals may experience "emptiness, ambiguity, emotional confusion, and other signs of a lack of meaning" (see also Rasmussen & Elverdam, 2008).

Episodic Existential Imperatives

I have thus far discussed theories that highlight that the existential imperative of transitioning from full-time employment to a life in retirement may represent a definite change and rupture in the primary practical and

²⁴ Giddens (1991) highlights the rupturing logic of existential imperatives when referring to "fateful moments". In such instances, Giddens suggests, "individuals are called on to take decisions that are particularly consequential for their ambitions or more generally for their future lives. Fateful moments are highly consequential for a person's destiny" (Giddens, 1991: 113).

²⁵ In "The Division of Labour in Society", Émile Durkheim (1997) makes a similar point to Frankl's and Baumeister's but from an explicitly sociological perspective. As noted above, Durkheim refers to anomie (socially induced situations of normlessness), which signifies a phenomenon that may occur at an individual- and group level when social structures and normative regulations break down and cease to structure and order life in a predictable and stable manner. According to Durkheim, in such instances individuals and groups are thrown into a state of social and personal uncertainty and ambiguity, which may include an increased sense of risk and lack of moral guidance in life.

temporal routines and habits of an individual's life. Working life is left behind and cannot be looked forward to any more for neither instrumental nor non-instrumental reasons. It can be reflected upon as a perceived whole retrospectively. A future is headed toward in which the social conditions for meaning construction/destruction/lack of meaning may be unknown, novel, and radically different. Thus, for the individual, an existential imperative may thus be associated with a significant (re)negotiation and redefining of key structures for doings and sources of existential and situational meaning in life.

The definite forms of existential imperatives addressed above give rise to questions about whether there are other and episodic turning points and ruptures in everyday life that influence the experience of meaning. Schütz's (1945) theory that people operate in, learn from, and move between different realities and his theory of the experience of meaning as a retrospective process indicate that this may be the case. This also involves the suggestion that when people move from, between, and enter different social realities and, thus, are confronted with having to think and act in ways different from those used to and taken for granted, they may experience a sense of "shock". In this vein, Schütz (1945: 552) suggests that such shocks are part of everyday life itself: "To be sure those experiences of shock befall me frequently amidst my daily life; they themselves pertain to its reality". Additionally, the split and moving between experiences of meaning and actions during leisure time and time spent at work, as indicated in the "work-life balance" construct (see, e.g., Kalliath & Brough, 2008; Gambles, Rapoport & Lewis, 2007), further fuel the idea of episodic existential imperatives and their existential significance. The phenomenological perspective on meaning as something that is understood before or after action provides even further theoretical inspiration for the idea that existential imperatives may also occur episodically and be of a lesser magnitude than definite imperatives, such as the transitioning to retirement (Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2021; Bengtsson et al., 2017).

Can transitions between everyday situations be viewed as ongoing episodic existential imperatives? As theorized by others, episodic transitions between everyday situations may be associated with different moods (e.g., being melancholic or cheerful depending on what situation one finds oneself in; see, e.g., Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Ringmar, 2018). The lived experience of being in different moods are not merely emotional states. They are suggested to be indicative of one's state of being, general concerns, and what one cares about in situations and life itself. Some theorists suggested

that moods are influenced by ongoing everyday ruptures and transitions between situations. As suggested by mood theorists, the moods experiences of such everyday ruptures may bring about in people (e.g., hopeful or melancholic) and may be indicative of what meaning they find in the activities and situations they are entering or leaving (Ringmar, 2018; Bude, 2018; Bengtsson et al., 2017; Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Areni & Burger, 2008).

How do people feel and think about their jobs when they are approaching the weekend or other periods of free time? What moods are they in when they are going to and leaving work? What may this reveal about what they think about the meaning of their job and working life in general? What do people think and feel about what they do at work and the meanings of their working lives in the midst of such episodic existential imperatives? I suggest that questions about what meaning work experiences bring to or take from work situations and life in a wider sense should not be restricted to what happens in the workplace. There is a need to include an in-between perspective that takes into consideration transitions from one situation to another and the ruptures this may create in experiences and sources of meaning. I suggest that questions related to existential imperatives are relevant to include when aspiring to explore the experienced meanings of wage labor from a more “holistic” and existential perspective than typically represented in the existing meaning of work research.

To sum up my theory chapters, their purpose has been to articulate a philosophically informed sociological ideal-typical understanding of experiences of meaning in work situations and in life in a broader sense. I have done this by focusing on the following sociologically relevant themes that are largely overlooked from a sociological perspective in the existing meaning of work literature: care, the will to meaning, temporality, action, authenticity/inauthenticity, alienation, instrumental rationality, and existential imperatives. My focus in the first half of the theory chapters was more philosophical and actor oriented than in the second half. Here, I outlined a social philosophical basis for understanding meaning as a fundamental human need and orientation in situations (situational meaning) and life in a broader sense (existential meaning). A general conclusion of this first half is that there are always already proximate or distant interconnected social and temporal relations between people’s lived experiences of meaning and agency in life in a broader sense and at work and constraining/facilitating influences thereon. In the second half, I integrated

this social philosophical basis into structure-oriented sociological perspectives on the organization and performance of wage labor and how it may constrain or facilitate agency and experiences of meaning in work situations and life in a broader sense. A general conclusion of this second part is that these structural features are ultimately related to material and nonmaterial manifestations of instrumental rationality in society, organizations, and work situations. A partly novel suggestion that my theory chapters contribute with, is that work experiences of meaning can be explored in a more “holistic” sense by focusing on people’s transition between work and nonwork domains in life and how they think and feel about their work before, during, or after such transitions.

Method

The method used for generating empirical materials in this study was semi-structured interviews. My purpose with conducting interviews was to describe and understand people’s own interpretations, perceptions, and understandings of (a): what working means in terms of what employees value/do not value and thus experience as meaningful and/or meaninglessness in work situations, and (b): what working means to employees in an existential sense, in terms of what in working life they value/do not value in life in a wider sense and thus experience as existentially meaningful and/or meaninglessness. The method used for analyzing the interviews was phenomenological interpretation of meaning. To recapitulate, phenomenological interpretation of people’s work experiences of meaning means to explore meaning in a more detached and indirect sense. This involves exploring what people pay attention to in relation to their own and others’ actions and outcomes thereof, and whether or to what extent this attention involves apprehension of value and significance of said actions and outcomes thereof to Self and/or others (Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen, 2017). My method and framework for interpreting and theorizing the empirical findings was inspired by hermeneutic phenomenological assumptions about social reality, knowledge, understanding, and the ideal-typical role of theory in interpretation and generating understanding (see e.g. Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Aspers, 2009; Gadamer, 2006 [1975]; Giorgi, 1997; Schütz, 1943).

The structure of the following methods sections is: (a) information about the study participants and inclusion criteria. (b) Description of practical aspects of the interviews. (c) Description of the method used to ana-

lyze the interviews and my transcriptions thereof. (d) Discussion of the role of preunderstandings and how certain aspects thereof may have influenced my interpretations. (e) Reflections on challenges and opportunities that have presented themselves during the course of the research process. (f) Discussion of research ethics and actual and potential benefits and shortcomings of the selected methods.

Participants, Inclusion Criteria, and Recruitment

My sample included presently employed and recently retired individuals. My reason for focusing on both presently employed and recently retired individuals was that such a perspective facilitates focusing on existentially relevant factors, such as temporality and existential imperatives (Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2016; Flisbäck, 2014). The present study is explorative in the sense that I draw on social phenomenology in a field where such an approach is largely overlooked or primarily implicit. I therefore conducted interviews with individuals from a wide array of occupations and socioeconomic positions. My total sample size was 20 participants. Regarding job types, I chose to focus on professional level employees situated primarily in bureaucratic settings, and manual level employees. The former includes work that is influenced more by bureaucratic routines, contains a larger degree of abstract elements, and typically requires more mental than manual dexterity (see e.g. Bauman, 1991). The latter involves working class-oriented and potentially stigmatized occupations with low task discretion and high routine. This type of work is performed primarily in a repetitive manner with one's hands and body in order to manipulate physical objects and reach goals in a largely immediate and tangible cause-and effect manner (Mercurio, 2019; Shim, 2016; Beynon, 1973; Blauner, 1964). As noted in the background sections, my reason for focusing on these two occupational categories is that it is a comparison that is typically overlooked in existing meaning of work research. Regarding organization size, the participants work/worked full-time in medium-size or large organizations. These organizations were either private or public. Detailed information about the participants can be found in appendix 2.

My total sample is subdivided into two additional categories: (a) employees who are employed (or retired) in jobs that according to existing research literature are more likely to be experienced by employees as lacking meaning in terms of not making a positive impact on society, and (b): individuals who are employed (or retired) in jobs that according to the

existing research literature are more likely to be experienced by employees as meaningful in terms of having a positive impact on society.

Examples of occupations that according to some existing survey studies are more likely to be experienced as meaningful in terms of employee perceptions of prosocial contribution, are professional occupations located in the health-care sector, social work, and the educational sector. Conversely, examples of manual occupations that according to recent surveys are more likely to be experienced as lacking meaningfulness in terms of perceived lack of positive contribution to society, are represented in the following occupational categories: food preparation, service and sales, transport industry, machine tool setters, industrial operators, tenders (metal and plastic), waiters and waitresses, parking lot attendants, advertising and promotions managers (Jobbhälsöindex, 2019a, b; Payscale, 2015).

In order to be included in the study, the participants had to be 30-67 years old. In their present life situation, they had to be/have been working full time for an employer in a medium-sized or large organization for at least two years. This time frame was chosen because I deemed it a reasonable amount of time for having accumulated work experiences from a specific occupational sector (professional or manual). Retired participants had to have transitioned from work to retirement 1-3 years ago and worked full time for an employer for at least two years before transitioning to retirement. My reasoning behind focusing on recently and not long-term retired individuals, was that I assumed that it would facilitate participants' sensemaking of what working had meant to them in their lives. With time, memories have a tendency to become distorted and sugar-coated by those recalling them (see e.g. Kahneman, 2012).

A potential merit with focusing on diverse cases, is that it can be a fruitful approach when exploring a phenomenon that is seemingly both ambiguous and heterogeneous. Other sociology of work scholars (Paulsen, 2014: 177) suggest that a diverse-cases approach in sampling can facilitate the researcher's analysis: it can "unleash the analysis from ingrained notions (...) and thus make your interviews more illuminating". In this vein, Paulsen and other further suggest that such "cases can make clearer what is otherwise veiled in shadows", where a mundane phenomenon that is seemingly taken-for-granted in everyday life and portrayed ambiguously in previous research may become more explicit (ibid.: 179; see also Patton, 2002).

Regarding participant recruitment, I posted study information sheets with requests in different physical and digital contexts. These contexts

were public billboards situated in densely populated areas with a high flow of people (e.g. at the entrance of grocery stores, city centers, in train stations), and public groups on Facebook, and on Instagram. Some participants were recruited via first-hand and secondary personal contacts. This sometimes generated a snowball effect that yielded further participants. The study information sheet contained for the participants' account all relevant and necessary information about the study, ethics, GDPR, and the form and content of the interviews (see research ethics discussion). Because of health risks associated with physical interaction during the covid-19 pandemic, I included in the participants request and study information sheet the alternative of doing the interviews in an outdoor setting at a safe distance.

Posting participants requests on the aforementioned digital platforms generated substantial interest among receivers. It was therefore generally not difficult to find people who were interested in participating in the study. However, because of governmental recommendations and restrictions regarding physical distance between people during the covid-19 pandemic, it became increasingly difficult to recruit retired individuals (they were more likely to be in a risk group). I also had difficulties recruiting individuals employed in blue-collar jobs. The latter may be related to the phenomenon that people with higher education and previous experiences of professional work may be more concerned with Self-realization through paid work (Goldthorpe, 1971). I will return to discussing additional influences of the covid-19 pandemic on the present study in the methods discussion section.

The Interviews

My initial intent was to conduct phenomenological interviews. This initial intent was affected for reasons outlined in the methodological discussion section. In relation to my choice of this interview method, it is relevant to recapitulate that a central assumption in phenomenology is that human consciousness and experience in itself is a legitimate object of empirical social inquiry (Kafle, 2013). This involves exploring the meanings people experience and construct from their always already socially structured lived experiences and how social structures may be reflected in people's verbalization of their thoughts (Bevan, 2014; Aspers, 2009; Giorgi, 1997). This approach thus resonates with a central task of qualitative interview methods in general: to generate knowledge of the social world by interpreting people's interpretations and understandings of their own

concretely lived experiences and the meanings they attach to and construct from them (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Sandelowski, 2004).

Interview Settings and Interview Questions

The majority of the interviews were conducted in a physical face-to-face situation: in a park, the participants' home setting, in a garden, or in a café. One interview was conducted both in a café setting and while walking to another café (the first café unexpectedly closed in the middle of the interview). Two interviews were conducted via phone. One was conducted via Zoom.

My interview questions were semi-structured. They focused on themes such as the perceived actual or potential value, social usefulness, significance, purpose, and worthwhileness of work experiences, or lack thereof. Some interview questions were designed to probe temporal aspects of the work experience (e.g. by exploring episodic and definite existential imperatives in relation to work). This was because of my interest in exploring the work experience of meaning also in relation to temporality and from a wider existential perspective. Furthermore, the first principles of hermeneutic interpretation of meaning had central importance in my invention of interview questions and interpretation of the participant's accounts. As noted in the literature review- and theory chapters, the parts-versus-whole logic resonates with both empirical meaning of work research findings and general philosophies of meaning. It also resonates with sociology of work theorists' emphasis on unity, fragmentation, and the individual's connection and separation from objects and others as a core element of meaning construction/destruction/lack of meaning in the context of wage labor.

Regarding wording and utterance of interview questions, I used everyday language as far as possible. This is in line with the phenomenological assumption that in order to "access to the respondent's perspective unencumbered by theoretical terms" questions should "be asked in the vocabulary and language of the individual being interviewed" (Bevan, 2014: 137; see also Benner, 1994). Wording and utterance of questions was thus done in a manner that aspired to facilitate empathy and avoid scholarly jargon that risked alienating the participants or obscuring communication and understanding during the interviews. However, if a participant used a more scholarly way of talking during the interview (e.g. using theoretical and philosophical concepts), as for instance Carina the special pedagogue did (she was trained in psychoanalytic theory and used it in her work), I adapted my language use to this style of speaking. This attempt at generat-

ing reciprocity and facilitating empathy through mirroring the participant was done generally and especially when noticing a preferred language style of the participant and while posing follow up questions.

Another example of when I adapted my language, was during the interviews with Karl the truckdriver and Jarmo the machine operator. Both used quite a bit of slang and vivid metaphors in an informal manner when they talked. I experienced that adapting my language to the participant's language use tended to generate a greater sense of rapport and reciprocity. It also seemed to facilitate a sense of shared understanding of the topic of conversation and response richness in the sense that it seemed to become easier to connect with the participant in an intellectual and emotional sense.

I refined my interview questions in a small number of "pilot" interviews ($n = 3$). During these interviews I noticed that I wanted to elicit responses of what working meant/did not mean to the participants at a deeper level. Noting that participants shared, often focused on and returned to some specific topics, in which they dived deeper into than others, I worked out a content and ordering of questions that seemed to facilitate more in-depth responses. An important aspect that facilitated this was to place the question of what they wanted to be when they grew up early in the interview guide. Similar to my questions about retirement, this backwards-looking seemed to open up for more existentially- and temporally oriented reflections on what working meant or did not mean to the participants in terms of purposive meaning. Content-wise, interview questions focused on both theoretically and empirically inspired topics and themes. These themes were related to different aspects of situated meaning construction/destruction and their relation to social and organizational processes in general, and what significance and worthwhileness working has in presently employed and recently retired individuals' lives in its totality.

In order to facilitate response richness and flexibility, I thus constructed my interview questions both in an open-ended and more direct format (Bevan, 2014; Aspers, 2009; Giorgi, 1997). Regarding the former, this meant to reformulate questions so that they were relatively open-ended and value focused. This included what value, interestingness, significance, usefulness, and worthwhileness people may or may not experience from working. For these reasons reason, the interview guide I considered the most fruitful for realizing my objective of exploring the experience of meaning, ended up also containing questions that probed the meanings of working from a more implicit perspective than initially planned.

Follow-up- and clarification questions, which are central in empirical phenomenology because of their supposedly meaning recollection facilitating effects (Bevan, 2014), were structured in the same way. For instance: “could you give an example of a situation in which that happened and where you felt like that?”; “how often does that occur?”; “can you tell me more about that?”; “why do you think that is?”; “what does that mean to you?”, and so on. Regarding my open-ended interview questions in general, some of them included a narrative structure, in that they included questions of the type “could you please tell me about...?” “can you tell me about if you remember if...?”. With regards to why it may be useful to also include narrative elements in the interview when exploring meaning from the perspective of lived experiences, Susan Chase highlights that

A personal narrative is a distinct form of communication: It is meaning making through the shaping of experience; a way of understanding one’s own or others’ actions; of organizing events, objects, feelings, or thoughts in relation to each other; of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions, events feelings, or thoughts over time (in the past, present and/or future). (Chase, 2017: 549)

An initial and ongoing aspiration and ideal that I had in the interviews, was thus to facilitate a “process of mutual help where the interviewee achieves a certain level of fulfilment through the exercise of reason and reflection”, during which participants were encouraged “to view the interview as an opportunity to analyze and clarify their feelings about the issues raised” (Oliver, 2010: 57). Thus, my interviews were “not a question of the researcher encouraging the interviewee towards a particular viewpoint (and certainly not the viewpoint held by the researcher), but rather of trying to provide an opportunity for the interviewee to arrive at a personal position on a number of complex issues” (ibid.). In this sense, the interview settings in the present study can be viewed as a temporary context in which meaning and the conditions under which it is experienced were explored and perhaps also to some extent discovered jointly. This exploration and discovery of meaning by reflecting on the meanings of working retrospectively, was a co-constructive effort between me and the participants (I posed questions that were intended to invite the participant to an opportunity of reflecting on meaning in the context of work).

Moreover, validation of the participants’ accounts during the interview played an important role in my interviews. Such an approach toward validation is suggested to facilitate empathy and understanding (Brinkmann &

Kvale, 2015). Follow-up questions were therefore also used as a way to validate the participant's account, as in both affirming that I had understood the participant's account correctly and in order to affirm that I was interested in what she/he had to say. The complete interview guide can be found in the appendix section.

Practical Matters

The interviews were recorded with a recording application installed on a smartphone that did not have internet access. Interview length varied between approximately 60-150 minutes. The varied length was due to aspects such as the amount of time the participant had available for doing the interview, participant talkativeness and her/his level of free association between working life events when reflecting on and responding to the interview questions. The recorded interview files were transferred to a computer. The audio was transcribed verbatim manually while listening to the interviews in a computer audio application (Reaper).

Quotes that were intended for use in the final analytic narrative in the results chapter were translated into English by using Google Translate as a starting point, correcting and modifying translations manually when needed. Transcription included (to the best of my memory) relevant accounts of non-verbal cues and communication, such as for instance posture, tone of voice, looking, changes in facial expression, pauses, emotional state, and so forth. Attempting to have a “holistic” interview approach in this way by also focusing on non-verbal communication, is a key feature of phenomenological analysis, where it is assumed that there is a connection between peoples' talk, thinking, and emotional state (Smith & Osborn, 2007).

Preunderstandings

Transparency about preunderstandings and preconceptions and their general influence on interpretation has a particularly central role in hermeneutic and phenomenological inquiry (Daher et al., 2017; Bevan, 2014; Aspers, 2009; Gadamer, 2006 [1975]; Lavery, 2003). This perspective on preunderstandings and their relation to potential bias and transparency, is also reflected in the research ethical principle that researchers should “disclose underlying assumptions” in their research practices “that might bear upon the findings and interpretation of their work” (American Sociological Association, 2018: 5).

The foreknowledge that has colored and guided my interpretations was not restricted to the knowledge and information I have constructed, consumed and appropriated in my research practices (e.g. reading, synthesizing, and referring to other scholars' works). It was likely also influenced by my own lived experiences of working and my evaluations thereof in terms of their meaning. In order to facilitate transparency, I will now to the best of my awareness of my own preunderstandings and underlying assumptions outline information about key foreknowledge and preconceptions that may have positively and negatively colored my interpretations. I do this from the perspective of my own working life experiences and normative preferences. A number of my own work experiences are directly or indirectly related to some of the study participants' current and previous occupations. Some of my own work experiences are from same or similar jobs. Besides the theoretically- and empirically informed foreknowledge constructed in the present thesis, the following working life experiences from different jobs and normative aspects may have colored my interpretations.

The topic of my bachelor's thesis, written in 2016, was employees' work experiences of meaning in low-skilled occupations. I have had many different jobs prior to and since then. When employed in the jobs I were employed in after writing the bachelor's thesis, I often reflected upon what meaning I and other employees in the workplace may have experienced in the work we performed. Below are my descriptions and valuations of the jobs that I have had throughout my working life so far. A first motivation for seeking employment in any of these occupations was my need to attain a wage to live off.

Assembly line production: manually putting labels on food products, monitoring the production line so that nothing went wrong, quality control by bending rubber parts that were used as components in truck transmissions. Although I could talk to colleagues while working, I did not experience this work as meaningful beyond the pay. I experienced it as degrading, alienating, and mentally/physically exhausting.

Distribution and transportation: delivering newspapers to residents by car during night/early morning. I remember experiencing it as somewhat exciting and rewarding to drive my own car through the city and running up and down stairs to deliver newspapers during the early morning hours when the rest of society was asleep. However, the pay was low, and I did not view it as reflecting the value of the actual work performed and the

sacrifices it required (sleeping in the day, not being able to socialize with others outside of work that worked day shifts, wearing my car out).

Music production: composing, editing, producing, and physically and digitally manipulating recorded music performances. It was/is aesthetically and socially rewarding to work with others on music projects in order to create sounds and songs. However, the work was/is typically also stressful (tight deadlines), monotonous, and not well paid. This type of work also involves producing sounds and songs that do not necessarily align with one's personal aesthetic taste and preference. Such preference and stress related aspects have rendered my work experiences of meaning in this job double-edged.

Health care: psychiatric caretaker; housing supporter, personal assistant: health- and everyday life related tasks (e.g. emotional support, distribution of medication, motivating to get started with and upholding structures for everyday chores in and outside the home environment). In general terms, my work in the healthcare sector has been the most meaningful I have had. The process and outcome of helping others was the key contributing factor to this.

Content writer: writing commercial blog texts in order to manipulate Google search engine result rankings for various products. This job was somewhat creative since it involved coming up with stories about a wide variety of products. However, the autonomy and creativity were limited by rigid regulations for how and what to write. It got boring quite fast.

Warehouse worker: lifting, moving, and packaging products of various kinds, from large radiators to small food products. This kind of work was physically demanding and often quite exhausting. It could also include idleness. I remember experiencing the work itself as quite pointless in a personal sense, but the friendship and socializing with colleagues made it more tolerable.

Elementary school teacher, grade 1-9, all subjects. This job could be very stressful. However, since it involved explicit and tangible social contributory aspects and helping others through teaching and planning thereof, it was something that I experienced as valuable and important both for the pupils and society at large.

PhD-candidate: reading, thinking, administrating, writing, teaching, supervising. Since I had developed a hearing disorder (over-sensitivity to sound) and could not continue working with music, I needed a new and quiet job. And since I had accumulated sufficient grades and credits in subjects that were relevant to the PhD-position, I happened to be qualified

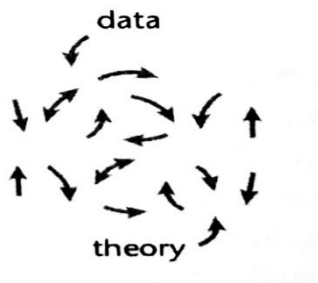
for it and selected for employment. Although I had written my bachelor's thesis on the present thesis' topic, I must say that I had grown very tired of it since. Hence, I did not search the PhD-position out of any deeper yearning for knowledge or political/normative interest in it. It was simply practical to pick a topic that I was familiar with. Also, it was not until it was too late in the PhD-process that I did understand that one was actually allowed to change one's topic. For me, the most meaningful part of this work has been teaching, asking questions, discussing with others, learning from others, supervising, doing interviews and analysis of interviews. I have experienced the rest of the work as instrumental elements and obligations that I have necessarily needed to live up to as part of fulfilling my duties as they are specified in my employment contract. This included formal criteria of how to do a PhD, and informal and formal criteria of how to be and act as a sociology researcher and an employee in a public authority.

Normativity. Regarding a conscious normative conviction that has influenced my research from the start, I have the conviction that the researcher should not favor one moral or political perspective over the other in her/his research. She or he should rather continuously aspire to be informed about the pros, cons, richness and general influence of normativity on and in research and remain nuanced and transparent about it and her/his own positions and convictions. For me, this conviction is also rooted in the research ethical principle that as a researcher, I am funded by tax finances. For this reason and in its relation to democracy, I view it as ethically problematic for the researcher to intentionally promote and reproduce her/his own political views or moral preferences over others in her/his interpretation of theories and empirical findings.

For better and for worse, my lived work experiences and ongoing and retrospective valuations thereof, and my normative dispositions, may have influenced my preunderstandings and interpretations.

Analytic Procedure

I agree with Karlsson and Bergman that in reality, qualitative analysis and its iterative combination of inductive, deductive, and abductive reasoning tends to look like this:



(Figure 3. Extracted from Karlsson & Bergman, 2017: 10)

I believe that my analysis benefitted from having both a flexible and systematic approach. It involved openness, creativity, and deep immersion in the empirical material, while aspiring to be as systematic as cognitively and practically possible within the boundaries of the present study. For the purpose of facilitating credibility and trustworthiness, regardless of the generally messy nature of qualitative analysis, it was key for me to be rigorous, methodical, and systematic. This was done by coding, developing themes, making informed decisions during the interpretive-analytic process (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2015; Nowell et al., 2017). As a whole, my analysis was driven by both empirical data and the theoretical understanding of the phenomenon in question. I was inspired by a form of reasoning that is central to hermeneutic phenomenological analysis. This type of abductive reasoning and its relation to methodology is different from traditional phenomenology. In this way of thinking about social reality and interpretation, preunderstandings in general and theory are viewed as natural and necessary preconditions for interpretation, while the importance of empathy and bracketing one's preconceptions during the initial stages of the analysis is emphasized. It is summarized by sociologist Aspers (2009) in the following way:

In the research process, the researcher cannot just let her theory guide her into the details of the empirical field; the empirical material, so to speak, must be given the chance to “kick back”. This means that the empirical evidence may reformulate the theory, alter it, or add dimensions to it. The researcher must, therefore, bracket the theories while being in the field. To be more specific, she lets the theory guide her to certain empirical domains and to address certain themes and ask certain questions, but she does not have a set of concepts that are used as boxes to be filled with empirical material. Aspers (2009: 6)

In its initial stages, the overarching purpose of my analysis was to, as far as possible, with an “unprejudiced” mindset develop an empathic non-theoretical understanding of people’s own interpretation of their work experiences in the situational and existential context of wage labor. At later stages in the analysis when I had written my interpretations in the form of a non-theoretical descriptive narrative structure, I directed my interpretive attention up an abstraction level. At this more theory-laden stage, I started integrating theoretical explanations for how these work experiences may be connected to work-related social aspects in the work situation and life in a wider sense.

In my analysis of the transcripts, I focused on identifying sociologically relevant themes that may be related to meaningfulness construction and lack of meaningfulness in the smaller situated and larger existential context of working for a wage. By “theme” I mean when I noticed during the interviews and analysis of the transcripts that participants paid attention to and returned to certain subjects and concerns more than others. A theme that was shared between participants or differences thereof was assumed to exist when I noticed that they had subjects and concerns more or less in common.

An overarching mindset in my interpretation of the empirical materials was moving back and forward between parts (different parts of participant’s accounts and the researcher’s preliminary interpretations of them) and whole (the original story/narrative told by the participants and the researcher’s more general conclusions about it). I moved back and forward between the phases of reading, writing, and interpreting the empirical material in relation to pre-existing and novel understandings (see e.g. Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2015; Karlsson & Bergman, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017; Swedberg, 2014; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009; Gadamer, 2006 [1975]). In other words, I relied on the interpretive logic of the “hermeneutic spiral/circle”.

I began my interpretation of the transcripts with a “vague and intuitive understanding of the text as a whole” where “its different parts” were “interpreted, and out of these interpretations the parts again” were “related to the totality” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015: 238). This back-and-forth process of multiple readings of each transcript involved an ongoing mode of self-reflective and critical questioning and writing. I thus engaged in a constant hermeneutic dialogue with the empirical material. This involved posing questions to and challenging my intuitive interpretations and pre-understandings (see e.g. Corbin & Strauss, 2015: 69-70). Depending on the stage in the analytic process, such questions were both based on pre-existing theoretical and empirically informed assumptions of the studied phenomenon and a more general hermeneutic nature, such as for example “what does the respondent mean when he/she describes the phenomenon of X and the way she/he states that he/she experiences it?”; “does this interpretation really makes sense in relation to the participant’s accounts of her/his experiences?”; as “what is the participant’s accounts about?”.

When trying to answer my own questions and hypotheses, I looked for clues of affirmation and refutation in the empirical material. Other analytic question posed when analyzing the transcripts were “what are the stories here?”, “does the story contain tragic and comedic elements?”, “what is the study participant talking about?”, “what are the main themes she/he is focusing on?”, “what cues are given for how the participant’s accounts may be related to organizational factors?”, “what is missing?”, “what concerns the participant and what does s/he seem to care about/not care about?”; “what does or does not the participant pay attention to?”; “what does she/he attach significance and value to in her/his work experiences, and why?”

Initially in the analytic process, I proceeded in a systematic fashion according to pre-determined steps. This procedure was inspired by Nowell et al.’s scheme for conducting thematic analysis of qualitative interview data (see e.g. Nowell et al., 2017: 4). It also drew on the idea that the process of coding represents a critical link between data collection and explanation of meaning (see e.g. Miles, Huberman and Sandana, 2015: 72). Regarding coding specificity, I agree with Corbin & Strauss (2015) and Miles’, Huberman’s and Sandana’s (ibid.) notion that the analytic process involves and requires multiple levels of coding and interpretation. For this reason, my coding routine included an open mindset toward using both in vivo codes and theoretically inspired codes. However, regarding the latter, in line with my hermeneutic phenomenological methodology I aspired to

as far as possible to keep my theoretical attitude partly bracketed during the initial stages of my analysis. In this sense, initially and generally, theoretical sources of inspiration for interpretation were used cautiously in order not to “bend the findings to fit the theory” (Corbin & Strauss, 2015: 40; see also Tomkins & Eatough, 2014).

My pre-constructed coding framework included categories such as the following: existential meaning, situated meaning, meaningfulness, meaninglessness, value, temporality, parts-versus-whole, separation of conception from execution, interest, care, value, significance, and existential imperatives. Such theoretical codes were inspired by theories of meaning and existing literature on the meanings of working (see e.g. Yeoman, Bailey, Madden & Thompson, 2019; Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Rosso & Wrzesnewicki, 2010; Bengtsson, Flisbäck & Lund, 2017; Braverman, 1999; Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2016; Schütz, 1967; Frankl, 1959).

Moreover, in general theories and empirical studies of meaning, people’s experiences of connection and separation between their actions and context are typically assumed to have a central role in the experience and social construction of meaning. Therefore, the logic of connection and separation in relation to a whole represented a central framework through which I interpreted the study participants’ accounts. Regarding open coding and in-vivo codes, examples of recurring words used as codes that participants across the total sample used when indicating experiences of meaningfulness or lack thereof, and when they related these experiences to structural features and social processes, were “routines”, “structure”, “time”, “contribute”, “important”, “useful”, “understand”, and “boring”.

My first reading of each interview transcript was performed by adopting an analytically reflexive and self-reflexive attitude of theoretical distance toward the subject under scrutiny. The purpose of this bracketed form of reading, was the attempt to really understand the participant’s experiences and accounts thereof on their own terms. During this initial reading I asked myself reflexive and curiosity-driven questions such as the following. “What are the participant’s accounts about?”, “what are the stories here and its main elements?”, “does the story contain tragic and comedic elements?”, “what is the study participant talking about and why?”, “what are the main themes s/he is focusing on?”. Other examples are “what cues are given for how and in what sense may the participant’s accounts may be related to social aspects?”, “what is missing?”, “what concerns the participant and what does s/he seem to care about/not care

about?"; "what does the participant pay attention to and vice versa?"; "what does s/he attach value and significance to, and why?".

After this first reading of a transcript, where I aspired to abstain from imposing theoretically informed preunderstandings onto the participant's accounts, I wrote an informal analytic memo about my reading experience. It included potential patterns, ideas and questions that emerged intuitively during my reading and reflection thereof. This memo was not intended to be included in the final analysis. It was a way to capture the initial ideas that were generated intuitively in my mind during my first reading and could be used as a reference point to compare my more theoretical interpretations with.

After my first reading and jotting down my initial reflections in a memo, I read the transcripts again. At this stage, regarding my interpretations of the participants' experiences of meaning, I consciously looked for explicit and implicit clues about what they valued or did not value in work both in situational and existential terms. In this sense, a key component in identifying experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness was the amount of significance and value participants attached to situational and existential aspects of working, such as its purpose in the organization and life in a wider sense. At this stage I also started to generate initial codes. This was done by using the comment section in the margin to write down terms that according to my interpretation captured and said something about the patterns and topics that I identified in certain chunks of "data". By "identifying patterns", I refer to the analytic procedure of "looking for trends that tie together bits of data" (Miles, Huberman and Sandana, 2015: 86). Such patterned regularities in the form of trends were looked for and identified within and between transcripts. Identification of trends within transcripts was performed during each transcript reading. The content of each transcript and my generated codes, patterns, and themes therein became a hermeneutic point of reference and comparison for reading each new transcript and seeing if the participant's shared/did not share similar experiences.

When revising my own analysis in relation to the participants' accounts, if my interpretations did not make sense or somehow lacked in their logic in relation to the participant's own words, I marked the code with a question mark in order to leave open the possibility to discard or revise/modify it. As the analysis progressed, in each transcript I paid attention to and revised/modified my own interpretations when needed, examined the interrelationship between categories and themes within and between tran-

scripts, and connected them theoretically to additional concepts related to pre-existing theories and potentially novel theoretical ideas.

At later stages, I connected preliminary theoretical ideas to the existing codes and began to write analytic narratives while simultaneously reading parts of the transcripts that highlighted certain themes. This step of the analytic procedure was still situated in each transcript document. My reason for beginning to write preliminary analytic narratives in the form of comments already in the margin of the transcript and not after cutting and pasting bits and pieces under theme headings in a new document, was the following. I wanted to stay as close and have a direct access to the participant's original accounts as possible and avoid imposing hasty interpretations and theories (the transcript is situated in the same context as the analysis and the process of moving between parts and whole is therefore facilitated). This analytic step corresponds with a central aspect in phenomenological analysis, which is to ground "scientific analysis in the first-order construction of the actors; that is, in their own meanings" (Aspers, 2009: 1).

Although the actors' perspective is related to the theoretical preunderstandings of the researcher, the intent is to "safeguard the actor perspective without downplaying the role of theory, which is all too common in qualitative research" (ibid.: 5). At later steps, I cut and pasted key quotes from participant narratives and my analytic narratives in the transcripts that highlighted a certain phenomenon and pasted them under a heading with the name of the theme in a new document. At this point I looked for further points of convergence and divergence between different participant quotes, and I began to write the final analytic narrative that were to be included in the results chapter.

In the presentation of my results, the purpose of my use of and developing theory when relating my interpretations of the participants' accounts to existing concepts, was to tentatively name and explain identified empirical phenomena that were indicated by the participants (Swedberg, 2016, 2014). My relating of the participants' accounts to existing theory and previous studies was done after having written the results chapter in a purely descriptive narrative, accompanied by participant quotes. This second-order abstraction focused description involved an aspiration to generate insights and deeper understandings about constraining and facilitating influences on the experience of meaning in work. It included a process of bringing in existing concepts and findings and developing them further by highlighting participant accounts that seemed to correspond with or refute

existing theoretical accounts that highlight the phenomenon in question in an indirect or direct manner.

Methodological Discussion

Just as any method the present one has shortcomings and leave things to wish for. Some argue that phenomenological approaches are too subjectivity-oriented and individual-centered. This renders phenomenology too reductive for understanding and critiquing the agency constraining structures and other oppressive aspects of social reality and their connection to institutions and power relations. In this vein, existential and phenomenological approaches are sometimes critiqued for adhering to a rugged methodological individualism that neglects sociality, historicity, and the influence of power and discourse on action, knowledge, consciousness itself, and understanding (McIntosh & Wright, 2019; Adorno, 2002; Tiryakian, 1962). At worst, this may lead to a solipsistic epistemology that paints a picture of a seemingly atomized ahistorical and rationally Self-interested individual. This limits intersubjective understanding of meaning and its relation to social contexts and social entities outside the actors' own consciousness (see e.g. Adorno, 2002; Habermas (1992)). Others suggest that empirical phenomenology risks becoming more about form than content, where “philosophical heavy weights” may be “used to legitimize relatively trivial empirical findings” (Dahlin, 2000: 56).

The critique of theoretical and empirical phenomenology outlined above can be responded to. In an article in which she emphasizes that because of its sensitivity toward understanding the relations, corruptions, and ruptures between parts and wholes of the experiences and structures of the social world, hermeneutic phenomenology is a distinctly critical endeavor, Gayle Salamon notes that

The caricature of phenomenology as a philosophy that is too subjective and too trapped inside first-person perspective to be able to offer any purchase on ethical or political struggles sees its mirror opposite in the caricature of critical theory as too structurally focused, too “high-altitude,” to borrow from Merleau-Ponty, to be able to offer any insight into the intimate textures of lived experience. (Salamon, 2022: 11; see also Tomkins & Eatough, 2014)

As argued in this thesis and by others, not all approaches that draw on phenomenology can be charged with neglecting the influence of historical, social, and linguistic aspects on human experience (see e.g. de Beauvoir,

2010; Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Merleau-Ponty, 2002 [1962]; Schütz, 1967). In contrast to more structuralist and functionalist approaches, in a critical hermeneutic and social phenomenological approach the researcher aspires toward understanding the structures and processes of society *through* the individual and her/his lived experiences, who is viewed ontologically as always already influenced by past, present, and potential future intersubjective arrangements (Salamon, 2018). Therefore, by exploring subjectivity from the perspective of interpretation of the lived experience of individuals, and since subjectivity and meaning is viewed as an always already social phenomenon, it is possible to explore history, structural and intersubjective factors (see e.g. Schütz, 1966; Nielsen & Skotnicki, 2018; Aspers & Kohl, 2013; Heidegger, 2013 [1927]).

Regarding sample selection, this study is limited to presently employed and recently retired individuals who have extensive work experiences in wage labor. However, wage labor is an inescapable and an extensive part of life for the majority also in a remote sense already from early age, even before entering the labor market. Education is partly directed toward preparing young people for working life. I could therefore have included younger participants. Such a sample could have included individuals who are about to enter working life and those who have just entered it – individuals who are oriented towards or employed in either manual or professional occupations. My limited focus on people who have more extensive work experiences, was motivated by the notion that I wanted to understand what it means to work for a wage to those who have been socialized into working life by working and accumulated work experiences over a longer time period. My hypothesis was that such individuals may have become used to having to perform wage labor in order to make a living and may have developed taken-for-granted attitudes towards its role in life.

Regarding interview questions, a concern that emerged during the early interviewing stages (pilot interviews and two of the original interviews), was that during my first interview sessions I noticed that it was less fruitful to use interview questions that focused directly on meaning (e.g. ‘from your perspective, what is the meaning of working?’). Such challenges associated with asking people to evaluate meaning in a direct manner, “(e.g., what does meaningful mean, by which standards and values, and to what degree of finality)” (Scott, 2019: 4), have been highlighted by both meaning theorists/philosophers and meaning of work scholars (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Wong, 2008). In the present study, when posing direct

questions about meaning, it was sometimes difficult to convey to the participants what I meant with the question and what I wanted to know.

When mentioning or asking about “meaning” explicitly in interview questions, participants often associated meaning with functions (as in performing an organizational and/or societal function in the role of employee). Moreover, when asked directly about meaning, it was common that the participants responded with silence or perplexity and asked “what do you mean?”. Perhaps this was because what meaning things have in life may not necessarily be something that people consciously intellectualize and reflect upon actively in everyday life or at some regular basis. When being confronted with this problem, since my intent was to explore meaning from a more holistic and thus processual and constructivist viewpoint than usually done in meaning of work research, I decided to formulate questions that explored meaning construction/destruction more from an indirect perspective. This approach has been used by other constructivism-oriented meaning of work researchers and deemed successful in probing the topics of meaningfulness and meaninglessness (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009).

Furthermore, it is important to highlight that it was not clear during the interviews whether or to what extent the participants reflected on the meanings of working on a regular daily basis. Regardless of participants’ present employment status and occupational group, the interview situation was a context in which the situational and existential meanings of everyday working life were reflected upon and made sense of by looking back at past and present work experiences retrospectively. However, given that full time working is or have been such a large ongoing part of life in both temporal and practical terms for the participants, I suggest that it is reasonable to assume that the topics they paid attention to and delved deeper into in their responses seemed to matter to them in a wider sense.

Other things affected the study. A global pandemic happened. It started in March 2020. Some of the interviews had to be relocated from physical face-to-face interaction to digital alternatives (via Zoom or regular phone). This was due to governmental restrictions and recommendations for keeping physical distance to others. As noted above, ideally, phenomenological interviews are to be performed face-to-face physically. Such an approach is suggested to facilitate interview-related aspects. These aspects are, for instance, empathy, co-construction of meaning and joint sense making, trust, reciprocity, interpretation of and conversational adaption to non-verbal communication, and transparency.

In order to mitigate the challenges for the present research posed by the covid-19 situation, when recruiting participants, I rewrote the information sheet about the study by adding information in which I informed that the interview could be done either outside at a safe distance, or via video call or phone conversation. A minority of the interviews were conducted via video- or phone call. The necessary rearrangement of some interviews to phone format compromised my initial aspiration for conducting traditional phenomenological interviews. However, because of available access to applications that allow for real time transferring of video and audio, the interview conducted via video call resembled an ordinary face-to-face physical situation. This interview thus allowed for both interlocutors to partly see, read, and respond to each other's non-verbal cues. Still, the interviews conducted via phone (with Carina, student/career counselor, and Simone, project lead-er/investigator) cannot be viewed as phenomenological in any traditional sense. The pandemic restrictions also introduced general difficulties in recruiting retired participants, who because of their age were categorized by health officials as higher risk groups. I initially intended to interview 10 retirees. In the end, I interviewed only three retirees. I posted retiree participant requests in digital and physical spaces where this age group were likely to be represented (e.g. Facebook groups and in conjunction to grocery stores), but this did not seem to help. Eventually I had to settle with interviewing mostly presently employed individuals. However, two of these were retiring soon. An additional shortcoming is that all of the older participants were currently/had been employed in professional occupations. However, when referring to their previous work experiences during the interview, a majority of them spoke of having worked in manually oriented occupations at some time in their lives. Despite my failure in realizing my initial intention of recruiting 10 retirees of which half had been employed in professional respectively manually oriented occupations, this adds to the relevance of the temporal focus of the present study.

Research Quality

With regards to the epistemological quality of different actors' interpretations, I agree with the assumption that some interpretations may be more empirically and theoretically qualified than others (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2012). My interpretations of the study participants' accounts are inevitably influenced by the foreknowledge I have learned and constructed during the course of the research process in its entirety. The inter-

pretations of meaning in this thesis may be considered more “qualified” at least from a scientific and theoretical perspective or informed than those based on everyday “common sense” or taken for granted assumptions about the experience of meaning in work situations. However, given the qualitative and hermeneutic nature of the present study, this does not suggest that the interpretations in this thesis mirror some broadly generalizable facts about the experience of meaning in work situations.

Regarding research quality criteria, in hermeneutic phenomenological research they are different from criteria typically adopted in qualitative research, such as credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability (Guba & Lincoln, 1999). In hermeneutic phenomenology, orientation, strength, richness and depth are quality criteria (van Manen, 1997). Orientation denotes the level of involvement the researcher has in the world of the research participants and their accounts. Strength refers to the convincing capacity of the author to represent the core intention of the understanding of the situations and meanings as indicated by the research participants in their accounts. Richness refers to the aesthetic quality of the researcher’s text that intends to describe and communicate the participants accounts of their experiences and understandings thereof. Depth refers to the researcher’s ability to identify and illustrate the participants’ intentions (ibid.)

Research Ethics

I have followed the ethical guidelines provided by the Swedish Research Council (2017) and the American Sociological Association (2008): informed consent, confidentiality, treatment, storage of personal data and integrity. Following these sets of guidelines for research ethics, with regards to their emphasis on good research practice and ethical conduct, those participating in the present study were informed that their participation needed to be based on informed consent. They were informed that this meant consenting to that their answers would be used solely for research purpose and that some of their answers may be used as illustrative quotes in the final research report.

The participants were informed that their participation was confidential, and that all persons and organizations related to the participants in the study were to be given fictional names, both in the interview transcripts and the final report. They were further informed that they were free to abort the interview at any time if they wanted, and that their answers would not be used for any other purpose than being analyzed and

potentially included in the form of illustrative quotes in the final report. The participants were also notified that their answers were to be stored in an encrypted folder on a password protected computer, and that no one except I had direct access to these files and their content during the course of the research project. They were informed about all GDPR-related aspects relevant for conducting research. These aspects were outlined in a study information sheet that I sent to the participants before the interview. I also repeated these aspects in the initial stage of the interview situation. All interview related information can be found in appendix 3.

Regarding participants' validation of my interpretations of their interview accounts, I informed all participants before the interview that they would be given the opportunity to read through and judge the validity of the interpretations that I included in my results chapter sections. In phenomenological and other qualitative research, participant validation is suggested to facilitate research ethical judgement, general research quality, and credibility (Slettebø, 2021; van Manen, 1997). Especially in participatory research (Slettebø, 2021). However, during the course of the research project, I realized that because of time constraints I would not be able to include participant validation as part of my method. When I realized this, I contacted each participant via email and explained that I had needed to change my method in this way and, therefore, that the information about participant validation they had been given initially was not valid anymore. For research ethical purposes, I also informed them that if the possibility for participant validation had been a determining criterium for their participation in the study, they were free to withdraw their consent. All responded. All reported that they still wanted to participate in the study.

Regarding power relations in interviews, I remained attentive toward the potential that research interviews “involves processes of performance and impression management; processes whereby interviewers and interviewees seek commonalities and differences, as well as enacting socio-cultural expectations regarding such things as “femininity”, “manliness”, “professionalism” and so on (Broom, Hand & Tovey, 2007: 52). I thus remained attentive to potential power asymmetries, manifestations thereof, and their potential effect on impression managements between me and the participant. It is possible that social desirability had a biasing role in why some participants frames their responses in particular ways (e.g. by omitting negative work experiences and accounts of meaninglessness in order to focus more on positive aspects and meaningfulness).

Moreover, I was clearly in a more privileged position employment-wise than some of the participants in terms of aspects such as for instance work autonomy and Self-determined flexibility. Especially in relation to participants who worked in low-status manually oriented jobs that were far more mentally and physically agency constraining than my role as a PhD-candidate. Additionally, I was also inevitably an external observer in the form of a researcher informed by scientific ideals and motives. In this role I was invited into analyzing first-hand accounts of the life world of participants to probe for personal accounts for scientifically instrumental reasons in the form of generating a knowledge product. My position as a researcher was thus in some sense inevitably objectifying to begin with (see e.g. Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Schütz, 1967).

I believe that mitigation of objectification of the research participant can be facilitated partly through informed consent and remaining aware and reflexive of my own position. I aspired toward being open and sensitive to understanding each participant from her/his own point of view, showing empathy and gratitude toward her/him for sharing experiences in a context of mutual agreement and informed consent.

Results Part I – Situational Meanings

The following empirical findings are based on my interpretations of what my study participants explicitly and implicitly indicated that they value/do not value in their work experiences in terms of aspects such as what they care about, find significant, relevant, authentic/inauthentic, and purposeful. I integrate my own interpretations with theoretical reflections and previous research. I present the content of my findings in thematic form. My main themes depart from my ideal types of situational meaning and existential meaning. Subthemes are presented under each main theme. My interpretations of the participants' accounts focus on constraining and facilitating the influences of organizationally related factors on work experiences of meaning.

I use participant quotes to highlight specific phenomena key characteristics of each theme and subtheme. I focus on the themes and subthemes of situational and existential meaning constructions/destructions that were the most salient in the participants' accounts and relevant for their answers to my research questions. I highlight similarities and differences in participants' accounts of experiences of what it means to work for a wage in terms of experiences of meaningfulness and/or lack thereof. Differences

between why working is experienced as meaningful and/or meaningless in work situations and life in a broader sense are highlighted between different occupations and employment statuses (presently employed and recently retired). The central concepts highlighted and used in my analysis are the lived work experience of meaning and its relation to subjectivity, authenticity/inauthenticity, self, freedom, alienation, power, temporality, and transitions and relations between work and nonwork experiences. The first four themes of situational meaning presented below are related to one another. They focus on being/not being oneself at work, social influences on the self at work, and social influences on the experience of meaning in work situations. The remaining themes of situational meaning are others at work as a double-edged source of meaning, when employees' and employers' realities collide, freedom and responsibility within predetermined boundaries, and the art of switching off from work while at work.

The Self at Work

Suspending the Self at Work

My interpretation of the participants' accounts of how they behave in work situations suggests that a defining characteristic of the work experience is not truly being oneself while at work. Based on their past and present working life biographies, people in both professional and manual occupations may learn to not be themselves at work. I view the general notion of being/not being oneself as related to the authenticity/inauthenticity construct. In the present study, the general phenomenon of not being oneself at work was indicated by the participants in four particular forms: (a) not being oneself in relation to one's work roles; (b) not being oneself in relation to others; (c) not being oneself in relation to one's work tasks; and (d): modifying one's definition of and attunement toward the work situation to render it more meaningful and/or tolerable and thus doable.

During my interviews, the question of whether they experienced that they could be themselves at work typically evoked significant attention and deeper reflections among many participants regardless of their current employment status or occupational type. One of my interview questions through which I wanted to explore the potential relation between the self and the experience of meaning was simply "Do you feel that you can be yourself at work?". The participants' reflections about being/not being oneself both at work and in life in general also emerged spontaneously in

response to other interview questions. Across the total sample, for both recently retired and presently employed participants, being oneself at work was expressed in ways that indicated that being fully oneself was something that was not necessarily desired or possible in the first place. A general sentiment reflected across the interviews was that one is not supposed to be able to fully be oneself at work because that is not how the workplace functions socially and practically. At work, one needs to have a fairly standardized work self that is adapted to work obligations and one's perceptions thereof. Therefore, as an employee, one needs to practice work-related modes of self-adaptation and self-discipline at work. A key take-away from this finding is that being one's authentic self at work risks renders the work experience less meaningful/more meaningless and/or less tolerable, acceptable, and doable. Being inauthentic at work may also render the work experience and its accompanied activities more manageable and more doable than they would be otherwise.

My interpretation of the participants' accounts is that while at work, the work experience in general—and in order to render it a doable, bearable, acceptable, and/or potentially (more) meaningful activity—requires adapting one's self/selves to different situations and other people. Being at work therefore requires being significantly different than how one is outside of work. This is what I refer to when using the expression “suspending the self” at work: employees leave their authentic selves or proportions of it behind when entering the workplace. Many participants indicated that being at work simply requires one to not fully be oneself. To fully be oneself in life in general was typically associated with either being outside of work in the company of close significant others or being alone (e.g., “To be by myself is to be myself” – college teacher, m, 41). My interpretation of the participants' accounts is that most of them left their more authentic self behind or put it on hold until the workday was over and that they preferred to do so. They preferred this approach because it was perceived as both a working life necessity and a personal need. A common sentiment conveyed in the participants' accounts was that as an employee, one is not expected to be oneself at work.

In a theoretical integration of existentialist and sociological thought, Tiyyakian has theorized the conscious and unconscious adaptation, subordination and conforming of the self to the workplace and its formal conventions and requirements:

Since people are interchangeable in the technological process, no one is indispensable. The individuals best adjusted to the modern work situation are those who least desire to be truly themselves. Those who succeed have sacrificed their selfhood to the mechanical-bureaucratic apparatus (...) (Tiryakian, 1962: 143)

However, rather than blindly, cynically, or rationally conforming to the actual and perceived requirements of a technological/economic system or simply not desiring to be themselves for ego-centered pragmatic reasons, many of the participants seemed to associate putting the whole self on hold at work with respecting and preserving both one's own and others' integrity. Such an approach shows that one cares about and recognizes the (perceived) integrity of both the self and others. It makes sense and is purposeful to not be oneself at work. At a general social level of work experience, the participants' accounts often indicated that not revealing too much of one's whole self at work is practiced in order to avoid different forms of social/interpersonal and professional friction that a divergence from the professional role may lead to in the work situation. In the current study, the formal requirements, obligations, and expectations of keeping oneself constrained while at work to avoid rupturing the order of both explicit and unwritten rules were associated with different risks. These risks included work-related problems and interpersonal discomforts that may emerge if one lets too much of one's self out into the open by acting and being as if one is outside of work.

Common forms of participant accounts related to being/not being oneself at work in relation to work tasks, work roles, and others were as follows: "I would claim that the private Marcus and the professional Marcus differ; they are two different individuals, if you put it like that" (Harald, 37, group manager); "In part, you assume a role; that's how things are. (...) I want to keep some distance; I value that. I would probably not be too comfortable being personal" (Loa, 35, committee secretary); "I put on a façade" (Georg, 30, correctional officer); and "When you are at work, you enter a professional role; that is how it is, of course. At home you are a different person. (...) It would be strange otherwise, if you did not" (Karin, 64, job coach/internship coordinator). In this vein, being different at work from how one is outside of work was often framed by participants as a self-evident necessity and natural part of being an employee at work.

Many participants thus spoke of viewing it both as socially and practically expected, necessary and desirable to keep one's whole self partly suspended while at work and not expressing or revealing too much of

oneself in one's professional role while performing work and/or in relation to others. As noted above, a common sentiment highlighted by participants across the total sample was that in relation to others at work, one could be a little bit personal with others, but not private. Neither should one expect to find significant levels of congruence between one's personal intrinsic interests, work tasks and their outcomes. Meaning of work theorists and philosophers have theorized about the kind of self-suspension in work situations that I have described above. Leadership ethics scholar and philosopher Joanne Ciulla theorizes that

(...) all of us at some time decide how much of ourselves we are willing to reveal to an organization. In the modern workplace it isn't always easy to draw this line. This thin line is not about the quantity of work you will do. It is the boundary that you draw between your private life and inner self and the more public aspects needed to do your job. Some workplaces prefer that there be no line between the two. Deciding how much to give and how much to withhold can be confounding and confusing. (Ciulla, 2000: 114; see also Harding, 2019; Gorz, 2010)

I now proceed to some empirical accounts of (a) not being oneself in relation to work roles. A recurring theme in all of the forms of not being oneself at work was that many of the participants' accounts included ambivalence and plurality. When reflecting on her work roles and how she behaves in them, the accounts of Carina, 64, who is presently working as a special pedagogue for younger adults in need of additional educational support, are instructive for highlighting this trend. She expressed her relation to self-expression at work and its connection to professional requirements, role expectations, and meaning in the workplace in the following way:

C: I have to be there (at work), and when I'm there I have entered into a role all the time. And if I were to be private (similar to some other study participants, Carina repeatedly associated being "private" with being herself), that other Carina, then I would walk away from there (the workplace). I would not even do administrative work (e.g., while waiting for her session with a student). It would be so meaningless because my life is far too important for me to just sit and wait (for her teaching session to begin).

At an existential level, then, in terms of referring to life in a wider spatiotemporal sense, Carina's accounts suggest that being one's authentic self at work is associated with a waste of one's life. As an employee, not being

true to oneself in terms of following what one values is a necessary feature of being at work.

Across the total participant sample, having to navigate and adapt oneself to work situations and others at work was a central feature of the work experience. This echoes Harding's suggestion about the fluid self at work that

(...) there appear to be not just one self that is constructed while at work, but many selves, or there are numerous subject positions and individuals move from one to another to another, constituting notions of the self in each one as they move through them. (2019: 139)

When describing work situations in which they found themselves throughout their workdays, Carina and other participants referred to recurring instances of stepping in and out of different roles at work. These roles involve different forms of front-stage performances that are accompanied by role ambiguity and modifications according to the demands of different work processes in both external and internal self-expression:

It's in these processes that happen all the time that there are parallel processes (in terms of being in different roles in order to do different things), and so on. Then, it (work) becomes meaningful, but it only becomes meaningful if I'm in my role. (...) So, I am never private, I mean we are never private at work. We never talk about anything private. (...) I have to get into a role all the time; so, in the team there, private, personal, professional, I am like that all the time. I am personal, but I am very much in the role. And then, I can be me, but I'm not private, because if I were I could not stand it in certain situations, I would go crazy, then I would.... Although that's not quite true... I can be, I do not need any filters, but it's just the professional... (...) well I have to think aloud now. Of course, I can be me, because I'm not expected to be private, so yes, but I can't really be my whole self.

(...)

Because if I had followed my heart, then in some situations I would have put a note on my office door, saying that "Unfortunately, my vegetable land needs to be cleared" (as in leaving the workplace in order to engage in activities that she finds more personally satisfying and meaningful in life).

Adapting oneself and one's attitude toward and conforming to situations and others at work by not following one's heart and entering into distinct and standardized work roles, in which private and personal aspects of the self are suspended and put on hold, was also highlighted by

Karl, 32. He works as a truck driver for a semilarge privately owned haulage contractor. Emphasizing intentional and a seemingly conscious adaptation to work situations and his assessment of them, Karl described how his outward representation of himself to others at work could change very quickly from one minute to another. A key feature of this seemingly pragmatically oriented mode of self-adaptation to work situations is to enter into a role and put on an act that conveys a sense of honesty and niceness to appear professional and not bothersome to others:

A: Do you feel that you can be yourself at work?

K: (looks down at the table and becomes quiet for a moment). Absolutely not (serious look on his face, and tone of voice indicates a strong sense of seriousness in that he seems to be very certain of the following). I am super false at work (emphasized "super" by raising voice and prolonging the word). I always walk up (to others at work), super friendly, like "Hello, hello" (waves with his left hand and smiles). I can be sitting in my truck, feeling anxious, and then I jump out of it and I'm like "Hi guys! What's up?" (changes tone of voice and facial expression from a sad and serious look to conveying positivity and cheerfulness by smiling and looking engaged). And that's because... People are simple. If you are honest, nice, and a little bit happy and make some jokes, there is never going to be any problems. And I don't like problems in my life.

A: So, you kind of adapt?

K: Yes. And as you have asked about before, the places you visit, there's a bit of a jargon there. I stick my nose in there (through the lunchroom door at places that he goes to load/unload his goods), "I need this and this", and they're like "Yeah, yeah, yeah", and I'm like: "You guys sit down and eat; I will take care of the loading myself", and then you go out and load.

Highlighting key economic and organizational aspects of his work role, this strategy of adapting oneself to front-stage work situations is not only connected to Karl's perception of particular work situations and what they require from him as an employee. Expressed in Lysgaardian (1985) terminology, these technical and economic aspects of the work role and subordination to them were shown to also be related to the company's economically rooted and instrumentally rational interests and representing them in a professional manner:

K: You have a work face because you are... This is one of those things people do not see or think about. It is we (truck drivers) who represent the outward face of the company. I am the outward face of the company. First,

I wear the company's clothes, the company's logotype is on the trucks; I am advertising the company, it is my employer. In addition, other than that, I advertise PLM (the main company that hires Karl's employer to carry/transport goods for them) because I transport only one hundred percent PLM goods. Therefore, I advertise two big companies.

Similar to Karl, Pontus, 30, who is presently employed as a blaster and odd jobber at a small painting firm, referred to previous work experiences in which he had adapted himself significantly to work situations in terms of not being true to himself. This was done by entering into a strictly demarcated and standardized work role. According to my interpretation, Pontus suspended large proportions of his authentic self and modified it according to his perception and assessment of what the work situation required from him both practically and symbolically to function and perform as an employee:

P: When I leave (from work), then I am... When I was at the hardware store, then it was like this; now I am wearing a red shirt, which has the company name on it, so I work for the company. Then, when I leave, I do not wear that shirt anymore, so I am Pontus Bengtsson (himself).

A: I understand. Have you ever had a job where you have felt that you have been able to be yourself more or less? Because is it about being yourself a little bit, the things you are telling me now, that you enter into a role in some way?

P: Yes, well... No. At work, you are at work.

A: And do what you are supposed to do?

P: You are there, you shut up, you do as you are told. And then you get fired, and then you are unemployed for a year. That's about my life.

The accounts exemplified above indicate that being at work involves limited and finite possibilities for being oneself in work roles. My findings suggest that employees adapt themselves to work situations and their work roles by suspending their authentic self or proportions of it. Schütz's (1967) view of different social spheres as finite provinces of meaning is instructive for shedding light on this self-related phenomenon. Drawing on Schütz, Benta (2014: 168) has suggested that "finite provinces of meaning always invite us—sometimes force us—to accept certain identities, to play roles, to wear 'avatars'", and "by just being present within the horizontal walls of a province, we are automatically placed in a relationship of desire, power, collaboration, love, hatred, etc., with our environment".

Returning to Pontus, who had struggled with precarious employment throughout his entire working life, not being himself while at work was practiced in relation to both others and work tasks. Out of necessity and his experience-based expectations and perceptions of what was required from him in the work situation as an employee, he behaved in a way that conformed to certain actual or imagined expectations of how to be at work and how to regulate oneself in work situations and roles that involve others (e.g., clients and coworkers). My interpretation of this phenomenon is that like many of the other participants who had similar work experiences, he left his more authentic self behind.

Putting the self on hold and leaving it behind by adapting, modifying and conforming to work situations and what is perceived to be required in order to be and act as an employee should in such situations, for example, by shutting up and doing as one is told, was also highlighted by other participants, albeit in a less explicit way. Some participants spoke of abstaining from speaking their true minds about problems in the workplace, i.e., problems that they felt needed to be confronted and resolved to render work more useful, productive, efficient, and therefore meaningful both to the organization and themselves. This phenomenon echoes Habermas' (1987) suggestion that a characteristic of organizational life is that the instrumentally rational organization and performance of wage labor both leads to and requires systematic silence and distortion of speech for its optimal functioning. A common pattern in such participant accounts of withholding authentic speech was that such experiences and the tensions in them could emerge in situations where work is performed in such a way that it is experienced as pointless, inefficient or even counterproductive in terms of reaching organizational goals.

Some participants indicated that after previous failed attempts to try to influence a work situation that was experienced as lacking meaningfulness in the above sense, they abstained from pointing out to others (same-level coworkers or management representatives) what they perceived as deficiencies and pointless activities in the labor process. Based on their previous work experiences, they knew that such forms of overt verbal transparency may be met with lack of recognition; furthermore, such transparency could cause interpersonal friction or other forms of social discomfort and tensions in the workplace. In such instances, experiences of meaningless and seemingly futile work were silently accepted and conformed to. The desire to point out problems in a transparent and honest way was suppressed. Echoing Alvesson's and Spicer's (2016) definition of functional

stupidity in organizations, work that was experienced as rather pointless because it could be performed in a way that, according to one's own understanding, made more sense in an efficient and productive sense was eventually carried out with both a sense of frustration and futility. Sandra, 63, communicator, stated as follows:

I used to work at an industrial company with web-related things. First, it was Swedish-owned, and then it became Stockholm-owned by financiers. Then, it became American in the end. In addition, in America, back then it was like, it is very hierarchical, you did not move as you want to at that time. So, they (management) just said "Do this and this" (referring to performing work tasks), and I kind of felt that some things were so stupid. Like, well, yes, but you cannot do that.

The sense of frustration and futility and coping with these feelings while shutting up and doing as one is told can be interpreted as an expression of what Bailey et al. (2017) referred to as existential labor. Existential labor represents a type of experienced and internally practiced form of emotional and mood-oriented labor. In this sense, being at work may involve two types of labor: existential labor of the self and labor in the form of work tasks. Bailey et al. suggested that existential labor may emerge "when employees feel powerless to do otherwise than fit in with managerial prerogatives, whatever their real views", which may lead to negative consequences for both employees and organizations in the form of, for instance, diminished trust, engagement, commitment, performance, and sustainability (ibid.: 417).

For some participants, pointing out work-related problems to others and trying to influence the work situation for the better could become pointless in itself. They reported that highlighting problems in an overt manner and attempting to change the work situation concretely does not lead to any real change to the better; rather, it could make things worse. In terms of experiences of problematic work situations and how one feels about them, the self is suspended and put on hold through adaptation by being quiet about work-related concerns. This phenomenon, as it is marked by tension and was typically expressed by participants in relation to their experiences of work tasks and leaders' definition and organization thereof, was highlighted in a salient way by Nadja. She is a 67-year-old student counselor who was set to retire six months after the interview. She associated such work experiences with management practices and reorganizations:

Yes, it was these reorganizations, the big reorganization in 2006-2007, when work was made into processes. A lot of middle managers were appointed, and we got a colleague who would suddenly become a manager in her last years of her working life; she had very good expertise about laws and regulations, but very little experience of being a supervisor and leader. She went into a managerial role (strongly emphasizes "managerial role" to simulate that the person exercised strong authority in her role as a manager): "I am the one who leads and distributes the work" (manipulates tone of voice into an authoritarian and military character). She could attack colleagues of all kinds and me, with rather harsh charges. So we began to realize that "Oh, here it is important to play a role, and to have an attitude toward the outside world." It was less pleasant to discover that very small things (as in speaking one's mind) could have very great significance. Above all, it was always the boss who... She showed us very clearly that it is always the boss who has interpretive precedence, no matter how wrong the boss is.

A: Okay. So, then it was more about adapting to the situation?

N: Yes, you can express it like that when I say that you have to play a role and dress in work clothes, and in doing so you dress for your professional role. Then, of course you can be yourself quite a lot in the lunchroom, but still not really. You have a private side and a personal side.

Drawing on Lips-Wiersma and Wright (2012), Bailey and colleagues (2019: 100) have suggested that "tensions are unavoidable in the search for meaning and that these tensions are manifest most often in efforts to integrate the opposing dimensions of doing/being and self/other". These authors have further suggested the presence of "complex, ambivalent, and demanding processes that may be connected to meaningfulness and highlight a gap in our understanding of the experience of meaningful work" (ibid.). For some of the participants in the present study, with regard to the experience of navigating the self at work in relation to the tensions that emerge from relationships with others, work roles, work situations and their influence on the work experience of meaning, such tension was clearly related to complex and demanding organizational processes. As noted above, these processes were related to both others across the organizational hierarchy and the concrete performance of work tasks. I now proceed to focus on the former issue.

Not Being Oneself in Front of Others

A second recurring self-related theme in some of the participants' accounts was that the participants' development of a self-adaptive and conformist attitude both toward and in work situations was associated with previous negative work experiences. From this perspective, as indicated partly above, previous attempts at being more authentic at work in relation to others produced either negative or no responses from the environment. Participants across the total sample recalled such prior working life experiences, for instance, when they had attempted to be more transparent to others (e.g., managers and coworkers) about what I interpret as meaning-eroding aspects in the workplace or when they had attempted to act more according to their own needs for meaningful interaction. Such prior working life experiences were also associated with failed attempts at interacting with others at work (e.g., coworkers) in a more sincere and transparent way, as in, for example, making jokes or being verbally open about things that one is interested in and cares about in life in general.

Loa, who works as a committee secretary, spoke of keeping quiet about things that interested him and concerned him in genuine ways in life. Based on his accumulated working life experiences, he knows that speaking about such things in front of others risks producing unease among and lack of recognition from others. Peter, who works as a subway train operator, emphasized that interaction with others at work (e.g., colleagues and others) "takes too much from me - energy and time that I don't get to be myself". Jarmo, a machine operator, spoke of not having much in common with his work colleagues. As I will describe later, he exemplified this concept by describing sitting in the lunchroom with some of his colleagues when they were chatting about things that he found boring and lacking substance. Since he experienced that he had little in common with them, attempts at joining in or speaking about something he found interesting and of value were avoided. Pontus, a blaster and odd jobber, spoke of having tried to connect with his colleagues more by talking to them about the products they produced, trying to make jokes, or speaking about things he was passionate about in life. In Pontus' experience, such attempts typically failed as a strategy for rendering interpersonal relationships at work more rewarding and meaningful beyond the work roles. Usually, one ended up engaging in small talk. Work situations of engaging in small talk could emerge, especially at the end of the workweek, during organizationally irrational periods of empty labor and pretend work (see Paulsen, 2014) while waiting for the workday to come to an end:

A: When the weekend is approaching, are you in any particular mood?

P: Yes. At the painting firm, we always used to say that the last hour on Friday was longer than the whole of Monday.

A: Okay.

P: Yes (laughs). But that was actually true, because then everyone is done with their work. There might be some guy who's still inside, painting, but we just stand there for a few hours (humming and looking up at the ceiling to illustrate that he stands passively and waits for the time to pass). "You can't leave yet".

A: But then you had a time clock (for checking in and out at work)?

P: Yes. Then, you just stand there, waiting for the time to pass, like, it can be an hour. Sometimes it's less.

A: But what do you do then?

P: We just stand there and talk trash. Someone may be like "Yes, now we have cleaned, but we can go another lap to see if we find anything to do", and then we stand there for another ten minutes, and then someone says "Yes, now we go and do something because here comes the boss!" Then, you pretend to do something (work-related).

A: Okay, but did the boss know about this, about the last hour?

P: Yes. It just had to look good.

A: Okay.

P: It is difficult when you talk trash for so long, when everyone wants to talk about sports.

A: Yes? It depends on whether you have something in common?

P: Yes. Well, sometimes it's someone who asks a music-related question, and then I answer it, and then they say: "Yes, okay", because they do not really know what it means. They have no follow-up questions. Then, maybe you start to explain something yourself, and then they say "Yes" and I say, "Yeah, okay."

A: Do you notice that there is no further interest?

P: No, it's probably more out of politeness.

For those participants who spoke about having similar interpersonal work experiences, not being oneself in front of others of the same hierarchical position was related to not having and/or finding common ground

beyond the formal work roles. These participants indicated that in such instances, there may be little to no deeper value to be found in socializing with others at work. Attempts to do so were repeatedly indicated by some participants as lacking meaning. In such instances, they indicated that they had experienced significantly limited or no commonality, reciprocity and recognition from others and that it was better to be by themselves in such work situations.

In sum, my interpretation of interpersonal sources of meaninglessness at work highlights Laaser's and Karlsson's (2021) suggestion that a lack of intersubjective recognition at work may be a source of meaninglessness. Sometimes, attempts of what I interpret as expressions of being more "authentic" at work in relation to others were even accounted for in opposite terms. Being oneself in this way could generate an intensified sense of alienation and lack of recognition from others at work. Such prior attempts at being oneself at work brought into light a lack of shared interests, i.e., a lack of common ground and shared frames of reference that extend beyond the work role with others in the workplace.

Keeping Tasks and Goals at a Distance

As noted above, inauthenticity/authenticity tensions were also indicated by participants across the sample in ways that were more directly related to the form and content of work tasks. Some of the participants, primarily those in the manually oriented job category (e.g., truck driver, subway train operator, blaster/odd jobber), spoke of not wanting to work with things that were related to their central life interests and passions. I interpret this phenomenon as both situationally and existentially relevant because, as shown below, such interests and passions may be significantly valued and central sources of meaning in life in a wider spatiotemporal sense.

References to generally wanting to keep one's work and the rest of one's life separate in terms of not wanting to monetize one's interests and passions were often made by participants by comparing their present work situation with their prior working life experiences. This temporality related finding yet again highlights that people's working life biographies may influence how they frame and understand their present work experiences of meaning (Scott, 2019). In these previous jobs, these participants had worked with things that were more aligned with key personal interests and passions in life in a wider sense.

A central reason for the participants wanting to keep their work and self separate in this task- and goal-related way was that when a central life interest and passion (e.g., playing a music instrument, producing music, sheet metal work, renovating cars) became salaried work, it risked losing its spontaneous and creative character. My interpretation is that in such cases, the participants did not recognize themselves in the form and content of activities that were otherwise experienced as worthwhile and authentically meaningful. If instrumentalized and practiced in the form of salaried work tasks, things in life that were previously experienced as authentic, valuable, and worthwhile to engage in was at risk of becoming inauthentic and lacking intrinsic meaningfulness. When practiced eight hours a day at work, the monetization and instrumentalization of one's central life interests and passions were not desirable. This change was associated by some participants with sacrificing and perverting something that they valued intrinsically and—according to my interpretation—experienced as authentic in their life outside of work and their life in general. The transformation of a central life interest and passion into salaried work was thus implicitly associated with alienation, a loss of meaningfulness and the sacrifice of their authentic selfhood.

Peter, a subway train operator, who, similar to some of the other participants (e.g., Loa, a committee secretary), expressed that he valued not being able to take work with him home, also spoke of not wanting to work with things that he was passionate about in life. In Peter's view, by drawing on his previous work experiences, he indicated that it caused a sense of alienation, eroded the sense of meaningfulness and led to a loss of authenticity:

P: Then, I also feel that because I have worked with both music production and music teaching (which are central life interests to P), I know what it is like to work with something that I like. And that's also a kind of aspect of that kind of work, that you like to do something, but then maybe you get to work with music you don't like, or with people you don't like. And it gets perverted somehow, because you feel dirty, for lack of better words. Like, it's a bit like, that you have to use your joy in a way that you do not like. And that's draining; it's not fun.

On a similar note, Pontus, a blaster and oddjobber, referred to his interest in music and that he did not want to monetize it; he also indicated that he did not want to instrumentalize the joy that music brought him.

To do so would involve too big of a compromise in authenticity and self-integrity and therefore also an erosion of intrinsic meaningfulness:

A: Did you feel that, as I understood you, that you would lose the fun in it if you started working with it?

P: Yes. No, because it turned out like this: the thing that was fun was playing what I wanted to play. It was fun to go to music school and play with others, but if you were to work with it, then you have to sacrifice a lot. At school, it's still fun to some extent; but to work with it, then you really have to go into this P3 Mix Megapol-adapted world and sort of do it on their terms (referring to commercial radio music and its standardized format). And I had no desire at all for that. I still don't.

A: It's an industry you have to go into, you have to adapt to it?

P: Yes, and then it's not art.

Similar to Peter, Pontus referred to having had previous working life experiences in which work had been especially incongruent with his judgment of what was aesthetically pleasing and artistic in a meaningful way. In such instances, when the wish to perform work in a manner more in line with his own ideals of authentic aesthetics clashed with the customers' preferences and prescriptions for how things should be done, cognitive dissonance and a sense of boredom and pointlessness emerged:

P: The gardening firm was quite interesting. But I did not want to work with that either, because the customers basically had such bad taste.

A: Okay.

P: Yeah. Like, "Yes, but build the stairs and the flower beds like this" and I'm like, "No". In that case, you have to be there and work with something that you think is ugly. It's not fun to do. It's more fun to do at home.

A: I understand. But was that like, some kind of creative job? It was a bit like the music thing that you could not play the kind of music you wanted to?

P: Yes. Like, if you were to make a stone-based garden trail, you could make a small one (shows with his hands), that would be nice. While some (customers) were like "No, it should be like this". Then you have to stand there with rulers and spirit levels, and stuff like that... And I'm like, "What the hell?"

A: Yes, okay.

P: But "I'd like it not to be straight". And they (customers) said, "No, it should be like this." Yeah, right...

A: Okay. For how long were you there?

P: It was not so long.

A: Yes, I understand.

P: Yeah, it didn't turn out well.

A: You did not stay?

P: No, I resigned. That time I resigned.

The loss of authenticity in activities when they became work was highlighted only by a few participants, albeit both in the professional and manual category. It is still however important to comment on. Such comments shed light on the fact that authenticity and meaningfulness are something that can be lost, specifically if an activity that is a source of selfhood and meaningfulness in life outside of work turns into wage labor. As suggested by Costas and Fleming (2009: 362), for employees, such experiences of inauthenticity at work may involve a "sense of unattainability" that "entails a reflexive moment in which the subject realizes they have become someone they do not want to be". My interpretations of the participants' accounts about the loss of meaningfulness in work when authenticity was lost in activities that they valued in their life outside of work also shed light on a general phenomenon observed in the present study, namely, that people may want to separate themselves from work in an existentially significant manner because more authentic aspects of the self may not align with the instrumentality of work tasks. The latter examples highlight that central life passions and interests may be experienced as becoming eroded when they are monetized in a salaried work situation. That which is experienced as authentic, identity-affirming, and a source of intrinsic meaningfulness in life outside of work may be experienced as inauthentic and lacking intrinsic meaningfulness when it becomes wage labor. In such instances, for the employee, the work activity and its goals and results do not result in satisfaction or alignment between herself or himself and the organization. General authentic interests and passions in life may become transformed into a source of meaning or meaninglessness that cannot and/or does not live up to the same standards of authenticity as when practiced outside of work.

When Attunement and Expectation Matters

Another form of self-suspension at work was highlighted by some participants, namely, what one thought about and paid attention to in the work situation mattered for the experience of meaning. In conceptual terms, this phenomenon can be interpreted as being related to the attunement and attitude the participants had toward the work situation. Here, I am referring to attunement in a phenomenological sense, as described in the theory chapters. This concept denotes the attention that people either individually or jointly pay to things in situations and the ways in which a general mindset affects their overall awareness and mood. In phenomenological terms, if people are attuned to something in relation to a past, present, or future situation and this attunement creates a certain mood (e.g., joy or melancholy), this indicates that it matters to them in a positive or negative sense. In this sense, people's attunement may influence and reveal what they value and find meaningful/meaningless in situations and existentially (see, e.g., Bude, 2018; Heidegger, 2013 [1927]).

In the present study, attunement in the work situation included identification of, paying attention to, and awareness of more or less proximate sources of meaning. According to some participants, the self-management of expectations and one's personal attitude and interpretation of meaning in work tasks, other work situations, and their relation to broader contexts were related to what meanings one could expect to experience at work in the first place. This finding partly echoes Victor & Barnard's empirically supported suggestion about how mindset may influence the work experience of meaning, namely, people with a more "positive outlook" may be more likely "to be able to comprehend their work situation and find meaning and purpose in it" (Victor & Barnard, 2016: 9; see also Mercurio, 2019; Frankl, 1959).

My findings suggest that from a phenomenological perspective, how and what one thinks about work and whether this thinking transcends the work situation in terms of imagining and being attuned to its value to other past, present, or future contexts (e.g., to society at large or one's own life in the long run) influences the work experience of meaning. These aspects of thinking and transcending the here and now resonate with the phenomenological suggestion that in any situation, consciousness is always already directed at something other than itself (see, e.g., Frankl, 2014 [1988]; Schütz, 1967; Heidegger, 2013 [1927]). A recurring pattern in some of the participants' accounts was that they viewed their definition of the work situation and being flexible in it in terms of being open to-

ward locating less apparent sources of meaning as key for experiencing working as meaningful beyond the pay. This was especially important under conditions where proximate sources of meaningfulness were far from evident or easy to identify. From this flexible perspective, some participants indicated that they viewed it as necessary and crucial to take individual responsibility for one's own mindset in terms of one's attitude toward and definition of the work situation.

The participants who highlighted this individualized phenomenon typically emphasized the importance of not getting stuck in negative and idealistic thinking about what could be expected of working in the first place in terms of experiencing meaningfulness. My interpretations of this phenomenon resonate with Frankl's (2002, 1959) theory of the will to meaning and his emphasis on responsibility and attentiveness in terms of agentic responses to demanding situations. This includes the phenomenological suggestion that the experience of meaning in life is linked to how people respond to situations and what they pay attention to practically and temporally before, during, and after such responses. In a more remote sense, my findings related to creative forms of attitude and action adaptation to work circumstances also resonate with the theory of job crafting. A suggestion that is present in this theory is that through agential responses, employees may find cognitive and practical ways to craft their work situations into something more meaningful than otherwise (Tufte, 2011; Wrzesniewski & Dutton 2001). I will return to the phenomenon of job crafting at a later point.

Among numerous participants in the present study, affirmative thinking about the work situation mattered for rendering their work experience more valuable and worthwhile to themselves. This type of thinking influences one's attitude, attention, and experience of meaning. It allows for a more open and flexible interpretation and definition of the work situation and its sources of meaning. As highlighted by Max, a group manager, even under particularly challenging conditions, it is possible to view both one's own and others' work as meaningful:

M: But I think, I would say that 90 percent of it all is about one's attitude. That is, probably, if you sum it all up, that it's what you put your mind to, how you choose to look at things yourself. Like, do you see it as, you know, it's the glass is half full or half empty thing. That's how I see it.

A: I understand. So, it's like, how you handle the situation yourself?

M: Yes, precisely. You can walk around (at work) and whine about everything that is not the way you would like it to be and like "What if I had been there?" and "What if I had been there?" (referring to disappointment emerging from nonrealized ideals and preferences). Yes, you can dream, of course you should do that, but I think seeing value in everything you do creates two different things. On the one hand, you feel that you yourself feel much better because you look at things positively instead of seeing them negatively. Second, it also creates an understanding of others and their jobs, which I can sometimes feel is something that some look down on. For example, being a dishwasher, a waitress, a garbage collector, or, well, anything that people say things about like "But how can you work like that?" However, yeah, I see a value in it, that they get things to put in their backpack (referring to "backpack" metaphorically as in collecting experiences that one learn from in life as a whole), they learn things. Therefore, I think you get a completely different view of all types of work in that way, that everything has a value and is needed in a completely different way.

A: Depending on how you look at it, from what perspective, and so on?

M: Yes, exactly. (Max 45, call center group manager)

Max further emphasized the necessity and importance of adapting oneself in general to work through perspective shifting by adopting a positive attitude toward the work situation. He connected his experiences of this to a work training experience that had occurred many years ago. During this occasion, part of Max's and other new employees' work training was to watch a documentary in which attitude adaptation toward and in work situations and the employee's responsibility for doing it was a central feature:

M: I just want to add something here. When I started working at the company a hundred years ago, we got to see something that we called the fish film. I don't know if you've seen it? I think it's from New York. It's about fishmongers who have fish stalls at some market pace. And then they interview them, because they have become... they have received good grades (from customers); everyone wants to go there because they have such good service, because they (the workers) are so happy. And then one of them says an expression, that when he wakes up in the morning, he asks himself "Should I have a bad day today, or should I have a good day today?" Because I think, related to what you asked about the mindset, that it's a lot about the mindset. Because they laugh and play, throwing fish between each other, like that. Things are what you make them to be. You can wake

up and have a headache and then feel bad or something, but then you can somehow decide “Well, should I walk around and be angry and bitter, or should I have a good day today?” It has become kind of a mantra for me, that I should have a good day.

A: So, it's about one's attitude toward the situation, how to deal with or handle the situation?

M: Yes.

The rationale behind this training program can be interpreted as an expression of management's ideological and economic incentives for and interests in optimizing the fit between employees and the organization. This may involve intentional attempts at managing the experience of meaning by influencing employee subjectivity (e.g., attitudes) (see, e.g., Bailey et al., 2017).

Similar to Max's views, Peter, 35, a subway train operator, expressed the following but without the potential managerial influence. Highlighting the value of the broader social functions of his work and conscious identification thereof through transcendence of the work situation, Peter asserted the following:

P: There are people who think that this is the world's most boring job, and so on. But that has to do with a variety of factors. Either they are young people who see this as only a step in their careers, that “I will not stay here”, or it is people who have a very strong social need and are unable to be alone. Or those who feel that “Now I have a route of three hours, oh how boring this is going to be”. They are not friends with themselves or comfortable with themselves in that way. So, it depends on how you work, how you experience it, if you can identify it (sources of meaningfulness) as, well, “But if I press this button, this happens, and it is meaningful”.

A: Yes, I understand.

P: Many people can experience it as monotonous, rather than thinking that now I am actually helping people.

A: You mean, like, that it (meaning) is connected to what you think and your attitude?

P: Yes.

The quotes above are indicative of a general trend in participant accounts across my sample. By staying attuned to certain actual or potential sources of meaning in work situations, one could affect one's overall mood and definition of meaning. By transcending the immediate work

situation and identifying certain less proximate sources of meaning, one could recognize for oneself that work was meaningful. What one thinks about the work situation and pays attention to thus matters for the experience of meaning. Since nobody else can do it for you, it is largely “up to you” (Karin, job coach/internship coordinator; Pontus, blaster and oddjobber) to be creative and responsible for rendering the work experience meaningful. This could be done by responding to it in thought and action and by being aware of one’s attitude toward and definition of the work situation and its actual and potential sources of meaning. In terms of attention, this response involves perspective shifting in and toward the work situation and potential sources of meaningfulness in it. Perspective shifting enables the widening of one’s attentive scope toward and definition of the work situation.

My interpretations above echo Bailey’s and Madden’s (2019) suggestion that “switching” can be a way in which to frame and counteract experiences of meaninglessness. As noted in the literature review chapter, this form of switching refers to employees’ positive or negative cognitive moves of connecting their work to broader contexts of significance and relevance (see also Lee, 2015). In the present study, through this mode of adapting, conforming, and modifying oneself at work through attunement toward and in the work situation, it became possible to experience work as meaningful even when external conditions for meaning construction were very limited in a very real sense. The participants who spoke of this indicated that they did so in deliberate ways. Such ways included modifying one’s needs and desires for meaning in life in general while at work and generally having a more open attitude toward interpreting even the most monotonous, repetitive, and boring work situations and work tasks as being potentially meaningful. Defining the characteristics of such constraining conditions could, for example, be sameness, lack of mental stimulation, heavily restricted physical movement, lack of opportunities for learning, and significantly limited opportunities for decision-making in how, when, and why to perform work in a certain manner.

An important sociological aspect of my abovementioned findings about the self at work is that a flexible mindset and creative attunement toward and in the work situation seemed often to have been imported by participants partly from the outside and developed over time. A general trend among the participants of the present study was that they used their prior work experiences from their past occupations and their current occupation as reference points for reflecting on their current work experiences. When

referring to their previous work experiences, the participants indicated that they had learned what to be attuned to at work to render the present work experience more meaningful/more tolerable, acceptable and doable. This temporal phenomenon resonates with Scott's (2019) suggestion that working life biographies and the narratives that people construct from them have a key influence on what people bring with them to work in terms of expectations and attitudes in and toward work situations. It also resonates with the phenomenological suggestion that the past is always already part of the present in terms of shaping and influencing individuals' overall dispositions, thoughts, and actions (Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Mannheim, 2009 [1949]; Schütz, 1967, 1945, 1943).

Conclusions – the Functionally Inauthentic Self at Work

The findings presented above in the first four subthemes suggest that a defining characteristic of the lived work experience is not truly being oneself while at work. At work, people may unconsciously or consciously have a somewhat pragmatic and instrumental attitude toward being at work and the roles they have to enter into and perform as employees. At work, it may be difficult to be true to oneself in relation to (a) work roles, (b) others, (c) work tasks, and (d) one's initial definition of and attunement toward the work situation. My interpretation of the participants' accounts of the general phenomenon of not being oneself at work suggests that it is necessary to conform significantly to work situations in terms of being flexible in both internal and external self-presentation, self-adaptation, and self-navigation. This may be practiced by employees by consciously or unconsciously adapting themselves to others, work situations, and in relation to what to expect from them in the first place in terms of sources of meaning and possibilities of being authentic. For some, the suspension of the self at work in terms of conforming, adapting and putting personal values and needs for meaning on hold while at work may even represent a precondition for rendering the general work experience less burdensome, tolerable, more acceptable and/or more meaningful. As expressed succinctly by Carina, who works as a special pedagogue, her work "becomes meaningful, but it only becomes meaningful if I'm in my role".

The central aspects highlighted in my findings about the self at work are temporality and working life biographies. For many of the participants, expectations and preferences of not being oneself at work and conforming/adapting to one's attitude in and toward work situations seemed to

have developed over time from their previous work experiences. In this sense, the accumulated work experiences related to the necessity of not being oneself at work have influenced their present work experience of meaning. Based on their biographically developed expectations about how one could and should behave at work, such an interpretation was thus something that the participants brought with them into the work situation partly based on the past and from “outside” of their present work experiences.

My findings thus far add to the existing suggestion that people’s working life biographies need to be taken into account when exploring the experience of meaning at work and in working life in a wider sense. The biographically evolved, socially acquired, and thus experientially generated and accumulated expectations, values, perceptions, and beliefs about work that people bring with them into the workplace influence what sources of meaning and purposes they may expect to find in and experience from work situations in the first place (see also Mercurio, 2019; Isaksen, 2000; Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999; Goldthorpe, 1971). My findings support the suggestion that people may have a biographically evolved perspective on what sources of meanings/lack of meanings one can expect to find in work in the first place. However, my findings also suggest that for some employees in both professional and manual occupations, less apparent sources of meaning and more positive moods may be brought into light and constructed in work situations. This may happen through conscious or unconscious changes in the general mindset in terms of definitions of what is perceived as meaningful and worth paying attention to in work situations.

Based on the findings above, I suggest that based on their past and current work experiences and interpretation of how to be and act as an employee, people may consciously or unconsciously not want to be themselves at work to begin with. For some, being authentic at work in relation to either others or work tasks may render working more difficult, both for interpersonal and practical reasons. People may value not being themselves at work because it makes the work experience easier and potentially more meaningful. Compared to life outside of work, to render the work experience more meaningful and/or tolerable and doable, people have to be actively or passively more attuned to other and often less proximate sources of meaning. Thus, for the employee, it may therefore become purposeful and worthwhile to not be oneself at work both out of necessity and from a functional perspective. This phenomenon of performing a bal-

ance act by navigating the self at work has implications for theoretical starting point assumptions in the meaning of work research about subjectivity and alienation and the relation of these concepts to the experience of meaning at work.

An important general observation regarding the self at work is that none of the participants indicated either verbally or emotionally that they had experienced any larger disappointments with not being able to be what I have chosen to call more authentic at work. This also included finding meanings in work that were connected more to one's personal desires for intrinsic meaningfulness in life in general. Being oneself at work and finding deeper meanings in work tasks or relations with others that resembled those desired, aimed for, and constructed needs outside of work seemed to not be expected as a particularly realistic or doable part of one's working life in the first place. A general sentiment indicated by participants across the sample was that this was just the way it was; i.e., not truly being true to oneself in terms of the desire for authenticity in tasks and relations was a commonsensical and expected part of working life. In phenomenological terms (see, e.g., Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Schütz, 1964, 1945, 1943), this can be interpreted as an expression of a natural attitude toward working life in general and selfhood at work. Employees' perceived necessity and common-sensical understanding of not being oneself at work can be interpreted as a form of natural attitude toward how to be and act as an employee. A recurring pattern in my interviews was the perception that since one could not truly have the same expectations for meaning at work as in life outside of work, work situations are not expected to contain sources of meaning that are of the same kind as the ones that can be found and/or constructed outside of work.

I suggest the following general interpretation of the self at work and its relation to the experience of meaning. First, in the general work experience, the existentialist ideal of the authentic self (see, e.g., Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Tiryakian, 1962) as a central starting point for creating and experiencing meaning in life by acting "authentically" in front of others and through action according to one's needs, values, and desires seems to be too idealistic. As noted in the theory chapters, from a power perspective, being at work can be viewed as entering into an economic/technological system of externally predetermined work roles and actions in which agency is restricted and determined by organizational needs that are manifested in technically and economically rooted conditions and regulations (Lysgaard, 1985). The findings presented above suggest that work experi-

ence also involves fundamental structural constraints of opportunities for being oneself at work in terms of work tasks and relations to other employees across the organizational hierarchy. This can be interpreted in Lysgaardian terms as an expression of how the human system at the level of selfhood becomes subordinated to the technological/economic system (ibid.). It is ultimately related to what Marx (1977 [1844]) referred to as self-estrangement and alienation, which he used interchangeably and suggested was a social and existential consequence of the inherently economically motivated organization and performance of human productive activities in capitalist societies.

However, my findings suggest that at work, being authentic may become associated with risks of diverging from perceived or actual organizational requirements of how to behave at work. Being true to oneself at work may therefore not be desired by the employee. Authenticity may become a problem and thus be intentionally or unconsciously avoided. In the employee role, the self becomes suspended and put on temporary hold for pragmatic, psychological, and organizationally power-asymmetrical reasons. This can be interpreted as a form of consciously or unconsciously desired self-alienation from the work environment. This resonates with Ciulla's (2000) critique of Mills's (1956) conception of alienation and the destruction of supposedly more authentic forms of subjectivity in work and life in a wider sense among white-collar employees in North America:

What Mills failed to notice is that alienation can be either the problem or the solution. The separation of work and life that he disparages might be the healthiest response to work in the modern organizations that he describes. (Ciulla, 2000: 110)

Second, my interpretations suggest the following: employees' attitudes toward and practice of withholding the self at work in relation to aspects such as oneself (e.g., what one values), others, and work tasks may represent a precondition for the experience of meaning and/or rendering working in general a more tolerable and doable experience and activity. This is not to be interpreted as merely a psychological strategy that is practiced and developed privately in the isolated consciousness of atomized individual employees. Rather, my findings indicate that it is also an organizationally constructed phenomenon that may take on an institutional character that is expressed in relation to work roles, others, work tasks, and what kind of mindset employees have toward the work situation in terms of locating sources of meaning. This phenomenon can be viewed as organiza-

tionally constructed and institutionalized since it becomes and is connected to people's biographically experienced and internalized commonsensical conceptions of actual or perceived role requirements and obligations of being an employee. In this sense, one could argue that over time and in relation to socialization into working life, people learn to not fully be themselves at work.

As indicated above, when some participants spoke about not wanting to work with something that was related to their passions in life since they risked that passion becoming instrumentalized and drained of authenticity, being oneself at work may even render the work situation less tolerable and less meaningful. Given these indications across different ages and occupations in my sample, the conscious/unconscious suspension of the self at work in terms of putting one's desires, needs, wants, and interests aside can be interpreted as a defining characteristic of perceptions of how to behave at work. In the sociology of work literature, an authentic connection between the self and work in terms of values, tasks, and others is conceptualized as a key source of meaningfulness construction/lack of meaningfulness in work situations and a working life in a wider sense. Conversely, incongruency between the self and the activity and outcomes of wage labor is suggested to represent a key source of alienation and lack of meaningfulness (Alfonsson, 2020; Marx, 1977 [1844]; Blauner, 1964; Mills, 1956). In the work-based stream of literature, it is suggested that if a person is given the opportunity to bring her or his whole self or central parts of that self to work, in terms of expressing and acting out personal needs, strivings, values, and desires in work, then she or he will be more likely to experience working as meaningful (Scott, 2019; Bailey & Maden, 2017; Bailey et al., 2017; Steger, 2017; Rosso, et al. 2010).

The self-adaptation and self-discipline expressed in the form of putting the self on hold for different unconscious/conscious and often pragmatic reasons while at work, as suggested in my analysis, indicates a more performative and fluid form of employee subjectivity. For example, a self that is more socially and contextually contingent, where experiences of both meaningfulness and meaninglessness may occur simultaneously during the same workday (see, e.g., Harding, 2019), or a self that is consciously or unconsciously contextually sensitive and more in a constant mode of conscious or unconscious adaptation and conformism than the one that is typically described in the present meaning of work theories. From this perspective, when entering the workplace, the self becomes partly organizationally and individually adaptable in an ongoing and sometimes em-

ployee-wise intentional sense, according to varying work situations with different conditions for meaning construction. This form of ongoing relation between the self and the work situation involves the employee's expectations toward, interpretation of and attitude toward what is needed to render working more worthwhile, meaningful and/or tolerable. Being inauthentic at work may also become a safety net for the frictions and consequences that being authentic in the workplace may produce. As noted above, inauthenticity may also influence the experience of meaning in work in a positive sense. In this sense, being inauthentic at work can be seen as a form of protection against the technological/economic system's infiltration of the lifeworld and its constraint of opportunities for experiencing meaningfulness at work (see, e.g., Lysgaard, 1985).

My conceptual suggestion is to call the general phenomenon of suspending the self at work that is identified in the present study an expression of functional inauthenticity. In work situations, for the employee, it may not be enjoyable to be inauthentic but still be perceived as necessary and experienced as functional (work becomes more meaningful and/or doable and tolerable). Based on an employee's socialization into and experiences of working life, she or he may enter the workplace with a commonsensical attitude toward how one can and should behave at work. This form of conscious or unconscious inauthenticity may also become functional for the organization as a whole. Expressed in Lysgaardian (1985) terms, such inauthenticity benefits both the technological/economic system and the human system. In terms of individuals' different needs and interests, such inauthenticity may reduce the friction between the employee and the organization. A consequence of this understanding of the self at work is that to understand and explore the experience of meaning in work settings, there is a need to distinguish between the self outside of work and the self in work situations.

Others at Work - a Double-Edged Source of Meaning

Another finding of the present study is that others at work may represent sources of both interpersonal meaninglessness and meaningfulness. Compared to the latter, the former is a less discussed topic in existing sociology and the meaning of work debates.

For most of the participants, whether one liked it or not, being at work meant being with others (e.g., colleagues and customers or service receivers). At this externally imposed interpersonal level, work situations may often involve interacting with people with whom one does not have or

wants to have a relationship outside the formal work role and immediate organizational context (e.g., coworkers and clients). From this perspective and perhaps unsurprisingly since it has also been found and suggested in much previous research, interacting with others at work is neither always meaningful nor always meaningless (see, e.g., Harding, 2019; Mercurio, 2019; Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Gebebe 2003; Lysgaard, 1985; Blauner, 1964). As indicated in previous research and partly above under my description of functional inauthenticity, a general theme focused on by numerous of participants across occupations and employment statuses was that in terms of representing sources of meaning, the presence of and interaction with others at work was experienced as a double-edged source of meaning.

For those participants who experienced low levels of meaning while being in concrete work situations in which they were performing work tasks, their accounts suggested that it may become meaningful to go to work not because of the work tasks and their goals but rather because going to and being at work becomes meaningful due to of the presence and recognition of others with whom one has formed relationships that are experienced as intrinsically meaningful. From this perspective, the sense of belonging, the company of, and the solidarity with others at work with which participants had things in common other than being an employee represented an opportunity to form reciprocal relations of friendship and interpersonal recognition of varying levels of depth. This observation highlights Laser and Karlsson's (2021) suggestion that intersubjective recognition is a core component of meaningful work experiences (see also Honneth, 1995). It also echoes Lysgaard's (1985) observation that solidarity with other employees may represent a source of meaning and a form of protection against the instrumental rationality of the inexorable and insatiable needs of the technological/economic system (see also Axelsson, Karlsson & Skorstad, 2019). These types of work relations with others, which are characterized by mutual care and interpersonal recognition, may be specifically valued because they take the form of long-term informal and work-based friendships and sources of interpersonal recognition that are ongoing and stable over time.

From a temporal perspective, participants across the total sample indicated that the presence of significant others at work may become a reason for looking forward to going to work, regardless of experiences of mental and physical constraints and meaninglessness in concrete work situations and work tasks. From this temporal perspective on forward-looking and

interpersonal sources of meaning, the participants' accounts indicated that interpersonal meanings derived from such relations with others may be constructed through engaging in different practices in the workplace that are not necessarily related to actual work tasks. Although teamwork and joint problem solving were highlighted by many participants as potentially meaningful ends in work because such approaches may involve working together toward a common goal that is experienced and recognized jointly and individually as societally useful, meaningfulness construction may also occur by engaging in nonwork practices with others at work.

Examples of nonwork-related intersubjective practices at work that were indicated as being valued across occupations and employment statuses by numerous participants were humor, everyday chatting about life in general, bantering, and forms of play (e.g., machine operators throwing snowballs at each other during periods of empty labor). These informal forms of relationships with others at work do not necessarily need to be of any deeper kind in terms of connecting with others at a deeper personal and/or private level. Rather, the opportunity for experiences of meaningfulness generated through the presence of others and the platform that this generates for engaging in joint nonwork practices while at work may become valued as an end in itself.

Sometimes, relationships with others at work may provide a form of distraction from concrete work activities, especially monotonous and boring ones. In such instances, these friendships and the related sense of community and solidarity with others at work may become significantly valuable and function as a safety net. Such a safety net may have the effect of distracting and distracting oneself from a work situation that is otherwise experienced as lacking intrinsic meaningfulness or exceedingly boring because of its monotonous, repetitive, and thus rigidly regulated and predictable character. Katrin, 64, who works as a job coach/internship coordinator, emphasized the importance and significance of interacting with others in both shallow and deeper ways, especially when work situations are characterized by what Paulsen (2014) refers to as empty labor:

K: I want some tempo. I do not want dead time. Well, of course there are times when I have some time left over, where I can think about and plan how to do things, but no, I want things to keep moving. I feel better then.

A: I understand. But when you sit down there in the canteen chatting (referring to her previous mention of the importance of having others to talk to at work when it is boring), what are you talking about then?

K: Well, they may talk about things they have done, or they may tell some funny old story about when they were out and did some work out by the canal, or something like that.

A: Yes, general chatter?

K: General chatter, yes, everyone needs it.

A: Yeah.

K: Or we can talk about how someone is feeling.

A: Yes?

K: Yes. It was like someone said here a while ago, he had tried to kill himself several times because he has abused (drugs). They had to kick start his heart a few times (mild laughter).

A: Oh really? Did you get into the professional role a bit then or... ?

K: No, then we sit like you and I sit now, then we sit down in the dining room, and we tell each other things.

A: Okay, it gets a bit personal?

K: Yes yes, no no, it gets personal, I do not go into any professional role, no, not then, no.

Similar accounts of the positive importance, value, and significance of others at work and socializing with them informally were highlighted by participants across the total sample. When referring to her previous job as a cleaner at a hospital, Gertrud, 67, a recently retired former dentist/clinic manager, emphasized the importance and value of significant others at work. Others at work and the sense of belonging and solidarity with them were especially important when the work experience is perceived to have detrimental existential consequences:

G: We scrubbed from floor to ceiling. It was nice with the coworkers there, but the work was soul destroying. Then, I thought that I could do anything (in terms of work), but not this for the rest of my life.

A: How long were you there for?

G: Well, I was probably there for about nine months.

A: Okay. But you said you had good coworkers and such?

G: Yes, I did.

A: And it was this that made you... (participant interrupts question)?

G: That I could stand it.

On the other hand, the presence of others and the compelled interaction such a presence may require in both formal and informal work situations may have a draining effect on the work experience of meaning. Interaction with others at work may not be valued. Some employees may even want to wholly avoid it. Some participants indicated that interpersonally originating experiences of lack of meaningfulness may become apparent when one feels compelled to interact with others at work (e.g., coworkers or clients) whom, for various reasons, one would rather not interact with (e.g., because one had little or nothing in common with them besides working in the same organization).

Some participants asserted explicitly that they did not value interacting with others at work or working together toward some supposedly shared goal. Sometimes this goal did not make sense in relation to the core purpose of the job or even the organization as a whole. Interaction with others at work, especially in the form of same-level colleagues, could become a source of pointlessness, boredom, and dread. Echoing Schütz's (2011; 1945) suggestion that social life is composed of different finite provinces of meaning and relevance systems that may be externally imposed, compelled interaction with others at work can be experienced as an obstacle for getting the actual work done. From this perspective, concrete solitary work activities may be experienced by employees as more relevant and meaningful and preferred before interacting with others. From this perspective, interacting with others (e.g., during formal meetings or coffee breaks) was framed by some participants as a potential element of unwanted distraction. Such interaction took time away from other things that these participants valued as more important and worthwhile at work, such as focusing on work tasks, getting things done, or other things.

Additionally, some participants expressed that interaction with others may be experienced merely as a form of keeping up with appearances. In such instances, they spoke of not valuing aspects such as small talk and being pseudopersonal with others during joint breaks and other more informal occasions. Such everyday work situations, which Heidegger (2013: 194-195) suggested are generally characterized by conformist and empty talk, were indicated by some participants as draining, not mattering, irrelevant, and unnecessary.

Some participants described interpersonal structures of interacting with others at work as if they had taken on a standardized institutional collec-

tive character. For example, Loa, a committee secretary, who tended not to view interaction with others as a source of meaning at work, highlighted this phenomenon. Loa expressed that the pressure from peers to participate in joint activities (e.g., fika) and the risk involved of causing interpersonal friction in the workplace if one did not participate was not something that he did not see much value in:

A: And do you have a shared coffee room?

L: Yes, there is a common coffee room for the whole building. Yes, it is very structured.

A: Okay, even there? (referring to the orderly nature of his work, which Loa previously described as very structured in terms of following bureaucratically standardized procedures and processes)

L: Well, it's not the case that there is some... There is a policy about it somewhere, but it is often that people show up at 9:30 and 14:30. Then, it varies a bit how many people are involved in the coffee break. But there has still been, so to speak, an implicit culture where people who choose to prioritize tasks clearly do not... Well, there is a kind of social pressure in the coffee situation.

A: Okay. One is expected to (participant interrupts question)?

L: I think it's up to everyone. I'm pragmatic about that. I do not think you are at work to have fun or how to put it (laughs). You are there to perform certain tasks, then it's of course good if you have fun in the meantime, but that is not why....

A: I understand. You need to be professional?

L: Yes, exactly.

In a similar way but without the focus on professionalism, Jarmo, a machine operator in the plastic industry, referred to coffee breaks. Highlighting that what people care about may be an indication of what they find meaningful/not meaningful (see, e.g., Graeber, 2018; Heidegger, 2013 [1927]), Jarmo spoke about not caring about or valuing small talk in groups, idle chatter, and other forms of shallow informal interactions that took place during such interactions.

J: I do not think they have much to do in their spare time (referring to some of his colleagues). Because, like, you notice that some who sit there at the table, maybe it's just me being antisocial (laughs), no, but when people sit in the coffee room, they always chatter on about what has happened and

what they have done and stuff like that. But I do not care about those kinds of things.

A: In their free time or what?

J: Yes, what they have done after they got off work, like, gossip at work about who has said what and stuff like that. No, I am not interested in that kind of stuff either.

A: Like small talk and such things?

J: Yeah. That's never been my strong side.

Furthermore, for Pontus, a blaster and odd jobber at a local painting firm, others at work (both leaders and same-level colleagues) had often been a source of discomfort and lack of meaningful interaction throughout his working life. Pontus' experiences resonate with Lysgaard's (1985) empirical observation that collectively sanctioned bullying and ostracism among employees in or outside of group arrangements at work may become a recurring phenomenon:

P: But I have had jobs where I have sat on my bed and like... I have gotten up an hour earlier just to come up with symptoms, so that I do not have to go there (to work), because I feel so bad and anxious about it.

A: Over having to do it (work)?

P: Yes, because I do not want to be there. But then again, it has mostly been because of colleagues.

A: So, it has been about social situations then, in a particular way in relation to colleagues and stuff like that?

P: Yes, I guess you could call it adult bullying (laughs briefly and quietly).

A: Okay.

P: Yeah, it has happened. Then, there have also been very strange managers.

A: Okay, so it has not been about the actual work tasks?

P: No. I think I have never had a job where I have hated the tasks, it has mostly been the people.

Pontus further noted that in the past, he had tried to interact with others at work in what he personally considered a more meaningful, and in my interpretation, more authentic way, but that such attempts were met with little or no recognition from others. One example was making jokes

or attempting to talk about things he was interested in; such attempts were responded to by others with indifference and little or no recognition.

In a similar manner to the aforementioned accounts, Peter, a subway train operator, indicated that he valued not having to interact with others at work to any larger extent. It was often experienced as socially compelled, artificial (inauthentic), and emotionally draining:

A: Would you have missed anything from your job if you had left?

P: That is actually an aspect that makes me not try to get out of here because I do not think I would be able to find a job with the space I need as a person. Then, there is also the fact that the salary is so good that you get a very comfortable life from it, especially since I have no loans. But most jobs require some form of interaction for the most part, and I feel that if I can avoid it, I am happy to do so, because it is too big a compromise for me, because it takes too much from me - energy and time that I don't get to be myself.

(---)

P: Other things that I dislike, is that the lunchrooms, or the rest rooms, there are people there who have greater social needs than others. In addition, it can easily become a sound level that tires you out. It is like, getting up at four in the morning, and then you sit there and have half an hour (for break), and then, this is our dedicated space for recovery, and then there are people who may not necessarily respect that you want to be at peace or that everyone may not be comfortable with such a noise level at eight in the morning.

A: Therefore, people are very different there, in how they express themselves and what needs they have?

P: Exact.

Karl the truck driver also referred to interaction with others in work situations in a way that indicated that he did not always experience it as particularly meaningful:

A: But is it a lot of cheating and such (referring to cheating with laws and regulations, which Karl had spoken about earlier)?

K: Yes, and then the people you work with are totally stupid in the head.

(...)

A: But are there a lot of... are there certain kinds of people who gravitate toward the industry?

K: Yes, either you are interested in cars and motors, people are interested in machinery, or they are criminals. Kind of (laughs).

A: Okay.

(---)

K: However, there are a lot of rotten eggs in the industry as well; I guess I should not say anything about that.

A: You need to deal with those people?

K: I am completely convinced that 70-80 percent of all truck drivers are racists.

A: Oh?

K: Yeah it is... Fuuuuck man (laughs).

The interview accounts above about interpersonal sources of meaning in work situations, highlight that across occupations, interaction with others at work may be valued or not valued by employees. According to my interpretation, some interpersonal work situations facilitate meaningful relationships at work. At other times, employees experience interaction with others (e.g. colleagues) as forced, shallow, and inauthentic, and thus a source of meaninglessness.

Conclusions - Others at Work: a Double-Edged Source of Meaning

For employees in manual and professional occupations, others at work in the form of colleagues or others (e.g., customers and managers) may represent a double-edged source of meaning at work. Colleagues and friendship and solidarity with them at work may be valued by individual employees. My interpretation is that such interaction may act as a compensatory source of meaning and protection against an otherwise instrumentally rational work situation. Others at work may be valued by employees to the extent that it is a central reason why their work experience becomes meaningful at all. Conversely, having to spend time and socializing with people whom one has little in common with, in addition to the work role and being in the same workplace, may not be valued by employees. Individual employees' dispositions in terms of interests, values, and preferences may clash with others' dispositions. My interpretation is that in work situations, such interaction may be experienced by the employee as forced, inauthentic, distracting, and therefore lacking value and thus meaning.

At a more abstract level, in social phenomenological terms, the experience of what I from this point forward chose to call interpersonal meaningfulness at work can be interpreted as originating from the different relevance systems and finite provinces of meaning employees are embedded in and draw on in everyday life when making sense of and evaluating their experiences. There may be limited reciprocity between provinces of meaning and their constitutive relevance systems. Here, I am drawing on the concepts of relevance systems and finite provinces of meaning as they are explicated by Schütz, where examples of finite provinces of meaning are the world of work and family life (Schütz, 1967; 1945).

At work, people may realize that in addition to their work roles and sharing the same organizational context, they may have little in common with other employees in terms of what they share and think and feel is relevant, of value, and therefore meaningful/meaningless in life in a wider sense or life outside of work. Although they share the same finite province of meaning of the work context and its (imposed) relevance systems, they may not share the same finite provinces of meaning and relevance systems outside of work (e.g., family activities and leisure interests). They may therefore have significantly different biographies, accumulated experiences, horizons of understanding, and expectations in terms of what is interpreted as relevant, significant, and valuable in the work situation and life in a wider sense. The participants' accounts indicated that this lack of common ground and reciprocity between networks of relevance in life in a wider sense may become apparent when interacting with others and realizing how different they are from oneself in terms of interests, preferences, and values.

Finally, it is important to note that none of the participants who indicated that interaction with others could be a source of meaningfulness generalized such experiences to all interactions with others. As noted above and suggested empirically and theoretically by other meanings of work scholars, a patterned regularity in the participants' accounts of their work experiences was that the lived experience of others at work was a double-edged source. As suggested by Wrzesniewski, Dutton, and Gebebe (2003: 95) in their theory of interpersonal sources of meaning at work, "others are key contributors to the process through which work meaning is created or destroyed". Thus, as noted further by the same authors, in the work experience, "the creation, alteration, and destruction of meaning at work occur in concert with others on a daily basis" (ibid.: 127; see also Mercurio, 2019; Lysgaard, 1985; Blauner, 1964).

When Employees' and Employers' Realities Collide

I now proceed to highlight what I view as an organizational phenomenon that may affect the experience of meaning in work situations in similar ways across a wide variety of work situations, both in professional and manually oriented occupations. A recurring theme highlighted by participants across the total sample was that their experiences of situational meaninglessness were connected to conflicting understandings and expectations of how and why to perform work in certain manners. In their work experiences, there was often a dissonance and discrepancy between management representatives' and their own understandings of the concrete work situation. In theoretical terms, this microlevel phenomenon at the point of the lived work experience highlights that the one-sided logic and needs of the technical/economic system may collide with the many-sided logic and needs of the human system in the organization (Axelsson, Karlsson & Skorstad, 2020; Skorstad, Axelsson & Karlsson, 2019; Lysgaard, 1984). In the present study, this antagonistic relationship was found to be related to employees' and their perception of managers' conceptions of when, how, and why to perform work in a certain manner (e.g., productive and efficient).

The participants' accounts indicated that from the employee's perspective, managers may care more about and therefore focus more on one-sided *forms* of work than its many-sided *content* and practicalities in the concrete work situation as it is experienced by subordinates. In this sense, the concept of care and its relation to work experiences and general experiences of meaning is highlighted (see e.g. Graeber, 2018; Heidegger, 2013 [1927]). Employees may often perceive and think that managers do not understand the concrete contents of their everyday work situations and what is realistic to achieve in such situations work-wise. My findings suggest that employees may very well care about doing a good job but may experience a concrete work situation and perceive that they are hindered from doing a good job because of management's lack of nuanced understandings in terms of the many-sided and fluid aspects of their work situation and what is relevant to focus on in it. From the employee's perspective, managers' conception of the form of work may be experienced as significantly divorced from their practical involvement with and execution of work in concrete work situations. For the employee, this cognitive separation and practical distance may lead to a loss of the core purpose of the actual work tasks and the organization's mission, which in turn may lead to experiences of meaninglessness. As suggested by Blauner (1964: 22), in

such work situations, “the employee may lack understanding of the coordinated activity and a sense of purpose in his work”. Numerous participants’ accounts of their perceptions of a gap between management’s understandings and expectations and their own indicate that in the work situation, this gap may be experienced as a source of meaninglessness. The participants’ accounts indicated that this source is embedded in the organizational structure as such.

When the participants talked about their experiences and perceptions of conflicting and colliding understandings and expectations of the work situation between themselves and managers, they typically also indicated that the lack of self-determination and thus responsibility for exercising judgement in work that became apparent in such situations was a key factor in generating experiences of meaninglessness at work. In sum, the participants’ accounts suggested that the construction of experiences of situational meaninglessness in work situations may stem from conflicting and interfering understandings, expectations, and interests in the organization of how to produce organizationally and situationally desirable work outcomes in the present and future.

When participants talked about their experiences of such work situations, they often spoke in a critical way about situations that generated a sense of confusion, powerlessness, frustration, indignation, and/or absurdity. However, because of their seemingly Kafkaesque character, some participants were also sometimes able to keep a distance from and laugh at such work situations. This was expressed in the notion that they were compelled to perform work that they perceived as pointless and knew was likely to be counterproductive for reaching organizational goals. Loa, a 35-year-old committee secretary in a medium-sized municipality office, highlighted such work situations and their recurring character. He emphasized the meaninglessness of particular bureaucratic routines that were externally imposed and micromanaged:

A: Is there any part of the job that you think is pointless, like something that you don't see the purpose of, that does not serve any function?

L: Well... (looks down, laughs and chuckles a bit) yes. Like, when you apply a project methodology. It's just like, when you apply it to something that is really too simple (simple as in not in need of having a complex procedural framework added to it). It just adds a lot of bureaucratic routines that have no other function than to do them for the sake of it. It's completely meaningless.

A: What can that be like then? Is it like, now we have a project and now we are going to do it this way?

L: Yes, then you have to follow a specific methodology, and it is completely useless because... Or, if it is a smaller assignment and you have to follow a project methodology, it is just unnecessary administration that leads to nothing, but just takes more time. It's meaningless.

Loa further described the imposed and one-sided nature of such formally prescribed work procedures, and that they could actually make things worse:

A: But do you have to use it?

L: Yes. In many cases. If it is considered (by management) that it should be done based on that methodology, then it should be done so, regardless. (...) In general, it is very easy to build up bureaucracies and detailed control around things, and that good intentions can result in the opposite. You build structures that are intended to solve a problem, and then it solves the problem but creates ten new problems. This is often the case.

Similarly, Gertrud, a 67-year-old recently retired dentist and former dentist clinic manager, indicated that top-down rationalization and standardization of time and work practices was a source of lack of meaning in work situations. As noted in the theory chapter, for leaders, because of the necessity to follow the logic and rules of an economically motivated instrumental rationality, it is relevant to care about and organizing work according to economically sustainable and profitable reasons that are rooted in an inexorable and insatiable cost–benefit logic (Axelsson, Karlsson & Skorstad, 2021; Lysgaard, 1985). My interpretation is that Gertrud connected her perception of the gap between managerial and subordinate interests and understandings of work specifically to macropolitical decisions and economic incentives in the organization of facilitating productivity and efficiency through optimal use of time. In Gertrud's (and other participants') work experience, being squeezed by economically and politically motivated practical and temporal regulations and standards sometimes had the opposite effect than intended in concrete work situations:

A: Now, here comes a fairly direct question: What was the worst thing about the job?

G: The financial pressure, quite frankly. It was always a stressful moment. It meant that you had to, as it were, try to do things well, but still quickly. And that does not always go well together. And you always had that whip

over you (the whip of efficiency and productivity that was ultimately grounded in economic pressure), especially as a clinic manager. Then, you had to make everyone else work faster as well. There is a limit to when that is no longer possible.

In terms of practical effects on work conditions, Gertrud highlighted the one-sided nature of the economic pressure imposed from above and its constraining influence on agency:

G: So, it was priority: economy, economy, economy. And we had, as it were, very tight frames as well, because child dental care, for example, we got paid per patient. (...) It meant that you only got a certain amount of time with them (patients); otherwise, it simply did not work out (economically). Same with adults too. It was the only tax financing we had; it was like this with child dental care from the beginning. Then, we also got something called necessary dental care, and it was for elderly individuals, in elderly homes and so on, that was also tax money. But otherwise, we had to work for rents, salaries, materials, equipment, everything.

A: I understand. So, the financial aspect made its mark on the job?

G: Yes, simultaneously the politicians decided what we should do. You have to do this, and you have to do this, and if you do not do that, you will not get any money.

A: Okay, so it's rooted in politics?

G: Yes, you are squeezed from two directions, you could say.

A: I understand. Were there times when you experienced something at work as meaningless, like a task or something else at work? It is a strong word, meaningless, but that it served no purpose? (Here, my placement and wording of this question is intentionally leading. From my perspective, it was relevant to ask this question in relation to Gertrud's prior assertions because they indicated experiences of meaninglessness).

G: Yes, well, it would be the economy thing (laughs), but you could not do much about it, because it was something real. But for the job as such, it was rather counterproductive. It was just hard.

In many of the participants' accounts of their work experiences, which shed light on the suggestion that managerial rhetoric and discourse may often fail to represent and be applicable to employees' experienced practical realities, top-down enforced principles and rules for work often did not make sense when applied to real work situations (see, e.g., Bailey et al., 2017; Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Weick, 1995; Bauman, 1991). In reality,

work situations were often unpredictable, had unintended consequences, and therefore did not fit well into the tight regulatory and standardized action scripts imposed from above. They required creative and improvised action to respond to the spontaneously emerged elements of the work situation.

The experienced and perceived gap between management's understanding, interests, planning, and control of how and why to perform work in a certain manner and the concretely lived work situation of the employee was further highlighted by Karl, 32, a truck driver. Similar to other participants across the total sample, he expressed critiques toward and great frustration with having to adhere to economically motivated bureaucratic principles and being forced to do certain things in a certain dogmatic standardized manner in the work situation. Similar to other participants, such requirements were perceived as hindering one from doing a good job, which one was committed to from the start. Karl specifically highlighted his experience of pointlessness and unreasonableness in such work situations by connecting top-down rhetoric and dictates regarding strict routines, rules, and time management with unpredictable events that would emerge spontaneously in concrete work situations:

K: We (the truck drivers) know how it looks (referring to the concrete daily reality of the work situation and what happens in it); we know how things work. And it's not like our managers think "Well, let's just talk a bit, so then suddenly there's no overtime"; they understand that there is overtime, they're just trying to diminish it a bit, and we're (Karl and his colleague) sitting there (in meetings) saying "We can tell you exactly what you should do in order to make this work: stop the trucks for one or two days a month, that's the only way to do it". (...) We get fined for driving overtime or working more than six hours or driving without a break. Or we drive 4:35 instead of 4:30 because we are not allowed to drive longer than 4:30. It's like this: "You might want to plan your day better".

Karl further highlighted that such one-sided top-down prescriptions for how to plan and perform work did not really work out in practice in concrete work situations:

Well yeah, I can sit on Monday morning and write (a plan) on a piece of paper exactly how my day will go. Then, I go outside the gate and everything stops (because something unforeseen has happened). Then, my day has been ruined. (...) I drive a truck. It does not work that way. I can arrive at a place, it could be someone who has gone off the road, it could be a red light that's stuck, maybe there is a queue somewhere where I have to load,

maybe there is a queue somewhere where I have to unload, maybe I get a flat tire. How should I be able to plan things like this? I can't solve the future. So, it's all about me having to solve it as it happens. Okay, now there's a traffic queue here. Break. Then, you have to stand here for 15 minutes of your break in the middle of the E4 (highway).

Other participants spoke of similar negative work experiences of managerial top-down imposing of rules, laws, and standardized procedures to the concrete work situation to optimize time use and facilitate efficiency and productivity. Consequences of this phenomenon, as indicated in the participants' accounts, were a sense of contradiction, dissonance, arbitrariness, ambiguity, confusion, pointlessness, and frustration in the concrete work situation. On this note, Alvesson and Spicer suggested the following:

By acknowledging dissonance, members may become increasingly disappointed about the distance between the rhetorical pronouncements of the organization and actual activities. This can lead to cynicism and alienation, decreased motivation, and a highly limited sense of commitment to the organization (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012: 1210)

It is important to emphasize that during the interview, many of the study participants were not passive but explicitly critical of some management practices of planning and interference with their work. Such work situations were a recurring concern for them in their daily work experiences. The participants asserted critiques in the interviews, especially when they talked about management representatives' lack of understanding of the concrete work situation and what was realistic and useful to do and achieve in it. For example, in Karl's and his colleague's case, whom Karl referred to during the interview as employees who do the actual concrete job, they have a practical understanding of "how it looks" and "how things work" in the daily reality of actual work situations on the ground.

According to Karl and other participants' accounts of their perceptions and experiences, the imposition of organizationally rational rules, laws, procedures, and conceptions of how to solve organizational problems may not ultimately lead to rational outcomes for the employer's account. Rather, numerous participants reported similar situations that were perceived to cause more problems and generated a working situation that was experienced as irrational, lacking purpose, and not making sense in relation to working in a productive efficient way to reach organizational goals (for similar findings but in relation to empty labor, see Paulsen, 2014).

An additional example from the interviews can be found in the accounts of Yngwie, a 57-year-old college teacher. Yngwie's particular accounts resonate with Nordegren et al.'s study (2022). The authors concluded that teachers' and principals' had diverging perceptions of what is achievable and realistic to achieve in the work situation in terms of planning and time use. Yngwie highlighted that being compelled to adhere to strict bureaucratic procedures and box-ticking practices when constructing educational material and evaluating students' performances is something that could lead to detrimental effects on student learning and experiences of meaning for himself and students. Work, planning thereof, and learning can become too instrumentalized and formalized. This has a detrimental influence on the experience of meaningfulness in work and the essence of what made it so, both in relation to his own work situation and for the students in terms of the quality of their education:

Y: So, if we ignore the fact that I realize certain realities (in the job) (laughs), grades are something that I think are useless in a way. Because there is a focus on the wrong things, it turns into a hunt (referring to students chasing good grades instead of experiencing learning as an end in itself and something that sticks in the mind). As I said, the reality is that you have to have some kind of selection system, I understand that, but for me grades are strange. I would like to avoid grades and just work instead, and try to progress, like... So that they (the students) learn things. I think you would get a different kind of interest from them then, if it (grades) were not a thing, that I have to be this or that... Sure, some (students) might fall out (from his idea of dropping the grades from the education) because they are very focused on "I am going to become a doctor" or something. But I still think somehow that you would get a better quality of knowledge. Because then they have to ask themselves, why do I have to learn this?

A: The "why" question, what is the point of it?

Y: Yes, what's the point of it.

In response to the same question, Yngwie further described his work experiences and perceptions of the grade system as one-sided and inflexible in terms of primarily promoting instrumental forms of learning for the moment:

Because it's just like, yeah well, if you start getting high grades on the tests and they want their grade, and then if I were to ask them three weeks later (about what they had learned), then it's just "eh, huh?" (to illustrate that students forget what they learn because they are just learning for temporary

instrumental reasons to get a grade). I think it's a bit of a shame. Then, there are those (students) who will always manage this system, they both get high marks and remember, they have learned a lot. But I think it's a bit negative (the chase for grades), which again, is my subjective experience (laughs).

Yngwie's accounts highlight the general theme in the participants' accounts that work tasks and their outcomes are at risk of being experienced as unreasonable or outright stupid, and not making sense in relation to performing good work. Such tasks may be perceived as lacking purpose and a sense of worthwhile direction in relation to the employees' experience-based and practical know-how understanding of their work and its outcomes. On this note, by referring to functional stupidity, Alvesson and Spicer suggested that there is often

a stark clash between the official version of events and the lived realities. For individuals, functional stupidity turns from a benefit into a bane when it reduces autonomy, narrows the range of choices or becomes a source of dissatisfaction. It may also throw doubt on the meaning and purposes of the individual's working life. (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016: 87)

When compelled to perform and confronted with work tasks and goal requirements that do not make sense according to employees' experience-based preferences, everyday understanding, knowhow and information about how to work in an efficient and meaningful way, critical questions of the purpose and meaning of particular work tasks and their outcomes arise. Such critical questions, however, often remain unanswered. The participants asserted that they have to carry on with work. Many participants indicated that although they felt that they knew how to perform work in a more purposeful manner, they had to adapt, conform to, and accept work situations that made little sense and were experienced as lacking meaning.

The experience of a disconnect and discrepancy between one's own and leaders' understanding and expectations of how and why to perform work in a certain manner in order to do it meaningfully was specifically salient in an interview with Simone, 62, a recently retired project leader and investigator at a public authority. In a manner very similar to other participants' (e.g., student/career counselor, special pedagogue, employment officer), Simone connected her experiences of a lack of meaningfulness in work and its relation to a gap between managerial and subordinate understandings to organizational changes. Echoing Frankl's (2000; 1959) em-

phasis on sense of direction, coherence, goal orientation, and a valued purpose as preconditions and key components for the experience of meaning, Simone emphasized a sense of pointlessness, lack of direction and lack of recognition in what she did at work:

S: I think that we lacked goals. Something that was missing was a sense of where we were going with the organization. They (management) went in with detailed controls, they went in to edit documents more, to guard some kind of output that was not allowed to be this or that way. The work was more controlled by its forms than its content. And I have a very (emphasizes “very” distinctly by raising her voice) hard time with that, when it becomes more important that you comply. (...) We would write knowledge bases, which we were supposed to reach out to municipalities and regions with. And when it was supposed be so carefully written and smeared and free from values that it did not say anything, then I felt that we did not contribute anything. And that was also what we were told - that we did not contribute anything. They no longer looked at our reports because there was almost nothing to retrieve from them. I feel that this is something that I had a very hard time with, it felt like a waste of time, that is, you... well the hours just went by somehow. It was more important to produce as neutral materials as possible (laughs briefly). In such instances, I react.

Several participants framed their accounts of work experiences and perceptions of a lack of meaning in work in similar ways. This was done from the perspective of where previous sources of meaning in work were eroded and replaced by top-down enforced novel structures of how and why to perform work in a certain manner. In this sense, certain aspects of top-down organizational change were associated with destruction and loss of meaningfulness in work. Previous work structures and sources of meaning were eroded and replaced by novel structures and practices for organizing and performing work. Such changes may not make sense to the employee in her/his lived experiences of concrete work situations. For these participants, work became more technical and micro-managed and was experienced as increasingly lacking connection to shared goals and core purposes within the organization. In Lysgaardian terms, the technical/economic system invaded the original work experience (Axelsson, Karlsson and Skorstad, 2020; Lysgaard, 1985). Work became more technical, formalized and abstract in terms of not being grounded in and connected to tangible purposeful actions and outcomes. The work situation became characterized by an increased focus on details in both actions and outcomes. This also involved more elements of fragmentation and quantification in

terms of quality measurement and control. The essential characteristics that contributed to rendering the work experience meaningful were lost. When speaking about new ways of organizing and performing work, Simone and some other participants employed in public organizations explicitly referred to the concept of new public management. This highlights the overarching societal and economic trend of neoliberal rationalization in work organizations, where public organizations have become more business-like (Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen, 2017; Diefenbach, 2009).

Resonating with the suggestion that episodic or permanent transitions from one situation to another may involve experiences of shock in the face of the disappearance or fundamental change of previous meaning structures and actions (see, e.g., Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2016; Schütz, 1945), the participants' accounts indicated that they had experienced a sense of disorientation and meaninglessness in work situations that emerged from fundamental structural changes in the work setting. Such experiences tended to have been intensified when the participants had felt that they were not listened to and/or understood by management representatives when pointing out aspects in work that were experienced as counterproductive or rather pointless for doing a good job.

A general observation gleaned in the interviews in which the present theme was indicated was that the participants reported experiences of a sense of lack of trust, recognition, and experienced powerlessness in terms of not being able to influence and/or change to a work situation into a more meaningful one.

Work stress and connecting such stress to organizational change and experiences of a loss and lack of essential sources of meaning in work was highlighted in a salient way by Nadja, 67, a student counselor:

N: We have done reorganizations, people have quit, changed jobs, gone to other places. Yeah, like that. So, we have new employees now. And as we have hired new people, the focus has been more on administrators, study administrators, not on study counseling in the sense of talking with students. But if we look at how it was before, as I told you at the beginning of the interview, then I had a lot more conversations (which she experiences as the most meaningful aspect of the job). When that group of study counselors started to discover all the administrative and technical reporting, there were many protests. Some of them changed jobs immediately. After that, there were still some who liked the workplace; it is a very nice workplace, they still worked. And then we have the situation today in which we have

had an incredibly (strongly emphasizes "incredibly") high level of sick leave due to burnout in the study counselor collective. It started in the autumn of 2019 and the spring of 2020. Throughout the autumn of 2019, the situation of the study counselor's side was very fragile. And common to all of them, when we talk like this, you and me, eye to an eye, is exactly what I have been talking about, the technical thing, that they have to sit and do that kind of work all the time.

A perspective that is hitherto missing in the present theme is the managerial viewpoint. I interviewed three participants with mid-level leader positions. Some accounts from two group managers can shed some light on this gap.

Harald, a group manager in the public transport sector, and Max, a group manager/team leader at a call center, both shared the perspective that for them, meaningfulness in work was closely connected to career advancement, personal development, learning new things, making a difference to others and society, and looking forward to new challenges. Working was generally intrinsically meaningful in life since it provided long-term and ongoing sources of purpose and sense of direction for personal development and made a positive difference to others in life in a wider sense. Regarding challenges in work, both of them spoke of work situations in which they sometimes had to work hard and in a very strategic way to motivate their subordinates to see the value and utility of both new and existing work-related procedures. From this perspective, it was important to make subordinates understand why they had to do certain things at work and what was its purpose. In the following quote, Harald highlights that sometimes, he has to struggle with and put a lot of effort into motivating and explaining the purpose and value of certain work procedures for subordinates:

H: Things are happening all the time (referring to changes and reorganizations in work). It's really fun. It's both cool and a bit challenging, because you have to try to sell things to a lot of train drivers who may find it very difficult with new stuff (referring to "sell" as in convincing and motivating subordinates). But it also depends on, because there's... That's where you really see the generational change. I mean, we have those who are a little older, they have a little difficulty with smartphones and apps and things like that, and then we have the younger ones who handle such things without any worries. And then we have the whole team in between as well. It's a challenge for sure.

A: Yes, I understand. And then you have to try to get in there (and manage it) as well?

H: Yes, as good as I can. So, it's somehow important, speaking of describing a purpose and a goal with it. To just say "Here you have an app, use it"; that's not very helpful, because they need (to know) "Yes, but why should I use it, what function does it play in my role in my everyday life, because I drive trains, what am I going to do with ten more apps?" So, it's a bit more like that, when you go into the basics of why.

Harald explicitly highlighted the clash between management representatives' and subordinates' understandings and perceptions of work and that this required a pragmatic approach from his side:

H: Because in some sense, in my role, I am in between, I am sitting on two chairs, partly from an employer perspective where I want the business to go well and still lead and distribute the work, while at the same time, I want my staff to feel good. And these are two worlds that sometimes collide. Then, it is important to try to find a good middle ground. It might be a little harder for me, it might be a little harder for the individual in question, but as long as you get over that threshold, maybe it will be better than before in some way.

A: So, then you pretty much have a negotiating role, when you sit there in the middle?

H: Yes, yes, but it's like, many of the managers of the first line, you have a little pressure on you from above and you have a little pressure on you from below, so you are a little stuck in there.

The present findings suggest that what may make sense and be purposeful for a manager according to her or his role requirements and understanding of work may thus be experienced as the opposite by subordinates. As suggested by Harding (2019: 135) in a theoretical analysis of the lived experience of meaning and selfhood at work in the face of organizational complexities and contradictions, "work that management defines as meaningful may be regarded as meaningless by staff" (see also Bailey et al., 2017).

The discrepancy in organizational realities may come to the fore if subordinates do not share the understanding of their work and why and how to perform it in certain manners with management representatives. For subordinates, it may be relevant to organize and perform work according to their experience-based mental and tacit understanding and knowledge of tasks and goals. Based on their accumulated work experience, employ-

ees may perceive their way of doing things as the most practically efficient and useful way for both the organization and its members.

Similar to Harald, Max, who works as a call center group manager, also highlighted the gap and collision between managerial and subordinate realities, understandings, and expectations in the workplace and its connection to purpose and meaning. He did so especially when speaking of the importance and necessity of viewing the meaning of everything you do in life from a long-term and future oriented perspective and how generational differences in such perspectives in the workplace may become especially apparent in Generation Y employees. In the following quote, Max highlights such temporal aspects of meaning when speaking about the importance of making sure that subordinates understand the purpose of why things should be done in a certain manner in the workplace and that he understands their perspectives:

M: But for me, it is important that whatever you do, that you are engaged and committed. And that you realize that everything you do (in life in general), boring as well as fun, ends up in your backpack, which you carry with you, which you will benefit from in the future. Millennials are a little more... (short pause). They want things to happen very quickly. They expect that yes, after a month at work, they should kind of be the boss, because their parents have told them that if they just believe something enough, then it will happen.

A: You notice such a difference?

M: Yes, I do, very clearly. Then there's the thing that, everything from putting things in the dishwasher, like such basic things, you notice that these things are not there. In cases where they may have been too coddled (by their parents), they don't understand, like "What!? Why do I have to think about how to put stuff in the dishwasher?!" These kinds of simple things (in the workplace and life in a wider sense) or saying "Well, now I feel like taking a break, so I'm going to have a break", even though they may not have a scheduled break at that moment.

A: But how do you handle that, when such situations arise?

M: Well, it's a lot about trying to understand them and trying to make them understand what it's like here, that their behavior also affects their own future.

Both Harald and Max highlighted the importance and struggle of generating mutual understanding between employer and employee in terms of what to care about at work, why things should be done in a certain man-

ner in the workplace, and why it mattered for both the organization as a whole and its members. Both of these participants in leader positions indicated that understanding the employee's perspective and experience of the work situation and getting the employee to understand the purpose of work practices are important aspects in integrating the organization's interests into the employee's overall work situation.

Conclusions - Colliding Organizational Realities

My findings suggest that from the perspective of the employee, there is a risk that formalized and standardized work rules and procedures are perceived and experienced as arbitrarily imposed from above. Managerial conceptions, expectations, and dictates may not be in concordance with employees' experience-based perceptions and everyday understandings of the concrete work situation and what is worth caring about in it in order to do a good job. Across manual and professional occupations, work experiences and employees' perceptions of this gap and the collision between organizational realities may generate a sense of lack of justification for performing work in a managerially prescribed manner, confusion and experiences of meaninglessness. Such work experiences may become intensified when accompanied by experiences of and confrontation with lack of self-determination in work. This was especially highlighted by participants whose work was experienced as cognitively and practically counterproductive in terms of productivity, efficiency and other organizational goals.

In theoretical terms, my interpretations of the participants' accounts resonate with Braverman's (1998) suggestion that a defining structural characteristic of modern forms of organizing and performing wage labor is the instrumentally rational separation of conception from execution. Participants across the total sample indicated that in their lived work experience, sometimes they do not understand the purpose of why certain work tasks should be performed according to certain procedures and steps that were determined abstractly at the management level. This relation between understanding and purpose in employees' perceptions of the purpose of work tasks and reasons for carrying them out highlights the intertwined relation between understanding and purpose in the experience of meaning (Scott, 2019; Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003).

The participants who shared these concerns and work experiences recalled instances in which they felt cut off from decision-making and planning. Their cognitive and practical understanding of the concrete work situation was experienced as disconnected from the managerially pre-

scribed rules and instructions of how and why to reach certain goals and perform work in certain ways. Lived work experiences of and perceptions and confrontations with this kind of separation between management's interests, conception, and planning of work and employee's understanding and execution of work in the concrete work situation gave rise to experiences of meaninglessness, powerlessness, and confusion. Some participants reported that in such instances at work, they often felt that they had a better practical understanding of how to perform work in practice to make efficient and useful contributions to the organization. Being compelled to perform work in a manner that did not make sense in relation to their experience-based and practical understanding of how to perform work in the best perceived way possible for both themselves and the organization was therefore often experienced as counterproductive.

As noted in the theory chapter, in phenomenological considerations and organization theories of meaning, different groups of people in organizations and life in general can be said to operate cognitively and practically in different social realities (Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Weick, 1995; Schütz, 1967, 1945). They share, operate in, and are influenced by different finite provinces of meaning and relevance systems. They draw on, develop, and share different sets of stock knowledge and action scripts. Different groups therefore have different horizons of understanding, pay attention to, care about, and find different things relevant. One group of people may thus find it difficult to understand other groups of people in terms of why they perceive certain things as relevant, worth caring about, purposeful, and vice versa. When different groups of people confront one another, their different realities may collide. This may involve experiences of shock in terms of cognitive and practical reassessment of the situation and one's interpretation thereof (Schütz, 1967, 1945, 1943).

What is perceived as relevant and worthy of attention for the employee may not be so for the employer and representatives thereof. To use phenomenological terms, the study participants' accounts indicate that sometimes, the employee becomes "thrown" into a work situation that is experienced as futile, irrelevant, unreasonable, and not making sense in terms of the purpose of tasks; thus, the tasks and planning thereof over which one has little or no control in terms of producing change for the better (see also Weick, 1995). In such situations, it may become apparent to the employee in a concrete way that her or his work is organized primarily according to instrumentally rational principles and relevance systems of management and thus that management and their representatives repre-

sent the technical/economic system and its interests and needs (Axelsson, Skorstad & Karlsson, 2019; Lysgaard, 1985). For employees, this system's instrumentally rational logic and rules may seem to be far removed from or even cut off from the qualitative logic and reality of the concrete work situation, its practical relevance, and the performance of the actual job. In this sense, what is relevant for management may represent an irrelevance system for employees. For the employee at the concrete point of production, when feeling cut off from managerial conceptions of how to execute work, fundamental questions of "Why?" and "What's the point" may arise in regard to tasks, their purposes, and planning thereof. In the concrete work situation, for the employee, this may result in experiences of irrationality, doubt, uncertainty, ambiguity, and separation from larger organizational purposes and goals.

Freedom and Responsibility within Predetermined Boundaries

Participants employed in either manual or professional occupations indicated that aspects such as spontaneity, creativity, and responsibility are key preconditions for identifying sources of and experiencing meaningfulness in work situations. I interpret these aspects as interlinked. Especially at the point of employees performing and planning their work in concrete work situations. This phenomenon sheds light on negative and positive freedom in work. Axelsson (2021) emphasized both positive and negative freedom, while suggesting that freedom and its relation to action tends to be an overlooked and underemployed concept in the sociology of work literature. Similarly, I have generally not encountered the concept of freedom in the meaning of work literature (for an exception, see Yeoman, 2014a). In line with Axelsson's observation, in the meaning of work literature, the concepts of autonomy and control are typically referred to when discussing aspects related to freedom. One exception is Blauner's (1964) empirical study of alienation and freedom in different work settings, which I discussed in the theory sections (see also Alfonsson, 2020)

The kind of freedom highlighted by participants was always relative to the formal constraints and possibilities within the employment contract, work role, and work situation. The participants in question valued spontaneity, responsibility, and creativity at work. This form of valuing was typically framed from the perspective of negative freedom, as in freedom from managerial interference (e.g., having to stick to standardized procedures) in the work situation. This freedom from certain constraints realized some measure of positive freedom to have more discretion in and

responsibility for how, when, and where to plan and perform work. These aspects are partly related to my finding that when reflecting on what they valued at work, some participants tended to focus on an absence of certain constraining working conditions rather than on the presence of sources of intrinsic meaning.

Regarding participants' accounts of responsibility as a precondition for and source of meaningfulness in work, an important detail was that this was closely connected to being trusted by one's employer with taking responsibility for getting the job done in a way that was organizationally satisfactory. Such conditions of work and doing good work, in which it was possible to be more spontaneous and think outside of the otherwise rigid box of managerial dictates and the labor process, were referred to by some participants as "freedom with responsibility". These findings resonate with Blauner's (1964) suggestion that responsibility over the labor process is a source of meaningfulness in work and that work is likely to be experienced as meaningless if it is lacking. The participants indicated that autonomy and decision-making within boundaries and freedom from certain autonomy constraining conditions in work is a sign of the employer's trust and recognition of some of one's talents and capacities in the sense that they are deemed valid for solving problems and getting things done in an organizationally satisfactory manner. This type of responsibility can be further related to Frankl's (2002, 1959) existentialist and psychological theory of the will to meaning, in which opportunities for and identification of ways to respond to situations are key components for the experience of meaningfulness. Such agentic responses may involve both performing self-initiated actions and thinking independently about how to act in action-demanding situations.

The absence of particularly constraining aspects in work simultaneously enable the partial realization of one's talents and capabilities because it allows for some and varying levels of relative self-determination and autonomy in work. The looser regulations of when, how, and why to perform work in a certain manner were therefore valued and attached positive significance by numerous participants.

Some participant accounts highlighted the phenomenon of valuing freedom with responsibility. Similar to other participants, but in a less fragmented way, Eva, 54, a communicator in the public culture sector, highlighted the interlinked aspects of creativity, spontaneity, and responsibility in work as sources of meaningfulness. Eva said that she found her job generally meaningful from a broader working life perspective and in life in

a wider sense. Specifically, she emphasized that her work contributed to an important societal communicative function that was oriented toward the public. Her work also contained opportunities for expressing herself in terms of using capacities and talents that she self-identified with and valued. She repeatedly referred to opportunities for problem solving, “play” and “creativity” as key factors for rendering life itself and her job meaningful. From this perspective, opportunities for getting the job done well according to her own judgment and making decisions within a relatively self-determined frame of work in terms of time and doings were a key factor for facilitating the experience of meaningfulness in work. Too many externally imposed regulations could become an obstacle for doing a good job:

E: (...) if I am to say some negative things, it is precisely this: I have problems with being controlled (laughs). I have realized that. I wish I did not have to have the time pressure, that I should start (working) this time and I should end this time, and that I should be there (in the workplace). I wish I had even more freedom, with responsibility, freedom with responsibility, that this job had that.

A: I understand. Like, as long as the job gets done?

E: Yes, you can do it how you want and when you want and where you want, as long as you do it. Then, I would, I think, be a much better worker than I am right now (laughs). I have a very high morale, so I am very careful to take care of stuff (getting things done), but it also makes me hate this feeling that I have to ask for permission, like, “Can I take this hour off? ”, and then hear “Weeeell...” (manipulates voice to illustrate how her boss may respond and react to such a question). I can be provoked by that.

Eva further emphasized that she valued seeing a concrete result from her work. In relation to this, she asserted that she had a strong need to control her own work efforts in terms of being able to be involved in them to the end, which meant until she could judge herself whether they were done and adequate:

A: I understand. You do many different things in your job, but is it important to see a finished result in what you do?

E: Yes. I am very goal oriented. I feel somewhat that if I do not see the result, then I have failed. I know it's like that inside me; I can't just let things go. I guess I have too much need for control there, that's probably the problem that I really have myself, and that's why I can't take directives from others (laughs). Well, that's just how it is, I guess.

This form of reasoning about wanting both freedom and being concerned with and committed to doing a good job was common among participants across the total sample. Eva, who indicated a strong work ethic and conscientiousness when she spoke of caring about following tasks through to the end, further said that she valued freedom under responsibility in work when comparing it to less attractive work situations in her present job. In such situations, her work was more controlled and managed. This external interference risked draining work of its initial relative freedom and responsibility:

A: Do you have an example of when there are obstacles to it?

E: Yes, for example, if I am asked to write a press release, and then I do it, and then my boss comes and goes through everything I wrote and changes and inserts dots and capital letters, and like does so much that I feel that it is no longer I who wrote it. That I have not actually been given that responsibility, it was only because I should do it. I can get very frustrated about those kind of things in the workplace. And it happens.

A: I understand. So, you mean that some kind of control comes in to play there?

E: Yes, but the control is a bit like, that you are delegated a task, but are still not allowed to keep it.

Examples of similar work experiences were also prevalent in the manual job category. Karl, a truck driver, also cared about, valued and explicitly referred to “freedom with responsibility” and its application in varying work situations. When describing his work experiences, Karl expressed that he valued being able to rely on his own judgment and creativity and that management allowed and trusted him in doing so. This way, the work situation could be crafted into something that made sense, and it was experienced as reasonable. Karl referred to such aspects of relative self-determination, especially when speaking of unpredictable work situations that required spontaneous, flexible, and creative problem solving. For Karl, working was often associated with aspects such as stress, not being himself, efficiency pressures, and experiences of pointlessness that sometimes spilled over to the rest of life. However, in addition to these negative aspects, he attached positive significance to being trusted with doing the job according to his own judgment and care within the limits of the work role:

K: It's like... I have worked a lot in industry, in dirty industrial places and stuff like that... (Now) I take care of my truck: I wash it inside, I wash it outside, I take care of its service, no day is like the other even though there are many places that are the same. So, just because I drive the exact same route as I have done every Tuesday for six months, that does not have to mean that the day looks the same.

A: Mm?

K: It's probably the freedom under responsibility that I'm really passionate about because I can do things at my own pace for as long as it takes. And it's like this: no one cares what I do, as long as I do the job in the time I have to do it. No one cares how I do it.

Karl further emphasized that in its everyday practice, his work required flexibility and initiative taking that were always related what the often unpredictable and changing work situations demanded:

A: You have to be very flexible, be able to solve problems?

K: Yes. You can't sit there and be bull-headed, like "No, but this is what I have planned". It does not work that way. It's not that kind of industry. Then, you should be in another industry, where you just push a button (referring to his previous work experiences of simpler work in monotonous and repetitive industrial jobs).

A: But it can be very spontaneous?

K: Yes, yes, yes, things can turn around very quickly.

On this note, Karl highlighted that although the spontaneity and unpredictability of work situations and the flexibility and responsibility they required, had a triple-edged character. It could be a source of stress, valued stimulation, and distraction from other life concerns:

A: Is it something that you like, that it turns back and forth like that, or would you rather have it more stable?

K: I think I would have found it easier to sleep, and had it easier, ehm... I probably would have had it a little easier if it had not been so spontaneous all the time. But if that was the case, I think I would become bored of the job in ten seconds.

A: Yes, okay.

K: (...) So, it's really a necessary evil for me, to really be able to push my soul into work and just keep on going. So that I can shut out everything

that's around me (in work and life in general), to feel good at work, it's probably because I'm so free and get to solve everything by myself.

I now present a final example that highlights how employees may value freedom in the form of responsibility in work situations, which requires and allows for spontaneous judgment, decision-making, and creative problem solving. Jarmo and Werner, both machine operators in the plastic industry who worked at the same factory, spoke of ongoing work experiences of meaninglessness. They highlighted that more meaningful work situations could emerge, especially when work equipment and machines broke down. The work experience can become more positively challenging and stimulating when rigid routines, standards, and procedures for doing and thinking in the labor process are limited or suddenly interrupted (see also Beynon, 1973). Echoing what some refer to as job crafting, an otherwise predictable and standardized work situation can become something else (see, e.g., Tufte, 2011; Wrzesniewski & Dutton 2001). It can be influenced practically through agentic responses. Such situations require varied and/or novel thinking and partly self-initiated action. In instances of surprises and ruptures in the labor process, the experience of the otherwise highly regulated and meaningless features of work in terms of rigid predictability and strictly standardized routines for doing and thinking is temporarily interrupted and modified. Such situations open up a space of opportunities for rendering the work experience more challenging in a positive sense. Working is then experienced as less monotonous, more productive, more interesting and engaging, and more worthwhile:

A: Do you find some tasks more interesting than others?

J: Yes. When the machines break down and you get to tinker with them, that feels better than just being in a trance, wrapping (referring to wrapping plastic pipes together, using cable ties). Like, that kind of physical work, I think it's more fun. It feels like you are doing something, screwing something together or tinkering, or something like that.

Werner highlighted that the breakdown of equipment and machines ruptured the otherwise immanent regularity and predictability of the highly standardized work situation and work experience and their relation to a strictly rationalized labor process. This enabled responsibility and control over the labor process and parts of its technology (see also Axelsson, Karlsson & Skorstad, 2021). It introduced opportunities for solving problems by picking things apart and then putting them together again:

A: What do you think about having more responsibility at work now compared to before, is it positive or negative?

W: As long as more responsibility means more variety, then I am satisfied.

A: You can do different things?

W: Yes, exactly. I hate doing the same thing for an hour. Rather, I may want to do one thing for 15 minutes, and then something new.

A: Okay. But what is it like now then, during a workday?

W: Well, it can be very different. Sometimes we can just stand there (by the machines) and kind of run a single product for a whole day. Boring as hell. But sometimes you have to... maybe you fix and tinker with stuff for half the night, then it feels more rewarding. Or when you're repairing something, such things.

A: When something needs to be fixed?

W: Yes, replacing gadgets and stuff like that. Then, it becomes more varied and more fun right away.

(---)

W: The best part of the job is when you get to fix something, I think that's fun, if something breaks down, or if something is strange or something.

A: If it deviates from... (W interrupts question)?

W: Yeah, exactly, then you have to go and do things for a while, maybe change some things, it feels like you are doing (emphasizes by raising his voice and prolonging the word) something that is a little bit more important than just tying stuff together (referring to tying plastic pipes together at a mass scale in a repetitive manner).

A: Yes, okay. Does it happen often?

W: Relatively often actually, because our machines are ancient (laughs), so stuff need to be replaced, fixed, and tinkered with.

A: Yes okay, so it happens, like with... (interrupts question)?

W: Yes, it's probably like once a week at least, where you have to fix things. Then, we have these places in which ... (inaudible), and then you also have to unscrew stuff and put it back together. You do that several days a week.

Werner's and Jarmo's accounts indicated that which may be irrational and problematic for the organization (time waste and deficient work

equipment) may introduce sources and opportunities for employees to render the work experience more meaningful. In their work experiences, such instances involved the opportunity to break the mundane reality of routine work to solve spontaneous problems. Although such forms of problem solving benefit both the organization and the individual employee, it would be more rational for the organization if it did not happen at all. This phenomenon sheds light on other organization and the sociology of work scholars' reference to organizational life as both instrumentally rational and characterized by contingencies, ruptures, unintended consequences and power shifts in the labor process (Laaser & Karlsson, 2021; Axelsson, Karlsson & Skorstad, 2020; Paulsen, 2014; O'Doherty & Willmott, 2009; Weick, 1995; Lysgaard, 1985). In such instances, employees may temporarily gain control of parts of the technological system (Axelsson, Karlsson & Skorstad, 2020). The kind of meaningfulness highlighted by participants when they highlighted such organizational contingencies is thus connected to positive freedom in the form of opportunities for exercising responsibility, creativity, and spontaneity in the work situation. However, this form of freedom is always relative to the formal constraints and possibilities within the employment contract and work setting.

Conclusions - Freedom and responsibility within Boundaries

Participants across the total sample valued freedom and responsibility in work situations. My findings suggest that relative self-determination and work autonomy in the planning and execution of work are preconditions for experiencing meaningfulness in work situations. During such occasions, looser regulations on the form and content of work may enable opportunities for more self-determination and autonomy within organizational boundaries. For an employee, this involves exercising judgment and making decisions of when, how and why to perform work in a certain manner to reach work goals, in other words, situations in which employees are trusted by management to exercise their own judgment to work productively, efficiently, and solve recurring and emerging problems. The present findings suggest that such work situations include opportunities for taking more responsibility for how and when to do things and acting and responding creatively to work situations within the limits of the work role and objective work conditions. In this sense, as part of a general sense of relative self-determination and thus some levels of freedom in work, responsibility and creativity are interlinked with spontaneity (see also Blauner, 1964). Ultimately, from an existential perspective on action (see,

e.g., Frankl, 2002, 1959), if such action involves the forms of self-determination that employees themselves value and management representatives facilitate it, responsibility in itself in work situations can be interpreted both as a precondition and expression of freedom at work. My findings suggest that for an employee, such forms of freedom and the potential for relatively self-determined action it entails may represent a source of meaning and organizational precondition for experiencing meaningfulness in work situations.

The Art of Switching off from Work while at Work

A further recurring topic that was highlighted by participants in the interviews was that while at work, one may find ways to confront and alter one's experiences of meaninglessness. While at work, particularly when working is experienced as particularly boring—when it is monotonous, repetitive, and experienced as lacking noninstrumental meaningfulness—employees may find ways to render the work situation more tolerable, acceptable, relevant, and/or worthwhile. I interpret this phenomenon as remotely related to job crafting (see, e.g., Tufte, 2011; Wrzesniewski & Dutton 2001). In the present study, job crafting was remotely related to the aforementioned phenomenon of adapting one's attitude to the work situation to interpret and define it as more meaningful than determined at first glance. However, as shown below, job crafting was also highlighted by participants in somewhat different terms. This phenomenon was especially salient during interviews with participants employed in more manually oriented jobs.

An aspect that these participants tended to focus on repeatedly during their interviews was work situations in which one could focus mentally and/or practically on nonwork-related activities while working. As suggested by Arendt (1998 [1958]: 146), such work tasks may be preferred by employees because they are “mechanical and does not demand attention, so that while performing it they can think of something else”. In addition, as suggested by Frankl (2014 [1988]: 22) in a comment about the will to meaning, “man is, and always remains, capable of resisting and braving even the worst conditions. Detaching oneself from even the worst conditions is a uniquely human capability. (...) By virtue of this capacity man is capable of detaching himself not only from a situation but also from himself”. For some participants, mental detachment from formal and physical features of work was a valued and desired aspect in their working life in general. Expressed in phenomenological terms, my findings indicate that

this task is easiest to achieve when the work tasks at hand are so habitual that they can be performed without conscious deliberation; i.e., they have become embodied and second nature (see, e.g., Merleau- Ponty, 2002). Such work situations facilitate directing mental and/or practical attention toward things one experiences as more worthwhile. This aspect was valued and desired by some of the participants because it opened up a space for rendering the working experience less boring and more tolerable, acceptable, and/or worthwhile. Such forms of work situations allowed for a form of practical and/or mental crafting of the work situation into something else.

Some valued practical examples expressed by the participants were playing video games and reading. A recurring theme in the interviews was also using smartphones to surf the web, communicate with friends/colleagues, or listen to music or podcasts through headphones. Consequently, nonwork-related technology over which the employee has control may have a facilitating role in enabling mental detachment from the work situation and work experiences of meaning. Taking breaks was another form of nonwork activity at work that was valued, especially by participants in the manual group.

Sometimes, being at work even involves instances of a complete absence of work tasks and management personnel. This aspect of nonmonitored downtime, which can be referred to as an expression of empty labor in the workplace, was particularly valued and appreciated by some participants (see also Paulsen, 2014). During such instances, working could stop resembling work. By engaging in the aforementioned types of nonwork activities when there was nothing work-related to do, it became possible to experience some sense of meaningfulness in the work situation. This could include socializing and engaging with coworkers in various technologically supported or traditional informal ways. For some, it could even resemble spontaneous forms of play:

A: What happens during downtime at work then (referring to the participant's previous mentioning of not having anything work-related to do while at work)?

W: Well, it might happen that you surf the internet (laughs).

A: So, you have your smartphones then?

W: Yes. Or maybe you play tricks on coworkers.

A: Play tricks? What could that be?

W: (laughs) Yes, what could that be... If it's winter, maybe it's throwing snowballs at each other (laughs, looks mischievous, and eyes shine).

A: And just play?

W: Yes, like, just fooling around (laughs).

When speaking of such instances of play and private activities at work, Werner's and other participants' overall demeanor indicated a far more positive mood (e.g., by having a mischievous look on his face, smiling, and laughing) compared to when speaking of actual work tasks. In Werner's case, he explicitly said that he experienced them as meaningless. It should be noted that in addition to engaging in play, Werner and (according to his perception) some of his colleagues also appreciated being able to listen to audiobooks, music, or podcasts through headphones while working because such activities rendered the work situation more interesting and tolerable. Werner asserted that this had been easier in the past, when managerial control and supervision was not as overt and present as it had recently become as a result of reorganizations and new company owners. Headphones were now viewed as a "security hazard" and therefore not appreciated by management. For this reason, one had to be careful and sneaky with wearing headphones while working. Werner exemplified this by referring to himself and his colleagues as wearing caps that covered the ears and/or by limiting themselves to using one headphone.

As noted above, the phenomenon of detaching oneself from the work situation while at work to render it more worthwhile or just more tolerable and acceptable is not a novel observation. For example, in Pollert's (1981) industrial workplace ethnography "Girls, Wives, Factory Lives", some of the participants working at the assembly line used the expression "the art of switching off" when referring to a particular strategy they used for confronting boredom at work. In this study, daydreaming and intentional detachment from the corporeal and material features of the concrete work situation represented a condition in work that facilitated the construction and experiences of compensatory meaningfulness and/or mitigation of boredom. According to Pollert, detachment from the work situation creates a space of mental agency under working conditions (task content and task form) that are characterized by monotony, heavily restricted movement, and experiences of boredom. Temporally, during such work experiences the experience of the passing of time is characterized by a strong sense of slowness and tediousness (ibid.; see also Bailey et al., 2017; Arendt, 1998 [1958]).

Another indication of crafting meaningfulness in work situations by switching off mentally and/or practically from the work situation was highlighted by Peter, a subway train operator. In an answer to the question of whether there are instances at work where he experienced that time passed faster than usual, he expressed the following. In Peter's case, the relative freedom realized in work by cognitively and physically non-demanding or a complete absence of actual work tasks was something that he valued in his working life in general:

P: Sometimes we also have on-call hours, which means that you are on standby (while being at work). Then, I am completely free to do exactly what I want (in the room he has to stay in). During those times, I have the luxury that if I want to bring a video game and sit and play, then I can do that. I can read books, socialize. So, I can do things that I think are fun. So, on those occasions, time is experienced as passing very fast. (...)

And referring to his present working life experiences in general, Peter stated the following:

A: Do any of the things that you do at work help to realize some of the goals you have in life in general?

P: Maybe not exactly what I do at work, or well, to some extent. Due to the nature of the profession and due to the time you have for yourself, it gives me a lot of space to go through things, thoughts, ideas, feelings, which I do not have to spend time on when I get home. In that sense, I can plan projects or music stuff that I want to work on (when he gets home). If I have an idea, I can sit and develop it during the day (while operating the train). Yeah, at that level I feel that the nature of the work helps.

A: Having time to reflect and so on?

P: Exactly. Like pushing buttons, pulling a lever and that stuff, that has nothing to do with me as a person (laughs).

A: These things are not big life goals? (This question was intentionally asked in a tongue-and-cheek manner to validate and reciprocate Peter's humoristic attitude in his previous response)

P: No (laughs). "I'm going to level up in life and press two buttons at the same time now" (laughs). In addition, then the fact that I cannot take the job home with me. Therefore, in that way, the nature of the job contributes to realizing life goals by the fact that I can focus on those goals. By not being present (in the work situation) (laughs).

A: Yes, I understand.

As indicated above, detachment from the work situation to focus on something other than work and render the work experience more tolerable, acceptable and/or even more meaningful in a remotely and nonwork-related sense was often described in ways by participants that indicated that this approach is limited to mental activities. This highlights the phenomenological suggestion that people cannot and do not always have to pay attention to what they are doing in order to carry it out practically. Actions may become habituated and embodied in a second nature manner (see, e.g., Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Merleau-Ponty, 2002). In the present study, this phenomenon, which challenges dualistic conceptions, also had a temporal characteristic; it involved thinking about things other than work while working. As suggested by Bailey et al. (2019: 490), “The more individuals can work toward a desired future self, the more meaningful they will find their work”. In temporal terms, experiences of meaningfulness and/or tolerableness of the work situation were constructed by participants by paying attention to aspects and meaning sources in life outside of work that were not available in the present work situation. This form of daydreaming among participants was typically future oriented toward aspects in life that one valued and found personally interesting – things, relations, and activities that one could engage in during life outside of work. This freedom of mind was often practiced by participants in physically restricting work situations to render the working experience more doable and to make the experience of the passing of time go faster. Jarmo, a machine operator, highlighted work experiences that bring to mind what Csíkszentmihályi (2008 [1990]) referred to as the kind of “flow” states people may find themselves in during particular activities in which they become completely immersed. However, in Jarmo’s case, this kind of flow state was not associated with being immersed in the task at hand but rather with repetitiveness and mental disconnection:

A: How is it at work for you; on what occasions do you feel that time passes the quickest?

J: Well that’s... We usually call it winding psychosis (laughs).

A: Winding psychosis?

J: Yes, because we wrap plastic sleeves with wire, which we put into the machine and cast plastic around, and then they use electric welding to melt the plastic. So, then you can just sit there and wrap those pieces, put them in the machine—wrap, wrap, wrap—and all of a sudden, like, the whole workday has gone by, and then you have amounts of pieces (shows with

hands to illustrate amount). Then, you can get into a winding psychosis, when you work, well, like if you listen to something (in headphones).

A: Is it only when you listen to something, or can it happen otherwise?

J: Well, yes, it can. You sit there and you think a lot. The mind wanders away, maybe I hum something (e.g., a melody). I don't know how many songs I have written (just like Werner, he's a nonprofessional musician in his spare time) when I have been like that, like riffs (guitar passages), and yeah...

A: So, you can use that time for doing something else, even though you are doing something (working) at the same time?

J: Yeah, that's nice. (...) So like, you can just disconnect your head in some way when you sit there and work, in some way when you sit and work, then time passes quickly as hell. But if you start thinking that this piece takes one and a half minutes to produce, and then you have made two pieces, then you know that then it has taken three minutes as well.

A: Mm. You try to disconnect in some way?

J: Yes, and it can be done in that job. So, that's damn nice. Like, you have time to think a hell of a lot. But then again, whether that's for better or worse, I don't know...

A: You told me earlier you could come up with stuff in your head and then do something with it later, like write riffs that can be used later?

J: Yes, exactly, so that's good. (Jarmo, machine operator)

In a similar way, for Karl, a truck driver, a valuable part of the job was to be able to listen to podcasts and audiobooks about subjects that he found interesting and could learn from in the present and have use in the future:

K: And some days, when I do not feel like it (chatting with other drivers on the phone while driving), I just spend time with my audiobook for a whole day, all by myself.

A: What kinds of books, are they something special?

K: Everything, everything that I find interesting. I've just listened to this Enders Game thing, so I've been listening to that book series recently. So, it became a bit like, adventure/sci-fi focused. I have listened a lot to fact books, feelgood books, grow-as-a-person books, marketing. I'm buying and selling shares on a very low basis, because it's a bit like this: you can learn

this (stock trading) in 20 years' time, so maybe this is something you can have, like, after 45 years, I will have money, and I may not have to work.

A: And is that related to your interest in economics (Karl previously mentioned that he may go into studying economics academically sometime in the near future)?

K: Yes, exactly. I know a few people like that, who kind of give tips and advice, and then you can sit and look around a little (for shares). And you listen to a book about someone who has made a career of it (stock trading), who explains all industries in all countries, and so on. Trying to learn as much as possible. Act smart, act long-term.

A: Mm. But there are podcasts and stuff where you can learn this kind of stuff?

K: Yeah, exactly.

For others, partly switching off from work situations while at work included being involved practically in work-related things that one felt were more important and rewarding than others. This was highlighted in a salient way by Morgan, a call center group manager/team leader. Morgan highlighted that the forced mandatory digitalization of some work-related activities brought upon working life by the COVID-19 pandemic opened up opportunities for directing his attention toward more meaningful things in some work situations. He specifically emphasized multitasking while being digitally present in phone meetings:

M: There are always things like... It is not about a task in itself, but to be in larger meetings where they mumble on about things that may not directly affect me, but it's mandatory attendance. Then, I zone out completely.

(...)

A: Okay. But what do you do then when you zone out?

M: Well, you have to sit there and try to look committed. But I also have to admit that regarding myself, as soon as there is a snippet of something that I'm interested in, then I start chatting, and then the others start to (hushes to illustrate that his colleagues want him to be quiet when he talks too much about things that they find irrelevant and don't care about). But yeah.

A: What about those meetings during COVID?

M: They are... Of course, we have a few larger meetings, but quite rarely, it is more by phone, that we have a conference by phone. Then, you can sit and do other things in the meantime (laughs).

A: I see, when no one sees you. Have you experienced any advantages and disadvantages of not having to have the meetings now in physical form to the same extent?

M: In such cases, I can focus on other things that I may think are more important than being in that meeting. But there is always, I say the same to these young people who come into the workplace, it's like this with all jobs, that there are things that are fun and there are things that are less fun, and it's a part of life.

The accounts from Morgan highlight the general trend in my findings that employees may value switching off from the work situation by engaging in something that they find more meaningful more than the work task at hand. However, Morgan's particular case illustrates that when out of sight of peers, employees may also switch off from the work situation that they find themselves in by intentionally paying attention to and engaging in other work tasks that they find more important and thus meaningful more than the primary work tasks at hand.

Conclusions - Switching off from Work While at Work

My findings suggest that employees' work experiences may involve disconnecting from the work situation in different conscious or unconscious ways. The first is disconnecting mentally from work tasks while performing them by letting one's mind wander away from work by thinking about things in life that are experienced as more meaningful. The second is disconnecting mentally and practically from certain work situations by engaging in other work tasks that require more attention and therefore are deemed more relevant and meaningful. The former method indicates that people may construct/craft additional and/or compensatory meaningfulness in work almost entirely through mental effort by disconnecting themselves from and therefore transcending the immediate features of the work situation. It can be viewed as a form of crafting because it may involve creativity and agential responses to work situations (see, e.g., Tufte, 2011; Wrzesniewski & Dutton 2001). This practice of disconnecting from the work situation may become desired and worthwhile for the employee. It may enable her or him to think of more meaningful things in life while simultaneously performing work. The latter method highlights that when

work is experienced as lacking meaning, it may be possible to find other and more meaningful work-related things to do and pay attention to, then people may make an effort to do so. Both in terms of wanting to be more productively purposeful and rendering the otherwise meaning-lacking work situation more worthwhile.

If experienced as a positive feature of the work situation and facilitating freedom of mind, some forms of alienation from work while at work may represent a way of transcending boredom and constructing compensatory meaningfulness (or merely enduring boredom and meaninglessness at work by finding ways to distract oneself from it).

In management-oriented literature, the phenomenon of employees detaching mentally from the work situation is problematized. For example, in the 2017 Gallup survey “State of the Global Workplace” (2017, see also 2022), it is suggested that 85% of employees worldwide are either not engaged or actively disengaged at work. In Gallup’s report “State of the American Workplace”, it is reported that “seven in 10 American workers” are either “not engaged” or “actively disengaged” in their work (Gallup, 2013: 6). It is further suggested that “not engaged employees are essentially ‘checked out’. They’re sleepwalking through their workday, putting time—but not energy or passion—into their work” (ibid.: 21). Disengagement at work is made further problematic for management because of its opaque and widespread character in the organization:

Not engaged workers can be difficult to spot: they are not hostile or disruptive. They show up and kill time with little or no concern about customers, productivity, profitability, waste, safety, mission and purpose of the teams, or developing customers. They are thinking about lunch or their next break. They are essentially “checked out.” Surprisingly, these people are not only a part of your support staff or sales team, but they are also sitting on your executive committee. (Gallup, 2013: 21; see also Gallup 2022)

What I have referred to as “switching off”, disconnecting or detaching from the work situation in my empirical findings, is related to what is described in management-oriented literature as disengagement from work. From a managerial perspective, such disengagement highlights the conflicts of interest between employees and employers in terms of needs and desires. In the latter case, employees’ mental and practical disconnection from work while at work is something that is viewed as problematic because it may generate disengagement and have substantially negative effects on organizational culture, work engagement, efficiency, productivity.

It may hinder profit and growth. My findings suggest that from the employee's perspective, disengagement from work while at work may represent an autonomous platform for constructing meaningfulness and/or rendering the work situation more doable, tolerable, and thus acceptable. This tension between employers' and employees' needs and desires sheds light on Lysgaard's (1985) suggestion that the organization of wage labor is characterized by the conflict and tensions between two systems that follow different logics in terms of needs and origins. These systems are the inexorable and insatiable and one-sided needs of a technological/economic system (e.g., efficiency, profit, and continuous growth), and the many-sided subjective needs of the human system (e.g., individuals' needs for meaning, autonomy, and self-realization). An important observation in the present study is that in their work, for reasons related to meaning, conscientiousness, and work ethic, people across occupations may both want to do a good job and value being able to partly switch off mentally from the work situation. This observation challenges management-oriented dualistic conceptions (employees are either fully immersed and part of the work task or disconnected from it in terms of engagement) of disengaged workers being unmotivated to do a good job (see, e.g., Gallup, 2022, 2021, 2017, 2013). Finally, my observation that people may want to and value switching off from work while at work sheds light on Ciulla's (2000: 110) counterintuitive interpretation of "alienation". From this perspective, for employees and in relation to their jobs, alienation may represent both a "problem" and "solution" in the work situation and life in a wider sense (ibid.). However, in the latter case, it needs to be alienation in the form of separation from the task at hand and a work situation that is valued and desired by the employee.

Results Part II - Existential Meanings

I have thus far presented my interpretations of my study participants' work experiences of situational meanings—which means focusing on workplace factors that constrain or facilitate employees' experiences of meaning in work situations. Although they are ongoing and may spill over to life outside of the workplace, I suggest that these work experiences of meaning are of a “smaller” and more fleeting spatiotemporal kind and that it makes analytic sense to keep them apart. In terms of lived experience, they are restricted to what happens and is experienced during work hours in work situations. I now proceed to present my findings that highlight what I have chosen to call “existential meanings”—work-related conditions that influence experiences of meaning in life in a broader sense.

Money Matters

A central theme highlighted across the sample either spontaneously in general reflections about work or when answering different interview questions was the initial and inescapable economic reason for being at work. My findings suggest that for some, working life is experienced initially and primarily as an economically necessary burden to be overcome in an ongoing sense. In such cases, in life in both a broader sense and situationally, working life may be experienced primarily as an alienating inescapable practical means to an economic end. Work as it is performed and experienced situationally and existentially becomes valued primarily for generating an income off which to live and consume. Among the participants who indicated that they valued working life generally and primarily in this instrumental sense, there was a joint tendency to focus on the absence of certain constraints in work rather than the presence of some sources of intrinsic meaningfulness. When reflecting on the general meanings of working for a wage and on the aspects that mattered and were valued in work situations, there was a tendency among some participants to value certain conditions of work rather than its content and goals in terms of work tasks and the organization's core purpose. I will return to this phenomenon after my focus on the current theme of money.

I now proceed to some empirical examples and my interpretations thereof. When reflecting on what he would do if he became economically

independent, Werner, a machine operator in the plastic industry, asserted that

W: Some say things like "I would continue to work because of my co-workers" (if they were to become economically in-dependent) or to have something to do, routines and stuff like that. But no, I have friends outside of work, I have things to do outside of work. That's not what makes me want to work.

A: But if you remove the salary out of the equation, are there any things in the job that you personally value and in what you do at work?

W: No. (laughs, looks down, and shakes head) nothing. No. If I were to get a new job with the same salary or higher, then I would have taken it immediately. Like, there's nothing else that keeps me going, it's just... it's just money.

Furthermore, Werner's colleague Jarmo emphasized, "I have never had any problem working extra on weekends or stuff like that, because then you get money coming in. So, it's kind of a motivational thing (the money)". He highlighted money as the primary reason for selling his time and labor to an employer when he connected it to attempts from management representatives to influence the culture in the workplace. This became especially apparent in the interview when I asked questions about his relationship with others at work. In one reflection, he described his observations of management representatives' efforts to promote and produce a certain kind of organizational culture and employee commitment in the workplace. He recalled that these initiatives included spreading the message that employees should try to identify with the organization at an emotional level:

(---) there are, like, large boards on the walls in the lunchroom, like saying that you should feel with the company (emphasized the word 'feel' by raising voice). Very American (the company is now owned by a large North American corporation).

A: A culture thing?

J: Yes, exactly, that we are the product, and that you should feel with and be proud of the product you produce. But it's like this: I don't give a shit about that (laughs, sighs, and shakes his head). I do not care one bit about that. I do it for the money.

A: Does anyone at work care more about those kinds of things?

J: Well yes, there are (sounds and looks surprised by raising his voice to a higher pitch and raising his eyebrows)... There are some who are very proud of that the stuff we produce ends up in... Because we make stuff that ends up in petrol stations. Like, now we are going to make something, and then it will... then it will be flown down to India and some petrol station, and there may be some petrol station in Sweden. And if you get a big order, then you will notice in some that they're like "yes how cool" (manipulates his voice and facial expression in an energetic way in order to mimic a person who expresses excitement). But the truth of the matter is that you basically prostitute yourself. You sell your time to them (...).

In Jarmo's case, managerial attempts at influencing employees' identification with and care about the job and the organization's mission rather seemed to have had the opposite effect than intended by management. It may have motivated him to detach himself even more from work and to become suspicious about the organization and its motives. It may have contributed to making the experience of the function and meaning of work in life in a wider sense even more instrumentally oriented and thus extrinsic than otherwise.

The participants' emphasis on money as an inescapable first and fundamental reason for being at work and performing actions there brings to mind Schütz's (1967; 1943) theory of in-order-to motives as a key rational and temporal component of the experience of meaning and its relation to action. A defining characteristic of action is that there is a rationale behind it—it is performed in order to reach some goal. This goal orientation and the sense of purpose it creates in the present and its eventual realization in a future present situation become constitutive for the experience of meaning. Many of the participants highlighted money as the first and central reason for working. The majority of adult people can make a living and beyond in the present because they have attained a priorly earned wage, and they ongoingly work in the present order to attain a future wage (in Sweden, it is usually around the 25th or 27th of each month). Simmel reflects on this general future-oriented aspect of money in society in general as a central motive for action in general and reason for the secularization in society, when suggesting the following:

Money all too often easily gives the impression of being the final purpose; for too many people money signifies the end of the teleological sequences, and lends to them such a measure of unified combination of interests, of abstract heights, of sovereignty over the tails of life, that it reduces the need to search for such satisfactions in religion. (Simmel, 2004: 238)

Similar ways of paying attention to the central and inescapable relevance of money, as exemplified in the participant accounts above, were highlighted by other participants, especially those in the manual job category who primarily attributed instrumental reasons for working, such as the wage and job benefits. This way of paying attention to money during the interview was typically highlighted when they responded to questions of whether they valued something specific about the job, regardless of its economic features: “Apart from liking my coworkers, no. Not the job itself, no. Nothing” (Werner, machine operator in the plastic industries); “The salary is what I get so that I can achieve what I want to do in life. It's kind of like that (laughs)” (Pontus, 30, blaster). When reflecting more in general terms on what was the basic point of working in life, money also came up among other participants as a given and central reason for working in the first place: “As long as you have an income that covers your living expenses” (Stefan, warehouse worker). Another worker noted, “Like, if one does not have any money, one has no money. Owning a house is expensive. (---) in order to be able to work more at home (with his personal projects such as renovating his house), I need more money, and then I need to work more” (Karl, 32, truck driver). In addition, a participant reflected, “It is not a matter of choice to work. It is something that I have to do (in order to attain money)” (Peter, subway train operator).

The fundamental relevance of money in life and its character as an inescapable reason for working was also emphasized by participants who were employed in more professionally oriented occupations. However, these accounts were typically not expressed when asked questions about whether they value/do not value some things. Rather, such assertions emerged more spontaneously during the interview in answers to other interview questions. This included reflecting on the general meanings of working in life in a broader sense, as one worker stated that “in order to have fun (in life in general), you have to have an income” (Nadja, 67, student/career counselor). Another participant noted, “Since income affects one's life, an even higher income is never unattractive. That's why you're at work in the first place” (Loa, 35, committee secretary). Another participant also noted that “one has to have an income” (Harald, 37, group manager). Additionally, a participant reflected, “I work because I need to support myself. I work because I want a decent life. I want to be able to relax and focus on things other than finances. So, a job is a way of making a living” (Magnus, 41, college teacher in philosophy). Participants across the sample thus

recognized that working life was an inescapable sphere of economic necessity that is a prerequisite for realizing basic necessities and other comforts and agency in present and future life outside of work.

The centrality of money as a fundamental and inescapable reason for participating in working in life was highlighted in an even more explicit existential way by some of the participants who were approaching retirement age. Some of these participants referred to the centrality of an income when airing private financial concerns about the future. This phenomenon highlights the theory that an existential disposition of being human is being ahead of ourselves in time. We are always already paying attention to and worrying about the future (see, e.g., Bailey & Madden, 2017; Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Schütz, 1967). In the present study, this could involve being concerned about what one's financial situation would look like during the retirement phase of life. Ėva, 54, communicator, noted:

Well, I'm very, very worried about this with my economic situation. I understand that there is a huge difference when you retire. (...) So I'm trying to provide for myself now, in a way, and that's why I'm doing this guide training, I'm trying to look what possibilities... What kind of thing can I pursue and make money on after I retire, where I can still be attractive (as an employee). And guiding is one thing, I think. Because people like to listen to an older person who tells you about a place, like, it's more trustworthy. And then, also, I took an illustration course. I think I may be able to illustrate if I have my own company. I'm thinking of reading the literature (about illustration). My thought is that I am educating myself here now, I have like fifteen years on me, to try to develop myself in opportunities, to be able to feed myself, because I can't really count on getting any money. Like, it feels scary that it has to be like that, but it feels like you have to. Then also, I can only hope that I get to be healthy. I have to be healthy.

As noted in the quote above, the necessary and indispensable value of money and its role as an initial and fundamental reason for working, was highlighted by some participants from a temporal perspective. Expressed in more theoretical terms, money as a key reason for working was highlighted in relation to the approaching existential imperative and life period of retirement (Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2016). However, in general terms and across occupations, my findings suggest that for inescapable reasons of subsistence, consumption, and facilitating agency in life outside of work, the income from work is always already existentially relevant and a

defining instrumental characteristic of the general work experience of meaning.

Conclusions - Money Matters

My findings suggest that as an ever-present necessary goal of the situated activity of wage labor and participation in working life in a wider sense, the wage is primary and indispensable. The inevitable economically necessary aspect is an always already present and underlying existentially significant reason for being at work in the first place and for performing work tasks there. From a temporal perspective on action and its relation to the experience of meaning, based on the participants' accounts, it can be argued from the perspective of action and the key reasons for performing it that employees are always already ahead of themselves for reasons of a socially and existentially imposed economic necessity. Regarding initial, present, and future reasons for working, as emphasized throughout the present study, most people do not choose the economic reason. In an ongoing sense, for existentially and economically inescapable reasons, wages are indispensable and are looked forward to. In phenomenological terms (see, e.g., Schütz, 1967; 1943), the participants highlighted that the first and fundamental in-order-to motive of working is economic. In other words, a defining characteristic of the general work experience in terms of reasons for working (including while at work and working life in a wider sense) is economically rooted instrumentality. From a temporal perspective on action and its relation to the experience of meaning, based on the participants' accounts, it can be argued from the perspective of action and the key reasons for performing it that employees are always already ahead of themselves for reasons of a socially (wage labor is an institutionalized primary means of subsistence) and existentially (people need and desire to generate and uphold a basic livelihood and beyond) imposed economic necessity. Regarding initial, present, and future reasons for working, as argued throughout the present study, most people do not choose the economic reason. In an ongoing and temporal sense, for existentially and economically inescapable reasons, the wage is indispensable in the present and has to be looked forward to. In phenomenological terms (see e.g. Schütz, 1967; 1943), the participants highlighted that the first and fundamental in-order-to motive of working is economic. In other words, a defining characteristic of the general work experience in terms of reasons for working (including while at work and working life in a wider sense), is economically rooted instrumentality.

Although a key component of critical assessments of wage labor (see, e.g., Alfonsson, 2020; Marx, 1977 [1844]); Paulsen, 2010), the first and given economic reason for working is typically taken for granted and seldom discussed or problematized in any deeper ways in the existing and primarily leadership-oriented meaning of work research. The present findings about the meaning of money suggest the inevitable economically necessary aspect is an always already present and underlying existentially significant reason for being at work in the first place and for performing work tasks there. Therefore, I suggest that if scholars and others want to understand work experiences of meaning from an action perspective and how people frame and describe their work experiences of meaning to begin with, the compulsory economic reason for being at work in the first place cannot be overlooked.

Valuing the Absence of Particular Constraints

I now leave the focus on money and proceed to describe the related phenomenon that I mentioned above: framing and describing work experiences and the aspects valued in them by focusing on the absence of particular constraining working conditions. This was highlighted primarily among participants who had an instrumental orientation toward their jobs. It highlights that when reflecting on and framing their work experiences and the things they value in them, people may focus on the absence of certain constraints in the work situation rather than the presence of sources of meaning. In this sense, the concept of negative freedom and its relation to agency in work situations is highlighted again (see, e.g., Axelson, 2021). The phenomenon of employees valuing the absence of certain constraining working conditions when speaking about what they valued the most in their jobs was not exclusive to but especially salient among manual employee participants. The latter highlighted and emphasized the centrality and meaning of money more frequently and repeatedly in a spontaneous manner during the interviews. Although it is not possible to speak of any causal relationships in the present study or to aggregate findings statistically to group levels, there seemed to be a relationship in the manual group between having such an instrumental relationship with one's work in a wider sense and valuing the absence of certain constraining working conditions.

The absence of certain types of constraining working conditions was valued and used by some participants as a reference point for interpreting their present work situations and framing their answers about experiences

of meaning in them. My interpretations of such negative ways of framing what is of positive significance and value in work situations highlight that both the absence and presence of action and objects may have a constitutive role in the construction and experience of meaning. Additionally, and in a temporal sense, these findings have a biographical component. They indicate that throughout their lived work experiences in life and socialization into working life, people may learn what specific sources of value and meaning to focus on in work situations, why it is worth focusing on them and not others, and what sources of meaning to expect to find in working life in general (see also Scott, 2019; Goldthorpe, 1971).

Now, I offer some empirical examples and my interpretations thereof. For reasons of clarification, I have italicized expressions of the phenomenon of negation and emphases of absences. When answering the questions of what she values and does not value in her work as a communicator, Eva, 54, noted,

I have problems with being controlled (laughs). I have realized that. I wish I did not have to have the time pressure, that you should start (working) this time and you should end this time, and that you should be there (in the workplace). I wish I had even more freedom, with responsibility, freedom with responsibility, that this job had that.

Like other participants, Eva valued (relative) freedom from particular forms of externally imposed constraints and prescriptions in her work situations. Across the sample, common examples of absences of constraints that were valued in work situations and working life in a wider sense were as follows: work was *not* dirty; there was *limited* or *no* external monitoring of work; there was *little* or *no* overt managerial control; work was *not* as stressful as it could be or had been under other conditions in previous jobs; and it was possible to decide when to take breaks because there was *no* imposed predetermined schedule for when to drink coffee or eat. For instance, among the two participants who were machine operators in the plastic industry, one of the main reasons they gave for working the night shift was that this shift involved fewer constraining conditions (e.g. monitoring) than during the day shift, when managers and more employees were present.

My findings of employees' focus on absences of particular constraints in work echo Scott's sociological theory of nothing and the relation of absences to the experience of meaning. Scott suggests that things that are not present in a situation matter for peoples' experiences of meaning: "Para-

doxically, nothing is always productive of something: other symbolic objects come into being through the apprehension of phantoms, imaginaries, replacements and alternatives, which generate further constitutive meanings” (Scott, 2018: 3). Compared to prior working life experiences in other jobs, the absence of certain constraining working conditions in their present work was associated with participants generating a sense of relative freedom and responsibility in work situations.

An important observation is that among the participants who had a general and more explicitly formulated economic orientation toward working life, there was a tendency to value and attach significance to specific conditions of work rather the qualitative content and outcomes of work. Generally, when speaking of what they valued in their present work, their focus on conditions was often directed at the absence of certain constraining features. This phenomenon was not restricted to but was the most salient among participants in the manual job category (e.g., truck driver, warehouse worker, subway train operator, machine operators in the plastic industry, and blaster).

Now, regarding other empirical accounts and my interpretations thereof, similarly to other participants, when asked about what he valued in his job or what was the best thing with it, Werner, plastic industry factory worker, compared his present work experiences with his past work experiences. They had often been precarious and more constraining. Like other participants, he used past work experiences as a reference point for making generalizations and assessing what was good and bad in his current job. This highlights the (social) phenomenological suggestion that people individually and collectively make sense of and value their current experiences based on what they have experienced in the past (see, e.g., Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Schütz, 1967). The following assertions are indicative of a general trend among the participants who framed their work experiences and what they valued in them by focusing on absences of particular constraining working conditions:

W: Contingent staff. That was my first job. Then there were all sorts of strange factories that you went to, maybe just a few days sometimes, and a few weeks here and there.

A: Okay. But then you got to see a little bit of everything?

W: Yes, I did. Everything from the dirtiest job of just stacking pallets, to sorting small screws and... (laughs).

A: Okay. What did you think of those type of jobs, if you compare them to what you do today?

W: Well, those jobs were really a nightmare, because they were so monotonous. It felt like they were actually made for a robot arm. So, it was like pure death, emotionally. I looked at the clock like every quarter. But it was fun when you got the salary eventually, because when you were a child, you had never had so much money (laughs).

(---)

W: If there is a single thing that is good about work, it is the freedom we have in my department. That we can move a little bit freely, like, we are not stuck in one place. Like, you can move around and do different tasks. In general, being stuck at machines is the worst thing you can do. And that's probably the good thing about this, because it's quite unusual in industry to be so free. You usually sit at a table or a machine and do the same thing all the time.

A: Yes, very specialized and so on? But you have that variation as well?

W: Yes, we have that variety and the ability to move.

Moreover, Stefan, warehouse worker, emphasized that he truly valued not becoming as physically exhausted from his current job as he used to become in prior ones. Similarly, Karl the truck driver used his prior working life experiences as a main point of comparison and source of generalization when making sense of and valuating his current work experiences. His past work experiences in other jobs often involved precarious and significantly constraining elements. Like other participants primarily in the manual group, Karl emphasized the absence of certain work-related constraints and regulations and associated it with freedom, control, responsibility, spontaneity, self-determined care, and variation in work situations:

K: It's like... I have worked a lot in industry, in dirty industrial places and stuff like that... [Now] I take care of my truck: I wash it inside, I wash it outside, I take care of service; no day is like the other even though there are many places that are the same. So, just because I drive the exact same trip as I have done every Tuesday for six months, it does not have to mean that the day looks the same.

A: Mm?

K: It's probably the freedom under responsibility that I'm really passionate about, because I can do things at my own pace for as long as it takes. And

it's like this: no one cares what I do, as long as I do the job in the time I have to do it. No one cares how I do it.

A further example is Peter, 35, a subway train operator. Like other participants, in response to various questions and in a recurring and spontaneous manner during the interview, he spoke about things that he valued in his current job. He often did this by comparing his current job with previous ones that had involved more socializing with others. In relation to this, he indicated that he valued aspects such as the following: "I can't take the job with me home, and I get to be myself to a very large degree. And I do not have to deal so much with people". Further absences of constraints that were valued in work by participants across my sample were physically and mentally constraining work performed under monotonous and repetitive forms, managerial surveillance (e.g., experienced through the physical presence of managers in the workplace); rigid time schedules for breaks and strict routines for when, how and why to perform certain tasks; and work interfering interactions with others (e.g., colleagues and clients) in the workplace.

Conclusions – Valuing the Absence of Particular Constraints

My findings above suggest that rather than focusing on the presence of certain sources of meaning in work situations, some people may frame their current work experiences and the aspects they value in them by focusing on the absence of particular constraining working conditions. Participants who indicated that they valued the absence of certain constraining conditions in the work situation tended to express that they experienced working life in general as an inescapable but acceptable and tolerable aspect of life. A general sentiment conveyed in these accounts was that at least work was not as bad as it could have been had there been more constraints involved in the work situation. As indicated above, such understandings of and references to constraining working conditions were typically related to and partly based on previous working life experiences from other occupations. During such past work experiences, work had involved more constraining conditions than was present in current work situations.

Hence, when framing their current work experiences and what they valued in them, some participants repeatedly compared their present work experiences with previous ones and vice versa. In this biographical and thus temporally relevant sense, prior work experiences seem to play an

important role in how people frame and describe their current work experiences, what they value in them, and what sources of meaning they may expect to find in them. This indicates that present work experiences of meaning are relative to past work experiences of meaning. It can be highlighted further in phenomenological terms (see, e.g., Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Merleau-Ponty, 2002 [1962]; Schütz, 1967). The participants directed their *attention* toward what they cared about in the past and present when reflecting on what they valued in work situations and in working life in a wider sense. These findings again highlight Scott's (2019) suggestion that people's working life biographies influence how they frame their present experiences of meaning in work and what meaning they may expect to experience in and at work in the first place.

As noted above, the participants who had such negation-focused ways of framing what they valued in their present work experiences were typically employed in manually oriented occupations. Their accounts had a more explicitly articulated instrumental orientation toward the job. Economic compensation and the general security and consumption capacity it made possible in life outside of work were often highlighted in a more spontaneous and recurring manner during the interviews as a self-evident and key reason for working. When reflecting on sources of meaning in work, the attention of these participants seemed to be more intuitively directed at the absence of certain constraints in work. Among these participants, unlike the participants in the professional category, the general attitude toward work and its meanings was thus not characterized by affirmative thinking and attention in the sense of focusing on the presence of certain sources of meaningfulness.

In contrast, in participant responses during my interviews with people presently or previously employed typically in professional occupations, there was typically less spontaneous attention given to the role of money as a key reason for working. When responding to interview questions of whether they valued certain things in work more than others, participants presently/previously employed in professional occupations typically focused on the presence of certain sources of meaningfulness in work. This included sources of meaning, such as opportunities for and practices of helping others and engaging in networking and teamwork to reach a perceived societally useful goal. Additional valued factors were opportunities and practices of using one's imagination and creativity in spontaneous ways to solve problems and develop ways to render work tasks more useful and efficient.

My findings of focusing on the absence of certain constraints when employees frame and describe what they value in their current work experiences indicate that depending on the type of occupation (manual or professional), people may differ in how they frame and interpret their work experiences in terms of what they value in them. Their attention (or in phenomenological terms - consciousness) may be either more or less negatively or affirmatively directed toward the absence of constraining work conditions or the presence of sources of meaningfulness. These findings partly resonate with previous empirical findings (see, e.g., Bailey & Madden, 2019; Mercurio, 2019). These studies suggest that resources that facilitate responses to experiences of meaninglessness in work are not equally available to all workers in all occupational groups. Their findings suggest that depending on employees' socioeconomic position and access to cognitive and material resources, there may be a stratified experience of work meaning. My findings add to the research agenda of raising questions about social stratification, which is biographically related, and social influences on the expectations and the experience of meaning in and at work. In terms of paying attention to absences of particular constraining working conditions or the presence of sources of meaning, do people with lower levels of formal education who are employed in manually oriented occupations frame their work experiences of meaning in a different way than professional employees with higher levels of formal education?

Checking in and Checking Out

In my empirical chapter on situational meanings, I highlighted that employees may desire and value disconnecting mentally and/or practically from the work situation while at work. It may be a conscious or unconscious practice that contributes to making the work experience more tolerable, doable, and/or meaningful. However, some participants also indicated that their appreciations, desires, and practices of distancing themselves from work were not restricted to what happened in the workplace. My findings suggest that it is also related to selfhood and integrity in even more existentially significant ways. Participants across the sample indicated that they valued and desired keeping their work self distinctly separated mentally and practically from the self outside of work. For instance, this desire to keep work at a distance while not at work was expressed in terms of distinguishing starkly between the professional self and the private self. This included what one does and how one thinks or simply not wanting to have anything to do with work at all during nonwork hours. In

this sense, the phenomenon of “switching off” from work can also be interpreted from a broader existential perspective that goes beyond work situations. The following findings shed light on concepts such as work centrality, alienation, and existential imperatives.

I identified two subthemes: (a) switching off from work when leaving the workplace and (b) switching off from work when approaching the beginning and end of vacation leave and during vacation leave. These existentially relevant findings suggest that employees across occupations may desire and value keeping a distance and separation from work in a wider and thus existentially significant sense in life. Some of the participants had rather strong preferences for the limited amount of centrality they wanted work to have in their lives as a whole. These particular findings shed light on empirically inspired suggestions from psychological research: “employees who experience more detachment from work during off-hours are more satisfied with their lives and experience fewer symptoms of psychological strain, without being less engaged while at work” (Sonnentag, 2012: 114).

Especially among the participants in the manual category who experienced little intrinsic meaningfulness in work, switching off mentally from work while not at work was generally desired and practiced as soon as they left the workplace. They did not want to have anything to do with work while not at work. This separation from work in a more profound mental and corporeal manner was typically indicated to be desired by these participants. Working life was indicated to be primarily experienced as an acceptable and unavoidable part of life but still an economically necessary and compulsory burden and therefore valued primarily in instrumental terms. Among these participants, the general work experience was typically indicated to be lacking non-instrumental meaningfulness in life. Partly resonating with Marx’s (1977 [1844]) original conception of alienation, the work experience lacked work task-related opportunities for self-expression, creativity, practicing one’s personal interests and capacities, and/or identification with the organization and its mission. Working was indicated by these participants as something that was not expected to be part of any larger life project or an expression of oneself in any authentic manner either in its form or in its content. They did not feel at home at work and did not want to bring work home.

My interpretation of these findings is that this alienated relationship to the work experience influenced both in situational and existential terms participants’ desire and value to separate themselves from work not only

in the workplace. It was also expressed in temporal terms: leaving work aside completely by disconnecting from and forgetting about work mentally and corporeally as soon they left the workplace. This aspect of forgetfulness highlights a phenomenological aspect of temporality in terms of people's temporal orientation: backward-looking and forward-looking in time (see, e.g., Bailey et al., 2017; Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Schütz, 1967; 1943). In my findings, this was related to the notion that not exclusively but especially employees in manual occupations may not want to think about work while not at work. They may want to leave it behind and not pay attention to it while not there. They may also not look forward to going to work for reasons other than economic or interpersonal reasons (e.g., socializing with colleagues).

Now, I offer some empirical examples and my interpretations thereof. A desire and necessity of switching off from work completely and forgetting about it when leaving work was highlighted in a salient manner by Werner, 35, a machine operator at a factory producing plastic pipes used for underground transportation of fossil fuels:

A: Do you ever think about work while you are not at work?

W: No, not really, except in terms of not wanting to go back (laughs), so no, very little. Only when it is approaching in some way, such as when the weekend is over or the holiday is over. Otherwise, I do not devote much thought to it. Maybe it was more before when I worked at a call center, when it was a struggle all the time. Then maybe I often thought that hell, I can't take it anymore; then maybe it spun around more in the head. But now that you have a job that you find acceptable, then you forget it when you are free.

A: I understand; so, you do not walk around thinking that this of that needs to be fixed (at work)?

W: No, I totally disconnect from it.

A: I understand; it leaves the mind when you walk outside the door?

W: Yes, totally.

Werner thus indicated that he did not truly want to be at work. My interpretation of his accounts is that he valued being able to disconnect from work while not at work. Compared to previous work experiences in other jobs that had been even more boring, monotonous, repetitive, and constraining in other ways, his current work experience was considered as "acceptable". A similar account of valuing switching from work and for-

getting about it by mentally disconnecting from it when leaving the workplace and not thinking about work when not working was expressed by Jarmo (who works in the same factory as Werner and performs the same work tasks). Jarmo had been recommended by significant others to actively disconnect mentally from work immediately after a workday:

J: But I have... my mother (who also works there) told me when I started there, that when you leave work, you should learn not to think about it, just disconnect from it immediately. So, I have never had that problem, if you're thinking of like Sunday anxiety or something like that, because I will not think about it until I go to bed, that tomorrow I will work. I just set the alarm on the clock. Then you get up, then you do your thing, then you get there, and then when you go home, you just don't think about it.

A: Then you check out mentally?

J: Yes, exactly, you check out mentally when you check in at work, and then you check in mentally when you check out from work.

A: Yes, I understand.

In addition, Pontus, 30, a blaster/odd jobber at a local painting firm, noted:

P: Dad and my little brother worked together for a while. It wasn't possible to... I couldn't go to their place for dinner or whatever, because they just sat there talking about gravel and excavators (work related stuff), and.. And I'm like, god damn it! I get annoyed at that, because I do not think it's something that you should do.

A: You want to keep work separated from... (Pontus interrupts the question)?

P: Yeah. I'd rather sit and talk about money than about work. Because I know that money is taboo for some as well. I do not really like to talk about money either, but there are pleasures you can talk about. Like, I mean, it's leisure.

A: Yes, I understand. Like, when work becomes a part of the rest of life, in some way?

P: Yes.

(...)

P: So, it's like, people who are... they have no personality because they are their job, that's among the most tragic things that I know of.

A: Do you think that there are people who really go into their role like that?

P: I have a friend who is... like his whole personality is that he is a carpenter. He is nothing else.

A recurring theme in the accounts from participants employed in manually oriented occupations was that they did not want work to be a central or any significant part of their lives outside of work. Although work situations sometimes involved sources of meaning (e.g., solving suddenly appearing problems, socializing, listening to music/podcasts), working was primarily about attaining a wage. This existentially significant alienated relationship to work, which was reflected in intentionally wanting to and actively trying to forget about work when leaving the workplace, was desired and valued. The participants who pointed toward this phenomenon in their accounts spoke about it in ways that indicated that there was little point in identifying with work in the first place and in any deeper sense. For given reasons, often based on previous work experiences, working did not and was not expected to be a source of intrinsic meaningfulness in life. The lack and absence of sources of intrinsic meaningfulness in work seemed to fuel the need to disconnect from work during leisure hours.

The desire and value of keeping work and the rest of life distinctly separate was further highlighted by some participants when they reflected on working life in general from the viewpoint of vacation leave. In phenomenological terms, similarly to the accounts above, these reflections included aspects of temporality and embodiment: From birth unto death, people's bodies are intertwined with their consciousness and the structures of the social world. The body in its totality and the socially acquired sedimented habits, routines, experiences, regulations, and conventions in it can be viewed as people's point of view toward the world through which they learn about it. In this sense, peoples' assertions of their relation to themselves in terms of their body may reveal what they are concerned with and care about in life (Merleau-Ponty, 2002 [1962]). Peter, subway train operator, highlighted the first week of vacation leave. In this particular account, he replied to questions of how he felt about work when he was approaching the beginning and end of his vacation leave. When speaking of the former, he referred to work metaphorically as dirt that was slightly difficult to remove. When speaking of the latter, he referred to beginning to look forward to work in time. This involved becoming aware of and

paying attention to its imposed routines and constraints of agency in life in general:

P: Usually it takes maybe a week before you get clean in your mind and body, that you are free ("clean" as referring to thoughts and feelings about work disappearing from the mind and body). But the last week (of vacation leave) may still feel a little awkward; not that you have forgotten what it is like and long to return, but you are mentally preparing that this life (working life) will soon return again. And then it can almost be a little frustrating that one's opportunities are limited with what one can do because the time is shorter until it starts again.

A: So, you know that it is approaching, it is in the future, and you adapt mentally to it?

P: Yes, exactly.

Keeping work and the rest of life distinctly separate in terms of time, thought, emotion, action, and attention was also desired and valued among participants in the professional category and even among those who indicated that they had access to sources of intrinsic meaningfulness in work on a continuous basis. However, such a broader detachment from work could be difficult to achieve for reasons of work internalization. This embodied difficulty of wanting to let go of work mentally, bodily, and thus existentially while not at work was a common theme in the accounts from participants in the professional sample. I have chosen to call it embodied work centrality. It was difficult because despite being off from work, work was still with them in mind and body (thinking about it and being affected by this thinking moodwise). In a temporal and attentive way, work was looked back at and looked forward to because it was always already present in life in a remote sense. Nadja, 67, student/career counselor, highlighted this phenomenon:

A: And the last days of vacation leave, when you are to go back to work, are you in any particular mood then?

N: Well, so this is very strange (emphasizes "very strange" by raising voice and pronouncing the words in a distinct manner by prolonging the utterance). Because then it's kind of like, that you start to work mentally: "Oh, now there's only one week left until the holiday is over. Well, then we were supposed to do that" (at work). Those thoughts start coming then. They come little by little. and then you start to have a countdown, now there is only one day left in the holiday, and then the thoughts of work take over more than the fact that you are free and are on vacation leave.

A: Okay; so there's like a winding up there?

N: Yes. Likewise, the same thing can be said of the first week of the holiday. It is an active winding down, downsizing (mentally), that there are still job thoughts left and processed. But they are being phased out. The first week and the last week of the holiday is really some kind of middle ground between vacation leave and work.

Now, I offer some further empirical examples from the professional group. Recently, a retired dentist and clinic manager, Gertrud, 67, associated the difficulty of keeping work and the rest of life separate with the stress that was generated from time pressure, managerial responsibilities, and the need to finish things before going on vacation leave:

A: If you think about vacation leave and so, how did you feel then, if you had a week left until you were going on vacation leave, did you think anything particular about the job then?

G: Yes, the stress level increased; of course, it did. I usually say that if you have four weeks (of vacation), then it takes a week to go down in stress and then you have two weeks of holiday, and then the stress goes up. Yes, I absolutely felt that. So, you needed a little more long-term coherent leave. I think that it is very important, that you do not divide the vacation leave too much, because then you almost never have time to wind down properly.

Furthermore, Loa, committee secretary, who earlier in the interview indicated that he valued keeping his private self and professional self distinctly separate, highlighted difficulties with winding down from work while not at work. He noted, "I think that I need some set time. If I, for example, at the beginning of the holiday, then there can be a few days where it is difficult to switch mode. I probably need a certain set time between work and leave". Harald, a group manager, expressed that "when it's time for vacation leave mode, like, I usually take a few days at home, so that you start to realize that now it's actually vacation leave".

Conclusions - Checking in and Checking Out

My findings suggest that regardless of their occupation, people may desire and view it as valuable to keep working life separate from the rest of life. This existentially significant separation refers to not thinking about work and having one's mood affected by this thinking. However, employees in manually oriented jobs may specifically value and find it easier to disconnect completely from work while not a work than professional employees. However, since paid work inevitably occupies a large proportion

of time, thought, emotion, attention, and action for a large proportion of everyday waking hours and thus lifetime, it may be difficult to keep work completely disconnected from oneself. For some, this difficulty may become heightened by social ideals of high work centrality, as in others talking about and expecting occupational identity to be a large part of oneself as a person.

My findings about embodied work experiences, which may be more prevalent among professional employees, add nuance the concept of work centrality. As noted in my literature review, work centrality refers to the relevance and importance given to work under any given period of time. Work centrality involves an absolute (how much work means to me) and a relative (how much work means to me in relation to other life domains) dimension (MOW, 1987). My findings suggest that work centrality cannot be reduced to personal preference. In phenomenological terms (Schütz, 2011; Merleau-Ponty, 2002 [1962]), the work experience and its accompanied habits may become internalized, embodied, difficult to disconnect from; whether they like it or not, people may pay attention to work and be affected by it through thought, sensation and mood-wise while not at work.

The participants' accounts thus indicate that the work experience and its accompanied work habits may become embodied in mind and body outside of work – it becomes part of oneself regardless of preference - and this part may be difficult to switch off from. This phenomenon is important to highlight in relation to understanding the existential conditions and existential meanings of working. It indicates from an existential viewpoint that although employees may prefer to keep working life and the rest of life separate, in neither practical nor temporal terms working life and life outside of work are not necessarily neatly separated spheres of doing, thinking, attention, and moods.

To use phenomenological terms (see e.g. Merleau-Ponty, 2002 [1962]), work centrality may become embodied. It may be difficult to shut off work from mind/body during leisure hours; people think about work, pay attention to it, and are concerned about it. They become existentially dispositioned toward work while not at work. In this existentially significant sense, whether they like it or not people may have a strong work centrality. Work may be with them in mind and body even outside of work. My findings suggest that this embodied work centrality may become especially apparent when employees have transitioned from work to non-work domains in life and look back at their work experiences and think about

what they mean to them. In this sense, existential imperatives may have a revealing character in terms of bringing to light what significance working life has to people, both in voluntary and involuntary and positive and negative ways (see also Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2021, 2016).

The Value of Life-Structuring Aspects of Working Life

Participants across the sample also indicated that working life may be valued for its broader latent life structuring functions in life. My findings suggest this may be the case even among those who often or primarily experience their work as lacking situational meaning. From a general perspective, my findings suggest that ongoing aspects of the everyday temporal and practical habits, routines, and scripts of working life may be valued by employees because they generate ongoing stable and predictable social structures for time, thought, action, emotion, and socializing in life in a wider sense. My findings further suggest that working life may be valued for its generally life structuring functions for other particular reasons. It may be valued because it provides a general recurring, stable, and predictable structure for time, thought, emotion and action, when one has too much free time on one's hands, or during periods of intensified existentially significant turmoil in life (e.g. feeling a lack of direction in life, loss of a significant other, or divorce).

Regardless of job type, working life in a broader sense was associated by some participants with action and goal orientation in life in general. In this sense, working life was indicated by the participants as representing a central platform for being active and productive. This phenomenon was present in the interviews despite the fact that working was almost never mentioned by any of the participants when I asked them about what they found important and cared about in life. Family and friends were ranked by the majority of the participants as primary sources of importance, value, and care in life.

Regardless of the reasons given for valuing life structuring aspects of working life, a common pattern in the participants' accounts was emphasizing the importance of having something to do in life and to have a stable and recurring temporal and practical structure for this. My findings suggest that this involves having and reaching ongoing goals and not becoming inactive, bored, idle, and unproductive in life. In this existentially relevant life structure, activity, goal attainment, and being occupied with something in general in life was often associated with doing something *useful* with one's time. This form of instrumentality typically meant ac-

complishing something – making a contribution, both as an individual person and a citizen who is part of a larger collective (e.g. an organization or society as a whole).

Now to some empirical examples and my interpretations thereof. Loa, a 35-year-old committee secretary who lives with his wife and their 10-year-old son, associated working life in a broader sense with being occupied and productive. An absence of salaried work activities and its wider life implications may become a problem because it may lead to idleness, lack of productivity, and a general sense of boredom:

A: And then when the holiday is over, when you are going back to work, how do you relate to it then? To work, mood-wise?

L: It's probably the case that then I'll probably be eager to come back to work. The holiday can't be too long, a period when you are not doing anything at all. It's... It is that golden balance between leisure and work...

(---)

A: If you didn't have to work, if you inherited money or won 30 million on the postcode lottery (both laughs a bit at the reference to the postcode lottery), what would you have done then?

L: (...) I think I would work voluntarily with something even if I was financially independent, or I would have a job, but I would probably not work full time. If I did nothing at all, then I would probably get very bored.

(---)

A: What is the best thing about the job?

L: That's difficult... it is difficult to answer.

A: Yes?

L: That's probably the point with the question? (laughs)

A: Yes, that you should think about it (laughs reciprocally).

L: Well, the best thing is that you get to be productive in a context, that you are not idle (at work and in life in life in a wider sense). And to be able to be content in the meantime, with what you have to do in order to survive.

When having to cope with making choices of how to structure one's life in order to avoid boredom and emptiness and falling out of the ordinary scripts of everyday temporal and practical routines and habits, latent and wider life-structuring aspects of working may thus be valued in a broader

sense. This phenomenon is highlighted indirectly in Frankl's suggestion that individuals sometimes get "Sunday neurosis", "that kind of depression which afflicts people who become aware of the lack of content of their lives when the rush of the busy week is over and the void within themselves becomes manifest" (Frankl 1959: 107). In existentialist terms, such kinds of situations can be interpreted as highlighting the existential problem and resource of "freedom" in life (Merleau-Ponty, 2002 [1962], Sartre, 1969). The existential problem of freedom comes to the fore when the individual is thrown into a particularly action-demanding situation. In such situations she/he has to confront her/his own attitudes toward the situation, take responsibility, and make Self-determined decisions of how to act in order to move on. In this vein, Ciulla (2019: 25) highlights existentially significant latent functions of working when suggesting in reference to Sebastian), that "few people know how to use their leisure to do meaningful things because they need the structure of employment, education, or other factors" (see also de Grazia, 1962).

Katrin, a 64-year-old job coach and internship coordinator indicated that she valued participating in working life in general. It provided a stable and ongoing source for structured activities, experiences, and goals in life.

K: Yes, well, the first thing I think of regarding myself, is the thing with getting up in the morning. I'm very tired in the morning (laughs). Fortunately, we have flex time here. So that will be one thing where I will feel that oh, well isn't that nice! I do not have to stress and get to work in the morning. At the same time, of course, I have had thoughts about, well... what do I do then (when she has retired)? During winter, then I'm afraid that I'll have a hard time occupying myself with things. But in the summer, I mean I grow a lot of vegetables and such things, then it's not a problem for me. And then, I think, since I will still have my political assignments, I have something to do (emphasizes "something" strongly by raising voice and prolonging her utterance), because I am terrified of becoming inactive, just being idle. I do not want to become like that. No! (shakes head and makes a facial expression that indicates fear and disgust). I do not want that (tone of voice that indicates that she strongly opposes a sedentary life-style and generally being idle).

A: I understand.

K: Because I look at my sister (who has retired and according to K lives that kind of sedentary life). And I think for myself that no thank you, no (shakes her head and emphasizes "no" by raising voice slightly).

A: I understand.

It is important to note that just as other participants who generally experienced their work as generally meaningful, Katarina explicitly stated that she experienced an ongoing sense of intrinsic meaningfulness in her work. She asserted that it contained outlets for creativity, spontaneity, and positive community involvement.

The fear of becoming idle, unoccupied, and bored in life, was further highlighted as a key concern among soon-to-be and recently retired participants. Some participants made references to stereotypical images of culturally idealized forms of retirement life, as in buying an apartment abroad, where one could live a lazy life filled with sunshine and supposedly relaxing activities. This lifestyle was loathed and viewed as deeply unattractive, unproductive, boring, and meaningless by some participants. Some of the participants who like Katarina also experienced sources of intrinsic meaningfulness in work, used significant others as a reference point for an active lifestyle and associated leisure-oriented retirement lifestyles with killing time until death:

E: Because I see... Both my mom and dad are still working, dad is 83 and mom is 79. Mom goes every day to her antique shop. Yeah, they are still working, both of them.

A: Could they abstain if they wanted to?

E: You mean in financial terms?

A: Yes.

E: I do not know what it is like with dad, but mom could definitely do it, because she has no profit on her antique shop. It is rather the opposite, that she almost pays to go there (laughs). For her, it's the social thing, it's what keeps her going, to be like that. She would rot and die immediately if she stopped, and that's what I'm afraid I would do if I just stopped. I will want to work, I do not want to retire on some sunny beach in Spain, doing nothing. I hate playing boules and stuff like that, that's totally uninteresting (laughs). (Eva, 54, communicator)

And Iris, 69, recently retired employment officer:

I: I'm not very much a homemaker, I do not feel very comfortable at home, I get mostly restless and so on. No, I simply want something to *do* (emphasizes "do" by raising voice slightly, going up in pitch, and prolonging it). And then I think, I mean you can work for free, and you can work as a volunteer and such things, and it's also very fun to get educated.

A: I understand. If you had won the lottery or something, what would you have done with work then? Perhaps it's difficult to... (Iris interrupts the question).

I: To fantasize about it? Yeah. No but, I would actually have wanted to do something that made the world a better place. Then I would like to have worked with something like that, maybe start a school. But now we are not allowed to fly anymore (laughs) (referring to ecological impact), but to start a school in a suburb or something like that. So, then I would of course make sure that my children got a lot of money, but if, you now if I had as much money as possible. That, I mean, I think for example that this thing with living in Spain, there was a TV show about it (about retirees who bought apartments in Spain and moved there), it seems soooo boring!

A: You mean as a retiree?

I: Yeah, it seems extremely boring (laughs).

Participants across the sample asserted explicitly that an absence of everyday action- and goal structures generated from working life, may lead to disintegration in everyday actions, goals, habits and routines in life in a wider sense. Disintegration and difficulty of achieving stability in life because of the absence of work, was expressed in negative terms. It represented a loss of a larger context in which practical purposes were present and fulfilled. Existentially significant consequences originating from the absence of daily routines and other everyday structures generated through in working life, were things like boredom, bad habits, lacking motivation, staying up all night, sleeping the day away, and getting out of temporal and practical sync with significant others and the rest of society.

Stephanie, a 64-year-old treatment educator who is working with education for adolescents who need special educational support, highlighted the aforementioned life-structuring and self-disciplining aspects of working and existentially relevant meanings thereof. Stephanie asserted that she found her job generally intrinsically rewarding and meaningful because she helped others, both in life as a whole and when she was at work. Stephanie specifically emphasized sources of responsibility and highlighted the life-structuring aspects of working in general. Like other participants across the sample, she related her work experiences as a central source for experiences and doings in life in a wider sense. An important aspect of this was that it enabled being in temporal and practical sync with significant others:

S: I do not need to work more than 50 percent, it could provide structure enough for me to manage my everyday life so that I do not turn around the day, so that I still meet my husband and that we have our lives together. If I have a holiday and he is working, then I turn the day around, I stay up late and write or watch movies, or read books, then I'm up a little in the morning and then I'm up a little during the day. So, I do, I kind of go out in the vegetable garden, and then I go to bed, and then I get up at 1 in the afternoon, and then I'm awake until five in the morning.

(---)

S: But I think structure (generated from working life) has a meaning for the rhythm of the day and the light of day, and the production of hormones, and feeling good, moving, and so on. But it is also in relation to my husband, or with my daughter and her family, or my extended family, to have something, to reflect on others and to have something to tell, something to share. A boring experience, or a good experience, or something I'm damn pissed off about. And I think so, it does not have to be paid work, but it should be a meaningful larger or smaller community where there is a group dynamic that can challenge the good in me, that is, to be one, to take responsibility, to think about how to communicate, not to offend but to still be straight and clear, to feel good inside. So, the structure, I think .. But I do not think it is linked to salary, but it absolutely has... (becomes quiet for a long time)

A: Like, structure in the form of interaction with other people?

S: Yes

In a partly similar fashion, Marcus, a 41- year old college teacher related lack of responsibilities in life outside of work with lack of routine. In a reply to the question of what he would do in life if he became financially independent, he asserted that

M: So, if I became financially independent, I do not see that I would have any need to continue working. Possibly I may need to work part time, because I have realized that when I am free for long periods, as a teacher you have a fairly long holiday during the summer, and towards the end of that holiday I actually long to return to work, because I notice that my life is getting gradually worse (laughs). I have no structure for bedtime, so I turn around the day, I drink too much alcohol, so a job has the function of regulating one's life in a way. Especially also because I do not have a family, I have no responsibilities for any other person that way, I have no children to take care of, so the job is a way to keep me in check. So, without a job I

would have to have other ways (for regulating his life), but I think I would find other ways to solve it.

Furthermore, as noted in previous examples, some participants specifically emphasized the sense of social exclusion and negative effects on relationships that were generated from not working. They associated an absence of employment in life with feeling disconnected from others and the rest of society, in which the majority of others were perceived to be experiencing and living according to the structures generated in working life. In this sense, the everyday scripts for doing, goals, and social contributions generated from wage labor were associated with the perception of being part of society by making a small contribution to a larger whole. This resonates with previous findings and theoretical suggestions about community involvement and belonging as central sources of meaning in work situations and participation in working life in a wider sense (Bailey et al., 2016; Doherty, 2009; Pattakos, 2004).

Yngwie, 57-year old college teacher working in a large scale prison, reflected on the structures and routines generated from his working life, and how these aspects were key for being in temporal and practical sync with others:

A: If you were to become financially independent, to attain 30 million for some reason, so that the financial incentive to work disappeared, what would you do with your life in such a case?

Y: (Laughs). The immediate thought is probably that I would not work. But then in hindsight, it is possible that I may work anyway. I never thought I would say that (laughs), but there is a certain sense of security in the routines (the daily routines and doings generated through working life). I have been like that (in a situation where he did not work). (...) Because you... As I said before I may be a little more introverted, but that I... That gets boring as well. "Now you're going to hang out downtown Yngwie". Yeah right, everyone else is at work, that sounds like fun (refers to "fun" in a sarcastic manner and laughs), like, no, that would be...

A: So, you compare yourself with others then, because the others are still at work (in an imagined situation in which he were not working)?

Y: Exactly.

The phenomenon of valuing of working life in a wider sense for its broader recurring life structuring reasons, was also prevalent among study participants who indicated that they did not necessarily experience any

deeper meaning in the concrete work tasks and the goals aimed at and reached in the work setting. Among these participants, being at work performing work tasks and reaching organizational goals, tended to be experienced as alienating and largely lacking intrinsic meaningfulness. Working did not align with one's personal values, desires, and needs for meaning or any positive societal impact. In these jobs, which were primarily manual and located in the industry- or transport sector, the meaning of working was often described by participants in instrumental terms, with regards to its income generating and consumption enabling function in life.

During the interviews, these participants spoke in a spontaneous manner more about the importance of making money than the participants employed in professional settings. Among the former group, work was often described and experienced as far too regulated, monotonous and repetitive to its form and content to provide a source of intrinsic meaningfulness. As highlighted earlier, a common theme highlighted by participants was that the activity of working was experienced to provide little opportunity for learning and using one's cognitive and practical potentials for decision making and problem solving in the work situation. However, despite such fundamental constraints and sources of boredom and lack of meaningfulness in work, the participants still reported, sometimes being surprised of their own answers, that they valued the life-structuring aspects of being employed in terms of its generation of temporal and practical routines in life in a wider sense.

Jarmo, a 33 year old machine operator in a factory that produces plastic pipes used for underground transportation of fossil fuels, pointed toward the life-structure generating functions and purposes of working life. He indicated that he valued working life in a wider sense because it generates stable routines and a general recurring everyday life pattern for actions and goals:

J: It's not like "no I refuse to work" (manipulates his voice to sound childish in order to illustrate defiance), like, if there is work, damn, I can work, that's no problem. Like, just being at home having nothing to do, I did that, and that's not fun either, because then you just lie down and sleep, you just get depressed.

A: When did you do that?

J: When I worked weekends, only weekends, then I did not really, like... I did not get into any routine. So, it's just like that, I laid down and slept, and then you slept like half the day, and then it was time to pick up the

kids, and then they came home, and then you slept. It was like that. It did not be-come a good routine (laughs).

(---)

J: But I would say that it's that routine thing anyway that makes it... it's really a damn good thing to have. Whether you like it or not, but you still benefit from having certain routines, like, so it's good.

A: Routines and a kind of structure in life?

J: Yes, like, it (life) does not have to be total anarchy, although that can be nice too. Like, it's a bit like chaos in orderly forms that's a bit exciting. So that's probably the relationship I have to my job role, it's probably that it's... it's nice with routines, even if you want to admit it or not (laughs).

Jarmo further expressed appreciation of the ready-to-go predicable action structures, responsibilities, and routines generated from working life. This was highlighted when he compared being at work to being at home. Too much time spent at home was sometimes associated with stress, because it could mean having to constantly come up things and projects to do with the family:

J: But I think it's more stressful with holidays too, because then you know that now you have to invent things to do, and the kids are home for three weeks so you have to do something every day, otherwise they will become completely mad.

A: Having small projects?

J: Yes, so that's like actually damn more stressful than working.

A: I understand.

Similar existentially relevant accounts about the value of the everyday habits and routines generated from working life, were highlighted by Peter, 35, subway train operator. However, for Peter, it was not the discipline-generating aspects of working in terms of predictable and stable routines for doing and goals that were given attention. Rather, it was the repeatedly occurring unpredictable things in work situations and in between them. This could involve being confronted with demanding actions and situations that were specific for work situations:

P: If I could design my work according to my preferences, it would not be the same work schedule, but maybe work every other week or so. Because there are still some points (to working). I think it is rewarding to leave home, get information that you might not normally have chosen, situations,

there is a development in it. Like, all of a sudden you get to meet an obnoxious colleague, and how do you handle that situation, that situation had never arisen (if you had not worked), and of course it would have been nice not to have had it, but it is something that contributes to me growing and learning about myself.

My findings of the general phenomenon of valuing working life for its ongoing and wider life structuring elements, partly resonate with Hochschild's (2001) theory of work becoming home and home becoming work. In an implicit sense, my findings and Hochschild's theory nuances and challenges Marx's original suggestion about employees' alienation:

He [sic!] is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home. His labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labor. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labor is shunned like the plague. (Marx, 1988 [1844]: 74)

Contrary to Marx's suggestion and similar to my findings, Hochschild (2001) suggests that the workplace and its situations may be valued by employees for its predictable and stable sources of responsibilities, doings, and interactions. In this sense, being at work may become a fixed and valued point in life. Despite working life's compulsory and otherwise constraining elements, a defining characteristic of being at work is that one knows what to do, why one should do it, and how and when it should be done (ibid.).

Working Life as Distraction and Safety Net

For some, the predictability and stability for socializing, doing and thinking that is generated in working life for a large proportion of waking hours may become a source of existential distraction and a safety net. From this perspective, working life may become existentially significant beyond the wage because it represents a means for temporarily escaping or putting on hold existential concerns in life outside of work and in general (e.g., loss, death, alienation from others, boredom, lack of orientation in life, loneliness). Since it represents a fixed and predetermined point for doing, thinking, and feeling in life, working life may become meaningful as a wider form of distraction: it may render it possible to forget about life outside of work for a while in terms of its challenges and concerns.

Despite the prevalence of constraining elements in work in terms of meaningfulness eroding, straining, and boring features that just had to be accepted out of lack of choice (e.g., financial pressure, rigid bureaucratic procedures, predictability, productivity pressures, stress in general, and administrative chores), participants highlighted the value of the daily rounds and routines of working. For Iris, 69, recently retired employment officer, the value of the temporally and practically life-structuring aspects generated from working became evident during a particularly difficult time in life:

I: On the one hand, I like working life, I think there is something a little meditative about riding the bus (to and from work), it is a bit like being between home and working life. But it depends, I mean, if you disagree with someone (at work), well that's not so darn fun. If you have done a very lousy salary negotiation, then it is not so much fun. If your co-worker has got cancer or it's a really difficult time, like it was with my husband (who contracted cancer and passed away). When it was all this with my husband, then it was very nice to have a job to go to, actually, that's difficult to deny. And sometimes, it's a real source of happiness (to work). It's so very different (depending on situation), I can't say really. But now I think it's very nice to sit on that bus again ("again" as in now participating in a full-time education program at an art school) and sort of get into this daily round again, the structure (laughs).

A: To get into the routines?

I: Yes exactly.

As discussed in my theory chapters, in existential phenomenological thought and organization theories of sensemaking, it is commonly theorized that the confrontation with imposed "freedom" to act and having to make choices in the face of demanding situations may be a source of anxiety and dread (see, e.g., Weick, 1995; Frankl, 1959). Such situations may be temporarily handled and avoided by engaging in different kinds of actions that can act as distractions from existential concerns. In "Escape from Freedom", Fromm (1965) makes a similar argument to Frankl's but from a Critical sociological perspective. The uncertainty and lack of order the freedom from the constraints and standardized predictabilities of working life entails may cause a sense of isolation, despair, and anxiety in the face of self-determined choice and responsibility for acting. According to Fromm, social constraints may represent a source of security, predictability, and loss of authentic selfhood in the otherwise complex and ambig-

uous nature of life. Fromm suggests that in such cases where “negative freedom” becomes a problem for the individual, she or he “finds new and fragile security at the expense of sacrificing the integrity of his [sic!] individual self. He chooses to lose his self since he cannot bear to be alone” (Fromm, 1965: 283)

I now return to some further empirical examples. Gertrud, a 67-year-old recently retired dentist and manager at a private clinic, highlighted that the predictable and stable structures and habits generated through working life provided a “fixed point” in life during a time of existential crisis and rupture in life:

G: At the same time, a job can be a fixed point in life when other things are in a state of crisis. Then it is very nice to be able to go to a job, which in my case required a lot of concentration and attention, because then I could concentrate on it for a while and forget about the rest. Like having a job and going to it. That was valuable.

A: I understand. Was there any certain period in life when you felt that the job had such a function?

G: Yes, it was especially during my divorce, it was a difficult time.

A: I understand. There was somewhere to go to, where you could focus on other things, because you can't do much else while you are working, you need to be so focused?

G: Yes exactly.

A: Your job as a dentist, it required you to be really focused?

G: Absolutely. You can't think about much else (than the task at hand while working).

Working life and its ready-to-go stable and predictable structures for doing, feeling, paying attention, and thinking in everyday life may thus be valued because it may act as a source of distraction from personal troubles and existentially oriented concerns. In such cases, working life and its recurring stable and predictable structures in everyday life may promote forgetting about existentially burdening situations in life outside of work. In this sense, my findings indicate that sometimes, constraints and the lack of self-determination in work and its everyday structures for time, action, thought, and feeling may facilitate temporary distraction and relative freedom from existential concerns in other parts of life. The participants' ac-

counts that indicated this and my interpretations thereof suggest the prevalence of an ambivalent relationship to paid work in life.

Despite its potentially alienating features, namely, lack of self-determination and lack of sources of intrinsic meaningfulness, and regardless of its rootedness in economic necessity and subordination to external constraints, working life may represent a kind of safety net (see also Jahoda, 1981). At work, one knows what to expect and anticipate from life: it provides general stable and predictable structures for responsibilities, time, doing, thinking, socializing, and feeling. This phenomenon is also echoed empirically in McReynold's study of the meaning of work for people living with HIV disease and AIDS. McReynolds (2001: 104) identified "distraction from the disease" as a source of meaningfulness in work. The phenomenon of valuing working life for its life-structuring effects is also highlighted in Tanaka and Davidson's (2015) study of what participation in a clubhouse rehabilitation program in which the work-ordered-day (WOD) was implemented meant to people with psychiatric disabilities. They found that the temporally and practically life-structuring and socially integrating effects of the WOD program acted as a source of meaningfulness in life for the participants. Participants also appreciated that working enabled them to forget about their illness and problems by focusing on work or health. Participants further indicated that they saw intrinsic values of a working life: it gave them discipline, routine, something to do, and worthwhile reasons for doing it. In this sense, the valuing of the life-structuring effects generated from the predictable and stable everyday routines and purposes of work activities and work situations may act as a source of freedom from existentially oriented constraints and challenges.

Highlighting such existential aspects and latent functions of working, Karl stated,

I have realized, after many, many years, that I am probably a bit of a workaholic. It has been difficult for me to realize that (laughs). But I have no problem with working. And I have, as I told you (...) very few things make me feel safe and feel good, making my anxiety go away and stuff like that. And working is one of those things that make me feel less anxiety. So, it has become a bit of a drug for me, that I feel good when I am working, I do not feel good when I am at home.

Like other participants that highlighted the present theme, Karl spoke of his work as representing a key predictable and stable life domain for general doings and purposes. Like other participants, this involved the

phenomenon that work gave him something else than his own problems to focus on in life. It provided recurring predictable and stable scripts for direction for time, thought, emotion, and action. In this sense, for some participants, working life was valued both as a source of life structure and distraction.

Conclusions – The Value of Life Structuring Aspects

My findings suggest that for employees in either professional or more manually oriented occupations, the broader life-structuring aspects (e.g., temporally and practically ordered routines and habits) of working life may be valued and experienced as worthwhile in life in. Despite or sometimes even because of its agency limiting aspects, the life domain of working life may represent a valued externally predetermined and stable fixed point for socialization, action, emotion, and thought during the waking hours of everyday life. On this point, Jahoda summarizes the value of such existentially significant latent functions of working life in the following way:

First, employment imposes a time structure on the waking day; second, employment implies regularly shared experiences and contacts with people outside the nuclear family; third, employment links individuals to goals and purposes that transcend their own; fourth, employment defines aspects of personal status and identity; and finally, employment enforces activity. It is these not purposefully planned, latent "objective" consequences of employment in complex industrialized societies which help me to understand the motivation to work that goes beyond earning a living and to understand why employment is psychologically supportive even when conditions are bad. (Jahoda, 1981: 188; see also Morse & Weiss, 1955)

My findings about employees' valuing the life-structuring aspects of working life suggest that the practical and temporal structures generated in life through working life may come to represent a stable ready-to-go life script. In this script, the responsibility for what to do, whom to socialize with, and how to think is clearly outlined and largely predetermined. Such latent functions of working life may also be valued for their everyday ordering and socially integrating functions in life in a wider sense. These findings resonate partly with findings from social psychology, in which it is suggested that there is a positive relationship between general everyday routines and meaning in life (Heintzelman & King, 2019). From a social integration perspective, stepping outside of the life-structuring functions of working life for too long of a time may generate a sense of being out of

sync with generalized and significant others and therefore contribute to a sense of social exclusion.

My findings make further sense when interpreted through a social phenomenological lens. The organization and activity of wage labor comprises an economically compelled institution and the primary vehicle for realizing leisure, production and consumption, which are simultaneously viewed culturally as representing a central platform for identity construction. In social phenomenological terms (see, e.g., Schütz, 1967, 1945, 1943), working life and the work situations in which it is experienced can be said to represent a finite province of meaning that comprises externally imposed systems of relevance that are not of its participants' design (for a similar argument, see Lysgaard, 1985). I suggest that these imposed relevance systems are exclusive to working life and may have multiple meanings of positive and negative kinds. Working life has imposed existential relevance since it necessarily structures time, thought, emotion, and action for a large proportion of waking lifetimes.

At an existentially significant intersubjective level, many participants associated their own working lives and participation in wage labor in general with being part of society and others. In such instances, they implicitly made reference to a perceived social whole ("society"). In my view, this further highlights the intersubjective nature of the organization and activity of wage labor as an externally imposed shared set of relevance systems (a primary source of livelihood and social roles). In this sense, wage labor represents a finite province of meaning that is shared by many people. When people feel that they are not part of this form of intersubjectivity in working life and the relevance systems it comprises, they may experience their lives and doings as being out of sync with both significant and generalized others' lives and doings (for a similar argument, see Jahoda, 1981).

Community Involvement – a Double-Edged source of Meaning

A response pattern that occurred on a regular basis among participants across the sample was relating what I interpret as work experiences of meaning to making a difference to others. This socially oriented way of speaking about work experiences and their meaning by connecting them to bigger social or even ontological contexts occurred when participants responded to interview questions in which I intended to probe experiences of meaningfulness (e.g., by asking whether they valued some aspects in work more than others or what was the best/worst thing about the job). Connecting the general work experience to a bigger picture as a way to

reflect on their own and others' work was typically related to perceptions of usefulness ("I think my work is important, because I feel that I am useful", Sandra, 63, care and health information communicator). This was done by participants by viewing the general meaning of working for a wage in light of the experienced broader social usefulness of one's work and the perception of whether working was experienced as an activity directed toward realizing the goal of such usefulness. This emphasis on social usefulness echoes Alvesson, Gabriel and Paulsen's (2016) suggestion that the actual or perceived relevance and significance of one's work to others is a key component for the experience of meaningful work (see also Dur & van Lent, 2018; Graeber, 2018). By "usefulness" or lack thereof, I refer to the study participants' perceptions of what contribution they perceived that the things they did at work made to others and/or society at large and why this contribution mattered/did not matter.

In terms of accounts of experiences of meaningfulness, the participants paid attention to and emphasized the qualitative use value of working in general in prosocial terms. Experiences of meaningfulness were thus typically pointed toward by participants in relational terms when speaking of what social functions in terms of usefulness working had to others. From this relational perspective on meaning (see also Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Schütz, 1967), meaningfulness tended to be related by participants in instrumental terms to a cause-and-effect logic: if work task A produces social outcome B and this outcome is perceived as prosocial in terms of being valuable and useful to others, then the work experience is worthwhile and meaningful. If it is perceived and/or recognized as valuable and useful to others in an ongoing sense, working life itself is more likely to be experienced as existentially meaningful.

The participants' perceived the proximate or remote impact of the outcomes of work on others, and the value assigned by participants to it was oriented toward both organizationally external and internal factors. Broadly speaking, it was reflected at three levels during the interviews and in my analysis of the transcripts thereof: making an impact on others (a) within the organization, (b) on single individuals outside of the organization, for instance, clients, customers, and students, and (c) in general at a broader societal or even metaphysical level (e.g., work that contributes to constructing and upholding important societal functions or in the long run to progress civilization or emancipate humanity from work-related constraints in life). In this sense, although work tasks in themselves and other work situations tended to involve different sources of meaninglessness for

a large proportion of participants, the social contribution aspect of working was highlighted by most participants.

With regard to (a)—valuing and viewing it as important to make a tangible contribution within the organization—this was highlighted by numerous participants when referring to working with colleagues in joint projects. From this viewpoint, one's work was perceived as an important step and function in a larger shared but task-divided labor process and over time. Feeling connected to others and belonging to a joint team effort was central. Several participants highlighted that this involved networking and working together with coworkers, whose work was viewed as filling other important functions and purposes in the broader context of reaching a shared organizational goal. For instance, a communicator, a recently retired employment officer, a recently retired investigator in the public sector, and a special pedagogue spoke of networking and joint problem solving in organizing and performing tasks to reach a broader shared goal as something that they valued and that represented a source of meaningfulness in work. These findings resonate with previous empirical research, where prosocial community involvement and employees' perceptions thereof have been shown to be a key component for the experience of meaningfulness (Cassar & Meier, 2018; Hu & Hirsch, 2017; Bailey et al., 2016; Doherty, 2009; Warming, 2011; Pattakos, 2004).

Regarding (b)—the perceived and directly experienced prosocial impact of work on individual others and its connection to work experiences of meaning, the following aspects were highlighted by numerous participants. Many of those previously or presently working were in jobs where the primary work tasks were directed toward assisting, helping, and guiding other people. Some examples are teachers, student counselors, group managers, employment officers, and communicators. These participants typically indicated that they perceived working life as generally meaningful in life in a spatiotemporally wider and therefore existential sense. From this perspective, note that the general mood of the interview situation changed when some participants became emotionally affected and teared up in a positive sense when talking about times during which they found their work meaningful. When they were directed toward making a positive difference in the lives of individual others, such work activities were perceived and experienced as meaningful in a very concrete way both in work situations and over time and space in an ongoing sense. This phenomenon highlights the concept of calling.

For some participants, this type of meaningfulness denoted that working was connected to a broader life purpose. I interpret this as an expression of a calling to be of service to an actual or perceived wider cause—such as helping others. For some participants, this calling transcended time and space, through which one's other self-interest was both transcended (focusing on making a positive contribution to others) and realized (experiencing making a positive contribution to others as self-actualizing) (see also Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2016). This interpretation resonates both with Frankl's (1959) phenomenological suggestion that the experience of meaning involves transcendence and potential and with previous research findings generated from studies of a wide array of occupations and generations (Bailey et al., 2019; Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2016; Perrone, Vickers & Jackson, 2015; Rosso et al., 2010; Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Scott, 2002; Weber, 1978a).

Perceptions and experiences of making a difference by impacting individual others in prosocial terms was thus something that was both valued at a personal level in the work situation and a broader societal and existential level (one's own and/or another person's life as a whole). This type of meaningfulness and its connection to prosocial outcomes was not restricted to the experienced social use value of the outcomes of work. It was also related to feeling generally useful as an active human being by virtue of doing something useful. In such instances, the participants' accounts indicate that they experienced that when they were an important functional part of a larger meaningfully connected social context.

Now, I offer some empirical examples and my interpretations thereof. In this sense, this type of meaningfulness facilitated a sense of coherence in relation to others and/or society in a larger sense (see also Antonovsky, 1987). Zoe, 69, a recently retired former employment officer, highlighted the phenomenon of finding meaningfulness in work by helping individuals outside of the organization and being able to see a tangible positive impact of one's work efforts over time by doing this:

A: What was important in working life for you?

Z: Well, I really think it is this, to be able to... the meeting (with others), to be able to help or support a person to move forward in their life. So, if you feel that you can, that you... That your efforts help, so that this person gets what it wants, it's very... How should I put it... Yes, it's like getting paid so to speak (using "paid" metaphorically by referring to a sense of being re-

warded and feeling satisfied), by helping others, and to be a great driving force. There is some kind of need for some joy (in work by helping others).

Among the participants, such work experiences and perceptions of making a difference typically evolved biographically throughout their working lives. This temporal aspect echoes Scott's emphasis on biography: previous work experiences and the working life narratives employees generate from them are central components for the work experience of meaning. Nadja, a 67-year-old student/career counsellor who is retiring in six months, highlighted biographically evolved evaluations of self-transcendence in working life in a wider sense:

N: If I put it like this, when I was young, then my experience was directed more toward the things that were the most unattainable. It was important to work, but at the same time you wanted to be able to have fun. But to have fun, you have to have an income. So, then the focus on working was directed at being able to do the things that were fun (in life outside of work). Some years later, I began to understand that it was not entirely easy to get a job. If you do not want to work as a cleaner, you need some education. And then the focus became more on the particular education that I put energy into. There was a satisfaction in seeing that yes, but I am doing something that is good, that makes a difference for others. So, then I shifted a little focus from having fun myself to seeing that I did good for others.

Nadja reflected further on the theme of making a difference to others when asked to look at her working life in retrospect. This time she also spoke of the importance of receiving feedback from clients and its role in her recognition of that she was doing something important in her work:

A: If you look back on your professional life, in your role as a student/career counselor, can you tell me if you have realized what is important in working life for you, what do you value with working, in that particular job?

N: When I get to... when I have a counseling session, when I get the feedback, that well now there is feedback on what I actually said (to the client/student) from the beginning, that I have helped someone. When I discover that this person that I am talking to understands the choices, understands what opportunities she/he has, and that it from this leads to a choice of education. They are accepted to a program, that they attend the education and are satisfied. When I get the feedback along the way, then I feel that this is such a tremendously fun job, that it is creative work, together with people I do not know, to try to produce something, what others

should become (in life). It's a huge satisfaction to get that feedback, that I did the right thing, that I made a difference, that it was good.

The accounts of Zoe and Nadja are indicative of a trend across the sample. From this occupationally and generationally transcending perspective, numerous participants associated meaningfulness with making a positive qualitative impact on the lives of individuals outside of the organization. An important observation in relation to this is that for many participants, this form of intersubjectively significant meaningfulness seemed to be largely dependent on being able to identify and recognize in a tangible way that what one did at work actually made a positive difference to others. This identification and recognition of the positive impact of work on individual others (e.g., students, clients, passengers) did not have to be experienced on a regular basis in order for work to become meaningful. However, recognition (e.g., by receiving positive feedback from those who were impacted by one's work or seeing in a tangible way that what one did make a difference) had to have been experienced in the past. Such past positive experiences seemed to realize the aspect of positive impact on others as an ever-present potential source of meaningfulness in work. These findings resonate with Laaser and Karlsson's (2021) suggestion that both subjective and mutual intersubjective recognition are central components of meaningful work.

Regarding (c), connecting working and its outcomes to a broader societal or even metaphysical/ontological level of impact, this was often done by participants from a longer spanning temporal, more abstract and overarching perspective on the perceived impact on society of their own and others work. These participants indicated that prosocial impacts and the general positive community relevance of the outcomes of work activities were valued. Echoing Graeber's (2018) suggestion that the employees' care about whether and how their work affects others is a key component of the experience of meaningful work, many of my participants cared about the social impact of their work. The work experience became meaningful especially when both the self and others recognized the social relevance and usefulness of one's work. A common feature in the participants' accounts was viewing their work efforts and work outcomes as a small but important part in contributing to the functioning of a societal whole. For some, this perception of social function and its relation to a perceived larger network of social significance generated a sense of pride and perceptions of positive social relevance of what they did at work. Now, consider-

ing some further empirical examples and my interpretations thereof, I begin by returning to Karl, the truck driver.

In the following account, Karl reflected on union activity, implicitly touching upon class, status, and the ways in which differences in attitudes and lack of public recognition toward different types of work can affect one's general work experience. Reminiscent of Durkheim's (1997) meta-physical view and metaphor of society as an organically interconnected totality, Karl used a biological analogy when reflecting on both the broader essential societal function and the large importance his work had for others and society in a wider sense:

K: If you park all the trucks that drive in Stockholm for 24 hours (in the sense of initiating a collective standstill), a third in Stockholm would starve to death, because the food runs out so quickly. We do not have enough trucks in Sweden to be able to save it (the crisis that would emerge), if it (the goods) is left standing still for any longer.

A: A societal function?

Yes, we are a kind of the aorta of Sweden. And we are the most monitored and least liked and have received the least pay increase in Sweden during a 25-year period. So, you definitely do not feel appreciated. (...) We did this thing, "Sweden stops here" in 2015. It was a protest act because we wanted a salary increase and other stuff. And the main union branch and all such associations and other companies were like "we're not going to give you more money, that's not going to happen". I think we had protested for fifteen minutes, we stopped 80 percent of Sweden's trucks for 15 minutes, then we got what we wanted.

However, for Karl, the sense of pride and significance he felt toward his work because of its essential and beneficial function for society was sometimes undermined by experiences of a lack of instrumental and qualitative recognition and appreciation both from peers and from an economic perspective. This echoes previous empirical findings that suggest that how others view and evaluate one's work in terms of its social value and status influences the experience of meaning (see, e.g., Laaser & Bolton, 2021; Bailey & Madden, 2019; Mercurio, 2019; Ulfsdotter & Flisbäck, 2011). Karl expressed that he did not appreciate when his work and its societal importance were not recognized and were taken for granted, criticized, devalued, ignored, and made invisible by others:

K: I've been to parties sometimes... I know a few people in Stockholm who are of a slightly higher educated rank, I hang out with people who probably

earn what I do in a year in a month. It goes like this: "What do you do then?" "I'm a truck driver". "Oh, you guys just pass each other on the road and are in the way all the time." "Mmmm, that's not really true" (ironic tone of voice and makes a facial expression to illustrate annoyance) (laughs). It's not that I defend my job, but I usually explain my take on it.

A: What do people say then?

K: They are very understanding; so it goes from "This is my prejudice against you" to "This is what it looks like", and then "I had no idea". Did you have no idea that everything you buy goes by truck to Stockholm? Wow! (sarcastic tone of voice and expression and a body language that indicates an upset mood).

A: I see, you don't think about it, it (commodities) is just there automatically?

K: Yes exactly, "I go to ICA (a grocery store), and there is food there". Yes, but how do you think the food comes to ICA? How do you think it comes from the peasants to the slaughterhouse, to the process, to the bakery, to everywhere they produce what you eat. There is an industry behind everything you eat. And everything is transported by truck or courier.

Several participants across the total sample expressed similar sentiments when speaking of sources of meaningfulness. In such instances, they connected their work experiences to social functions at a broader societal level. The participants' accounts indicate that recognition from others of these functions was valuable to the work experience of meaning. For instance, Peter, subway train operator, viewed his work in a more abstract way as being generally valuable and important in society and viewed collective human life in a wider historical and existential sense. It filled a societally and civilization-wise critical purpose and function. Operating the train realized people's essential everyday needs for transportation. Peter did not restrict this framing of his experience of meaning to societally essential terms for his own job. Like other participants, he related the general activity of wage labor to a historical context and indicated that he also perceived other occupations in this way:

P: (...) even such jobs that can be seen as junk or dead-end jobs, without being prejudiced, for example, McDonald's, the fast-food chain, which may be difficult for the individual since it is demanding and tiring. Certainly, long hours and other things. But then there is a meaning in it precisely because it in a way represents a piece of human potential and development. And by this, I mean that if you look back in history and consider what kind

of function it fills, that all of a sudden you can get fast, easy, cheap food at any time of the day, which is a result of human development. So, many of these luxury items that you can see as unnecessary are also a form of our development. And there is a certain meaning in that too, even though it may be the case for the individual that "this is just hard, this is just a necessary evil". And then there are also opportunities and space for creating meaning. You may get it through work colleagues or through customer contact, or that you can develop in your area, or that you see that you can climb upwards. Then I also feel in general that work in general, is quite meaningful because whether you are happy with it or not or if you fit in on a personal level, there is a meaning in it because it contributes to that we get to satisfy our basic needs for security, food. Like, it's an extension of being able to have a good life.

Moreover, while recognizing and being slightly critical of the inherently commercial motives of the organization, Max, the group manager/team leader at a call center, connected his own and other employees' work activities and their outcomes to societally and technologically essential functions for society's communication infrastructure:

A: How do you feel that your job affects society?

M: Well, indirectly you can say that it affects society, but directly it is perhaps more of a commercial activity, so to speak. But it is clear that it affects everyone's lives and every-day life. Because it's about mobile telephony, for example, and it's about broadband. And that is the biggest and still upward trend, precisely when it comes to googling different things, you get information, you communicate with each other via computer networks in a completely different way now. So, in a way, it is socially critical that there need to be opportunities for all ages to be able to communicate and enter the new world, if one puts it like that.

Like other participants, Max emphasized that he valued such perceived and/or actual prosocial aspects of his work. On a similar note, Loa, committee secretary in a semilarge municipality, framed his interpretations of the meanings of his work by connecting it to a broader societal picture in an even more transcendent and abstract way. He compared the meaning of his current job to his previous occupation as a researcher in history. Loa had experienced that his work as an aspiring researcher (PhD candidate) was inherently abstract and completely lacked concrete connection to a broader practical societal purpose. He asserted that because of this, he had experienced a profound and ongoing sense of irrelevance-based meaninglessness in his work. This particular work experience echoes Alvesson,

Gabriel and Paulsen's (2017) suggestion that research in the social sciences tends to be useless for society and meaningless for many of its practitioners because it focuses more on form than substance and lacks practical societal relevance and impact for people outside of academia. In contrast, although he also experienced meaninglessness, he viewed the social significance of his present work as committee secretary as a key precondition for experiencing his work as meaningful beyond the wage and job benefits:

L: What I contribute to is adding structure or order to management; it leads to that the non-profit sector can benefit. That it will be easier to have contact with authorities and so on. So, in that way, I feel that there is a societal benefit. Likewise, as I said, we have a very strong focus on non-profit culture and sports activities. There is a great benefit to that if our organization works well. So, I can motivate my own usefulness in some way based on that as well.

A: It's always there?

L: It's possible to... there's a connection to it. Then it may be on an abstract level, but it's there.

A: I understand. Do you feel that what you do at work contributes to making society a better place?

A: It (laughs)...

A: It is a very big question. You can interpret it as you want.

L: Some things probably do. Then it is the case that you can see it as part of the exercise of democracy also that what we do is actually to execute political decisions, and whether they are good or bad is not really for us to value, but it is the politicians and the voters who get to evaluate according to what kind of decisions they make. The things we implement, it benefits society based on what kind of orientation the voters want.

A: So, there is an anchoring, an abstract connection to democracy?

L: Yes, it's on a fairly abstract level, but it is still the case that... Then there are the activities that exist in this administration; they are useful to many. That needs to be recognized.

In a similar vein, other participants also connected their perceptions of the historical and long-term purposes of their work to a more abstract level of society and existentially to perceptions of human civilization itself as a whole. Pontus, blaster/odd jobber, who prior to this interview response reflected on the potential impact of artificial intelligence and tech-

nology on humanity, situated the general activity of wage labor and framed its meaning beyond economic necessity in a utopian context:

A: Is there anything else that has to do with meaning in work that I have not asked about but that you may have thought about?

P: Well, it's probably this. It's a bit like this: people work to get money, and I understand that, because I'm like that as well. But you should still work, no matter what industry you are in, in order to progress humanity. Because... I don't know... I believe in that.

A: Do you think it is a contribution to... (participant interrupts question)?

P: Yes. It's like this; just the thing that we work with something and then we're just content with wearing ourselves out (from work). Or... It's hard to... (seems to struggle a bit to put into words what he means). Because some day, it should not be like this. It's weird. (...) It must be like... Well, because sometimes it feels like humanity does not really want it to get better. But I want that (emphasizes "I" by raising voice and prolonging the word). And if nobody tries to make it better, then it will not get better. So, I guess I have that kind philosophy a little bit. But I also want to, I want to go to work and do what I have to do, and then I can go home and eat my food and drink my beer and hate the world (referring to having a critical attitude in general toward society and the things he thinks are wrong with it). But still, I kind of don't want to do that. So, it's a bit ambivalent.

A: Yes, I understand.

P: It's a bit contradictory.

This assertion from Pontus highlights a general trend across the sample. Among many participants, it was common to have this type of ambivalent relationship to one's own job and to the significance of wage labor in society in a wider sense. On the one hand, they indicated that they knew and felt that working was an inescapable economic source of subsistence and that it lacked intrinsic sources of meaning. They needed the wage, and there was not much to do about that. On the other hand, there were indications among some participants of a will to connect their work to something larger beyond the immediate work situation. This highlights Frankl's and some meaning of work scholars' suggestions that the transcendence of both the self and the situation in the here and now is a key component for the experience of meaningfulness (Bailey & Madden, 2017; Frankl, 2014 [1988], 1959). As noted above, this form of socially oriented transcendence was pointed toward specifically when the participants spoke of their

perceptions of the smaller or larger social significance and usefulness of their work to others.

The Darker Side of Community Involvement

Now, specifically in terms of the perceived social usefulness of the activity and outcomes of work, I turn to a darker side of employees connecting their work experiences to bigger pictures. In the existing meaning of work research, community involvement is typically framed as positive and a central source of meaningfulness in the work experience of meaning.

Some participants explicitly reported that they perceived the social impact of their work as destructive. In such cases, connecting working and its outcomes to a broader societal level limited opportunities for experiencing meaningfulness both from a situational and existential perspective. This phenomenon was highlighted especially by the two participants who worked in a factory that produces plastic pipes used for the underground transportation of fossil fuels and by Stefan, 30, warehouse worker and safety representative (union position), who works in a factory/warehouse that produces and stores tubes and hoses that are used for industrial equipment (e.g., transmitting hydraulic oil). The former two participants asserted explicitly that they felt that the things they produced at work and the purpose of these objects when put to use in society largely contributed to making the world a worse place. This work experience was related to the nature of the product and its broader area of practical application. Because of its contribution to pollution and environmental degradation, they experienced and perceived that their work had negative effects on the world and humanity at large. For these participants, connecting work to a broader societal perspective was something that could contribute to making the work experience even more meaningless to a large extent than it already was. The following was from an interview with Werner, a machine operator:

A: If you won 30 million or something like that...

W: Yes...

A: So, if you were to do that, you would not continue working in the job you have now? (this question has a particularly leading character because the participant had indicated this earlier during the interview when he spoke of financial independence).

W: No, not for a second. Not for a second.

A: Would you miss anything from that job?

W: Yes, I guess that would be the closest co-workers, but you can actually contact them (outside of work). There is nothing with the work itself that I would ever think "oh this I would miss". Because it's so damn meaningless in the end.

A: When you say that, I think that I understand what you mean, but are you talking about social significance and such things?

W: Yes, yeah but... Let's say if we were to produce something that was good on the whole, then I think you would feel that yes, what the hell, now we did something good! Well, of course people need to refuel their cars (short laugh), but (laughs briefly again) if you are a little more environmentally conscious, the whole thing still becomes negative.

A: If you think about it in a larger way like that?

W: If I were to try to see anything positive with the job, then there is no such thing in what I do either. It's only negative. We dig plastic into the ground, which poisons (short laugh). Like, there's nothing good in that, unfortunately (serious and sad look on his face and lowered tone of voice).

Regarding assertions about the social impact of the job, Werner's and Jarmo's accounts were very similar. These assertions highlight that making sense of and understanding what one's work means in relation to the bigger picture may not render work meaningful. In such cases, the work experience may involve double-edged perceptions of both contributing to the common good and making the world a worse place. Werner recognized that his work contributed to a critical social function by satisfying society's and people's need for fuel and therefore enabling transportation. However, making sense of the outcomes of work and the social value thereof may simultaneously have negative influences on the work experience of meaning. Stefan, warehouse worker, compared his present job with previous work experiences. He made similar comments as Werner and Jarmo regarding the ecological impact of his job but also recognized that his company and those they delivered products to may work toward sustainability goals.

S: I remember when I worked at a grocery store; then, I felt a sense of pride in what I did. Like our ecological products are good. Then, I was young and a vegan. The company put much effort into developing and buying such products. Then I felt that well, this is in line with my values. And now, sure, it's like... We send hoses to excavators that drill the ground in India

or wherever it might be. And that's a bit "uuhh" (makes a facial expression and tone of voice that indicates disgust). No... Then again, they work with sustainability I guess, in some ways. But it's not like I feel that I contribute to the climate issue with what I do.

An additional aspect was significant in Werner's and Jarmo's accounts of work experiences of meaninglessness. In contrast to Stefan, who asserted that he was generally satisfied with his current job because it gave him a stable income, was not too physically or mentally demanding, included opportunities for meaningful interaction with others, and did not include shift work, they tended to frame such work experiences by emphasizing that they would have liked to work with something else. Such references included occupations that they thought had a generally positive social impact. This again highlights the general tendency of participants across the sample to frame the meaning of their own work experiences by comparing and contrasting them with other jobs, i.e., either previously experienced ones or ones in society in general. The two machine operators referred to previous work experiences in other jobs in which they had experienced a more positive societal contribution. For instance, Jarmo spoke of having experienced a deeper sense of importance and meaningfulness when he worked temporarily with producing health care equipment at another factory during parts of the COVID-19 pandemic to support the health care sector.

Among these participants who expressed a wish to work with something that had a more positive impact on society, another way to frame the meaning of their work experiences was to use existing occupations on the labor market similar to those of other participants as a reference point for what they considered societally useful and therefore meaningful work. In this sense, the perceived social usefulness of what others and oneself did at work was a central component for framing work experiences of meaningfulness. Examples of social comparisons made by the participants were often oriented toward jobs in which they perceived that people were helping others (e.g., teachers, health care workers, counselors). However, the two machine operators' ways of making sense of and valuating their work experiences of meaning in relation to a broader societal context suggest that it may not necessarily be desirable for the employee to think about the social impact of her or his work. For the two machine operators, the impact of their work on the social/natural world was therefore not something that was reflected upon on an everyday basis ("I try not to think about it"—Jarmo, the machine operator). This phenomenon can be inter-

preted as being related to my above findings of employees' desire to keep working life and the rest of life distinctly separate.

In the professional job category, the negative relation between the experience of work meaning and the environment was typically nonexistent. However, Zoe, a recently retired employment officer who spoke of viewing her work as rewarding because it involved helping others, highlighted that work may be experienced as both situationally meaningful and existentially meaningless. She connected her work activities to human activities in general, which she framed in broader existential terms and perceived had wider existential impacts on the world in the form of environmental degradation:

A: Did you feel that your job helped to make the world a better place?

Z: No, I can't say that.

A: In what sense do you mean that? The world is quite big, but society?

Z: No, I can't say that. Maybe I was hoping for that when I was 20 years old. No, I think the world has become both a worse and a better place but not because of what I did (at work), I think. One could wish that was the case (laughs) (referring to making the world a better place). No, but it is better in that it is a more open society today. Well, right now I can't come up with anything other than this thing with gay people or that we are now more accepting of differences and such. It is not the same harshness as it has been. But worse when it comes to the environment. I mean, it's awful, it's going to hell, so to speak. And so on.

It is important to note that Zoe's response was not indicative of any general trend in the assertions made by the participants in the professional group. A recurring pattern in such participants' assertions about community involvement and its relation to their work experiences was that it was typically perceived as a central source of meaning in their working lives as a whole.

Conclusions - Community Involvement

My findings suggest that employees may frame the meanings of their work experiences by connecting them to their own experiences and perceptions of their social impact. This social impact may refer to the work setting in broader terms, others, or society as a perceived whole. Furthermore, employees' experienced and/or perceived social usefulness of work may represent both a source of meaningfulness and meaninglessness. My findings of the former resonate with previous research, where community

involvement has been found to represent a key source of meaningfulness in and at work (see the literature review chapter). As suggested by Graeber (2018), employees' perceptions of, experiences in, and care about making a positive contribution to others through one's work often represent a central source of meaningfulness. For the employee, this socially significant source of meaning gains prominence if both the self and others recognize the social value of their work (see also Laaser & Karlsson, 2021). Employees' perceptions of the social importance, value, and relevance of their work in relation to other contexts thus have an existential character. Such socially significant ways of framing work experiences of meaning transcend both the self and immediately experienced work situations. My findings of community involvement as a source of work meaning echo general theories of meaning. In such theories, the relation between the self and others and the human capacity of going beyond the here and now in thought and practice, are suggested to be a defining characteristic of the general experience of meaning in life (see, e.g., Heidegger, 203; Frankl, 2002, 1959; Baumeister et al., 2013; Antonovsky, 1987; Schütz, 1943). In sum, my findings of how the participants make sense of and value the significance of their work to others highlight that interpretation and evaluation are key interlinked components in the experience of meaning, which is always already relationally grounded (Martela & Pessi, 2018).

My findings also suggest that employees may not value or desire to pay attention to community involvement aspects of their work. On this point, the sense of coherence generated from framing the meaning of one's work experiences and outcomes thereof by connecting them to a perceived bigger picture in terms of the social usefulness of one's work is not always positive for the employee. Transcending the here and now of the work situation by interpreting the broader impact of one's work efforts in relation to society and other people may render the work experience less meaningful/more meaningless. For some employees, their perceived social usefulness of their own work may ultimately be experienced as negative for both the social and natural world. Some employees may therefore prefer not to care or think about wider socially relational aspects of their work. These negative aspects of employees' perceptions of the community involvement aspects of their work may be one further explanation for why some people want to distance themselves mentally and practically from their jobs both while at work and in life outside of work. My findings of negative aspects of employees' perceptions of community involvement factors nuance previous empirical and theoretical meaning of work con-

siderations. Such commentators typically emphasize positive connotations of community involvement, such as enabling solidarity, overcoming alienation, belonging, or facilitating beneficial work outcomes for groups or society as a whole (see, e.g., Graeber, 2018; Antonovsky, 1987; Sievers, 1986; Blauner, 1964; Marx, 2013 [1867], 1977 [1844]; Fromm, 1965).

Conclusions and Discussion

The objective of this thesis has been to contribute to a sociological mapping that the meaning of work scholars have typically overlooked, namely, of both general and particular sources of situational and existential meaningfulness and meaninglessness in the lived experience of wage labor. I have not intended to re-examine or create causal explanations for work experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness in a particular work setting or occupation. As a whole, the thesis contributes to, nuances, and resonates with previous research. As a characteristic of exploratory studies in general, my overall findings are diverse. A general finding is that work experiences and perceptions of situational and existential meaning (meaningfulness and meaninglessness) arise in, are relative to, are part of, and reproduce both particular social contexts, situations, and a broader social ontological context. These contexts need to be understood both spatially and temporally (see also Bailey & Madden, 2019, 2017). My empirical findings can be summarized as follows.

(a) The wage is a fundamental economically unavoidable and existentially necessary reason for being at work and performing tasks there in the first place. Professional and manual employees value their wage because whether they like it or not, they need it to make a basic living and beyond. In this sense, the general work experience is initially always related to economic necessity and instrumentality.

(b) Not being oneself (inauthentic) at work can be perceived by professional and manual employees as a given and necessary condition of how to be and act at work as an employee. For some, not fully being oneself can even facilitate being professional and doing the job in an adequate or good manner. Inauthenticity at work may therefore facilitate experiencing working as more tolerable and doable than otherwise. For some, not fully being oneself at work in terms of performing work roles and tasks that are not necessarily aligned with one's "truer" self may even contribute to rendering the work experience more meaningful than otherwise. In general terms, inauthentic selfhood at work may not necessarily be pleasant but is

perceived and experienced by employees as practically necessary and functional both for themselves and the organization.

(c) Professional and manual employees' lived work experiences of leaders' and subordinates' contrasting interests in and understandings of how to perform work in purposeful, reasonable and thus rational ways, can be a source of meaninglessness at work. In their lived experiences of performing concrete work tasks, employees may come to perceive that managerial prescriptions of how to perform work are far from what is practically useful and rational to the organization and themselves in their roles as productive and efficient employees. In this sense, when put into practice in work situations, managerial work prescriptions may be experienced concretely and come to be perceived by employees as irrational and meaningless for the core purpose of their job.

(d) From an existential meaning perspective, professional and manual employees may value working life for its broader latent functions. In such cases, working life attains a functionally oriented form of existential meaningfulness. My findings suggest that key valued latent functions generated from working life are ongoing and stable routines and habits for time, thought, emotion, and action for a large proportion of waking hours in everyday life.

(e) Professional and manual employees' work experiences from past and present occupations influence what they pay attention to in their present work in terms of sources of meaning and expectations and anticipations of what meanings to find in their current job in the first place. This indicates that employees make inferences and generalizations from their previous work experiences when framing and describing their present work experiences and what they value in them.

(f) Nonwork activities may be valued and experienced by professional and manual employees as more meaningful than the performance of work tasks and the attainment of work goals. Doing things at work that are not related to the formal features of the job itself can facilitate crafting the work situation into something more meaningful than otherwise. This type of agential construction of experiences of situational meaningfulness can be facilitated if the employee can consciously or unconsciously disconnect mentally and/or practically from the work task at hand (e.g., by thinking about an activity in life that is not related to the work task and is experienced as meaningful). This is especially prevalent in manually oriented occupations when work is experienced as monotonous, repetitive, boring, or lacking meaning in more general terms. In such cases, employees' en-

gement in nonwork activities at work can be interpreted as expressions of conscious or unconscious agential responses to experiences of meaninglessness.

(g) The habits, routines, and temporal rhythms of working life may become embodied and spill over to life outside of work. In an existentially significant way, this form of internalized and thus embodied work centrality may become especially apparent during the first days or weeks during or after vacation leave in terms of thinking about work and being concerned about work-related issues. This is especially the case for professional employees. In such instances, it may become difficult to disconnect mind/body from work while not at work. This existentially significant phenomenon challenges existing dualistic conceptions of work centrality. Work centrality refers to the relative importance given by employees to work at any given moment in life. In previous work research, work centrality has been conceptualized primarily as preferential and in a dualistic way (working life and life outside of it are distinctly separated in mind and body) (see, e.g., Manuti, Curci & van der Heijden, 2018; MOW International Research Team, 1987). These findings also raise existential sociological questions about the relation between work centrality and socialization into and inside working life.

(h) In an existentially significant sense, professional and manual employees may prefer to disconnect mentally and physically from work while not at work. They may want to keep the work self and the nonwork self distinctly separate in terms of time, thought, action, emotion and roles. This split in consciousness and identity may, however, be difficult to achieve because the embodied form of work centrality described under (g). When work has such embodied centrality in life, it can become difficult to leave it behind in life outside of work.

(i) Making a positive difference to others through work and employees' perceptions thereof are key social factors for facilitating both manually oriented and professional employees' work experiences of situational and existential meaningfulness. The social relevance of the work or employees' perceptions thereof may generate a sense of doing something useful that matters to others. This form of experienced community involvement may also facilitate the experience of belonging and unity in terms of being part of a group. However, if employees perceive that the outcomes of their work are detrimental to others, the organization, society at large and/or the natural world (e.g., ecological impact), they risk experiencing their work and its relation to the broader community as meaningless.

An Updated Janus Face

The general argument and findings of this thesis echo Bailey's and her colleagues' (2019) suggestion that people's work experiences of meaning are characterized by situatedness, paradoxes, ambivalence, heterogeneity, and plurality. As noted by other work sociologists, although they share general technological and economic components at a structural level, work organizations are complex and diverse, containing both formal and informal features that constrain and facilitate the general work experience and agency at work (Lysgaard, 1985). Thus, as suggested by Harding, there is

no such thing as a homogeneous organization; organizations have within them numerous other organizations, and a single place may be the location of several or numerous "organizations" (...). Attempts to apply a single theory of meaningful work, whether managerialist or critical, to such fluid, unstable, dynamic, emergent "entities" are unwise. (Harding, 2019: 135)

When interpreted from a social phenomenological perspective, the overall accounts from the study participants suggest that depending on what the employee expects from, anticipates and pays attention to in work situations, a job can be experienced as both meaningful and meaningless (see also Iatridis, Gond & Kesidou, 2021; Mercurio, 2019; Humle, 2014). For employees across occupations, organizational life and the more or less rational conditions under which it takes place involve experiencing, performing and navigating multiple roles, situations, and work experiences that include experiences of both meaningfulness and meaninglessness occurring sometimes simultaneously (see also Konstantinos, Jean-Pascal & Effie, 2022; Harding, 2019; Humle, 2014). In this sense, work organizations can be viewed, as Harding (2019) suggests in relation to the quotation above, as *heterotopias*. On this note, an important finding in this study has been that work experiences of situational meaningfulness or meaninglessness may not necessarily be related to the performance of work tasks. Rather, meaningfulness or meaninglessness may stem from other sources, such as relationships with others and conditions that are not related to work tasks in themselves and their goals or outcomes. Additionally, at an existential level, work situations may be experienced as lacking meaning, while working life as a whole is experienced as existentially meaningful for generally life-structuring or other reasons (e.g., helping others through work). In other words, the metaphor that wage labor has a Janus-Face can also be applied to my findings (see also Laaser &

Bolton, 2021; Aronsson, 2015; Furåker, 2014; Paulsen, 2010; Shershow, 2005; Ciulla, 2000; Jahoda, 1981).

The Value of Latent Functions of Working Life

My findings also show that the Janus metaphor should not be exaggerated. On this point, this thesis also contributes to the empirical observation that there are general conditions that influence work experiences of meaning across occupations and occupational sectors. This adds nuance to the previous meaning of work debates, where commentators often make broad but primarily theoretical claims about how general working conditions affect work experiences of meaning either in terms of meaningfulness or meaninglessness.

As a general existential condition, participation in working life may indeed be experienced primarily or partly as an economic compulsion and inescapable necessity in life. In such cases, which was more common among study participants employed in manually oriented occupations, working life as a whole represents an obstacle that needs to be overcome in an ongoing way to attain money for sustenance and to facilitate doing more meaningful things in life outside of work. Despite such instrumental and alienating conditions, working life may simultaneously and perhaps paradoxically be valued by employees for its latent functions in everyday life in a broader practical and temporal sense. My findings suggest that such latent functions of wage labor in life can have existential significance for individuals employed in professional or manual occupations (see also Jahoda, 1981).

Either spontaneously during the interviews or in response to questions related to existential imperatives, presently employed and recently retired participants valued the life-structuring aspects of working life in terms of its broader implications for the everyday structuring of actions, goals, time and socialization in terms of routines and habits. In this sense, in regard to my research question of under what conditions employees' work experiences of meaningfulness are facilitated, the latent functions of working life may represent a condition for existential meaning in life (see also Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2016; Jahoda, 1981). For some, this existentially relevant feature of working life may become manifested specifically when working (being at work and focusing on work-related things) and can act as a distraction from sources of suffering in life. This form of suffering may involve experiences of losing another or feeling lost and not having a direction in life in general. In such cases, the predictability and stability of the

highly structured routines and habits generated in and through working life may represent both a distraction from existentially significant concerns in life and a safety net. In previous research, such findings about the influence of the broader latent functions of working life on experiences of meaning have typically been highlighted in studies of people who experience other sources of psychological and/or somatic suffering in life, such as terminal or psychiatric disease (see, e.g., MacLennan, Murdoch & Eatough, 2022; Tanaka & Davidson, 2015; McReynold, 2001).

Recognizing the Significance of Recognition

A further red thread in my findings is that recognition and employees' experiences and perceptions thereof in relation to the social relevance of their job are conditions that matter for the work experience of meaning, both in subjective terms ('I recognize that what I am doing at work is valuable and thus meaningful') and in intersubjective terms ('others recognize what I am doing at work is valuable and thus meaningful to them. Therefore, I recognize that my work is valuable and thus meaningful' (see also Laaser & Karlsson, 2021; Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen, 2017; Honneth, 1995). These findings have relevance for answering my research question of what conditions facilitate or hinder employees' work experiences of meaningfulness. My findings suggest that work experiences of meaningfulness are facilitated if the employee her/himself can recognize through perceiving or actually observing that her or his work makes a positive difference to others and therefore matters in a broader sense. This is especially true if others (e.g., colleagues, organizational leaders, clients, customers) also recognize the social usefulness of her or his work efforts and the employee is aware of this recognition from others. If such perceived or directly experienced recognition of social values of work efforts are lacking, experiences of meaninglessness may emerge both in relation to the work situation and to working life as a whole (see also Graeber, 2018; Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen, 2017). As noted by Laaser and Karlsson (2021), such aspects of recognition and their relation to work experiences of meaning have been largely overlooked in previous work research.

My findings of the significance of recognition for work experiences of meaning and their joint relation to the employees' perceived or concretely experienced social impact of their work highlight the intersubjective nature of the lived experience and the social construction of meaning (see also Heidegger, 2013 [1927]; Schütz, 1967). They add the suggestion that work experiences of meaning cannot be reduced to individual psychologi-

cal phenomena but also have to be understood and analyzed in relation to larger and smaller intersubjective arrangements both inside and outside of work settings (Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen, 2017; Dekas et al., 2010).

The Significance of Temporality

One of my objectives has been to explore how employees describe their work experiences of meaningfulness/meaninglessness when framing them and whether they describe them in particular ways. In relation to this objective, a key suggestion and finding in this thesis is that people's past, present, expected and anticipated future work experiences in general and of meaning and the working life narratives they construct based on them influence how they frame, interpret, and describe their current work experiences and what they value/do not value in them (see also Scott, 2019). Manual and professional employees partly interpret, describe, and frame their present work experiences and what they value/do not value in them based on inferences and generalizations that they make from their previous work experiences (see also Scott, 2019; Schütz, 1967). On this biographically related and temporal note, my findings suggest that employees' working life biographies influence what sources of meaning they expect and anticipate finding at work in the first place. The biographically evolved, accumulated and anticipated work experiences, expectations, values, and beliefs about work and its meanings and opportunities for agency people bring with them into the workplace may influence what level of agency, meaning, and purpose they expect to find and experience in the workplace in the first place (see also Scott, 2019; Mercurio, 2019; Manuti, Curci & van der Heijden, 2018; Isaksen, 2000; Goldthorpe, 1971).

A novel and particular observation in the present study is that if people have previous work experiences and currently work in manually oriented occupations with low levels of negative freedom and work autonomy, they may be more attentive toward valuing absences of certain regulations and constraints in the work situation. In such work experiences, when framing and describing what they value in their work, employees may focus on such absences rather than being attentive toward locating the presence of certain sources of meaning.

Previous work experiences and their influence on employees' present ways of framing meaning may thus be different for people depending on shared group characteristics, such as generation, occupational types, or socioeconomic status/class. This raises questions about whether work

experiences of meaning and how employees' frame them to begin with by drawing on their previous and accumulated work experiences may have a stratified character. However, such assumptions remain speculative and remain to be explored empirically and systematically. Nevertheless, my findings give rise to methodological and interpretive concerns about conflating manual and professional employees' work experiences of meaning in terms of how they interpret, frame, and describe them. Such conflation tendencies are prevalent in the existing meaning of work literature (see also Bailey et al., 2019).

The Problem and Resource of Functional Inauthenticity at Work

Another objective of this thesis has been to explore whether there are conditions across occupations that influence employees' work experiences of meaning. In relation to this research objective, a recurring theme has been the self and its relation to the facilitation and constraint of subjectivity at work. Not being oneself at work was indicated by the participants in four particular forms: (a) not being oneself in relation to work roles; (b) not being oneself in relation to others; (c) not being oneself in relation to work tasks; and (d): modifying one's definition of and attunement toward the work situation to render it more meaningful and/or tolerable and thus doable. There may thus be different reasons why people experience/apprehend that they cannot or do not want to be themselves at work.

However, as illustrated in this thesis, the general phenomenon of not being oneself at work and its widespread character across different occupations evokes general questions about subjectivity and alienation at work and the relation of the phenomenon to the general work experience of meaning and how employees may frame it to begin with. My findings highlight that across occupations, employees' suspension of their authentic self at work is a general condition that influences their work experiences of meaning. On this note, I suggest that a defining general characteristic of work experiences across occupations is not truly being oneself while at work. This suggestion highlights a fluid perspective on the self and its relation to authenticity/inauthenticity at work. This fluidity is related to employees' performance of occupational and professional identities. My findings suggest that the general experience of work situations and meaning in them can be viewed as characterized by an ongoing balance act between one's more "authentic" self and different work-related Selves (see also Konstantinos, Jean-Pascal & Effie, 2022). In employees' performance of work roles and their lived experience and perception of what is required

of them in such roles and the work situations in which they are performed, they may unconsciously/consciously assume a distinct work role and work mindset. My findings suggest that this role and mindset can be rather different from roles and mindsets in life outside of work. Expressed in social phenomenological terms, this means that being at work is characterized by a socially acquired and habituated disposition (mode of being) that is exclusive to how the self is experienced and performed at work (see, e.g., Muzzetto, 2006; Schütz, 1945).

Partly echoing (neo)Marxian interpretations of alienation, my findings thus suggest that people have a distanced and alienated relationship to themselves at work, their work roles, and others at work (see, e.g., Alfonsson, 2020; Marx, 1977 [1844]). However, for conscious or unconscious pragmatic and integrity-related reasons, not being oneself at work may represent a condition that has positive connotations for employees' work experiences of meaning. For the employee, if referred to in an unorthodox and more existentialist way than the original Marxian conception, alienation may become both a problem and partial solution to experiences of meaninglessness and demanding work situations (see, e.g., Ciulla, 2000). For some, separation of one's authentic self from work tasks and work roles may even represent a precondition for rendering the work experience more tolerable, doable, and/or even more meaningful/less meaningless than otherwise. Being inauthentic at work may also make it easier for people to do a good job according to organizational standards of what purposeful and worthwhile activities are. In this sense, since it may benefit both the human system and the technological/economic system, what I have chosen to call functional inauthenticity at work has significance and thus matters for both the individual and the organization.

Not being oneself and not expecting to be able to be oneself at work in terms of being true to one's desires, needs, values, preferences for meaning evoke questions regarding subjectivity at work and its relation to work experiences of meaning. If people based on their accumulated past and present work experiences consciously or unconsciously do not expect or anticipate being able to and do not want to be themselves at work in the first place, then their subjectivity may change significantly when entering the workplace. For those who consciously do not want to be themselves at work, remaining functionally inauthentic in work situations may be a source of self-determination, since they may intentionally choose to keep their authentic Selves or parts thereof suspended.

In a more abstract sense, perhaps being inauthentic at work can even be interpreted as an act of authenticity in itself, since it may be performed consciously to protect the integrity of one's more authentic self and to appear professional in front of others (e.g., colleagues and clients/customers). As suggested by Costas and Fleming (2009: 356), when emphasizing the separation of the self from general work situations as key characteristics of organizational life, it can "provide relief by opening up a space of self-determination and sincerity within tightly controlled environments".

Based on my general findings of the relation between the authentic/inauthentic self and work experiences, I suggest that it is important for us meaning of work scholars not to presuppose that peoples' self and thus expressions of subjectivity at work are entirely the same as those outside of work and that they are preserved in and across work situations or that employees view it as desirable to fully or partly be themselves at work. Such starting point assumptions presuppose that people value and desire to import their supposedly more authentic self into the workplace from the outside—a self that supposedly has a core that is stable over time and space. This implies a form of subjectivity whose presumed essential core remains unaffected by and resistant to the explicit and implicit formal and informal regulatory powers and constraints in the workplace.

In terms of putting on a work face and a work role that are specific to the general work experience, the work-Self may take on a standardized mode that is exclusive for being at work. Therefore, there needs to be an openness among the meaning of work scholars toward the possibility that selfhood and thus expressions and doings of subjectivity at work may be very different from subjectivity outside of work. In the work literature, it is typically assumed that authentic selfhood in the workplace is a key precondition for the work experience of meaningfulness; if there is a fit between the self and work in terms of values, tasks, and relationships with others, the work experience is likely to be meaningful (see, e.g., Martela & Pessi, 2018; Bailey et al., 2017; Rosso et al., 2010). My findings suggest that when exploring and trying to understand work experiences of meaning and social influences thereon, it is important to consider the fluidity of the self and its relation to functional inauthenticity in work situations.

Interpersonal Sources of Meaningfulness and Meaninglessness

One of the objectives of this study has been to explore the question of under what conditions employees' work experiences of meaningfulness are

facilitated or hindered. On this point, my findings highlight that across occupations, interpersonal conditions in work situations can be sources of both experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness at work. Regarding the former, colleagues, cooperation and socializing at work may be a key reason for looking forward to going to work. For some, especially those in highly alienating and agency constraining manually oriented occupations, it may become a primary or only source of meaningfulness. Regarding interpersonal sources of meaninglessness, my findings also suggest that employees across occupations may experience interaction with others at work (e.g., colleagues and others) as lacking meaning. This finding can be interpreted as related to the inauthenticity construct. On this point, employees may experience that they have little in common with work colleagues besides their work roles. In such cases, interaction with them is experienced as distracting, shallow, rather insincere, and/or emotionally draining, and thus inauthentic (see also e.g. Heidegger, 2013). This negative aspect of relationships with others at work puts into question overly positive accounts and ideals about socializing at work, which emphasize that they facilitate social integration, solidarity, and meaningfulness. Such considerations about the value of relationships with others in working life and their integrating functions are reflected in extant research, for instance, labor market policy discourses about wider functions and meanings of wage labor in people's lives (see, e.g., Paulsen, 2010; Junestav, 2001). My findings highlight that in terms of representing sources of meaning for employees in both manual and professional occupations, interaction with others at work is a double-edged sword.

Organizational Realities Apart

One of my objectives has been to explore under what conditions employees' work experiences of meaningfulness may be hindered. A key finding in this thesis is that there is one power-related organizational condition that influences employees' work experiences of situational meaning across occupations in detrimental ways. This situational condition is employees' perceptions and lived work experiences of a separation and dissonance between their own understanding and definition of what is reasonable and meaningful to pay attention to, care about, and achieve in work situations. It involves employees' lived experiences and developed perceptions of having a different understanding than managers of the core purpose of the job, doing a good job, and how one should work in order to do so.

In such instances, the essence of that which was previously experienced and perceived as meaningful and sensible in the work situation may become experienced by the employee as partly lost or wholly absent. It may therefore give rise to work experiences of meaninglessness. My findings indicate that such work experiences of meaninglessness may emerge, especially when employees perceive and experience in very concrete ways in everyday work situations that they are or have become micromanaged. In such instances, they may experience that they are robbed of exercising their own judgment and being trusted by leaders to take responsibility for working efficiently and productively. In such work situations, employees may perceive and experience practically that they have to perform work according to one-sided, top-down prescriptions that go against their many-sided and therefore allegedly better knowing of the concrete work situation and what is reasonable in it in terms of doing a good job. Since these conditions are experienced to make it more difficult to carry out the job in a rational and purposeful way, the employee may feel that she or he has to perform work in primarily formal ways that actually lack practical significance and thus are not really worth caring about in practice.

Viewed in light of Braverman's (1999) main thesis, the dissonance between subordinates' own everyday work reality and their perception of leaders' organizational realities and what they care about in them highlights the separation of conception from execution of work tasks in work organizations. Management ultimately has the final say in how, when, where and why to plan, organize, and execute labor processes in certain ways. In terms of what is rational and purposeful in work performance, subordinates may not agree with managerial ways. My findings suggest that in general terms, employees' experience of a separation and dissonance between subordinates' and leaders' organizational realities in terms of conception and execution may become an organizationally rooted process that contributes to generating work experiences of meaninglessness.

In essence, these findings shed light on the power asymmetrical structure of the organization and wage labor activity in society and organizations and its constraining influence on work experiences of meaning across occupations. Specifically with regard to the limits of the employment contract in terms of opportunities for self-determination and autonomy at work and the empowerment to have the final say in how work should be organized and performed and for what reasons (Yeoman, 2014a). From this perspective of structurally and systematically limited agency at work, the experience of a lack of control and power in the work situation is a

condition at work that is related to work experiences of meaninglessness (see also Blauner, 1964).

In more abstract terms, this phenomenon highlights Lysgaard's (1985; see also Skorstad, Axelsson & Karlsson, 2019) suggestion that the workplace can be understood meso-and macrostructurally as comprising a technological/economic system and a human system. These systems are in tension and conflict with each other in terms of one-sided instrumental needs and many-sided human needs, preferences, desires and wants. From the microperspective of the employee, not being able to change the situation and the experience of not being listened to by management representatives when airing concerns about the experienced irrationality of certain top-down implemented aspects in work may be a contributing factor in the construction and experience of this type of structurally related form of meaninglessness in the work situation. In such instances and at the subjective level, to borrow from both Frankl (1959) and Lysgaard (1985), *the will to meaning at work becomes hindered by the inexorable and insatiable one-sided needs of a technological/economic system*. These needs may be expressed in management's primarily economically motivated practices for maximizing productivity and efficiency through the rational conception and organization of labor processes (see also Braverman, 1998). It is relevant to speak of a will to meaning here, since the participants who highlighted this phenomenon indicated that they wanted to do a good job, but that top-down prescriptions of formal work requirements hindered them from doing so. In such instances, the situational meaning associated with doing a good job became compromised.

At a more abstract and macro level, my findings shed light on the structural conflict between capital and labor, specifically, its manifestation in work experiences of meaning among study participants who worked in private companies. This antagonistic relation has been identified and explored in relation to private companies and primarily by Marxian-oriented and other critical sociology of work commentators (Alfonsson, 2020; Marx, 2013 [1867]; Braverman, 1999). However, my findings highlight antagonisms and clashes between the economically rooted instrumental rationality of the technological/economic system and the human system in both public and private organizations (see also Axelsson, Karlsson & Skorstad, 2019; Lysgaard, 1985). My finding of employees' lived work experiences and perceptions of dissonance and clashes between subordinates' and leaders' organizational realities can be interpreted as a social phenomenological expression of this structural antagonism. With some

modification, one could say that this antagonism is also reflected in the tension between top-down financial pressure and subordinates' work experiences of meaning. Across occupations, this tension may become manifested at the microlevel in employees' perceptions and lived work experiences, two organizational realities that are at odds with one another in terms of how to perform work in ways that are meaningful both to the organization and employees. These findings challenge the dominant and dualistic assumption in the leadership-oriented meaning of work research that leaders can and should define work situations and the things needed in them in terms of how to perform work in reasonable and meaningful ways.

Work Meaning – a Conceptual Suggestion

A further objective of this thesis has been to explore whether there are general conditions across occupations that influence employees' work experiences of meaning. By integrating theoretical and empirical arguments, I have suggested in general terms that the practical and temporal conditions under which the experience of meaning takes place and is constrained/facilitated may be very different or even unique at work compared to those in life outside of work. Specifically, as illustrated in my figure 2 on page 126, this difference and uniqueness in conditions for meaning is manifested in the tension and antagonism between one-sided and inexorable economically rooted instrumental needs of the organization and the many-sided subjective needs of employees (see also Axelsson, Karlsson & Skorstad, 2020; Lysgaard, 1985). In this sense, the subjective and structural conditions under which work experiences of meaning take place are relative to specific situations and conditions that are unique for the world of wage labor. This relevance of situatedness and context to work experiences of meaning was indicated implicitly by the majority of the participants in that they viewed the economic reason for being at work and performing work tasks there as primary and obvious. The economic compulsion and its one-sided relation to the distinctiveness of performing work roles in order to make a living, is further indicated indirectly and subjectively in my finding that people across occupations may want to keep work and the rest of life cognitively, identity-wise, and practically separate in rather distinct ways. Economic compulsion, and the role as employee and forms of subjectivity associated with it, are rooted in the necessity of generating a basic livelihood and beyond is typically not a primary reason for actions and practices in life outside of work. Further-

more, the economic compulsion and uniqueness aspect of wage labor was highlighted when participants across occupations asserted that for reasons related to performing work roles and professional identities at work, they did not want to or could not fully be themselves at work. Additionally, the uniqueness of the structural conditions for experiences meaning in work situations as compared to situations in other life domains, was also highlighted when the study participants indicated that they and management representatives operate in different organizational realities. Specifically in terms of how to define and understand what is reasonable and achievable in the concrete work situations. I suggest that lived experiences and perceptions of such a distinct polarity between one's own and leaders' organizational realities are specific for the domain of wage labor.

Based on these findings and arguments, and by drawing on social phenomenology (see, e.g., Schütz, 1967, 1945, 1943), I offer the following conceptual suggestion. As a finite province of meaning in which the needs of the technological/economic system are typically in friction with the needs of the human system (see also Lysgaard, 1985), workplaces in the formal labor market are constituted by economically rooted imposed relevance systems. People do not choose the economic relevance of working in life, the way in which work is ultimately organized and performed, their roles as employees, or the persons to work with in terms of the same level and superordinate colleagues. These economically rooted structural conditions and how they influence the self at work and thus work experiences of meaning can be viewed as specific for the world of wage labor.

There are many different work forms that may represent sources and finite provinces of meaning in life, such as artistic work, domestic work, and gardening work, but the work form of wage labor under employment and self-employment is unique in that it is socially, ontologically and ideologically rooted in and mediated by economic necessity (Karlsson, 2013). In conceptual terms, I therefore suggest the following. Since the lived work experience of meaning may be fundamentally different from the lived experience of meaning outside of work both in subjective (the Self at work) and objective terms (conditions for experiencing and constructing meaning), it may be more appropriate to use the term *work meaning* than "meaning" when referring to experiences of meaning in work situations that take place under conditions of gainful employment in the form of wage labor. I suggest that it is more appropriate since it may facilitate conceptual clarity in terms of specifying that work meaning and the conditions under which it is experienced and constructed are unique to the

world of wage labor. In this sense, using “work meaning” could counteract tendencies of normalizing the economically compulsory and asymmetrical power structures of wage labor in workplaces and society. The most common way of referring to experiences of meaning in wage labor in the literature is to refer to “experiences of meaning” or “meaningful work”. In my view, the use of such imprecise terminology risks giving the impression and producing the narrative that wage labor is just like any other social domain in terms of sources and opportunities for meaning. This may obscure both the economic necessity and economic structures of wage labor in society and peoples’ lives, and their actual and perceived influences on organization, activity, and experiences of meaning in the workplace and life in a wider sense. Some authors do use “work meaning” when referring to the experience of meaning in wage labor, but it is typically done in a non-systematic fashion (see e.g. Scott, 2019; Duffy, Duffy, Autin & Bott, 2015; Fock, Yim & Rodrigues, 2010). Finally, when using “work meaning”, there also needs to be an openness toward modification and variation, depending on structural aspects such as whether the work experiences in question take place in regular paid occupations (wage labor) or in self-employment.

Study Limitations

Like any study, the present one has shortcomings that I may or may not have been aware of. I will now highlight limitations that I did not discuss in my methodological discussion. The first is related to methodology. My study cannot be regarded as phenomenological in any traditional sense. Rather than employing phenomenological analysis in the form of reduction and bracketing of theoretical and other preunderstandings, I draw on social phenomenological theories of social reality and meaning and use them partly as a heuristic device for (pre)understanding organizational structures and their relation to work experiences of meaning. In this sense, my study has been hermeneutic phenomenological. Initially, I intended to focus primarily on making an empirical contribution to the field. However, as I kept surveying and assessing the field, I noted that a sociological theoretical contribution was asked for by other scholars and needed. However, in the end, my somewhat theoretically dominant focus may have overshadowed my empirical and phenomenological aspirations. It may have colored my interpretations of the participants’ accounts of their work experiences more than initially intended.

Second, in this study and in the research on meaning of work in general, it remains unclear whether and/or to what extent people think about the meaning of their work while at work or in life in general. Like other qualitative studies, the present study is an interpretation of how a small and selectively chosen number of people talk about, share, value, and make sense of their work experiences retrospectively when responding to theoretically laden interview questions in a research interview. How, when, where how often, and why people think about the meaning of their work during actual workdays and outside of them and how related social and temporal factors may affect the overall experience of situational and existential meaning remain to be explored. On a similar temporal note, it also remains to be explored whether or to what extent experiences of meaningfulness and meaninglessness are sustained and for how long of a period, and “how intensely the individual needs to find their work meaningful for it to be deemed ‘meaningful work’” (Bailey et al., 2019: 495). The same can be said about the experience of meaningless work, which, as noted in my literature review, is typically overlooked in the present meaning of work research.

Third, my study has been a sociological exploratory endeavor that focuses on diverse and general work experiences across a wide array of factors, such as occupations, work situations, ages, and potential differences between them. A limitation here is that in terms of focus and comparison, I have not stayed true to any analytical distinction between work and work experiences in public organizations and private companies. To advance understanding of the general and particular characteristics of work experiences, future studies need to focus on employees’ work experiences in specific work roles, occupational sectors, occupations, and their associated work situations.

Last, my study and meaning of work research in general are rooted in Western intellectual traditions, with biases and predominant influences such as male perspectives, enlightenment rationality, and dualistic thinking. Such viewpoints may be privileged or overshadow that there are other and non-Western conceptions of reality, work forms, work experiences, and meaning that may or may not correspond with Western ones. More openness to other ontologies and epistemologies could provide novel insights into work experiences of meaning and social influences thereon (see also Rosso et al., 2010).

Future Research Opportunities

A partial objective of this thesis has been to explore how social phenomenological insights can contribute to or challenge previous research on the meaning of work. Based on my findings and assessment of the primary and adjacent literature in the field, I suggest that there are a number of additional future research opportunities that may inspire scholars to conduct further investigations on the following topics.

Cultural differences. This thesis nuances the field by contributing empirical findings of work experiences of meaning in Sweden. As noted earlier, it is a country that is uniquely characterized by highly individualistic ideals, conventions, and norms that valorize self-realization and individual autonomy in relation to constructing and experiencing meaning in life. In terms of cultural differences, countries may differ significantly in such aspects and in their dominant work norms and work ideologies. Future studies could, therefore, focus on comparing the experience of situational and existential meaning in and between culturally and/or ideologically heterogeneous countries, for instance, employees' work experiences of meaning in current or former non-Western countries with past or present socialist/communist characteristics (e.g., Russia and China) and (neo)liberal capitalist societies. It would also be relevant to focus on employees who have work experiences from occupations in both communist/socialist and capitalist societies but have transitioned from the former to the latter, or vice versa.

Socialization. A further contribution to the field by this thesis is that I challenge dominant psychologistic and individual-centered conceptions of work experiences of meaning. Psychological perspectives are important and indispensable, but I contend that meaning always already needs to be understood and analyzed in relation to a social context. Depending on their background in life in a broader sense and in relation to work experience, people may acquire, develop and have different attitudes toward work and differ in what sources of meaning they anticipate and expect to find in work. On this note, future studies could focus on exploring socialization factors in relation to people's socialization into working life and their apprehensions of it. Does socialization affect people's working life biographies, general dispositions (e.g., habitus) and what they anticipate, expect and/or want from their work in terms of meaning in the first place? Such questions could be explored, especially in relation to younger employees or individuals who are about to enter into employment for the first time. Younger individuals' present and future work experiences of

meaning and the sources of meaning they expect to find in working life tend to be overlooked in the meaning of work literature. On this point, it would be relevant to conduct comparative longitudinal studies of younger people (e.g., of different socioeconomic status/class), starting during preemployment age and then following their work experiences over time. Such studies would include a temporal focus of both past, present, and future work experiences and therefore facilitate existential sociological understandings of what it means to individuals to work for a wage in terms of their perceptions of its value-based significance at work and in life in a broader sense.

Gender. In my review of the empirical meaning of the work literature, I identified that gender perspectives are scarce. Regarding gender-related socialization factors and their potential relation to group differences, more research is needed that focuses on the lived work experiences of meaning of women and other sexes and the gender roles associated with them. For instance, women are overrepresented in certain occupational sectors (e.g., in health care and clerical occupations). More gender-sensitive perspectives could open up possibilities for comparing and identifying differences in employees' lived work experiences of meaning in terms of, for instance, what aspects of the work situation they direct attention to when speaking about sources of meaningfulness and meaninglessness and for what sociologically relevant reasons they focus on such aspects. Do men and women frame and describe their work experiences (of meaning) in similar and different ways? On this note, some studies suggest that "women are more inclined to seek work meaningfulness than men" (Iatridis, Gond & Kesidou, 2021: 1403).

Spatiotemporal factors and social influences thereon. I have argued theoretically and shown empirically that temporality is an overlooked topic in the meaning of work research and that it is a key component in general in work experiences of meaning. My empirical findings and assessment of the literature raise new questions of when, where and how often people think about the meaning of their work, why they do so, and whether social factors influence such thinking and the apprehensions associated with it. To advance the understanding and knowledge of such sociotemporal factors, future studies could be designed by combining narratively structured working life diaries in which employees share their day-to-day work experiences of meaning both while at work and outside of work with participant observation. Ideally, to give the research a more biographical focus and existential orientation that takes into account both structural and

subjective factors and their intertwinement, such studies could be combined with a longitudinal working life course design of work experiences in particular occupations across time and conducted as interdisciplinary efforts.

Class. The existing meaning of work researchers tend to focus primarily on middle-class subordinates' work experiences of meaning. As noted by Bailey (2019: 484), research tends to be biased toward "occupations where one might reasonably expect there to be high levels of meaningful work". This thesis contributes to and nuances the literature by including accounts of lived work experiences of meaning from people working in manually oriented occupations and findings of differences between how manual and professional employees frame and describe their work experiences of meaning. To advance the knowledge of potential differences between occupational groups in terms of how people frame and describe their work experiences of meaning (e.g., socioeconomic status) and how social factors influence these aspects, the research field needs more comparative studies that focus on different occupational sectors and occupations therein.

Moreover, to advance knowledge, understandings and normative assessments that may influence organizational change to the better for all employees, future studies could benefit from having more focus on both employees in stigmatized, manual, precarious, and dirty occupations and managerial work. Regarding the latter group, my interviews with people in managerial positions were very limited numberwise. However, my findings indicate that management representatives need to perform an ongoing balance act between satisfying both the needs of the technological/economic system and the human system (see also Lysgaard, 1985). Such organizational factors and the balance that it requires from management representatives may generate working conditions that are unique for organizational leaders and their work experiences of meaning.

Morality. Other domains of work experiences of meaning that could be explored further are occupational sectors and jobs therein that may be perceived by employees and others as morally ambiguous here and now and futurewise. This may involve organizations and occupations that are related to existential risks, such as military organizations, producers of war equipment, and organizations, and occupations related to the fossil fuel industry or other sectors that have negative ecological impact. Such morally ambiguous occupational domains have been introduced but are still only touched upon in the present study.

Family structure. From a family structure perspective, future research could focus on whether family constellation aspects influence employees' work experiences of meaning, including factors such as single household, marital status, parenthood, and breadwinner role. Such factors and their potential influence on work experiences of meaning, which may be partly gender related, have been glanced at but remain largely overlooked in the present study and previous literature.

Discourse and ideology. Language-oriented analysts may find it interesting to focus on the varying academic and political discourses about what meanings wage labor has and ought to have for the individual and society in a larger sense. A recurring observation in this thesis is that there are stark differences between leadership research-oriented scholars and postwork theorists in their epistemological and normative preconceptions and conceptions of what is or ought to be meaningful or meaningless work for employees. Additionally, another discourse-focused research opportunity is to explore how the experienced meanings of wage labor are depicted normatively and framed experientially in the fiction literature or other popular cultural discourses.

Existential focus. Regarding the meaning of work debates in general and academic contexts, I agree with other commentators' suggestion that debates about wage labor and its meanings to individuals and society could benefit from having a more explicit and direct existential orientation. I have intended to contribute to this. Such an orientation includes taking into consideration that working life is not separate from human life itself: whatever happens and is experienced during its situations is ultimately taking place within a context of finitude and mortality (see also Hägglund, 2019; Paulsen, 2014; Sievers, 1986; Fineman, 1983). From this existential perspective, as suggested by Hägglund (2019), all time spent working is ultimately part of a lifetime (see also Marx, 2013 [1867]).

As noted by Bengtsson and Flisbäck (2021), the existential relevance of wage labor became even more pertinent today when related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has brought to the fore, restructured and redefined some of the old and taken-for-granted ways of organizing and performing wage labor (e.g., remote work and peoples' different needs for social interaction). If interpreted as a collectively shared existential imperative, it can be argued that the pandemic has also catalyzed many people into reassessing and rethinking the position and centrality of wage labor in their lives and what is left of them (Bengtsson & Flisbäck, 2021). On this point, management scholars use the expression "the great resigna-

tion” when referring to extensively increased job leave during and in the wake of the pandemic (Gandhi & Robison, 2021). One key aspect in this novel and unequal working life landscape in terms of possibilities and constraints is the newly introduced possibility for at least parts of the more privileged and societally nonessential workforce to work remotely. For work-life balance-related issues, such as decreasing work-family conflicts, commuting, and less stress and time waste, many employees have indicated that they would like to continue having the opportunity to work from home.

Change and Alternatives?

As noted initially, this study is inevitably part of a moral and political landscape in which questions of human dignity, meaning, and identification of who has the power to influence the conditions under which such aspects are facilitated and constrained are brought to the fore (see also Yeoman, 2014; Roessler, 2012). It therefore raises policy relevant questions related to how to change working life practically to the better and whether or to what extent the meaning of work research has relevance for policymakers and employees. This involves questions about humanizing working conditions by reducing suffering and facilitating aspects such as autonomy, recognition, and freedom. Such questions also include how to facilitate opportunities for work experiences of meaningfulness and how to reduce the risks for work experiences of meaninglessness (see also Yeoman, 2014; Roessler, 2012).

Relative freedom and responsibility. My findings indicate that employees across occupations want more freedom in their work. On this note, they also want to be trusted with more responsibility to exercise their own judgment in their work in terms of how to perform it in a reasonable and flexible manner that promotes doing a good job (e.g., meaningful, productive, and efficient). Here, I refer to the existentialist conception of responsibility, which denotes that the general experience of meaningfulness in life is associated with exercising capabilities through judgment and responsibility in and for action (see, e.g., Frankl, 1959). As noted in my empirical findings and by others, employees across occupations but primarily in those with strictly circumscribed work autonomy often feel constrained and deprived of such meaning related aspects in their jobs (see, e.g., Laaser & Bolton, 2021; Eklind-Kloo, 2020; Alfnsson, 2020).

However, such responsibility and the relative work autonomy associated with it should not be externally imposed from above. It needs to be in

line with employees' experience-based definitions of what responsibility entails, why it is reasonable, and why they value it. My findings suggest that in terms of meaning in the workplace, there is a need in both professional and manually oriented workplaces to improve communication and democratic relations and practices between managers and subordinates. As suggested by other commentators, such as Yeoman (2014a), Bailey and Madden (2016) and Sievers (1986), managerial approaches toward facilitating the experience of meaningfulness in work need to take into consideration this power-related and workplace democracy aspect. And as theorized by Bailey et al. (2019: 494), "Normative controls or the 'symbolic manipulation of meanings' (...) can serve to coerce employees into the acceptance of poor or even harmful working conditions, the felt need to act 'as if' work were meaningful, or engender a sense of alienation". Thus, rather than bridging the gap between managerial rhetoric and employees' lived work experiences, top-down attempts at influencing employees' work experiences of meaning may promote experiences of meaningfulness (see also Bailey et al., 2017; Alvesson & Spicer, 2012).

The knowledge generated in this thesis thus adds to the following existing suggestion. Neither meaning of work scholars, management representatives nor policymakers should have as an analytic or normative starting point the assumption that experiences of meaningfulness can or should be defined, constructed and provided by leaders or others in authority positions through various top-down means. For example, through unproblematic and ultimately economically motivated strategies such as job design and workplace culture engineering. As noted in the introduction chapter, such top-down interventions may well promote *opportunities* for work experiences of meaningfulness. However, they should not be viewed and used as one-size-fits-all strategies for influencing employees' own lived experiences of what is meaningful or meaningless in work situations. If opportunities for meaningfulness in work situations are to be facilitated, they need to include employees' experience-based definitions of what is meaningful and not in their work. On this point, as suggested by Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009: 503-504), making meaning "is a condition of being human" rather than something that can be defined, created, prescribed, and "supplied" by some external authority (see also, Yeoman, 2014a; Frankl, 2010, 1959). In other words, efforts at promoting of work experiences of meaning need to have a democratic character where employee's experience-based voices, concerns, and definitions of their work situations are taken into account.

However, my findings also indicate that people across occupations may want to keep working life and the rest of life practically and cognitively separate in rather distinct ways both at work and outside of work in terms of what they want to pay attention to, do, and in relation to their identities. Such distinct existential and situational separation may in itself be experienced by employees as a form of freedom from work. This existentially significant finding gives further fuel to the argument for making an analytic distinction between situational and existential work meanings. It is possible that it may be difficult for employees to find personally valued incentives and motivations for becoming more involved in decision-making and planning at work, at least if such aspects would mean that working life takes up an even larger proportion of waking lifetime in terms of attention, emotion, exertion, and identity. On this note, as suggested by other commentators, too much meaningfulness in work may lead to the neglect of and have detrimental consequences on relationships outside of work in terms of what people do with their time and pay attention to in life (Bailey et al., 2019; Lysova, 2019; Kuchinke et al., 2019).

Ecology. The topic of experiences of meaning in wage labor is related to the relationship between human influence on ecology and existential risk. Greta Thunberg (2018) shed light on this contemporary pressing and temporal relationship when asserting that since change is needed now and not later, it was pointless for her to educate herself to become a professional climate scientist in order to change the world and do it for a living. Similarly, some postwork-oriented theorists inspired by Marxian and critical conceptions of alienation call for larger systemic changes. They emphasize the severe ecological impacts associated with the organization, activity, and outcomes of wage labor and put forth the argument that comprehensive change is needed. The motivation for this change is grounded in reasons related to environmental and social sustainability. Basic income, degrowth, reduction of working hours (e.g., part-time work), and reduction of consumption are suggested to be viable alternatives to be aimed at realizing in practice (Hoffmann & Paulsen, 2020; see also Larsson et al., 2021).

Radical suggestions. A social phenomenological argument in this thesis has been that wage labor represents a finite province of meaning that is built upon imposed relevance systems that are rooted in economically motivated instrumental rationality. In a somewhat truistic way, this means that as long as the imposed economic reason for being at work remains intact, the employees' will to obtain meaning in work and experiences of

sources of meaning in work settings in the formal labor market will always already be regulated, mediated, influenced by, and situated in structural conditions that are rooted in an economically motivated instrumental logic.

Referring to this structural condition of work, other contemporary work sociologists and meaning of work commentators view revisionism (e.g., better working conditions) as inadequate for facilitating structural changes to the better for all employees in terms of promoting work experiences of meaningfulness and regaining control over their lives. In this vein and while staying partly true to the original Marxian interpretation of alienation as abstractly determined by economic structures and concretely experienced in work situations and life in a broader sense, Alfonsson (2020, 2017) suggests that the dissolution of alienation is possible only through the liberation of work from economic ends. This ultimately refers to an upheaval of the monetary market logic (see also Marx, 2013 [1867]; Gorz, 2010). Such more radical suggestions are grounded in the vision of an establishment of authentic workplace democracy, where the purpose and value of the work performed is rooted exclusively in the noneconomic rational production of socially useful values in the form of commodities and services. However, an ever-present question in relation to such suggestions and visions is whether they will remain mere yearnings for something different or can become realized in practice. This also includes the question of whether the road to well-intended profound changes in social and economic structures will need implementation of a noneconomic form of instrumental rationality and whether this form of rationality can avoid becoming overly functionalistic, objectifying, and authoritarian in itself (Arendt, 2017 [1951]; Gorz, 2010; Mannheim, 2009 [1949]).

Technology. Technological forecasters discuss change factors in light of actual and potential promises and risks of current and coming automation and computerization of tasks or entire occupations in both white- and blue-collar sectors (Frey & Osborne, 2017). These commentators suggest that automation and the exponential development of computerization is one of the biggest socioeconomic challenges for industrialized societies. For intertwined technological and economical necessary reasons and their relation to the replacement of old work tasks and occupations, comprehensive structural changes across the labor market are suggested to be highly likely to continue and intensify (ibid.).

What the future holds and whether or to what extent comprehensive changes to the better in terms of facilitating opportunities for meaningful-

ness will take place in the world of wage labor in the near or distant future depends on policymakers' and union representatives' political interest in and appropriation of such agendas. It ultimately also depends on employers', employees', and other citizens' awareness of, interest in and support of them.

Final note. The overarching aim of thesis has been to clarify and deepen sociological understandings of lived work experiences of situational and existential meaning in wage labor. Sociological studies are sometimes criticized for lacking relevance and meaning to both sociologists, others, and society at large. In such instances, sociology is criticized for merely stating the obvious – things that we already knew (Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen, 2017; Lysgaard, 1985). Against this background, my hope is that the knowledge and questions generated in this thesis is interpreted by others as more than what some critical meaning of work scholars refer to as “trivial discoveries, mundane realizations, or simply confirmations of what is already widely known and accepted” (Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen, 2017: 17).

Whether or to what extent the knowledge in this thesis can open new doors for both critical and inclusive discussions that can facilitate practical change toward more meaningful and dignified work for all is for others to assess individually and collectively. Hypothetically, such change could entail continuing to conduct normatively, methodologically, and epistemologically diverse debates but in less siloed and more consciously and systematically interdisciplinary ways (see also Rosso et al., 2010; MOW, 1987). Such debates, in which the meaning of work scholars' and others' opposing perspectives and different hierarchical positions are allowed to meet and clash not only remotely in academic writings and debate articles, need to continue including room for pluralistic critique and viewpoint diversity. On this last note, an overarching argument in this thesis has been that the meaning of work debates in general need to consider more employees' first-hand accounts of their lived work experiences of meaning and how social factors influence them in constraining and facilitating ways.

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Appendix 1

Research Review Procedure

My general review methodology was semi-systematic and polymorphic (Snyder, 2019; Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen, 2017). Regarding the former, as noted by Snyder

when wanting to study a broader topic that has been conceptualized differently and studied within diverse disciplines, this can hinder a full systematic review process. Instead, a semi-systematic review approach could be a good strategy for example map theoretical approaches or themes as well as identifying knowledge gaps within the literature. (Snyder, 2019: 334)

Regarding polymorphic methodology, it is characterized by “moving between fields in order to attain cross-fertilization and the joys of serendipity” where for example “economics, religion, psychology, history, organization and philosophy merge into theories that cannot be confined to any particular one of these disciplines” (Alvesson, Gabriel & Paulsen, 2017: 90). By adopting a semi-systematic polymorphic methodology, I set out to identify studies from different disciplines that according to my assessment of the authors’ research questions and results are sociologically relevant for learning about and assessing the present field. The purpose of my review was to generate a sociologically relevant overview of the historical and present state of knowledge in the meaning of work research literature that focuses on employees’ experiences of meaning/lack of meaning in work situations and what meanings/lack thereof participation in working life bring to life in a broader sense. Besides focusing on single studies, I also included other sociologically relevant reviews. These reviews give a complementary and general overview of the field.

I conducted my literature searches in the following databases: Primo, Google Scholar, Sociological premium Collection, Sociological Abstracts (SOCAB), and Applied Social Science Index and Abstracts (ASSIA). Searches were performed continuously during the period 2018-early 2022. I used the following inclusion criteria:

- Peer reviewed articles

- Exploring questions of why employees experience their paid work as meaningful or meaningless
- Published in scholarly journals
- Available in English or Swedish

I read the abstracts of all the search generated articles that were not obviously irrelevant to the purpose of the review (some article titles immediately revealed that they were irrelevant). All articles relevant for the purpose of the review were retrieved. After reading abstracts and retrieving relevant articles, I engaged in close reading. Since some articles could not be sufficiently evaluated merely by reading abstracts, this step enabled me to further decide which articles to exclude. Duplicates of articles were sorted out immediately when discovered during the reading of abstracts.

Since there is a dearth of empirical meaning of work research and since it is a young field that has flourished the most recent years, my temporal search scope was set to 1950 to present. In order to identify literature relevant for my research objectives, I used different combinations of search terms. I used both English and Swedish terms. My search strings in Swedish were directly translated from my English versions. In order to identify literature relevant and central for probing and assessing the field, I used a number of different search terms and strings, boolean operators and truncations as means for specifying and tailoring searches. After an initial period of trial and error, the following search strings were shown to be the most fruitful when searching in the databases Sociological premium Collection, Sociological Abstracts (SOCAB), and Applied Social Science Index and Abstracts (ASSIA).

AB, TI, SU(meaning of work*) OR (meaning of occupation) OR (meaning of wage labor) OR (meaning of labor) AND (high-skilled) OR (low skilled)

AB, TI, SU(meaning of work*) OR (meaning of occupation) OR (meaning of wage labor) OR (meaning of labor) AND (professional) OR (manual)

AB, TI, SU(meaning of work*)

AB, TI, SU(meaning of work* AND review)

AB, TI, SU (existential meaning AND work OR (occupation) OR (wage labor) OR (labor)

AB, TI, SU (meaninglessness AND work OR labor)

AB, TI, SU (meaningfulness AND work OR labor)

AB, TI, SU(meaningless work OR meaningful work OR meaningful work OR meaningless work)

AB, TI, SU(meaning of work* OR (meaning of occupation) OR (meaning of wage labor) AND retirement)

AB, TI, SU(meaning of work*) OR (meaning of occupation) OR (meaning of wage labor) AND noft(sociology)

AB, TI, SU(occupational transition AND meaning AND retirement)

noft(meaning of work*) AND noft(sweden)

AB, TI, SU(meaning of work*) OR (meaning of occupation) OR (meaning of wage labor) OR (meaning of labor) AND (high-skilled) OR (low skilled)

AB, TI, SU(meaning of work*) OR (meaning of occupation) OR (meaning of wage labor) OR (meaning of labor) AND (professional) OR (manual)

AB, TI, SU(meaning of work*)

AB, TI, SU(meaning of work* AND review)

AB, TI, SU (existential meaning AND work OR (occupation) OR (wage labor) OR (labor)

AB, TI, SU (meaninglessness AND work)

AB, TI, SU(meaningless work)

AB, TI, SU(bullshit jobs)

AB, TI, SU(meaning of work* OR (meaning of occupation) OR (meaning of wage labor) AND retirement)

AB, TI, SU(meaning of work*) OR (meaning of occupation) OR (meaning of wage labor) AND noft(sociology)

AB, TI, SU(occupational transition AND meaning AND retirement)

noft(meaning of work*) AND noft(sweden)

For searches in Primo and Google Scholar, I used simpler and broader separate strings such as “meaning of work”; “meaningful work”; “meaning and work”; “meaning of working”; “work and meaning”; “meaning and wage labor”; “meaningfulness and work”; “meaningfulness in work”; “meaninglessness and work”; “meaninglessness in work”.

Widening my search scope by including a larger number of databases from other disciplines (e.g. psychology) would have yielded more and richer findings. However, since my study is sociological, I limited my searches to social science articles or sociologically relevant articles from adjacent fields. In spite of such limitations and according to my interpreta-

tion of other reviews of meaning of work research, my review is a representative sample of general sociological tendencies in the field.

Appendix 2

Study Participants

Pontus, 30, blaster/oddjobber. Single household. High school degree. Main work tasks: sand blasting various forms of industrial equipment. Cleaning work, loading/unloading goods.

Karl, 32, truck driver at a private firm. Single household. High school degree. Main work tasks: driving a truck between loading/unloading facilities, unloading/loading of goods, planning routes and how to follow transport law requirements, implementing the plans in his work.

Werner, 34, machine operator in the plastic industry. Lives with spouse and one child. High school degree. Main work tasks: Operating, monitoring, and maintaining machines that are used for producing plastic pipes used for underground transportation of fossil fuels. Assembly line-type of manufacturing tasks.

Jarmo, 33, machine operator in the plastic industry. High school degree. Lives with spouse and three children. Main work tasks: Operating, monitoring, and maintaining machines that are used for producing plastic pipes used for underground transportation of fossil fuels. Assembly line-type of manufacturing tasks.

Peter, 35, subway train operator. High school degree. Has credits from some university courses. Lives with spouse. Main work tasks: Operating a subway train (e.g. opening/closing doors in order to let in/out passengers, taking the train from various A-B points within a strict time schedule, following strict safety routines.

Stefan, 30, warehouse worker and safety representative (union position). High school degree. Lives with spouse. Main work tasks: keep track of product deliveries, load pallets, sort products, take care of inventory, and order materials. Pick, package and complete incoming orders and deliveries. Receiving and unpacking deliveries that come to the warehouse as well as checking and placing these on the warehouse shelves. Forklift driving. Requires a forklift driver's license and training, which his previous employer paid for.

Georg, 30, correctional officer. Double bachelor's degree. Main work tasks: administrative and inmate-related work in the daily life of a prison, such as implementing and keeping track of daily routines. In contact with inmates, correctional officers monitor safety and order. They guard the inmates, search them and plan their release. Through conversations and counseling, they motivate them to reflect on their situation.

Loa, 35, committee secretary in a municipality office. Lives with spouse and one child. Master's degree and unfinished PhD-education. Lives with spouse and one child. Main work tasks: Board administrative work both towards the district board and towards the board's social delegation. The work includes sending invitations, participating in preparation meetings, compiling documents for meetings and keeping minutes at meetings

Karin, 64, job coach/internship coordinator at a municipality office. Single household. College degree. Main work tasks: Helping and supporting people who are looking for work, for example by setting goals for the job seeker and helping with writing CVs, cover letters and finding suitable training courses or internship positions.

Carina, 64, special pedagogue for younger adults in need of additional educational support. Lives with spouse. Master's degree. Two adult children. Main work tasks: works strategically and preventively to remove obstacles to students' learning. Conducting educational investigations, but can, if necessary, take help from, for example, speech therapists. Based on the student's needs, the special education pedagogue then designs which extra adaptations or special support the student needs.

Zoe, 69, a recently retired former employment officer. Bachelor's degree. Single household. Two adult children. Main work tasks: Supporting jobseekers finding jobs and employers finding employees. By following instructions from the government, employment officers' main mission is to contribute to the smooth functioning of the labor market.

Nadja, 67, student/career counselor, retiring in six months. Single household. Double bachelor's degree. Main work tasks: contact with pupils, students, parents, teachers and other staff in the school as well as representatives of working life and the education sector. The main mission is to guide students in the face of study and career choice situations, as well as inform about education, working life and the labor market, among other things.

Simone, 62, recently retired project leader and investigator at a public authority. Two adult children. Bachelor's degree. Lives with spouse. Main work tasks: responsibility for a project being carried out on time and at

the budgeted cost. Leading and motivating the work group, which often consists of people with different skills, for example technicians, data experts, analysts and economists. Handling cases by gathering facts, analyzing and writing statements.

Gertrud, 67, recently retired former dentist/clinic manager. Lives with spouse. Master's degree. Three adult children. Main work tasks: repairing cavities, making root fillings, carrying out operations and treating gingivitis. Interventions for preventing damage to the teeth, study changes in the entire oral cavity and raise the alarm about diseases at an early stage. Planning, directing and coordinating the overall activities within health care, in consultation with senior managers and managers of other departments or units, as well as subordinate managers.

Yngwie, 57, college teacher. Lives with spouse. Bachelor's degree. Two adult children. Main work tasks: teaching and developing children, young people and adults. The work is varied involves freedom to set up the teaching within the framework of the current curriculum and syllabus.

Magnus, 41, college teacher in philosophy. Lives with spouse. Bachelor's degree. Main work tasks: Main work tasks: teaching and developing children, young people and adults. The work is varied involves freedom to set up the teaching within the framework of the current curriculum and syllabus.

Max, 45, call center group manager. Single household. High school degree. Main work tasks: Administrative tasks. Works closely with colleagues in all hierarchical positions. A certain type of leadership is part of the role. As a group manager, responsibility over other employees within the company or organization is often included. The work includes leading, engaging and supporting the employees.

Harald, 37, group manager at a public transportation organization. Single household. High school degree. Administrative tasks. Works closely with colleagues in all hierarchical positions. A certain type of leadership is part of the role. As a group manager, responsibility over other employees within the company or organization is often included. The work includes leading, engaging and supporting the employees.

Eva, 54, communicator in the public sector. Single household. Bachelor's degree. Two adult children. Main work tasks: planning, design, dissemination, evaluation and management of information and communication efforts. The work can be about developing a brand or building long-term relationships. The communicator needs to pay attention to which external factors affect the business. It is important to stay up-to-date and

follow the social debate in order to be able to give advice to decision-makers at different levels.

Sandra, 63, communicator in the public sector. Single household. Bachelor's degree. Two adult children. Main work tasks: Same as above (Eva).

Appendix 3

Interview Questions for Presently Employed

Följande intervjufrågor är delvis baserade på filosofiska och sociologiska resonemang om lönearbetets mening. Frågorna, som är av både narrativ och mer direkt karaktär, fokuserar på olika teman. Dessa kan enligt den tolkning jag gjort utifrån min nuvarande förförståelse anses centrala för att förstå lönearbetets situerade och existentiella mening, samt eventuella länkar mellan dessa nivåer.

Under intervjun: Glöm ej att validera IP:s berättelser och svar. Improvisera och använd vinjetter om det behövs. Ej nödvändigt att följa intervjuguiden strikt. Improvisera när det behövs, men försök hålla dig till temana så gott det går.

Background questions

Jag skulle vilja att du berättar lite om din bakgrund.

Hur gammal är du?

Vilken utbildning har du?

Vilken utbildning har dina föräldrar och vad jobbar/jobgade de med?

Hur ser din familjesituation ut?

Har du barn?

Kan du berätta om vad som är viktigt för dig i livet i stort? Vad bryr du dig om och vad är betydelsefullt för dig att lägga tid och energi på? Varför är dessa saker viktiga?

Om du tänker tillbaka till när du var liten, kan du berätta om vad du ville bli när du blev stor (inte nödvändigtvis endast när det gäller yrke)? Varför ville du bli det?

Om du ser tillbaka på ditt yrkesliv, kan du berätta om vad du kommit fram till är viktigt för dig i ett arbetsliv? Vilka saker med ett arbete värde-
rar du mest?

Vad har du för yrkestitel idag?

Kan du berätta lite om varför du jobbar som, Vad fick dig att söka
dig till det jobbet?

Hur länge har du jobbat med det?

Kan du berätta om vilken arbetsgivare du jobbar för? Vad är organisat-
ionens syfte och mål?

Skulle du kunna beskriva din arbetsplats?

Vilka arbetstider har du?

Jobbar du ensam eller tillsammans med andra när du utför ditt arbete? I
vilken utsträckning? På vilket sätt?

**Questions intended to invite the interviewee to reflect upon existential
meanings of working**

Upplever du att dina arbetsuppgifter är intressanta? Varför/varför inte?

Kan du berätta om vad du anser att ditt jobb tillför till ditt liv?

Har uppnått några särskilda personliga mål med ditt arbetsliv?

Upplever du att det du gör på jobbet bidrar till att förverkliga de mål du
har i ditt liv i stort? På vilket sätt? Varför/varför inte?

Vad skulle du ha sysslat med om du inte hade behövt jobba?

Hur ser det perfekta jobbet ut för dig?

Upplever du att du som person passar för det jobb du har? På vilket
sätt? Varför/varför inte?

Working conditions and the meaning of work at work (purpose, significance, comprehension)

Skulle du kunna berätta lite mer detaljerat om vad du gör på ditt jobb? Hur ser en typisk arbetsdag ut?

Vad använder du dig av för hjälpmedel/arbetsredskap när du jobbar? (dator, datorprogram, maskiner, verktyg, saker osv).

Kan du bestämma själv hur du ska utföra ditt jobb, dvs välja redskap, arbetsuppgifter osv? Skulle du vilja att det var annorlunda? Varför?

Kan du bestämma själv i vilken takt du vill jobba? Skulle du vilja att det var annorlunda? Varför?

Hur ofta har du rast? Kan du berätta om vad du/ni brukar göra på rasterna och lunchen?

Kan du berätta om vilket slags ansvar du har ditt arbete? Trivs du med att ha den nivån av ansvar? Skulle du vilja ha mer ansvar? Varför?

Kan du se det färdiga resultatet av det du gör i ditt jobb, dvs ser du vad du har åstadkommit och vilken betydelse det har?

Är det viktigt för dig att kunna se resultatet och betydelsen av det du gör i jobbet? Varför/varför inte?

Vilken påverkan har ditt jobb på samhället? Är det viktigt för dig att kunna se vilken betydelse det du gör på jobbet har för samhället? Varför/varför inte?

Upplever du att det du gör på jobbet bidrar till att göra världen till en bättre plats?

Är det viktigt för dig att det går bra för företaget/organisationen? Varför/varför inte?

Känner du dig som en del av ett sammanhang när du är på jobbet?

Brukar du få återkoppling/feedback av arbetsledare/chefer/kollegor på det du gör på jobbet? (typ ”det där var verkligen bra gjort”, ”bra jobbat”, ”det här skulle kunna förbättras” osv).

SELF

Upplever du att du kan vara dig själv på jobbet? På vilket sätt/varför inte?

Kan du berätta om du upplever att du får använda dig av dina förmågor i ditt jobb, dvs att du får göra sådant som du tycker att du är bra på och har talang för? Varför/varför inte?

Hur känner du inför det du åstadkommer i ditt jobb? På vilket sätt? Varför inte?

Meaningfulness

Kan du berätta om vad som är det bästa med ditt jobb, dvs vad du uppskattar och värderar mest? Varför är just dessa de bästa sakerna med ditt jobb?

Finns det någon/några särskilda arbetsuppgifter som du upplever som mer meningsfulla än andra? Varför? Skulle du vilja ha fler sådana arbetsuppgifter?

Upplever du att det du gör på jobbet är utvecklande? På vilket sätt/varför inte?

Finns det tillfällen på jobbet då du känner dig mer stimulerad än vid andra tillfällen?

Upplever du att du lär dig nya saker i ditt jobb? Är det viktigt för dig att kunna lära dig nya saker? Varför då?

Lack of meaningfulness/meaninglessness and potentially responding to it

Kan du berätta vad som är det sämsta med ditt jobb? Vad är det som gör att du inte trivs med dessa saker?

Kan du berätta om det finns tillfällen när du upplever jobbet som meningslöst?

Vad brukar du tänka/hur känner du när du måste utföra sådana uppgifter? Hur hanterar du att du måste utföra sådana arbetsuppgifter?

Kan du göra något för att förändra situationen vid sådana tillfällen?

Temporality

Kan du berätta om det finns tillfällen på jobbet när du upplever att tiden går snabbare än vanligt? Vad för slags uppgifter utför du då? Hur känns det att jobba då?

Kan du berätta om det finns tillfällen på jobbet när du upplever att tiden går långsammare än vanligt? Hur känns det? Varför tror du att det är så?

Kan du berätta om hur du tror att du kommer se tillbaka på ditt arbetsliv när du blir äldre?

Hur skulle du vilja se tillbaka på ditt arbetsliv då?

Hur ser du på ditt framtida arbetsliv?

Hade du saknat något från ditt nuvarande jobb om du hade bytt till ett annat?

Vilken sinnesstämning brukar du vara i när du är på väg till jobbet? Brukar du tänka något särskilt om ditt jobb då?

Vilken sinnesstämning är du i när du jobbar?

Vilken sinnesstämning är du i när du är på väg hem från jobbet? Varför tror du att det är så? Brukar du tänka något särskilt om ditt jobb då?

Vilken sinnesstämning brukar du vara i när helgen närmar sig? Brukar du tänka något särskilt om ditt jobb då?

Vilken sinnesstämning brukar du vara i när du ska tillbaka till jobbet efter helgen? Hur känns det på måndagar jämfört med andra dagar? Brukar du tänka något särskilt om ditt jobb då?

Hur brukar du känna inför ditt jobb när semestern närmar sig? Brukar du tänka något särskilt om ditt jobb då?

Hur brukar du känna inför arbetet när du ska tillbaka till jobbet efter semestern? Brukar du tänka något särskilt om ditt jobb då?

Additional probing of the meaning of work from a non-work perspective

Kan du berätta om det finns något av det du gör på din fritid som liknar det du gör på ditt jobb? Varför/varför inte?

Finns det något av det du gör på jobbet som liknar det du gör på fritiden?

Brukar du tänka på jobbet när du inte jobbar? Hur ofta då? Vad tänker du på då?

Vad skulle du göra om du blev ekonomiskt oberoende (vinner eller ärver pengar)?

Final questions

Om du kunde börja om från början, skulle du ha sökt dig till samma yrke eller hade du riktat in dig på att jobba med något annat?

Skulle du rekommendera andra att jobba med det du gör? Varför/varför inte?

Vad trivs du bäst med i livet/arbetet i dagsläget?

Är det något mer du vill ta upp som har med mening i arbetet att göra som jag inte har frågat om?

Interview Questions for Retirees

Under intervjun: Glöm ej att validera IP:s berättelser och svar. Improvisera och använd vinjetter om det behövs. Ej nödvändigt att följa intervjuguiden strikt. Improvisera när det behövs, men försök hålla dig till temana så gott det går.

Background questions

Jag skulle vilja att du berättar lite om din bakgrund.

Hur gammal är du?

Vilken utbildning har du?

Vilken utbildning har dina föräldrar och vad jobbar/jobgade de med?

Hur ser din familjesituation ut?

Har du barn?

Kan du berätta om vad som är viktigt för dig i livet i stort? Vad bryr du dig om och vad är betydelsefullt för dig att lägga tid och energi på? Varför är dessa saker viktiga?

Om du tänker tillbaka till när du var liten, kan du berätta om vad du ville bli när du blev stor (inte nödvändigtvis endast när det gäller yrke)? Varför ville du bli det?

Om du ser tillbaka på ditt yrkesliv, kan du berätta om vad du kommit fram till är viktigt för dig i ett arbetsliv? Vilka saker med ett arbete värde-
rar du mest?

Vad har du för yrkestitel idag?

Kan du berätta lite om varför du jobbade som ..., Vad fick dig att söka dig till det jobbet?

Hur länge jobbade du med det?

Kan du berätta om vilken arbetsgivare du jobbade för? Vad var organisationens syfte och mål?

Skulle du kunna beskriva din arbetsplats?

Vilka arbetstider hade du?

Jobbade du ensam eller tillsammans med andra när du utförde ditt arbete? I vilken utsträckning? På vilket sätt?

Questions intended to invite the interviewee to reflect upon the existential meanings of working

Upplevde du att dina arbetsuppgifter var intressanta? Varför/varför inte?

Kan du berätta om vad du anser att ditt jobb tillförde till ditt liv?

Har uppnått några särskilda personliga mål med ditt arbetsliv?

Upplevde du att det du gjorde på jobbet bidrar till att förverkliga de mål du har i ditt liv i stort? På vilket sätt? Varför/varför inte?

Vad skulle du ha sysslat med om du inte hade behövt jobba?

Hur ser det perfekta jobbet ut för dig?

Upplevde du att du som person passade för det jobb du hade? På vilket sätt? Varför/varför inte?

Working conditions and the meaning of work at work (purpose, significance, comprehension)

Skulle du kunna berätta lite mer detaljerat om vad du gjorde på ditt jobb? Hur såg en typisk arbetsdag ut?

Vad använde du dig av för hjälpmedel/arbetsredskap när du jobbade? (dator, datorprogram, maskiner, verktyg, saker osv).

Kunde du bestämma själv hur du ska utföra ditt jobb, dvs välja redskap, arbetsuppgifter osv? Skulle du ha velat att det var annorlunda? Varför?

Kunde du bestämma själv i vilken takt du ville jobba? Skulle du velat att det varit annorlunda? Varför?

Hur ofta hade du rast? Kan du berätta om vad du/ni brukade göra på rasterna och lunchen?

Kan du berätta om vilket slags ansvar du hade ditt arbete? Trivdes du med att ha den nivån av ansvar? Skulle du vilja haft mer ansvar? Varför?

Kunde du se det färdiga resultatet av det du gjorde i ditt jobb, dvs såg du vad du har åstadkommit och vilken betydelse det hade?

Var det viktigt för dig att kunna se resultatet och betydelsen av det du gör i jobbet? Varför/varför inte?

Vilken påverkan hade ditt jobb på samhället? Var det viktigt för dig att kunna se vilken betydelse det du gör på jobbet har för samhället? Varför/varför inte?

Upplevde du att det du gjorde på jobbet bidrog till att göra världen till en bättre plats?

Var det viktigt för dig att det går bra för företaget/organisationen? Varför/varför inte?

Kände du dig som en del av ett sammanhang när du var på jobbet?

Brukade du få återkoppling/feedback av arbetsledare/chefer/kollegor på det du gjorde på jobbet? (typ ”det där var verkligen bra gjort”, ”bra jobbat”, ”det här skulle kunna förbättras” osv).

SELF

Upplevde du att du kunde vara dig själv på jobbet? På vilket sätt/varför inte?

Kan du berätta om du upplevde att du fick använda dig av dina förmågor i ditt jobb, dvs att du fick göra sådant som du tycker att du är bra på och har talang för? Varför/varför inte?

Hur kände du inför det du åstadkommer i ditt jobb? På vilket sätt? Varför inte?

Meaningfulness

Kan du berätta om vad som var det bästa med ditt jobb, dvs vad du uppskattade och värderade mest? Varför var just dessa de bästa sakerna med ditt jobb?

Fanns det någon/några särskilda arbetsuppgifter som du upplevde som mer meningsfulla än andra? Varför?

Upplevde du att det du gjorde på jobbet var utvecklande? På vilket sätt/varför inte?

Fanns det tillfällen på jobbet då du kände dig mer stimulerad än vid andra tillfällen?

Upplevde du att du lärde dig nya saker i ditt jobb? Var det viktigt för dig att kunna lära dig nya saker? Varför då?

Lack of meaningfulness/meaninglessness and potentially responding to it

Kan du berätta vad som var det sämsta med ditt jobb? Vad var det som gjorde att du inte trivdes med dessa saker?

Kan du berätta om det fanns tillfällen när du upplevde jobbet som meningslöst?

Vad brukade du tänka och hur kände du när du måste utföra sådana uppgifter? Hur hanterade du att du måste utföra sådana arbetsuppgifter?

Kunde du göra något för att förändra situationen vid sådana tillfällen?

Temporality

Kan du berätta om det fanns tillfällen på jobbet när du upplevde att tiden gick snabbare än vanligt? Vad för slags uppgifter utförde du då? Hur kändes det att jobba då?

Kan du berätta om det fanns tillfällen på jobbet när du upplevde att tiden gick långsammare än vanligt? Hur kändes det? Varför tror du att det var så?

Hur ser du på ditt framtiden?

Hade du saknat något från ditt nuvarande jobb om du hade bytt till ett annat?

Vilken sinnesstämning brukade du vara i när du är på väg till jobbet? Brukade du tänka något särskilt om ditt jobb då?

Vilken sinnesstämning var du i när du jobbade?

Vilken sinnesstämning var du i när du var på väg hem från jobbet? Varför tror du att det var så? Brukade du tänka något särskilt om ditt jobb då?

Vilken sinnesstämning brukade du vara i när helgen närmade sig? Brukade du tänka något särskilt om ditt jobb då?

Vilken sinnesstämning brukade du vara i när du skulle tillbaka till jobbet efter helgen? Hur kändes det på måndagar jämfört med andra dagar? Brukade du tänka något särskilt om ditt jobb då?

Hur brukade du känna inför ditt jobb när semestern närmade sig? Brukade du tänka något särskilt om ditt jobb då?

Hur brukade du känna inför arbetet när du skulle tillbaka till jobbet efter semestern? Brukade du tänka något särskilt om ditt jobb då?

Additional probing of the meaning of work from a non-work perspective

Kan du berätta om det fanns något av det du gör på din fritid som liknade det du gör på ditt jobb? Varför/varför inte?

Fanns det något av det du gjorde på jobbet som liknade det du gör på fritiden?

Brukade du tänka på jobbet när du inte jobbade Hur ofta då? Vad tänkte du på då?

Vad skulle du gjort om du blivit ekonomiskt oberoende (vinner eller ärver pengar)?

Final questions

Om du kunnat börja om från början, skulle du ha sökt dig till samma yrke eller hade du riktat in dig på att jobba med något annat?

Skulle du rekommendera andra att jobba med det du gjort? Varför/varför inte?

Vad trivs du bäst med i livet/arbetet i dagsläget?

Är det något mer du vill ta upp som har med mening i arbetet att göra som jag inte har frågat om?

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