



## **Working for a Wage - What's the Point?**

Lived Experiences of Meaningfulness and Meaninglessness in  
Professional and Manual Occupations

av

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### **Akademisk avhandling**

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## Abstract

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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

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