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The Meaning and Meaningfulness of Work – the View from Sociology

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Abstract

Since the mid-20th Century, theory and research in sociology on workers' responses to their experience of work can be broadly divided into three overlapping phases. The immediate post-war decades from the late 1940 to the 1970s saw the pervasive influence of an 'essentialist' conception of the meaningfulness of work. From the 1960s this was challenged by a 'liberal' view that rejected the idea that there was an inherent human nature in favour of an emphasis on the importance of individual value choice. It argued that a growth of instrumentalism in work orientations would make job quality decreasingly relevant to the meaning of work. Then in the first decades of the 21st Century, there was a revival of theory and research on meaningfulness, premised on the notion of fundamental human needs, but emphasising at the same time broader societal needs. These different perspectives have given a very different importance to the role of technology as a determinant of the meaning of work. Technological change was at the core of the essentialist arguments, it was marginalised by the liberal arguments and has become once more an important preoccupation of more recent work on meaningfulness.

Keywords: meaningfulness, alienation, job quality, skills, control, technology

JEL codes: J24, J28, J81

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1. Industrial Technology and Meaninglessness in Work

In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx argued that humans have a distinctive 'essential' or 'species' being, which requires expression through 'free, conscious activity'. Through conscious life activity 'Man makes his life activity the object of his will and of his consciousness.' The realization of this essential nature is determined by the nature of a person's productive life, most vitally by their ability to produce freely, which enables them to contemplate themselves in a world that they have created (Marx 1844, ed. 1973:113-5). If they do not have possession of their own productive activity, if it is externally controlled and coerced, work constitutes estranged, alienated labour.

The alienation of labour has crucial implications both for people's capacity for self-development and for their subjective sense of the meaning of their work. It tears a person from their species life: instead of being a source of self-realization, work becomes only a means to their existence (113-4). Marx (1844, pp.110-111) spells out the subjective consequences of this:

'in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. ... It is not therefore 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 a plague. External labor, labor in which man alienates himself, is a labor of self-sacrifice, of mortification'.

In Marx's vision, the ultimate driving force behind the progressive degradation of work, and the consequent loss of meaningfulness of work tasks, was the concern of owners within a capitalist system of production to gain competitive advantage and enhance their profits by reducing the costs of labour. This was secured through a transformation of the work process that reduced the skill level of the workforce, initially through an ever more detailed division of labour and, in the era of large-scale industry, by increasingly incorporating skilled work tasks into the machinery itself. The use of machinery in manufacturing made it possible to replace a skilled with an unskilled workforce, while increasing the intensity of work for those employed (Marx 1867/ 2004).

This emphasis on the critical role of technology for the meaningfulness of (or alienation from) work under the conditions of industrial capitalism came to inform a good deal of sociological theory and research on work in the decades after World War II. In particular, it was developed by two influential traditions of work – the Friedmann school of the French *sociologie du travail* and the Anglo-Saxon *labor process theory*. Both neo-Marxian traditions

pursued a research agenda of providing very detailed case studies of the implications of technology for changes in work tasks and work practices.

They focused particularly on the growing implementation of ‘Scientific Management’ policies, developed by Frederick Winslow Taylor in the late 19th century and the early 20th century. These were seen as confirming and even accentuating Marx’s predictions about the fragmentation of tasks and the reduction of worker skills. The efficiency and profitability of production, it argued, is maximized when work tasks are highly subdivided and standardised. The simplification of the labour process into elementary skills, together with the introduction of close supervisory control, were seen not only as a way of eliminating ‘time-wasting habits’, but also of isolating workers from each other, undercutting their capacity to resist management plans. With the growth of scientific management, employees lose control over their own labour and become alienated from the work process.

While the most prevalent trend was for complex tasks to be increasingly subdivided into routine and repetitive subtasks, the development that came to epitomise conceptions of the way in which work was evolving was that of the Fordist assembly line which both facilitated the coordination of highly subdivided work tasks and gave management a means of controlling (and therefore intensifying) the speed of work. It deprived workers of the ability to decide the rhythm of their own work and made them subject to the rhythm and rapidity of the machine.

The classic text that informed this perspective in *sociologie du travail* was Georges Friedmann’s *Industrial Sociology: the Emergence of the Human Problems of Automation* (published in French in 1946 and in English in 1955). Friedmann’s argument is notably more nuanced than Marx’s, emphasizing the benefits of mechanization in freeing workers from many of the most disagreeable, and physically hazardous tasks, as well as providing them with greater choice and comfort as consumers. He also points to a degree of psychological variation in people’s vulnerability to apparently negative work conditions – for instance the repetitiveness of work tasks. He does, however, place a central importance on the destructive effects of current trends in technological and organisational change on the skill structure and hence on workers’ ability to use initiative in their work¹.

For Friedmann, ‘The steady trend of “scientific management” is to cause semiskilled workers to perform all operations which can be performed, without calling on the worker’s intelligence and personality’ (1955, 214). It is ‘precisely against the system of individual initiative that technicist rationalization was constructed and developed...It is incontestable that Scientific Management and its variants actually destroy all individual initiative in many

¹ Friedmann (1956) later developed a less pessimistic view of the potential scenarios of change, influenced by the experiments of some US companies with job rotation and job enlargement.

workers '(212). This has important consequences for their sense of involvement in work. Describing the characteristic reaction of workers to technicist rationalization of the work process, he notes that:

'The rarity or disappearance of those problems which stimulate skill, and the loss of initiative, seem to have been felt especially by them. A system requiring little of the worker's personality but rapid and precise reactions, and which also lowers his prestige among his comrades, inevitably tends to eliminate valuable satisfactions' (210).

He concludes that the predominant mechanized systems of production have strongly negative effects on work involvement: 'Personal involvement in work is counteracted by contemporary tendencies in industry. And this is not the least reason for the risks which industry involves for the psychic equilibrium of many individuals' (375)... 'the unskilled worker has nothing but indifference for the inter-changeable tasks which arouse in him no interest, no real knowledge of material, and which touch no deep spring of his personality' (397). The dominant tendency, he concludes, is for a growing 'despiritualization' of work (389).

Friedmann was writing at a time when industrial manufacturing was still the dominant industry in most economically advanced countries. However, the growth of clerical work from the interwar period and the marked rise of the service sector from the 1960s raised the issue of how far theories of work based on research on manual workers in manufacturing were relevant to the conditions of work more widely, given the changing occupational structure. Predictions of a long-term trend to deskilling appeared to be contradicted by the rise of a new middle class.

Although broadly similar to Friedmann's analysis in its general account of the dynamics of capitalist industrialism, Harry Braverman's (1974) *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, was in part an attempt to respond to the issues raised by the growing numerical importance of white-collar work. His version of the argument was influential in giving the broader perspective an important role in Anglo-Saxon sociological theory and research. Braverman, like Marx and Friedmann, identified the distinctive capacity of human labour as 'its intelligent and purposive character' (56). But, in selling his labour power to the capitalist, the worker surrenders his control over the labour process to the employer, and is confronted by 'the progressive alienation of the process of production' (58).

Building on the earlier research of C. Wright Mills (1951), Braverman argues that clerical and service occupations have been subject to this process in a broadly similar way to manual work. In the early stages, the development of new specialisations among non-manual workers may have raised skill levels. But, as the numbers expanded, so too did the division of work

tasks, the concentration of planning and control in a small managerial elite and the mechanization of the work process. The computer system has transformed clerical work in much the same way that machinery recast manual work. Overall, the skill level of clerical workers has declined sharply, with the bulk of clerical workers becoming effectively semi-skilled workers, a process reflected in both training times and pay levels. While the transformation of service occupations, such as retail workers, may have been slower, a similar process is becoming evident (Braverman, 1974, p. 371). Rather than the emergence of a new middle class, the once relatively intermediate clerical and service occupations have been increasingly downgraded into an integral part of the working class and now suffer from the same alienating conditions of modern work as manual wage-workers' (Braverman, 1974, p. 352, p. 371).

The major challenge to the view that trends in work inherently led to alienating work conditions that deprived workers of the opportunities for personal initiative and self-development in work that made work meaningful came from a quite different theoretical perspective, rooted in theories of industrialism developed in the United States (Kerr et al. 1960). The most comprehensive development of this view was by Robert Blauner in *Alienation and Freedom* (1964). For Blauner, meaninglessness was a central aspect of alienation at work. He elaborated his view of the factors that gave rise to it in some detail:

'Meaning in work depends largely on three aspects of the worker's relationship to the product, process and organization of work. The first factor is the character of the product itself. Working on a unique and individuated product is almost inherently meaningful...The second point is the scope of the product worked on. It is more meaningful to work on the whole, or even a large part...than to perform one's tasks on only a small part of the final product. Third, purpose and function increase when the employee's job makes him responsible for a large span of the production process.' (Blauner, 1964, p. 23)

Blauner largely accepted the picture of the past implications of the development of mechanized technologies, with their tendency to subdivide tasks and intensify work. 'Tendencies toward meaninglessness' he writes 'stem from the nature of modern manufacturing, which is based on standardized production and a division of labor that reduces the size of the worker's contribution to the final product' (1964, p. 23). These problems are most sharply accentuated in the assembly line technologies characteristic of the automobile industry. In these work settings,

'The alienation of meaninglessness is further intensified by the worker's lack of a clear identification with a particular job...Fractionalised job assignments, cyclic rather than task-directed work rhythms, and the anonymous atmosphere of the large plants – all dilute the sense of meaning, purpose and function on the assembly line' (p. 108).

However, while accepting that technological development has undercut the meaningfulness of work in the past, Blauner (1964) strongly rejects the neo-Marxian thesis that this will

continue to be the case in the future. As technology continues to develop, he argues, work processes will become increasingly automated, producing the conditions for a restoration of the meaningfulness of work. In highly automated work settings such as the chemical industries, the tendency for the subdivision of work tasks is reversed, with task operations increasingly integrated into the machinery itself. Instead, such technologies increase the need for skilled workers who can take responsibility for monitoring the operation of large technical complexes and who have the craft skills necessary for the high-level maintenance work that is essential with a more intricate technical system (pp. 167-168). This has profound implications for the enhancement of meaningfulness in work:

‘The perspective of the worker is shifted from his own individual tasks to a broader series of operations...And responsibility as a job requirement demands thinking in terms of the collective whole rather than the individual part. For all these reasons, automation involves a widening of the worker’s scope of operations and provides new avenues for meaning and purpose in work’ (p. 173).

The primary role given to technology as a determinant of meaningfulness is a shared characteristic of both these neo-Marxian and non-Marxian approaches. For the former, there was a deterministic effect of technology within a capitalist system of production, whereas for the latter technological determinism was seen as inherent in a process of industrialization. However, while the emphasis was still placed strongly on the exploitative nature of the capitalist employment relationship, as research developed within the neo-Marxian tradition, there was an increasing recognition of the variability of work processes and the scope for managerial choice in how to maximise worker effort and productivity (Freidmann, 1956; Friedman, 1977; Wood, 1982). Similarly to non-Marxist research, there was a growing emphasis on the non-deterministic nature of technology and the importance of cultural and institutional factors in influencing the specific nature of management practices (Gallie, 1978; Piore and Sabel, 1984; Kelley, 1989). These developments raised significant questions about the validity of predictions of a technologically driven growth of meaninglessness in work.

Meanwhile, in the late 1960s, a significant development had occurred in theoretical perspectives about the experience of work, with a focus on the meaning in work replacing that of meaningfulness.

2. From Meaninglessness to the Meaning in Work: Values and Work Orientations

Despite their disagreement about the long-term implications of technological change, the theoretical perspectives considered in the previous section shared the view that workers’ capacity to use their initiative and develop their skills were crucial for meaningfulness and personal well-being. However, in the 1960s, this assumption became subject to an influential critique. In the *Affluent Worker: Industrial Attitudes and Behaviour* (1968), Goldthorpe and

colleagues, drawing on action frame of reference, contended that workers' experience of their jobs depended crucially upon their prior work values. They rejected the view that responses to work depended upon some innate or essential human nature and argued that the workforce is highly differentiated in terms of the wants and expectations that people bring to their employment, leading to quite varied interpretations and evaluations of the nature of any specific work environment. Under conditions of near full-employment, workers would be able to exercise a degree of choice in their selection of jobs based upon the types of rewards they seek (Goldthorpe et al., 1968, pp.183-4).

Drawing upon interviews with British workers in car assembly, small and large batch machining and chemical production, Goldthorpe et al. (1968) note that, while technology-driven conditioned working conditions did affect the intrinsic satisfaction that people derived from their jobs, there was no evidence that poor working conditions led to the types of antagonistic attitudes and conflict-laden work relations that might be expected if work experience were crucial for well-being, rather workers had largely positive dispositions to their employing organisations (pp. 181-3). They attribute this to the fact that 'the orientation which workers have to their employment and the manner, thus, in which they define their work situation can be regarded as mediating between features of the work situation objectively considered and the nature of workers' responses(p. 182). Among the workers they studied, such orientations were primarily of an instrumental type, in which people were mainly concerned with the financial rewards that come with the job rather than with the intrinsic satisfaction obtained by carrying out the work.

In contrast to theories of intrinsic human nature, this 'work orientations' perspective views the development of people's wants and expectations with respect to work as 'culturally determined variables, not psychological constants' (178). As such they are rooted in the structure and processes of the wider society, in particular the family and community contexts in which people live. With changes in the family leading to a stronger emphasis on the nuclear family, 'relations both between husband and wife and between parents and children would seem likely to become closer and more inherently rewarding' than had been the case in traditional working-class communities. Hence people will be better able to satisfy their expressive and affective needs through family relationships, making satisfactions from the experience of work less crucial to their well-being. This in turn leads to workers giving priority to the financial returns from work to realise their family projects outside work (175-6). Further, the authors argue that given the broader changes taking place in society, for instance higher levels of geographical mobility, it is likely that such instrumental work values will become increasingly prevalent over time in both the blue-collar and white-collar workforce.

The *Affluent Worker* studies led to an extended debate about the variations in work attitudes in different categories of the work force and their possible determinants (Daniel, 1969; Brown 1973; Beynon and Blackburn 1972; Blackburn and Mann, 1979). In particular, there was sharp contention as to whether work values should be understood as independent of work experience or as a result of particular experiences of work, how stable they are across time and whether the lack of transparency of the labour market really makes it possible for workers to select jobs in terms of their work orientations. However, many of these studies were based on specific occupational groups, organisations or localities, making it difficult to assess the wider validity of their conclusions.

The argument that there was a long-term trend for rising instrumentalism proved particularly problematic². In an attempt to assess this, national surveys have tended to use a measure of employment commitment, which asks respondents whether they would wish to continue to work even without financial necessity. Evidence from the US suggests that there was some decline in employment commitment between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s, although it then levelled off and remained relatively stable over the next decade (Highhouse et al. 2010). An analysis of trends in the EU between the early 1990s and the mid-2000s found only a marginal decline. Evidence from Britain showed relative stability in employment commitment from the early 1980s to the early 1990s (Gallie et al. 1998). Arguably, more specific questions about job preferences provide stronger evidence about the meaning people attach to their jobs. In a study of 19 OECD countries, Esser and Lindh (2018) concluded that the relative importance of extrinsic and intrinsic job preferences changed little between 1989 and 2015. Research in Britain found that there had been no shift towards instrumental values over the period 1992 and 2006. Rather intrinsic job preferences rose over the period (Gallie et al. 2012).

Given the resilience of intrinsic work values, it is difficult to conclude that the experience of work has become less important for workers' life experiences. One factor that may help to account for this is the rise in levels of education in the workforce. Arguably one of the major effects of more extended education is that it encourages both the capacity and desire for self-determination, as well as expressive and self-development values. A more educated workforce could then be expected to have retained strong intrinsic work values. A number of studies, both national and cross-national, have found that empirically educational level is strongly associated with the prevalence of both employment commitment and intrinsic work values (MOW, 1987; Hult and Svallfors, 2002; Gallie et al. 2012).

Work orientations theory was initially developed to account for the responses of mainly male manual and white-collar workers in poor working conditions. But perhaps the most controversial extension of the argument came with respect to the nature of women's work

² For a fuller discussion of the evidence on instrumentalism, see Gallie (2019).

orientations and the consequent meaning they attach to work. Catherine Hakim (1996) contended that ‘women are heterogeneous, diverse and divided’ (p. 207). Unlike men, they have genuine choices to make between different styles of life, in particular with respect to the importance they give to their careers and the family. As a result, there is a marked polarisation of the female workforce not only in the UK, but in Europe and the USA (208). A minority choose to give priority to their careers, whereas a majority choose ‘a modern homemaker career, that combines a priority for family life, with limited employment, often in part-time jobs. The two groups have quite different orientations to work. While the career woman seeks personal development and fulfilment in work, women who pursue the modern homemaker career ‘are secondary earners, fail to utilise any qualifications they may have, choose jobs for their convenience factors and social interest rather than with a view to a long-term career, are concentrated in female occupations and have lower earnings’ (Hakim, 1996, pp. 207-8).

Research in the 1980s strongly confirmed the difference between men’s and women’s orientations to work. A major British national study concluded that work was less central to women’s lives than to men’s and that most women were still primary domestic workers (Martin and Roberts, 1984, 191-2). However, later studies show an overall convergence between men and women in employment commitment (Gallie et al. 2019; Steiber, 2013). Increased centrality of, and commitment to, work has been accompanied by a stronger attachment to intrinsic work values and to the more detailed job preferences that relate to such values³. In their analysis of data from 19 countries, Esser and Lindh (2018) find that ‘on average, women express stronger intrinsic preferences’ and that ‘Women tend to be more concerned with job autonomy than men’. (p. 157). Overall figures may mask important differences within the female workforce. In particular, Hakim’s argument points particularly to the distinctive work orientations of female part-timers. The evidence here is more ambivalent. British research has tended to confirm that female part-timers have lower intrinsic job values than full-timers (Zou, 2015), whereas wider international research has found that they have ‘stronger preferences for intrinsic qualities and job autonomy than full-time employees’ (Esser and Lindh, 2018).

Women’s work orientations and their related work values are not static. They can change in response to changes in educational and occupational attainments. In the 1990s and 2000s, a widely reported puzzle in the job satisfaction literature was that women have higher levels of job satisfaction than men despite their low wages and inferior working conditions (Clark, 1997; Curtice, 1993; Sloane and Williams, 2000; Sousa-Poza and Sousa-Poza, 2003). This paradox has been attributed to the relatively low significance attached to work in women’s

³ Authors can differ in their terminological preferences. We take the notion of work orientations as a synthetic concept that refers to the relative centrality of work compared with other significant life activities (usually assumed to have necessary implications for both the strength of work commitment and the nature of work values). Work values refer to the relative importance of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards in work, while job preferences relate to the specific intrinsic or extrinsic aspects of work that are most important in a worker’s assessment of a job.

work orientations, which influenced what they value in and seek from their work (Hakim, 1991; Clark, 1997; Zou, 2015). However, with the rising educational attainments of women over recent decades, this gender gap has largely disappeared in recent studies (Green et al., 2018). The evidence cautions against treating work values as an inherent characteristic of employees in general or of particular categories of employee, rather than as contextually influenced and potentially varying over time in their implications for the experience of meaningful work.

The progression of research on work values and work orientations presents then a paradox. Initially developed as a critique of earlier traditions of work that had emphasised the central importance of work for personal self-development and well-being, more systematic research has shown that, far from any clear trend to greater instrumentalism, the intrinsic quality of the work environment, as reflected in factors such as the use of skill, initiative and job autonomy, has remained a high priority in workers' preferences. The alleged gender gap in work values and orientations also closed significantly in response to changes in education attainments, work experiences and social norms. Although the earlier traditions tended to see this as reflecting inherent human needs, it is notable that a subjectivist approach, relying on people's personal preferences, points very much in the same direction.

3. The Revival of Research on Meaningfulness in Work

The last two decades witnessed a resurgence of interest in the meaningfulness of work in the social sciences. The revival was driven by both theoretical developments and growing empirical evidence highlighting the benefits of meaningful work for desired organizational outcomes such as work engagement (Williamson and Geldenhuys, 2014; Steger et al., 2013), job satisfaction (Steger, Dik and Duffy, 2012), and performance (Allan et al., 2016; Harris et al., 2007; Leiter et al., 1998).

Two primary approaches to the conceptualisation of meaningful work can be identified. The first, known as 'the realization perspective' (Lepisto and Pratt, 2017), is closely aligned with Marx's conceptualisation of alienation. It suggests that meaningfulness arises from the fulfilment of fundamental human needs for control, competence, and personal growth. Enriched jobs that allow individuals to express their creative potentials and develop skills according to self-congruent goals are inherently more meaningful than tedious, repetitive and restrictive work imposed by others (Michaelson, 2005; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Podolny et al., 2004).

In contrast, the 'justification perspective' (Lepisto and Pratt, 2017), highlights the objective value of work. From this viewpoint, meaningful work is defined by its ability to generate

outcomes that extend beyond personal gains, contributing to a greater collective good. There is necessarily a moral argument implied in the justification perspective, with its emphasis on the ‘goodness’ of work, judged from an external standard independent of the perception of the individual carrying out the work. Such work often involves delivering tangible benefits for others and enhancing societal welfare (Beer et al., 2022; Florian et al., 2019; Trittin-Ulbrich and Glozer, 2024). From the justification perspective, the barrier to meaningful work is not the separation of conception and execution of work that reduces the scope for control and skill development as proposed by Marxist theorists, but the lack of value, significance, or worth of the work itself (Lepisto and Pratt, 2017).

This notion was elaborated in detail in David Graeber’s (2018) book *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*. Graeber argues that a large swath of the labour force is employed in pointless jobs that serve no useful purpose, such as “flunkies” whose work is to make someone else feel important, “duct tapers” who fix problems which should not exist in the first place, and “box tickers” who deal with bureaucratic tasks which benefit no one despite the illusion of creating value.

The distinction between the two conceptualisations of meaningful work hinges on whether meaningfulness arises from fulfilling one’s own needs through self-actualisation or from serving others’ needs, even if the work itself is not particularly enjoyable. Work can be meaningful in one sense but not the other. For example, developing addictive video games for adolescents may require sophisticated skills and substantial decision latitude. Although it may provide a sense of personal satisfaction, few would consider such work as meaningful due to its harmful consequences. Conversely, work can be meaningful even when it is carried out in relatively restrictive working conditions. For example, care workers who look after patients with terminal illnesses often feel a strong sense of meaningfulness, despite the fact that such work is often repetitive, exhausting, and poorly compensated (Bailey and Madden, 2016). During the COVID-19 pandemic, a high proportion of frontline workers who provided essential services for the public found their work meaningful despite significant personal sacrifices (Norris-Green and Wheatley, 2022).

While the realization and justification perspectives can be regarded as sharply opposing views about what constitutes meaningful work, Wolf (2010) has advanced a third position – namely that meaningfulness requires a combination of both subjective and objective elements. In her widely discussed book *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, she rejects the view that meaning can be derived purely from either the pursuit of hedonistic self-interest or from the rigid adoption of the normative demands of morality. Instead, she argues that it requires both strong subjective engagement, providing a sense of personal fulfilment, and an object of activity which has a value whose source comes from outside and is independent of oneself. As she puts it ‘meaning in life consists in and arises from actively engaging in projects of worth’ (p. 26).

The definition of objective or impartial value inevitably raises questions about who makes these judgments. While recognising that this remains a contentious area, for Wolf an important (although not exclusive) source of external endorsement of the independent value of an activity would appear to derive from how far it relates to wider values in the society. Their importance reflects in part the fact that people have a need for self-esteem that can be provided by the judgements of others. They also have an inherently social nature that encourages them to do something whose value extends beyond themselves and to be part of a community that shares values (pp. 28-37).

There is, however, no consensus in the literature on whether beneficence is a necessary condition for meaningful work. Some argue that meaningfulness can arise from either personal fulfilment or social contribution, without the need for both elements to be present simultaneously (Bramble, 2015, Taylor, 1984). Empirical evidence on this issue remains limited, particularly with respect to the extent to which jobs that support self-realization also provide social justification. Many occupations, such as those in education, healthcare, and skilled trades, may fulfil both criteria by enabling individuals to develop their abilities in the process of serving others. The practical relevance of the theoretical distinction between self- and other-oriented sources of meaningful work warrants empirical investigation.

Evidence on the Antecedents of Meaningful Work

Despite the well-established conceptual distinction between the realization perspective and the justification perspective, most empirical evidence on the antecedents of meaningful work has focused on the former, likely due to its longer theoretical tradition and data availability. A rich body of research has explored the structural factors that influence the degree to which employees derive a sense of meaning from their work, such as the characteristics of job tasks, the way in which work is coordinated and organised, the quality of social relationships in the workplace, and wider institutional and cultural environments.

The most studied job-level antecedents of meaningful work reflect job quality, which encompasses a range of manifest and latent benefits that meet individuals' fundamental needs from their work (Green, 2021; Green et al., 2024). While economists have traditionally focused on monetary compensation, sociologists and psychologists have paid greater attention to intrinsic aspects of job quality such as skills, autonomy, and work intensity. While returning to many of the themes of the post-war alienation literature, the revived research on meaningfulness not only focussed on positive rather than negative outcomes, but provided much more detailed empirical evidence on the relationship between work conditions and worker experiences.

Two particularly influential theories informing this work have been the Job Characteristics Model (Hackman and Oldham, 1976) and Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000), that have their roots in organizational psychology. Research guided by the Job Characteristics Model consistently shows that jobs which provide greater skill variety, job autonomy, task significance, identity, and feedback are associated with higher levels of meaningfulness and motivation (Fried & Ferris, 1987; Hackman and Lawler, 1971). Self-Determination Theory, highlighting the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, has also received substantial empirical support. For instance, Nikolova and Cnossen's (2020) research based on the European Working Conditions Surveys shows that these three factors account for 60% of the variation in perceptions of meaningful work across Europe—4.6 times more than indicators of extrinsic job quality such as pay, benefits, job security, career advancement, and working hours. In the UK, the 2024 Skills and Employment Survey reveals that key determinants of perceived work meaningfulness include managerial support, skill utilisation, and involvement in workplace decision-making. In contrast, extrinsic factors such as pay and job insecurity show only weak correlations with meaningfulness (Zhou et al., 2025). Additionally, intrinsic aspects of job quality, particularly task complexity and opportunities for skill development, account for a large portion of the variation in meaningful work experiences between employees in higher and lower occupational classes (Williams, Gifford, & Zhou, 2022).

Besides the features of job tasks, the meaningfulness of work is also influenced by how work is organized and managed. This stream of research has explored the impact of human resource practices and social relationships in the workplace. For instance, research based on the French Working Conditions Survey suggests that organizational restructuring and downsizing undermine the sense of meaningfulness, most likely due to their implications for obscured career prospects, disrupted learning, and increased workload (Coutrot, 2022). The system of “algorithmic management”, where job performance is constantly monitored and evaluated by quantifiable metrics, is particularly demoralising and frequently gives rise to health issues (ibid).

In contrast, high-involvement management practices which empower individuals to make independent decisions about their job tasks and participate in wider organizational decisions are associated with higher levels of work engagement, skill development and perception of meaningfulness (Gallie and Zhou, 2020). Employee participation (or voice) in decision-making has both direct and indirect implications for meaningfulness. Participation directly enhances opportunities for self-determination, enabling the realization of a work value that has been consistently shown to be of central importance to employees. At the same time, it has an important indirect influence by providing a means for improving other aspects of the work environment in a way that better meets employee needs.

Of central importance in this respect for the realization perspective is that participation has been shown to have an effect in improving opportunities for learning at work – both in terms of informal learning through everyday work activities and formal learning through the provision of training (Gallie, 2019, Gallie and Zhou, 2020). Learning is essential for developing skills and enhancing productivity, especially in the fast-evolving technological environment where new tools and systems constantly challenge the workforce to adapt and upskill.

In addition to participation in organizational decision-making, the quality of social relationships in the workplace is another critical source of meaning. Teamwork can influence the degree to which individuals identify with their work groups, thereby affecting the meaningfulness they derive from their work (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). When employees perceive their groups as distinctive and valuable, they are more likely to experience a sense of belonging (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003).

Leadership style also affects the social atmosphere in the workplace. Managers who inspire and support their employees tend to foster a stronger sense of meaning than those who solely rely on financial incentives to drive performance (Bono and Judge, 2003; Arnold et al., 2007; Zhou et al., 2025). Besides directly motivating employees to go the extra mile (Nembhard and Edmondson, 2006; Schaufeli, 2021), Supportive supervisory styles enhance individuals' perception of their job characteristics (Piccolo and Colquitt, 2006). For instance, progressive performance management practices that emphasise timely feedback, recognition, and development increase work engagement by making employees feel valued and appreciated (Kahn, 1990; Saks, 2006). A limitation of this stream of research is that many studies of leadership and teams are based on occupation or industry-specific samples, which may restrict their generalisability to the broader labour force.

Beyond organization-level factors, the perception of meaningful work is influenced by the broader institutional environments in which individuals are embedded. Cross-national comparative research on meaningful work remains scarce, but a rich body of research has examined country variations in job quality and their structural sources (Gallie, 2007a; Gallie and Zhou, 2013, 2020; Green and Mostafa, 2012; Holman, 2013; Olsen, Kalleberg and Nesheim, 2010). While these studies have rarely explicitly linked such variations to work meaningfulness, given the well-established importance of job quality for meaningfulness, it is reasonable to expect that institutional arrangements that promote intrinsic job quality will also enhance work meaningfulness, particularly when defined from a self-realization perspective. Policies and regulations that encourage skill development, job autonomy, organizational participation, and social support will increase the prevalence of enriched jobs, which are inherently more meaningful than repetitive, routine work.

Although earlier Marxian analyses were concerned with the social utility of work, this has been more formally developed in contemporary discussions of the justification perspective. However, there is much less empirical evidence on the antecedents of meaningful work from a justification perspective, with its emphasis on the extent to which work makes a positive contribution to other people or society at large, than is the case for the realization perspective (Beer et al., 2022; Florian et al., 2019; Trittin-Ulbrich and Glozer, 2024). Considerable ambiguity exists about what constitutes a positive contribution, and who should make such value judgments. Some have attempted to provide an objective definition of meaningful work as “jobs in which people help others, alleviate suffering, eliminate difficult, dangerous, or tedious toil, make someone healthier, happier, aesthetically or intellectually enrich people, or improve the environment in which we live” (Ciulla, 2012, p. 127). Others have used their own judgement to assign beneficence values to different occupations (Burbano et al., 2024). However, given the challenge of creating an exhaustive and widely agreed-upon list, most studies have relied on individuals’ own assessments as whether they consider their work to be making a valuable contribution to society or not.

Most empirical evidence on the social value of work has been based on anecdotal evidence or analysis of non-representative samples from specific occupations. An exception is the research by Dur and Lent on ‘socially useless jobs,’ which examined four waves of the International Social Survey Programme covering over 100,000 workers from forty-seven countries (Dur and Van Lent, 2019). Their study found that contrary to the “bullshit job” discourse, only 8% of workers disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “My job is useful to society,” and 17% were doubtful (neither agreed nor disagreed). The presence of socially useless jobs is higher in the private sector than in the public sector (by 6 percentage points). Notably, almost no one in occupations such as firefighters, police officers, social benefit officials, health workers, and teachers considered their jobs to be socially useless.

Research based on the American Time Use Survey and the UK Annual Population Survey suggests that highly skilled workers perceive their work as more meaningful than those in medium- or low-skilled occupation (Bryce, 2018). In France, a comparison of perceptions of meaningful work across industrial and occupational contexts found the lowest levels of meaningful work in manufacturing, commerce and sales, banks, insurance, and security. By contrast, the highest levels were reported by maternity assistants and more generally those working in caring occupations (Coutrot, 2022).

According to the European Working Conditions Survey, workers in the craft and related trades, as well as the agricultural sector, reported particularly high levels of meaningful work (Nikolova & Cnossen, 2020). In the UK, the 2024 Skills and Employment Survey which covers 5,465 workers across the country revealed highest levels of meaningful work in

healthcare, education, and construction (Zhou et al., 2025). The CIPD UK Working Lives Surveys found that care workers reported higher levels of meaningfulness than engineers, IT professionals, and finance professionals despite their inferior wages and working conditions. While highly skilled employees reported higher levels of meaningfulness in terms of doing useful work for their *organization*, a handful of occupations related to health, social care, and protective services stood out for reporting a strong sense of doing useful work for *society* (Williams, Gifford and Zhou, 2022).

Taken as a whole, the evidence indicates that the meaningfulness of work, when viewed through the lens of social justification, is associated with the inherent nature of the work. Specifically, jobs that provide essential public services tend to foster a heightened sense of meaning and purpose. Meaning appears particularly high in the types of jobs that involve direct relationships with the public or clients, where individuals often experience immediate feedback and recognition of their contributions (Coutrot, 2022). These roles tend to go beyond personal or organizational goals by connecting individuals to the tangible impact of their work on others.

Technologies and the Future of Meaningful Work

The rapid spread of artificial intelligence, machine learning, and robotics technologies (often referred to as the 4th Industrial Revolution) has raised questions about the future of work. Similarly to industrial automation and continuous processing technologies in the 1960s and 1970s and computerised and information technologies in the 1980s and 1990s that prompted generations of neo-Marxian and non-Marxian scholars to investigate how technology reshapes work and its inherent meaningfulness, the advent of artificial intelligence technologies is expected to profoundly transform the landscape of work and employment relationships once again. While technologies are unlikely to directly affect the meaning of work, they can certainly support or undermine the conditions for experiencing meaningful work through the two mechanisms identified in the literature: self-realization and social justification. Given the extensive evidence on the importance of job quality for self-realization, there are grounds to expect that the ways in which new technologies shape the meaningfulness of work will largely depend on their impact on intrinsic job quality.

Research on the impact of emerging technologies on job quality is still in the early stages, but a burgeoning body of evidence suggests that different types of technologies can affect the quality of work life in distinct ways. An online survey of 4,802 UK employees conducted by the Institute for the Future of Work found that employees' life quality was positively associated with the frequency of their interactions with traditional digital tools such as laptops, tablets, and smartphones. In contrast, the relationship was negative for new technologies such as wearables, robotics, artificial intelligence, and machine learning software (Soffia et al., 2024a). An examination of the underlying mechanisms revealed a

significant association between emerging technologies and job insecurity. Additionally, the use of wearable devices to monitor, assess, and control workers in real time have been found to intensify work and heighten health risks (Soffia et al., 2024b).

Another study has explored the impact of robotic technologies on job quality based on data from the 1995-2005 European Working Conditions Surveys matched with information on robots provided by the World Robotics Survey (Anton et al., 2023). The study found that exposure to industrial robots led to increased work intensity, while having no significant impact on the physical work environment, skills, or discretion. Consistent findings are reported by Nikolova et al. (2024) based on employee survey data and robotization data for 14 industries across 20 European countries from 2005 to 2021. Focusing specifically on the meaningfulness of work, the study suggests a doubling of robotization is associated with a 0.9% decrease in meaningfulness.

As was shown in earlier studies of automation, the impact of new technologies on job quality is not predetermined, but significantly affected by how they are designed and implemented in the workplace (Gallie, 1978; Parker and Grote, 2022). In particular, the extent to which employees are involved in this process moderates the impact of technology adoption on organizational outcomes. A survey of over 1,000 UK firms shows that high involvement management practices which encourage training, information-sharing, and employee consultation significantly enhance the positive impact of new technologies, leading to job creation, skill augmentation, and job quality improvement (Hayton et al., 2023). These outcomes are more pronounced in regions that have invested substantially in human capital and connectivity infrastructure.

Participative management enhances the benefits of new technologies because frontline workers possess valuable tacit knowledge about production and service processes, which can be leveraged to improve the design and implementation of new technologies. Involving employees in decision-making also fosters a sense of procedural justice, increasing their openness to embracing new technologies that enhance work efficiency (Felstead et al., 2020). Conversely, implementing changes without seeking employee input risks removing complex and interesting job tasks, potentially diminishing individuals' sense of competence and agency. For instance, technologies that require employees to "tend the machine" often reduce individuals to passive monitors of digitalized equipment, which can result in boredom and alienation. In contrast, technologies which create tasks that challenge and stretch human capabilities can make work more engaging and fulfilling. Roles that involve "managing the machine" often instill a greater sense of meaning as they require employees to perform complex, autonomous, and integrated tasks that promote skill development (Bankins and Formosa, 2023).

Beyond concerns with job quality and its implications for self-realization, from a justification perspective, the future of meaningful work will also depend on whether technologies will be used to enhance or harm societal welfare. Artificial intelligence technologies are versatile tools that can be deployed for both beneficial and detrimental purposes. They can drive scientific breakthroughs, extend life expectancy, and deliver personalised education. They can also spread misinformation, enable mass surveillance, and create weapons of mass destruction (Suleyman, 2023). The implications of the upcoming wave of artificial general intelligence technologies for the social welfare and hence for the meaningfulness of work in terms of the justification approach are difficult to predict.

In summary, the more recent literature on meaningfulness has pointed to two main pathways through which meaningfulness can be achieved: self-realization and social justification. From a realization perspective, the focus is on the quality of work and its implications for personal fulfilment. Jobs should be designed in a way that avoids overly segmented tasks or constraining working conditions that give rise to feelings of alienation and estrangement. Human resource practices that promote skill development, employee participation, and social support are crucial for fostering a sense of meaning. The justification perspective centres on the social value of work. Individuals need to have reasons (that would be persuasive to others) to believe that their work contributes to the welfare of others or the betterment of society. This is relatively straightforward for those who work in occupations that directly help others such as doctors, nurses, teachers, and firefighters, but the rationale can be more elusive for those in process-focused roles which offer limited opportunities to interact with beneficiaries.

Work is arguably most meaningful when it benefits both the individual and the broader society. The impact of the Fourth Industrial Revolution on the future of work will depend on its ability to create jobs that are not only fulfilling for workers, but also contribute positively to the common good. Striking this balance requires prioritising human-centred design principles to ensure that technologies are used to automate tedious tasks and free up individuals for more interesting, engaging, and often people-centred roles where they can directly witness the beneficial impact of their work on others. Achieving this vision requires policies and practices that cultivate a workplace environment where employee voices are valued. Organizations that embrace high-involvement work practices are better positioned to harness the potential of new technologies, paving the way for a more meaningful future of work for all.

Conclusion

Although the issue of meaningfulness in work has gained considerable visibility in the literature over the last decades, our chapter has shown that it has been fundamental to the

sociology of work throughout the post second world war period. The nature of the arguments deployed and, indeed, the centrality attributed to the issue have varied however over time.

In the immediate post war decades, the focus was primarily upon the decline of meaningfulness in work. This was attributed to the increasing prevalence of Taylorist management policies and technological developments such as the growth of assembly-line production techniques. These arguments were underpinned by an essentialist conception of human nature in which initiative and creativity were viewed as fundamental human needs. Developments in the work process were seen as curbing the capacity for the realization of such needs, thereby creating the conditions for both objective and subjective worker alienation, with work increasingly viewed as meaningless.

From the 1960s to the 1990s, an influential critique of this thesis was provided by proponents of an action-theory perspective in sociology, which rejected the notion that there were fundamental human needs for self-development through work in favour of the view that work preferences were rooted in cultural values that could vary between individuals, communities and societies. The major direction of change, it was suggested, involved the decreasing importance of work in people's lives and the increased centrality of family and non-work aspirations. As such meaningfulness in work itself was no longer regarded as a core issue in the sociology of work. Rather, workers selected particular jobs in the light of their personal value preferences. Those in jobs offering poor intrinsic work conditions – whether male manual workers or female part-timers - were not experiencing meaninglessness but rather satisfaction with employment conditions that met their instrumental orientations to work.

While the shift from an essentialist account of worker experiences to one based on the relationship between work conditions and work values was helpful in allowing for a degree of variation in workers' preferences about types of jobs, subsequent research has shown that the intrinsic features of work are of high importance for the majority of workers. Rather than an exclusive emphasis on instrumental benefits, workers tend to value characteristics of work – such as the use of initiative, control over the work task and opportunities for self-development – that were at the heart of the early concerns with meaningfulness.

The last two decades have seen a major renewal of research on meaningfulness, although perhaps with less recognition of earlier contributions than might be expected. But it has led to the development of earlier work in two important respects. The first lies in a stronger conceptual distinction between two types of meaningfulness. It has emphasised the contrast between meaningfulness in the sense of the capacity for self-development through work (the realization perspective) and meaningfulness in terms of the value of a person's work to society (the justification perspective). While these two approaches are often thought to have

very different implications, a third view has argued that the meaningfulness of a job requires that it meets a combination of both subjective and objective criteria. While there are conflicting views about the viability of an attempt to define adequately the notion of objective value, upon which both the justification and the combined approach depend, there is a degree of agreement that certain qualities, such as work that involves ‘caring for others’, do constitute acceptable criteria.

A second contribution of more recent research on meaningfulness in work has been an enrichment of the empirical evidence. It has provided a more detailed characterisation of the features of the work task and the work environment that are conducive to meaningfulness in the self-realization perspective. It has also shown the association between the meaningfulness of work and key organisational outcomes. In both cases, researchers were able to draw upon developments in self-determination theory and on the growing body of empirical research by both organisational psychologists and sociologists into the implications of job characteristics for workers’ experience of their jobs.

The potential role of technology in facilitating or undermining meaningfulness has been central to discussions of the longer-term future of work since the earliest studies in the post-war period. In particular, across the decades, debate has revolved around the potential impact of automation, in its diverse forms, for the experience of work. The cumulative results of empirical research into earlier phases of automation suggested that quite varied forms of organizational design were compatible with a given technological environment. Given the central importance of job quality for workers’ attitudes, this points to the absence of technological determinism with respect to the future meaningfulness of work and to the crucial importance of the adoption of organisational policies that enrich workers’ jobs and enhance their feeling of involvement in the decisions that affect their work.

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