

Going back to my roots: Stability despite liminality in the search for meaningful work

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Meaningful work, described as work that is personally significant and worthwhile (Pratt and Ashforth, 2003), has typically been explored in stable workspaces (Berg et al., 2013; Cardador et al., 2011; Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). However, modern workplaces have become increasingly changeful (Bauman, 2000).

This changefulness manifests itself in a variety of workplace practices, including the adoption of in between organizations, work roles, career paths and career stages (Ibarra and Obodaru, 2016), as well as the development of hybrid workspaces (Empson, 2021). The in-betweenness in workplace practices, or liminality, has been described as a state of being ‘betwixt and between recognized fixed points’ (Turner, 1967: 96). As transitional phenomena, *liminal spaces* have long been viewed as fertile crucibles that facilitate *change* (Erikson, 1959; Horney, 1945), including cultural change (Howard-Grenville et al., 2011) and identity change at business schools (Petriglieri et al., 2018; Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010) and other workspaces (Beech, 2011; Daskalaki and Simosi, 2018; Dubouloy, 2004). Despite the increased prevalence of liminal spaces in contemporary times, less is known about their role in enabling changes in people’s perceptions of what meaningful work means to them. We situate our paper at the intersection of meaningful work and liminality (Toraldó et al., 2019) and use a Bourdieusian lens (Bourdieu, 1977) to understand how liminal spaces facilitate change in people’s meaningful work sensemaking.

A 21-month, qualitative analysis (see Table 1) at four business schools, as exemplary liminal spaces, first found three distinct meaningful work habitus that had been imparted by people’s *childhood caregivers*.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Second, despite the liminal space, we found remarkable *stability* in most meaningful work accounts. A minority experienced change (see Table 2).

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

The different scenarios resulted from habitus-workplace conditions (mis)fit, which contributed to meaningful work (dis)enactment. We offer a process model (see Figure 1) that elucidates how meaningful work is (dis)enacted in liminal spaces.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Our analysis offers a two-fold contribution. First, we introduce the novel concept of the ‘*meaningful work habitus*’. This contributes to the sensemaking in meaningful work literature (Jiang, 2021; Schabram and Maitlis, 2017) and its associated, ambivalence stream (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009; Oelberger, 2019; Toraldo et al., 2019) by explaining *why* and *how* a plurality (Lips-Wiersma and Morris, 2009) of self- and other-focused (Rosso et al., 2010) understandings of meaningful work exist: they reflect differences in meaningful work habitus among different people’s caregivers, which are intergenerationally socially reproduced through the influence of everyday family interactions. This temporal finding also extends prior, largely atemporal person-environment fit scholarship at the nexus of meaningful work and vocational psychology (e.g., Vogel et al., 2020) by highlighting the importance of the past on contemporary (mis)fit sensemaking. We argue that a temporal turn in meaningful work scholarship would deepen our knowledge of people’s meaningful work sensemaking processes.

Second, while prior liminal space scholars have emphasized how this context facilitates *change* (Söderlund and Borg, 2018), including at business schools (Petriglieri et al., 2018; Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010), our analysis suggests that these spaces are not always

change enablers; instead some aspects, such as meaningful work perceptions, are largely durable and resistant to change. This has implications at the individual and organizational levels. At an individual level, people's desire to return to the familiar, by reaffirming the stability of past meaningful work habitus, leads to career choice limitations. It also has negative consequences on people's wellbeing during periods when externalities change. At an organizational level, our findings can be generalized to other purportedly change-focused liminal spaces such as workplace retreats and business schools, questioning the sincerity and permanence of certain changes initiated in these settings.

Keywords

Meaning of work, liminal space, Bourdieu, sensemaking, career choice

Potential contribution to *Organizing and social relationships in non-traditional contexts*

According to this stream's call for papers, it explores "how members of an occupation, organisation and/or profession make sense of and/or rationalise who they are, why they do what they do, and how they deal with contradictions or ambiguities". Our paper fits well with this as we introduce the novel concept of the 'meaningful work habitus', which plays a key role in people's sensemaking of who they are and explains why people make sense of meaningful work in ambivalent ways, with implications on why people do what they do in different careers.

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Table 1. Stages of analysis and development of the findings

Stages	Tasks	Outputs
Stage 1 – Developing narrative accounts.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Chronicle the story of each interviewee, including their perceptions of and experience of work and the meaning of it in their lives. 2. Validate interviewees’ meaningful work perceptions and experiences: present initial findings to a sample of participants. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thick descriptions of interviewees’ meaningful work perceptions and experiences.
Stage 2 – Using a data reduction process, identify how people perceive and experience meaningful work.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Using NVivo, develop descriptive empirical codes of how interviewees perceive and experience meaningful work, e.g., as benefitting society, benefitting family and benefitting the self – the latter either through fulfilling self-potential or through work-life balance. 4. Iterating between the meaningful work literature, practice theory and our data, identification of three categories of meaningful work habitus, expressed through self-narratives. 5. Note the role of childhood caregivers in meaningful work habitus and its core, enduring nature into adulthood, reflecting Bourdieu’s primary habitus. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification of three meaningful work habitus: (a) <i>calling</i>, (b) <i>supporting</i> (c1) <i>self-caring as self-realization</i> or (c2) <i>self-caring as work-life balance</i>. • Identification of meaningful work habitus as an aspect of the <i>primary habitus</i>.
Stage 3 – Identifying the factors shaping how people make sense of meaningful work.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Use the three identified meaningful work habitus: (a) calling, (b) supporting (c1) self-caring as self-realization and (c2) self-caring as work-life balance to develop descriptive empirical codes capturing factors that affect how people make sense of meaningful work e.g., (b) supporting by e.g., benefitting family and e.g., high pay. 7. Note that some interviewees sought only to e.g., benefit family <i>or</i> society and others sought e.g., to benefit family <i>and</i> society. 8. Derive (a) internal categories of ‘single meaningful work habitus’ or ‘mixed meaningful work habitus’ and (b) external category of ‘aspirational workplace conditions’ from the codes. 9. Form cross cutting themes based on empirical characteristics: ‘Who am I?’ (which included the single meaningful work habitus or mixed meaningful work habitus category), ‘What does meaningful work look like to me?’ (which included the aspirational workplace conditions category). 10. Analysing how these themes interact to explain meaningful work sensemaking. 11. Check coding reliability: use survey data to check whether clusters of interviewees adopting each of the three distinct meaningful work habitus were internally consistent and discrete. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification of internal factors: either (a) single meaningful work habitus or (b) mixed meaningful work habitus • Identification of external factors. Workplace conditions: (a) sustainability, (b) high pay, (c) learning and development and (d) work life balance. • Conceptualization of the meaningful work process as a sensemaking exploration constituted through the interaction of internal (meaningful work habitus) and external (workplace conditions) factors that mirror the aspirations of childhood caregivers.
<p>⇒ Outcome of Stages 1 to 3: Conceptualization of the processual emergence of three distinct meaningful work habitus that had been imparted by interviewees’ childhood caregivers. This informed our first findings (see Figure 1).</p>		

<p>Stage 4 – Identifying the outcomes of meaningful work sensemaking.</p>	<p>12. Using NVivo develop descriptive empirical codes capturing the outcomes of meaningful work sensemaking (e.g., ‘feel happy’ or ‘feel sad’). 13. Moving back and forth between our data and cognitive dissonance theory, derive sensemaking categories of ‘existential resonance’ for interviewees experiencing positive wellbeing and ‘existential dissonance’ for interviewees experiencing negative wellbeing. 14. Derive outcome categories of ‘meaningful work work enactment’ or ‘meaningful work disenactment’ with impacts on interviewees’ psychological wellbeing; clustering the interviewees according to these outcomes (see Table 2).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification of the ambivalent nature of meaningful work, in which it can have outcomes of either enactment or disenactment. • Identification of existential resonance and dissonance, grounded in cognitive dissonance theory, as explanation for the opposite wellbeing experiences.
<p>Stage 5 – Analysing the temporal patterning of meaningful work sensemaking.</p>	<p>15. Analysing interviewees’ meaningful work perceptions and experiences through chronological analytical periods that corresponded with the interviews conducted at wave 1, 2 & 3. 16. Summarizing our results to identify patterns of stability vs. change in interviewees’ meaningful work habitus over the three periods (see: Table 2), and evaluating the proportion of change in the 25 interviewees who participated in all three interview waves.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification of stable and changing patterns of meaningful work habitus.
<p>Stage 6 – Developing a process model explaining how liminal spaces influence meaningful work (dis)enactment</p>	<p>17. Search explanations for the divergent (dis)enactment outcomes by analysing the temporal patterns of resonance and dissonance. 18. Conceptualization of (mis)fit mechanism between two factors: (1) meaningful work habitus (whether single or mixed) and (2) working conditions. 19. Reliance on data from wave 2 and wave 3 interviews, to confirm the presence of the mechanism in stable/change patterns of meaningful work perceptions and experiences (positive and negative consequences). 20. Production of rich vignettes capturing the distinct patterns and making salient the mechanism of (mis)fit that explains the meaningful work (dis)enactment outcomes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conceptualization of a process framework, grounded in our data, which integrates the antecedents and outcomes of meaningful work sensemaking and explains it produces opposite outcomes. • Empirical vignettes summarizing the trajectories of interviewees having followed exemplar patterns.
<p>⇒ Outcome of Stages 4 to 6: A process framework (see Figure 1) that explains how a (mis)fit mechanism between meaningful work habitus and working conditions can generate ambivalent outcomes and empirical vignettes that make this mechanism salient.</p>		

Table 2. Analysis of stable and changing meaningful work self-narrative patterns and outcomes

Part A. Interviewees with stable meaningful work self-narratives* (n= 20)				
Single meaningful work habitus		Outcome: (Dis)enactment of meaningful work		
Calling	Adrienne <i>Gloria</i> <i>Sylvia</i> <i>Emmeline</i> Gabriel Pablo			Enactment Enactment Disenactment Disenactment Disenactment Disenactment
Supporting	Ahmad <i>Daniel</i> Pierre			Enactment Enactment Enactment
Self-caring as self-realization	Bruno Cecilia Karen Maggie Nina <i>Ruby</i>			Enactment Enactment Enactment Enactment Disenactment Disenactment
Self-caring as work-life balance	<i>Alejandro</i> Joe Rodrigo Brian Reena			Enactment Enactment Enactment Disenactment Disenactment
Part B. Interviewees with changing meaningful work self-narratives* (changing types as well as single or mixed) (n= 5)				
	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3	Outcome: (Dis)enactment of meaningful work
Joshua	Single: Self-caring as self-realization	Mixed: Self-caring as self-realization & Calling	Single: Self-caring as self-realization	Enactment
John	Single: Calling	Mixed: Calling & Self-caring as self-realization	Single: Self-caring as self-realization	Enactment
Pooja	Single: Calling	Mixed: Calling & Self-caring as work-life balance	Single: Self-caring as work-life balance	Enactment
<i>Isabella</i>	Mixed: Calling & Self-caring as work-life balance	Single: Calling	Mixed: Calling & Self-caring as work-life balance	Disenactment
Willem	Single: Calling	Single: Calling	Mixed: Supporting kin & Calling	Disenactment

* Legend: All first names are pseudonyms. We developed vignettes in our narrative with the interviewees that have been highlighted in italics

Figure 1. Stability despite liminal space: Sensemaking, mechanisms and outcomes in the search for meaningful work

